

River Runs Red

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None of them would ever know when it all began. Human memory doesn't reach that far back. Recorded history has its limits. Time is a veil not easily pierced.

Where it began? That's another story. It began on the river, always on the river. This, everyone could see. Rivers take the long view, and the signs they carve into the earth survive the ages.

Every ripple, every riffle, every eddy, each rush of wild whitewater over rocks or between towering limestone walls, every still-seeming pool hiding quick currents, all these aspects of the river exist in the now but hold the memory of eons gone by, and at night the river whispers or roars or babbles its secret memories to those who know how to listen.

The river is at fault, yet blameless. The river doesn't choose sides or hold grudges.

But the river remembers....

Part One: El Paso

Lawrence Ingersoll intended to take the night off from death.

The fact that it didn't turn out that way was no fault of his. He got caught up in events. Best laid plans, and all that. A man who took his gaming seriously, he might have said that he played the cards he was dealt. But when the red king calls, somebody has to answer.

All day long, bitterly cold rain had fallen from skies as gray as a stretch of old road; after the November evening enveloped the San Juans, it turned into a gentle, persistent snowfall. Ingersoll had no appointments, and no client would make the trip up the mountain—not until the snowplows went through—so he looked forward to a rare quiet night. In his lodge-style home outside Creede, he stirred the embers of a fire with an iron poker, jabbing the poker into a pinion log and releasing swirling nebulae of sparks that wafted up the chimney and away. He liked the warmth against his nose and cheeks, enjoyed watching the orange clouds he agitated, and when his phone made an obnoxious chirping noise that could in no way be described as ringing, he swore, closed the wire mesh curtain, and set the poker down on the stone hearth.

The bearskin rug he crossed on his way to the phone had once been a mature black bear; Ingersoll had bought it from the neighbor who had killed it a couple of miles from the house. Life was that way in the mountains; more to the point, so was death.

Ingersoll cared about the natural world. He chose to live in rural Colorado, far from big cities, because he wanted to feel connected to nature, but he was no stranger to death and he had no problem with those who hunted for sport. His occult studies taught him that death was a transition, not an ending. Although he could no more know if wild creatures had an afterlife than he could know their hearts and minds while they lived, he had no reason to think they didn't. He was, furthermore, pretty sure they didn't spend their lives afraid of death, as so many people did.

But then, most people didn't share his profound understanding of it. Death was as much a part of Ingersoll's daily life (or nightly, since he met most of his clients after dark) as numbers were a part of an accountant's or whips a dominatrix's. He made his living—a very comfortable one—

communicating with the dead on behalf of the living. When not working, he was usually in his study reading rare, often forbidden texts, trying to increase his understanding of the various worlds outside the one most people knew, which he had always referred to as the straight world.

He had his fears, of course, as did everyone. Ingersoll's included high ledges and cliffs (roof edges and the like), public speaking, incapacitating injury, and the idea that restaurant chefs might spit disease-ridden saliva into his food.

Not death, though. Never that.

"...the seventeenth day of apparent captivity in Iraq for CNN reporter Wade Scheiner," his plasma TV blared. "Last seen in a video released more than a week ago, bruised and gaunt but—"

Ingersoll snatched the remote off the arm of a sofa, punched MUTE, then grabbed up the phone.

"Ingersoll," he said. A bad habit, he knew, left over from corporate days when he and the other guys in his technical writing office had pretended that first names didn't exist.

"Lawrence." A female voice, throaty and velvet, with a Chinese accent evident in the single word.

"Millicent," he answered. Millicent Wong of Hong Kong, whose identity, so like a child's rhyme, disguised the fact that she was a mature, graceful, accomplished woman, far from childlike in every way but physical appearance. "What a pleasure to hear from you."

"You won't think so in a moment, Lawrence."

"Something's wrong?" He had already noticed an unfamiliar tightness in her voice. She was worried. "What is it?"

"I'm not certain," she said. "There's a problem of some kind. It's disrupting the ley lines. I've been trying to perform a reading and nothing's working as it should. I am very concerned, Lawrence. Frightened, a little."

"I'm no expert at that sort of thing, Millicent," Ingersoll said. Ley lines directed mystical energies around the world, and to points beyond, worlds beyond. Like electricity or the Internet, he could use them but that didn't mean he could fix them when they were broken. "Why call me?"

"As well as I can determine from here, you're the nearest of my acquaintances, physically, to the disruption's focal point. I hoped that perhaps you could learn something from there."

His mind buzzing with possibilities, Ingersoll quickly agreed. As he had warned her, this sort of thing was far from his realm of expertise. He considered himself a novice compared to an old hand like her, a mere dabbler in the petrifyingly deep waters of the occult. No way to learn like

on-the-job training, though. Anything that scared Millicent had to be significant, and therefore something from which he might gain wisdom.

On the other hand, if Millicent, with her wealth of experience, was afraid, it had to be pretty damn scary. Treading carefully would be a good idea.

He exchanged a few more terse words with her—the usual *how're you doing, what's new, how about them Broncos* pleasantries didn't seem appropriate—and ended the call, anxious to get started. A cup of tea he had brewed earlier was abandoned in the living room along with the muted TV.

Ingersoll's study was the sort of “masculine” room that model home designers built and magazine editors loved. The lifeless, unblinking eyes of mounted elk and bobcat heads gazed down at his rough-hewn wooden desk from high on knotty pine walls. Indian rugs covered part of the polished plank floor. Other artifacts, mostly mystical objects he had collected around the world, crowded onto bookshelves and a wide burl coffee table set in front of a pair of low-slung brown leather chairs. The bookshelves would have looked wrong in a magazine layout, because they were stuffed with books, mostly old, thick, bound in leather, and well used.

He used the study to sit and read when he needed a large desk surface, and he interviewed prospective clients there, but it was primarily a showplace. For his real work, he left the study through a doorway almost hidden between two of the massive bookcases. As a private joke, he called the next room his inner sanctum, aware of its pretentiousness and also of the old radio show with the same name.

The room itself was no place for jokes. The study was meant to impress, while the inner sanctum was purely functional. Its hardwood floor was painted a dull battleship gray. Dark purple curtains draped every wall, to muffle sound. The room was wired for electricity, but Ingersoll preferred to light the candles scattered on top of antique wooden tables and chests. He lit one now, placing it on a small table in the exact center of the room, then pulled up a shabby but comfortable chair and sat down.

Gazing into the nascent flame, he worked on blanking everything else from his mind—the cup of tea that had seemed so important a short time before, the television news, the snow outside, the checks for his mortgage and the payment on the Escalade that had to be mailed before the end of the week, even the greasy scent of the thick black candle. Mentally taking each topic and closing it into a black box, he folded down the flaps and stacked those boxes neatly on a shelf. His greatest gift was the ability to slip quickly and easily into a trance state, in which he could commune with any of several spirit guides with whom he had developed relationships.

Ingersoll stroked his mustache a couple of times, the few white whiskers thrusting through the darker ones notable for a little extra wiriness. He had been forty pounds heavier when he worked in the tech industry (and living in a second-floor apartment in Cupertino, California, overlooking a sea of carports, instead of a six-bedroom lodge with its own sauna and a stunning view of Uncompaghe Peak). He had cultivated a new image to meet the expectations his clients brought with them: a drooping, Fu Manchu-style mustache, a thick head of curly hair that required a curling iron to get just right, a sturdy but not intimidating physique. He wore dark pants and a fitted dark shirt or V-neck sweater with a couple of esoteric-looking but purely decorative medallions on thin gold chains around his neck. He had patterned the look, basically, on Dr. Strange from the Marvel comic books—although he didn't think he could pull off the voluminous red cloak—and once he adopted it, the difference in attitude on the part of potential clients had persuaded him that he had nailed it.

More meaningful than any physical changes, though, was the change in how he felt about what he did. He helped people now. In his previous career, he had written technical documents read by precisely no one. Engineers thought they already understood everything, and lay people didn't believe they ever could. Now, people left his home with deeper comprehension of their own lives and acceptance of the things they couldn't change. He had never felt so rewarded as a technical writer, not in any emotional sense.

He appreciated the rewards of his new life, his new career, both tangible and not. Better the rustle of wind in the firs than the rush of freeway traffic, the glow of stars at night than the flash and tawdry glitter of city lights. Better a sense of real satisfaction than a steady but inadequate paycheck.

Dropping his hand to his lap, Ingersoll stared into the candle's flame, which grew and flickered and reached ceilingward like a mutilated paw. He let the fire fill his vision. The silence was broken only by the hiss and spit of the candle. He willed his breathing and heartbeat to slow.

The flame was everything.

The world fell away; in its place, a universe of yellow-white light embraced him.

After several seconds of nothing but that light, he saw himself walking through an indistinct glow. He looked down on that other Lawrence Ingersoll, as if watching from a height of twenty-five or thirty feet. His dark clothing had turned to white, his hair gone as thick and snowy as Mark Twain's. He walked on cobblestones made of pure light.

He knew this way well. The cobblestone road led toward a gleaming city, its spires and minarets jabbing at a golden sky. One of his spirit guides would meet him outside its gates. He hoped it would be Alicia, which would save time. Alicia was well versed in ley lines, arcane energies, and the like; a noted spiritualist in her day, even before death she had been well versed in the occult.

Along the way, though, an unexpected sense of unease—bordering on panic—clutched at his chest. The road twisted where it should not have, leading toward a bridge arching over a dry, reed-choked riverbed into what looked like dense forest. Ingersoll took a few steps back, trying to return to the spot from which he had been able to see down the straight, glowing road all the way to the city, but that view was gone.

Inside the riverbed, something rattled, like the river's bones under a loose coat of skin.

The Ingersoll sitting safely in Colorado felt the other one's growing dread, but at the same time part of him remained detached. *This must*, he told himself, *be what Millicent Wong was talking about*. Something was screwing with the other worlds, near enough to the straight world to threaten it too.

Time to pull out of the trance, before something terrible happened to the astral Ingersoll, defenseless on that road of light. As if reeling in a fish, he psychically tugged at his other self.

Instead, his physical self was yanked forward, like someone had jerked him from his chair. He flew through the ether and slammed into his astral self with enough force to make him sway unsteadily.

For the first time in his life, Ingersoll was totally inside his astral self, with no consciousness remaining behind in his inner sanctum.

And his astral self quaked with terror.

That rattling noise came from the river again, a dry, somehow covetous sound. Then a shape reared up from the riverbed, a shape Ingersoll thought he could make out until it flared into dazzling light. He blinked and threw his hands up protectively, but could still hear it coming at him. Behind his hands, his eyes burned, as if the brilliant flame were cooking them, and they ran down his cheeks like hot wax. The top of his head smoldered from the inside, as if he held a candle in his mouth.

For an instant, he saw himself sitting in his inner sanctum, through the eyes of his astral body. That wasn't supposed to be possible. The head of his physical body head was thrown back, smoke wafting from beneath his hair, from empty eye sockets, from his mouth and nose and ears. His hands

clutched at empty air. The desiccated rattling noise came from *him*, he realized, as the heat sapped all the moisture from his body.

The image flashed out of existence almost before it had time to register, then the heat grew even more intense and the rattling thing from the river reached him and white heat overwhelmed his consciousness. He was back in his inner sanctum just long enough to know two things: the heat radiating from his body had set the drapes on fire, and his fear of death was actually much, much stronger than he had ever realized.

When James Livingston Truly raised his blinds and pressed his brow against the window of his small office on the third floor of the CIA's New Headquarters Building, he could see a sad, scrawny tree—a sapling eighteen months ago when he'd been assigned this office and this posting (dead-end in every sense of the phrase)—waving crimson leaves like an underfed streetwalker trying to draw attention to her wares with a flashy red skirt.

Watching the bright leaves flutter in the morning breeze was preferable to sitting at his desk, because at least by the window, its glass cold against his palms and forehead, he was less likely to fall asleep. If last night hadn't been the worst night of his life, it was only because the competition for that honor was so steep.

Around two-thirty, while he slept in his Georgetown brownstone, a hammering noise had drilled into his skull. Truly dragged himself from bed, cursing the cold that seeped through the walls at night, and managed to stumble to the front door without falling down the stairs. The pounding continued until he opened the door. On his front stoop stood a mountain of a man dressed only in a long-sleeved tee shirt, jeans and work boots. He should have been an icicle, but he looked ready to kill.

Truly recognized the guy immediately, from pictures in his girlfriend Bethany Gardner's house and wallet. The aggrieved husband. His short blond hair, squared-off jaw and chin, and slightly hooded blue eyes all looked like they did in Bethany's pictures, although in none of those had he been wearing an expression of barely restrained fury.

He wore it now.

At five ten and one eighty-five, Truly was in reasonable shape. He knew he didn't *look* like much of a threat, with his neat brown hair and round-cheeked baby face and wide, liquid blue eyes. Especially dressed in green plaid cotton pajamas. At least it was winter, so he wasn't wearing his summer-weight silk Bugs Bunny boxers. Bethany's husband edged two fifteen and six four, with reach to match, and none of it appeared to be the kind of useless weight that Truly wished, especially at this moment, had been hidden in the photographs.

That and the tenor of the pounding—not a polite knock but an insistent barrage—made Truly believe that Bethany's husband (Perry, he remembered, a name he had always associated with wimpy little stamp

collector types, a prejudice he would have to revisit) had come with a different sort of pounding in mind. Truly backed away from the door a couple of steps and threw the big man a friendly, confused grin. “Help you?”

“You’re Truly.”

“That’s right. And you are...?” He didn’t want to let on that he had already figured it out. He’d take any advantage he could get, however slight.

“I would think you’d want to know what the husband of the chick you’re fucking looks like, if only so you could avoid me at the supermarket.”

“Look, it’s late,” Truly said, trying to sound gracious but a little peeved. That last part, at least, was real. “Maybe you had a little too much to drink or something, made a mistake, but I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Truly, because it won’t work. Bethany told me everything. How else would I have found you?”

Which was, Truly had to admit, an excellent question. If he hadn’t just been snatched from a sound sleep (and a moderately satisfying dream that had vanished like a soap bubble in the wind when he’d tried to capture it) he might have thought of it himself. How had Perry Gardner found him? Only Bethany’s betrayal could explain it. He made a half-hearted beckoning gesture. “All right,” he said. “Come on in and we’ll see if we can’t straighten this out.”

Somehow Perry squeezed through the doorway, banging the door shut behind him. He smelled like he had opened a whiskey barrel with his teeth. “There’s nothing to straighten out except you,” he said, advancing on Truly with his massive hands bunched into fists. “You don’t fucking fuck other men’s wives.”

“I know that,” Truly said, “believe me.” At some point he’d have to stop playing innocent and focus on defending himself. He was awake now, and he could take the guy. Bethany had said Perry was a sports nut and a college jock, but he worked in an office at the Treasury Department. He was a middle management type, not a man who found himself in physical altercations very often. Besides, the booze that had jacked up his nerve enough to approach Truly would also hamper his reflexes.

Then again, it had been years since Truly had been in a real fight. He was trained, and he kept fit, running a couple of miles a week, working out in the Langley gym. But he wasn’t a big man or an especially strong one. And his training was largely of the lethal variety. If Perry didn’t back off, Truly might not be able to stop the bigger man without killing him.

“Look, you want some coffee or something?” Truly asked, still hoping to defuse Perry’s anger. “I think we should sit down and talk about this.” He started for the couch.

Perry surprised him by throwing a punch instead of another threat. Truly tried to dodge it, but he was hemmed in between the couch and a coffee table. The big fist caught him in the ribs. The breath huffed out of him and he staggered back, raising an arm to block the next punch. He took this one on his left forearm and tried to catch Perry’s arm, missed. Another idea coming to mind, Truly feigned a stumble that landed him on top of the couch.

“Get up, you punk-ass motherfucker,” Perry said. He waited at a reasonable distance, apparently willing to give Truly a chance to gain his feet before continuing to pummel him.

But instead of rising, Truly reached under the couch and drew out an M9 Beretta pistol he’d cached there. He thumbed off the safety, pointed it at Perry and made a “back up” motion. Perry’s eyes went wide when he saw the weapon. Truly had no idea if Perry knew he was an operations officer at the CIA—the guy might think he was a cop or a criminal or just a well-armed citizen. “Dude...”

“I don’t want any trouble, Perry,” Truly said. “Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you since you showed up.”

“Then put away that gun,” Perry suggested. Truly gave that idea exactly a half-second of consideration before deciding against it.

“I don’t think so. Seems like the first time you’ve been willing to listen to reason.”

“I don’t want to get shot,” Perry said. “But you’re fucking my Bethany.”

“You don’t think I’m going to admit to that, do you?” Truly settled back on the couch, a brown and gold monstrosity that he’d been meaning to throw out or donate for about a dozen years now. He kept the 9mm aimed at Perry. “But just to be conversational, let’s say I was. Hypothetically, of course. Two points come to mind. First, she must have wanted me to, so the discussion you really should be having is with her. And second, now that I’ve met you, surely you don’t think I’m stupid enough to ever do it again. You’re a walking tank, pal, and I won’t always have this nine on me.” He was dissembling—he was usually armed, just not with the gun he kept hidden under his couch. Then again, in his trade dissembling was a way of life.

“I guess that’s true.”

“I know it’s got to hurt, Perry. Trust me, I never would have intentionally done anything to cause you pain. I’m still not saying it’s true—that’s something you’re going to have to work out with Bethany—but if it is, it was intended to be something you would never know about.”

Perry nodded, understanding that Truly’s was, in the proper spirit of Washington, D.C., a non-confessional confession. He looked like he wanted to go a few more rounds, but the barrel of a gun resembled a gaping tunnel when it was pointed right at you. “Maybe you’re right,” Perry said after several long moments. “I guess we have some stuff to work out. Me and Bethany, I mean.”

“I guess you do.”

After a couple more minutes, during which Perry fumbled about like a naked man who had unexpectedly found himself inside a convent with no knowledge of how he had come to be there, lost, embarrassed, and deeply troubled, he went back out into the cold night. Truly stayed on the couch, his weapon in his hands, not trusting that Perry was really gone until he heard a car start up and drive away. He sat for another ten minutes or so, wondering why Bethany would have told Perry anything about their affair, much less given her husband his name and home address. Things had seemed to be fine between them, or so he had believed.

There were two points of view to any relationship, of course. And when one person thought everything was jim-dandy because he was able to see his girlfriend a couple of evenings a week, getting laid and enjoying nice but not painfully long dinners, once every month or two even spending the night together in a hotel someplace like Front Royal or Lexington or Baltimore’s harbor area, maybe the other was tired of lying to her spouse, or wanted to be able to spend holidays with him without thinking of the lover left behind, or to be able to hold her man’s hand in public without worrying about who might see them. Bethany had seemed subdued on their last couple of evenings together, reticent, which she had attributed to pressures at work, but which might also have been a sign, if only Truly had been able to read it, of growing discontent.

Their last really good date, he realized, had been to see Shawn Colvin at Wolf Trap Farm Park, at the end of summer. They had arrived before sunset, and sat on the lawn with a picnic basket and a nice Merlot. The sky had turned gold and then indigo, stars popping out one by one like musicians walking onstage, then flooding into the sky. Colvin’s voice had washed across them like honey, singing about joy and heartbreak, triumph and despair, and he and Bethany had snuggled close together against the cooling night air.

Every date after that had been marred by something—a pointless fight, Bethany’s unknowable sadness. He should have recognized it, should have pressed her on it more thoroughly. Maybe he could have headed this off in some way. As it was, the changing tide of her heart had carved a hole in his.

The hell with it, he decided at last. It was almost three in the morning. He had to go to work in a few hours, fighting Key Bridge traffic to get to McLean. If he was going to get any sleep, it had to be now. He tucked the Beretta back into its hidey-hole under the couch and headed upstairs.

His cell phone beeped when he was halfway up. By the time he reached it, on his nightstand next to an empty cup of water and a T. Jefferson Parker paperback thriller, it had stopped. He looked at the screen and saw that he had received a new text message.

Terrific. He sat down hard on the bed, shoulders slumping. This could only be more shitty news. Nobody texted at three a.m. to tell you that you had been promoted or won a trip to Tahiti.

His sigh was melodramatic, but he allowed himself that small theatrical touch as he read the screen. “Perry will be over to see you, if he hasn’t already been there. I’m so sorry, James. Honestly. I know you won’t think so, and I won’t blame you if you hate me for it. I had to tell him, had to be truthful with him so we can fix our marriage before its too late. Its over between us, James, and I’m sorry and I wish I was brave enough to tell you in person, but I’m not. Please don’t contact me.”

At least Bethany had written the message herself. She refused to use modern text-speak, which would have been more like, “I no u wont think so,” and, “b4 its 2 late.” Besides, although she was an educated woman, she had never been able to get the hang of which “it’s” was which, so this note was right in character.

But the whole idea of breaking up via text message seemed more appropriate for a seventeen-year-old than for a professional woman closing in on thirty-five. Truly was just four years older, and it never would have occurred to him as an acceptable method. He guessed Bethany was more high-tech savvy than he would ever be,

Truly was distracting himself with nonsensical details in order to avoid dwelling on the real hurt that waited on the other side of them. He possessed enough self-awareness to understand that it was a survival mechanism he needed right now. He felt like he had been hit by an eighteen-wheeler that was backing up in order to squash him again.

He put the phone down, climbed back under his covers and sat there with the light off, willing sleep to take him. It hadn’t then, and so he fought

it now, in his office after lunch, feeling the cold smoothness of the window and watching the flutter of red leaves and wishing that his life belonged to someone else.

The phone on his desk startled him—he had actually drifted off, for a moment, his face against the glass—and he lunged for it. Bethany! She knew the direct number to his desk, and not many other people did. He snatched up the receiver. “This is James Truly,” he said.

“James, it’s Millicent. Millicent Wong.”

His heart sank. “Hello, Millicent.”

“I detect a distinct drop in your level of enthusiasm,” she said. “I’ve disappointed you in some way?”

“I...I was expecting another call,” Truly said. “It has nothing to do with you, Millicent. I’m always happy to talk to you.”

“People keep saying that, and then I keep sharing bad news and changing their minds.”

“Maybe it’s time to try a new approach.”

“I would love to, James. But at the moment, I’m afraid, bad news is the only kind I have. Something has happened to Lawrence.”

He had been picturing Millicent—petite, with a luxurious head of rich black hair that, topping her slender body, almost made her look top-heavy. She was no taller than five two, not counting the hair, which added another three or four inches. She often wore spike heels and gained another couple of inches that way. Still, she’d have to hold on to a couple of five-pound bags of sugar to push the scale over a hundred.

Now that mental image shifted. “Lawrence Ingersoll?” he asked, envisioning the curly-haired, dour-faced man in his typical dark clothing.

“Yes, Lawrence Ingersoll,” Millicent said.

“What happened to him?”

“I’m hoping you can find out. Last night—your time—I detected a serious occult anomaly. Disruptions of the ley lines—”

“Spare me the details, please,” Truly interrupted, knowing that she could go on about them at some length, but that she would lose him by the end of the first sentence. The fact that he had been put in charge of Moon Flash, the CIA’s officially nonexistent continuation of psychic research programs Grill Flame, Sun Streak and Star Gate—discontinued in 1996, as far as anyone outside the building (with a very few exceptions) knew—didn’t mean he understood such things. “What about Ingersoll?”

“Well, the disruption seemed to be centered not far from his home, so I asked him if he might be able to look into it. I never heard back from him, and when I tried to call him again I got no response. Concerned, I went

online and checked the *Mineral County Miner*, the newspaper in his town in Colorado. It said that there was a fire at his house last night, and although he isn't mentioned by name, it reported that no one survived."

"Christ," Truly said. His bad day was getting worse. He could almost hear the air brakes of that metaphorical semi as it slowed for another run at him.

"Exactly," Millicent said. "So I hoped you could investigate, see if he really died in the fire, and find out just what is going on there."

"I'll check it out," Truly said. "Thanks for the tip."

"One thing I'd like to make clear, James. To we practitioners of the occult arts, the immediate consequences of this sort of thing are inconvenient—and, obviously, sometimes dangerous. But the mystical energies around us can't be divorced from the rest of life—there are vast areas of convergence, for instance, between ley lines and string theories of physics. Over the long term, this sort of disruption could affect—well, we just don't know. Time? Weather? The very nature of reality as we understand it? If it continues, I fear that we'll find out. But I'd really rather not."

Truly didn't know what to say. Doomsday scenarios were common enough in the intelligence game, but they were usually attached to the threat of Commies or Islamic fundamentalists or some other group with access to nuclear weapons. A mystical version was beyond his imagining.

Millicent seemed to grasp that, and kept her sigh brief and subdued. "Please let me know what you find out, James. Lawrence and I weren't particularly close, but I like him. I would hate to not know."

"I will," Truly promised.

"At the same time, I shall be exploring some alternative angles on my end."

He knew she meant paranormal angles, and didn't pursue it. Those were the kind she was qualified at, while he decidedly was not.

But he wouldn't turn down the help.

* * *

In the next twenty-five minute, Truly made four phone calls. The last one was to his boss, Ronald Loesser, who he met shortly after in the atrium of the New Headquarters Building (called that to distinguish it from the Old Headquarters Building that had once been the main structure at the Langley campus—a compound Truly still had a hard time thinking of as the George Bush Center for Intelligence, named in 1999 for the former president and Director of Central Intelligence), beneath the suspended U-2 plane model. Loesser hated to let Truly come to his office almost as much as he hated

going into the nearly empty suite of offices dedicated to the Moon Flash project, so they usually met on neutral ground.

Truly wore a navy blue pea coat over his suit, and when he spotted Loesser, the older man not only had a leather barn coat on but was clutching a Styrofoam cup of coffee and letting steam wash over his mouth and chin. He barely glanced Truly's way, then ticked his gaze outside and started walking. Truly adjusted his course and caught up with Loesser in the courtyard, where the man had taken a seat on a bench near the main section of the Kryptos sculpture. During warmer weather, there might be Agency employees standing around the sculpture—a blue-green oxidized copper wall shaped like a piece of paper scrolling out of a printer, with a sequence of letters punched into it—trying to decipher the code it carried. This time of year, Truly and Loesser were alone, and the babbling fountain running beside the sculpture would help keep their conversation private from anyone who might wander by.

“What is it, Jim?” Loesser asked without preamble. He knew Truly never went by Jim, but he regularly pretended to forget. Just one more illustration of the way he felt about Truly. Loesser was an assistant to the director of the National Clandestine Service—or an assistant to that assistant, Truly could never be certain how many levels from the top his supervisor really was. Loesser would fire Truly in a hot minute if he thought he could, but he believed Truly to be protected—a belief Truly didn't share—by his father, former United States Senator Willard Carsten Truly. Instead, he had arranged for Truly to be given ownership of the Moon Flash project, which was as close to fired as one could get while remaining on the Agency's payroll.

“One of our people has been killed.”

“An Agency employee?”

“One of *my* people,” Truly amended. “A contract operative. Lawrence Ingersoll. Winston brought him in, after the first World Trade Center bombing.” Barry Winston had been Truly's immediate predecessor in this post, until the day he ran a hose from his exhaust pipe into his car window and sat in his sealed garage listening to Sidney Bechet CDs until the car ran out of gas. His housekeeper found him two days later.

“One of Winston's charlatans, then.” Loesser sipped his coffee, his hard gray eyes appraising Truly over the cup's rim. His hair was short and silver, neatly combed, and he affected the air of an old-time parson who disapproved of virtually everything and everyone created since the end of World War II.

“They’re not all charlatans,” Truly began. At Loesser’s disapproving frown he stopped. “I don’t necessarily have a lot more faith in them than you do, Ron,” Truly said. In fact, although when he had accepted the job, he hadn’t, he had since grown to respect their abilities more than he’d ever expected. He would never admit that to Ron Loesser, though. “But you’ve assigned me to deal with them, and I’m doing that. Now one of them is dead. And it’s not just that. Another one told me she called him last night, to ask him to look into—I know what you’re going to say—a disruption in the ley lines. He agreed to check it out, and the next thing anybody knew his house burned down with him inside. He didn’t even try to get out, and the arson investigator’s initial conclusion is that the fire began where he was sitting, although they couldn’t find any source of ignition or fuel there. It all sounds suspect to me.”

“He’s a U.S. citizen?” Loesser asked.

“Yes.”

“And there’s no definitive evidence of foul play? Have the locals completed their investigation? Probably not, if it all happened last night.”

“Of course they haven’t. I don’t know how big Creede, Colorado is, but it’s no major metropolis. It’s going to take them a while.”

“Then let them do what they have to do,” Loesser said. “No sense in you running off to Colorado now. You’d just be in the way, and we don’t have any indication that this is any of the Agency’s business. We don’t mess around with American citizens inside the U.S.”

He said that last part as if he was explaining something that Truly had never heard before. “But he works for us.”

“Part time. He works for others, too, right? Or for himself? What’s to say this is at all related to what he does for us?”

“What Millicent Wong told me, for starters.” He left out her warnings of global catastrophe—that would just muddy the water even more.

“Unless Millicent Wong pays your salary, Jim, you ought to give more credence to what I tell you.” He crushed the empty cup and looked about for someplace to toss it. “Just wait and see.”

Ron Loesser rose from the bench and walked toward a freestanding trashcan. He tossed his cup at it. The cup hit the rim and bounced away, but Loesser was already taking rapid strides toward the building. He didn’t look back, at his cup or at Truly.

Truly picked up the cup and dunked it into the can. He felt an obligation toward those who had worked for the Agency, even if it wasn’t their primary occupation, even if no practical application had been found for their abilities. But given the way his day had begun, he didn’t mind being

told not to put any effort into finding out what had happened to Lawrence Ingersoll. Just staying alert and coherent would take all the energy he had to offer.

Walking back toward his office he realized some of Loesser's coffee had leaked onto his fingers. He shook a drop away, then sniffed his hand. Loesser took his coffee black, strong and rich. Suddenly a cup seemed like a good idea. Truly couldn't drown himself in booze at work—and he wasn't a hard-drinking guy under any circumstances—but a good jolt of caffeine might keep him going until it was time to head back to his empty home, and his now equally empty life, on the other side of the Potomac.

The Colorado River. The Conchos. The Crooked. The Cannonball. The Missouri, the Musselshell, the Madison. The Snake, Salt, Salmon, Secesh, St. Mary. The Canadian River. The Russian River. The American, the Frenchman, the Republican. Shoshone, Sheyenne, Gila, Mohawk, Flathead, Klamath, Kootenai, Pawnee. Eel, Snake, Swan, Bear, Beaverhead.

In his cell—a cave, really, with a triple-locked solid steel door over the opening—Wade Scheiner tried to make the hours pass by remembering the names of as many western rivers as he could. He had visited many of those rivers. Some he had run in rubber rafts or wooden dories or canoes made of steel or fiberglass. He had gone swimming in some, wearing trunks or not, most often in the company of Byrd McCall, his best friend during those carefree summer days of youth when hurtling headlong into the greenish-brown waters of the Guadalupe or the ever-present Rio Grande seemed like the ultimate expression of sweet freedom.

Outside his prison, he was certain, the war raged on, Iraqis killing Iraqis with Americans caught in the middle. Before his abduction, he had covered it for CNN. Now he was part of the story.

Tongue, Milk, Knife, Kettle, Boulder, Sun, Powder, Encampment, Big Hole. The Green, the White, the Red, the Ruby, Big Blue, Little Blue, the Greys, the Vermilion, the Verdigris, the Yellowstone. Neosho, Niobrara, Little Nemaha, Wynoochee, Owyhee, Coweeman, Humptulips.

Wade had attempted to keep track of the days of his imprisonment by scratching out hash marks on the cave wall with a bit of stone. Without windows, though, with captors who fed him when they wanted to and woke him at will and allowed him to bathe (using lukewarm water in a metal pail) only sporadically, he had no way to accurately gauge the passage of time. At least ten days had passed, he believed, but maybe it had been two weeks or a little more. Seemed like forever.

His dark blond hair was matted, his normally clean-shaven cheeks and chin thick with whiskers. He itched all over, but when he scratched he worried that he was rubbing the stench of this place into his pores. His jeans and long-sleeved dress shirt were torn and filthy and they had taken his belt, his wallet, his ID, had thrown his cell phone out the car window as soon as they had shot his driver and squeezed inside around him. He was glad he'd left his iPod and his satellite phone and his video equipment in the hotel room, along with backup identification and most of his cash reserves. He

just hoped it would all still be there whenever he was freed. The cave's temperature was steady, humid and not too cold, and he had been taking off his shirt and wadding it up as a pillow when he slept.

All he knew about the time now was that he had slept for a longer period than usual, and he was hungry. No, starving. No one had come with food. His captors had left nothing in his cell to occupy his attention; once the crude steel bunk and toilet had lost their entertainment value, all he had were occasional meals and even more occasional conversation. Lacking both left him with only his rivers, in whose waters he could feel untethered, adrift. There he could stave off the terror that threatened to drown him when he considered his lonely plight.

The San Joaquin, he remembered, the San Jacinto, San Pedro, St. Joe, St. Regis, St. Maries.

And that dream! He inspected the rugged rock wall next to his cot, where during the night he had believed that he saw several glowing shapes. They had reminded him of some of the Indian rock art he had seen at Smuggler's Canyon and Hueco Tanks close to home, and scattered elsewhere throughout the West. A jagged line, a double arch, an open-mouthed face with looping ears. He remembered seeing them, an unexpected source of light in the dark cave—which never happened, since the weak steel-caged incandescent bulb in his cell stayed on all the time—and getting up for a closer look, feeling faint heat reflecting off them. At the time he would have sworn he was awake.

But that wasn't possible, he realized now. None of it. He had dreamed the whole thing. Not the first bizarre dream he'd had in captivity; they were quickly becoming the norm, nightmares of being cornered and shot, or beaten to death, or having his limbs sawed off one by one. He bolted awake from one of those at least once during every period of deep sleep, and then, not knowing how long he had been asleep or if he would soon be visited, he would have difficulty going back to sleep, and he would lie back on the hard cot willing the panicked drumming of his heart to slow, the surge of adrenaline coursing through him to taper off. Few of those dreams had seemed so real, though. He tucked the memory away, returned to countering fear and hunger with his beloved rivers.

Rio Costilla, Rio Paraje, Rio Chama, Rio Penasco, Rio Puerco. The Rio Grande, on whose banks he had grown up, and where he would rather be, at this moment, than somewhere near the Tigris. McKenzie, James, Dolores, Gunnison, Owens, Solomon, Reese, Quinn, Madison.

The names were coming more slowly as the protestations of Wade's stomach grew more insistent. His last meal had consisted of stale bread and

cheese, which he'd been given with a cup of water before he had gone to sleep. Fear trumped hunger in the short term, Wade figured, but over the long run, a man had to have something in his belly if he was going to put any energy into being afraid. He hadn't seen anyone since Ali (he just assumed all the names he'd been given were phony, but having nothing else to go by he used them just the same) had come to collect his dishes. That had been many hours ago. By now someone should have come in to shout abuses at him, to accuse him of being a spy, to hit him with sticks, or else to engage him in what seemed like a serious discussion of the Koran and the advantages of the Muslim faith over the Christian—"seemed," because while Wade was no religious zealot, nor did he have any problem with Islam except when it was used as an excuse for murder, the few arguments he tried to make in favor of Christianity's precepts as he understood them were shouted down instead of given a legitimate hearing.

But they were in charge, so he listened when they talked and he didn't try to convert them. He wanted them to see him as a person and not an object, certainly not a soldier for Christ. They called American soldiers "crusaders" and "occupiers," and he tried to impress upon them that he was a journalist without a horse in the race except for the truth.

Had they forgotten about him? He didn't see how that was possible, unless perhaps they had captured someone else with a higher profile. He was sure the U.S. media were covering his disappearance, which probably meant that Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were as well. Still, he was just a TV reporter, and the city teemed with better captive material than that.

He had tried not to call undue attention to himself. He didn't want to be the kind of problem that was most easily solved by putting a couple of bullets in his skull and dumping him in the reeds beside a road. Now, though, his stomach felt like it was twisting in on itself. Even last night's stale bread would taste like a slice of heaven on a plate. He steeled himself for the worst and pounded on the steel door with both fists. "Hey!" he shouted. "I'm hungry!" He repeated the appeal in his functional Arabic.

He didn't hear any response. He waited several seconds and banged again, getting a steady drum riff going. *The Max Weinberg of the cell block*, he thought, before realizing that while his own Germanic name had set off some alarms for his captors, the name of the E Street Band's drummer would have been even worse to have in this situation. Not much was less palatable to the Sunni fundamentalists who had captured him than an agnostic journalist, but a Jewish rock musician would easily top that on the hate parade.

I could sure go for a rocking version of "Rosalita" or "Badlands" or

“Adam Raised a Cain” right now, though, he thought. He’d heard the expression “I’d give my left nut,” but never before in life had the likelihood of needing that body part again seemed so remote, and the desire to hear some flat out rock and roll so strong, that he would have considered it.

Even more than music, though, he needed food. His anger growing along with his hunger, he grabbed at the door handle and pounded again.

The handle turned easily in his grasp.

Wade pulled. The door creaked and swung open.

A trap? It almost had to be. He couldn’t see any other reason his captors would have left him in his cell with all three locks on the door unlocked. Still, they weren’t the kind of people who would need the “prisoner trying to escape” excuse if they wanted to snuff him. The Sunni insurgency had made no secret of its willingness to kill for their cause, with little provocation or none at all. Journalists were not exempt from that; they seemed a favorite target, as somewhere around eighty of them had been murdered so far during this war. If they wanted to kill him, they would do it, excuse or no.

Still, he looked both ways, up and down a dimly lit tunnel, before he stepped through the door. When no one shot at him, he kept going.

He had been brought in with a canvas bag over his head, his hands zip-tied behind him, insurgents hauling him along by the arms. He wasn’t sure which way to go. He stood in the hallway, the hairs on the back of his neck tickling as if someone stared down a gun sight at him, and tried to hear anything except the beating of his own heart.

He couldn’t. Total silence. As if the world had gone away.

Wade didn’t know if he should call out, or keep his trap shut and thank whatever god was looking out for him. If he did encounter his captors, surprising them might guarantee taking a bullet. And really, what were the chances that he could get all the way outside—with no clue what the layout was, how far underground he had been held, or anything else about his prison?

He walked a dozen steps to his right and stopped. The air tasted stale. He turned and went the other way. Fresher. Fresh enough, anyway, to make him aware of his own brutal stink.

The arching cave roof brought back horrific memories, as had being beaten up, memories that threatened to... He shook his head to halt that train of thought, back-burnered both topics and kept going. Ahead, the strand of wires connecting caged light bulbs took a sharp right. Wade followed. Now he could feel an actual draft, faint but unmistakable.

With every step, he expected to hear the click of a weapon being

readied, the banging of a door or the scuff of anxious shoes on the tunnel floor. None of that happened. He reached a staircase that wound up, the steps shallow and worn smooth by what must have been centuries of use. As Wade climbed, a smell insinuated itself into his consciousness, overpowering his body odor.

He allowed himself a fleeting grin.

A river.

An urban river, with water and fish and organic wastes—feces and corpses—and spilled diesel fuel mixed into it in more or less equal proportions. It *had* to be the Tigris. Wade hurried his ascent, his right hand brushing against the rough rock inner wall of the tightly curving staircase. Here and there wooden timbers shored up the roof.

He reached a level where another rock-walled tunnel led away from the stairs. Lights led down this tunnel as well, but the staircase continued to wind up, and it seemed like the river smell wafted down from above. Wade skipped the side tunnel and kept climbing.

Finally, he came around a curve and saw a door at the top of the staircase. End of the line? He thought he might just sit down and weep if that door was locked, after all this. Maybe the whole thing was some new form of torture. Maybe he was being videotaped right now, his captors watching a monitor and laughing at the distraught expression on his face. “Stupid American spy journalist actually thought he could walk out of here,” one would say, and the rest would just crack up.

Whatever. He wasn't turning around now, not without at least trying the door. He climbed to the top and listened, pressing his palms against the door's bare wooden planks. He couldn't hear a thing on the other side.

He pushed against the door. The wood was old and weak, spongy. Locked or not, he could smash through it without much trouble. Not without noise, of course. If insurgents were on the other side, they'd hear him coming. At this point, he no longer cared. He had come this far and he would keep going if the slightest hope of freedom remained.

As it happened, he didn't need to break the door down. A rusted bolt held it closed, and that snapped easily. He passed into what seemed like a vast chamber, although the light from the bulbs in the staircase below didn't penetrate far and there was no light source inside. The river smell was overlaid here with something sour, like garbage.

This looked like a storeroom, although not one that had seen use in the last century or so. Wooden shelving had collapsed near one wall, with what appeared to be many layers of dust coating the debris. Wade oriented himself and let the door close long enough to scramble to the pile and snatch

up one of the larger pieces. Retracing his steps, he found the door and propped it open with the hunk of wood.

He still hadn't heard a sound made by anything but his own progress. Twenty minutes must have passed since he had left his cell, but no audible alarm had been raised. Something didn't add up. *Not that I'm complaining.* It was strange enough to keep him on edge, expecting an ugly surprise at any moment.

The big room contained trunks and crates, all of which, like the shelves, looked ancient and seldom visited. Wade had no idea what might wait beyond where the faint light fell. He couldn't imagine that the door he had come through was the only entrance, though. Why put a storeroom at the top of a high staircase, when there seemed to be plenty of space in the tunnels below?

So there had to be another way in. Wade walked across the floor—ceramic tile, not rock like the cavern floors—into the darkness beyond the light's reach. He barked his shin on something hard and round and muttered a soft curse. Feeling his way around it (some kind of urn, he thought), he kept working his way toward where the far wall should be.

After two more bruises on his legs and a growing ache in his lower back from bending forward to grope for obstacles in the dark, he found another wall. It felt dry and dusty, but relatively smooth beneath the layer of dust. Plaster maybe, instead of bare stone. Solid, too. Tapping on it, Wade felt no give beneath his knuckles.

He kept one hand on the wall and started working his way left. After a couple dozen steps, the wall vanished. He probed with his foot and found a stair. He crouched beside it. Wood, not stone or plaster. The staircase was at least eight feet wide, leading up into impenetrable darkness.

Anything could be up there. He wouldn't be able to see a snake, a tiger, an entire Sunni militia. Or a Shia one—they were no better.

Biting back his fears, Wade climbed again.

This had all taken too long. By now they knew he was out. They had to. Maybe it was a trap all along, and maybe not, but they would certainly have the exits covered—if this indeed led to an exit, and wasn't just a long, exhausting journey toward ultimate disappointment. Hopelessness filled him and he almost sat down where he was, to wait in the dark until they found him with their flashlights and their guns.

But then he smelled the river again, and he climbed.

At the ninth stair Wade had to push through a spiderweb that wrapped around him like a shroud. He pawed it from his eyes and mouth and kept going. A dozen stairs, fourteen, and then he came to another wooden door.

A double door, this time, latched from the other side. Pressing his eye to the minute gap between the two doors, he saw natural light.

This door was at the top of the stairs, with no level space to get a running start. In the darkness he felt unbalanced, so he didn't want to rear back and kick at it. If he fell down those stairs he could easily break a leg—or his neck. Surviving the fall might be his worst option; if no one found him he would stay there until he died of thirst. Everybody had to die sometime, but not that way, he hoped. Wade loved the water; he wanted to die beneath it, leaving behind only a splintered boat washed up on a sandy spit in some river, not craving a drink in a dark hole beneath Baghdad.

He pressed against the door. Something snapped and it started to give way at the hinges. He pushed harder, putting all of his weight against it. Wood splintered, the hinge pulled free, and Wade tumbled into a lighted space, landing on his hands and knees on top of most of the door.

The racket he made was ferocious.

And yet no one came running, no gunshots echoed though the space, no bullets *spanged* into the tiled walls around him.

Gaining his feet, he saw that he had fallen into a mosque—old, no longer used, but a mosque just the same. It had probably been hit in the early bombing, the days of “shock and awe,” he guessed, but on further reflection he thought the damage might pre-date even that assault. Massive holes Swiss-cheesed the walls and an intricately filigreed blue roof dome, letting daylight in. The back wall—the one through which he had come—was pockmarked with bullet holes. Wooden benches had been reduced to rubble, and trash—including newspapers (Wade recognized several of the papers that had sprung up out of nowhere in the weeks following Saddam's fall: *The Dawn of Baghdad*, *A New Day*, and *Those Who Have Been Freed*, mixed in with older, pre-invasion copies of *Babel* and the *Iraq Daily*, the official English-language paper of Saddam's government), glass and plastic bottles, greasy food wrappers, flattened shipping cartons with Arabic writing on the sides—covered the floor. This was where the garbage smell originated. For all he knew there might be bodies beneath the detritus. Wade didn't think his captors had taken this route into the tunnels, because it didn't look like anyone had passed through here in months.

He didn't stand around wondering for long. Across the big room a doorway gaped, sunlight streaming through it. Wade pushed through the debris and outside. He found himself on a city street lined with low, mud-walled buildings and courtyards. Peering over the top of a low wall, he saw a quiet, shaded yard, and beyond that, the Tigris itself tossed shards of sunlight back at him. The sparkle was all show—since the war had started,

the Tigris had become ever more polluted. It was not a river he would choose to swim in, but at this distance it looked inviting.

From the position of the sun, he knew that if he followed the river to his left—to the west—it would eventually lead him to the Green Zone. There he would find Americans, soldiers and diplomats. Until then, he could only hope to encounter a U.S. or Iraqi patrol, and pray that no militia soldiers or insurgents spotted him. Or anyone else. Americans were about as popular in Iraq as avian flu was in the States.

He started walking, keeping the river on his right. The streets were strangely empty, as were the skies. He heard no screaming F-16s, no big lumbering transports, no helicopters buzzing overhead. He didn't even hear any birds. It was as if a nuclear bomb had gone off while he'd been underground, wiping out all life in the city. He hadn't been that far underground, though. He would have felt the blast. If they had survived, his captors would have brought him up, forced him to bear witness to yet another American atrocity.

Except for the silence, it was a typical Baghdad residential street. Power and phone wires crisscrossed overhead, and here and there obviously illegal splices directed pirated electricity into homes. Buff-colored buildings, some with balconies, faced onto the street. Their yards were hidden behind walls. A few spindly palms brushed the sky.

Cars and trucks had been parked haphazardly along the sides of the road. Wade kept an eye out for any with keys inside, since hotwiring wasn't in his skill set but wheels might make the trip to the Green Zone quicker. On the streets, the smell of shit competed with the river's odor, because trucks hosed down the dust with untreated sewer water. The aromas of sewage and death had become inescapable inside the city.

At the end of a city block, someone had hauled together the carcasses of three burnt-out cars as a barricade. This was the dividing line between neighborhoods, between Sunni and Shiite. Ordinarily men would be gathered here with guns, but there weren't any now. Wade passed through the narrow space left for foot traffic. *So much for stealing a car*, he told himself. *That might just complicate things.*

The next block was rubble, burned-down buildings, chunks of stone and concrete, twisted steel, flame-blackened timbers. Both sides of the street had been destroyed, the debris almost meeting in the middle. He picked his way gingerly down the narrow aisle. At the beginning of the next block, another barricade, this one made with materials salvaged from the rubble. Still no guards.

After ten minutes or so, he finally saw a sign of life.

A pig, a scrawny sow with ribs showing through her flesh, trotted across the street ahead of him and disappeared into an alley. When Wade reached the alley, he paused, looked around the corner cautiously, in case someone waited there who had released the pig, or who she had been running from. But the alley was as empty as the rest of the streets. He looked the other way, but the pig was gone.

The emptiness of the tunnels beneath the mosque had been unexpected, but this was just too weird. People had been fleeing the city—hell, the whole country—by the hundreds of thousands. An Iraqi with a toothache had to go to Jordan, because all the dentists already had. But there were still plenty of people around.

So where could they be? What had happened to everyone? Wade hated questions that didn't have answers. He tried to block them out with his rivers, running through their names as he walked, his own private rosary. Belle Fourche, Marais des Cygnes, Coeur D'Alene, Loup, Gros Ventre, Touchet, Sevier, Deschutes, Payette. Arikaree, Apishapa, Chikaskia, Yampa, Yaak.

After another few minutes, wondering why there had been no boat traffic on the river, he heard a vehicle. At last! Someone was alive.

The sound came from the direction Wade was headed anyway, toward the Green Zone. With each passing second, though, his heart hammered in his chest, harder and harder. To have come all this way just to be shot down by militia soldiers, or worse, by Americans who didn't realize who he was....

He crouched down between a white Toyota and a Mercedes panel truck and watched, ready to dive beneath the truck if necessary. When he saw a small convoy of Humvees flying United States colors, he thought he might burst out crying. He had to take the chance. He wiped away a single tear, sniffed, and stepped into the middle of the street, waving his hands.

The front Humvee braked to a stop, road dust billowing around it like smoke. Long moments passed. Wade couldn't see them from here but he could envision the barrels of dozens of weapons all leveling on him. One guy with a nervous twitch and it was all over.

Finally, a soldier, a jug-eared, gap-toothed black kid who looked fresh off the family farm, climbed down from the passenger side of the front Humvee. "Wade Scheiner?" the kid asked. "Sir, are you Wade Scheiner, with CNN?"

Then the tears did come, and Wade couldn't stop them, and when the soldiers spilled from their vehicles, shouting his name, recognizing him, he couldn't even make out their features through the saltwater in his eyes.

Saved, he kept thinking, I've been saved, I've been motherfucking saved at last and I don't even know how or why.