

Flesh And Blood

A short excerpt from *Going Under*

November 2013-present

It was as bad as Snake Tongue, this descent of Red Oak Hole, maybe worse in a way, that Doyle couldn't see where he was going at all. At Snake Tongue he couldn't see much, but at least it was something. Here he had to rely on the muffled voice of Chris Hobbs, a caver he didn't know, to guide him downward. Trust was imperative in this sort of thing, and Doyle Hubbard was not by nature a trusting soul. For that matter, Chris Hobbs was not a trustworthy caver. Or at least, he had not been in the past.

And Doyle had heard about Chris Hobbs. Had heard about the wild excursions to Webster Cave, where he had blindly dived a virgin siphon, popping through into more than two miles of stupendous new cave. He had mapped that cave too, and seven miles on top of that, in the process uncovering the secrets of one of the most epic water caves in central Kentucky.

But Hobbs was brash, outspoken, and controversial. He did things his way, and if you didn't like it, tough. He was a member of OVSS, but he never caved with them, preferring to run with his own little group, which he called the Kentucky Cave Studies Group. They did their own thing, digging open new cave entrances, plotting new locations, and generally irritating OVSS in a backhanded kind of way by claiming as their own one of the most important sections of underground Sinking Creek. Hobbs stated it was not grandstanding as the likes of George English and Kevin Luft of OVSS insisted, that he was just trying to protect his interests, as Webster Cave was a part of the larger Sinking Creek system. That rapidly expanding Druids Hole was also a part of that same Sinking Creek watershed was merely a coincidence, and Chris had a natural "in" with the explorers of Druids, and its various surrounding caves.

Chris Hobbs was not a big man, standing only about five feet and a couple of inches, but he was immensely strong, and with a decade of experience in some truly awesome caves to his credit. He was also a talented cave photographer whose work had graced the covers of newspapers and magazines. That he would be called in this sort of a case on served to emphasize his importance to the area and the caving community.

But, that reputation still preceded him, and that was what gave Doyle pause as he wriggled downward. A full body length he had descended now, like a spider being washed down a drain. It was nerve wracking, this was, and as the distance increased between himself and the worried faces of Danny and Carol Ann peering down from above, he found himself becoming curiously and very uncharacteristically frantic, his breaths coming short, difficult and shallow.

Oh, damn it all, he thought. How many hours was I stuck in Snake Tongue, and now I'm going to panic here? Not even twenty feet from daylight? That's just flat out stupid.

He stopped for a moment to collect himself. Hobbs, blessedly, figured out what was happening from below and didn't say a word. Five years prior, he probably would've unleashed

a stream of profanity up, trying to convince his companion to move, that losing one's nerve was a sign of cowardice. But Chris Hobbs had grown and matured, and few who knew him could deny that he was a different person than he had been at fifteen and sixteen. They still might not want to cave with him, but they couldn't help but admire him.

Slowly Doyle worked his way down to where the hole narrowed and began a gentle jog toward the hollow outside. "All right," he called out, "I think I'm at the part you warned me about. You going to talk me down from here?"

"Yeah," Hobbs's voice echoed upward. "Like I said, just keep your hands at your sides as much as you can. Don't try and hold on to anything, and I do mean anything. It's going to look really, really hairy for the next couple of body lengths, but the going is actually a little easier. Just wedge yourself, then slowly let yourself slide down. In about five feet you'll feel a little projection you can sort of sit on. Then let your feet dangle, and I'll come up and guide them down. Okay?"

"All right," Doyle replied. What else could he do? He was too far down to try to climb back out, that was for sure, and only now did he realize that for the second time in this rescue he'd allowed himself to be put into a position of no return.

Slowly, slowly, he eased himself downward, using his body to lever itself into place so as not to allow himself to slip uncontrollably. A foot, two, three and then he could feel the projection Chris had talked about. He sat on it, rather uncomfortably, trying to ignore the shattered rock only inches from his face.

"Jeez, you weren't kidding," he muttered. "This is awful. It looks like the only thing holding this whole section through here in place is the grace of God."

"I prefer to think of it as our combined wills," Chris said, closer now, just below Doyle's feet, in fact. "Ready? I'm going to take your feet now, and if you just let yourself slide down, I'll put them on the footholds."

"Wait just a minute." He looked upward at Carol Ann's plaintive looking face, which looked so far away and alone now. "I'm coming back, you know," he said, trying for a smile, but only managing something akin to a grimace.

"You'd better," she said to him. "I'll be waiting when you come out with those people, because I know you will, Doyle. I believe it."

"All right, Chris," Doyle said. "Bend me shape me, any way you want me."

"Where have you been all my life?" Chris laughed, taking Doyle's right foot and gently directing it as Doyle slowly lowered himself. "Okay. Three feet. Two. One. Six inches. There, you've got it. Now rest a minute, and we'll do the next bit. It's another five feet, and when it's done, you'll be on the bottom. Plenty of room for the both of us, and there's a going passage down here. Okay? Here we go."

The second section was as bad as the first, worse in a way because it was longer, but better in that instead of shattered rock, it was now solid limestone that surrounded them. Carefully, Hobbs eased Doyle down till his feet just touched the floor, then he pulled them

backward. “Keep on coming, Doyle,” he said in a comforting voice. “You’re doing great. Almost there. When you’re down the rest of the way you’ll be on your knees, then all you’ll have to do is scoot backward a few feet and you’ll be able to turn around. There you go, that’s it. Just a little more...there.”

And at last it was done, and Doyle was able to carefully turn around and look up into the beaming face of Chris Hobbs. “Hell of a job, Doyle,” he said admiringly. “I didn’t think you were going to make it for a minute there. It’s awful tight, isn’t it?”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Doyle said. “It’s probably a one way trip for me, unless somebody arranges a way to haul me out of here. I won’t be able to climb back up, that’s for sure.”

“Sometimes being short has its advantages.” Chris eased past him, then stuck his head back up the hole. “Hey!” he shouted. “Send the supplies down.”

There was a flurry of scrapes as the first of the supply sacks, tied to a rope, began to work its way down the chute. And that was what Doyle figured it ought to be called. “The poop chute,” he said. “It fits. Because after passing through that thing, I purely feel like...”

“Hey! Hold up!” Chris called upward. “Hey, hold up! I think I’m going to have to guide the next couple of those things down, otherwise they’re going to hang up in the bad part. Doyle, the first one is down, but it brought a bunch of crap down with it.”

“Like I said. A poop chute.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’m going up to guide the next one down. I’m going to have them cinch it up good so it’ll come down easier. Just relax for a few minutes. As soon as we get all three down, we’ll au revoir the scene. Okay?”

Doyle took the sack from Hobbs. “Sounds good to me. Be careful.”

“There’s no fun in that,” he laughed, his voice disappearing along with his boots as he wriggled upward.

Alone for the moment, Doyle took a moment to walk—that’s right, walk, for heaven’s sake—ahead in the passage. It appeared that they had intersected a canyon of sorts at its far end. It wasn’t terribly wide, canyons passage rarely are, but it was plenty high, probably seven or eight feet of comfortable head room and plenty more above that that he could see but not penetrate. After Snake Tongue and the Poop Chute, this was luxury indeed.

He had taken another five or six steps forward when there was an ominous rumble from behind him. He whipped around just in time to see a slump of rock and dirt where the slope leading up to the Poop Chute had been.

Had been. Past tense. As in, it wasn’t there anymore.

Doyle ran toward the rock pile, found it was still mobile, even growing as he watched. It appeared that the earth somehow knew he was under its surface again, and, having failed to seize him at Snake Tongue, it was now endeavoring to finish what it—no, what he had started.

“Chris!” Doyle shouted. “Chris! Are you all right? Chris!”

There was an anxious moment of silence, and Doyle was taking a breath for his next

utterance, which was to have been a scream, when he heard, just faintly, “Oh, keep your shorts on Doyle. I’m okay. You sound like you are too.”

Whew! Another bullet dodged. Maybe. “Well, I’m okay,” Doyle called, “but there’s going to be no digging this mess out, not from down here.”

“Or up here,” came Hobbs’s reply. “You were right about that much...that whole section just shifted just as I got past it. Good thing too! It looks like it’s all waterlogged. So close to the valley wall, it was bound to be pretty badly shattered anyway. We’re lucky we got down without getting squarshed. Can you get to the second bag?”

“I don’t...wait.” Doyle saw a bit of orange fabric mixed in with the matrix of dirt and shattered rock. “Yeah, I think I can get at it, for what it’s worth. It’s bound to be pretty mangled.”

“Hopefully they thought to put the canned stuff in there. If you can get it free without bringing anything else down on top of you, go ahead and do it, and then just push on without me. I reckon we’ll have to go on back toward Charles Hollow and see what we can do from that end. Who knows, maybe we’ll find something else along the way. Maybe I’ll beat you to Grand Canyon.”

“You do that.” He started to turn away, then he called, “Listen, Hobbs, tell Carol Ann I’m okay and that I’ll be fine. I’ll see her as soon as all this is over, okay?”

“Okay. Be careful, Doyle.”

There was a furious scrabbling of nylon on rock from above, a noise that grew fainter and fainter till it finally stopped. Faintly, oh so very faintly, Doyle thought he could hear voices filtering down through the rock, Carol Ann’s voice in particular, calling his name, but of course that wasn’t possible. He was alone again, and this time he was as cut off from the outside world as he could possibly be. There would be no digging him out, that was for sure, not from up there at Red Oak Hole, anyway. But maybe Hobbs was right, the three of them might just find another glory hole somewhere between there and Charles Hollow. Hell, it was what they came out there for in the first place, wasn’t it? It was the purest of chances that they had even looked in Red Oak to begin with, and only by his insistence was it even checked. So maybe there was another way in, and maybe they would find it, and who knew, maybe Chris really would be waiting for him somewhere between here and in East of Grand. Stranger things had happened.

At any rate, here he was, and here he would be staying. There was no turning back, and at least he was in going cave, and walking cave at that. His heart lighter and a crooked smile on his face, Doyle took a sack in each hand, turned down his light to save battery power, and strode forward into the unknown.

Carol Ann Conner was almost beside herself. “What do you mean, we just have to leave?” she shouted. “You mean, leave him down there? I won’t do it!”

“We have to,” Chris shrugged. “There’s going to be no getting him out through there. No point even thinking about it. He’s okay, he’s got plenty of supplies, and he’s got a way onward in virgin cave. He’s probably way better off than those folks in Charley’s Cave. Doyle can take

care of himself, Carol Ann. Just relax and let him do it.”

“Now look here,” she said angrily, stabbing a pair of fingers in Hobbs’s chest. “Don’t you even think of talking to me like that! I don’t care what kind of big time caver you think you are. That man down there is the man I love, and...”

“Wait a minute,” Danny interrupted. “Since when?”

“Since about an hour ago. I finally figured out I was missing something in life, and it occurred to me that Doyle Hubbard is about as fine a man as I’ve ever known. So yes, he’s the one. So what?”

Danny grinned. “Oh, nothing. Except that, it’s about time. Good for both of you. Listen, you may not like to hear it, but Hobbs is right. Doyle is a lot better off than he was earlier today, isn’t he? And if anybody’s going to get to those people and save them, it’s him, right? Well, now he’s in a perfect position to do it. Just relax and let him do what he knows best, and don’t worry about it. There’s nothing you can do anyway.”

Carol Ann looked at him angrily at first, with her fists on her hips, then she slowly began to unwind, the anxious look on her face transforming to something merely sad.

“It’s okay,” Hobbs said with a smile. “Doyle will be fine. The man is in his element.”

His voice, his look were so confident, Carol Ann couldn’t help but feel better. Returning his smile, she said, “So what can we do now to help him?”

“Oh, that part’s simple. We just find another way in.” He grinned. “And we’ve got all this land to cover, so we’d better get on it.”

The three of them walked through the woods toward the gasoline cut, occasionally meeting up with some of the other OVSS folks who had also been searching for sinkholes. No one had found anything, not yet anyway, but everyone seemed to be curiously hopeful, especially when they learned that Doyle had made it into the cave. Well, a cave anyway, no one could be sure it was the cave, not yet. But that didn’t seem to matter as much now, and all three of them realized it. In the end Hobbs was right: they had someone in the cave now, someone who knew what he was doing, someone well equipped to stabilize the situation and make the trapped group as comfortable as possible. They realized that they had gone from the worst of all possible situations to the point where they could discern a glimmer of hope. It didn’t put Carol Ann’s worried mind at ease much, but it did give her a swelling of pride to think that the man for which she had suddenly realized love was worthy indeed, worthy of anything she could give him, and so much more. And as they walked out toward Snake Tongue, she began to make plans for how they could spend the rest of their lives together. What they might do, that wasn’t so important. All that really mattered was that they be happy, and more important, that he be happy. Because in the end, that would please her the most: seeing a constant smile on Doyle Hubbard’s homely but oddly handsome face.

He took his time. There was no rush, not now. He was in going cave, a pleasant, lofty canyon that varied from a foot or less to two feet wide. It wasn’t exactly a comfortable corridor,

but it was a step up from everything else he'd experienced since all this began. What was more important was the feeling: it simply felt right. Not like Snake Tongue, where the ambiance didn't matter more than the surety of death; here, he knew he was in something that was making genuine progress. Slow progress, to be sure, but progress nonetheless.

He had moved about six hundred feet south from the Poop Chute, he figured, and had about the same distance to go before he would be in the general vicinity of the Grand Canyon Chamber in Charley's Cave, or perhaps East of Grand, wherever he might connect. He figured it would have to be East of Grand, even though he had already been a fairly substantial distance into that passage and hadn't seen anything like this. It didn't matter, he supposed, so long as the two passages connected somewhere and he could pass through into Charley's Cave with his precious bags of supplies.

A good portion of the way he'd come so far he'd had to take sideways, willing himself to be thinner. And in some places even that wasn't enough, and he'd had to climb up the canyon looking for a wider place to pass the narrow bit. The climbovers never lasted very long though, probably a good thing should they actually have to lead the trapped party out this way somehow. Of course, it really wouldn't matter if they managed to clear the Charley's Cave entrance and they could all go out the way they came in. He hoped they could; it would be the ultimate Meade County through trip, to pass from the Poop Chute—once that was cleared, of course—in Red Oak Hole and come out of the Charley's Cave entrance. What a coup that would be! The snow-noses (as in, noses held so high that their summits always had snow) in OVSS would never recover. Guys like George English and Kevin Luft. Well, maybe not George so much as Luft, who had been the real driving force in getting Doyle eased out of OVSS. And why? Because Kevin Luft had his own ideas as to who made a responsible caver and who didn't, and people like Doyle who didn't really fit into anyone's comfortable little group just didn't have a spot in his picture. Well, that would surely change now.

Or maybe not. Maybe it didn't matter anymore. Maybe, Doyle thought, maybe when I get out of here I won't have any inclination to ever see any of those folks again, or maybe never even set foot in a cave again. Maybe I'll just lose the inclination entirely.

He sat down on a thin ledge of limestone, wedged his feet across the passage, and pulled the bags up with him. That was the biggest pain in the ass of doing this, toting the bags. If he didn't have them, he probably would've found connection to Charley's already, might've located the trapped party and given them some hope that they were being sought. But even though he was as tired as he'd ever been in his life, he never considered leaving them behind. The supplies were life and hope for those trapped people, and he couldn't bear the thought of perhaps losing a bag. Better to keep everything together, and that meant him too. Maybe an extended rest would be a good idea.

He had a secure spot, here about twenty feet off the true floor of the canyon. The bags weren't going anywhere. He took a deep breath, let it out, tried to excise all the tension from within him.

That wouldn't happen, of course. That would take a long, long time. If psychotherapy hadn't helped, what would?

He thought again of the doctor from the VA hospital. She'd been probably the most beautiful woman he'd ever been close to, ever. She'd had that kind of effect on him, more so in that nurturing kind of way than even his mother. Or perhaps it was just that the memories of her were so much fresher. At any rate, she had been a splendid diversion from a very bad time in his life. He just wished that he'd thought to tell her just how amazing she was. Funny, how you never think of things like that at the time, he mused. But then, if you did, well, maybe life would be too easy. And nobody wanted that, did they? A life so simple that you could just coast, with no bumps in the road, no complications of any kind? No adventures, no risks?

He used to have a poster on the wall of his bedroom that read, "Life without risk is not life", and it was as close to an ideal for existence as he'd ever come across. He supposed he could do without crawling around in dumpsters for aluminum cans and the occasional bit of edible food, but would his life had come to this point if he hadn't been through everything? Was it all a means to an end?

So many questions, and no answers. Maybe when this is all over, he thought, I could go see that woman at the VA and put it all to her. Maybe she can shed some light on it.

Or maybe, just maybe, he'd already found the woman who would have all the answers for him.

He looked down the passage, saw a wisp of fog being pushed toward him. It was pretty, the way it reflected in his headlamp beam. Something that no one else on earth could see, and even if they did, they probably wouldn't be able to appreciate it, not the way he could this very instant.

Carol Ann Conner. Who would've figured that? Did she really love him, or was she just blowing smoke up his ass to keep him alive and focused? That latter was a cynical point of view, to be sure, but probably it was only to be expected. She sure did sound serious, and if she didn't really love him yet, well, it sure did seem like she was pretty far down that path. Maybe she was the one.

He closed his eyes, thought of her, pictured her as he'd seen her. Wearing that beige shirt, almost like his old Army uniform shirts, only without all the starched creases. There was no need for that sort of thing in the kind of job she had. Oh, to do something like that for a living! Did she think of it that way, or was it just a job for her, like any other? He didn't expect so. She sure seemed to be there an awful lot, even when she probably had other places she could've been. People she could be seeing. Men...or, perhaps, women. Not that that sort of thing had ever mattered to him, of course. But now that it seemed that she truly cared for him; now, yes it did make something of a difference.

She was fairly tall for a woman, maybe five foot nine, maybe five ten, just a little shorter than Doyle. Springy, curly brown hair, with a little bit of grey mixed in. He'd wondered at time just how old she was, but he'd never worked up the nerve to ask. After all, he'd always heard

that was the one question you never asked a woman, her age. She wasn't fat, but neither was she gaunt; pleasing was the word he preferred to use, enough of a curve to get his attention, even when she was in uniform, and not so much that it ever seemed to get in her way in anything that she did. It didn't stop her from caving, obviously.

He could imagine what she looked like naked. He'd had something of a preview, after all, that one time he'd caught her dressing in her office, and it had been a very pleasant sight, one he still remembered with fondness. Maybe sometime, perhaps very soon, he'd get to see a little bit more than just the preview. Maybe the entire show. He imagined it would be quite...fulfilling. Yes, fulfilling. That was as good a word as any.

How long had it been? How many years? Iris had been the last woman, and that was... what, a year and a half? Two years? It seemed much longer, actually, probably because Iris had a certain way she liked her sex, and you didn't do it any other way, not if you ever wanted to do it again. That was no way to run a railroad, but of course by the time he'd realized it they'd been married several months. He hoped things would get better, that they might prove ultimately to be completely compatible, but that had turned out to be a total fantasy, just like most of his dreams of sexual fulfillment. It got to be embarrassing, Iris constantly asking why his sheets always seemed to be stained. How do you tell your wife, the woman you supposedly love, that she doesn't satisfy your needs? If you were Doyle Hubbard, the answer was that you did not.

But that was over and done, and Iris was in Nashville, or Gallatin, or wherever she was, and he was in Kentucky, deep within Red Oak Hole, or Charley's Cave, or East of Grand or whatever they ended up calling it. In the end it didn't really matter. What really mattered was finding those people, making sure they were all right, and making them as comfortable as possible. And as he opened his eyes to resume his pensive stare down the canyon, he realized it was time he got back to making that happen.

Lissa Cohn sat in the Grand Canyon Chamber with her knees drawn up to her chest, arms crossed tightly. She had been sobbing a moment ago; had known the urge was upon her, in fact, which was why she asked Holly if she could exit the room. It was getting awfully stuffy in there anyway after having been cooped up in it for so long. She was stiff and sore and sick and depressed, but they all were, and she didn't care to exhibit her flaws publicly. She was sure that Holly was doing the same thing now from time to time, excusing herself from the group so she could go off and cry on her own without being seen. She sure did look like she'd squeezed out a few tears the last couple of time she'd come back, anyway, and who could blame her? Certainly not Lissa.

She had climbed down the stone curtain into the Cathedral Room and then down the first couple of step downs into Grand Canyon before finding a relatively comfortable place to sit, a rounded out pothole-like affair right on the edge of a thirty foot drop. It was airy, but nice, very comfortable, comfortable enough that she switched off her light as Holly had suggested, to save as much precious battery power as possible.

It was nice out here, as nice as it could be giving the circumstances, she supposed. Even in the dark the room was beautiful, but in a different way, chilly but moist, the source of what little hydration they were getting, she supposed. The scattered drips and drops of water echoing about the chamber and the gentle breeze soothing were calming and peaceful and if she hadn't been so overcome with emotion chances were as good as not that she would've fallen quickly asleep. But that had been impossible. She had a very clear purpose in leaving the room and no sooner had she set herself down that the sobbing began, big, wracking cries she had to stifle with her arms.

But no tears. None. It was more than a little troubling. She knew why, of course. They were all thirsty, all of them. The last sip of their remaining water had come over twelve hours ago, and it had been that whiny Teddi Marlowe that had gotten it, of course, the spoiled little twat. Not April, who had been brave, so brave, even though it was obvious she was suffering and a whole lot more than any of the rest of the group.

There were so many things going through Lissa's mind, so many of them regarding the unfair nature of life and why it was she and April, who had suffered so in life that were trapped down here and not any one of a number of people she could think of. But Lissa was nothing if not rational and knew that, of course life wasn't fair, but ultimately, perhaps you got what you deserved. And maybe this was her payback for having slept with Paul Wagner, or maybe for her flirtation with Jeremy Dailey (for you surely couldn't call what they'd had an affair) or maybe even for not having given Jim a second chance. He had asked, after all, had made an attempt to get back into her life last Christmas, the time you expect that sort of thing anyway, and she'd turned him down for that very reason, figuring that he really didn't mean anything he was saying. Well, maybe he had, and maybe he'd gone home devastated that day she had so cuttingly asked him what he really wanted by visiting them now. Money, perhaps? She sure didn't have any. But maybe she had misjudged him, maybe his intentions had been nothing but honorable, and maybe he would be at home with them even now had she been a little more understanding. Maybe she would not be here at all, and maybe all of this really was some horrid reversal of karma that just happened to be affecting April so terribly as well.

And so the sobs renewed themselves, till she doubled over in pain from cramps, awful, painful cramps that could only mean that her body was crying out for water and salt. It was torture being in here like this, surrounded by so much water yet unable to drink it. Already Teddi was sick because she'd been drinking the cave water—both she and her mother denied it, but there you go—and things were only going to get worse before...before...

Before what? There was no indication they were any closer to being rescued now than they had been almost three days ago. The water had gone down some, yes, that was true enough, but it hadn't gone down enough, and that was the crucial point. All three of the "real cavers" had said so... Lissa referred to Marv and Billy and young Michael Ellis as the real cavers of the group, the rest were just like her, along for the ride, even Holly, who was even more curious now for Lissa than she had been at the start. What was she doing down here?

She didn't seem to be overly into caving, she seemed to tolerate it for the sake of Paul. So why was she here while he was off doing his Sinking Creek trip? Maybe there was more going on than met the eye. Maybe...maybe she knew about her husband's indiscretions...

That gave Lissa some pause. If Holly knew, then maybe she knew about Lissa being one of those flings. More than once, even. But if she did, why didn't she say something? She wasn't going to start a fuss, not here, not now, surely? Or...

Now Lissa began to wonder. Strange thoughts, these were strange thoughts. If Holly did know, if she wanted revenge, if maybe perhaps she was capable of murder, well, wasn't this a perfect place to commit such an act? Down here, deep below the earth? Who would know? If somehow she managed to get Lissa off on her own, there were so many places here when it would be easy to fall, to get hurt, to just...disappear...and do you know, maybe somehow Holly had set this whole thing up...she was a smart one, that Holly Wagner...might she somehow be able to find a way to get Lissa into the cave and let her...

Lissa laughed and shook her head. No, that's dumb, she thought. More than dumb, it's crazy. Not that Holly wasn't a smart cookie, she was, but nobody would've been able to predict that the cave was going to flood, not the way it did. Nobody could've rigged anything like the landslide they were all saying happened. Lissa might not be the smartest person in the world, but even she knew that. So if Holly might or might not have anything planned for her, she sure hadn't arranged any of this.

"You ain't that bright," she murmured to herself. "No wonder nobody wants to be with me."

She knew, of course, that she was no Rhodes Scholar. She wasn't very smart at all, in fact. She was smart enough to get out of her own way most of the time, but she wasn't anybody's idea of bright. She was pretty, that was about all she had going for her. That, and she enjoyed sex. Guys would do things for her, so long as she did things to them. It was a sad tradeoff, but it was about all she had. Maybe instead of being angry at me, she thought, maybe Holly should feel sorry for me. Because I sure do feel sorry for myself enough.

And again she held her head in her hands and tried to cry, without success. Only this time it hurt. Not emotionally, but physically. And while Lissa might not have been very book smart, she knew enough about how her body worked to know that the way she was feeling right now was a sign of things shutting down. And if it was happening to her, then it was happening to April too.

How long would it be, she wondered, before the first of them died? Probably someone would pass out first and just not wake up. Billy was a paramedic, he was keeping a special eye on Teddi, she knew, and maybe he would be able to save her if things went from bad to worse. But who would be the first to succumb? Who would be the first to lose that little spark that kept them all going? Who would never see the light of day again, but would be the first to see that other light, the one people all talked about, that light you see when...

...light.

There was a light. Either she was seeing things, or someone had come into the room. Was it Holly? Was now the time?

“Oh, don’t be such a stupid cow,” she muttered. “It’s just somebody coming to check on me.”

But who? Everyone knew where she was, and it wasn’t like she’d been that long...why would anybody come to check on her?

Unless...unless maybe whoever it was hadn’t come to check on her, but to check on all of them...

Her head swiveled around the chamber in the dark, looking wildly for another glimpse of what she knew, knew she had seen, just the faintest glimpse of light, not her imagination or her fondest wishes...it was real...

There! There it was again! Light! And now she could see where it had been, and maybe, maybe where it had been coming from. She knew from being in here as long as she had now that light tended to do funny things when it reflected off the moisture covered walls, and it was even trickier when it came from an odd angle. And this was nothing if not odd: what she had seen seemed to have come from the opposite wall, about ten feet or so above the floor...and wasn’t there an opening there? Marv had said something about maybe going in and checking that as they had been on the way in, but all thoughts of exploring had been forgotten when they all realized the fix they were in...

...and again, just the barest flash of light, and this time her eyes were focused in just the right direction at just the right time. Yes, there was someone there, someone who was not in their party, because everyone in their party was all huddled in that stuffy, cramped little room, trying for whatever warmth they could manage. It was just her out here now, her...and...who?

Well, who could it be, but a rescuer? The very thought made her heart race. Someone had managed to get in! They know we’re here, she thought gleefully, they’re coming in to get us, and I’m going to be the one to meet them!

An hour had passed now by Doyle’s reckoning since the Poop Chute had collapsed at Red Oak. He wondered how Chris and Danny were managing on the surface, and more, he wondered about Carol Ann. Every time he paused for rest now he saw her face swimming upward through his consciousness. Desire, he supposed. Funny, he’d never had thoughts like that before, even back when he’d been (well, halfway) flirting with her. I guess now that I know she cares, he thought, it’s easier to visualize her.

Maybe. He had plenty of opportunity to visualize too, as he paused more and more now; he was tired, so very tired. The necessary climbing up high in the canyon had been arm wearying, and he was only just able to keep the bags moving along with him, though the progress was agonizingly slow. It was a lot like moving through Snake Tongue now: you had to plot each move in advance and do it all very deliberately. The consequences of a misstep were perhaps not so obvious as they might be were he crawling along the edge of a hundred foot

drop; the fall here would only be twenty feet, if that, but chances were pretty good that he'd wedge in between the walls when he landed, and that act of wedging would spell his doom, a tighter trap than even Snake Tongue had been, and impossible from which to extract himself. So, with the thought of finally getting out and making it back to Carol Ann, that smiling, weathered face that kept popping up before his eyes, he kept moving, and thought twice, sometimes even three times before he committed himself to anything.

Eventually he found himself at what appeared to be the end of the canyon, but not the end of his progress. The vertical joint in the rock which contained the canyon apparently had intersected another trending in another direction. The new passage was smaller, but it did have something the canyon passage did not: a small stream of water zigzagging across the floor. At some points the stream actually had cut beneath the wall, and that was what had Doyle's undivided attention now. He'd had some success locating new cave at Evert Hole this very same way, following the undercut stream to where it eventually worked its way into an independent passage that connected to the main run. Sometimes the connection was not humanly passable, but a couple of hours with a hand sledge could change things. Maybe it could happen here too.

He moved in stages now. Leaving the supply bags behind, he would explore ahead a hundred feet, then he would go back, get the bags, and move them up to his farthest point of penetration. Then he would begin the process all over again. It was laborious, yes, and really, it was even slower than moving along the canyon, but at least it didn't involve hanging himself out over a drop, and he was beginning to get a little of the feeling back into his arms, which had become numb from all the exertion above.

Another hundred feet. Or maybe not quite; he wasn't terribly adept at judging distances. A man thing, he'd heard that called, and in his experience women did have a greater knack for it. Call it seventy feet. And then the stream diverged from the joint he was in, trickling off into a narrow slot in the wall. It would be tight, but he figured he could make it if he took his time. The problem again would be commitment; if he passed through without the packs, he'd have to come back and get them, eating up more time and energy. On the other hand, if he took them through with him and the passage didn't go, well, he'd have to carry them back, and that would be twice the time and effort.

Decisions, decisions. Well, in for a penny. He sat long enough to collect his energy again and gave the slot a look. It appeared to drop into a canyon like the one he'd been in at first, only it was blocked part of the way down with some rocks that had fallen from the ceiling at some time or another. Nothing but collapse down here, he thought. The whole formation here seems to be unstable. Of course, this close to a bombing range, I don't suppose that's to be unexpected.

All right. He would go, and he would take the bags with him. Call it an instinct, but when he saw ahead of him excited him. That, and the air on the other side had a different kind of feel to it. It wasn't so much a smell as it was a quality of heaviness to it, like it was carrying an

extraordinary amount of moisture. It was all very silly, and even an undergrad would make him look like a fool if he tried to explain why he felt like he did, but he found that more often than not his hunches were correct. Never mind that he couldn't explain them.

He pushed the first bag through then, watched as it dropped to land securely on the collapsed rock below. He positioned the second bag to where he could reach back through the hole and collect it once he'd gotten himself through, and levered his way carefully past the constriction to the other side. Then he pulled the second sack through and carried it to the floor.

He'd gotten back to the stream again. The passage was a lot narrower than it had been on the other side, but it also had that feel. He smiled. The cave was paying him off. Slowly, but surely.

He turned around to get the sack which still rested on top of the pile of collapsed rock, and noticed something odd: there were marks on the larger boulders, as if something had been chipping at them. Funny.

He didn't notice the rock hammer at first. How could he, it was underneath the bag. He hadn't seen it from above, but now...

How long ago had it been that he had been in that passage with Jordan Surrat, that oddly quiet kid from Ellet Station? A nice enough fellow, he had brought the rock hammer along to pick at the rocks at the end of the narrow passage, trying to find a way through into the cave he suspected was beyond. Never mind that there wasn't much hope of the thing going much of anywhere; it was there, and it was unknown. Together they had worked it for about an hour before deciding to come back with climbing gear to work their way up the passage to the top of the collapse pile, something they could not do from where they had come in.

And where had they come in? East of Grand, in Charley's Cave.

"Great balls of fire," he murmured. "I did it."

He grabbed both bags in one hand and began to shuffle rapidly down the passage. It wasn't far, maybe a few hundred feet. Getting down the side of the canyon would be interesting, but he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

Farther, farther. The passage made a ninety degree turn to the right. Ahead, past another bit of collapse, a window into a larger passage beckoned. From beyond, when he paused, he could hear the unmistakable siren song of water dripping. It had been a while since he'd been there, but he already knew exactly where he was at, and when he stuck his head out into the Grand Canyon Chamber, he knew his face had as big a smile on it as it had worn in years.

And then he heard the voice calling to him. "You're real, aren't you?" A woman's voice.

"I've been called a lot of things before," he said with a grin, "but real ain't among them. Yeah, I'm flesh and blood."

"What's your name?"

"Doyle. What's yours?" He still couldn't see her, but then it sometimes took a while for his eyes to adjust to larger chambers.

"Lissa. Are you here to rescue us?"

He shrugged, hoping she could see him. “I don’t know how much I can do,” he admitted, “but I’m here, and I have supplies. If I can’t get you out right away, maybe I can make us all more comfortable.”

A light appeared across the canyon, and one of the sweetest faces Doyle Hubbard had ever seen was illuminated. “I’d be satisfied with that,” the face’s owner said. “Can I help you get down?”

She could, it turned out, and in twenty minutes the two of them had pretty much made the day of everyone still trapped in the cave.

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