

Soliloquy

A short segment from *River of Jordan*

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Note: *Another short sampling of what goes on in Ellet Station, Kentucky and Lennoxton, during a certain period in time that has yet to be determined. The incidents here take place long after Adventures in Surveying, so I suggest you read that first.*

"Another tick," Chris Hobbs sighed, pulling the horrid excuse for a bug off his sock. "This has got to be the most infested knob in Kentucky. I swear this is the fifth one I've pulled off me so far."

"Right," laughed Gwen Chaney. "And that's just the ones you see. God only knows how many are crawling up your pants right now."

Hobbs blanched. "Oh god, you don't think so?"

"Why, sure! They're attracted to the warm, moist places, so I figure you know where they're going." She laughed while he skinned out of his coveralls and only when they were dangling around his ankles did she relent. "I'm only kidding, Hobbo. I don't see any ticks on you."

He looked daggers at her. "Oh, you're going to pay for that, Gwen."

"Yeah, right. What're you gonna do about it?"

"I'm gonna...oh, I'll tell Stevie on you."

"That would be silly," Stevie giggled, coming out from behind a rock ledge she'd been checking. "I would've just encouraged her. You men are so cute when you blush."

He threw up his hands in dismay. "C'mon, you guys. You know how paranoid I am about ticks."

"But Chris," Stevie cooed, "if we didn't tease you, you wouldn't think we cared about you."

"And we do so care for you," Gwen added, doing her best to look sincere.

"Oh yes we do."

"More than you could ever know."

"Enough," Hobbs sighed, pulling his coveralls back up. "When I'm rotting in my grave after a horrible, lingering death, you'll be sorry."

"Just sorry it didn't happen sooner," Gwen laughed. "Now, what did you find?"

"Not a damn thing," he replied, glad for an opportunity to change the subject.

"And I followed the contact point all the way around and met up with Phil Warren's bunch along the way. If there's another opening, it's not making itself real obvious."

"What's a contact point?" Stevie asked.

"It's where the upper surface of the limestone beds are exposed to the surface," Hobbs said. "Where you were just looking, in fact. It tends to crop out in benches like these. How about you two?"

Gwen shrugged. "You think this knob was wholly devoid of caves." She joined him sitting on a hollow log. "Why they don't just get this Larry Morgan person to jackhammer his warehouse floor is beyond me. There's another entrance there, isn't there?"

"Yeah, but even Jordan wasn't sure exactly where it was. Besides, in the process we might bring down the entire sink, or fill in the opening. And even if we did find it, we wouldn't really know where we were in Druid's, or even if we were in Druid's at all." He shook his head in frustration. "I feel for them, especially the kids. Whatever possessed Steve Gandy to lead that trip in spring is beyond me. You'd think he knew how quick storms blow in from out of nowhere around here, and how bad Druid's can flood."

"That's not really fair," Gwen countered. "There's no way he could've predicted this kind of storm. It caught everybody off guard. Besides, as I understood it, it wasn't exactly his idea to go to Druid's in the first place."

"I didn't know that," he said after a moment's surprised silence. "Surely Belinda Menard didn't get them in. You've got to be serious buds with the Wrights to even set foot on the property."

Gwen nodded. "The only person I can think of might be Layla Weyrick. Her dad's the Senator, right? I'd bet she knows Slug pretty well." She had a funny look on her pretty face. "That's kind of a strange coincidence, don't you think?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, think about it," Gwen mused. "Remember that rumor going around about Jordan being down here for SpeleXpose? Suppose Layla somehow knew he'd been here. So she knows either he's around or he's not so far away that he couldn't get here pretty quick if he needed to."

Hobbs rolled his eyes. "There's some folks in Dallas that you probably need to get with. They've got some theories about a grassy knoll they'd enjoy discussing with you."

"No, think about it," she insisted. "Layla suggests the trip, right? Maybe she had a clue, a hunch that rain wasn't too far away. She's brighter than you'd think. And I happen to know she had a thing for Jordan, Rose told me so years ago. She did since school. That's why Rose was never close to her. So..."

"So she diverts the trip to a cave that everyone knows is a flooder. And Jordan shows up like a white knight for the rescue." Hobbs shook his head. "That's just whacked."

"Not a white knight. *Her* white knight."

"Whacked, Gwen."

"Sure it is. But it's possible."

All the speculation had eluded Stevie, who only had known Jordan in passing. "Well, I'm hot and stinky and need a shower," she complained mildly. "Are we done yet?"

"Is it worth another trip around the knob?" Gwen asked.

They all looked at each other. None of them really wanted to give up, even Stevie, but after nearly seven hours of searching they all felt they'd covered the area as best they could and probably better than anyone else, perhaps even Jordan, ever had. They'd seen lots of rock, dirt, bugs, stinging nettle, hornets, and whatnot. No one was eager for another circuit.

"So?" Gwen repeated.

"Once more," Hobbs sighed.

Would one have happened to have been visiting at the Homespun Restaurant on the square in Lennoxton, Tennessee that particular afternoon at that particular time, one might've observed Denise Abbott receiving—and reacting to—a most unusual phone call.

It had been a perfectly normal day up till then. The breakfast rush had come and gone, the same stream of faces ordering the same things as they did every other day. With that sort of routine it would be easy to burn out and just chuck it all, and she'd often considered doing just that, but it was the only life she'd known since Jim had left her. Besides, it kept her in touch with her town, and that part she liked.

Well, sort of. Enough to stick around.

Things had finally wound down now, the tables had been bussed, and she was preparing for the lunch bunch.

She was feeling a little dejected. She couldn't really explain it to anything in particular, but in the back of her mind (she wouldn't admit it directly) she was a little agitated that she hadn't seen or heard from Sonny for the past several days, not even a phone call, and she wasn't sure whether to be irritated or worried. Be that as it may, she was thinking about him when the phone rang, a pleasant image of his craggy, almost-smiling face on her mind as she picked up the phone.

It was, as it was so often, her mother. "No," Denise replied somewhat impatiently, "I haven't seen it yet."

The phone jabbered into her ear. She held it back a little, grimacing.

"No," she repeated. "Some of us do have to work for a living, Momma." A pause. "No, I never watch Fox." Another pause. "Or CNN." Long, annoyed pause. "Well, if I had a TV, people would sit in here longer than they already do drinking free coffee. I can't make money that way, and believe it or not, I do need to make money, Momma. Now, what is the leading up to? I'm awfully busy."

She was cleaning out the pie case at the time and had just removed a large and luscious-looking rhubarb pie so to clean the mirror behind it. She didn't ordinarily keep rhubarb pie, but Sonny had expressed a preference for it, and in the back of her mind she was thinking that maybe she ought to save it for him, when something her mother said caused her blood to run cold.

"Well, I don't know where he is. What makes you think he's...Momma, will you let me finish a goldarn sentence? What makes you think he's in trouble?"

There was another long pause as she listened to what her mother had to say.

Then she dropped the pie. It made a sickening "splat" as it hit the linoleum.

"No," she said softly. "I can't believe that. I *won't* believe that."

Another long pause, the silence almost deathly.

"You're sure it's him." Not a question so much as a statement, as if she already knew the answer. "You've only seen him a few times."

There was a hitch in her throat as she heard the reply.

"All right, momma," she said. A pause, then, "Well, what can I do? I don't even know the man all that well. We've only been out twice, and the second time we decided it would be better for both of us if we never went out again. Hearing this, I reckon maybe that was a pretty good idea." She took a silent breath, then concluded, "Look, I've got to go, okay? I'll call you tonight. Goodbye."

She didn't wait for a reply. She hung up the phone.

What a mess, she thought miserably, stepping absently toward her office. There was a squishing sound as her shoe twisted in what was left of the pie. Another mess.

"There are just some days I oughtn't be here," she murmured.

She abruptly decided that was a pretty good idea. Leaving the pie where it sat, she called her employees together and told them they were getting the rest of the day off, with pay. After a brushed off question or two they all cleared out, leaving her to shut off the lights, put up the "Closed" sign and lock the doors.

What was left of the rhubarb pie still lay on the floor at the foot of the pie case. She hoped it wouldn't draw ants while she was gone. She didn't know exactly when she'd be back.

What Denise's mother had seen on TV, what only a few people in Lennoxton had seen then, but which would be rebroadcast later for Denise and a whole lot of Lennox County to see was a press conference which was broadcast live on all three networks and Fox from the community center in Nemire, Kentucky. It was headed by Senator Everett Weyrick, Danny Wilson, and a reluctant Sheriff Kenny LaVon.

The Senator stood first and gave a synopsis of the events thus far. He began by thanking the massed crowd for attending. "It's been a difficult week," he said, almost sounding apologetic, "and we surely appreciate the cooperation of everyone involved."

He read the following from a stack of typed sheets: "To recount: this incident began at around 9 AM last Saturday, when a party of ten explorers, five adults and five children, led by one Steven Gandy of Louisville and Belinda Menard of Muldraugh, entered a cave on the property of Earl "Slug" Wright of Ellet Station here in Breckinridge County commonly known as Druid's Hole. I understand the cave contains over two miles of mapped passage and a vertical extent of over 150 feet." He looked to Danny to confirm this, and seeing the nod, continued. "While its deeper areas require a considerable amount of skill to travel, the outer rooms are fairly easy to reach and are accessible by groups of little or no caving skills.

"The weather forecast for Saturday was for clear skies in the morning, followed by clouds and possible rain by the evening. Well, we all know what happened: it started raining early that afternoon and since then we've broken all records for rainfall here." He paused. "Eleven inches in the last five days. As a result the entrance passages of the cave flooded. We got the first report that we might have people trapped in the cave at around midnight Saturday, and confirmed this by three Sunday morning. We've been on site at the cave ever since, pretty much just waiting for the water to go down enough to give us a chance to get into the cave. We got that chance early this afternoon, when the

rain stopped and the water flow from the entrance shaft began to fluctuate remarkably, drying up and flooding again in roughly 90 second cycles. During an ebb, two rescuers, Tyler Maddox, 38 years of age from Ellet, and Jordan Surrat, 27 of Lennoxton, Tennessee, attempted to force an entry into the cave. During the attempt..."

"Excuse me, Senator Weyrick," a reporter on the front row called tentatively, "did I hear you right? Did you say *Jordan Surrat*?" There was a chorus of agreement.

Weyrick cleared his throat. "That is correct. Jordan Surrat."

"Jordan Surrat? The same man who's wanted for the murder of the Sheriff's Deputy?"

The growing murmur in the room rose to a mild roar.

"Let me clarify that, if I may," Weyrick said as soon as the noise diminished a bit. "As you probably recall, the body of Deputy Barrett was found last fall..."

"In the cave," a reporter called.

"Yes," Weyrick replied, irritated, "and I'd appreciate it if you'd let me speak."

"Sorry."

He began again: "As I said, the body of Joe Barrett was found, and yes, it was found in the cave. An autopsy was done on the remains once they were removed, and the opinion of the...well, I really should turn this over to the law here. Sheriff Kenneth LeVon."

All eyes focused on LeVon, who paled.

"Sheriff LaVon, tell them about the coroner's findings on Officer Barrett," Weyrick said to him, a tight smile on his face.

LaVon glared at him, cleared his throat twice and said hesitantly, "The M.E. said it looked like suicide to him."

Still another buzz rose from the room.

"But me," LaVon continued in a louder, more confident voice, "I didn't and won't ever believe Joe Barrett killed himself. I won't call the case closed until there's an inquest, and for that I want Surrat on the stand. If I have to take him into custody once this is over, I'll do just that."

"I think we can avoid that," Weyrick said quickly. "And for the record, Sheriff LaVon, is Jordan Surrat charged with any crime?"

After an uncomfortable pause LaVon shook his head slowly. "No. He's not charged with any crime. But he *is* wanted for questioning, and for evading. He run out on us once, and I aim to see he doesn't do it again. As soon as he sets foot outside that cave he goes into custody. That goes for Maddox too." He looked back out into the gallery. "So's you know, Tyler Maddox is a convicted felon. He's serving an eight year sentence in the Kentucky State Reformatory in LaGrange for burglary." With that, LaVon turned to Weyrick and grinned. "Your turn, Ev," he muttered away from the microphone.

"I'd like to explain that too, if I may," Weyrick said firmly. "Tyler Maddox knows that cave as well as if not better than anyone else in the state. He and Jordan did most of the exploring and mapping. I felt his presence here would be a major benefit, and it has. I'd also like to point out that he came of his own free will, with no promises of rewards. I might also add that right now as a direct result of his efforts, he's in intensive

care at Breckinridge County Hospital. He was thrown out of the cave by the force of the water after ensuring that Jordan got in safely."

The buzz died away.

Everett Weyrick glanced back with a look of satisfaction toward LaVon, who, oddly, had rather a thoughtful look on his corpulent features. The Senator turned back to the audience and continued: "Doctors say he'll be all right, but he'll be a while recovering from his various injuries. We have reports prepared for you at the door on your way out. Now, as to Jordan...well, it would seem he's gotten into the cave successfully."

"How do you know for sure?" someone asked.

He shrugged. "We don't. The only proof we have, grim as it may be, is that he was never swept out of the cave as Tyler was. But Tyler did speak to us as he was being brought up out of the hollow and he said he believed Jordan had made it. That's good enough for me."

The next question: "So if he's in the cave, what does that mean? Is he carrying food? Can he lead them out?"

"Yes, and yes," Weyrick replied, "and here I need to turn it over to Danny Wilson, leader of the rescue team."

Danny had come prepared. He walked across the dais to an overhead projector, on which he had placed a cell depicting what was known of the map of Druid's, drawn roughly on what Jordan had sketched on George English's topo map, with Xs marking the Druid's entrance and the K-Mart entrance. He explained the situation as he saw it so far as getting them out via Druid's: "Without a man in the cave it would be pretty grim," he admitted, "particularly if the additional rain they're calling for does come. But the option of taking them out up top *is* available, providing we can find a way in, and Jordan can lead them up that far. We've got teams combing Benet Knob looking for an alternate entrance or even for something we might make into an alternate entrance. I've been known to use a little instant cave to open something promising up; I guarantee you I won't hesitate in this case."

"Instant cave?" Weyrick asked, puzzled.

"Explosives. I'm a licensed blaster. We have several on site Anyway, we'll use that method only if we think it's necessary. It may be the only way."

"Has anybody tried to get in touch with the fellow who owns the building over the top of that one entrance?" a woman in the front asked.

"No," Danny admitted, "we're saving that as our last gasp option. The chances of leveling the building, clearing off the debris, and then finding the cave entrance are awfully slim. Awfully slim. So slim that it's not worth trying just yet."

"Why?"

"Well, we're not exactly sure where the entrance is. Heck, we didn't even know there was an entrance there until Jordy told us about it. He did tell us it was pretty obscure and hard to find, and very tight, leading to an 85 foot pit. From there the route into Druid's was fairly technical. So, even if we did get in, we're not talking an easy way to go so far as getting everyone out is concerned. But there's lots of benches, exposed rock outcroppings, all around Benet Knob, so maybe we'll find something someone else

has overlooked. Or so we're hoping. At this point it's up to the folks on the Knob to find the way."

The press conference adjourned at that point. Immediately following, most of the network feeds ran a series of videos showing some of the action taking place around the entrance, including the unbelievable sequence of Tyler and Jordan's penetration into the cave. All too obvious to anyone who happened to be watching was a closeup of Jordan's face...both sides of it. He was very easily identifiable to anyone who knew him...which is to say, anyone in Lennox County, Tennessee.

The news spread, as it does in Lennox County, with amazing speed.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, no one wanted to sing or play games. Or talk much, to anyone. It wasn't that they were bored, or even anxious about getting out. It was a hard feeling to describe; Jordan likened it to a combination of fatigue and malaise, which he figured was only appropriate considering what they'd all been through. Even he wasn't immune.

He still wasn't certain how Layla had gravitated over to him. Perhaps it was inevitable, since Honey had long ago taken station next to him. He was at first sitting on the soft sandy floor, his back against the wall, and she'd wandered over and plopped down beside him. Then she leaned against him.

He looked across the room at Belinda, who was busy with a can of peaches. She shrugged and smiled, nodding toward Layla, who only grinned.

Only then did he look down at Honey.

She was a startlingly pretty girl, with the same honey blonde hair as her mother (the source of the name? Jordan wondered), near-perfect features including her mother's turned-up nose, and a soft glow that belied her fatigue from four and a half days underground. The one feature that didn't seem to fit were her eyes, which were a little widely spaced, and were more green than blue, perhaps taking something from either her father or perhaps her grandfather. Something in the genes. Odd though, from this angle she sort of looked like...

He shook his head slightly. She felt it. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "Just tired. You looked like somebody I knew once a long time ago."

"Did you like her?"

The reply choked in his throat for a moment, then finally came loose. "Honey, I loved her with all my heart."

She smiled and sighed, "Then she was lucky," and leaned into him again.

So like April.

He shut his eyes tightly, and kept them shut until Dawn, who'd been pretty much invisible up till then announced: "I'm bored."

"We all are," Jenni said wearily, giving Steven a look Jordan read as saying, can't you keep her quiet?

"We should do something," Dawn continued. "A game or something to pass the time."

"Oh fine," Steven sighed. "Let's play charades."

"Well, I'm bored. I'm tired and cold and I want to go home. And you can forget any further adventures, Steven."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, almost meekly. It was pretty clear that he was smitten by her.

She smiled at him as if she were well aware of that fact. "It's all right, Steven. Only, let's go hiking or swimming or skydiving next time. You know, something *safe*."

Jordan had to grin. *That* reminded him of Emma.

"Well, I'm tired too," Kit agreed.

"Relax," Jimbo said. "We'll be out in a little while. And if you never want to go caving again, well, that's fine with me, Son. We'll stick to fishing from now on."

Kit replied quickly, and with embarrassed candor: "But I don't like fishing either, Dad."

That seemed to surprise—and slightly annoy—his father. "You never told me that."

"You can take me, Mr. Carson," Andy said cheerily. "I like fishing."

That brought a sharp response from Kit, who reminded Andy that Jimbo was his father, not Andy's, and it brought visions of an incipient brouhaha to Jordan, who was ready to say something meaninglessly encouraging when Layla abruptly spoke up and said: "I know what we can do."

The room fell silent, waiting.

"Maybe we can tell stories," she said.

"God, no," Jenni said flatly.

"Fine with me," said Belinda. Dawn nodded her agreement.

"I ain't much for tellin tales," Jimbo admitted, "but I reckon I can come up with some jokes."

"Sonny could tell a good story, I bet," Honey said.

Jordan kept his eyes shut. *Boy, could I*, he thought.

"That's a great idea. Why don't you tell us about the cave?" Layla suggested.

"It's been a long time," he said. "And I'm not sure I know any more than anyone else." He nodded toward Belinda. "Why don't you tell it? I bet you know a lot more than me."

"Yeah," Andy said enthusiastically. "Tell us all about the killings too."

"Killings?" Steven gasped. "What killings?"

"They used to kill folks here. Right outside. It's *true*." He grinned with morbid anticipation. "I read about it in a book."

Belinda smiled. "Well, there's lots of stories about this place, and some of them did end up in books. The legend goes that it was discovered a long, long time ago by descendants of the real Druids who'd come to America to practice their religion freely. At the bluff around the top of the entrance you can find all sorts of Indian petroglyphs that kind of resemble runes, and that probably confused things even more. And that big slab of rock right outside the entrance is called the Sacrificial Altar."

There was a chorus of "oooo's", mostly from the kids. "Oh, there's all kinds of gruesome stories about things that took place here," Belinda continued. "And who knows, there probably were pagans living in the area. Some folks say that Kate Bellamy was a pagan."

"The 'Wilder Witch'?" Jenni with an i Gandy declaimed. "Well, we all know *that* story."

"Well, maybe you do and maybe you don't," Belinda said impatiently. "If he was alive, Jeb Stuart probably could tell you all about her. But anyway, there's no real proof that Druids did ritual killings. The true story of the cave is a whole lot less interesting. The property was owned years and years ago by a man named Jarrod Drood, D-R-O-O-D. Supposedly he explored up to the point where the lower stream passage gets really bad. The neighbors all referred to the entrance pit as Drood's Hole. Years go by, his family leaves the area, and Drood's somehow gets changed to Druid's, D-R-U-I-D. Somebody concocts a legend around a campfire, connects it to the petroglyphs and the rock that looks like an altar, and you can guess the rest."

"So who found the cave we know?" Kit asked.

"Good question," Belinda said, glad for a change of direction in the tone of the story. "As far as we all know, the first person to make note of it as a cave with potential was a guy from Frankfort by the name of Jim Green. He was studying the Sinking Creek area for his Master's thesis and located the entrance. He explored at least as far as Drood probably did and quite a ways up what's called the A survey, but he didn't discover the upper cave. That was Chris Hobbs. Supposedly he was re-checking Green's Sinking Creek leads and took what he thought would be a quick peek into Druid's. Now, Chris is a small guy, and the water was high that day, so the story goes, and he was trying to stay out of the water by pulling himself along the ledges in the lower stream passage. He just happened to look up right where the Uplink is, saw it kept going, and decided to check and see if it connected to anything at a higher level. It did, of course, and a couple of weeks later he brought Danny Wilson and the cave hasn't been the same since. People saw how pretty it was and they came back and brought more along. The mapping project started in the nineties, and that's where folks like Marv Alexander, Tyler and Rose Maddox, and Jordan Surrat came in. Lots of others have kinda been in and out, but nobody did more than that bunch."

"Rose *Weyrick*," Layla corrected. "She was my sister. You know that." Then she paused and added, with a furtive glance at Jordan, "Or Rose Surrat. But I don't think she ever really used that name."

She didn't, he thought. Maddox, yes. Weyrick, after she'd married Jordan. But she'd never taken the Surrat name. He closed his eyes, saw himself sitting at the desk in the spare room, looking at the papers for the change of name, remembered how painful it had been to consider how she'd just skipped back to Weyrick and left his name out of it. It was like he'd never been there. Of course by that time the eventual annulment was pretty much a foregone conclusion.

"Whatever," Belinda sighed. "Anyway, there's all kinds of stories about the sorts of things that those three did in this cave. Tyler and Jordan did some far-out stuff, especially down in the lower stream, and their climbing in what they called the Inner Cave. And while nobody ever knew anything for certain, it's pretty much a given that Jordan and Rose spent a lot of time up in this area." She smiled conspiratorially. "Danny Wilson in particular used to claim they knew a lot more cave up here than they ever let on."

"Funny it's never been found," Steve Gandy interjected. "You'd think that as many people as have been in here, everything that could be has already been looked at." He took a drink, then continued in a haughty tone, "Me, I've been in here nearly a dozen times and I've never seen any 'inner cave'. Fact is, I think it's all a joke." He snorted. "'Inner cave'. Seems to me it's a pretty obvious hoax. It's all 'inner', isn't it?"

Well, you conceited jerk, Jordan thought. "Seems to *me*," he murmured, "that somebody who'd been in the cave as many times as you say you have would've noticed the opening into that area they found the body in."

"It's not exactly like that was obvious," Steve declaimed. "The opening is behind the Firefall. You'd have to be looking in exactly the right place to find it."

Jordan nodded. "That's right. A real caver would've done just that. At least two *did*."

"He's got you there, Steven Gandy," Jenni with an *i* cackled. "*Real* cavers."

"Two?" Belinda asked, puzzled.

Eyes still closed, he nodded toward her. "I want to say it was Tyler who found the lead first. It's on the map, if I remember right, as having been discovered in 95..."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Steve exclaimed. "On *what* map?"

"The map of the cave."

"*What* cave? This one? I've *seen* the map of Druid's, and that passage behind the Firefall isn't on it."

"Not on Danny Wilson's map it isn't."

"There is no other copy of the map," Steve declared.

Jordan's eyes remained tightly shut, but he smiled, despite the flood of memories that were screaming dizzily across his synapses. "You okay, Sonny?" Jimbo asked, concernedly. "You look a little peaked."

"I'm fine," Jordan said, holding his head in his hands.

"You don't *look* very fine," Layla said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"There is *no other copy* of the map," Steve repeated. "Danny keeps it locked up. Hell, he won't even let the people on the survey see the actual working copy."

"Yup. That's right."

"So, how did *you* see it? Let alone one with..." Steve paused for a mockingly apparent emphasis, "*mystery* passage on it?"

Now it began to hurt. Not Steve Gandy's comments; those were annoying, but not painful. No, it was the mounting tide of recollection that was so stinging.

He opened his mouth and was amazed at what came out.

"They're sneaky SOBs, those two," he murmured in something that didn't really sound like his voice. "I don't think I would've approved of what they did, but under the circumstances I guess they didn't have a whole lot of choice."

"What are you talking about?" Belinda asked, looking at him bemusedly.

"Danny never did want to come off that map," he continued in a sing-song tone. "That's why they did it, I guess. How exactly...I can't really say, but what I think happened was this: they were at Danny's house, they broke into his drafting room, and they took a picture of the map. It would be easy enough to do. There wasn't a lock that was safe around either one of them." He laughed. "Tyler used to carry a padlock and a

bobby pin in his pocket that he'd practice on whenever he got bored. And Jordan? He could open a locked car door in nothing flat. Start it, too."

"How would you know that?" Jimbo asked. "Did you know them?"

Jordan ignored the query and continued, in that same quavery voice. "The map, I understand, is pretty much permanently tacked to a board, that Danny sets on his table every time he wants to work on it. He never takes it off. He mounted a camera above it, shot it, and took it to a printer to transfer to paper. That's how you did it in those days, probably it's the same way he does it today. He never did like computer-aided drafting. Said it ruined the art."

"Well, he's right about the 'art' part anyway," Belinda mused.

Oh, did it hurt. A lot. Jordan squeezed his eyes shut tightly now, wrapping his arms around his head. He knew—after a fashion—what was happening: he was vocalizing memories now, similar to what had happened to him at the Homespun the night before he'd left. Even as he spoke, sounding more and more like he was channeling Rose, he wondered about Denise, whether she'd ever speak to him again. *Oh 'Nise, I am so, so sorry...*

And still it continued. "Anyway, they just did the same thing. Mind you, they didn't have the kind of large format camera Danny had access to, so they just used a digital. Jordan's, one his girlfriend had given him, as I recall. Then they took that to Tyler's and increased and decreased the size till it was to scale, then they took it to a printer themselves and had it put on paper. They either worked off that one, or they laid a piece of vellum over the top of it and traced it. Pretty simple, really. They had their own bootleg copy of the map, including the locations of key survey stations, and from there it was nothing to scan it and scale it to lay over the top of topos. Then they could run their own legit surveys to tie into the map. *Their* map." He peered at Steve Gandy under hooded eyes. "The same map I saw."

Layla was looking at him oddly.

"More to the cave than anybody knows about?" Jordan muttered. "You should only know how much, Steve. *Real* cavers, those two."

"Do you know about where we're going?" Andy asked Jordan.

"Well enough, I guess."

"Can you tell us about it?"

"We probably ought to rest," Belinda said, looking at Jordan concernedly.

"But you do need to know what's ahead," Jordan persisted, "and the best way to prepare for what's ahead here is to understand what's behind." He finally took his hands away from his head and looked at Steve Gandy. "See, Steve, there's actually six sections to this cave. Lower, Middle, and Upper you know about. Inner Cave you *think* you know about, but really, you don't know spit." He glanced at Belinda. "Even you, Belinda. The body was found in *Outer* Cave. Inner Cave is a cluster of pits and domes on the south side of D Trail. But I wouldn't expect anyone to know about that, it was pretty well hidden even before we blocked it off. Only way you can get to it now is through the Music Room, and that's a pretty hairy climb." He glared at Steve. "So I hear, anyway. Know where the Music Room is?"

Steve stared back in silence.

"I didn't think so. Anyway, the sixth section is called Outer Limits, and that's the direction we'll be heading. It's mostly a narrow canyon connecting some upper level rooms and an alcove at the top of a pit not far from where Jordan connected through a pit called Blue Light. Near as I can remember from the map, we ought to be no more than eight to ten feet below the surface up there, maybe closer."

"Well, that's not very far at all, is it?" Jenni said, her voice not sounding very sure.

"It beats the pants off twenty to thirty feet, that's for sure," Jimbo noted. "As long as we're dry, that's all that really matters to me."

"Oh, we'll be well above the water," Jordan assured him.

"And it's not going to be too tough for us?" Belinda asked.

"We'll make it. So let's get some rest. Not long, but we all need to be fresh when we head out. I promise, it's not going to be an easy trip. Not super dangerous but not easy either. You'll need to be as sharp as you can be."

There was unanimous agreement. "Please, just kill that light," Carson said. "I'm about give out. If I'm gonna get out of here on two feet tomorrow I've got to get some sleep."

"Right," Jordan said. "It's almost eleven. We'll try and get going around two or two thirty, so relax as much as you can." He stepped over Layla and past Belinda on his way out of the room; both of them followed him.

"Where are you going?" Belinda asked.

"Gotta pee," he said over his shoulder, adding "I don't need any help, really."

They both sat to wait for him to return.

He walked as far as the first side lead and took care of his business. He contemplated walking on down toward the Volcano Room to check out the water level but decided that might be too depressing. Besides, they might be talking about him, and he wanted to hear what they had to say.

Oh yes, they were talking about him. This is what he heard, from a distance:

Belinda, to Layla: "You know him from somewhere, don't you?"

Layla: "Who?"

"I'm not an idiot, Layla. I can see you looking at Sonny with googly eyes."

There was a faint chuckle. "Googly eyes."

"I'm serious. What is he to you?"

Silence.

Belinda again: "You know him, don't you?"

Layla: "That's what you say."

He could almost hear the sigh.

"It's bizarre," Belinda said, "but I would swear I know him too. Or know *of* him."

Jordan shook his head in disbelief.

"And if you do?" Layla asked. "Would it matter?"

A pause, then: "I don't suppose."

Then, the sound of someone scuttling back into the room. One person. But which one?

It was Belinda waiting outside the room when he returned. Surprise, surprise.

She looked at him calmly. "I suppose you heard that."

He nodded. "Acoustics are funny up here."

She looked up at him. "You know an awful lot about this cave, Sonny. Or is that your real name? I think Layla believes you're somebody else."

He was quiet for a moment, then he shrugged. "I am who I am. She is who she is. No, it doesn't matter to me, call me what you want. Whatever makes you comfortable."

"None of this does."

"Well." He started to duck through into the room, only to be stopped by her hand on his shoulder.

"Wait," she said. "Don't be angry. It's just that Layla...she...concerns me."

He laughed dryly. "Concerns you."

She held up her hands in a helpless sort of shrug. "I don't know how to explain it," she said, "but...well, she's not all there, Sonny. It's just a feeling, but..."

He was prepared to retort angrily, if softly, then at the last moment changed his mind. It would not do to have mistrust in the coming hours. "Layla is as she ever was. And it doesn't matter anyway. Trust me, if only for just a little while longer."

Belinda blinked. He wasn't sure if it was his light in her eyes or her surprise. "She *does* know you, then."

"She does."

Now she shook her head. "Jesus. Now I'm beginning to feel this all was some kind of setup, and I'm stuck down here because of some wild scheme she had to get you here."

"Have you ever met me before?"

"No." A pause, then, "I wish."

"So you tell me."

She looked at him questioningly. "Tell you what?"

"That this wasn't some kind of setup."

"I can't," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know anything about you, except that you call yourself Sonny, and that you know this cave as well as anybody, probably better."

"Probably."

"And Layla knows you. That means you probably know her too."

He nodded. "That goes without saying."

She took in a deep breath. "I feel used."

"*You do?*" He laughed, without a trace of humor.

She recognized it, waited for him to speak.

"I had a life, Belinda," he said sadly. "A life I enjoyed. As far as I know, that's over now. Everybody back home would probably know by now what's happened. Whether or not I'll be welcome there after all this, I have no idea." He sat down on a piece of breakdown and switched off his flashlight.

She did the same, plunging them into darkness. "What makes you think you wouldn't be welcome back home?" she asked.

"They have a pretty high regard for the truth. And I've been living a lie to them the entire time I've known them." He sighed. "It's not like I had a choice, at least at first. I...I seem to have episodes of amnesia. Fugue states, a friend of mine calls them. Some of what happened—most of it, really—has come back since. But I haven't told anyone

anything. If they find out..." He stopped, imagining the consequences. "For all I know, they might be waiting at the county line to tar and feather me."

"Well now, there's just some times when people have got to understand. You certainly couldn't help what you were. And as for this...you're only doing what you had to do, right?"

"Sure, but what about Layla? Maybe she was doing what she thought *she* had to do."

Belinda seemed to think on that a while.

"I don't think I have any right to be angry at Layla," he continued. "I had a chance to reconcile with her, not that long ago." Emma's face swam into focus in his memory. "And with somebody else, I guess. Maybe what happens here will bring things full circle, and I can go on with my life. Maybe here, maybe there, maybe somewhere else. But in any case, I don't regret doing what I did."

"But you could've been killed."

Silence.

"You know, if I could see you, I'd kiss you right now." He could hear a smile in her voice.

"Well then, I reckon it's a good thing you can't see me, isn't it?"

He started to move as he heard her fumbling for her light. By the time she'd grabbed it and switched it on, he was already back in the Home Room, having moved stealthily through the absolute darkness. "How does he do that?" she mumbled in wonder, then decided he had the right idea and rejoined the group herself.

Thankfully, no one had moved very much. The picture in his mind of how everyone was situated was still pretty fresh and he had no trouble navigating his way to the space between the Gandys and where Layla and Honey lay. Honey was fast asleep; her mother most assuredly wasn't.

She rolled silently toward him "I've been waiting for you," she whispered in his ear.

"I know," he said.

"I won't bother you," she said. "I just want to know one thing, then I'll leave you alone."

He knew what she needed to hear. It didn't take a genius.

"I forgive you," he said. "For everything."

She sighed and rolled back towards Honey, who stirred just a little, then fell back asleep.

"Maybe when we get out..." she whispered hopefully.

"We'll talk then," Jordan said. "Only then."

That was enough, for now. She sighed and fell asleep. Jordan wasn't far behind.