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December 24, 1969
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dad had an ironclad rule of never picking up any hitchhikers. He violated it only one time. Maybe because it was Christmas Eve or because the hitchhiker wore an Army uniform. Or maybe it was the pistol stored under the driver seat as part of our family vacation ritual, along with Mom making sure he put a spare key under the bumper.

Then again, it might have been because I asked Dad to stop. It was the first time I'd spoken to him since all the trouble at school. We both probably thought of the request, and the granting of it, as a kind of peace offering to each other.

We saw him on the morning of the trip's fourth day. If we'd sailed on by, we'd have totally forgotten him a few miles later. But we didn't. Instead, Dad eased our red Rambler station wagon into the wash by the highway where the soldier sat on his duffel bag, almost as if the meeting was pre-arranged. The hitchhiker looked at us, unsure if we had stopped for him. A nod from Dad confirmed it, and our new passenger was quick to put his bag in the back of the car while removing a large manila envelope. He took off his garrison cap, got in the rear seat with sis and me,

and deposited the envelope in the side door pocket.

Settling in, he looked us over just like we did him. He thanked each of us individually for the ride, as if it had been a family decision.

“Hi. My name is Travis Nickels. Actually, make that PFC Nickels.”

I shook his hand and said, “I’m Jim Peterson.”

My little sister piped up with, “Hi, I’m Susan, but everyone calls me Susie. What’s a PFC?”

Little sis was twelve and newly interested in boys, especially a classmate of hers named Joey Walton. That’s why she took up the fire baton. It allowed her to perform at the junior high football games when he played. She really was spectacular, but I never told her so.

“Private first class, dummy,” I said. I’d learned all the Army ranks from *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos*, courtesy of Marvel Comics.

She ignored me entirely and asked our newcomer, somewhat dubiously, “Is there a second class?”

He smiled and nodded his head. “Actually there is,” he said. “I was just that, a PV2 or an E-2, until three months ago. Now I’m an E-3.”

Sis wasn’t paying attention to his words as much as staring at him. He was a good-looking guy, about my size, and seemed to be about nineteen, with blue eyes and black hair like me. It was clear by the way she tilted her head that she liked what she saw.

“Is that good?” she asked.

“It means more money,” Dad said from the front seat.

“Have you been to Vietnam?” she said, looking at the

red and gold ribbon on his uniform. Above it was a silver badge with a parachute imposed on a set of spread wings.

“Nope, but that hole in my military career is about to be filled. I report to Oakland, California, in four days to catch a plane to that jungle paradise.” He threw in the last sentence as a flip remark, turning and looking out the window as he spoke.

Silence followed.

“How long have you been in the service?” I said.

“Seven months. Enlisted ten days after graduating from high school. Thought I might as well volunteer and get it over with rather than drag it out and get drafted later.”

“Dad was in the war with the 45th Infantry Division in Germany.” I turned my head in the direction of the driver, as if Nickels might be confused about who I was referring to.

“Sir.” Nickels nodded respectfully in his direction.

Dad grunted without taking his eyes off the road.

Back when I was little I’d asked the usual, “What did you do in the war, Daddy?” But I never got much of an answer. The last time I asked was several months ago while we were watching a rerun of *Combat*, a TV series on ABC. Vic Morrow led his squad in taking out a tank and wiping out a bunch of German soldiers. Getting the usual nonresponsive grunt, I dropped it. A few minutes later Mom asked me to help her in the kitchen. Instead, she took me to their bedroom and quietly closed the door. Putting a finger to her lips, she led me by hand over to the closet and opened the door. Standing on her toes, she reached up to the top shelf and pulled down a shoe-sized

red cedar box. She placed it on the bed and motioned me to sit down next to it.

“Put it back when you’re done,” was all she said as she left the room.

Looking back on it, I’m not sure what I expected to find. I knew somehow, without being told, that it contained answers to my question. Given Dad’s silences, I didn’t expect much.

Inside was a jumbled array of ribbons, medals, a 45th Infantry Division Thunderbird shoulder sleeve patch, various badges, National Guard paper citations, and several news articles from countries in Europe, along with some old black and white box-camera pictures from the war.

One photo showed him cradling an M-1 rifle in a jeep with a driver. Others showed Army buddies standing next to each other. Another had him standing in front of a crowd of miserable looking, newly freed prisoners in striped pajama uniforms. His gun was in one hand, and his other arm was around the shoulder of some kid with a shaved head. The kid appeared to be about twelve years old—small, thin, and not very healthy. Dad looked grim, and the kid had a shy, frightened smile, as if afraid to look directly into the camera. They were both standing close to what appeared to be a pile of bodies stacked outside a train boxcar.

On the back of the picture there was a date, April 29, 1945, written in Dad’s handwriting. One thing was clear. The old man didn’t sit out the war in an office filling out supply forms.

I was disappointed not to find more pictures of the war. The rest were touristy shots of the aftermath. Bombed churches, Nazi monuments, women in streets standing in lines and removing bricks from destroyed houses. That type of thing. Based on the handwriting on the back, most seemed to be from Munich, Germany.

Tucked under the newspaper clippings was a dark blue oblong box. Inside, lying on a velvet cloth background, was a five-pointed star with a laurel wreath.

Underneath the box was an Army citation dated October 28, 1944. It stated that 1st Lieutenant Tom Peterson was awarded the Silver Star for “gallantry in action against a superior force” and saving a platoon in his company. Now that was pretty cool. The problem was he never wanted to talk about the war. I didn’t understand that. I mean, he was famous.

When I came out of the bedroom, Mom was sitting at the kitchen table holding a cup of coffee to her mouth with both hands.

“Well?” She peered over the cup rim and looked at me as if expecting me to say something. Instead I asked if I could go over to Steve Gorwood’s. He’d bought a new Rolling Stones album he wanted me to hear.

Mom stared at me for a few moments before finally nodding. She sighed and said, “Maybe that’s a conversation for another time. When you’re older.”

I left the room sensing her disapproval. Time moved on and I forgot all about it.

2

We stopped to eat at a Stuckey's on the highway. The blue-roofed restaurant chain was a family favorite, with the same layout and food at each location. Dad told our passenger lunch was on us. The folks ordered the French dip and lemonade; the rest of us got cheeseburgers and cherry cokes. Mom put a coin in the jukebox, and we ate listening to Elvis warning about "Suspicious Minds."

Travis went into the restroom and changed into civilian clothes from his duffle bag. It occurred to me he'd worn his uniform on the side of the road for a reason. What better way to snag a ride? Hey, it worked.

While eating, we learned more about PFC Nickels. He was a loner in the world, raised in a series of foster homes. He never knew his parents, since they were declared unfit due to drugs and alcohol when he was an infant.

I turned and nodded to my father. "Just like you, right, Dad?"

"No, not just like me," he said. "I was raised in an orphanage."

"Well, Mom can relate to you both," I said to Nickels. "Her relatives were killed in the bombing of Germany during the war. She married Dad when they met in the American Zone after the war."

Mom dabbed au jus sauce with a napkin at the corner

of her mouth and glared at me. She didn't mind the info coming out as much as me, a child, doing it. In the old country, kids kept their mouths shut unless spoken to. I didn't know a lot about her past, but that one thing was drilled into me. She spent years getting rid of her Germanic accent and preferred to release personal info on herself, by herself. I'd gone too far, sharing with our Army guest.

"Well, what I meant was we all seem to be alone in the world at this table," I muttered.

Susie played peacemaker, telling Nickels about all the difficulties involved in twirling a fire baton without being burnt in the process. He seemed suitably impressed.

After eating we checked out the concessions area. Band Aids? Check. Candy cigarettes in a fake Lucky Strike pack? Check. Postcards to mail home with pictures showing various tourist sites you saw during your travels? Check.

Stuckey's had just about anything a traveler could want. Susie got their famous pecan log roll. Dad and Mom each got a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. Nickels didn't buy anything but skimmed a few magazines.

While everyone else was looking around, I joined Nickels at the magazine counter where he was thumbing through an issue of *Hot Rod Magazine*. I picked up a newspaper. I read the morning and afternoon editions at home, along with our subscriptions to both *Time* and *Newsweek*. According to my school, I have an IQ of 130. But that's not something you brag about unless you want to get labeled a stuck-up egghead.

Here at Stuckey's the reading pickings were pretty slim. Eventually, I selected an old 1969 *Fantastic Four Summer*

Annual featured on a nearby comic book rack. Seventy-two pages of reading for a quarter. That was a bargain. I figured it would last longer than a pecan roll. It wasn't my first choice, but new editions of *Spiderman*, *The Doom Patrol*, and *X-Men* weren't available. Dad called all comics "funny books." He swore that was the original name for them when he was a kid, which only showed how dumb adults can be.

Back on the road we got into the usual swing of things. Dad was the driver. Mom rode up front and was responsible for finding the right stations on the AM dial. She was fair in parceling out country music (Dad, with Hank Williams or Johnny Cash), classical (Mom liked Bach and anything from the Big Band Era with Benny Goodman), and rock and roll (me, the Rolling Stones, and little sis, the Beatles). I was the navigator with a tattered old road atlas purchased at an Esso station in Asa, Oregon, two years earlier. Susie was responsible for the car trash being emptied at each stop.

"Might as well get ready for your life as a housewife," I said. That remark earned me a quick slug on the arm.

We'd had good weather traveling from the Seattle area through Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico. Despite being late December, the forecasted sixty degrees held steady, making for a safe and easy trip. There was little to see most of the way except prairie, sagebrush, and an occasional animal as we sped along at eighty miles an hour. Mom, who disliked going over sixty miles per hour on the highway, kept silent because Dad said going sixty in such country was like being on the slow road to

Hell. We were set on seeing two things in the southwest before veering over to California and Disneyland: Carlsbad Caverns and the Grand Canyon.

The folks always wanted to go to the caverns. That was all right with me and Susie. We'd never been in a cave before, and the spooky aspect was appealing after the flat landscape of the southwest. Dad took us to task for calling it a cave, though.

"Look, it's not a cave. Caverns are given that name because they have lots of individual caves inside them. It's what makes them special. You'll see."

We stopped to refuel at a Conoco. While out of the car and walking the kinks out of our bones, Nickels announced he couldn't go any further with us. He didn't have any cash on him, which was why he was hitchhiking. Carlsbad was out.

"Where did your money go?" asked Dad.

"Lost in a craps game at the Greyhound station back in Dallas, sir." It was clear he was embarrassed. A flush rose to his cheeks, and for a moment I imagined him as a classmate of mine in Mrs. Carpenter's freshman English class.

Maybe Dad saw the same thing. "Well, Private Nickels, it's Christmas Eve, and in that spirit we're going to think of you as our guest on this trip. We'll get you to Oakland, then make our way south to Disneyland. Don't worry about the money. Things always have a way of working out."

"Things always have a way of working out" was one of Dad's favorite sayings. He really believed it. I didn't think of my father as a classy guy, but that was a classy thing to

do.

“Hey, does that mean I can buy extra souvenirs at the next Stuckey’s, Pop?” Susie asked.

“You should be so lucky,” said Dad. He grinned. “But good try.”

She shrugged and winked at Nickels and me, while whispering, “It never hurts to try.”

Mom told Dad he’d better “put the pedal to the old metal” if we wanted to get to Carlsbad park before it closed. She liked using American phrases when possible. It made America seem more like home.

We were in Carlsbad an hour later.

The park was easy enough to find. Plenty of signs advertised Carlsbad Caverns National Park along the highway, and the exit was clearly marked. A small place called Whites City popped up just before the park. A sign by the side of the road announced a population of seven.

“Seven!” hooted little sis. “Since when is that a city?”

A winding ascent through a series of arid canyons led to the top of a mountain. We pulled into the visitor parking lot just before two o’clock. A large visitor center with huge windows was on our left.

A sign listed the visiting times and tours. The park closed at six o’clock during winter season, and the last self-guided tour was at three o’clock and would take about two hours. It listed prices for admission, and an arrow pointed the way to the entry gate. Mom had me and Susie put on light jackets, as the warm weather was cooling down. I’d been reading my comic and stuffed it in my jacket pocket to read later. It fit loosely.

We congratulated ourselves on making the last tour as the attendant took our ticket money. He motioned to his right, indicating the path to the amphitheater where a short presentation kicked off the actual tour. That route led us to a seating area of carved stone bleachers forming a semicircle with a small stage in front. I took a detour to use the restroom. Returning, I saw they'd already seated themselves at the bottom left with Nickels on the far right of the family, next to Mom. He saved me an empty aisle seat next to him.

The amphitheater held mostly families, some college kids, and a smattering of military in uniform. You could see the cavern entrance several hundred feet from where we sat. The amphitheater was built at the entrance to the caverns to allow people to see the millions of Mexican free-tailed bats fly out at dusk. It was supposed to be quite a sight. Unfortunately, they migrated south prior to each winter season, so we were out of luck.

A pretty female park ranger in one of the front seats stood and turned toward us. After welcoming everyone, she took a pointer and used it on a large info board set on the stage explaining the geological history of Carlsbad.

Despite her good looks and calm voice, my mind wandered. I didn't care about geology. I mean, rocks are rocks. Science was never an interest of mine. I found myself scanning the crowd, looking for something to occupy my attention.

Several girls in the crowd were definite lookers. One was a redhead on the far left. I found myself staring at her a lot. She didn't notice me, so I watched and drank her in.

I prefer redheads. It's a thing.

After a while I felt someone staring at *me*. It was so strong I gave up looking at the redhead and scanned the crowd left to right, section by section. I could feel the hairs rising off the back of my neck.

By now the ranger on stage had progressed to how the caverns were discovered by a local teen, decades earlier, but no one believed the kid.

That's when I saw him. Blonde crew cut. Big guy, well over six feet. The type you didn't cross.

He was on the other side of the U-shaped bowl of seats, wearing an Army green uniform and staring directly at us. I didn't doubt it for a moment. There are times when someone is caught looking at you and you know.

I knew.

An icy finger of unease slithered up my spine.

3

He spotted them as they entered the seating area. He was in his seat enjoying the fading sun, although the stone was losing some of its warmth. Leaning forward and staring, not daring to breathe, he thought it was as if Providence had sent them here at this moment.

Intellectually, he knew that was foolish. After all, he'd spent a long time, a very long time, tracking them down. The past two days he'd posed as a casual tourist visiting the caverns. In reality he was waiting and planning for their arrival. He knew they'd come, but not the exact day or time. All he'd been given was an approximation. It was enough.

With plenty of people around, he wasn't conspicuous. True, there was the uniform. It made him stand out more than someone in civilian clothes. But the uniform was non-negotiable. When the time came, it had to be visible. It was important they see it.

He'd learned long ago that the best way to hide was in plain sight. Luckily, there were many tours available here. A person could blend in as someone taking in more than one. Staying for more than a day didn't create suspicion.

He believed in Fate. It saved him in enough situations

that he didn't doubt its power. The badges and ribbons on his uniform testified to that. He had experienced the world and survived, while others who were smarter, stronger, richer, and more powerful had died. He'd learned to trust Fate—and his instincts.

The air was beginning to turn chilly. His dress greens provided little protection but he didn't mind. He had survived worse cold. Much, much worse. This was nothing.

He was chatting with the woman on his left when they entered. She was a pretty thing. Blonde with blue eyes. About thirty would be his guess. Light blue jacket, bell bottoms, and a colorful golden scarf around her neck. All topped off with some designer sunglasses. Probably divorced since there was no ring. What was her name? Lauren? Lori? Laura? Laura. That was it.

He knew she was drawn by the figure he cut in his uniform. Even at forty-four he looked impressive and knew it. Attracting women wasn't a problem. He enjoyed Laura's company and planned to ask her to dinner after the last tour if they hadn't shown up today. Her warm eyes told him she would have said yes. That wasn't going to happen now. Instead it was time to wrap up some long delayed business.

He smiled. He was going to be busy. Very busy.

4

I acted like I didn't see the man staring at us. No one else in the family was paying him any attention at all. Watching him out of the corner of my eye, I talked with Nickels as the ranger droned on.

"What will you be doing over there in Vietnam?" I said.

"Mostly trying not to get shot. I expect to be pretty busy since my MOS is 11B."

"What's an MOS?"

"A Military Occupational Specialty. Means your job. I'm an infantryman, 11B. If I were, say, a 95B, I'd be a military policeman. A supply clerk would be a 76Y. Works like that."

I asked him about his jump wings.

"Yeah, they require you to volunteer and do five jumps at Fort Benning to qualify. It's a three-week course and includes a night jump. I could say I did it as a challenge and to get the monthly jump pay bonus, but the truth is it was to impress all the girls." He grinned sheepishly.

"Does it work?"

"Hell, yes." He laughed.

"So you're going to jump out of planes over there?"

"Nah, there's only been one traditional mass combat

parachute drop in Vietnam—the kind you see in the movies. That was almost three years ago. Just too much jungle around. Easier to get where you need to go by chopper. That’s why you see Army helicopters on TV news all the time.”

The lady ranger was going over the various sites inside the caverns. In the Big Room you would see the Hall of Giants, Temple of the Sun, and the Bottomless Pit. She said you could toss an object in and you would never hear it hit bottom, hence the name.

“Don’t worry, folks. We won’t let you get too close.” The audience tittered and she continued, describing the Rock of Ages among other attractions, but I wasn’t really listening. The staring man was still staring.

Finishing her cavern talk, the ranger told us we had a choice. We could proceed to our left down the natural entrance of the caverns or go to our right and ride the elevator down.

Moving toward the amphitheater exit, I felt the man’s gaze on my back. I casually turned my head and read the letters on his name plate. Ross. A few moments later when I turned around again, he was lost in the crowd. In a green uniform he should have stood out like a beacon.

I knew something about this guy, though, courtesy of watching TV and movies, plus reading comics and newspapers. With those stripes I knew he was a sergeant first class, a career man. The eight golden cuff bars on his lower right arm indicated he’d had four combat tours overseas somewhere. The Combat Infantryman Badge on his chest was identical to the one I found in Dad’s shoebox.

It appeared that this Ross guy was as tough as he looked.

“Travis, why is there a red, white, and blue cloth background for jump wings? Where’s yours?” I’d seen it on Ross, but they were missing on Nickels.

“Oh, that means you’re in an active paratrooper unit on actual jump status. There are different trimmings for different units. The red, white, and blue one is for the 506th Battalion stationed in Vietnam as part of the 101st Airborne Division. We had to memorize all the active unit histories in jump school.”

“If you noticed,” he said with a hint of defensiveness, “my wings don’t have an oval background. Means I’m jump qualified but not currently with a paratrooper outfit. When I get there I’ll have one, and when I leave I’ll keep the jump badge but have to ditch the trim when I arrive at my new unit.”

“What’s the shoulder patch with the black shield and an eagle head?”

“The 101st Division. Screaming Eagles. Paratrooper outfit. That’s why there’s a small tab saying ‘Airborne’ on top of the shield. I might be assigned to their 3rd Brigade when I report overseas and end up in the 506th. Who knows?”

I started to ask him about the other shoulder patch I’d seen, but it was clear he wanted to have some fun, so I dropped it. Everyone in line was smiling, laughing, or talking excitedly. Several downed a quick snack or drink at a concession stand to the side, while people held their places in line. The stand had a picture painted on it that said OLLIE’S and featured a smiling boy and pigtailed girl

chomping on hot dogs and downing a Pepsi.

The cavern opening itself was on the side of a rocky bluff topped with grass and looked like a giant yawning maw from some monster's mouth, waiting for the chance to engulf you. The tourist path was smooth with small gravel and lined with foot-high concrete sides winding downward into the mouth of the cave.

To get into the actual caverns you had a choice. It took a good sixty minutes to walk to the Big Room through the natural entrance. The alternative was to take one of the elevators in the visitors center. Considering the time constraints we were under in order to see the Big Room before closing, it was a no-brainer. Elevator it was.

Once in line, Nickels got an admiring glance from a cute high school girl who was there with her parents. She had long brown hair. A real Marcia Brady type. He smiled back but her mom frowned, took her by the arm, and whispered in her ear. She pulled her daughter away from our elevator line and moved over to the next available one. Nickels had a military haircut and even in civvies there was little doubt about his status. It was a reminder that soldiers were not popular in this particular war.

"Sorry," I said.

"Not your fault." His jaw tightened as he said it.

We were at the tail end of the line for the elevator. The man who stared at us earlier was nowhere to be seen.

I relaxed.

The elevators were futuristic ones with red digital readouts showing the levels as you moved down. On one side was a glass wall allowing you to see the rock shaft as

your car plunged seventy-five stories down into the deep bowels of the earth in under a minute.

Coming to a halt, the elevator opened, and we spilled out into a short corridor, turned left, and stopped. Ahead was a large cavern, all dark and mysterious except for the adjacent aid station and small gift shop, reassurance you were not in some underground hell but in a civilized area. Tables and chairs from a tourist cafeteria were scattered throughout the main floor of the cavern.

The Big Room had a posted sign at the entryway stating there would be a five-minute delay before we could enter. I found an unoccupied bench and took my copy of *The Fantastic Four Summer Annual* from my jacket pocket and started to read. The Thing was about to hit Dr. Doom after announcing “It’s clobbering time!” when a tall ranger in a Smokey the Bear hat appeared in the cavern entry and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Big Room. This tour is self-guided. That means what it sounds like. No one’s here to hold your hand or urge you to stay or move. It’s entirely up to you. Typically, there are four roaming rangers in the area. Today, because of sickness and the holidays, there’s only one ranger available. He’ll walk along the trail and stop at various points to discuss sites wherever clumps of tourists are bunched up. His job is to be an interpreter, lecturer, and traffic cop of sorts.”

“Folks, you are about to enter one of the most famous parts of the caverns. The Big Room tour consists of just that—a Big Room. I mean a *really* Big Room. Imagine a room that holds six football fields and is one hundred feet

high. That's the equivalent of a ten-story building. It's so large that the length of the figure eight shaped trail you'll be on is one and a half miles long."

"What also makes this cavern different, besides its size, are the unique sites along the way. These are well marked with lighted signs sharing important details."

He paused, scanned us, and nodded to a woman who had raised her hand. "Isn't it dangerous for us to wander alone in the dark?"

The ranger smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, miss. Even though the pathways are dark, they're fairly level and easy to traverse. You're almost always near a lighted area highlighting one of the upcoming exhibits to help you find your way. While there are totally dark spots, most of your walk is similar to being in a dimly lit movie theater. If you get lost, our roaming ranger will find you. He has a flashlight and is trained in first aid. I should note I've been here seventeen years, and we've never lost anyone in the Big Room yet. Don't become the first by straying off the marked paths."

He stopped speaking and looked sternly at several in our group. "If you do stray, you may find yourself in a limestone water pool, fall into a gap where you will never be found, or put your hand out and accidentally break off a thousand-year-old stalagmite. That there is a felony, even if you don't intend to do so. Don't put yourself in a bad situation and end up in jail. Be a tourist who obeys the rules and have some fun. You'll really enjoy this."

He paused for a moment and then continued with a smile. "Don't forget the temperature here is always a

natural fifty-six degrees. If you brought a light jacket or sweater with you, that's probably a wise decision."

Scanning the group, I counted about thirty people. Most everyone had a light jacket with the exception of a few macho types. And Travis. He said earlier he had an Army overcoat in his duffel bag but would look like a schmuck if he wore it over civilian clothes. Still, I would have done so in his place. I'm not a fan of the cold.

The ranger looked at his watch. "All right folks. Our man on the scene should be in place now. Remember, his job is to answer any questions you have and then move on to help others. He'll make a last sweep at five thirty to ensure that everyone is out, and we'll lock up the elevator for the night."

With that said, and a sweep of his arm, he released us into the Big Room.

5

Traveling from light to dark, he entered the natural cave entrance where he'd timed his descent on the path two days earlier, in case the family used the elevator route. It was over a mile on the switchbacks and normally took an hour. That assumed taking in the various sights along the way and walking, not jogging. He'd completed a quick recon, walking fast when in view of any group and going into full sprint mode when out of sight. Two days of practice knocked the hour-long time span down to twelve minutes.

It helped that he was in excellent shape and the path was downhill. The trail descended through a tall and wide passage called the Main Corridor, and passed the Bat Cave, Devil's Spring, Green Lake Overlook, Boneyard, and Iceberg Rock. He paid no notice.

What mattered was that this path ended in the underground rest area near the elevators. Darting through this separate entryway from the natural route, he'd have a quarter-mile head start into the Big Room versus those taking the elevator. With people stopping to admire the sites in the Big Room, he was able to get to the pit area well before the tour group with the family arrived.

The question was where to best ambush his targets. The daughter would be easy enough. The father and the boy would put up resistance to his knife. The mother would be dealt with last.

Looking around on the pathway, he slid behind a rock enclosure jutting out from the wall. Five feet high, it lay in the shadows away from the pit, and was slightly to the left of the middle viewing bench. He had a good view, and the rock outcropping would prevent anyone from seeing him until it was too late. The pit was perfect, an ideal disposal point and relatively isolated.

He waited an hour as different groups walked through. They each had the same reaction, a kind of awe. The pit was actually a rift in the limestone floor but its mouth was gigantic. It looked like you were constantly in danger of falling in, despite the park fence. Inevitably a tourist would reach between the metal railings, pick a loose stone from the sharp incline leading down to the mouth, and toss the rock in while standing stock-still and listening for an echo. There never was any sound. “How far do you think it goes?” was the common question.

As each group trickled in, the old group would move on down the path to the left. It was an unstated but observed agreement. No one returned once they moved on. He only needed to keep a sharp eye on the path coming from Mirror Lake to be in complete control.

6

Some people aren't fans of caves. They don't like small, pitch-dark passageways with confined spaces. I'm probably one of those people. But that didn't apply to the Big Room.

After being in the dark for a minute, your eyes adjust and focus on a faraway light. You're in the upper portion of the cavern and you immediately see the reason for the name. It's huge. I mean really, really huge. Like medieval cathedral huge. You're lost in a vastness so overwhelming that each visitor murmurs quietly. Regular speech seems too loud and vulgar.

"This is so cool," Susie whispered.

Pathways were paved and mostly level, but dark. Everyone was careful not to touch anything or wander off the walkway. Dimly lit Park Service signs described what you were seeing.

The first exhibit was the Giant Dome in the Hall of the Giants. Measuring over sixty feet, it was—according to the sign—considered a column, since it actually met up with a part of the ceiling. Small pools of crystal clear water here and there cast reflections of giant stalactites hanging from the ceiling and stalagmites rising from the floor.

Further on, a gigantic chandelier made up of long ribbon stalactites hung from the ceiling like a gob of sugar frosting surrounded by huge columns. The ceiling itself looked like it was made of popcorn. A sign said moths lived close to the ceiling stalactites, but we didn't see any.

Strategic lighting gave a luminous beauty to the shapes and patterns formed by nature. The bright colors made them breathtaking. This part of the trail made me feel very, very small. A midget in the Hall of the Giants. It was humbling.

Approaching the Temple of the Sun exhibit, I realized my right jacket pocket was empty. My comic book wasn't there. I'd lost it somewhere between the entrance and where I stood. I was miffed. What would I read on the road after the caverns? I told Nickels what happened and went back to find it. I didn't tell the folks. They wouldn't have let me go, insisting we all stick together. Telling Nickels meant the folks would know where I was if they asked but wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Besides, I'd catch up with them as soon as I found it. No harm, no foul.

Actually, that's not the whole truth. Dad had been so mad at me for the past few days I knew he didn't trust himself to look me in the eye. We hadn't been close for a few years. He used to attend all my football games and even bought me a shotgun for my tenth birthday and a rifle two years later for us to go hunting together. Now we rarely talked. Our last sustained interaction was last month, with him teaching me to drive so I'd pass my learner's permit.

Some of it was because he'd become more involved at the factory. Strikes, foreign competition, shortage of

supplies, all combined to make things difficult. I heard him and Mom argue about it. Liquidate and he'd come out handsomely, she said. Dad refused. He felt he owed an obligation as the largest employer in town to keep it afloat. As he worked harder at keeping the business going, we lost touch.

Then there was my school suspension last week. What a mess that was.

Moving backward on the trail meant moving away from the lighted exhibits, with plenty of dark spots on the path to be searched. I was almost all the way back to the entryway before I found my comic, none the worse for wear.

Walking back and passing the Temple of the Sun area, I saw a sign map showing a shortcut on the left. I'd save time and meet everyone quicker at the top of the trail loop.

I turned left.

The path shortcut wasn't level. Instead, it was a steep rise. My calves burned after a few minutes. Maybe going the normal route would have been smarter.

Moving along I saw people from our group coming down the path. Passing them I walked over a chasm with a metal bridge. No one in any of the groups I passed seemed to wonder or care why I was going "backward." As I realized the family would be bringing up the rear of the tour, I relaxed a bit. We'd meet up soon and share some of the upcoming sights.

A few minutes went by with no one passing me, when I heard a shout of some kind. It sounded urgent but unintelligible. The folks were probably telling Susie or

Nickels to stay on the trail. Or maybe they were listening for an echo. In any case, I didn't hear anything else. As I approached the top of the loop, a sign said the Bottomless Pit and Mirror Lake were around the bend.

Coming up to the curve, I heard another noise. A human voice. A hurt sound. Then a soft thump as if something heavy hit the floor. An eerie hush told me to approach with caution, although I had no idea why. Slowing my pace, I moved instinctively to the darker side of the path—away from the dim lights on the walkway—and peered around a jagged rock outcropping.

A gigantic hole, the famous Bottomless Pit, lay at the edge of a downward slope of smooth rock beyond the tourist path. It was bathed in park lights of red, green, and blue, resulting in a gothic scene of the damned straight out of Edgar Allan Poe. In front of the pit was the man I'd seen staring at us earlier. He was holding Mom by the throat in a tight one-handed grip—three feet off the ground. There was a smile of triumph on his face as if he had some long sought prize. She was beating her fists on his shoulders and kicking her legs against his thighs in an attempt to break free.

“Frank, don't,” she gasped.

He kept his hand on her throat and bent down slightly, using his free arm to encircle her legs. Then he walked several steps over to the fence and threw her over the rail. It was as casual as tossing a wadded gum wrapper off a bridge and happened in the space of a few seconds.

A low wail of despair echoed as she slid down the fifty feet of smooth limestone on the lip of the pit. She tried

desperately to grab hold of something, anything, to stop her descent into Hell. There were rock outcroppings and jutting boulders, and for several seconds her frantic attempts to gain a handhold looked possible. It was no use. She went over the edge into a black hole of nothingness. If there was a final scream, the pit smothered it.

I could only stare. This couldn't be happening. Did I really see my mother murdered in front of me? I wanted it to be a dream. Yet I knew it was true. And I knew I would remember every detail of the moment. The chill of the cave. The silent scream in my head. Somehow I knew this wasn't random. Death had followed us into the cavern. I leaned backward into the darkness of the pathway, paralyzed by fear.

The man didn't notice my arrival and walked over to one of the two viewing benches on his right by the pit railing. I dimly saw three shapes lying on the ground. He picked one up, threw it over his shoulder, walked to the railing, and tossed it over. He dragged the next bundle to the lip of the pit. A vicious kick sent it over the edge. The third bundle was smaller than the other two. He didn't bother to put it over his shoulder, drag it, or kick it over the edge. Instead he cradled it as he walked back to the railing. There he held it out with both arms and let it go. As it slid down into the pit's waiting mouth I knew whose body it was.

And if he turned around, I'd be next.

Holding my breath, my heart hammered so loud I was sure he'd hear. Outside my body, it was as silent as the moon. After swallowing my family into its dark fold,

it almost seemed the cave felt it needed to pay a silent homage.

I'd heard no shots. Did he have a silencer? Was there even a gun at all? I didn't see one. Was there a knife? Even with the element of surprise, he must have a weapon of some kind.

At my feet were several loose rocks. I bent down and grabbed one, gauging the distance to him at twenty yards. The rock would not be of any use unless I could creep up on him and crush his head with the first swipe. One attempt was all I'd get. But the distance was too far to achieve any surprise. To try was crazy. Or so I told myself.

I was scared. This maniac had just killed four people. I needed to do something. Even as I told myself to act, my legs went weak. If he saw me, he'd do to me what he'd done to them. Afraid he'd smell my fear, I dropped the rock.

He cocked his head as if he heard something. I ducked behind a small outcropping before he turned around.

Get up! Run! I told myself. But I couldn't move. Instead I curled up in a ball. Paralyzed with fear, I shook uncontrollably and fought the urge to vomit. This man was Evil in the flesh. I shut my eyes tight and asked God for invisibility.

Crunching gravel on the pathway indicated he was coming toward me swiftly and with assurance.

Pass me by. Pass me by. Please, please, pass me by. Please, please, pass me by, I prayed. His footsteps receded as he went by unseen. Even with my eyes tightly shut, I sensed he was cool and calm. He was leaving the scene of the crime as if it were an everyday occurrence.

As he left, he began to whistle. The sound hung in the air long after he passed down the pathway.

How much time I spent crouched in the dark with my eyes shut, I don't know. I only knew if I opened them he'd be standing there. Watching me. It was a dumb fear. A stupid fear. A real fear.

At some point I opened my eyes but didn't move. I sat there not wanting to take a chance on meeting him as I left. When I summoned the courage to look at the luminous green glow dial on my watch, it read 7:02. The park officially closed an hour earlier. There'd be no rangers around or civilians. Just me and hopefully not him.

I walked cautiously back toward the entrance, and realized I hadn't considered the possibility of the park turning off the lights in the cave after closing. Apparently they kept them on, because I wasn't in total darkness, thank the Lord. I couldn't have handled that.

Water dripped from the ceiling into small ponds as I passed. Except for those occasional splashes of water and the muffled sound of my footsteps, it was as silent as a tomb. A crypt for my family.

I was still in denial about what I'd witnessed. Surely it was a mistake somehow. Death was an abstract notion you discussed in class or watched on TV while safely sitting in your living room drinking a soda or munching popcorn. It happened only to family pets or old people. Very old people. Mom and Dad were old, but not that old.

Somewhere in their forties or so. I'd never thought to ask. And now I never would.

The further along I moved, the more I felt the hairs rising on my arms. It wasn't from the constant cool temperature of the cavern. Before, the darkness wasn't a threat, but now it pressed around me like a living thing. I flinched at each curve in the pathway and tried to search every dark corner before walking forward, always looking to be taken by surprise. Was he lurking just ahead, ready to pounce?

There was no sign of the man named Ross.

At the iron-gated entrance where the elevators and cafeteria were, it was clear the cave was closed. No one was in sight and everything was locked away. The only way to get to above ground was to take the Natural Entrance route. Its path was too large for any type of gate.

It took over an hour to get to the surface.

Outside the caverns, I breathed the crisp night air. It seemed different. Intellectually I knew that was ridiculous. Yet deep down, I didn't doubt my feeling that it was different.

A deserted entry, boarded up concession stand, and drooping awning banners were the only things greeting me. A few hours before, they were all bright and cheery. Now everything was dismal black and hidden in the winter twilight. A sense of total abandonment threatened to pin me to my spot. Only the thought of Ross lurking nearby got me moving quickly toward the parking lot.

There was no sign of him or any park personnel. It was Christmas Eve, and everyone bugged out as soon as

possible. The parking lot was empty except for our station wagon. The overhead lights made the car's red paint seem like blood in the dark.

"Get yourself together. You have a car. Get the spare key," I whispered to myself. Kneeling by the driver's side of the bumper, I felt for it. It was there all right. I opened the door, slid in, and locked it immediately.

Even with locked doors, I was shaking badly. Anger and grief surged through me. It was hard to think. I knew I needed to calm down.

Take deep breaths, I told myself. That seemed to help as I fought to bring myself under control over the next several minutes.

First things first. I needed to find the cops. Head to Carlsbad—the city. Get the word out to the highway patrol. Fear had made a coward of me and I let him get away. Now I needed to stop him. *Quick*.

I drove rapidly down the hills on NM 7 West. I didn't consider stopping in Whites City, population seven, and headed to US 62. Carlsbad itself was the only real option. It was a twenty-minute drive from the caverns according to the highway signs. A population of 22,000 meant it probably had a decent police department.

The city lights beckoned and an exit sign pointed me into town. Neither told me how to find the police station. A Texaco gas station attendant said it was on Second Avenue by the Tastee Freeze. Three blocks east.

I probably looked a bit crazy, because he asked if I was all right. Despite the poster behind him advertising **YOU CAN TRUST YOUR CAR TO THE MAN WHO WEARS THE**

STAR, I brushed him off. What could I say? Where to start? He couldn't help anyway. I was anxious, irritated, and waved him away.

Three minutes later I was walking hurriedly toward the glass front doors of the Carlsbad Police Station.

Then I stopped.

I stopped because—and I know this sounds freaky—I'm a *Twilight Zone* fan. I've seen every episode. At least five times. It's a heck of a show.

There's this episode where a woman finds herself dreaming she's in a hospital elevator in the dead of night, heading down to the basement. It opens up to a dark, deserted hall. At the end of the corridor is a pair of double doors—the type that swing open to accept a body table being pushed inside, because this is a morgue. The doors open and a nurse in uniform smiles while saying, “Room for one more, sweetie.” The woman runs away shrieking. The next day she's late catching her plane for a trip and is coming up the ramp when the same morgue woman appears at the top but in a stewardess uniform. She smiles and says, “You just made it. Room for one more, sweetie.” Our heroine runs back to the terminal and collapses. When she awakens everyone is abuzz about how the plane crashed at the end of the runway during takeoff.

The message I got out of that was to trust your gut.

As I approached the double doors at the police station, one of them was held open for me by a man, not a woman. And he was in a cop uniform, not a nurse. But what he said stopped me cold.

“Room for one more, fella.” He smiled and kept the

door open.

I didn't shriek and run away. I didn't go through the door either. Instead, I walked rapidly back to the car, thinking furiously. *What the hell was I doing here?*

As I sat in the car thinking, I realized something. It was gnawing at me as I drove to the station, and now it was in front of me full force. I had no proof against this Ross guy. What was there to stop the cops from claiming that I killed my family and Nickels?

What I had done a week earlier at school would make me suspect number one.