

By the Jeep, RJ was swabbing Zorro's hands. I wanted to get that done before we started on the crime scene.

Eva wasn't going anywhere.

But Max was.

7- ORCUS AIMATOS -

Webster defines homicide as "The killing of one person by another."

Sounds simple enough.

What Webster doesn't say is that homicides are something that happen to other people. As a rule, I usually didn't know the murderer or the victim. Every homicide I'd ever investigated maintained that rule.

Now, that had changed.

Death had reached out and taken a friend. I'd spoken with Eva. I'd heard her dreams, broken bread with her and danced at her wedding.

Those memories ended here with her dead on the floor.

I remembered thinking about all the different scenarios that spousal abuse could play out into.

Scenario One was the abuser killed the person he was abusing, and Max had followed that one to the letter. He'd killed the person that he supposedly loved.

I think we all thought we were past this, and this wouldn't happen.

But it did.

Andy was sketching out the crime scene. Later he and RJ would put measurements into it.

“If it’s any consolation,” Andy said without looking up, “they never get easier.”

I’d always thought that someplace, somewhere, you built up mental armor against such a thing. That you got jaded and a dead body became just a dead body.

“The victim,” Andy said, still adding to the sketch, “was a person. They were someone’s son or daughter. They were someone’s mother, father, brother, or sister. When someone murders them, they aren’t committing a crime against just that person, but the whole world. A crime against humanity and God.

“Each person is unique. There will never be another person like the victim. And when they’re taken from us, we’re poorer as a people.”

I recognized what he’d said as coming from one of his books.

I asked him about it after having read it. He explained it to me this way. “It’s a warning to those of us who work on these crimes. Murder is the worst crime imaginable, and we would do the victim a massive disservice if we brought their killer to justice but lost them in the process.”

It struck me as a nice way to stop being objective and had said so. He replied that we

couldn't be so objective that we forget we're the ones who speak for the dead.

And now I was thinking about what to do with someone who had silenced a voice in the human chorus.

"You're going after Max?" RJ asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Need some help?"

I thought about it, but said, "This is your case. And I need you here supporting me. Moving pieces as needed and getting information."

"I can do that."

"You let Zorro go?" I asked.

"I did. He got in his pickup and drove away."

I nodded, wondering what bottle we'd find him in.

If Max had any mercy, he would have killed him. Zorro had to live the rest of his life knowing a woman he loved and who was carrying his child had been murdered a few feet away from him.

And that he did nothing but hide under the bed like a dog scared of thunder.

"RJ. Call Zorro's family. Tell them what happened and ask them to keep an eye on him."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I looked in the direction Zorro had driven. "I would."

Zorro had failed himself on a cosmic scale. If I hadn't tried to defend or avenge the woman I

loved, I'd have eaten the business end of a gun by now.

I couldn't stop and think of that or what he might do. We had work to do. We broke the area up and searched from the outside in. They call this a spiral search and was different from the zone search RJ and I had done months before.

In that, we broke up the area to be searched into individual grids and swept through them, identifying evidence as we went.

Here, we were looking for evidence. As we spiraled towards the house and Eva's body, Andy directed RJ to get pictures of footprints, tire tracks, and whatever else we found. They got photos of the door frame and the latches. There was no damage to indicate forced entry.

"I'm sure he used a revolver. Probably that Colt Detective missing from the gun safe," Andy said as we finished looking through the house.

Max had drawn and fired. The spent casing stayed in the gun. Had he used a semi-auto, the casing would have been ejected to be found. That is unless he cleaned up after himself.

"Max carries a snub nose 38," I said, confirming the guess. "Colt Detective like the ones we carried at MPI."

"Good bet the bullet came from it," Andy responded.

I doubted Max would hang onto it. Too bad. I'd offered to buy it from him once.

Based on what Zorro had told us and the physical evidence, we could easily see what had happened. Max had been looking towards the house. In violation of the terms of their agreement and the restraining order, he came and knocked on the door.

Eva let him in.

I felt a flash of anger towards her when I thought of it. She opened the door, invited him in, and made coffee. I'd thought she was smarter than that.

But maybe she thought, like everyone else did, that it was ok. Maybe she sought to forgive him for the abuse he'd directed towards her. Maybe she thought they could be friends again.

She was wrong.

RJ photographed the coffee cups on the table and said, "At least it started peacefully enough."

"Collect the coffee cups as evidence," Andy directed RJ. "When they catch Max, we'll do a swab and probably match one of them to him."

"Dust for prints?" RJ asked.

Would fingerprint powder screw up the saliva? I didn't know.

"Don't," Andy answered. "Collect them and let them dry. After they've dried, send them off to CBI. Let the lab collect the saliva samples and do the dusting."

I was glad to have the older detective along. I was learning just listening to him.

“Are you sure Zorro didn’t have coffee here?” RJ asked.

I hadn’t thought about asking. “Put that one in follow-up.”

RJ scribbled a note in his notepad to do that.

Then they photographed the rest of the house. They noted a dusty boot print on the floor. Andy put a ruler next to it, told RJ to watch the lightning, and got a picture of it. The shoe print had ridges I knew well.

“Max still likes combat boots,” I said, kneeling by it. “This looks like a recruit boot.”

It confirmed what Zorro had said about polished boots.

We photographed the bedroom and then ducked down and photographed under the bed. It was clean except for the drying puddle of urine.

The county coroner came up to the kitchen door as we finished photographing the inside of the house.

“How we doing, Will?” Jim asked.

“Getting ready to photograph the body, Jim,” I answered. “RJ is taking point on this one.”

I introduced Jim to Andy. “Andy DeShong from Routt County. Murder is his specialty.”

“Dr. Murder! We’ve met,” Jim said, shaking Andy’s hand. “I took a class from you last year.”

“I remember. Good to see you again.”

Jim looked at Eva lying on the floor. “Her husband did this?”

“I’ll be going after him.”

“You watch yourself.” He said that as if he expected I’d be giving him some business.

RJ finished putting a fresh roll of film into the camera.

“I’ll help you photograph the body,” Jim offered.

Most people would start by photographing the wound. But training and experience taught us to start further away and work in.

The idea was to get the body from every angle and set it up for a judge and jury. They needed to know what we saw.

“Where did the coat come from?” Jim asked, studying the body.

“We think Max put it over her,” Andy answered.

He blinked in surprise. “Why?”

“I suppose he loved her,” I said.

The words were no doubt true, but they caught me by surprise.

Eva is lying in the home they bought. She has a hole in her chest and no light in her eyes because Max killed her. And yet, Max loved her enough to cover her face with a jacket after he’d murdered her.

The disconnect between the two events was at once touching and jarring.

Love or guilt. Which one did he feel? Maybe a little of both. Or maybe her open eyes fixed him with an accusing stare he didn't need.

Too bad I wasn't a psychiatrist. I could have had fun unraveling that one. I'd leave that one for my psychologist wife to ponder over.

But it made me wonder just how rational Max still was.

That he hadn't lost it entirely was obvious. After all, he'd walked into the bedroom where Eva's lover was and allowed the man to live.

Max was rational to be sure. He hadn't killed again, and he'd thought through and executed an escape plan. But, how long he'd stay sane was anyone's guess. A man escaping into the wilderness and pursued by the demons that drove him to murder could quickly go insane.

Jonesy came to the door and called me over. "Will. I have better sketches of the foot and tire prints."

Jonesy held up a legal writing pad. It had drawings of footprints, hoof prints, and tire tracks. He'd circled several things that caught his attention and written notes concerning those items. Among them was a bent nail on the horseshoes and a gouge out of the bottom of Max's right boot print. He'd also recorded some items that stood out about the tire tracks.

"I'm going to walk to the road and see if I can figure out which way he went," Jonesy said.

“Go for it. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“And the Sheriff put out a 10-64 on the vehicle.”

A 10-64 is a notice to “be on the lookout for” to Law Enforcement officers. It was a mere formality. If he was heading into the mountains, there would be only a few game wardens and forest rangers up there.

“If he took a horse, pack, and weapons, he isn’t sticking around,” I said. “He’s headed into the woods!”

Jonesy agreed with the assessment. “It would place us at a distinct disadvantage.”

The mountains would be the equalizer for him. Disappearing up among the trees and the incoming weather brought our prospects of catching him to just about zero.

“If we can find a starting point, we can pursue him,” I said. Without that, we’d just be two guys stumbling around in the woods. I was putting the mission together.

There were still horses in the corral and we’d use them. Some might favor ATVs, but Max would hear those coming a mile off. Besides, horses could go places ATVs couldn’t.

Jonesy knew I needed a direction of travel and he would do everything possible to find that for me. He began walking down towards the county road.

“We’re almost done here,” Andy said.

“Good.”

“I heard what Jonesy said,” Andy said. “My Beechcraft is at the Monte Airport. I can give you a couple of passes through an area.”

“Can your plane handle the altitude?”

The San Juan’s could be a very unforgiving place for an airplane. The hills and canyons were littered with the skeletons of aircraft larger and more powerful than Andy’s little red and silver plane.

“I’ve got twin engines and a twenty-thousand-foot ceiling. More than enough. I fly in and out of Steamboat and Aspen all the time. This place won’t be a problem.”

“What do you need?”

“Like you, an idea of where to start looking. And I’ll need spotters.”

“Spotters?”

“I’m going to be too busy driving to be looking around. Maybe we’ll get lucky and spot his truck. Maybe we’ll get luckier and spot him.”

I leaned against the Jeep. “Ever done an escape and evasion course?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“We did. The instructors caught every one of us except Max. He not only beat them at their own game but was cocky enough to start leaving little notes like, ‘You just stepped on a landmine, Stupid. Good job.’ ”

“He turned the tables on them.”

“He’s good. His dad was a SERE instructor for the Air Force, and he taught Max everything he knew. If anyone can get away, he can.”

Something about what I’d said clicked with Andy. “Native American?”

“Lakota,” I replied.

He puffed out his cheeks and then let the air out. “I think I knew of his old man,” he said. “If Max is a third as good as he was, you’ll have a tough time catching him.”

Terrific, I thought.

“What can we start rounding up?” he asked. “I’ll call Annie. She and the girls can get what you need. They can also double as my spotters.”

That was a good idea.

“At home, I’ve two Ranger rucks. Jewell knows which ones they are,” I said. “Each pack has enough food for five days, a shelter, sleeping bag, clothing, and so on.

“Ask her to bring my Mosins. Not the old ones. The modified ones and forty rounds of ammo per. They’re good long-range weapons.

“I also need one box for my forty-five and a box of nines for Jonesy.”

He had written it all down and then took a cell phone from his pocket. He dialed a number and began talking to someone.

I looked towards the road where Jonesy had reached the turn-off. He’d bent over as he looked at the ground studying the tire tracks. He decided,

stood, and began walking up the dirt road towards the foothills.

A couple of cars passed him as he walked.

In the years to come, the drivers of those vehicles would create a rural legend that would haunt us for decades.

The story was that we had the wrong guy in the murder of Eva. Witnesses would say that a big black man was seen walking down the county road away from the crime scene. He had a scowl on his face, blood on his clothing, and was muttering as he went along.

In 1990s Conejos County, Colorado, a person of color walking down a county road was unusual. There was one black man in the entire county and he was a highly respected teacher.

We did put out a statement that the man they saw was in fact Officer Michael Jones of the LAPD and that he was assisting us in the investigation.

Everyone seemed to have missed the story. The legend would persist that the real culprit was a black guy despite our having a witness, evidence, and events that supported Max being the killer.

People will believe what they want.

I went back towards the house.

“Almost done, Perkins,” RJ said.

A few minutes later, one of the old “Ghostbusters” ambulances arrived. The vehicles had long since been replaced with newer EMS

units and this one was detailed for morgue duty. It paused at the gate. I could see the deputy point them down the road. It came to a stop in front of the house.

The EMTs got out and went around to the back. Opening the back door, they pulled out a gurney. It had a body bag rolled up on it.

There was also a crash kit on the stretcher. Normally, the box would have held lifesaving equipment like bandages and such. This one carried plastic bags to put over hands or whatever body part might need to be enclosed to preserve evidence.

Usually, these EMTs would be fighting to preserve life. But there was no one here to save. The life of their charge had long since faded.

“You ready for your first autopsy, RJ?” Jim asked as they brought the gurney in.

RJ hadn’t thought about that and went a little pale.

I’ve helped butcher cattle and sheep, field dress game, and never got sick doing it. Watching a human being split open like a chicken is a whole different experience.

I lost my lunch.

“It will be a few days away,” Jim added.

“I’m looking forward to it,” RJ muttered.

Jim and the EMTs began preparing the body for transport. They put plastic bags over Eva’s hands so that anything on them wouldn’t be lost. Her

nails and hands showed no evidence of a struggle, but we still needed to cover that base.

Soon, they were ready to load, but before moving her into the body bag, Jim pulled out a piece of chalk and outlined Eva's body on the floor.

We'd get one last picture when she was gone.

The body bag was waiting.

Jim and the EMTs placed the bag next to Eva's body and then positioned themselves to put her in it.

"Be careful," I said, adding, "don't hurt her."

It was a silly thing to say. Eva was beyond pain.

Carefully they picked her up and positioned her in the body bag. The bag would help to save any physical evidence as well as make transport easier. Rigor had started to set in, and it took some doing to get her into the bag. Once done, Jim grabbed the end of the zipper. With a hiss of metal on metal, the bag closed.

The next time I saw Eva, she'd be in her coffin.

From there, she went onto the gurney and was strapped down as any patient might be. They popped the gurney up onto its wheels and rolled her gently out of the house and to the Ghostbuster to load.

Like so much bread pushed into a delivery truck, they guided the gurney with Eva on it into the old ambulance.

The AC was already screaming full blast. It wouldn't do to let the body get too warm on the trip over the mountains. Decomposition starts at death and there's no point in helping it along.

Jim got in with the body. "I'll let you know when they'll do the autopsy."

"Thanks," RJ said.

The driver closed the doors. She got in and the ambulance began moving down the farm road.

I watched as it turned onto the county road and then accelerated away for the trip to Pueblo.

And just like that, Eva became someone we used to know.

The Ghostbuster passed Andy's rental truck coming down the road. Jonesy had walked up the road and was walking back down. The truck drove past the gate and up to meet him.

He talked through the car window with someone, and then he jumped up onto the bumper and stepped up and into the truck bed. The pickup did a U-turn and turned down the road.

Seconds later, Jewell was looking at me, her eyes wet with tears.

"Was that Eva?" she asked, looking down the road where the ambulance had gone.

"Max killed her," I said.

For a second, I thought Jewell was going to faint, so I held her close. Jewell had spoken with Eva at least once a week and they were friends.

"I'm sorry, Baby Love."

“You guys are going after him?”

“We are.”

“I got everything on your list.”

“Will, here’s your radios,” the Sheriff said, handing me two handheld police radios. “The batteries are fresh. I wish I had some spares to send with you.

“What are thinking, Will?”

“I’m thinking, we can’t send a large force in after him. You can only move as fast as your slowest element then. With just Jonesy and me, we can move fast and close the distance.”

RJ joined us and listened carefully.

“RJ, hand me that county map from my ruck?” I asked.

“Sure thing,” he answered. He looked through my ruck and pulled out a topographical map of the county. The map also showed trails and roads.

I took a pen from my pocket and found our location. “Ok, we’re here. Jonesy, what did you find?”

Jonesy pointed at a “T” intersection on the map. “I walked up to here. Where do these roads go?”

I pointed at the one that headed south. “This goes up to La Jara Reservoir. This one,” I said, indicating the one that ran west up into the mountains, “goes up into the Terrace Reservoir area.”

“The tracks went past the T and kept heading west. He’s going towards your Terrace Reservoir.”

RJ pointed at another road. “There’s this back way down by Jacob’s Hill that comes out by the wildlife refuge. Any chance he might have gone that way?”

“He might,” I said. “But I doubt it. He comes out onto the valley floor and it's game over. He knows that every cop down here will be looking for him.” I traced the road up. “No, Max is headed into the timber.”

The Sheriff said, “Hunting season starts tomorrow.”

Hunters had been coming into the Valley and were dragging their trailers and tents up into the mountains. They’d be watching for deer, and most would shoot at the first thing that moved.

I’d never liked hunting season. I’d seen horrible accidents during that time of year. The year before, Rio Grande County had a hunter killed by another hunter. A bullet went right through his head.

They never found the shooter and the lingering question with that case will always be if it was a horrible accident or murder.

“Jesus,” Jonesy said, thinking the same thing all of us were. “Iraq was safer.”

“He’ll be doing his best to blend,” I said. That meant he’d be wearing an orange hunter's vest just like everyone else.

We’d have to wear one as well. We wanted to be covert about hunting him, but we also didn’t want to get shot off our horses by some idiot.

“We’ve got another problem,” RJ said. “There’s a major storm heading our way. Mucho nieve.”

As the county emergency manager, RJ watched the weather closely. With hunting season coming up, he’d be especially concerned.

He already had the county search and rescue, the SLV High Angle Rescue Team, and the Colorado Office of Emergency Management briefed and ready to go to rescue stranded hunters.

“That will complicate things,” I said.

“Nieve?” Jonesy asked.

“Snow,” I responded. “That white stuff you don’t see often in LA.”

“You might get your fill of it with this one,” RJ said. “It’s supposed to hit in two waves. The first wave will come tomorrow evening and drop about twelve to sixteen inches in the mountains. The other is about fourteen hours behind it. That one will be measured in yards.”

“We even get a little snow and we’ve lost him,” Jonesy said.

“RJ, can you support us with weather reports?”

“How about weather in the morning, noon, and in the evening?”

“That would be perfect,” I said. “Now, here’s what I’m thinking. We get the posse and reserve deputies out and string them along Highway 17 to Platoro as a picket line. With luck, we’ll push him right into them.”

“They’re going to be spread thin,” the Sheriff said.

“I know.”

“I’ll get them out and setup,” RJ said.

Having a picket line was almost an exercise in futility. I was hoping he might be seen, heard, or at least pause long enough for us to close on him a little.

“What else?” he asked.

“We get his picture out there. We have a recent booking picture and we use it. With luck, someone will see it and him and let us know.”

“They might shoot him!”

“Good point. Tell them not to approach. If they shoot him, it better be in self-defense. Give an interview to the paper and the radio stations. Maybe even television.”

“Conejos 2, Conejos 6,” crackled the radio. It was Tom at the gate.

“Go ahead, Conejos 6,” I said.

“Samantha from the newspaper is here. She wants a statement,” he answered.

“OK. Who drew the pentagram and chanted ‘I summon thee’ there time?” RJ asked.

It was his way of saying “speak of the Devil.” The joke at least brought a smile to our faces.

“Let her through, Tom” I said into the handheld. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Do you expect him to make a run through that road?” the Sheriff asked, indicating the road up to Platoro and then back down.

“I expect him to keep us going in circles till the weather closes in on us and we’re forced to break pursuit.”

“And then?”

“And then, he breaks into a cabin, bags a deer or two, and waits for spring. If he’s smart and careful, he can be in Mexico a few weeks later.”

“Could he do that?” RJ asked.

“He could,” Jonesy answered. “Max knows how to live off the land. And he knows how to think two moves ahead. That’s why we hated playing chess with him. He’s very capable of it if he decides to do that.”

A small car pulled up and Samantha Gallegos got out. Judging from her appearance, this caught her in the shower.

“Sam,” I said, standing up and away from the map.

“Will, every time I see you, it isn’t good news,” she said.

“And I’ve none to offer today.” She already knew the Sheriff and RJ. I introduced her to Andy and Jonesy.

“What can you tell me?” she asked, her notebook open and her pencil ready.

“Here’s it is. Today at about 0900, Conejos County Sheriff’s Office was called to a report of a

shooting at this residence. Upon arrival, we found twenty-four-year-old Eva Laurie having been shot in the chest and killed. Our preliminary investigation reveals that her husband, Max Laurie, shot and killed her.”

“Do you know why?”

I shook my head as if I didn’t know, but did say, “They’ve been separated for several months.”

She looked at Andy and Jonesy and said, “I know almost all the cops in the valley. Who are you two?”

“LAPD,” Jonesy said, extending his hand. “Will and I are friends. I’d came up on a hunting trip.”

“Detective Andy DeShong, Routt County Sheriff’s Office. Same story.:

“Did you guys know the suspect?” The question was to the three of us.

“We were best of friends,” I answered.

“And where is he now?” she asked.

“He’s up there,” I said, pointing at the mountains. “He’s running and Jonesy and I are going after him!”

“How does your friendship factor into this?” she asked. She had to ask the question.

I was thankful that Jonesy handled it.

“You see that,” he said, holding up his right hand, palm facing her.

“What is that?” she asked, seeing the scar across the palm. She took a picture of it.

“Will has one, too. So does our friend, Terri,” he answered. “And Max has one.” He paused as she wrote it all down. She looked a little confused by his explanation.

. “Do you know what an *orcus aimatos* is?”

The confusion on her face made it obvious that Sam was dipping into her well of foreign languages and coming up empty.

“Sorry. I don’t.”

“Blame Terri for the wording. She studied Greek, not us. It means a ‘Blood Oath.’ ”

“I didn’t think people did those anymore.”

“Well, it is a little primitive. And with AIDS and all, people are scared to death of doing it. But we swore one. We swore that we’d always be there for one another.

“But then we swore something else. We also swore that if any of us ever went rogue and needed to be made answerable to the law, we would pursue and bring that person or persons to justice. We even have an official written on paper charter that says that.”

“You hold each other accountable?”

“Yes,” he answered. “And because of that promise made to each other and before God Almighty, we’ll do everything in our power to bring him in.”

“And he knows this?”

“He knows this,” I answered. “And if the situation were different, we’d expect him to hold up his end of the oath.”

She finished writing that down.

“Sam, I’m sorry to cut this short, but if we have a chance of catching him, I need to hammer down a few final details with the Sheriff and RJ. If you want to stick around, feel free to. You can’t go into the house and stay out of the outbuildings.”

“Thanks, Will.” She stepped back away from us and took pictures of the house and us.

“OK, here’s the communication plan. Once we start, I call in. We’ll contact the SO or CSP with our location every three hours at the top of the hour. Say twelve, three, six, and nine, unless we say differently.

“We’ll try to stay on Sheriff’s Channel unless we need to switch. Otherwise, we’ll keep the radios off and come up only if we have something urgent. If we miss two check-ins in a row, come looking for us.”

I rolled up the map.

“Got a compass?” Jonesy asked.

“Yes, and we’ve got GPS,” I answered.

“There’s a unit in each of our rucks.”

“Spoil me, “ he said. No shooting azimuths on this trip.

I gave him a radio and RJ showed him which frequencies were which.

“I’ll post a guard,” the Sheriff said. “Anything else?”

“Get ATF down to look at those grenades. It might be nice to know where they came from.”

“We’ll make it happen.”

I still had a lot to say to Jewell, but things were moving fast. I walked over to where Andy stood with the ladies. He’d briefed them on his part of the plan.

“Andy, are you ready?”

“We are. Which way are we going?”

I unrolled the map again. “Jonesy?”

Jonesy pointed to the county road and said, “He turned west and headed up into the mountains. I went a couple of miles down, and he stayed on that track.”

“Headed up to Terrace Reservoir,” I said.

“That’s rough country.” Jewell, Kari, and Pam clustered around, listening. “If we find a starting point, Jonesy and I are riding in after him.”

Andy studied the map and without looking up, said, “Looks like a fun place to fly.”

Jewell asked, “You guys going to be OK up there?”

“We got this,” Jonesy said. “It’ll be one big fishing trip.”

Jewell put her arms around me. She gave me a big kiss and said, “I know you’ve got to do this. You be careful.”

“I will,” I assured her. “If you need something, give the Sheriff a call.”

Kari was holding Jonesy, kissing his face, and telling him the same thing.

Jewell said, “Jonesy, you keep an eye on Will and bring him back alive!”

He smiled. “That’s against my better judgment, Jewell.” Then he turned serious. “I won’t let him get killed.”

“Hang on up there,” RJ said to Pam.

“I will,” she assured him. She looked a little ashen. I wondered why.

They got into the pickup and drove away.

We turned and walked towards the horse corral. Everything we needed was there in an adjacent shed to include blankets, saddles, and bits. There was feed for the horses and I quickly bagged some of the oats.

“Why did you tell Pam to hang on?” Jonesy asked.

“She hates small planes,” RJ answered.

Jonesy and I changed into BDUs and cowboy hats and walked out to the corral. We each had an orange hunting vest over the dusters we wore. It made us look like some weird combination of Elmer Fudd meets Gunsmoke meets the Green Berets.

“Will,” Jonesy said. “Assuming they locate his truck, how are we getting the horses there?”

I just about choked. I hadn't thought of anything that basic. I was laying this mission on too quickly and I was missing stuff.

I scratched my head, feeling stupid, and then finally said, "I'm going to have to call my pastor."

I used RJs cellphone to call the church.

"Pastor Morgan," I said when he picked up the phone. "This is Will."

"Morning," he said. "Jewell put in a call to us. We're getting some prayer going for you guys."

"Good," I said. We'd need it. "Pray that we stay safe and pray that we get a starting point and that we finish this mission successfully."

"But I need your help with something else."

"Name it."

"Can you hook up your horse trailer and come out to Max's place. If we find his truck, we'll need to move two horses."

"I anticipated your call and already have. Give me thirty minutes," he said.

While we waited, we double checked our gear.

"We'll use our pistols for close-in work," I said. "And the Mosin's for long-distance."

"You've modified them?" Jonesy said holding one. He'd never fired one but saw his share of them in Iraq.

"I've rebuilt them from the ground up. They've got improved triggers, and the stocks are different. We've forty rounds for each of them."

The Mosin-Nagant is a product of the late 1800s. It has a straight bolt and adjustable sights. It is highly effective as a combat weapon and a hunting rifle.

A couple of kids at school had made new stocks for me based on the Draganov design. Others had rebuilt the trigger so that each Mosin had about a two-pound pull. Others had turned out a muzzle brake for each, bent the bolt, and rigged up a means to mount a scope.

One of the more unusual things about the Mosin is its length. It's over four feet long. There's a joke that if you put the bayonet on it, you could stab your enemy to death without ever leaving your foxhole.

The long barrel length was the secret to its range. Five-hundred-meter hits weren't unheard of and with a scope, eight hundred meters and then some. It was the weapon of choice of more than a few Russian snipers.

After all, a Russian girl is supposed to have used one to blow out the windshield on my car a year ago. That the shot was from about four hundred meters and at a moving target using iron sights.

"Let's get the horses saddled. Pastor will be here soon."

We each got a saddle and a bridle and went out to our horses. As we were walking, I heard an airplane coming. Looking in the direction of the

sound, I saw Andy's red and silver twin-engine plane racing towards us, growing louder and larger. A moment later, it passed overhead and then arced to follow the road up the canyon. The wings wagged as it roared past.

I wasn't crazy about Andy barnstorming up into the canyon. But he was smart enough not to take any risks.

As we walked back with the saddles, Jonesy said, "Will, I seem to recall you don't like riding horses."

"I don't," I replied. Truth be told, I'm scared to death of them. "But that doesn't mean I don't know how."

We'd just finished saddling the horses when Pastor Morgan arrived. He stopped near the corral.

"Do we know where we're going?" he asked, getting out of the truck.

"Not yet," I answered. "It depends on finding Max's truck and horse trailer."

The Sheriff and RJ joined us, and we all spent a few minutes talking about the operation.

"Conejos 1, Conejos SO," the radio squawked.

"This is Conejos 1. Go ahead."

"That Routt County Detective reports that he thinks they found the suspect's truck and horse trailer."

The Sheriff took out his pen and notebook.

"Send the location."

“Routt County advises it’s on the main road up the canyon, about two miles above the reservoir but not yet to the Alamosa Campground. He says there’s a cliff to the north of that location with a big cave in it.”

“The old Bean Ranch!” I said.

“You know the area?” the Sheriff asked.

“There used to be a cabin there, but it burnt down. I knew the people who owned it.”

“We got lucky,” Jonesy said.

“Let’s get loaded up.”

“Good luck and good hunting, Will,” RJ said.

“Thanks, Bro!”

“And we’ll send someone out to take care of the horses,” Pastor Morgan told RJ.

“I’ve got the scene,” RJ said. “Be careful, guys.”

Quickly, we loaded the horses and our gear. While we were packing up, Samantha talked with the Sheriff and continued to take pictures.

Then, with the Sheriff leading the way, we headed up the canyon. The tires kicked up dust and made a cloud of it in our trail. Sam was bringing up the rear and eating that dust. She knew a good story when it came to her, and a little dust wasn’t about to keep her from it.

This would be one of the biggest of her career.

In minutes, we’d left the valley floor and the mountains stretched ahead.

And up there, someplace, Max was already on the run.