

Fleeting Shadow

Tracking Jane, interlude between episodes 2 & 3

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Quick Foreword

Before you start reading the story, you might want to know that *Fleeting Shadow* comes chronologically between [Rover](#) and [Tahoe-1](#), episodes 2 and 3, respectively, of the [Tracking Jane series](#). I wrote it to fill in some of the eight month period separating those two episodes, and to provide some background into events and relationships mentioned in [Tahoe-1](#) that will build through [Brownie](#) and [Blood Track](#).

Should you read this story ahead of those episodes? I recommend you at least read [Rover](#) first. But since I wrote it to stand on its own, yet reach across to the episodes that precede and follow it, reading this story first won't give away too much for those stories. It's your call.

I'm offering this story as a free download for [subscribers to my mail list](#). If you wish to share it with fellow readers and friends, I would appreciate if you point them to the subscription page.

Thanks again for reading. Without further delay, here is *Fleeting Shadow*.

«01» After Thanksgiving

Dan and I stand in the kitchen, facing each other. At first I know he was waiting for Cassandra to leave, which she did only seconds ago, but not before she winked at me. Now I suppose we're listening to make sure Cassandra's engine starts. She's got a friend in town she claims she needs to visit.

Through the kitchen window, we see her pulling away. Her car's headlights pierce through the faint veil of sparse snowflakes.

"You should go before it thickens up," I tell Dan.

He takes one step toward me, tentative, not his typical sure way. "I guess I should."

I edge back, but can't go far. The beveled edge of the sink counter pokes me in the butt, and I rest my hands on it, real nonchalant like, while inside I tense up. From the look Shadow and Shady give me from the kitchen door, tongues hanging out and all, they're not buying my act.

"You OK?" Dan asks.

"I am. I can take care of the rest." I point at the few pans that remain to wash after he's helped me soap up, rinse and dry off the rest. "You've done enough."

"That's not what I meant."

"Ah, that other thing." I try but fail to smile. "I had a lovely time."

"I did too." His voice comes out in a deep, soft tone.

"Sure ate your fair share of the turkey. Hope it don't put you to sleep before you finish your drive."

He smiles and comes closer. "Thank you," he says.

"What a thing to say, it being Thanksgiving and—"

Before I can react, he lays a gentle, but not short kiss on my cheek. As if to assure me he intends nothing untoward, he steps back. "We'll talk?"

It's all I can do not to bring my hand to my cheek to hold his kiss there before the warmth of it flees into the cold of the night. "Yeah, sure."

"I best be going, then."

I follow him to the front door and watch him put on his thick coat. A second later I'm standing at the door as he shuffles toward his SUV.

"It's going to be a good one," he shouts before he climbs in.

A cold wind makes the snowfall swirl around the headlights now. It all goes to black, quiet cold darkness once his lights vanish beyond the ranch's entrance.

I bring my hand to my cheek, finally. It lies cold and near to trembling as I step back into the living room and close the door.

By the time Cassandra returns an hour later, potbelly stove crackling fire notwithstanding, it's as cold in the living room, on this lumpy couch where I lay with a fleece blanket over me, as it is out there. She starts to say something, but cuts herself off. She knows how to read me now. She knows when after a long day I've reached my maximum capacity for non-grunting social interaction.

In silence she takes off her coat and boots, and in silence she climbs the stairs to her room.



It rolls in with the gloomy snowfall. Yesterday was sunny, today presses down on me cold and heavy. I need to move, but it's the last thing I want to do. I know it ain't right, but I pull the covers with every intention to stay under them until a fire or some other cataclysm forces me out.

Cassandra's in the kitchen. I hear her from my bed. A snout sniffs at me with its own brand of encouragement.

I pat Shady on the head, and on cue, she reaches down. A second later she rises above the edge of the mattress, teeth latched around a strap. I pull on it, and she helps me lift it, the long black duffel bag containing my special legs.

The coffee smells good as I climb down the stairs a couple of minutes later. It beckons me when I reach the kitchen, and so I push on to pour me a cup, see if it'll make the fog lift.

"Dan get off OK?" Cassandra asks.

I grunt in the affirmative and take a long, scalding sip from my cup.

"It was snowing pretty hard by the time I got back," Cassandra adds.

"Don't know why you had to chance it. Go out like you did."

"I promised my friend I'd come over."

“Dan and I didn’t need the privacy you know.” I shoot her a sharp glance over my cup of coffee. “Kind’a surprised you’d wanna give us the chance to get improper, actually.”

Cassandra looks down and lets a few seconds go by as she shuffles newspaper pages. With a finger tap she notes one particular sales page. “I was thinking of going by the mall, check out some of the sales.” She looks up, the implied question mark flashing on her eyes.

“Why would a sane person wanna join the Thanksgiving Friday mayhem? I ain’t sane, and I still know not to come near that mess.”

Cassandra looks down again, pages calmly through the paper, then takes a sip from her cup. “If we go, we should leave in the next half hour or so to beat the crowds.” She looks me over. “Don’t shower now. Too cold out there, anyway.”

Before I can object, Shady comes to sit by me. She blows another of her hot snorts, this time into my thigh. Cassandra looks at her and smiles. I peer through the kitchen window at the blank, fogged exterior, looking for an objection out there, in the inclement weather. But snow no longer falls, and though hidden behind many layers of clouds and frozen air, a bright washout signals sunlight’s persistence.

“Alright,” I say. “Let me throw something on.”

Cassandra looks up at me, this time with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” I ask. “Expecting a protracted argument?”

“You should eat something first. I can make us some egg and potato burritos to go while you change.”

“Sure. There’s some cooked bacon in the fridge. Throw some of it into mine.” I take another swig of my coffee. It hits me hot and bitter at the back of my tongue. I head for the kitchen door and halt there to turn around halfway. “Thanks,” I tell Cassandra, before I head upstairs.

Cassandra’s voice trails behind me. “Don’t mention it.”

At my side, Shady snorts again, probably telling me I should be ashamed for almost doing just as Cassandra said.

By the time I come back down the stairs, Cassandra stands ready by the front door. I reach her and stop when I catch her gaze drifting over to the fireplace. More shame comes over me when I notice Shadow curled up by the potbelly stove. None of my waking thoughts went to him, did they?

“I let him out earlier,” Cassandra says. “He should be good for a few hours. I dropped a few logs into the stove, too.”

I nod. “How’s he walking this morning?”

“Fair.”

“Still limping, then.”

“A bit.”

I nibble on the inside of my lip and stop myself from shaking my head. I've ignored his pain, or to state it more accurately, I've carried the weight of it with me while pretending it doesn't exist. More to the point, I'm pretending it doesn't much matter. It doesn't mean they're going to take him away from me—recall him to tinker with him some more, or cut him up with another operation, or God knows what. No, I don't want to think on that. I don't want to consider what it means for me, not having him, maybe needing some tinkering of my own.

"He's going to be alright," Cassandra says.

"We ran 'im too hard. Should've never done all those miles in the marathon."

"It's normal, Jane. We're all still recovering with our aches and pains. You, me—" She stops short. I know she meant to say Allison's name. When I face her, I can tell she's more than nibbling on the inside of her lip. "Shady, too," she rushes to add. "It's normal."

I zip up my jacket, take my aluminum foil wrapped burrito, and step through the door. The cold hits me like a moving wall. It wants to stop me, send me back to bed, but I won't let it.

«02» Black Friday

Something, something, “peace on earth” is sounding out through the mall’s speakers. Out there earth may want to claim its peace. In here, the blur of chaotic bustle declares quite the opposite. Maybe that’s why they play the elevator music, though in me something else shoots up to the top floor.

“Shady’s got recon,” Cassandra whispers next to me. “Let her do it, Jane.” Her voice rises enough to peak above the white noise of shoppers and the din of the music.

A child lets out a shrill scream, and I jump almost to my feet, held only in check by the sight of a kid pointing up at a giant red ornament.

Outside a coffee shop, we sit at one of three round, two-seater tables, the one that lets me rest my back against a wall and away from the folks that meander by. We made it through two stores before my mind started spotting enemy combatants and IEDs masquerading as flower pots all around me. My throat’s dry, and the cold glass of water Cassandra fetched for me ain’t helping much.

“She can catch and detect far more than you,” Cassandra whispers on. “Take it easy and let her do her job.”

I glance down at Shady. She sits erect, as tense as she can get. But she ain’t doing it on account of any real dangers out there, whether a pack of C4 floating by inside a bulky shopping bag, or a swerving stroller that conceals an AK-47. No, she’s on edge because of my imaginings. My pheromones tell her I’m set to go off. She senses it and responds with hypervigilance of her own.

Her ears twitch at every sound. Her nose sniffs at the air. Her eyes scan this way and that, and on occasion turn to me with mellow brown assurance. We’re in the clear. Nothing to fear.

Though I usually avoid crowded, high traffic settings, unlike many vets suffering from the mental anguish I brought back from overseas, I don’t have many of these episodes.

Indeed, having a dog with me wherever I go helps, more or less because of what Cassandra said. Shady takes care of guard duty. Which means I don't have to. I've endured one or two of these episodes, but only when Shady couldn't come with me, or I decided I didn't need her. Like right after I came back from my last deployment, the first couple of times I ventured back to church and I deemed it a safe enough place to not merit Shady's company. Big mistake.

Still, I haven't gone through this for some time. At least a year, I reckon.

I ponder why I feel this way now. I think on it with all the self-loathing and self-blame accompanying what everyone deems a break with reality.

Maybe I should've brought Shadow this time. Maybe it's his limping and what it may mean for him—and for me—that pulled my pin, so that now I have to keep a tight grip on this grenade-like psyche of mine. Maybe it's Allison, laid up on some hospital bed, and the fact that I put her there.

I close my eyes and breathe. I try to suck in calm and shove out anxiety. Or whatever that quack of a counselor called it before I put it in my own words. Shady lays her head on my lap and shoots me another of her hot snorts before she pulls out to watch on my behalf.

With a hand on the back of her neck I tell her, "I know. You got this." Like I believe it, I say it to myself, again and again. She's got this.

Shady lets out a growl, and I open my eyes to see him. Rover, walking by on a leash. His high pitch, snarling bark breaks the spell. Different terrier. Not Rover.

I close my eyes again. Great. More flashbacks. Flashbacks inside flashbacks.

Shady eases off and snorts at me one more time. I don't need to take it from her. Besides, I'm sitting in the good ol' United States, ain't I? Perfectly safe here, inside this mall, with Christmas music ringing, children laughing, registers cha-chinging and all that, right?

"Black Friday," I mumble. "Why do they call it that again?"

"Biggest shopping day of the year," Cassandra says. "Or they'd like it to be. Hasn't been that for the last few years, economy in the dumps, etcetera."

"Yeah, maybe," I sigh more than say.

Shady exhales a snort of her own. I keep my eyes closed, but I relax my eyelids.

Cassandra places her hand on mine. "We can go, if you want."

"That's probably a good idea."

Cassandra stands and waits for me to gulp the rest of my water. On the way out, close to the mall's exit, she says, "Well, since we're in town and all—" She leaves it at that, the way she does when she's baiting me to ask what she means.

I don't fall for it, keep walking ahead, with Shady breaking into a near trot next to me.

"Allison's hospital isn't too far from here," Cassandra adds. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind a visit."

I fight the urge to stop. "You sure about that?" I don't add, "After the way she and I left off last time," but Cassandra no doubt reads between my lines.

"I think it'll work out." Cassandra's lips draw a faint, almost playful smile. "We talked this morning. She's ready for visitors."

"Mm-hmm, I bet she is." I go through the door first. A blast of cold air hits me flush in the face as I try not to come across annoyed at Cassandra's shopping ruse. "If you'd told me, I'd brought Allison some leftover turkey," I add, but a gust of wind swallows my words, and I don't bother to repeat them.

«03» Visiting Hours

At the hospital, they won't let Shady go in with me. In spite of Cassandra's calm, steady effort at persuasion, the head nurse sticks to her policy and standards. So what if Shady's my service dog? Normally I'd do OK, given a hospital's less populated environs. Last time I came to visit Allison I went in canine free, no problem. Today it takes more of Cassandra's persuasion—this time aimed at me—before I yield Shady's leash. Cassandra walks me as far as allowed, and a nurse takes me the rest of the way.

I find Allison sitting up in bed, her red-orange hair, longer and unrulier than I remember it, flashing like random rays atop a powder blue pillow. With eyes that shine with calm confidence, she curls her lips into a soft smile.

Her voice soothes me some. Or maybe I hear grogginess from the pain meds. "Hey, stranger. Thanks for coming."

My eyes notice a metal walker, no more than three feet from her bed.

Her lips curl some more. "That's right. A few things have changed since we last saw each other."

"That's encouraging." I pull a chair along the side of the bed opposite where the walker stands, and I sit.

Allison scoots to face me more head on. "You were right. What you said about me not feeling sorry for myself. Needing to fight through it. You were right about that. All of it."

At the moment I can't manage to look her in the eye, but go to rubbing a spot on my work jeans. "I reckon I could've said it nicer, though."

"Well, yeah. That. But most of us should by now know you like to tell it true way more than the nice part."

I can't help but grin as I look up at her. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well? Did you bring me some turkey?"

"Didn't figure it would keep too well at the mall, so..."

Allison smiles. "OK, I get it."

"Wasn't that good, anyways."

"Oh? Cassandra tells me it's all Dan could talk about. So moist this. Wonderfully seasoned *that*. Best meal he's had in years, and so on."

My grin grows. "Dan's a bachelor."

"We should fix that."

"That pretty much makes him destitute when it comes to home cookin'. I could've mixed a can of stewed tomatoes with a can of dog food, and he would've exclaimed the virtues of my culinary prowess all the same."

Allison lets out one of her cackling laughs, but a grimace cuts it short.

"Take it easy there," I say.

She waves me off. "It's OK. Just some stitches. I've been cutting back on the pain meds. Almost off them now."

I feel the grin drain away from my face. I have to look down again.

"Jane, what I said. Blaming you... that was below the belt."

I rub harder. The spot on my jeans won't budge. I nod.

"I'm sorry I said that. I just wanted to have my pity party, and you weren't bringing streamers and a piñata." I hear her sniff. "Are we OK?"

I raise my gaze to meet hers. "Yeah, maybe."

"Maybe?" Allison tries to force a smile. "Don't give me that maybe stuff. We are OK, right?"

"I'm here, ain't I?" Now I try to force a smile. "We're here. You and me. Sometimes that's all we can say. All that needs saying."

"How existential of you."

I resist the temptation to point out what I said has nothing to do with existentialism. "I grumble, therefore I am."

"You grumble well," Allison says with an edge to her voice. She shifts to sit a tad higher in bed, like her back needs to stiffen up a bit.

"Yeah, about that," I rush to say before our fragile small measure of good will vanishes. "I'm sorry, too. Like I said. I should've said it nicer."

A soft smile returns to her lips. "It's working, Jane." She nods several times to communicate what words can't say in this room. Her eyebrows cock higher as substitute for discussion of classified information. "It really is." She pauses. "And I have you to thank for making it happen."

I don't know how to respond to that. Down deep I don't know whether to feel guilty for putting Allison in a situation where a bomb blast paralyzed her, or for insisting they fix her up like they did with me, sucking her into a program whose implications I ain't too keen to ponder for more than thirty seconds.

“Wanna see?” Allison asks.

My gaze, which has drifted to my lap once more, goes up again, this time to find her hand pointing at the walker.

“You can help me get out of bed,” she adds.

“Shouldn’t we get a nurse?”

“You’re way stronger than any of the nurses or physical therapists they have here.”

“Still. Shouldn’t you be supervised?”

She arcs her left eyebrow. “Not for a shuffle to the restroom.” Her lips twist to the side with a playful grin. “I really need to go.”

“Bet you do.” I stand and step around the bed to reach the walker.

By the time I get there, Allison has brought her legs over the side of the bed. She sits straight and reaches out, twirling her fingers like a girl twitching to open her Christmas present. My mouth opens and stays like that for a few seconds because that’s something right there. She’s sitting, back straight. When we had our blow-out over her not wanting to do physical therapy, she could barely move her legs or shift her weight in bed. And that happened, what? Two weeks ago?

“Come on,” she says.

I push the walker to her and line it up in front of her.

“They want me to slide down to the floor gently,” she adds as she reaches out her right hand, this time to me.

I take my cue and slide to her right, crouching down a little to support her weight as I let her grip my forearm. She scoots left, then right, then left again until her right toes scrape the floor. In another instant, her left foot touches down. Then she lets go off me and stands, steadying herself with hands out and in front.

“Ha.” She shoots me a sideways glance, mouth open, but about to smile. “What do you think?”

“That’s something.”

“Something? Come on. Something?” She teeters a bit, but regains her balance before I get a hold of her. In fact, my touch unsettles her balance some.

“Do me a favor and grab them handles.”

“Ah-ah. You do *me* a favor.” She points at the walker. “You get in front of it, facing me, and pull it toward you as I walk.”

“Without the walker?”

“It’ll be right there. Right in front of me. So technically, no, not without the walker.” She grins and lowers her voice. “Come on, Jane.” Her voice goes down to a hissing whisper. “These things work.”

I relent and do as she says. In another second, I’m inching back, slowly, one hand on the walker, the other out toward her, ready to grab one of her hands should she falter. Inch

by inch we move in tandem, my back getting closer and closer to the door into the restroom. At first she slides her socked feet along the tiled floor. But then, she bends at the knee and takes a bigger step, one that brings her almost nose to nose with me. As her foot lands, she teeters left.

I touch her forearm, but she's already re-steadied herself. "Jesus, Allison. Easy, girl."

"It's all good. We're doing good," she says, sounding like her own cheerleading physical therapist.

In a flash, I'm where she stands, learning to walk again. My own legs tremble and my balance dithers. That does it for me. My eyes blur with tears. "This ain't safe." My voice cracks, and I swallow. "Let's get you back to bed."

"You don't get it, do you? I really do need to—" She pauses, finally catching on to me. "Jane?"

I can't tell whether I reach for her first, or whether she pulls me in, but a moment later we're holding onto each other by the arms. Not soon after that, we lock in an awkward embrace, each of us leaning over the dumb, irrelevant walker.

We hold each other, convulsing with our sobbing, swaying left, right, back, and forth, steadying each other to somehow keep ourselves upright.

I don't know how long we stay like that, but we do, gradually calming ourselves, growing steadier, never breaking our embrace until we hear the room's door crack open.

"Well, look at this," the nurse says as she comes in.

I look up in a near panic. "She needed to go to the restroom," I rush to say like a kid caught in mischief.

"That's not a problem," the nurse says, except when I look closer I realize she ain't no nurse. She wears dark purple scrubs rather than the blue I saw on the nurses, and upon closer examination, her name tag confirms my finding.

"Susan... You the therapist, then," I say.

"As I live and breathe," she replies with a twang I at first assume for ridicule of mine, but in the end decide she owns all by herself. "Well, go on," she adds. "Let's get her to the potty before she tinkles all over herself."

By the time Allison comes out of the restroom, Susan has cajoled me into assisting Allison in her twice daily walk around the hospital floor. I grumble some as we start, but to tell it true, do it with no small measure of gladness. And relief. Allison is walking, like I hoped. Like I prayed so I wouldn't have to add yet another sack of guilt to the load I already lug around.

We complete one full lap, and to my surprise and Susan's, Allison says, "Let's go another lap."

"Why not?" Susan says.

The door to the reception room opens after she's taken a few steps. Cassandra comes through it.

"Oh," she says, getting a look at Allison. "Wow. You're—"

"Walking," Allison says. "We call it walking." She lets go of the walker and stands up straight.

"That's awesome. Really. Wow."

"Something wrong?" I ask.

Cassandra nods. "Got a call. Some college kids hiking in Estes. Started yesterday. Got caught in that storm."

Her words don't quite register. I stare at her, stunned, trying to make sense of what she just said in light of Allison's quantum leaping progress.

"Sounds like a good snow shoeing time," Allison says.

Cassandra and I exchange a look, glance at Allison in near unison, then back at each other.

"Well, go on," Allison says. "I can't exactly join you, so you're all on your own there."

After another few seconds to clear my senses, we say our goodbyes. Cassandra and I grab Shady and walk out of the hospital, talking of where we'll grab lunch and all the equipment we need to get from the house.

That's when it hits me, the sight of Shadow curled up by the pot belly stove, warming himself up. How will he take to this job? Should I even take him?

Outside it's started to snow again. Windy and thick it comes down, making me shiver inside.

«04» Deep Snow

Back at the ranch, we load my SUV with winter gear and supplies for the dogs. Cassandra offers to drive, and I don't see much reason to object. Besides, my mind grapples with a more immediate decision.

"Are we taking him?" Cassandra asks.

Shadow looks up at me. He remains on his padded bed, next to the potbelly stove. I stand by him, catching the last of the fire's ebbing warmth.

"Yeah, maybe." I urge Shadow to stand. Together we take a walk into the kitchen and back.

"No limp," Cassandra says. "If we're going to leave him, we'll have to figure out who can come by and take care of him."

And that's not Allison, who would love to do it if she were not laid up in a hospital bed.

"In this weather we're not likely to find anyone willing to drive over," she adds.

"Yeah. I don't want to leave him in the kennel, either. For the same reason. Most of their big animal stalls are exposed to the elements."

"I'm sure they would bring them inside," Cassandra says, though her tone hints at her own doubts. Indoor accommodations at the local kennel don't come with much space, and I don't like my dogs crowding with other animals and catching all their ills. That's especially true of Shadow, who doesn't usually take well to cramped quarters.

We don't need to say much of that to each other, and not long thereafter we have Shadow and Shady loaded up in my SUV. A few minutes later we leave the ranch, not bothering to lock the gate behind us.

Once we reach Highway 34, Cassandra hands me her cellphone and asks me to call back to notify the authorities we're on our way. The officer that answers spends a few minutes chatting me up about the weather, road conditions, and how long it'll take us to

reach the park. We agree he and a partner will drive up to meet us at a roadside diner. It takes us an hour to reach it. We stop to grab some hot coffee, while they quick-brief us about the situation ahead.

We learn that the hikers could've gone down one of two trails. One of the officers notes how glad he is we have two dogs, since that will allow Cassandra and me to split duty. She and I exchange a glance. I can tell she ain't so sure about letting me go on my own with one of the dogs. Given Shadow's condition, I admit to some wisdom in her doubting.

We get coffee refills to go, and from there our police colleagues set to escort us the rest of the way.

The snowfall lets up some. Ahead, piercing through flurries of dot-sized flakes, one patrol car leads the way, bubble lights glowing, siren blowing, while the second police vehicle, an SUV, falls in behind us. We press ahead at a safe forty-five miles per hour. Underneath us the road noise gives way to the crunching of tires on snow and ice.

Something inside me lets go. For a moment, the whiteout lifts and I see early morning sunlight. I'm not on Highway 34, heading west, but on 25, speeding south toward Denver. The radio reports a bomb blast, and I'm thinking about other bomb blasts half a world away.

Cassandra's voice snaps me back. "You OK?"

"Flashbacks inside flashbacks," I reply, harking back to a conversation we had about how my recent life conspires to hand me more PTSD material.

"Be here."

"Yeah. In the moment," I reply, even if my mind drifts to an airport, blown glass, and torn asunder body parts radiating from the black bomb blast epicenter. "Here's all we have," I mumble. "In the now, in this moment."

The regurgitation of my therapy group mantra appeases Cassandra some. She lets me dwell in silence broken only by the crunching snow.

Before us the fog lifts a bit. The outline of peaks and rock formations break through a gray-white sky.

"So what do you think?" Cassandra says. "Team up and tackle one trail at a time, or divide and conquer?"

"I reckon we should divide. Ain't so sure about the conquer part."

From the look on her face, I can sense her measuring her next remark. "Shadow or Shady?"

"Shadow goes with me. No questions asked."

"None will be."

We pull into a parking lot whose asphalt shows as faint, slashed gray through a thin, shoveled layer of snow and ice. A tent rises in the western corner of the lot. Inside it, dogs and gear in hand, we gather around a table to review a map of the area. Though she doesn't

put it that way, Cassandra suggests she should take the path that features the steepest climb. I don't object. Fifteen minutes after we arrived, I lead one team of three men along trail one while Cassandra does likewise on trail number two. We have markers gathered from the effects the hikers left in their vehicle, where deputies found several items of worn clothing the dogs now use to scent the track. Neither Cassandra nor I have the heart to point out that with freshly fallen snow and more blowing about in flurries, those markers, no matter how stinky, won't do us much good.

The men and I use snow shoes to avoid the worst of the deep, soft powder. Shadow, though sporting snow booties, still struggles to bounce up trail. He doesn't give up, but with each forward leap out of belly deep snow, I can sense him tiring. We wind our way along a trail hardly discernible. GPS guides our way and marks our distance. Our path dips downslope, and I fear that will make for harder going.

By the half mile mark, the snow gets deeper. It crunches under our snow shoes powder-soft. Shoes or not, we also sink with each step, an inch or more, and when we lift our feet, we drag up snow with us. My hips start feeling it. Muscles burn and a dull soreness forebodes sharper pain to come.

This only means Shadow must labor even harder. Soon it becomes clear. The trek is putting far too much stress on his rear haunches, and in particular, his right hip. At times he double-clutches his leaps out of the snow. I call a halt to our progress. Only then does he turn around, pain shimmering in those brown eyes of his. He lets out a reluctant but long whimper that tears through me with guilt for letting him go this long.

I re-check the GPS. We stand a couple of decimal ticks above the half mile mark. God only knows how much farther we have to hike.

"Problem?" one of the guys says.

"This ain't no good."

"What do you mean? We got people missing out there, and the clock's ticking. You and your dogs are supposed to be top notch. We haven't even gone a mile, and you're calling it?"

Though I'd love to smack him one, I point at his radio instead. "Let me have that."

He frowns and hands it to me. I call Cassandra and confirm what I hoped for. Her steeper grade is making for easier progress because snow hasn't gathered as high and deep there.

"It's icy, though," she tells me.

"Got anything?"

"Hard to tell, but Shady's interested."

A gust blows a stinging handful of shredded ice onto my face. I turn from it. Snow flurries swirl around us seconds later with increased intensity.

"Alright," I say into the radio. "I'm calling it here. See you back in camp. Careful out there, and call it off the second it don't feel safe."

I hand back the radio. The guy goes on with something or other about pressing for an hour or so. By way of reply, I take off my backpack and hand it to him, saying something to the effect that he should make himself useful.

“You sure you can carry him?” guy number two asks when I lift Shadow with arms under his belly.

I squint as I turn to face head down into another lashing flurry. “Let’s get going,” I say.

Guy number two is nice enough to lead the way, making fresh tracks for me to ease my going. Nonetheless, as we push through near whiteout conditions, I have to rest every tenth of a mile or so. Whether from sympathy or a kind of cruel synchronicity, my hips and lower back ache with shooting pain as I squat down.

Guy number three, a tall muscular specimen with linebacker written all over him, offers to carry Shadow after the third stop.

“My dog,” I reply. “I brought him in. I take him out.”

Those words resonate through me the rest of the way with meaning other than what I intended. Step by step, I press on and swat aside defeated thoughts.

It takes another ten minutes to reach the tent. I find an open slot by a heater and set Shadow down. With my face turned away from the others, I let myself cry.

I don’t know how long I stay like that. When I come to, Shadow and Shady are licking either side of my face. Cassandra pats my back and tells me it all turned out OK. We found them, she says. By which she means Shady led her team to a snow berm where a hiker’s boot poked through. She leaves out the part that the three hikers are long dead, as I’ll learn later during the return drive. But hey, we found them. That’s what they pay us to do.

Shadow drops down with a sharp whimper, and that’s when Cassandra gets it.

“I pushed him too hard,” I say. “We had no business being out there.”

“He’ll be OK,” she replies.

I don’t rush to rebut her, even if something tells me the passage of time will.

«05» Homecoming

We spend the night at a local motel. Though we don't see roaches, the accommodations very much suggest them. Glad to leave the following morning, we shuffle through a coffee shop to grab us a cup and pastry to go, and drive east in much improved weather.

Surprise number 1 back at the house: a shoveled drive leads up to the house.

Surprise number 2 explains the shoveled driveway. Allison's boyfriend's truck awaits us. Its front end snowplow digs into the mound of snow it shoved into place by the oak tree

Surprise number 3? Heat from the fired up potbelly stove hits me flush in the face when I open the front door. Inside the living room, Allison lays on the couch, while her boyfriend, Esteban, enjoys my easy chair. He gets up, as if caught in the act. Allison pulls herself up with one hand on her walker, and when my eyes drift to a folded up wheelchair by the potbelly stove, she winks at me the moment I turn back to her in search of explanation.

"The insurance company said I was good enough to check out." She shoots me another wink and chases it with air quotes. "Can receive equivalent and appropriate care at home."

"Yeah, them cheap rascals," I say, catching on from her manner of speaking and body language that the insurance company bit comprises some sort of cover story to camouflage Allison's miraculous recovery.

With her boyfriend flanking her, she takes a few steps toward me. Even if she teeters a bit, her legs move with less awkwardness and stiffness than I saw at the hospital. When was that? Oh, yeah. Yesterday. Her balance seems near normal. A wholesale miracle.

"Yeah, them cheap rascals," I repeat for lack of anything better to say.

But Allison's no longer fixed on me. Her face breaks into a frown as she watches Shadow limp to his bed by the potbelly stove. He lays himself down with a moan, achy hip turned toward the fire, as if seeking warm comfort.

"What's up with him?" Allison asks.

"Same ol'," I reply. "Told you he's been like that since the race. Our latest escapade didn't help none."

She shuffles over to him. Though it doesn't look like she needs the help, she accepts Esteban's hand as she crouches down.

"What's wrong, Shadow?" she says. "Tell me all about it, big boy."

He replies with a huff-puff of a breath.

"It's his hip," I say, eyeing Cassandra, who with a shake of her head, makes for her bedroom.

"Wish I had brought my kit," Allison says. "I should prescribe him some anti-inflammation—"

"I've been giving him that. Gone through half a bottle already."

"Still." She looks up at Esteban, and in another minute he's heading out with a list of things to bring back. Not long thereafter, I'm showing her Shadow's pain meds, and she's scowling at the bottle, telling me to give him double the dosage.

Allison giggles, watching me stuff the pills into Shadow's mouth inside a spoonful of peanut butter. I have to smile a little, too, when Shadow licks his mouth repeatedly to liquefy the residue peanut butter.

"He's lost some weight," she notes once our levity subsides.

"Mm-hmm. On account it ain't too comfortable to squat down and eat properly."

"We'll take care of him. He'll bounce right back."

"He's been doing quite the opposite. His trick hip's misbehaving." I cut it off there. I can tell she catches on to my lack of specificity and our inability to delve into deeper discussion about the gadgets in Shadow, me, and now, her.

Allison heads back to the couch, saying, "We'll make it behave again."

"We?"

"Who's been taking care of him?" she asks with a hint of jealousy in her tone.

"The Vet at the base."

She shakes her head. "At Warren?"

"Yeah."

With a twirl of her hand she dismisses me, the Vet, and whatever else she may find questionable. "Well, I'm back now. We'll set him straight."

I come over to sit by her. I go down with a groan.

"Tough hike?" Allison asks.

"Maybe you can fix me right up, too."

“Meaning?”

“It’s happening to me too.” I lower my voice. “Achy joints, sore as hell back.”

She leans in and whispers, “It’s all about the level of activity, Jane. With this weather, you two haven’t gotten out much—”

“Oh, we been out plenty over the last twenty-four hours. Got to do our fair share of hiking, the last half mile of which came with me carrying him.”

“You know what I mean.” Her voice rises a notch. She makes a rolling motion with her arms to add, “You gotta keep moving, as part of a regular routine.”

She stops it there, but her raised eyebrow says the rest. I should get out of bed at the crack of dawn, instead of staying under the covers, hiding from life. I shouldn’t stay home for days on end, moping. If I can’t walk around the ranch on account of snow and weather, head over to the mall. Do a few laps there. Join a gym. Get on a treadmill. Keep moving. Keep pushing forward. Get on with life. Rah-rah-rah.

“We don’t give up, right?” she adds.

I feel heat rise in my cheeks. “Now, let’s look here and see who’s gotten all perky all of the sudden.”

“Hey, I get it, alright? I’ve been there. Despondent. In pain. Wanting to give up. But this... our... therapy. It works on motion. We have to keep moving, Jane.”

I point at Shadow. “Even if it keeps knifing us from the inside?”

“Like I said, we’ll take care of the pain. Once we knock down the inflammation—”

“What if it ain’t inflammation, huh? What if it’s more... mechanical than that? What if his nerves are shot? What then?”

Allison scowls. “What then? What are we talking about here, Jane?”

“You know what we’re talking about.”

“You can’t be serious. You’d wouldn’t just—”

“I’d do what a loving owner should do for an animal in anguish.”

“Hey, you know I’d support you in that. But it’s too early for—”

“You’ve no idea how much pain he’s in. I’m not going to watch him like that. I’m not.”

She slaps her thigh. “I can’t believe you, Jane. Just giving up like that. Well, maybe it’s not so surprising, the way you give up on yourself all the time.”

“Hey!” I stand up and aim an index finger at her. “Below the belt.”

“What? You’re going to put yourself down, too? If it hurts too much, just poof, end it?”

“Ah, please. Since when are you the right-to-lifer, euthanasia-never advocate?”

“Oh, and who is going below the belt now, huh?” She stands up, teetering one second, and recovering her balance the next.

I step up to her like I’m gonna whop her one. We stay like that, me sneering down at her, she giving me that upward nostrils flaring glare.

“Get yourself together, Jane. For once, get a hold of yourself.”

“Don’t you get it by now? Too many loose parts to spit-glue together.”

“Stop that! Stop it.” She steps back and aims an index finger at me. “Stop it.”

I turn and storm into the kitchen where I go around moving and putting stuff away, banging each cover and drawer as I go.

For her part, Allison dials her boyfriend, asking where he is and what in the world other than snowed over roads and bad weather is making him take so long. We don’t as much as look at each other until he gets back. She bangs a pill box on my coffee table, and the two of them storm off.

«06» Rodeo Honors

Saturday night, Cassandra and I head to the local Rodeo. We don't attend as spectators. Rather, during a halftime show in which the event organizers plan to get patriotic, Cassandra and I will take center stage with Shady and Shadow. We'll run a demonstration. It will involve locating certain clowns under barrels, and some clean fun for the dogs to chase a heavily padded cowboy around the rink.

This should not come as anything other than light duty for Shadow, whose pain has subsided some. But I will assign Shady most of the horsing around, with Shadow doing nothing but sniff-and-find duty.

We arrive a little before eight, about thirty minutes before our allotted time. An overweight cowboy meets us at a side gate and escorts us through dung scented underground passages leading up to the arena.

Other than sniffing out the bovine and equine species, the dogs proceed without much alteration in their moods. Shadow, having taken his pain meds right before we left the house—double dose, no less—moves about with mellow aplomb. As I expected, closer to the roar of the crowd and by the bull pen, Shady begins to fidget and increase her vigilance.

A bull pokes his nose between fence metal posts and blows a snort in her direction. She responds with a snarling growl. The bull takes one step back, at first startled, then defiant, scratching at the soft ground with a hoof.

Cassandra pulls back on Shady's leash. "Easy, girl."

Shady settles down some, and she and Shadow lay on padded blankets I brought for their use.

Our location makes for good viewing of the ongoing competition, namely bull riding. The three gals observe with some interest, while Shadow curls up and closes his eyes. Cassandra sees him go down and shoots me a disapproving look.

"He'll perk up. We won't be using him for much, anyways," I say.

She smiles back in a way that tells me something's up.

"What?"

"Nothing." She looks away. "You're right. It'll be alright."

A gate clanks open. A massive bull flinging a skinny cowboy leaps and lurches onto the arena, bucking like something hot and melting is poking him in his anal track. A thousand one, a thousand two. Skinny cowboy's hat flies off. A thousand three, a thousand four, and skinny cowboy spins off head first.

"Not eight seconds by any stretch of the imagination," Cassandra says.

I look her over. "You not telling me something?"

"What's there not to tell?" Again, she looks away, a twitch on her lip hinting at, but not giving way to a smile.

Something about the way she asks that also strikes me wrong, too. But in my estimation she's not up to anything untoward. I let it go.

By now the next bull and mounted rider have cued up. The gate releases with a clank. We watch another skinny dude ride out atop another overfed bull. This one lasts for seven seconds, sliding off to the disappointed groans of the crowd.

Shady growls at the sight of mounted riders and shepherding clowns routing the bucking bull toward a nearby exit. She growls some more at next bull cuing up, and at the rider climbing onto the fence.

He ain't so skinny. Maybe that helps him as his turn comes. He hangs on for the full eight, but his dismount turns into a bad tumble. The air goes out of the arena in one collective sigh, that long and short moment when everyone realizes we got a man down, and he ain't moving. Then come the screams. The bull's charging. His head aims low, and none of the other cowboys or clowns will stop him in time. A gate opens in front of me, and two guys with ropes spring out.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm running out after them. We don't get there in time. The cowboy flies up, right leg first, the one impaled with the horn. The two guys that went ahead of me scamper to my left, and I stand staring at the bull. He's shaking his head one way and the other. He drops his prey and levels his horns at me.

Shady and Shadow race past me. With fierce barking and growling they go at the bull. He spooks and backs up. The dogs keep at it, ganging up on the bull, each from a different angle. Cassandra joins them, and I choose not to worry about one of them getting gored. No, can't worry about that. The blood commands my attention. Lots of it, gushing from the cowboy's mangled leg.

I dive for it, grabbing one of the ropes out of some guy's hand. Next thing I know I'm tying up the rope around the thigh, close to his crotch. I cinch it up tight, looping it a couple of times to do my best to stem the blood flow. I look up quick to see a couple of cowboys have roped the bull. Pulling him by a horse, they steer him into a pen.

A tap on the shoulder tells me to look right. The medic's crouching next to me, telling me something I don't grasp. Here I am, dressed in my desert camo uniform, warm crimson covering my hands and sleeves, the crowd buzzing around me, and I'm not here anymore.

No, right now I'm crouching down on dusty ground having cinched up dual tourniquets on a buddy who's lost his legs much like I would give up mine somewhere down the line, on a different land.

Cassandra pulls me up and out of that place. Well, she pulls me out as far as she can, because I'm still halfway there. She guides me and the dogs back to the edge of the arena as applause breaks out in sporadic, tentative spurts to grow in intensity. That's when I see him, standing more or less where Cassandra and I stood a minute ago: Major Joseph Brenner. Joe Brenner to me.

I go back, all the way back. I look at him, then down at my bloodied hands, then back at him, then down again. I'm there, hard and irreversible. I can even smell the acrid scent of a recently exploded IED. Only one thing grips me to stay here, in this moment. He stands. On his own two legs, he stands and looks back at me.

"It's me, Joe," he says, thinking I don't recognize him when it's quite the opposite. I grab onto that thread that lets me hang on. He's not lying on the ground, bleeding. He's not missing his two legs. He's standing, like I'm standing—once crippled, now erect, projecting a semblance of normalcy.

The next few minutes pass in a blur. The cowboy goes out on a stretcher to more smattering applause. The competition comes to a premature stop. The organizers decide to swing into half-time. Soon I catch on. I won't have to run my demonstration, not because of what's transpired, but because they brought me here for a different purpose. A ploy to lavish me with honors I don't want.

Ain't nothing I can do to stop it, though. Soon a familiar voice—Major Joseph Brenner's voice—echoes and reverbs through every arena speaker. That Georgia accent rings and bounces off every wall with its smooth confidence.

"What you saw a few minutes ago wasn't an act. No one planned it, like no one planned the way Major McMurtry ran to my aid to save my life seconds after an IED ripped off my legs."

The crowd responds with more of their applause, more emphatic now, but still tentative. Not too sure what to do with that, how to deal with the price of their freedom. No doubt the sight of a bloodied uniform and Joe's direct, straight up oratory ain't quite the sort of inspiring moment anyone planned. Certainly not the thing that stirs up a crowd's patriotism, not without mixing in a good measure of regret, maybe even disgust.

Joe goes on to say something or other about courage—mine and that of so many like me who've given it all, by which I suppose he means to highlight his own sacrifice.

A heat rises up from my belly. It spreads through my chest and burns like steam inside my face. Something spins out of control inside me. I struggle to draw breath. The smell of bull dung threatens to suffocate me. The blood on my uniform seems to expand, like it wants to swallow me whole. My legs weaken, and in response I take a step back.

I take another step to the side, and one more. Then I'm running, sprinting, hearing nothing. Outside, I stumble over a pile of snow and pound through it on hands and knees until my feet regain their balance on solid asphalt. The cold air sweeps over me. It feels good, refreshing on my face, but brutal and sharp, too.

Behind me someone is yelling. I hear Cassandra's voice and Shady's bark. They call and run after me. I sprint all the harder until, exhausted, I can go no further and drop to my knees.