

CHAPTER ONE

Uncompahgre National Forest in the San Juan Mountains, West of Ouray, Colorado

Fox Walker maneuvered his pickup truck in and out of the washed-out gully, the vehicle listing and rolling like a ship at sea. He shifted gears to maintain traction and keep the tires from hanging up in the loose dirt and gravel of the road—if one could call it a road at this point. The narrow path winding its way up the mountainside had grown worse by the mile.

Beside him Nataya leaned forward and pointed. “There, just ahead, on the right side of the road . . . under those trees.”

He pulled over and parked a fair distance away from the Jeep in front of them. Walker studied the barely visible vehicle through the overhanging evergreen boughs of the surrounding forest. “Looks empty. Matches the vehicle description for our missing person, though.”

Walker killed the engine and they both got out of the truck. He studied the ground in front of him before moving and knew Nataya did the same. “See that?”

“Yeah, tire tracks from another vehicle—a truck maybe. It pulled in behind the Jeep, then left in a big hurry.”

“Question is, did anyone get out before it took off?”

Walker signaled Nataya to stay to the right. He went left as they both moved forward, watching the ground for any other tracks or markings.

“Based on these prints, I’d say a man exited on the passenger side of the vehicle,” Nataya said, then moved forward a few steps. “He was joined by the driver, another guy, and they walked toward the Jeep.” She stood still and looked off to the side of the road. “Same two sets of prints return to the truck from that direction,” she pointed toward the forest. “They sure were in a big hurry when they came back.”

Walker made his way to the Jeep and knelt to study a set of prints leading away from the vehicle. “One set of prints. Male. Karen described her friend as five-foot-ten and around a hundred eighty pounds. The depth of the print and length of the stride matches that.”

Nataya joined Walker. “All the tracks were made about the same time frame. What are the chances someone decided to come up here in the middle of nowhere and just happened to stop at the same spot?”

“Exactly. Although, I suppose Watkins could have asked the two guys to meet him up here for some reason.”

“Didn’t Karen say she thought Watkins might be out here alone, possibly hurt, with no cell-phone coverage.”

“Yeah, that was her story.” He walked farther from the Jeep. “All the prints look to be about two days old.” He leaned down to study the tracks, his straight black hair falling over his shoulders. “The two men join Watkins’ trail right there, but they weren’t walking with him, looks more like they arrived later and followed him.”

He turned and looked back up the road. “And there are no prints showing that Watkins returned.”

“So he didn’t leave with the two men. He’s still out in the forest.”

“Yeah.” Walker continued to survey the road and woodlands surrounding them.

“Makes me wonder if there’s more to Karen’s story than we know,” Nataya said.

“Only one way to find out.” Walker gave a nod toward their pickup and, without another word, they made their way back to it. He opened the door and pulled out two pairs of moccasin boots and handed the pair decorated with beads to Nataya. He preferred moccasins while tracking. The softer sole allowed him to feel the ground and move silently over it. Important when he didn’t want to be heard. He pulled off the cowboy boots and slid on the moccasins, while Nataya did the same.

Returning the cowboy boots to the truck, Walker glanced over to see her weave her long blonde hair into two braids. She might not be full-blooded Ute, as he was, but her love of nature and spiritual oneness with it complemented his Native American beliefs. In fact, he had discovered Nataya surviving in the wilderness, as the ancient ones had lived. A mysterious white woman with scars and no memory of her past. She had first communicated with him using a mixture of English and Shoshone words. Looking back, he wondered if that had been the moment he began to fall in love with her. But it wasn’t until he had saved her from a killer that she had freely given her trust to him.

Walker forced his thoughts back to the present and checked his jeans pocket for the leather pouch containing the flint he always carried, then adjusted the knife sheathed at his side. He locked the truck, opened the hitch cover and slid the key in for safekeeping until they could return.

“Sure didn’t anticipate that it would take us an hour to get here,” Nataya said as she looked up to the sun rising above the mountain peaks. “No wonder Karen said only a four-wheel drive vehicle could make the trek. Still, we have most of the day left.”

Walker made his way down the embankment from the road and stood at the edge of the tree line, Nataya following. He stepped through the low brush and into the heavy coverage of evergreens. The smell of damp earth and pine permeated his senses. His shoulders relaxed. At times like this, he could hear Grandfather's voice reminding him to be patient, to immerse himself in nature, to take the time to see what others did not see.

For a moment he stood still and listened to the natural world surrounding him, the tree boughs creaking overhead in the spring breeze and the buzz of insects. Seconds later, he heard the twittering series of pips from a lone Black Swift flying high above the tree tops.

They were far from civilization in this part of the Uncompahgre National Forest, miles above the settlements, including the popular ski resorts Telluride and, farther south, Silverton. Walker didn't know this region well, even though it bordered the northern edge of the San Juan Forest, where he lived and roamed. Three national forests made up the central San Juan Mountains, making most of the mountains reachable only on foot, or a few dirt roads such as the one they drove in on, left over from mining days, rugged and often impassable. It was even rumored to be one of the last strongholds of the wild grizzly bear. But nobody had reported seeing one for years.

Walker made his way over to where the tracks of the two men followed Watkins's footprints through the soft dirt of the forest floor. He knelt and indicated for Nataya to do the same. "Take a good look at these prints and tell me what you see." He never missed an opportunity to teach her more about tracking, no matter how much she had already learned in the past year and a half. It was how Grandfather had taught him from a young age. Now that Grandfather had passed, Walker carried on the tradition.

Nataya studied the prints, then pointed. “One of the men wore a sort of heavy-duty work boot, with a distinctive tread mark on the toe.” She then indicated the footprint of the second man. “This print has a smooth sole, but there is an indentation on the back of the right heel, a worn place, maybe from where it rests at the accelerator of a car. Judging by the length of the strides and depth of the prints, both guys are big men—heavy-set.” Nataya shifted her weight and leaned closer to the prints left by Watkins. “The tread indicates he’s wearing some type of hiking boot. I’d say he knew he’d be trekking into the wilderness and planned ahead for it, unlike the two men who followed him.”

“Excellent observations. And it supports our other clues that Watkins didn’t set up a meeting. What else do you see?”

She stood and walked alongside the prints as they headed toward the forest. “The impression made by Watkins’ right boot is a bit odd. Perhaps he carried something on that side of his body?”

“Could be.” Walker moved closer to see. “But we should also keep in mind that Watkins is in his late sixties. Age could be a factor in the oddness of his stride.”

Nataya turned her gaze to the forest. “I guess we won’t know for sure until we find Watkins.”

Walker and Nataya followed Watkins’ trail through the trees, his hiking-boot tread easy to spot in the moist dirt of the forest floor littered with pine needles and last autumn’s dried leaves. Young tender sprouts of violets and thistle emerged from the earth, reaching up toward the sunshine and encouraged by the early spring rains.

Nataya pointed to the prints they followed. “Even with his odd gait, Watkins moves easily over the landscape for someone his age. I’d say he definitely knew his destination. There’s no hesitation about which direction to take.”

“I agree. And the men following him took lots of stumbling steps through the brush, definitely out of their element trekking through the wilderness.”

For the next mile, Watkins’ trail led them through the forest, sometimes in the dense cover of ancient evergreens high above, other times the number of trees grew thinner and sunlight played down through their limbs. Walker heard the murmur of running water long before he could see it as they continued to follow Watkins’ trail. Soon the footprints stopped at the edge of a swift-running stream. “Must be the Falling Waters Creek Karen mentioned.”

They crossed the water, using larger rocks as stepping stones, and picked up the trail on the other side. Then the land did a sharp drop-off to lower ground. The two men had still followed Watkins, even though they continued to struggle in the rough terrain. Walker made a mental note that perhaps the men were also physically out of shape.

The ground soon became level. Watkins’ trail crossed the water again, then began to follow alongside the creek as it moved downstream. The trees grew farther apart, with more open meadowlands. The stream took a sharp turn. When Walker rounded the bend, he stopped to take in the tunnel-like scene. The land before them abruptly dropped off at some point ahead, creating a wide panoramic view of blue skies at eye-level and, far in the distance, the jagged tops of surrounding mountainsides.

The trail of prints changed as the two men veered off at an angle from Watkins. Nataya noticed and indicated she would follow the trail of the two men.

Walker continued to follow Watkins' prints, with Nataya still in sight at the edge of the tree line. As he approached closer to where the land ahead became the edge of sheer cliffs, he noticed the prints she followed were bringing her closer to him. He stopped and shouted to Nataya, then pointed to a muddy spot alongside the stream. "There was a struggle of some sort."

She sprinted over to join him and knelt to study the marks. "The ground sure is torn up, but I can still make out all three prints jumbled together in the mud." Nataya looked back to where she had come. "So that's why the two men took a different angle back there. They must have spotted Watkins at the creek and planned to ambush him from behind."

While Nataya studied the ground, Walker moved farther downstream. "Here. More prints," he said. When she joined him, he pointed. "Bad news. See there. Heel marks in the soil, with a set of footprints on either side. The prints match the boots for our mystery guys, so they were dragging Watkins. They must have knocked him unconscious."

"I don't like the looks of this."

"Me, either."

Walker and Nataya continued to follow the tracks alongside the stream until they reached the cliff edge where the water cascaded off, creating a waterfall to the valley below. Looking out over the cliff, Walker could see a small community nestled far below among the foothills, consisting of cabins, outbuildings, and barns. The heel drag marks ended at the edge of the cliff, where another struggle had taken place. But only two sets of prints left the area and trailed off into the grassy meadow beside him. The prints belonged to the two men.

Being careful not to disturb any sign, Walker lowered his body to the ground and peered over the edge of the cliff. Directly below, a rocky ledge jutted out from the side of the mountain and on it lay a body. The man was positioned on his back, his limbs bent at odd angles. His eyes

were open but no longer saw anything of this world. A large stain of dried blood had formed under his head and over the edge of the rock ledge. Walker shook his head. “Dammit. My worst fear.”

Nataya joined him and looked on as Walker spoke softly in Shoshone, asking for Watkins’ *mukua* be freed to begin its journey.

After a moment of silence, Nataya spoke. “If they hoped to make it look like an accident, why did they leave a clear trail for anyone to find?”

“We’re so remote. If Karen hadn’t hired us to come up here, his body might never have been found.”

“True. And even if someone eventually stumbled upon it much later, all signs of their presence would’ve been long gone. Washed away by the rains.”

Walker nodded. “Exactly. Question is, why did they want him dead?”

“What if they didn’t? Want him dead, I mean. Could be as simple as they only meant to knock him unconscious, but the blow killed him?”

“An ambush or a kidnapping gone wrong?”

“Yeah, maybe they panicked. Dumping the body over the cliff would’ve been the easiest way available to them.”

“I’d agree, except for the signs of a scuffle at the cliff edge and the fact Watkins’ eyes are open in death. Maybe they knocked him out and planned to throw him to his death before he woke. But Watkins regained consciousness right beforehand. Even as he fought them, their combined strength would have easily overpowered him and pushed his body over the cliff edge. A bad way to go, either way.”

Walker stood up and gave his hand to Nataya to assist her. "I'm sure of one thing. These guys certainly don't strike me as professional hit men." He turned and looked back upstream.

"Let's take another look at where the first struggle took place. Maybe we can pick up a clue."

They walked upstream and studied the prints and markings in the dirt. Nataya moved closer to the water and pointed out a shape in the damp soil. "Looks like Watkins knelt there, and something sat on the ground next to him, something with a rectangle base."

Walker joined her and studied the imprint. "Interesting. Perhaps he *was* carrying something with him, like you thought."

"Maybe that's what the two men wanted."

"Could be. And Watkins resisted them." Walker stood. "I'll take a closer look downstream. Make sure we didn't miss something." He made his way along the edge of the water, gently moving foliage and weeds with the toe of his moccasin boot. Then he crossed over the stream and did the same process on the other side.

"Ah. What's this?" He reached down and picked up a small glass bottle. It had a label on it that read Sample C. He looked over at Nataya. "Water?" He unscrewed the lid and took a sniff of the liquid in the bottle. "Yep."

Nataya looked back to the disturbed ground where the struggle took place. "He must have been taking water samples from the stream." She looked back toward the direction the two men had taken to flank Watkins. "Perhaps he was hired to take water samples, and someone didn't want him to succeed."

"I think you're right," Walker said. "The noisy stream could've drowned out their approach until they got fairly close. Maybe at the last moment Watkins saw the danger and tossed the sample before they got to him. He saved it from being taken."

“I’m guessing a container for the samples made that rectangle imprint in the mud. And now it’s missing. So, the water might be the key to this—whatever it is.” Nataya looked back toward the cliff edge. “Nothing left now but to contact the authorities. We’re west of Ouray, but it’s still the closest town. Do you want me to stay while you go to the sheriff’s department?”

“It will take over an hour to drive back down the mountainside and into town.” They walked to the edge of the cliff as Walker answered. “The body isn’t going anywhere. We’ll drive down together and contact the sheriff. Most likely he’ll want our assistance anyway, to show him how to get to the body.” He looked at Nataya. “Which brings up another point. Until we can talk with Karen, I don’t want to mention that she hired us. As far as the sheriff knows, we discovered the body while exploring in the wilderness and practicing our survival skills. Besides, we truthfully don’t know for sure that it’s Tom Watkins down there. We’ll give them the license plate number to check.”

He looked beyond the waterfall to the small village below. “So peaceful down there. They have no idea a murder took place up here.”