



THE RANGER

By Greg Kay

The last red rays of the Western sun painted a bloody strip across the sky as the desert began settling into its nightly rhythm. The animals of the day left along with the sun, slipping back into their dens and hiding places in fear of the hunters of the night. A lone coyote came sniffing along the seldom used trail; the twin ruts of the tire tracks made easier going than the cactus and mesquite thickets all around. Besides, he knew there were sometimes good pickings there at the end of it.

He found little enough this time; no one had visited since he last checked the wide turn-around spot. Sniffing at the long cold campfire ashes, his big ears twitched at the sound of rustling in the filthy sleeping bag that had been abandoned there weeks ago, and his sensitive nose caught the sharp ammonia scent of mice.

Patiently, he pawed and dug at the cloth in pursuit of the rodents lodging in the lining. There was a sudden movement followed by a brief squeak as his jaws snapped down, and he lifted his head to swallow his prize.

Suddenly the coyote paused, the tiny tail still hanging out of his mouth. There was another sound, not mice this time, but something almost as familiar, coming from up the track. He caught the flash of headlights heading towards him, and he melted away into the thorny brush like a silent gray ghost, gulping the mouse as he fled. He knew danger when he heard it.

Coming slowly, the van bounced over the ruts. Old and rusty, a loose piece of molding clapped in discordant time to the creaks and thumps of the chassis and the valve clatter of the worn-out engine. With a squeal of metal on metal, it stopped beside the dead fire, the

motor coughing a half-dozen times before finally giving up to the prompting of the ignition and shutting off with a mechanical gasp.

Both the front doors opened – after the driver threw his shoulder against his door twice to pop the sticking latch – and three black-haired, brown-skinned men got out, bantering in border Spanish. While the others laughed, the driver kicked the fender with a curse.

One of them produced a fifth of cheap tequila, and in between slugs from the bottle, they gathered some nearby brush and got a fire going. As the musty-tasting liquor made the rounds, the light from the flames clearly showed their faces.

All three were Mexicans in their twenties or early thirties, but they had the weathered and dissipated features of men many years older. One was large and fat while the other two were small and stringy, but they had in common an aura of evil about them that couldn't be explained by their greasy black hair and barrio clothes. There was something about their eyes and the set of their mouths that spoke of a greater and more casual, yet more determined cruelty than any other predator of the night.

Still watching from the brush well beyond the fire, the coyote backed up a little further and crouched down in the shadow. Driven by curiosity, instinct, or possibly experience, he decided to wait and see what was going to happen.

The big one, the leader by virtue of his size, held the half-empty bottle as the firelight streamed through it and grunted. Both the others smiled; one showing several gold teeth in the process, but the expressions that never reached their hard black eyes. They rose as one and walked to the rear of the van.

Jerking the sagging back doors open, they reached in and dragged out a rolled up rug, much heavier than it should be. They carried it back beside the fire and carelessly dropped it to the ground with a thud. One muttered something about being more careful, causing the others to laugh uproariously. After a moment, their companion joined them.

Gold teeth and steel both flashed as their owner produced a lock bladed folding knife from the pocket of his ragged jeans, knelt by the rug, and sliced through the length of clothesline that held the roll together. Then he, along with the leader, grabbed the loose end and pulled hard, unrolling the bundle and spilling the teenaged girl onto the hard-packed dirt in a cloud of dust.

Unable to speak or move for the duct tape gag and bindings, Jennifer Dover could only blink in wide-eyed terror through the strands of tangled blonde hair that fell over her eyes.

Less than two hours ago she had been a normal fourteen year-old, a cheerleader, a pretty, popular girl ready to meet her friends at the local fast food joint. She thought nothing of giving directions to the smiling Mexican – the small one with the ponytail and without the gold teeth - standing behind the old van. She turned to point the way and never saw the fist that hooked upwards into her solar plexus. Unable to scream, unable even to breath, the shock to her nervous system buckled her knees and paralyzed her body long enough that she couldn't even struggle when the hands grabbed her and yanked her inside the vehicle.

She had no way of knowing for sure, but she thought they must have done this before; they were mercilessly efficient. Thrown face down on the van's greasy metal floor, one of them already had a piece of duct tape torn off and ready to slap over her mouth while another dropped a knee into her back with stunning force and wrenched both arms behind

her so hard she would have screamed if she could have. In less than ten seconds, her wrists and ankles were taped, and they rolled her into the old rug that stank of stale smoke, spilled booze, and urine. Her nose pressed against the filthy pile, she could barely breathe and the trip into the desert seemed like an eternity.

Looking into their eyes now, she wished she was back in the rug.

The fat one grabbed a corner of her gag and snatched it off. As the tape came away, it felt like it was taking her lips with it, along with a large chunk of her sun-colored hair that had been beneath it when they put it on her. She did scream then, and tears streamed from her eyes.

The men seemed to find the sight amusing. The fat one chuckled as he took another long pull from the tequila bottle.

The man with the knife cut the tape around her ankles first, then her wrists, but the circulation had been restricted for so long the only feeling was pins and needles.

His ponytail dangling, the man who had originally lured her to the car grabbed her blouse with both hands and jerked, sending the tiny pearl buttons raining on the ground as he tore it from her. She quickly crossed her arms trying to cover herself, but Gold Teeth reached behind her and clumsily but quickly severed her bra strap with a single slash, cutting a deep gash in her back in the process. Yanking it off as she screamed in pain, he waved it like a trophy towards the others.

Licking his thick lips, the fat man reached for the fasteners on her jeans. Shouting, "No!" she grabbed her waist band and hung on, and he called her a puta and punched her hard in the jaw. Barely conscious, she still fought on in desperation until Gold Tooth kicked her in the ribs with the toe of his cowboy boot, and Pony Tail pulled her arms away and pinned them. Despite her struggles, the fat one took jeans off before they let her go, followed by the brief panties that had been pulled down almost to her knees in the process. Crouching naked and bleeding, she hung her head and used her arms to hide her small breasts.

She knew then that there was no hope. They were going to rape her, and then they were going to kill her, and leave her body in the desert.

Feeling sorry for herself and frightened of the pain to come, she wept miserably.

The men argued for a moment, but was no more than habit; there was never any doubt the big one was going to go first. Grabbing her hair and throwing her back to the ground, he began prying her legs apart with a knee while he fumbled for the fastenings of his own pants, ignoring her struggles and screams as the other two cheered him on.

"Buenos noches, pendejo!"

The fat man was just crouching between her thighs when the heavily Texas-accented Spanish insult came out of the darkness. Startled, he looked in that direction. There was a loud roar and a long tongue of fire, and a heavy lead bullet slammed into the bridge of his nose, rocking his head back and blowing the back of his skull out in a spray of brain and bone. He dropped, almost three hundred pounds of dead weight, half on and half off his intended victim, covering her with blood.

Instinctively Gold Tooth wheeled around in a fighting posture, knife gleaming in the firelight, and the gun fired again. He hunched forward as if hugging himself as the slug shattered his breastbone and tore apart the heart behind it before lodging in his spine. He fell face down across the fire, dying even as he hit the ground.

The last Mexican desperately dove for the open door of the van, trying to get at the 9mm Tech Nine that was under the front seat. He was still five feet away when a third shot punched him in the side just below the ribs, in through the left and out on the right, shredding everything in between. Instead of going through the door, he hit the side of the van with a bang and bounced off, falling to the ground. He curled up into a ball of agony as his bowels let go from the pain.

Frantically squirming her way out from beneath her would-be rapist, Jennifer saw her rescuer for the first time. As he stepped into the light, it surprised her how small the stranger was, not even topping her own five feet-six. He was compact, broad-hipped and slightly bowlegged, with a weathered face and graying brown hair that could have made him either forty or sixty; she didn't know. She did know, even in the dim flickering light, that the face with the drooping moustache beneath the broad-brimmed hat was hard as nails. The light reflected from the silver badge on his chest, and the biggest revolver she had ever seen hung from his right hand.

Instead of coming directly to her, he walked deliberately over to the man moaning beside the van and raised his pistol. She jumped at the report as the Mexican's ponytail bounced and his head recoiled off the ground, splattering the area beneath it with gore. He turned away and moment later he was squatting beside her.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

Kneeling on the ground, knees pressed tightly together and arms crossed, she stammered, "They-they were going to-"

"I know, ma'am," he told her, laying a hand on her shoulder as she quivered with great, racking sobs. The temperature had dropped dramatically with the departure of the sun, and his hand was cold, even against her own exposed flesh. Dimly a part of her realized that he must have been out here for a while.

"It'll be alright now though. Those three won't bother you or anybody else again. *Damned bandits!*" The last words came out as a hiss.

The wind shifted slightly and brought with it the smell of blood, of torn bowels, and of burnt flesh and hair as the one who had fallen into the fire roasted. Her gorge rose and she suddenly threw up, her body convulsing.

By the time she finished, she felt his hand on her back, wiping something on the knife slash that simultaneously cooled and stung.

"It's alright, ma'am. Let's get you cleaned up."

Shyly, she lifted her head and the older man wiped the vomit and blood from her face with the rag he had soaked in the last of the tequila. Despite his earlier ferocity, something about him left her too reassured to be embarrassed, even when he cleaned the fat man's blood from the milky white skin of her shoulders and chest. His eyes held nothing but kindness now, and his touch was remarkably gentle. He left for a second and came back with her panties, jeans and torn shirt, handing them to her before turning his back and looking up at the stars. She slipped them on, gasping in pain as the soft cloth of the ruined shirt brushed the cut on her back. The right sleeve had been torn almost completely off and only two buttons had survived, but she buttoned them anyway, feeling ridiculous at the large gaps of skin between them.

Sensing she was finished, he turned back to her.

"Can you drive this machine, ma'am?"

"I d-don't have a driver's license, officer..."

“That wasn’t what I asked,” he said with such a tight little smile that she couldn’t help but manage a tentative, quivering smile of her own in return.

“I think so.”

“Good. You go ahead and get in it, and get yourself to a doctor.” Taking her arm, he walked her around to the driver’s side, and helped her into the seat. He slammed the door behind her, and she shook as she turned the key, forcing the reluctant engine to kick over several times before it started.

“Wait a minute, sir” she called through the open window. “I don’t know your name.”

He tipped his big hat.

“Jack McDermitt, ma’am. Texas Rangers.”

He watched her carefully and inexpertly maneuvering over the rutted path until the lights disappeared from sight. Then he turned and walked away in the direction he had first come from.

No sooner was he gone than the patient coyote appeared like a ghost again, ivory fangs gleaming and tongue lolling with anticipation. Trotting into the fading firelight, he ignored the mouse nest in the sleeping bag. This time, the spot had produced much better pickings than that.

Under the merciless eye of the afternoon Texas sun, Ranger Captain Bill Todd lifted his hat long enough to wipe his forehead with the back of his hairy hand and, not for the first time today, swore vehemently. He had a bad feeling about this case.

Late last night, he had been called out of bed after the dispatcher was contacted by the municipal hospital where a little girl was being treated for assault and telling tales of an attempted rape by a gang of Mexicans, followed by the shooting of all three of the perpetrators by a Texas Ranger.

That was odd, since nothing had come over the radio about it and all the Rangers in the area claimed to be ignorant of any such incident.

Anticipating the usual teenaged tall tale that is made up by a kid out way past curfew who wants to avoid a grounding or keep her father’s belt around his waist, he was surprised to see that Jennifer Dover gave every appearance of being a real victim. The long slice in her back took four stitches to close; she had a variety of bruises on her face and body, and a rash on her mouth, wrists and ankles from the tape. The nurses had found a clump of matted blood and what appeared to be brains that obviously didn’t belong to her in her hair, and her clothes he had bagged for evidence, including a sixty-dollar blouse she had saved for months to get, were filthy, blood-spattered and ruined. What struck him the most, though, was that, as a twenty-five year veteran officer, he could detect no signs that the girl was telling anything but what she believed to be the truth.

The trouble was, he ran the name through the computer, and there was no Texas Ranger by the name of McDermitt.

He got the location from the girl as good as she could remember it, which was little more than it was a dirt turn off a long way down the road to the west, which meant it could have been any one of a hundred. They started the search at first light, and it was nearly noon when one of the local sheriff’s deputies involved got curious when he saw vultures circling. By the time they got there, the predators had obviously been active and the mangled bodies were beginning to bloat in the heat.

In the meantime, one of the hospital staff had opened her big mouth and blabbed to the press just in time to make the morning papers, and the whole thing had gone straight to hell.

The press and the Mexican Government were practically screaming in outrage. Obviously – according to them – there were only two possibilities. Either the “Minute Men” who had taken it upon themselves to guard the border the overworked Border Patrol couldn’t even begin to handle had gone from reporting illegal aliens to shooting them, or else the Texas Rangers had begun executing suspects on the spot. Because the “alleged victim” as the papers called her was White, all three of the dead were Mexicans, and the allegation of rape had been thrown out, the “racial overtones” were too serious to ignore. In their eyes, it had to be vigilante-ism. The Vice President of Mexico had already called the US Secretary of State in protest. The Secretary called the Attorney General to demand an investigation into a possible violation of the Federal Civil Rights Act. The Attorney General, in turn, called the Governor of Texas and hinted that he would send in the FBI if this situation was not immediately cleared up. The Governor called the Head of the Department of Public Safety and politely threatened his job. Since gravity works, the latter called Ranger Captain Bill Todd.

Since the Captain had no one it would do one damn bit of good to call himself, he was the one out here taking in the heat and stink amidst yellow police tape and white suited techs crawling around on the ground like a band of big albino armadillos.

During his initial survey of the crime scene, Todd had developed a tentative hypothesis that the girl had been parked with a boyfriend when the three would-be rapists had attacked them. Jennifer’s boyfriend had killed them, and they had made up the “lone ranger” story in order to protect him, even though the case was almost certainly justifiable homicide in self-defense. The techs had taken prints from the deceased where they lay attracting flies, and had faxed them in via the Texas Department of Public Safety’s Mobile Crime Lab computer. The three dead Mexicans – Jose Gonzales, Pedro Mendez, and Jorge Velasquez – all had extensive criminal records that included robbery, numerous drug offences, and sexual assault. The trio had been deported several times, but kept coming back.

“Came back once too often, I reckon,” he muttered, looking at the report. Although he would never say it aloud if he valued his job, particularly under the current conditions, he didn’t consider their violent passing to be any great loss to the world in general.

There was only one fly in the ointment – well, two actually – with the boyfriend theory. Both Jennifer and her increasingly hostile parents - who wanted to know why in the hell the Ranger Captain wouldn’t believe their little girl - insisted that she didn’t have a boyfriend. By the look of those bodies, Todd had to admit if she did have one, he must be a hit man for the mob or CIA assassin; he was just too damned efficient. A professional killer would be an unlikely companion for a fourteen year-old cheerleader.

The thought had crossed his mind that, unlikely as it seemed, the killings might have been done by Jennifer herself. With her parents’ permission, a paraffin test of her hands showed no gunpowder residue. At Mr. Dover’s profane insistence so they would be cleared as well, he had tested both the parents’ hands at the same time. No suspects there.

Todd walked over to the head of the investigative team.

“What do you think, Bob?”

Bob Gildorf grinned beneath the brim of the Longhorns cap that shaded his bald head.

“Which do you want; professional opinion or gut feeling?”

“Right now, I’ll take anything you can give me and sort it out later.”

He nodded his understanding; he and Todd had worked more cases than either could remember over the years, and each knew well how the other operated.

“Okay. Big entry wounds; I’m guessing something on the order of a .45, maybe .44 special. I don’t think it was a .44 magnum though; not quite as much damage in the exit wounds as I’d expect.” After a moment, he added, “Almost certainly a revolver; that, or he took the time to police up all his cases. Hard to do in poor light, especially when he left no sign of it. That, more than anything else is what bugs me about this case.”

“How so?” By now the last body had been zipped into its bag and carried to the waiting meat wagon, and one of the techs was probing the bloody patch of ground beside the spot where the van had been parked. Todd watched idly as he listened.

“No tracks. Other than that, we’ve seen signs to verify everything the witness said right to the letter. I’ve got tracks from those three, tracks from the girl, and tracks from the coyote who came in her after it was all over and done with and had himself a field day, but not track one for the shooter.”

The Captain’s head swiveled back.

“Did he brush them out?”

“Nope. Or if he did, he didn’t leave any sign of it.”

“Sir!” the tech with the probe called, rising to her feet and waving a plastic evidence bag in his hand. “You need to see this!”

“What the hell is that?” Todd demanded, looking through the clear plastic at a slightly deformed round lead ball almost half an inch in diameter.

“I’d say that’s the projectile that passed through the victim’s head and entered the ground below him; it’s what killed him in other words.” Gildorf made a gun out of a fist with the index finger extended, pointed it at the ground and said, “*Boom!* One shot through the head to finish him off while he was laying there with a hole through his guts.”

Todd ignored the dramatics.

“I’ve never seen a bullet like that.”

Bob took the bag, fished a folding magnifying loop from his pocket, and examined it intently.

“Now that’s odd,” he said absently. “That is really odd.”

Turning to Todd, he shook his head.

“What you have here is a .44 caliber pistol ball, and I’ll bet you a week’s pay it was fired from a black powder revolver, probably a Colt Walker or Dragoon, or maybe a Remington Army. If you look close here, you can still see the trace where a little shaving of lead was cut off by the cylinder all the way around the ball when it was pushed in with the loading lever.”

“You’re telling me he was shot with a muzzle loader?”

Bob shook his head.

“No, with a cap and ball revolver: same mid-19th Century time period and same propellant, but a different technology.”

The Captain looked at the meat wagon as it was pulling away.

“Could someone have killed all three of these men with that gun?”

“Oh yeah, and most likely did although we’ll have to wait for ballistics to confirm it. A big Walker or Dragoon can easily approach the power of a modern .45 automatic, and it will definitely do the job. It sure fixed these guys up, that’s for sure.”

“Does anybody still use those things?”

The examiner pursed his lips.

“Occasionally; people still buy a lot of replica models, and we get somebody killed with one of them every two or three years, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Todd blew out his breath in frustration.

“Look, if this is just one guy like the girl claims, then he had to be good – a real pro. He took down three men permanently with three shots in probably as many seconds, and all in poor light. Two died instantly, and the other one wouldn’t have made it an hour if he hadn’t walked over and finished him off. That finishing shot was the only one he was close enough against to leave powder tattooing on the skin when he fired. He was also evidently good enough to do it all with a handgun. This was a professional, someone who knew how to handle a gun. So why would a pro use an old fashioned, inefficient weapon like that?”

The investigator shrugged.

“I don’t know; maybe it’s all he had. You don’t have to go through any paperwork or background checks for black powder arms.”

“But why, damn it? It’s not like a modern weapon is hard to get; you could walk down the main drag in town and buy half a dozen of them in an hour.”

Bob Gildorf hesitated before answering.

“I hate to say this, but maybe he was out here fantasizing, pretending to be a Texas Ranger. I’ve got a brother-in-law who reenacts the Civil War, and it’s dead serious with those fellows. These historical reenactors sometimes get more deeply into their rolls than is completely healthy.”

“Thanks,” the Ranger told him sarcastically. “That’s all I need.”

The ring tone for *Deep in the Heart of Texas* began sounding from the Captain’s belt, and he pulled his cell phone out of its holster.

“Hello? Todd here.”

“*Sir...*” He instantly recognized the voice of Sheila Cox, his long-time secretary. Not only was she extremely efficient and discreet, but she had the most beautiful Texas drawl he had ever heard. “*I think you ought to come on back to the office now. I’ve found something that I know you’re going to want to see.*”

“What is it, Sheila? Can you give it to me over the phone or fax it to me through the mobile crime lab out here?”

“*I really don’t think that would be a good idea, Captain.*”

He trusted her judgment. She knew when something was sensitive, and you never knew who might be eavesdropping. Once he returned to the office and saw what she had for him, he thanked God he had listened to her and promised her dinner later in the week.

Although it may not have been completely professional, he brought a bouquet of flowers for Jennifer, who had been discharged and was recovering from her ordeal at home. Her mother took the vase and put them with the others that half-filled the living

room before returning to stand protectively behind the daughter she had nearly lost, a hand reaching over the back of the couch and resting on her shoulder.

“You must have a lot of friends,” Todd told her, looking at the living room that resembled a florist’s shop.

She looked up at him. Despite the bruises starkly evident on her light skin, her wary defensive attitude was evident in her posture and on her face. The initial stress that made her so forthcoming last night had evidently worn off, and now she was regretting everything she had said.

“Yes sir, I reckon I do. I even found one last night I never even knew I had.”

“Jack McDermitt: he’s the one I want to talk to you about.”

“Sir, I’m not going to help you arrest the man who saved my life.”

He paused, wondering how much to tell her.

“Jennifer, if he’s who we think he is, he won’t be arrested.”

She looked at him skeptically.

“Why not?”

“Let’s just say he’s out of our reach and leave it at that.”

“If that’s the case, then why do you need to know?”

“So we can stop wasting time and money and close the case. Here,” he offered her a series of photo printouts. “Please look at these and see if you recognize any of them.”

Reluctantly, she thumbed through the papers as he watched intently until she suddenly paused, her eyes widening. Realizing his eyes were on her, she hurriedly put that one down and started thumbing through again, but he deftly lifted the paper from her hand, the one that revealed the hard face of a middle-aged man with a moustache.

“I see you found him. This is Jack McDermitt, by the way; that’s his real name.”

“I didn’t say that and I won’t testify in court against him either! I won’t and I don’t care what you or the judge or anybody else says, you can’t make me!”

Her mother patted her shoulder reassuringly.

“It’s alright, honey, we won’t let them.”

Turning to the Captain, she said, “Why don’t you just leave, Ranger Todd? You’re upsetting my daughter, and she’s been through enough already. Maybe you ought to be out there looking for more monsters like those three instead of harassing someone who’s doing your job for you!”

Smiling at the stinging remark and the determination on their faces, he gathered up the paperwork.

“Don’t worry, Jennifer, Mrs. Dover; I don’t think anybody’s going to try and make you do testify. Do me and yourselves one favor though; don’t talk to anybody else about this. Not friends, not family, and especially not the press. Will you do that for me? It will make this thing a whole lot easier for everybody concerned.”

Both mother and daughter agreed; they wanted to put it all behind them anyway, almost as much as they wanted to protect Jennifer’s savior.

His suspicions confirmed by the girl’s reaction to the photo, Todd hurried to the car. He had a few more stops to make: first the evidence locker and then the impound yard, where the techs would be going over the van.

He knew he was putting his career as a Texas Ranger at risk, but he also knew that any other choice he made – like telling the truth - would utterly destroy it, just sure as the world.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press; it would like to bring you up to date on our investigation into yesterday’s triple homicide.

“Our investigators have discovered traces of cocaine in several places throughout the van, so much so that we believe the van was being used to transport a large quantity of that drug. Based on that evidence, coupled with the criminal records of all of the deceased, including multiple narcotics offences, we believe they were drug traffickers, part of a cross-border gang.

“We now believe that the girl, a juvenile whose name is being withheld, was kidnapped by this drug ring for use in trade, as part of the price for the deal. Witness accounts indicate that the triple homicide was probably part of a drug deal gone bad, or a robbery scheme by a rival gang.

“The suspect being sought is described as a short white male, about five feet-six, having graying brown hair cut short, a moustache, and is estimated to be approximately fifty years old. He is known to use the alias Jack McDermitt, and was reportedly impersonating a law enforcement officer at the time of the shootings. He is considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you have any information on the case, please call the Texas Department of Public Safety...”

Thumbing the remote, Todd turned off the TV in his den. The Director of the Department of Public Safety was handling it just the way he’d hoped.

Of course, after the Ranger Captain had surreptitiously blown a few grams of loose powder cocaine into the van, the director was simply acting on evidence he had no reason to believe was not genuine.

For the first time in a career spanning a quarter of a century, Todd had planted evidence. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel a damned bit guilty about it. The three scumbags who owned the van were dead so they couldn’t be hurt by it. He had to come up with something, because he knew nobody would have believed the truth, even if he had been foolish enough to tell it.

Tilting back his head, he drained the last of the foamy suds from the Lone Star bottle before dropping it into the trash beside his desk, where it joined the four others already there with a loud clink. Absently, he reached for yet another, doing something else he had not done for as many years: getting rip-roaring drunk.

Before him on the desk was an open book, an official history of the Texas Rangers. Much nearer the front of the volume than the back was a grainy tintype photograph of a serious looking group of men studded with guns and Bowie knives. The third one from the left was shorter and older than the rest, and had a bushy moustache. The caption below the picture identified him as Ranger Jack McDermitt, 1810-1859. Further reading listed him as being missing and presumed dead after a running battle with a Comanche war party.

The computer-enhanced blow-up of that particular face from the group was the one he had shown to Jennifer.

Shaking his head, Todd closed the book and stared out the window, looking at the sunset.

Less than a mile from the site of the crime scene, but well outside the search area, a mesquite bush clung precariously to the bank of a dry, shallow wash. Though the rains in that part of Texas were not particularly frequent, almost half the root system had been undermined. There, eroded out of the dry ground, were bits of bleached, rodent-gnawed bone: age weathered, cracked, and non-descript, and no more noticeable than the bits of dried leather or the flake of rust that took the shape of a tin star.

Not far away, the coyote howled in the darkness, ready to begin his nightly hunt.