



DEATH VALLEY

An Alexandra Mallory Short Story

Cathryn Grant

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CATHRYN GRANT



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Camping is a spiritual experience. It reveals the inner stuff you're made of, stripping away the shell of nice clothing, the finer creature comforts, and many times, clean skin and hair. *Camping is character-building.* So said my father.

The Mallorys never stayed in hotels.

Those places were for the heathen. The things that went on in hotels were shocking. To hear him talk about it, the hotel itself, the very idea of a structure offering anonymous, locked rooms, cleaned by strangers, was the brain-child of Satan. The ability to check into a place and slip away to a room where you couldn't be located unless you provided contact information, invited all kinds of ungodly behavior. When we were children, the ungodly behavior was never spelled out. What my parents didn't seem to realize was that not providing the specifics left our imaginations free to invent our own details.

We whispered about it. What might be happening in those isolated, locked rooms with *Do Not Disturb* signs dangling from the door handles? We knew about the presence of the signs from movies and TV shows. Those signs had the allure of the unachievable. Imagine a sign on our bedroom doors that was respected by

parents and siblings! It was too wonderful to think about. Not that we wanted to do ungodly things in our rooms, but just knowing it might be possible to take a nap or read a book, or move away from an open textbook on our desks without a parent walking in was pure heaven.

Inside those hotel rooms, there must be people plotting robbery and murder. Maybe even committing the actual murders! They would be watching TV shows that were bad for their minds and eating food they shouldn't. They would be skipping bedtime prayers and shirking their Bible readings. Occupants would be gossiping without fear of being overheard, and possibly lying. They would be sharing their bodies — the vessel of the spirit of god — with people they shouldn't. Those were the primary sins we were aware of, so of course, that's what we spun into vague stories.

Occasionally we visited relatives during our family vacations, but even then, my mother would diligently research nearby campgrounds so we could spend time outside in the created world, experiencing natural sounds and smells, textures and temperatures, unfiltered by wood and insulated walls and central heating.

It was August and time for the annual trip. My parents had been working on this one for months, surfing through online travel articles and studying maps. The plan was to drive to Death Valley, California. One third of the planet is desert, so why they chose one with such an ominous name was a mystery. My father said it was a very historic place and along with beautiful scenery, we'd have the opportunity to learn quite a bit of history. That made us roll our eyes even higher in our skulls, smirking that the last weeks of freedom before school began would include history lessons.

Thursday evening my father shoved the tent into the back of a large van they'd rented for the trip. Six sleeping bags were piled on top of the tent. He stuffed in duffel bags of clothes, boxes of food, two coolers, a gas lantern, and a propane stove. The other supplies — collapsable chairs and towels for the swimming pool we were

promised in the middle of the desert — went into a plastic carry-all bolted to the roof of the van.

My parents also felt compelled to pack supplies as if we were going on a wilderness trek rather than to a National Park, where rangers cruised around in four-wheel drive trucks, and the restrooms were equipped with showers. There was a box of shovels, buckets, flares, rope, tablets for purifying water, and a knife that looked like it could hold its own in the face of a Grizzly bear attack.

We woke before dawn on Friday and piled into the van. The trip would take two days — down through Northern California, an overnight stay near the ocean, and then *into the valley of death*, which my oldest brother Eric had taken to calling it.

My father didn't like this disrespectful attitude, but Eric kept saying it, arguing in a very calm and logical and slightly condescending tone that valley of death was *exactly* the same thing.

The temperature climbed to ninety-eight degrees as we made our way through the California Central Valley. Inside the van, it was comfortable, but when we stopped for gas and bathroom breaks, the air licked at the skin of our faces and arms. To a bunch of people from cool, moist Oregon, it was like walking into the jaws of hell.

Death Valley had earned its name. The landscape was desolate — rock and pale hard-packed earth, miles without any living thing, at least nothing visible. Snakes and tarantulas and black widows scuttled along in the dirt, disappearing into their surroundings, as they looked for shelter. The things that did grow had the same bleached appearance as the ground out of which they sprouted, managing to eke out a parched existence, occasionally drenched with buckets of rain, then left to the sun, their moisture sucked out once more. From a distance, the surrounding foothills were gray with a purple tinge, appearing swept clean of vegetation.

By the time our tent was pitched and the sleeping bags arranged inside of it, we were sweaty and dirty and cranky. Everyone but my mother. As always, she felt it was her heavenly-ordained role to put a positive spin on each idea that erupted out of my father's mouth. It

was her job to make sure the four of us appreciated what he did for us, that we gave him the respect he was owed, that we didn't whine. No one likes whining, but my father crowed about his dislike of it as if he were the only man on earth who felt that way.

Still, despite her cheerfulness, my mother's face had a drawn appearance, the desert draining the moisture out of her as well. She forced her smile with dry, sticky lips.

I found the vast emptiness beautiful, but I couldn't admit to my father that he'd chosen a spectacular destination. The best way to strengthen the alliance with my siblings was to murmur and gripe. My father said we were like the Israelites crossing the desert — woefully ungrateful.

That first night, we ate canned stew for dinner, with a side of canned pears sliced into narrow strips. Turning up the flame on the propane stove to its full potential made it hard for my mother to breathe in the face of all that heat. But she'd kept it too low and the dense contents of the pan didn't heat through properly. She served dinner rolls with butter that was close to liquid, and iced tea. The iced tea was the best part. We ranged in age from thirteen to nineteen, and felt very grown up that we were allowed something as adult as tea with our dinner. It was almost like being allowed coffee.

When the sun went down, the heat faded fast. Now wrapped in jackets with beach towels around our bare legs, we sat beside the fire and told stories — a Mallory campout tradition. Each one of us started where the sibling before us left off. These storytelling efforts were often a convoluted mess with very little story, simply strings of barely connected events. The only one who really got into it and seemed to have a knack for creating a genuine story was my middle brother. The rest of us did our best to attach relevant incidents, making them up as we went along. My parents were an appreciative audience, enthusiastic over every word out of our mouths, but I wondered what they really thought.

This time, my youngest brother, Tom, began the story by describing a girl named, not too subtly, Alexandra. He made this girl

out to be a superhero, *stronger than her two OLDEST brothers put together*. When he said this, he raised his arms, flexing his biceps. *This girl was so strong she could beat a boy in a fistfight*, he said.

Eric was next. He quickly revised the story to explain that in the eyes of *scrawny* guys, this *Alexandra person appeared strong, but of course she wasn't as strong as even one boy, she just thought she was*. He sounded extremely bent out of shape for a nineteen-year-old guy who looked like a man.

I followed with a brief scene that told of this girl, whose strength wasn't recognized, carrying a wounded German Shepherd for ten blocks so the wounded dog could be looked after by a vet.

Next, my middle brother also down-graded her strength, making the story veer off to the fact the girl was a liar and her brothers had helped her rescue the seventy-five pound dog.

This was how it usually went, which was why we often ended up with a loosely connected, sometimes completely *disconnected*, string of events.

The next morning, we were woken in the pre-dawn grayness to eat breakfast, setting out for a hike early, with the goal of completing our journey before it got unbearably hot. We were too late. An hour into the hike, the temperature was pushing eighty-five degrees and we trudged along the rocky path like deranged animals, our vision fractured into double images. Each of us had a metal canteen full of water, but the water grew hotter than the flesh inside our mouths. The moisture was necessary to our health, so we drank, but there was no pleasure in feeling the steaming liquid flow down our throats.

After lunch, we pulled our sleeping bags out of the sauna conditions inside the tent, dragged them to the shade of several Tamarisk trees, and stretched out for naps. We fell asleep worrying about those desert reptiles and spiders, but at least there weren't any mosquitos to puncture our skin like we'd experienced on most of our camping trips.

Eric and I woke up first from our naps. Our father was seated at

the picnic table, working on a crossword puzzle. He suggested Eric and I walk to the old fashioned pump near the restrooms and fill two buckets with water to heat for dishwashing after dinner.

“Now that it’s getting cooler, you should be able to manage.” He smiled as if he’d offered us a chance to go on a treasure hunt.

Neither of us pointed out that *cooler* was relative. Eric guessed it was at least ninety. Compared to one hundred and seven, it was cooling down.

We started off, empty buckets bouncing against our shins as we shuffled along.

The trail was nothing more than a worn section in the dirt, but more packed down and with smaller pebbles and loose gravel compared to the surrounding area. My father had warned us to watch for rattlesnakes, and Eric spent the first five minutes whispering in a panicked voice — *What’s that?* — every fifteen steps, hoping to elicit a shriek from me when I mistook a stick for a snake.

Only a few other tents dotted the campground, the beige and brown and dark green canvas blending in as if it were part of the natural landscape. Most people weren’t masochistic enough to camp in Death Valley in August. Of the few neighboring groups of campers, no one was sitting outside at their picnic tables.

We wandered past sad, thirsty trees that grew closer together as we neared the area where there was a cinderblock restroom with showers, a collection of benches for talks by park rangers, and the pump that provided nicely cooled water, safe for drinking. A faucet would have made more sense, but the park personnel wanted to recreate the sense of life when covered wagons rambled through the area on their way to greener parts of California.

Beyond the pump was a shallow ravine, and on the other side, a decrepit building, the boards of the siding pulling away from each other so that it wasn’t really habitable, open to cold and heat, rain and all kinds of unwanted insects. It looked abandoned, but there was no sign indicating it was a historical landmark. It was an odd placement for a home — right in the center of a National Park.

We pumped water into our buckets and trudged back, the weight pulling at our shoulder joints. About a third of my water splashed out as I walked, which felt nice on my legs.

Dinner that night was hotdogs cooked over an open fire, potato chips, and watermelon. The water from my bucket was heated on the camp stove and filled with liquid soap to wash the plates and the knives used to cut the watermelon and smear mustard on our hotdogs. Our bellies full, we lounged around on chairs and read until it was dark. Tom stayed at the picnic table, working on a Rubik's cube. When he got up, he managed to kick over the remaining bucket of water.

It ran out from beneath the table, raced toward the tent and pooled just outside the entrance, then quickly soaked into the ground. My father gritted his teeth, working hard not to lose his patience. He tried very hard to be calmer and more fun on our camping trips than he was at home. He instructed Eric to return to the pump for two more buckets of water.

"Why?" Eric slumped down in his chair and stretched out his legs as if the arrangement of his body would make it more difficult for our father to send him on a pointless mission.

"We can't spend the night without water," my father said.

"What do we need water for? The dishes are done."

"We're in the desert. We need easy access to water."

"That's dumb," Eric said.

"Get out of the chair and go fill the buckets. Alexandra too."

Eric held a small flashlight and I carried both buckets. We walked as slowly as we could, irritated that our siblings didn't have to walk through the darkness and return with their backs and shoulders straining under the weight of unnecessary water.

Neither of us wanted to say it out loud, but walking on a path carved roughly through seemingly horizon-less desert was unnerving. There was no ambient light and only a faint glow from the moon. The stars were brilliant since they didn't have to fight city lights, but it wasn't enough to help us see. The sparse scattering of

tents appeared as uninhabited as they had in full daylight. There were sounds, not identifiable as coyotes or other wild animals, but something inhuman, noises that made us *think* of coyotes and wild dogs and mountain lions, all of them hungry from living in such a desolate place, food hard to come by.

Eric lengthened his stride, as if to prove his confidence. I lagged behind, as if to prove that I wasn't worried and I didn't need him to protect me or reassure me. The older he got, the more he adopted the view that it was his god-given directive to watch out for me. He'd been shaped by my father, who looked to a god instilled with his own opinions, wishes for how the world should operate, desires for how others should behave, and labeling those views divine revelation. It's really quite frightening how often this happens on this tiny, overcrowded, yet vastly uninhabited planet. Men and women take ancient books, pull out the phrases and paragraphs that fit their views of the world, then attribute all associated thoughts as coming directly from the mouth of some god or another.

By this point in my life, the lines of male and female and been sharpened, like knives whetted and honed for slicing clean through bone. There was no room for disagreement about the role of a girl, the men in each family unit chosen as protectors and leaders. Men took action, women responded. Men led the charge, women followed. Men chose careers and wives and homes, women supported men's careers and waited for marriage proposals and decorated the homes that were situated in a man's desired neighborhood with proximity to the place he worked.

They over-ruled us in numbers — three boys and my father, two girls and my mother. Plus, god was clearly male. And if you counted his son and the spirit that was sent to live inside of us, the voices trying to dominate our own minds were all male. It seemed as if we didn't have a chance.

As I lagged behind Eric, I hoped to scare him. His ridiculous comments earlier, trying to make me think a poisonous snake or a scorpion was in our path, demonstrated his opinion regarding his

intelligence compared to mine. He thought silly games like that would frighten me. Despite all our years living together, he hadn't learned that very few things frighten me.

Soon, the outline of the cinderblock bathrooms emerged. The pump was still hidden.

"Hurry up," Eric said.

"Why?"

"Let's just get this done."

"I'm in no hurry to get back. What are we going to do, tell another story?"

He laughed. "We should make up something that happened out here."

"That's a good idea. Let them guess if it's true."

In the darkness, the pump made itself known, only a few yards in front of us. We walked toward it and I put the buckets on the ground.

"You'll have to pump," Eric said. "I'm holding the flashlight." He waved it around, casting erratic flashes of light at the side of the cinderblock building, across the ravine, and against the decaying cabin on the other side.

"Fine." I positioned the bucket under the spout and lifted the handle.

"Or you can hold the flashlight."

He shoved it into my free hand. He stepped around me and grabbed the pump handle and pressed it down, lifting it quickly, priming it to spit out water.

"You did that to make me carry it on the way back."

He laughed. "It's your turn anyway. You can lead the way, be the first to step on a rattler."

"They don't come out at night," I said. For someone who imagined himself my protector, he was more unsettled than I was. It seemed he wanted me to view him as the male looking out for the female without actually having to do anything.

It's not that Eric was a jerk. He was my favorite brother, and I

think I was always his favorite sibling. Overall, he's mostly had my back over the years. Growing up with my father, he couldn't help the voices inside his head. Despite the echoes of all those men, I had my own female voice fighting to counter what my father and our church defined as the Truth with a capital *T*. Eric didn't have that.

Water sloshed into the bucket, drowning out all worrisome sounds. When both buckets were full, he eased the pump handle back into place. A few drops plinked on the surface of the water. I waited for it to finish dribbling.

I pointed the flashlight at the ravine.

Something moved on the other side. A figure stepped inside the rundown cabin.

I whispered Eric's name, but I didn't have to. He saw it too. He stopped moving and turned toward the ravine, both of us hardly breathing.

Then, a woman's voice spoke low and crisp in the dry, still air. "You can't have her."

The words were as clear as if she stood beside us. I wondered if she'd heard the water gushing from the pump. She should have, and yet there was a mixture of terror and rage in her tone that made me think she was having an intimate and very private conversation, a conversation so intense, it muted all other sounds.

"Where is she?" Eric said softly. "Inside the cabin?"

"Yes."

"How come her voice is so clear?"

"I don't know." I moved closer to him. I turned off the flashlight.

"Turn it back on."

"She might see us..."

"So?" He grabbed my wrist, but I gripped the light harder. We tussled, our feet scraping on the gravelly dirt around the pump. My toe hit one of the buckets and water sloshed out.

"I'm not pumping again if you kick that over," he said. "Give me the flashlight."

"Don't you want to hear what happens?"

"We can hear with the light on."

"Don't be such a scaredy-cat."

"I'm not."

"Just be quiet so we can hear." My throat felt raw from the harsh whispering and I wanted him to stop talking.

"You're a busy-body," he said.

I took a few steps away from him.

A moment later, the sound of skin slapping skin and bone shot out of the tiny cabin. There was a small gasp.

"How come it sounds like she's right next to us?" Eric said.

"Acoustics. You know, when they design buildings so a quiet voice can be heard on the other side of a large room."

"I know what acoustics are, smart-ass. It makes no sense out in the open."

"Maybe it's something about the desert. The dry air, or the open space, I don't know."

A dim light came on, light showing through the spaces between the boards in the sides of the cabin. Another slap rang out. A male voice spoke, rough and full of venom. "You bitch. This is not how it's going to be."

"Yes it is."

"She's mine. She doesn't belong to you. You're not her mother. You're only good for one thing, and I'm sick and tired of your bullshit. So give her to me, or else."

The woman laughed, a loud shrieking sound like a hyena. "Or else, what? You'll kill me, too? Dead wives tell no tales?"

"Stop it."

The voices were much louder, neither one making an effort to keep their argument private.

"We need to go back," Eric said. "Dad's gonna come looking for us. We've been gone a long time."

"Not that long." I moved closer to the ravine.

"Alexandra. Come back." His voice hissed through the darkness.

The woman inside the cabin screamed and a moment later, a child started wailing.

“She’s *my* kid.”

“You don’t deserve her.”

The man laughed.

“You’re a monster.”

“And you’re overreacting. As always. You’re all the same. Everything’s hysterical drama.”

A moment later, a bellow exploded from the cabin. The sound swept across the ravine, carrying all the way out over the open desert on the opposite side of the cabin. I was sure it carried back to our campsite with equal force. It was followed by groans and more bellowing, the sound of an animal in extreme pain, or dying.

The light in the cabin went out and we heard footsteps, running, skidding across dry earth. The moonlight revealed enough for us to see a bulky shadow lunge toward the ravine. The figure crashed down the side, tearing through dried weeds and sending rocks skittering. Then the sound of someone scrambling up the opposite side, stopping for a moment. It was the woman. She held a small child against her chest, the girl’s legs and arms flopping like they had no life of their own.

Eric grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the cinderblock building. I tried to wrench my arm out of his grasp, but I couldn’t break free. He dragged me to the building and around the back side. The woman ran past us, staggering under the weight of the child.

Despite our effort at silence, she must have heard us earlier, or felt our presence, the intensity of four eyeballs staring at her. She stopped at the corner of the building, turned and stared back. The whites of her eyes, and the child’s, seemed to glow.

I turned on the flashlight, pointed it at her feet, and drew it slowly upward. Her feet were bare. She was dressed in shorts and a tank top. Every inch of exposed skin was wet with blood. Her hair on one side was damp and clumped together. The child was also spattered with blood, her eyes filled with terror.

The woman turned and ran past the pump, disappearing into the darkness.

I stepped away from the building and started toward the ravine.

“Where are you going?” Eric said.

“To the cabin.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We need to get back to the campsite.”

“I want to see.”

“There’s nothing to see.”

“I want to know what happened.”

“We can guess what happened.” He grabbed me.

I wrenched to the side, but he held tight. I twisted in the opposite direction.

“Dad will be pissed. Come on.”

“Let go of me.”

“We should tell someone,” he said.

“Tell what?”

“That a man might be...hurt.”

“We have to see, first,” I said.

“That’s sick. Why do you want to see?”

“Because I do. We might be witnesses to a crime. Don’t you want to know?”

“If Dad comes looking for us, we’re...”

“Then hurry. You’ll regret it if you don’t. You’ll wonder what happened.”

“No I won’t.”

I laughed. “You’re such a sissy.”

He let go of my arm. “I am not. I just don’t want to get in...get involved.”

I waited.

“Okay, fine. But we have to be quick. And then we have to report it.”

I ran to the ravine and made my way down sideways to keep

from pitching forward. Eric followed. We crossed the rocky bottom and climbed the other side. We stepped quietly up to the cabin entrance. The door was partially open. I pushed it wider and we went inside.

It was a single room, empty except for one thing.

A man who wasn't much older than Eric lay on the floor. He was on his back, arms and legs splayed. A thick wood stake that looked like it came from a fence was embedded in his belly. Blood soaked his shirt and covered his face. I turned away, as the room spun around me. Even though it was dark except for our flashlight, I felt a different kind of darkness clouding the edges of my eyes.

"I feel sick," Eric said.

I nodded.

"Now are you happy?" he said.

"I'm not *happy*. I just thought we should see."

When we returned to the campsite, the round-robin story time had already begun. Started by Jake, the middle child, it was clear after hearing two sentences, that the story took place on another planet. It wasn't my father's favorite type of story, he preferred things that were real to life, especially something historical, but the rule of the round-robin stories was that parents were the audience and they wouldn't edit or correct. Not that we went too far afield. After all, we knew our limits.

In the light of the lantern, Eric's face was pale. His lips had a floppy quality, as if he couldn't decide whether he was going to throw up, or wanted to say something but couldn't get his mouth to make the required shapes.

I waited for him to inform our parents. He'd been so insistent on reporting it. Instead, he mumbled almost senseless additions to the round-robin story, clearly not paying attention. No one seemed to notice he was out of it. The story went on longer than usual, maybe because the contributions from Eric and me were unusually brief, and Eric's were so off track, the others made more elaborate efforts to cover up our wasted efforts.

My parents smiled and nodded, my father looking less stiff and unhappy once Tom managed to work the characters back to planet earth.

It was close to ten o'clock when we dumped sand on the fire to extinguish the flames properly. We walked as a group to the restrooms, carrying flashlights and our toiletry bags, to pee and wash up. The area around the cinderblock building looked the same as it had earlier. There was no suggestion that a man's body was pouring blood all over the cabin floor just thirty or forty yards away. In fact, with no light but a half moon and our flashlights, the cabin was almost invisible. My mother didn't even look in that direction.

That night I was restless. I twisted from one side to the other. Each shift of my body tightened the sleeping bag around me until my legs and arms were squeezed into immovable positions. I pulled the zipper down and sat up. My back was sweating and my hair was filled with static electricity. I tried smoothing it down, but it flew up with even more rage.

I stared at the zippered screen flap covered by the door of the tent and thought about the blood-soaked woman. I wondered how she'd found the strength to stab that man with so much force that the stake went seven or eight inches into his body. I didn't know how she'd coped with his blood dousing her skin and hair, splashing into her eyes. Even thinking of it made me shiver. Not that shivering made the sweat go away. The shivers came in brief tremors and then I was burning up again.

It wasn't that hard to guess why she'd done it. He'd hurt the child in some awful way. Something I didn't care to think about. She protected a child that wasn't even hers. Maybe she deserved to become the mother.

Eric needed to realize it was too late. How could we explain the next day, hours after we'd overheard the things we did? There was no way to say why we'd done nothing while there was a chance she might be found. By now, she was far away, maybe even

making her way to Mexico, but surely on her way out of California.

I wanted to help her, to make sure she got as far away as possible.

The desire was sudden and intense.

It came over me like the desert heat, pressing down on my head. She was in trouble. They wouldn't consider murder justified, especially such a brutal murder, no matter how despicable his crimes.

If thoughts like these had come to my father with such insistence, weighing on his mind like physical pressure, with such a clear sense of purpose, he would have assured us it was the voice of god. And if I ever in a million years, which would never happen in a million years, suggested to my father that god had given me direction to help a murderer escape, he would have found a punishment so terrible, I might not recover. He was fond of punishments fitting their crimes, so I imagined him cutting off my ear, to teach me that I should only hear things that were the true voice of god. The voice he was used to hearing inside his own head.

But I was barely a teenager. How could I do anything? And I had no idea where she'd gone, and really no way to help her escape. I unzipped my sleeping bag and lay on top of it.

Eventually, I went to sleep.

The next day we took another long, brutal hike. After, we were rewarded with a trip to the public pool. The problem was, with the desert sun and all the other campers, people who didn't seem to be staying anywhere around the nearly vacant campground where we'd pitched our tent, flocked to the pool. It was shoulder-to-shoulder bodies heating the water along with the sun. You could hardly turn without slapping someone in the face.

Even so, we stayed for two hours, letting the tepid water soak our skin, desperate for some cooling.

Eric hardly spoke that day. He must have understood that it was much too late. Telling would only get us in trouble. Thinking back over his change in attitude, I realized he'd become strangely quiet

about it quite suddenly. He'd insisted on reporting it until he'd seen the body. Then, he hadn't said another word about it.

The following day, he grabbed my arm while I was washing the breakfast dishes. He put his mouth close to my ear as he squeezed my upper arm. "I need to talk to you."

I tried to shake him loose.

"Now."

"I have to finish this. Let go of me."

"Hurry up, then." He moved to the side and stood with his arms folded, staring at me. The rest of the family was scrambling around looking for geodes to hopefully split with a hammer, yielding beautiful crystals inside. Along with their rock hunting expedition, my father was giving biblical lessons about unimpressive exteriors and the magnificent, sparkling souls of believers, hidden within the dullest colors, and roughest forms.

I wrung out the sponge and placed it on the picnic table. I carried the pan of water away from our campsite and dumped it out. The ground sucked up the water immediately, leaving a damp spot, not even enough to be called mud. I wiped out the pan and packed away soap, sponge, and pan. I put the dishes, already dried from sitting in the blistering air into the carry-all that held our pots and pans and other utensils.

I followed Eric down a trail that led to an enormous pile of rocks.

Eric pointed to one of the rocks, slightly flattened on top. "Sit down." He chose a lower rock and sat beside me. "Something terrible happened."

"What?"

"I went back to the cabin."

"Why?"

"I had to...I don't know why, exactly. I just did."

I shrugged.

"He's not there!"

"Who?"

He stabbed his index finger at my shin bone. "You know who." He spoke more softly. "That guy. There's blood everywhere."

"I know. I saw it, remember?" I shivered again.

"But the guy isn't there! His body isn't. It's gone."

"So?"

"Think about it. Don't be all Miss Nonchalant. We went in there. What if he wasn't dead, and he saw us, and then someone helped him, or he got up and..."

"Are you nuts?" I said.

"It could happen. Otherwise, why is he gone? What if he finds us?"

"Eric. He's dead."

"We don't know that."

"I think we do."

"Then where did he go?"

"She came back for him. Or someone buried him, maybe."

He stood and shoved his hands into his pockets. He studied the pile of rocks for several minutes, shifting his shoulders, pushing his hands farther down into his pockets as if he wanted to lock them in place. Then, he turned slowly and looked down at me. "Who would bury him?"

I looked up, keeping my expression neutral. "Someone who found him. I don't know."

He stared at me for quite a long time.

I stood. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

"You don't seem very worried."

"What is there to worry about?"

He grabbed my upper arm again and held it, moving it slightly, massaging the flesh and muscle. He moved his hand away and took hold of my shoulder, pressing his fingers into bone. He let go and stepped back. "Sometimes you act like you're older than me."

I sort of agreed with him, but I didn't say anything.

"It's just strange. It doesn't feel right," he said.

"What doesn't feel right?"

“It feels like he disappeared into thin air. What if someone comes and talks to us...”

“Who is going to do that?”

“How should I know? Someone investigating why the place is soaked with blood. What if they talk to us and find out we didn’t tell anyone she stabbed him?”

“There is no way that would happen. We wouldn’t tell them. So how would they even know?”

“You don’t know who else heard. And saw. Maybe someone saw us. We should have told dad right away.”

“Well we didn’t and now it’s too late.”

“I never should have let you talk me into staying. I never should have...if dad finds out, I’m in deep shit.”

And now I knew what he was really worried about. Not the woman getting away with murder, or the escape of a man who was clearly dead, as if he were a zombie. His fear of my father’s wrath for exposing a girl to something wicked, something far worse than she would ever be exposed to in a hotel, was twisting his brain into all kinds of absurd beliefs, and childish fears.

It was impossible being a girl and living with my father’s views that men were in charge and women existed to support them. But it was impossible for my brothers, too. And sometimes I forgot that. They were always, without fail, expected to watch out for me. They were *responsible*. If anything happened to us, they could be blamed and punished as quickly as we were. In trouble for being a girl, and in trouble for not treating girls like the precious, fragile, playthings they were.

“Are you going to tell him?” he said.

“Of course not.”

“Can I trust you?” His face was pale despite the rising temperature around us, the sun climbing higher, burning down so the rays stabbed through our clothes.

I stood and took hold of his wrist. “You know you can.”

“I don’t know, sometimes. You..you’re mostly out for yourself.” He smiled but he didn’t look pleased.

“Isn’t everyone?”

“Maybe. But it’s different with you.”

“We’re in this together. So being out for myself is being out for you, in this case.”

He laughed. “In *this* case.”

We started back to the campsite. “Where do you think he went? Do you think he’s alive?”

“I don’t see how,” I said. “All that blood?” I shivered. “That huge stake in his gut?”

* * *

The night it happened, after we’d seen all that blood, when I got so hot, burning with desire to help her, I’d slipped out of my sleeping bag. I took the flashlight my father kept by the tent door. Unzipping the flap took several minutes, as I tried to mute the sound of the metal teeth drawing apart. Luckily there were other sounds outside to help cover it — a bird that sounded like a crow but with a lower, rougher cry than the crows I was used to.

I crept toward the supply box that was on the ground next to the van. I took out a shovel and some rope.

I followed the path back to the pump then walked to the edge of the ravine. I scrambled down sideways, as before. I climbed the opposite side and made my way to the cabin door, keeping the flashlight low to the ground so it wasn’t splashing all over the landscape, announcing my presence to anyone nearby.

Inside, I turned off the light, preferring the dark. There was enough light from the moon to see the outline of his body and I didn’t want to see all that blood. I tied the rope around his ankles and dragged the body a few inches. Although he wasn’t a large man, it felt like he weighed a ton. I had to stop every five or six steps to catch my breath. But Tom was right, I was a strong girl.

When I finally got him to the door, I left him there and went outside. I walked around the entire cabin, shining the light at different angles, looking for the softest dirt. Finally, I found it. About ten feet from the back window was an area that looked like it might have been a garden, although I had no idea how it was possible to have a garden in the desert. Maybe that's why everything had died. And maybe that's why the cabin was abandoned — the person or people who built it weren't very smart.

I began digging a hole. I didn't think it needed to be deep. I wasn't hoping to hide his body forever, just long enough for that woman to get a significant head start.

Digging took what felt like half the night. I hoped no one in my family woke and wondered where the flashlight was, wondered why the sounds of people sleeping were softer than usual, a hole in the spot I should have been occupying. I thought I was fairly safe — no one had woken during the other nights. There was nowhere to go, so if you did wake, you found ways to get yourself back to sleep. The biggest risk was my father, but he wasn't a restless sleeper. He didn't even snore. When he slept on the couch for a Saturday afternoon nap, it seemed like he was dead.

In the end, Eric told after all. I was only thirteen and I think he was afraid it would slip out, despite my best intentions. Confessing your sins brought far less punishment than being found out. He didn't mention that the body disappeared, only that we'd heard something horrible. Something violent. He didn't mention seeing the woman and the child.

After he told, we never went camping again. Eric didn't come home from college the next summer. My mother found a hotel that proclaimed religious virtue, with wholesome activities for young teenagers. It sort of seemed like my parents were defeated, scared maybe, that they couldn't keep our minds as pure as they'd hoped.

It didn't matter that Eric told because nothing came of it as far as the woman was concerned. We returned home to Portland and

never heard that she'd been identified, arrested, or convicted for trying to save a child's life.

I never forgot her and I never stopped thinking about her courage. You could say my connection to her was almost a spiritual experience. From what we'd witnessed, she had a very good reason for doing what she'd done.

Without ever speaking to her, only seeing her eyes and her blood-soaked body in the darkness, I realized that sometimes, justice is your personal responsibility.