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Jake had been driving for nearly three hours along roads that barely deserved the name when he saw what he'd been looking for. A weathered board, crudely shaped like an arrow, pointed down a muddy, ice-packed strip of land, deeply rutted, with a large mound of snow-covered earth in its center. Scratched on the board was PORTER. Jake shook his head, parked his car near the split-rail fence that lined the north side of the dirt road which intersected with the wagon path, and hoped he didn’t have a long walk ahead of him. There was no help for it though; his car wouldn’t clear the center of the wagon trail. He sure didn’t want to get stranded this far from help in this weather. He pulled his collar up, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and started walking down the path.

Fifteen minutes down the road, he saw the dark boards of the shack. Smoke rose lazily from a central stone chimney. *It might be called picturesque in different circumstances*, he thought. The dogs in the yard took something away from its rustic charm. As soon as he got within shouting distance, dogs leapt toward him, teeth bared, snarling and barking. Fear froze him in his steps, until he realized they were chained. *There must be more than six of those mongrels in the yard*, Jake thought, trying to figure a way to approach the house without getting torn to pieces. Jake stood, not moving a muscle, and wondered that no one had mentioned this minor obstacle. A movement at the dwelling caught his eye. What appeared to be a man stepped out onto the downward sloping porch that ran along the front of the shack. A rifle was in his hand.

“Shut yer yaps, dogs! Cain’t hear m’se'f think wi’ yer carryin’ on!”

The dogs dropped to the ground, quiet as death.

“Say yer piece, mister, ‘fore I take it in mind to shoot yuh where yuh stand.”

“I was told Fanny Runyon might be staying here. I'm Jake Witherspoon.” Jake took a step toward the shack, stopped as the man raised his rifle, cocked it, and pointed it in his direction.

“Jes stay put ‘n yuh’ll live a mite longer, hear?”

Jake nodded. The man said something to someone standing in the shadows behind him. Jake couldn’t quite make out what it was. If Fanny were here, he thought, why would she want to leave? No one could get past those dogs if they tried. The man with the rifle looked like he could take care of himself and a few more as well. Something was happening up at the shack. Two women appeared beside the man. If his life had depended on it, Jake couldn’t have picked out which one was Fanny Runyon. Even at this distance Jake could tell both of them had led hard lives. Both were slender to the point of being gaunt. Both were angular, no traces of femininity anywhere. Their hair, which might have lent some softness to their features, was pulled back tightly from their faces, presumably captured into buns. *Put them in men’s clothes*, he thought, *and you'd have a hard time telling they weren’t men themselves*. The two women embraced briefly. Then the man said something to one of them, who stepped directly behind him and followed him into the yard. Jake heard the dogs begin to growl. One sat up on its haunches, as the two made their way toward the place where Jake stood. Suddenly the dog was on its feet, teeth bared—there was a sharp yelp, as the man kicked the dog and sent him sprawling.

“I said shut yer yap!” the man said.

Jake caught a glimpse of the woman’s face: as gray as the winter sky. Black

circles rimmed her eyes, their color lost in the distance between them. She had a haunted look. Jake watched her as they came toward him. This woman was Fanny Runyon. He had no doubt.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Fanny looked back over her shoulder as they began the trek back to Jake’s car. He followed her gaze. The man and his wife stood side by side on their porch, watching them, as they walked down the frozen dirt road. Fanny stopped, raised her hand in silent

farewell. The couple nodded, turned away, and disappeared into the blackness of the

shack’s doorway. Fanny began walking again, head down, purposeful.

“How did you come to be at the Porters’ place?” Jake asked, his voice sounding too loud in his ears.

Fanny glanced sideways at him but said nothing.

“Their name was Porter, wasn’t it? I assumed so because of the sign…”

Fanny walked on in silence beside him. The coat she wore over her dress didn’t fit, seemed too thin in this cold. He remembered that her own coat had been left behind in Larry’s fishing cabin when she fled. The one she had on must belong to the Porter woman. He glanced back at the shack, wondering that a woman that poor had an extra coat. The thought entered his mind that the one Fanny wore had not been a spare coat at all.

“They seem like a nice couple,” Jake said, trying once more to establish contact.

Nothing.

They trudged on a few more yards, their eyes trained on the difficult path ahead.

“Real nice.”

The sound of her voice startled him. Minutes had passed since he'd said anything. *At least she makes sense and can talk*. For a moment there, he'd wondered if she’d reverted into her trancelike existence. He made no immediate reply. It was like coaxing a wild deer to eat from your hand: Any sudden movement or sound and it might bolt in fear. He glimpsed his car in the distance and pointed, “My car’s over there. On the other side of that fence.”

Fanny raised her head, followed his finger with her eyes, nodded, and went back to studying the ground before her feet.

“It has a heater. You must be freezing with nothing on heavier than that coat.”

Fanny pulled the coat around her. “I'm all right.”

They reached the main road. Jake led her to the passenger side of the car, opened the door for her, and held it while she got in. It was only then he noticed she was shaking. He said nothing, closed the door.

He started the engine, turned on the heater, and sat there for a moment, letting the car warm up. Then he pulled out onto the road, turned around, and headed back the way he had come. Ten minutes later Fanny stopped shaking, turned her face to her window.

“I don’t suppose I'll ever see those folks again,” she said, as if they'd been carrying on an extended conversation all this time. “They were real nice to me. I suppose I would’ve died if they hadn’t come along when they did…”

“When *did* they come along, Mrs. Runyon?” The formality of the title sounded

strange to him. For months now, she’d been “Fanny” not “Mrs. Runyon” in his mind.

“I don’t know exactly when it was…. I just ran for the longest time, didn’t even feel the cold until I fell over a tree limb. I had no idea where I was or what direction I was running in…I just ran. I kept on running until my legs just wouldn’t work anymore.

“What happened then?”

“I sat down.”

“Where?”

“I didn’t know then, and I don’t know now. I just sat down. I couldn’t go another step…. Then the Porters came along and took me to this store and gave me money so I could use the telephone. I got a real nice operator. She found Mr. Branch for me,” Fanny turned to face him, a look of bewilderment in her eyes.

“Not one of those people knew me…they treated me real nice…She made me take this coat. I didn’t want to…. It was the only one she had.”

Her eyes seemed to bore into him, seeking something from him he couldn’t identify.

She clutched the coat tighter around her, turned back to her window.

Jake couldn’t explain the effect she had on him. After all the stories he'd heard about her, he had expected something different from the woman who sat beside him, and yet he’d known her on sight.

He was driving east toward Hulet when he realized he couldn’t take her there. In the rush to find her, he hadn’t thought what he'd do with her afterwards. He needed to talk to her, find out what she knew, what she could tell him. But *then* what? Where would she be safe now?

He drove around a curve and passed a small country store with a gas pump in front of it. A sign said OPEN in the window. He drove on down the narrow, winding road until he found a place to turn around.

Fanny looked at him as they headed back in the other direction.

“I'm hungry,” Jake said in answer to her unasked questions. “It’s nearly noon, and I haven’t had a bite since early last night. I thought you might want something to eat, too. I saw a store a way back. We can make a rest stop there and get some gasoline. If they have a telephone I can use, I'll put in a call to a friend who can help me get you somewhere where you'll be safe for the time being.” She said nothing, just stared at him. “Is there another place you can go?”

She looked down at her hands, shook her head, and returned to staring out her window. He couldn’t remember seeing anyone so completely alone before.