

A few days later as she entered her home after work, the phone rang.

“Hello, Mrs. Eagleton? This is Jerod McCabe. Do you remember me?”

Marie hesitated, “Yes.”

“I was able to do some research on the talisman. You’ll be happy with the results. It would be beneficial if we could speak face to face. Are you available tomorrow after 5:00?” he asked.

“I suppose it depends where you want to meet,” responded Marie.

“I don’t expect you to drive all the way up to Fort St. John. How about if we meet at the café next to the *Columbia Gazette*,” he suggested.

“That will be fine, I guess. 5:30 at the café.”

“5:30 it is. Goodbye,” said McCabe.

Marie hung up puzzled. To the best of her recollection, she hadn’t provided a phone number or even a last name. How did he locate her? She said she would meet him – she would keep her word – but in the future, Marie had no intention of ever having any further contact with Jerod McCabe for any reason whatsoever.

She drove the five miles to the Gazette from work. She knew the location well and liked the editor. For the past year, Jonathan Smith had provided coverage for Marie’s numerous charitable events and activities. To the right of the Gazette was a refurbished saloon with brass rails adorning the front terrace, green parasols folded up like Christmas trees sheltering the black wrought iron tables. She walked slowly up the brick-faced steps past russet Chrysanthemums

cradled in brass cauldrons. Entering the café, she shook the snow from her hair, and slipped off her coat.

A waitress welcomed her, saying, “Mrs. Eagleton, Mr. McCabe is expecting you. Please come this way.”

Perplexed, Marie all at once smiled and frowned. “This is the first time I’ve ever stopped by here. How do you know who I am?”

“Mrs. Eagleton, that’s Mr. McCabe. He likes to be prepared and he simply described your appearance in detail,” said the waitress.

Marie sat in a brown leather booth, in front of a glass-faced table layered with heavily textured placemats and pewter silverware. She turned around admiring the oil paintings and the suspended Tiffany lighting. Reaching for a menu, which bore the same cranberry-colored crosshatched pattern as the placemats, she scanned the Edwardian script and turned the menu over, looking for the beverage section. Her eyes trailed to the bottom where, in fine print, were the words, “Jerod McCabe, Proprietor”.

Marie’s eyes widened with the realization that Jerod McCabe, at that particular moment, could possibly be watching her. She leaned back in the soft leather, rolling a napkin holder back and forth. She was startled to notice her hand shaking. She glanced around, seeing a few booths some distance away full of customers enjoying the casual atmosphere. Turning left, she became enthralled with the subjects of an oil painting spanning from table to ceiling. At the top was an eagle circling in the bright sky over dark pine trees shooting vertically. At the base of the trees was a fawn alone, nibbling at some grass among strewn pine cones. On the left was an eagle’s nest resting in a

rocky outcrop, while centrally in the painting were two Ravens, flying. She rested her head on the fingers of her right hand, her mouth slightly agape in wonder, as she analyzed the detail of the work of art.

Entranced in the brief wait, she imagined herself swaying in a hammock caressed by a summer breeze. She had almost forgotten why she had come.

“Marie,” exclaimed McCabe. Marie jumped feeling an iciness bristling down the back of her neck. “How are you? So pleased that you could make it.”

“Hello,” sighed Marie, doing her best to force a smile.

“I noticed you were looking at this painting. It’s one of my favorites.” McCabe sat down across from her and with some effort, jockeyed his way toward the center of the table. Marie thought that he looked much older than before. With the overhead lighting, every crack, line and wrinkle near his eyes became magnified, especially his crow’s feet. It was like looking at a topographic map with striated rivers and streams. “What story do you think this painting tells?”

“It’s very well done. It’s about the eagle in the foreground, protecting its young from the predators in the forest. The crows or Ravens have taken flight in fright. I would guess that that the eagle has been successful,” said Marie with a glimmer in her eyes.

“What an optimistic view! I had this commissioned by Malakwa,” said McCabe.

Marie interrupted, “Malakwa? Malakwa painted this?”

“Yes, do you know of him?” asked McCabe.

“Malakwa and my husband are very good friends, but I never realized Malakwa also paints. I thought he only sculpts.”

“For the most part, he’s a sculptor. Yet he has another talent, painting. Now there’s the value! I don’t think that he likes to spend his time on paintings, so there will be few of them, but those that are sold will be very valuable someday. I believe in the future. It’s my ability to predict that also provides my value to clients,” responded McCabe. “But, I’m getting off the topic. When Malakwa painted this, he had very much the same viewpoint as you. However, I see something entirely different. Perception is reality. The eagle is, yes, protecting its young, but where’s the mate? I don’t believe the Ravens are fleeing, rather, the Raven is a free creature, free to find any destination it wishes, and it sees an opportunity – the eagle’s nest with its young. And, as to the eagle’s prominence, look down at the bottom left below the cliff. Notice that a mountain lion roams in search of prey above the fawn. The creatures are simply a part of a much larger whole, the natural order. They are merely small details within a panorama, the larger forest, surrounded by mountains, for nature is truly in control. If the environment can be controlled, so can the lives of each beast, and that is the power.”

“Mr. McCabe, when you say ‘that is the power’, are you speaking of the painting?” asked Marie.

“Well, that depends upon your perception, doesn’t it?” asked McCabe.

The waitress interrupted asking “Have you made a selection from the menu?” McCabe looked at Marie.

Marie avoided his eyes and responded, “I think I’ll have a decaf coffee, thank you,” happy for the disruption to their conversation.

“Marie, why don’t you join me for dinner? It will be my pleasure,” offered McCabe.

“No, thank you, I have much to do tonight.”

“You do, indeed, seem to be a busy woman.” Disappointed, McCabe said, “If you insist. Make mine strong and black. I’ll take a sirloin steak, rare. You know, my regular.”

“Yes, Mr. McCabe,” said the waitress, as she spun around.

Marie didn’t like being called by her first name by such a stranger. McCabe looked at Marie and smiled.

“Mr. McCabe, you mentioned that you wanted to discuss business. So, what do you have in mind?” asked Marie.

“May I take another look? Do you have it with you?” asked McCabe.

“Yes. This is especially dear to my husband.” She carefully pulled the talisman from her purse and handed it to McCabe.

“Sensible tactic,” said McCabe, looking straight into Marie’s green eyes. “An item of value should always be kept close by.”

Marie felt foolish with her last remark. She shouldn’t let her guard down and felt perhaps that she disclosed too much.

He glanced at the ivory figurine, saying, “I’m convinced. This is extremely valuable. My original offer was what, \$40,000?” he asked.

“Yes, it was.”

“My firm and final offer, quite generous I might add, is much higher. Are you interested?” he asked.

“Yes, perhaps.”

“I have given this a great deal of thought. The offer is \$60,000. What do you think?” he said, smiling.

Reaching for the talisman, Marie responded, “I would like to think about it,” tucking it away carefully in her purse.

“I don’t think you’ll obtain a higher offer in all of British Columbia.”

“You’re probably correct, but my efforts don’t have to be confined to this area, Mr. McCabe,” she said with bristling confidence.

The waitress dropped off the coffee while Marie reached for the cream and sugar, pouring copious amounts of cream into her cup. She swallowed it as quickly as possible, avoiding McCabe’s gaze.

“I would like to thank you for your time and the coffee, said Marie.

“So, what’s the rush? Surely, you will give some thought to my offer?” he asked.

“Mr. McCabe, whatever your perception may be, in *this* environment, we are free to do what we choose. Good evening and thank you for your time and interest,” responded Marie. McCabe feigned a look of surprise.

“Good night. Think carefully about it. I can always revise the offer,” he said. As Marie slipped out of the booth, McCabe waited for her to button her coat, turn towards the door and take a few steps. “Mrs. Eagleton. I believe you had requested a written quote,” stated McCabe. She stopped, turning around. He stood up and approached Marie. Reaching into his pocket he produced the quote and extended

the paper to Marie. She grasped a hold of the document to retract it. As she did so, McCabe held on tenaciously. Her fingers slipped free. He remarked, “Don’t be so impulsive, Mrs. Eagleton. If you accept this offer, you can be as free as... the Raven.”

Without saying a word, she took the folded paper and left the café. Outdoors she stopped for a moment, shuddering, thinking about the offer, McCabe’s behavior, the painting, and his words. The wind grew blustery as she ran to the car. As she looked back, there he was, watching her. Across the contours of his face, the blinds in the window created deep horizontal shadows making him appear like a native warrior preparing for war. Only then did she remember what disturbed her so – Aika’s warning.