

## SKULL VALLEY

by Michael Cassutt

**Michael Cassutt most recently appeared in Asimov's with his thought experiment, "Me and Deke and the Paradigm Shift" (February 2007). He is the author of eleven books of fiction, such as Missing Man, Red Moon, and Tango Midnight; non-fiction like Who's Who in Space; sixty teleplays for such SF series as Twilight Zone, Max Headroom, and The Dead Zone; and a regular column on SF television writing, "The Cassutt Files" on Scifi.com. He lives in Los Angeles, where among other projects he is currently working on his first video game. Unfortunately, Mike has not been a prolific provider of short stories for our pages. His first Asimov's story, "A Star Is Born" appeared in our July 1984 issue. It was six years before another of his tales showed up in the magazine and another six years before his third appeared in our October/November 1996 issue. While we hope we don't have to wait six, or even eleven, years for his next tale, we're glad that he's chosen to return to our pages with a thrilling and deadly chase through...**

\* \* \* \*

"He's headed south," the woman from Homeland Security said, clicking off her cell phone.

Her name was Nicole Hulseley. Even swathed in a vest and khaki uniform, she was blonde and beautiful, impossible to ignore, especially when sitting next to you in the front seat of a car. But my admiring sideways glances had to be brief. Negotiating the switchbacks of old Highway 89 through the Cleopatra Hills demanded total concentration. The occasional roadside memorial of cross and withered flowers showed the penalty. So did my memories of a dozen—or was it twenty?—crash sites over the years.

"Miss Hulseley," I said, "'south' doesn't tell me much. In fact, you haven't actually told me *anything* useful about this fugitive. Certainly not enough to let me catch him."

She had arrived at the Yavapai County Sheriff Station in Prescott at six AM, waving Homeland Security identification and dropping incomprehensible acronyms while juggling a cell phone, a BlackBerry and a shiny laptop. It appeared that she was chasing a fugitive, or so I heard when I arrived for my shift. "What kind of fugitive?" I asked Dan Fennessy, my supervisor. "Bank robber? Escaped prisoner? Free-range Democrat?"

He forced a smile, never an easy thing for him. “She hasn’t said.”

I found this vagueness to be uncharacteristic; Fennessy was precise, dogged, quick to snap “bullshit” at fuzzy thinking and vague phrasing—hence his scorn for those who had what he believed to be soft, unfocused political views.

“Is he armed?” This was usually an automatic trigger for a download of law enforcement jargon from Fennessy.

“Won’t say and likely don’t know.”

“Okay,” I said, my frustration growing, “if it’s such a big mysterious deal, where are the Federal marshals?” I nodded to our computer and fax machine. “Where is the bulletin from Phoenix?”

Hulsey rejoined us at this point, and my amazement at Fennessy’s uncharacteristic goofiness vanished: the agent from Homeland Security turned out to be tall, blonde, rangy and fit, the kind of woman who could appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*—a beach volleyball champ, perhaps. Her all-American beauty and exuberance had overwhelmed Fennessy’s normal rigor; the man was in a stupor.

Not that I was completely immune. But Fennessy is the station’s alpha male—good-looking in spite of his years, always charming, twice-divorced. I’m younger, but not notably easy on the eyes, with a waistline that suggests (however falsely) domestic bliss ... and so stereotypically Latino that, compared to All-Americans like Fennessy and Hulsey, I might have belonged to a different species.

The goddess spoke: “The existence of this fugitive is classified. We don’t want the incident broadcast, we just want him caught with no noise.”

She waited for Fennessy or me to comment; we did not. “These are the only facts I’m authorized to release: approximately ten days ago, a male escaped from a Federal facility that was in the process of being closed—”

Now Fennessy sat up straight. He was a Tom Clancy reader, a military junkie. He often bored my ears off with tales of Titan missile silos around Tucson and the vast swaths of Arizona that served as Air Force gunnery ranges. “What Federal facility is within running distance of us?”

Hulsey blinked her long lashes, clearly not wanting to give up even

this much hard data. “Table Mesa Research Station, up near Sycamore Point.”

“Table Mesa.” Now I couldn’t help laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Hulseley said.

“In Spanish they mean the same thing. ‘Table Table.’” Hulseley actually blushed. Probably hated to be one-upped by a rural deputy sheriff. Especially a fat, Latino deputy sheriff.

“Either way,” Fennessy grumbled, “I’ve never heard of it.”

Hulseley’s BlackBerry twittered at her. She moved off to let her fingers talk, leaving us alone.

“You don’t suppose they’re parking Al-Qaeda out here,” Fennessy said. “Could this ‘Table Mesa’ be some kind of Gitmo?”

I hadn’t considered that. Maybe I *am* too trusting. “Here?”

“Shit, yeah! My old man came to Arizona during World War II to do guard duty! There was a big German prisoner-of-war camp down at Papago Park. They also had a bunch of Japanese diplomats stashed outside Tucson.”

“I never knew.”

“You’re too young, Sandoval.” He offered that strained smile again. “Twelve years in the department, and you still have so much to learn.” Bubbling under this benign bit of teasing was something more ominous: the department was facing cutbacks, and I was facing a review.

Hulseley returned, this time with a hurry-up-and-go attitude. “Our last confirmed sighting was in Jerome two days ago. We have a report that puts him here.” She opened the laptop, displaying an overhead satellite picture of Yavapai County.

She used her touchpad to illuminate a string of dots which marked a rough trail from the northwest, down the Verde River Valley, up and over Jerome, through the mountains and across Prescott Valley to the west and south.

“How come there are so many dots at the start of the line, and none

past Jerome?" I asked.

"You had this guy tagged, didn't you?" Fennessy said.

Hulsey frowned, and pulled a plastic baggie out of her pocket. In it was what looked like dried-up contact lens crusted with blood. "We picked this up last night at the mouth of a mine there."

Fennessy barked a laugh. "Shit, lady, if he's got into those mines, you could look for years and never find him." Jerome was a former copper town built on the side of a mountain. Most of its mines had played out fifty years ago, but the shafts still honeycombed the place. I should know: as a kid, I used to play in them.

"Fortunately, we have a sighting from Prescott Valley the day after he ... carved this out of his arm."

I looked at Fennessy. "Is this guy pulling our robberies?" There had been a series of odd little break-ins and thefts clustered along the north side of Prescott Valley, the big development north of the city proper. Nothing major had been taken—just clothing, food, and, inexplicably, toys. My job for the day was to have been follow-up.

But Fennessy was still entranced by Hulsey and her many devices. He was drawing his finger in a straight line from Jerome through Prescott Valley. "If this guy's on foot, call it twenty-five miles a day, where would he be now...?"

We came to the same conclusion. "Skull Valley."

Hulsey's phone got her again. Before she answered it, I told her I would bring a vehicle around to the front door.

As I headed down the hall to my ride, Fennessy winked. "Remember, Sandoval, if he *does* turn out to be a Democrat ... shoot to kill."

Skull Valley was a rural community of a few hundred ranchers and retirees, too far from downtown for convenient development ... so far. It was wooded, bordered by mountains, and served as a pathway to the desolate reaches of western Arizona.

It would be a perfect outlaw hideout—and had been for a hundred and fifty years.

“So who is this guy?” I said, as we headed down into the valley itself. “All I know is the word ‘fugitive.’ Is he old or young? Armed? Dangerous?” I indicated the laptop. “You wouldn’t happen to have a picture, would you?”

She looked out the window, clearly taxed by these basic questions. “Young,” she said finally, as if offering a gift. “Unarmed and not familiar with weapons.”

“Please don’t make me feel as though I’m buying vowels on *Wheel of Fortune*. Give me an age or I can turn the car around.”

“Seventeen.”

That was useful, if only to lower the chance that the fugitive was some kind of terrorist. Not that there aren’t teenaged suicide bombers—but I found it unlikely that a 17-year-old would be an international bad-ass worthy of confinement at this Table Mesa facility.

“Does he have a criminal record?”

“No.” She was losing patience, or so I assumed, when she exhaled as if she’d just finished a hundred-yard sprint, then brushed back her hair. “Look, if this were up to me, I’d simply give you the file. But this was classified far above me. I’ll lose my job and career if it’s compromised.”

“You mean, further compromised.” I smiled.

“Yes.” Strangely, she wasn’t amused.

A thought occurred to me ... dumb, but I couldn’t help asking. “He isn’t some kind of extra-terrestrial, is he? Is Table Mesa where we keep the frozen aliens?”

She actually laughed out loud. “I wish! An E.T. would be easier to explain!”

\* \* \* \*

Armed with that much data, I pulled off at the intersection of 89A and Sharps Road, a location that was as close to a chokepoint as you could find on this route through Skull Valley. There was an antique store—still closed at this hour—and a rutted parking lot.

To the south lay low hills and fairly rugged terrain. To the north, flat

ranch land, still home to cattle. "Come on," I said, climbing out of the ride, making sure Hulseley had a hat and carried a water bottle. With her milky complexion, it was obvious she hadn't been working in Arizona for long.

I started us walking north, figuring that was Fugitive's likely route from his last known location.

"You've got to be kidding me," Hulseley said, following with obvious ill grace. "This is *it*? One deputy is supposed to find my fugitive in a hundred square miles?"

"This isn't television," I said. "If you're thinking the local sheriff is somehow going to 'seal off' a hundred miles, you're dreaming. Ten thousand Border Patrol and National Guards can't seal off a few hundred miles of fence. Up here we don't have the personnel to do more than throw up three or four roadblocks at a given time. Hell, we have a tough enough time finding a dead body in field. A moving target that doesn't want to be caught is much tougher. And by the way, we're talking more like five-hundred square miles."

I realized I sounded nasty. "All we're looking for is evidence, a sign. Another data point. Once we have some kind of projected path, then we rustle up a posse."

Three hours passed, in which Hulseley and I worked a search pattern sometimes as much as a hundred yards apart. When we happened to pass, we talked. That is, I talked. By the time the sun was high enough to blister, and the sky bright enough to blind, Hulseley knew I was thirty-four, that I was separated, that I had two children. What did I think of the current craziness over the illegal invasion? "I wish all you late-comers would have to pass tests," I said. "My family name is Sandoval, but my heritage is Hopi. We were here before the Spanish."

We found cattle and the attendant cattle pies. We saw rabbits, a hunting hawk, dozens of examples of Arizona flora that I, as a native, can still not identify. Beer cans, broken glass, a very new bra and a very old sneaker.

But no blood, no fresh footprints. "What would he be wearing?" I shouted to Hulseley at one point.

"He was wearing sandals when he escaped."

Which, given the thefts of clothing from P.V., meant he could be

wearing boots, sneakers, or high-heeled pumps by now.

We could have looked all day. We could have looked all of several days, but shortly before ten AM my radio squawked with a message from dispatch: a Skull Valley resident named Elizabeth McKenna reported a prowler, description to come. She had apparently frightened him off by banging pots and pans and shouting. (Her age was given as sixty-eight and her husband was away golfing.) She had also found something so disturbing she wouldn't talk about it on the phone.

"This could be your fugitive," I said, as Hulsey and I humped it back to the ride.

"God, I hope so."

The only thing that troubled me was this: I had chosen to search at what should have been the *outside* of a box representing the maximum distance a human being could walk in eleven hours, the time of the last confirmed sighting.

The McKenna residence in Skull Valley was another fifteen miles down the road. Whoever or whatever this fugitive was, he could cover ground.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sure he was another illegal," Elizabeth McKenna said, with real anger in her voice, and a frown on her face. She was an otherwise pleasant, gray-haired woman in shorts and a polo shirt, leading us through her west pasture to this "disturbing sight." "They're always going through here. Why can't you stop them?"

What's amusing to me is how a uniform trumps ethnic identity: had Mrs. McKenna seen me in civilian clothing, she'd never have raised the subject, much less used that tone of voice. I suppose I should be grateful.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Hulsey said, "Ma'am, ten thousand border patrol and National Guards can't block a few hundred miles of fence. There aren't enough deputies in the department to seal off this area." Hulsey threw me a smug look behind Mrs. McKenna's back.

I nodded an acknowledgement ... even as I was struck by Hulsey's strange posture. Her feet were arranged like a ballerina's. "Ah, you and your husband don't have horses," I said, noting the dry, horse-apple-free state of

the corral, the rusted nature of the fencing.

“No, that was the previous owners. But ... well, here’s what I want to show you.”

As Hulsey lingered a step behind—picking something up? I couldn’t tell—we rounded an out-building and almost stumbled on a bloody carcass. It was easily identifiable as a calf—torn apart, half-skinned. I didn’t need to get closer to identify the remains.

“*That’s* what I found,” Mrs. McKenna said. “I saw this man in the corral and started yelling at him. I don’t know why, but I took my skillet and came out here, and there it was. What kind of ... primitive being does that to a poor little cow?”

I was about to say, *anyone who buys a hamburger or bites into a steak*, but I was too busy looking at Nicole Hulsey again. If possible, she was even paler than before. “Thank you for reporting this, ma’am,” I said, using my most soothing, professional voice. I could see fresh tracks leading into the brush to the west. “Nicole, why don’t you stay with Mrs. McKenna while I check this out?”

Hulsey had pretended to be a deputy; now she pretty much had to keep up the charade.

The ground was dry, hard-packed, but I could make out the ridges of fresh bootprints, as well as spots of blood. I could picture our fugitive running along, chewing on a raw, bloody haunch. I wondered how hungry you would have to be to eat a cow like that.

And how strong you would have to be to wrestle one from a nearby pasture to this place.

The McKenna ranch abutted another property, this one abandoned, wedged against a wooded hillside and bordered by a barranca.

There was one surviving building, a grayed horse barn open to the sky on three sides. The tracks led toward it—

“Sandoval!

It was Hulsey calling from behind me. I turned left, toward her, away from the barn, just in time to see a man standing in the shadow of the structure.



Well, not a man—he was too short, too thick through the chest. Not a dwarf, but stooped.

He saw me, too, and he honest-to-God shuffled sideways as he tried to hide.

For an instant, his face entered the light. He blinked, as if he'd been in darkness. He was the closest thing to an ape I'd ever seen: heavy brow, super strong jaw, big, square teeth in a mouth that was human even though smeared with blood.

But the eyes *were* those of a young human, and they were wide with fear.

I've only drawn my weapon a dozen times in that many years as a deputy. Part of the reason is luck, part of it is the reality of being a sheriff's deputy in central Arizona, where most arrests are disorderly drunks, battering husbands (and, occasionally, wives), and amateur pharmacists.

But I am officially death on the target range: I reached for the Glock, shouting, "Hold it!"

Either he didn't understand, or, more likely, ignored me. He crashed through the brush, down and through the barranca, then up and over the slope, out of sight.

"Hulsey, on me!" I shouted, and tried to follow. But within a few steps, I was slipping on sharp rocks, hindered by thick brush. I was lucky I didn't go face first into the barranca.

Hulsey's gear was her enemy, too, slowing her down as she tried to reach me. "Boy, this guy is fast!"

"Sandoval, he's getting away!"

"We're not going to catch him from behind." I was out of breath, but I'd already started back toward Mrs. McKenna. "This hill gets steeper and rougher. If we drive around it, we'll catch him coming out the other side."

"Do you think it's time we called for backup?"

I ignored this. "Mrs. McKenna! Thank you for your report. We're in full pursuit!"

And I kept right on going, letting Hulsey catch up if she could.

\* \* \* \*

The moment we were back inside the vehicle, I gunned it away from the McKenna place and back to the road. I drove due west, paralleling the fugitive's line of escape, knowing that five miles ahead I could turn south again.

But I was so angry I was shaking. I pulled over, kicking up a spray of dust and pebbles. "What's the matter now?" Hulsey said.

"I'm not going any further and I'm not making any report until you tell me what the hell is going on here. What was that?"

"Don't do this to me," she said. She sounded about sixteen.

"You're not the issue here! We've got some kind of ... two-legged carnivore running around loose! How am I supposed to catch him if I don't know anything about him? What the hell were you guys doing at Table Mesa?"

She put her hand to her forehead, rubbing it. "Start the car."

I took that as a gesture of surrender. But we had to travel a quarter of a mile before Hulsey could force herself to break security. "Did you ever read *The Lord of the Rings*?"

"I saw the movies."

My answer seemed inadequate, somehow. "Well, the whole history of the story is that Tolkien, who was a professor at Oxford, used myths to sort of reverse-engineer a time fifty thousand years in the past, when several different human races co-existed.

"He studied the stories that people have told for the past five, ten thousand years—stories about giants and trolls and ogres, and tried to imagine what would have inspired them."

"And he came up with ... giants, trolls, and ogres."

"He wondered if giants, trolls, and ogres might not be how modern humans saw *other* hominids."

“You mean, like Neanderthals? Or those little people in Java?”

“Yes.” I felt like a first-grader who had finally mastered the alphabet. “And a fourth distinct type that co-existed with both in the Middle East for several millennia. There may have been dozens of races. Even the Book of Genesis talks about it: ‘There were giants in the Earth in those days.’”

“Fascinating.” I had turned south and was trying to keep my eye on the dirt road while watching the brush for the fugitive. “What does this have to do with Table Mesa and the calf-killer?”

“Twenty years ago, a government agency that should probably stay nameless tried to do what Tolkien did—with genetic engineering. They took scraps of ancient DNA and injected it into an existing human genotype, which was carried to term by a female gorilla. The calf-killer, whose name, by the way, is Kip, is one of the results.”

“You *altered* a human fetus? Is that even legal?”

I slowed down as the road dipped for a wash ... the shallow end of the barranca I’d almost fallen into five miles to the east.

“I have no idea,” Hulsey said. “I had nothing to do with the original decision. I was in grade school.”

“What *are* you, by the way? Because I’m guessing you’re not really with ‘Homeland Security.’”

“What was your first clue?” she snapped. “I’m on loan from the State Department.”

“You’re not even a scientist?”

“They’re long gone, believe me.” She made an exasperated face. “It could have been worse: most of the people at T.M. are from the Government Accounting Office.”

“That’s the nastiest thing I’ve ever heard! Born and raised in a camp? Mom’s an ape! No wonder he ran away.”

“Don’t get too judgmental. These aren’t *people*. They’re simply smarter gorillas. Their kind died out thirty thousand years ago because they couldn’t cut it.”

“Then why re-engineer them in the first place?”

“Someone was looking for soldiers, I think.” Or guest workers, I thought. “They used a forty-thousand-year-old trace of DNA from some skull dug up in France.”

I couldn't help laughing. “So this Kip really *is* a cave man?”

“Yeah.”

“How *did* this guy get loose?”

“How else? The program lost its funding. Zeroed out. Somebody got careless and Kip ran away.”

“Just like that.”

“When a powerful Senator with Creationist leanings finds out you're dicking around with evolution and Darwinism, he can take your money away.”

“What about the subjects? When the money goes away, what happens to them?”

Hulsey's face literally turned red. “The options were brutal. Turn them loose ... or terminate them. You asked what I am? I'm a re-settlement specialist. I help political refugees and former agents make the transition to life in the U.S. of A.”

Okay. But it still wasn't enough to make me like Nicole Hulsey.

\* \* \* \*

I called in a sanitized version of the story: fugitive sighted, deputy in pursuit, no immediate danger to the citizens of Skull Valley. But I didn't feel good about it. I wanted help. I wanted Fennessy's moral clarity in this very cloudy situation. But I had a review coming up. If I couldn't prove I could operate without having my hand held today, then when?

We skirted the ragged edge of the barranca. The terrain on our side was flat, studded with brush. The terrain beyond was rugged, a steep hillside covered with trees. A good hiding place.

“So what was the plan?” I asked Hulsey. “After you prove you can breed a Neanderthal, you cook up a bride? Raise a whole litter in captivity?”

“I guess so.” She was having second thoughts about telling me anything. Tough, I thought.

“And your resettlement plan?”

She sighed. “We had a family in Oregon—retired anthropologist—who offered to give Kip a place to live.”

I turned down my radio and motioned for Hulsey to be still. When it comes to tracking, ears are almost as good as eyes, especially when sight lines are blocked by thick brush. The arrangement of hills along the barranca formed a natural amphitheater—I had thought I heard a distant scraping.

But if I did, it was gone in the jingling of Hulsey’s cell phone. “Goddammit!” she said. She started walking away, making me wonder why she needed privacy.

While she communicated with her mysterious colleagues, I climbed to the bottom of the barranca—where I was assaulted by a smell so unusual that I almost sneezed. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t perfume, either.

Then it was gone, like a puff of smoke. But I felt I had a direction.

When Hulsey appeared above me, I shouted, “This way,” and pointed east through the twisty creek bed.

Hulsey managed to catch up within a few yards. “Does Kip understand fire?” I asked, already starting to pant from the exertion.

“Yeah. Whether his ancestors did, I couldn’t tell you. I’m not an anthropologist.”

I was relieved to note that she was looking winded, too. “Hey, aren’t you going to ask me who was on the phone?”

“Hell, I’m just amazed you got service out here.” I smiled. “If I’m cashing in another truth-or-dare card, I’d rather know what you picked up back at the McKenna ranch.”

Hulsey actually blushed. “Okay.” She pulled what looked like an

arrowhead out of her pocket, only bigger, and bloodied.

“Is that a Clovis point?”

For the first time in our brief, contentious relationship, Hulsey seemed impressed. “Yes! A shot in the dark?”

“I spent two years as an archaeology major, U of A in Tucson.”

“Gave it up?”

“Got my girlfriend pregnant. Very stereotypical, I’m sure—”

I stopped: there was a huge dead oak across the barranca and no way under it. I sniffed. There was the smell again.

I started climbing up the far bank, leading into the hills. “Kip shouldn’t know a Clovis point,” Hulsey said. “They weren’t invented until his people had been extinct for twenty thousand years.”

“Well, they didn’t have the advantage of being raised in a modern prison camp with knives and forks.”

She didn’t answer, too busy struggling to the top. “What’s that?” she said, sniffing.

“Not sure.”

It took us fifteen minutes to ascend the hill. As we did, the brush gave way to pine trees. And there, hidden away fifty yards above me, was a cabin of stone and logs. I signaled for quiet, and pointed. Hulsey’s eyes went wide, thinking, as I did, that we had Kip cornered.

As quietly as I could, I said, “Does he speak English?”

“He seems to be mute. But he *understands*. If you tell him to freeze, he should get the message.”

He hadn’t the first time, but there was no use arguing the point.

Climbing through the woods, I started to feel like an ancient hominid—living in a cave, eating what you found or hunted, fighting with creatures that looked like you, but had strange new weapons. Of course, my Hopi great-great-grandparents had lived that way, a few hundred miles

from here, and only a hundred and fifty years ago.

We clawed up the slope, making enough noise to spook an elephant herd. When my boots hit level ground, I drew the Glock, took a breath—"Sheriff! Come out!"

No answer from the shack. I glanced back to see Hulsey lurking in the pines, then nudged the door open with my knee.

The place was dark, dusty, with a dirt floor. The first sign of recent habitation was a collection of torn wrappers from what must have been a box of Milky Way bars.

And toys! A doll. A See-and-Say. Colored squishy things suitable for a one-year-old.

Someone had also broken a bunch of sticks, probably to start a fire. There were coals in the fireplace. Long pieces of string or thin rope coiled beneath markings on the wall—blood?

Otherwise the cabin was empty ... except for *two distinct sets* of tracks leading out.

"Well," I said as Hulsey joined me, "Kip isn't here. And he isn't alone."

"That's what the phone call was about."

\* \* \* \*

"I didn't lie! He *wasn't* the only one. I kept saying 'them', didn't I?"

"You're not in court, you don't need to play games with language."

She stopped, clearly furious. "Fine. Yes. The project raised eleven ... subjects. Six male, five female. Kip was the oldest at seventeen. One of the females was a year younger. I didn't know until that phone call that she'd escaped, too."

We were following the twin tracks, climbing deeper into what was now a pine forest. To the right, between the trees, I could see flashes of Skull Valley. To the left, more trees and hillside.

I stopped long enough to use the radio, telling dispatch that Homeland Security and I were in pursuit, capture of two fugitives expected

shortly. I wasn't exaggerating by much—the trail was fresh and so was the unique smell, which I now realized was a mixture of blood and hominid sweat. The terrain would only get rougher, and our escaped Neanderthal and his sweetie would be forced to slow down.

“Does she have a name?” I said, between breaths.

“Debbie.”

“It's hard to think of them as animals when you call them Kip and Debbie, don't you think, Nicole?”

“I don't think of them as animals. I've spent the last two months trying to get them fake I.D.s and creating backgrounds, just in case anyone ever asks.”

“But you're carrying a gun.” Her vest had fallen open and I could see a Glock like mine holstered there. “In case of re-settlement failure, unholster and use as directed?”

She shot me a look I frankly didn't like. “Let me guess,” I said, pressing her. “If these two happen to be shot while trying to escape, it will be two loose ends all tied up.”

Hulsey didn't even try to deny it.

Still no signs of movement. But I felt we were close. And I thought about the end game—suppose they fought? Suppose I had to shoot one? If we needed assistance of any kind—medical or plain old muscle—how long before Fennessy and help could reach us? We were a good fifteen miles from the station ... Yavapai County Medical had a helicopter, but the sheriff didn't. Anybody trying to reach us would have to park below and hike up.

Then I thought about Kip and Debbie. What was it like to grow up in a camp ... treated like humans only when it was convenient? They had been given some language, had seen weapons, had no doubt been abused at times, and, I could only hope, received some acts of kindness.

What did they see? What did they think? What did they *want*? Surely not to be shipped off to a farm in Oregon, to rope dogies or bale hay or whatever the hell people did there, while waiting for death?

How long did Neanderthals live, anyway?



What would Fennessy and my other bosses do to me, since there was no way I would be cleared to tell what I knew: the best I could hope for was a pat on the back for “helping Homeland Security” in whatever it was they wanted done.

Suddenly Hulseley bolted ahead. “What are you doing?”

She poked the air in front of her as she stumbled into a higher gear. With her radio and other gear, she clattered like a skeleton making love on a tin roof.

And then she pulled that gun out of her vest.

I was too busy trying to catch up to complain.

She stopped, pointing into the shadows. “There!”

“Hulseley, get down—!”

She was actually sighting the weapon as—zip!—an arrow appeared in Hulseley’s neck.

The most surprised person on earth, Hulseley reached for the ends of the arrow—one was slick with blood—as she choked and stumbled.

I caught her just as Kip showed himself.

Dressed in jeans and a heavy down jacket, he looked much like men I had seen on the res—or in downtown Prescott. Thicker, maybe, hairier, but *human*. Especially his eyes.

And he held the bow on me. Kneeling at Hulseley’s side, I aimed my gun at him. “I’ll shoot,” I said, hoping Hulseley had told the truth about Kip’s abilities.

Blood was pumping from Hulseley’s neck. “Kill them!” she wheezed.

The woman looked a lot like Kip ... smaller, in jeans and a man’s shirt. Did they deserve to be hunted, killed, their skulls left for research? Or to bleach a hillside here?

Hulseley uttered a fatal sigh, blood bubbling from her lips. I’ve not seen a lot of death, but I knew this woman was gone. I wanted to scream at her.

*You raised this boy in a camp! What did you expect him to do?*

I thought of my family—how they had foraged and farmed in Arizona for ten thousand years, only to be pushed aside by the Spanish. And then the Spanish became the Mexicans, and they were pushed aside by the Anglos. And now the Anglos were worried that the Mexicans were coming back.

Didn't we all deserve a chance for a little peace? Didn't these two? They could disappear into the forest and likely never be found—

I turned to Kip. "Run."