

Book #2
IN PACE REQUIESCAT
(Wilderness Concerto)
By Jack Ballard, Jr.

Tagline:

A simple search for a family heirloom in the backcountry leads Dusty down a road to obscure Mayan symbolism, white-collar crime, and murder.

Treatment:

Dusty is approached by Search-And-Rescue supervisor, Mark, at an informal barbecue in town, where he is introduced to striking thirty-something Caroline. It seems she is an heiress of the Vasquez chemical company, and embroiled in a particularly bitter divorce. Her mother has completely alienated herself from the family, and to make the thing nastier, has taken her father's ancestor's ashes in a valuable urn and hid it somewhere in 1000 acres of national forest. Mark asks Dusty if he can get a couple of volunteers to search the area to recover it. "An unusual body recovery," Dusty muses. Before that can happen, the summer drought brings dry lightning storms into the mountains and ignites the forests. The urn is in the burn area. It is now more important than ever that qualified personnel are searching for it. Dusty and Todd search, and, after a couple of close calls from falling trees, find it. Mark tells him to head up to the Vasquez retreat.

Dusty puts it in his jeep and looks at it closely. It is an odd thing, with what look like Mayan symbols around

the rim and on the sides. Creepy-looking. He heads down the road, with Todd following. Another jeep pulls out far behind them. It might be a cleanup firefighter: we don't know. It seems the day for SAR busyness, for they receive a call for a carryout in another part of the burn area. A landowner was looking at what was left of his house, when a "widowmaker" dropped on him. Todd and Dusty go to the site and stabilize the patient. When Dusty gets back, the urn is gone.

Embarrassed beyond belief, Dusty goes to the Vasquez retreat to confess the loss. He finds Caroline shooting handguns behind the pastures at the retreat, coached by her uncle, Sean. He meets the rest of the family as well, her father, who is the CEO and major shareholder in the company, and her cousin Craig, who manages the retreat for the family. Caroline is concerned, but perplexed as to why it was stolen, for that far in the backcountry, it obviously was: everyone on the mission, including air support, is personally known to Dusty and beyond doubt. Is it valuable? Sort of, more for antiquities' sake than real money. It is gold-plated and made by the only people in Mesoamerica who developed the technique: the Purepechan Empire of Western Mexico, who were often at odds with the better-known Tenochtitlan Aztec empire of the Aztecs. How did the family get it? Zach Vasquez, whose ashes they are, was a Texan officer who was recruited by Teddy Roosevelt and accompanied him up San Juan Hill. It was probably part of the plunder. Dusty, in his naiveté, is ready to follow up this intriguing story of American history.

He goes online and finds that the idea of gold plating is associated with the Incan Empire and the Purepechan Empire, and that there must be some association. Is this

proof? Is this worth the big fight over the urn beyond just spite over a long-dead ancestor? He meets with a friend who is a professor of Southwest culture at the state university. Is the urn unique? he asks. The urn is worth only about \$50,000 on the antiques market, for it is not really earthshaking in the archeology area and valuable only for its history, minimal gold plating, and family travels. He exits the archeology building of the institute, followed by the same jeep as before. This time, he notices it and takes a backcountry "short cut." The jeep follows, clearly not trying to be clandestine, but actually chasing Dusty down.

Dusty is clearly the master in the backcountry and he outdistances the mysterious jeep. The road crosses over a stream. He goes through it, but specifically to the right, where he knows that there is a narrow, hidden, but solid bed of rocks while the center is too deep for a vehicle. He spins up the hill and turns quickly to the right. He pulls out his "emergency only" Glock 22 Gen4, stuffs it in his pants, hops out and runs out to the edge of a cliff that has a good view of the crossing. The second jeep drives slowly through – not as foolish in the backcountry as Dusty had hoped – when suddenly the deep hole in the center of the ford drops the front end into the creek. The jeep topples over and Dusty scrambles down the hill. The person inside is spluttering, but seems unharmed. Dusty reaches his hand into the interior and grips the outstretched hand. He pulls the person to the top. It is Caroline's cousin, Craig. He tells Dusty to stay away from the situation and from Caroline. Dusty tries to pry more information, but he stays closemouthed, but not unfriendly. He is rather embarrassed about his wreck and thankful for Dusty's help.

Dusty uses the winch on his jeep and together they wrangle the jeep back onto the shore. Everything's solid, if a bit wet. Dusty builds a fire and Craig and his jeep dry out. Soon everyone's back on the road.

Time passes. The urn seems to be forgotten by everyone but Dusty, but he is casually persistent in his efforts to be around Caroline. They actually become friends after a fashion: her reticent personality doesn't help but only intrigues Dusty. The divorce proceeds: both parties aware and satisfied that it isn't in the other's control. When the gavel strikes, Caroline calls Dusty.

It seems there is a legal action against Caroline's family. The scandal involves a recent method for testing cremated bone material that goes beyond DNA, which is destroyed in the process. A test for lead shows such a high concentration that it seems impossible for Great-Grandpa Zach, whose ashes they are, to have had kids from the time of San Juan Hill. A copy of a will is included in the documentation and it stipulates that any descendants must be blood related to Grandpa Zach. According to the lawsuit, Caroline is not blood relative because he married her great-grandmother several years later.

Who is the instigator? Craig. While not a bad guy, he's not the brightest bulb around, and it's clear that he's been manipulated somehow. Dusty starts digging around, using resources that only his consulting business can generate. He asks his connections, finding out that there are allegations of a Ponzi scheme. It seems he's deep in the scheme and owes a lot of money to the wrong people. Dusty begins to chase down red herring number two. He calls Caroline to tell her he's got proof of Craig's involvement and can nullify any legal action with information that

implicates Craig. She warns him off as it could be blackmail: after all until the final tests are in, she is not a legal heir. The question at this point is legal: is the will original as claimed? Is she an heir or not?

There is a callout page at that moment. Dusty promises her that he'll follow it up, then heads up into the hills. It is routine – just a bad case of hypothermia and a quick carryout. The victim is revived. Dusty gets back to his jeep, parked at the trailhead. Engine doesn't start. It doesn't even turn. Not completely ignorant of basic car mechanics, Dusty does everything he can to start it but it doesn't turn. The place is deserted: Dusty is "cleanup" and the last one to leave. He calls on his radio: scratchy but he raises Todd who picks him up and tows the jeep. The engine is ruined: someone put linseed oil in the manifold: it's wonderful, efficient additive, but once heated will freeze the engine solid when it cools down. Why would anyone want to delay him that few hours?

He gets back to town, to find that all his resources proving the Ponzi scheme have been cleaned up mysteriously. He confronts Craig, who is scared of someone or something. He tells Craig that he need to come clean and drop the legal proceedings: it'll only make things worse and he suspects that statute of limitations run out on something like this, anyway. In that state, it's only six years and it's been 60. Craig is very quiet and Dusty can get nothing out of him. Dusty suspects that it was a poor attempt to gouge money with a scare tactic. So poor, that he wonders why. He feels like a fool, if well meaning, digging into something he knew little about. He begins to think of Craig as the family's "pet bad boy." He asks about the urn, but Craig denies having anything to do with it.

Summer passes and things settle down in the small town. Caroline and her family spend part of the fall in Chicago while Craig resumes his position as caretaker of the retreat: apparently the family is charitable to a fault. The lawsuit fades, as the legalities begin to crumble. Craig's lawyers disappear and miss some significant filing dates. Dusty lets well-enough alone.

Dusty keeps contact through social media, but is too busy to really miss her. It is a bad (or good) year for SAR volunteers. Hunting season has not started and it is already busy with late summer tourists and "colors/elk" viewers.

Bow season begins and almost immediately, there is a callout. A hunter is missing in the backcountry: the details are that he followed some spoor into the dark hours and didn't show up at camp that night or the next morning. Dusty finds that it's Craig, who for all his faults had found in his caretaking a love for mountain sports. They search and his body is found at the bottom of a cliff. There is a severe slice into the thigh muscle, which certainly incapacitated him, presumably making him fall off the edge. One of his arrowheads is covered in blood and there was blood found at the top. Accident, just one of those things? Dusty isn't so sure. There are too many issues that don't add up: Craig's experience and outdoor savvy, why the arrowhead sliced instead of pierced, why so much blood at the top but only in one spot and no artery apparently cut, and other signs. He calls Caroline with the information. He says he will stay at the retreat to keep an eye on it until they can find someone else, to which Caroline assents. Dusty moves in. As he does so, he notices the front door is open. The place has been ransacked, but

not so that you would notice: not the typical trashing of everything, but everything is open, out of place or mismanaged.

She flies out: Dusty is encouraged about their relationship since other family members coming out might make more sense. She and Dusty find the urn while searching through the residence, but in the back yard where Craig dressed his elk and deer. "Such trouble for such an insignificant thing," Dusty muses. "Someone was looking for something, and I'm sure this is it."

Without a residence manager, Dusty offers to continue to stay in Craig's place as long as she is at the retreat. No one else is onsite, as service personnel are hired by from town residents. Dusty is being professional and respectful: Caroline is interpreting that as being "not interested." Dusty suggests they hide the urn in the manager's house, which was already ransacked. An early-season snow begins to fall as night closes in.

At two in the morning, Dusty receives a text on his phone: "noiz n hll." He put the phone on silent, dresses in dark clothes and put the Glock in his belt. The snow reveals a single set of tracks leading up to the main house. The door is unlocked: not forced. He slips off his shoes and heads up the stairs. The house was built in the last decade, so he has no fear of squeaks.

Dusty confronts a shadow outside Caroline's room and pulls the gun. There is a sudden surprise to both parties, then the stranger shoves something he is carrying at Dusty, who falls partway down the stairs. The stranger jumps over him, and after a tussle, flees out the door. There is crunching in the new snow as Dusty gets up to chase, then

realizing Caroline is up there, runs up. A vehicle roars away. Caroline is shaken, but okay.

Dusty radios Dispatch and they send a deputy up their way. It is a long night as the deputy, whom Dusty knows slightly, asks questions about the intruder. Caroline looks at Dusty meaningfully: it is clear that she knows more than she's telling. No, there was nothing missing, she doesn't know what they were looking for beyond just theft. Deputy says that it does happen from time to time in houses left empty. Obviously, someone thought that with Craig's death, there was no one around the house, so they took advantage of it. Dusty knows they took advantage, but he has a sneaking suspicion that it goes way beyond mere local thievery.

He starts digging into Craig's background, beginning with Caroline. He looks at the investors in the Ponzi scheme. Interesting: people still think it's a legitimate investment. Craig had set up a company to invest mutual funds. The problem is there are dead ends in every "investment." Some of the companies never existed. Some of them are ghosts or fronts for multiple holding companies. The threads seem endless. It was incredibly well set up. He continues to try to "follow the money."

Dusty finally receives a phone call to stop "poking around." He stops, but only because he had enough. There is no indicator as to who is behind this, yet. His jeep and his house are broken into. Again, nothing is taken and unless Dusty knew what to look for, it would appear that no one had been there.

An email shows up: short and to the point. "Where is the urn?" It gives a link to a public blog. The blog is popular, on a software torrent site and there is no way of

knowing who might read it or write it. Dead end there. What is it with this urn? The email address is a yahoo address with no indication of origination. He calls a computer friend who tries to track the server down. It is just a computer at a truck stop internet café somewhere in Ogallala, Nebraska. Dusty ignores the email, wondering what will happen.

A week passes. He and Todd go climbing. It is the late hunting season and they hear the rare, but not unexpected shots through out the valleys. As they work up an easy, but fairly safe section of a climb, they hear a shot and the rope breaks. Todd has slightly weighted the rope and he falls about ten feet, spraining his knee in the process. Dusty calls SAR for a carryout: Todd is embarrassed to no end and lets everyone know it. It seems funny to everyone, but Dusty knows the rope break and the shot were related. No one else can really figure out why a well-maintained rope would break for no reason. The rope itself shows a ragged, strained section, but clearly not a clean cut. Is it a factory weakness? A cut from scraping against the sharp granite? Or, even poor maintenance on an old rope? The latter is unthinkable, but Todd is given grief for it.

Another email: "That was no accident. Where is the urn? Next one may be your girlfriend." It is one thing to put one's own life at risk, but not someone else's on your conscience. Dusty confronts Caroline. She knows Craig was involved in some sort of scheme but was afraid of Sean who seems to have initiated it and threatened her. So the emails were an elaborate bluff. They suspect Sean, but there is nothing beyond circumstantial evidence.

He and Caroline examine the urn. Finally, Dusty broaches the idea of emptying the ashes – with all due

respect, he hastens to add. He looks now more closely at the ashes. His lack of decorum shocks Caroline, as he digs his fingers into it and smudges it. Whatever it is, it certainly not cremated bone.

At the bottom is found a slip of paper. Craig had stolen the Ponzi money and hidden it in a safe deposit box. The amount is high, around \$400k in cash, certificates, bearer bonds, etc. That much is obvious, but there are other numbers they can't decipher. The bank is in Hobbs, New Mexico of all places. Why? Obscure town is better hidden. Dusty calls an FBI agent at the Fort Collins office that he knew through Kelly Frey, (see *Rock Dance*) whom he had worked before. He tells them about the urn and the paper, the Ponzi scheme and the money that it generated, but not about Craig's involvement. Their only hope is to smoke the killer out. Caroline insists on joining: some of it family, some sheer stubbornness, some wanting to see it through, and finally, not to do so at this point would tip off Sean that things are blown. FBI sets up stakeouts in Hobbs, Albuquerque and Laramie, although no one expects anything to really happen until Dusty actually retrieves the cash. They also notify their financial research wizards to dig into those shadowy companies and Sean's assets.

They get into Dusty's jeep with the paper and the urn, well disguised and hidden. Taking the forest service road at the back of the property, they head into the boonies to throw off any pursuit. They have about a ten-minute start, before a backcountry, decked out, SUV follows. Dusty suspects they don't have the casual outdoorsman that Craig was following them. They flee, staying about a quarter mile ahead for the next twenty miles. Fortunately, Dusty's SAR experience makes him intimate with the area and he goes up

a difficult road that he has worked out before. The chaser has no problem, as Dusty figured, but he goes through a rocky chasm, up the stream and around a bend. The last mile has given them about a five-minute lead, again, and Dusty levers some rocks from the top of the forty foot deep chasm, effectively barring the way completely. They continue over the divide and down into the next town, thence to Laramie, Wyoming: farther away, but less obvious. Dusty's jeep is conspicuous, but they leave it at the university and take a taxi to the airport. They fly to Albuquerque and take a car out to Hobbs. They've shaken the tail. It must be convincing.

Dusty walks into the bank with his Glock tucked into his belt, hoping a small bank as this has no electronic scanner. He retrieves the money, which is exactly where it was supposed to be and heads to the car. They drive to Amarillo and fly back to Laramie. Nothing has happened so far and they relax. They drive down highway 287, taking the cutoff to Fort Collins. It is not busy but neither is it too remote. As they hit the rolling hills, a sniper hits the windshield of the jeep, and Dusty loses control. He goes off the right, crashing through a windbreak fence and comes to a stop as the jolting at that speed keeps him from keeping hands and feet off the controls. Caroline is bleeding from glass fragments. They are shaken, but okay, and scramble out of the jeep. They hear the noise of a small engine: an ATV approaches in the distance. Where is their law enforcement support? The stakeout is in Laramie or at home. Cell coverage is shaky, but Dusty tries to get a text out, since a call won't hold where they are. He puts the text send on auto repeat, hoping that conditions will change to get out.

Confrontation with Sean: he is not taking the chance that they are recording and says nothing incriminating. No one else is here. Dusty claims the Feds are on their way, but uncle is confident in his plan to put any credibility in his bluff. He wants the urn. Dusty offers him the cash, but he ignores it. Dusty hands him the urn and he dumps the ashes, which are picked up by the wind and spread across the prairie. There is nothing left in the urn but he doesn't seem to care. He seems satisfied with the urn itself.

The thumping of chopper blades mixes with the blowing wind and Sean looks up. Caroline is behind Dusty, and grabs his Glock from his belt and shoots at Sean. His gun goes off as Dusty grabs Caroline and ducks behind the jeep. She has the shakes badly and drops the gun. Dusty picks it up and shoots from underneath the jeep, hitting uncle in the leg. The chopper passes overhead: it is a state patrol doing speed patrol. It fades and is gone, but notes the jeep and the broken windbreak fence. Dusty holds Sean face down in "the position" and considers.

A state patrol stops by: he pulls his handgun and tells Dusty to drop it. Dusty yells his defense but is made to drop it. He tosses it out of reach. Sean tries to get up only to see the patrol officer's gun in his face. At that time, another chopper roars overhead. This one is FBI, who got the text, and picked up the State Patrol's chatter on the radio and figured details.

Epilogue: A month later, and the FBI turns over the urn to Caroline for family's sake. They've run analyses on it and "we'll let you know, and we have it handled." The last we see is enigmatic symbols glazed into the inside of the urn. Dusty's initial research comes in handy. They look

like Mayan numbers with the classic dot-and-bar combination, but there are odd variations that don't seem to fit with the original makers of the urn. There is more to this than a cheap Ponzi scheme.

THE END

Mountain Symphony
(Novel #3, Dusty Palmberg series)

Prologue has Dusty looking at an odd Mesoamerican urn that once contained the ashes of his friend, Caroline's great grandfather. Her uncle was caught in some odd sort of Ponzi scheme, but once he'd had the urn, it didn't seem to bother him that the note Dusty found in the ashes was no longer there. It seems there is more to this than meets the eye.

Caroline has caught the volunteer bug from Dusty and to some extent, even the climbing. She is an expert shot – her outdoor specialty – but others never really interested her until she met Dusty in their search for the Ponzi scheme and family scandal. As a result, she and Dusty have become close friends, although both would deny any romance. She has picked up rock climbing and joined the SAR team, but has absolutely no interest in fieldwork, being more than happy to do radio and logistics support, and field command post work. Dusty on his part enjoys the shooting range at her family ranch and has improved immensely although he'll never be as good as she.

Dusty calls a friend up at the University archaeology department to have the urn analyzed. As he suspects, the writing on the inside is definitely modern. The urn has these markings easily within the last 20 years. The symbols are modern, but in code. They mean something bigger than the Ponzi scheme of before.

It is the last hunting season in November, and the mountain town has settled down after tourist season. This is the last fling before winter when only the ice climbers and backcountry skiers come out. There is a page and SAR is called out: all points bulletin. A hunter has disappeared. Last Known Point was at the 11,000 ft level, and the thought is that the hunter, who was from Atlanta, GA, was just a local "gentleman hunter" whose overconfidence forgot about warm days and very cold nights in the high country. He's a competitor in high-stakes business and as such apparently had more money than brains, according to "shop talk."

Four days later, SAR operations are suspended. The man has disappeared without a trace. It is very unsatisfying for everyone involved. No one likes not finding someone in any case, but there are flags on this one. Todd recalls several other disappearances in the backcountry by experienced tourists, but no one thinks anything more about it. The sheriff interviews the reporting party (RP). The man had no family. It was reported by his company's secretary, who knew where he was and was concerned when he did not return. Mark informs the crew that they had done a missing person's report. There was nothing on the man: single, loner, high-stakes businessman who lived, ate and breathed his work. 18 hour days, occasional golf, but only with clients, and one

weekend a month on his yacht, but oddly never taken out. He never went hunting, but gave a detailed report to his office of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that he claimed was part of his "bucket list."

Dusty's experiences give him the "gift" of paranoia and he is in the habit of looking more closely at odd "coincidences." He starts looking at the news reports of backcountry missing persons over the last few years and plugs in commonalities. The flags: a high degree of MP are in the energy business, all "deputy" VPs or higher, all backcountry disappearances, "justifiable" because all were urban people who were nonetheless active, all over the most rugged terrain, and only a few people and spread apart. There is no real pattern, even after Dusty puts up a map on his kitchen wall and starts putting tacks in it.

In the meantime, Caroline is studying the urn (it's her family's after all) and the enigmatic symbols. The symbols look like something a camp program director would do for a late-night game or treasure hunt. Now that she looks at them, they are not even remotely Mesoamerican, but she never would have noticed that before. As they are in code, not cipher, she has no idea how to break it. She uploads her notes onto a common Dropbox with Dusty.

Dusty goes to the FBI with the information he has and they politely patronize him, "thanking" him for his past efforts. He still has an "in" with his work with Kelly Frey and calls in a favor in Chicago. Reluctantly, Kelly's friend, Brien, promises to look at the conclusions that Dusty has, but more importantly, will keep an eye on Caroline when she comes out.

Dusty says goodbye to Caroline: "be careful." She doesn't know what's going on, but her experience with her

uncle makes her a bit paranoid. Nobody has connected the urn, the disappearing hiker, and Sean. She heads back to Chicago, shutting the house down until Christmas or skiing. The new caretaker is a local, referred by Dusty.

He goes back to the Last Point of the disappeared hunter, very dissatisfied with the results. It's clearly a body recovery, now, and he believes the hunter to be a murder victim. It is more than that: it's a trap for him, luring him into the backcountry. The business man exists, but he is a spec-ops who disappeared, then changed identities and locations. Dusty is still naïve or overconfident (probably both) what with his nature and has no idea what he's getting into. He is well prepared for winter conditions, and plans to spend the night poking around.

Clouds come in with snow. Not a big deal: he's prepared, knowing the changeable weather in the high country in the winter.

In Chicago, Caroline is stubborn and won't leave well enough alone. Dusty has taken her into his confidence enough, and most of his guesses he has uploaded to an online dropbox. He naively thinks it's secure. Caroline has access and starts looking at the evidence.

Dusty runs into human tracks. They are fresh, in the light dusting of snow that's already fallen. He follows them, curious and "accidentally" runs into three men: Paul and his guides, Frank and Aaron at a high-impact area some miles from the trailhead. The greeting is friendly as is normal among backcountry enthusiasts. Everyone's willing to have Dusty spend the night. The three men are out hunting mountain lion, normal at that time of year. Dusty calls in to Mark on "White" channel, who gives an updated weather

report: pretty innocuous, but routine. He understands Dusty's experience in the backcountry, but reiterates his philosophy against going BC alone. Dusty says he'll only be out for the night; just checking the Last Reported location of the missing hunter, but not any of the odd details surrounding him. The three men glance at each other as Dusty's back is turned. He saves his life for the present by mentioning to Mark on the radio an update, including the three he's found: they can't kill him now or SAR and law enforcement would swarm the area. He's off the radio and everything is "code 4."

In Chicago, Caroline is online at a local shop on her personal laptop. She finds a couple of significant pieces of evidence and names start going up. She is way out of her league and hasn't a clue how to hack into the well-known sites of significant people. She is being watched by a person outside the shop. Company man, he doesn't interfere, merely watches. Caroline FBs a geek friend of hers from college. The questions are innocent on top, but he suspects something. She gives him the symbols in a pdf, saying they're a FB Dungeons and Dragons type game, but she's stumped on this one. It's a 'Net-wide resource that's available, but they have to do research to pass on to the next "gate" in the game.

Next morning, Dusty is gone very early. Again, he checks in dutifully and once again saves his life on the report. He bids goodbye to the others. They follow, waiting their chance. They hope it'll be a hunting "accident," reporting it as such and say they "heard" the shot and found Dusty's body. It must be several miles away, though to divert attention from them. They have trouble keeping up with him. They are in shape, but are a few years past optimum spec-

ops condition, which is what they are. Dusty was born, raised and has been living at that altitude for years.

Paul takes a long-distance, but well within his skill, shot at Dusty. He is an expert marksman, but hits the pack, glancing off Dusty's pack's cell phone, which shatters into the back of his neck. Dusty is knocked on his face from the blow of the high-powered load. He rolls into cover without thinking, not knowing what hit him. The snow is bloody and his neck hurts like crazy, but he seems to be okay. He thinks it's a lion or bear, or loose stone, but a shot doesn't immediately come to mind. It finally comes to him that he heard a suppressed shot but has no idea where it came from. It's an "oh crap" moment for the Three, and they scramble.

The snow is still pretty shallow, and nonexistent on the sunward side of the mountains. Dusty doesn't know what's going on, but the only people he knows are the "hunters." He has seen no one else and concludes it is they who are after them. He still doesn't know why. Bottom line: It is Dusty with his years of SAR and backcountry experience against what seem to be mercenaries with special ops skills. They are good, but not great, trackers, and most of their spec-ops life is twenty years behind them. In shape, experienced, but their knowledge is a bit fuzzy. They haven't been called into this kind of duty for years, having been hired to manage more urban VIP protection.

Caroline's geek friend FB back to her. It is hard to find symbols like this, because they are drawings and a search for pdfs and jpegs are impossible. He has a piece of software that identifies basic shapes across the internet, though: they are not symbols in a sense. They are *logos*. Each symbol identifies a company by its logo. The new

question is: what ties these companies together? Why? Who are they?

Dusty tries to circle back to his car, but the Three head him off. He sees them ahead of him down the hill waiting at the car, disabling it. His options are to wait until they leave, then try to make it the fifteen miles of National Forest road to the nearest ranch, or head into the wilderness with the advantages of a local's knowledge of the area, experience in the BC and the possibility of a clear signal for his radio.

He heads into the wilderness, hoping he can lose them. He makes it to a higher ridge and calls out on his radio but can't raise the repeater tower. No one is within SAR range. The cell, of course, is shot. As evening closes in, Dusty manages to find a ridge high enough to get an equivocal signal into town on White. Reception is fuzzy. Mark takes over from dispatch and understands Dusty is "onto something." That's it. Dusty can't risk giving away his position as the Three are closing in. He replaces the depleted battery and tries again. Dusty heads into a narrow gorge, being sure to leave clear sign. As it gets dark, Dusty sets a "man-killer" trap in the gorge, then travels a couple more miles into the night.

It's late evening and Caroline, now into a chai habit she picked up from Dusty, is online in Chicago. She is chatting with the geek. They have compiled a list of the 15 companies on the urn. On the surface, they are all high-tech, mostly dot-coms that somehow survived the purge of the late-90s, but nothing very big. She logs into Dropbox to upload the list and the very interesting BOD each has. There are seven common people when put together into a Venn

diagram. It seems they are also involved in several medium "green" energy companies.

There is a decent looking student behind her: he can see her screen. He pulls out a smartphone and pretends to text, while actually taking a video of her screen and the password she types in. She types in the password. The student stops and packs up for a quick exit.

The storm comes in and Dusty, confident in his gear and backcountry knowledge, heads to the high country the next morning. The Three follow, postholing it in the foot of snow and following the now-faint tracks of their quarry into the gorge. The man-killer springs as Paul steps into the trigger line, hidden cleverly in the snow. It pulls a holding stick from under a large boulder above them, which falls into the three men, narrowly missing Frank but slamming into Aaron. His arm is severely broken and it looks like he's punctured a lung from a broken rib. Paul has no choice but to call in a chopper.

The Company is not happy. Paul has broken the oh-so-inviolable communication silence. In bureaucratic pragmatism, though, they admit that while Aaron is technically expendable, he is a loose end that would come back to haunt them. Paul argues team integrity, which the company does not really care about as far as the mercenaries go. But he does bring up a good point: Dusty is the really loose end and they need winter supplies, something they had not expected from either the weather, the time they had to spend out, and Dusty's surprising skill in the backcountry. The chopper is sent in.

Paul considers leaving Aaron with Frank or even by himself, as he's conscious and able to talk on radio. He's afraid Dusty's spoor will disappear in the snow, but the

squall passes and the snow stops. Dusty gains some distance, but things are against him as long as the clear weather holds.

Mark and the team are still working through things, when they are notified that a chopper has entered NF airspace. It is checked as an emergency authorized corporate vehicle heading into the forest for an injury at an inholding well site. The flight plan and communication with the pilot claims overflight across a short section of NF to skirt around the Jefferson Wilderness, something NF would absolutely forbid. Seems weak as Mark monitors the conversation. He switches to the local airport band, hoping to get more ideas. The chopper heads into the wilderness under radar: first mistake the company has made. Mark's concern is rising. Bells start ringing, but what it means yet, no one knows. He knows that Dusty was okay, checking out the guy, then gets some garbled message about "running". He's off the screen and hasn't shown up yet. Corporate chopper goes in the next day. They can't raise Dusty on the radio or on his cell. Evening of the next day closes in, just as the chopper appears on airspace. Its disappearance was for two hours. It is not an emergency yet.

The chopper has picked up Aaron and leaves after dropping off a package of winter gear. It cannot be more than nominal support without blowing its cover, and the weather doesn't help. Dusty notes its arrival from a distant ridge and its location. He smiles grimly, knowing that at least one of his pursuers has been neutralized.

The other two head up: their determination outweighs their caution. In spite of the weather, Dusty has now evened up the odds a bit. He is decked out as a very

prepared BC survivor, and Paul and Frank are back up to his preparedness level with the gear the chopper dropped. A second front comes in, nominal in the low country but 3 feet or more and blowing snow in the high country. The snow is deepening to the point where postholing is too exhausting and Dusty cannot keep up the pace. Dusty makes emergency snowshoes out of fresh, doubled-back fir branches and he gains on the other ones. Dusty heads up to the Divide.

The geek on FB has hacked into one of the companies. As suspected, it is a front for an energy company that has close ties to the DOE. He follows up with the other companies. Several prominent Congress members are listed, as well. This frightens him. He warns Caroline off, but does not tell her of his suspicions. She hesitates between telling the FBI or keeping quiet. She tries to contact Dusty, but no cell, no social media and no email. It is black on the other end. Now, she's scared.

The prevailing wind is blowing cornices on the ridges. Dusty hesitates, but decides that the snow is too fresh and shallow to be avalanche hazards...for now. He heads up the bowl toward the pass.

Paul and Frank enter the bowl, hidden among the firs. Paul raises his gun, but Dusty is already out of range, a tiny speck among the deepening white. They head up in pursuit. Dusty looks back, but sees nothing as their "cami" coveralls and coats blend in with the snow. A sixth sense makes him sweat a bit. Providentially, the lowering storm brings in a heavy snow squall and even he disappears. Paul and Frank head up to the valley end. It is very slow going for everyone, considering the conditions.

Caroline is definitely being followed. She carries her laptop to the café but merely Facebooks, her paranoia getting to her. Dusty is still not online, so she can't check and there is no answer to her texts or emails. A young man sits down and begins to "hit" on her. Gently, nicely so she has no real excuse to be rude or blunt. Without waiting for an answer he sits down across from her, trying to engage her in chitchat. She is too preoccupied to rebuff him so somehow gives the answers he wants while still checking her FB. There is no answer from the geek. It has turned black, there as well.

He says, "here's my card" and slides it across. She says, mmhm and ignores it. He says, no I really think you should look at it. It might come in handy. He leaves and she looks. It says FBI.

Dawn breaks in the high country. Dusty has dug into the side of the bowl under the avalanche lee of an overhanging rock. He at least is safe. (no glacier so no crevasses or randkluffs). Paul and Frank have found a similar place much lower down, outside of the bowl itself: good enough in the winter to not wander in a night storm. However, the bowl is extremely avalanche-prone. Dusty is at the top and fairly safe, but Paul and Frank have wandered into the middle of the bowl and could be targeted on both sides. It is deceptive.

Paul escapes to the left (south) side and heads up the ridge, convinced they've lost him. He directs Frank up the middle. HQ has basically said come out with a successful mission, or don't come out. The clouds break up. Dusty packs and heads up to the pass itself, which is fairly blown free of snow.

SAR team assembles again. Mark is really nervous about Dusty, now. Clearly there is an issue for an overnighiter with D's experience would be able to make it out, especially as the snow in the lower altitudes, where he was supposed to be, is negligible. That and this maverick chopper...He assigns Todd and Nora to look for Dusty's jeep. The SAR pilot comes in and picks them up. This is a flag to Todd: no one would do a chopper search unless it was of some serious concern. The jeep is found, completely disabled.

The company has digitally found Dusty's "evidence" mostly conclusions and know that Caroline and the FBI have access. They backpedal but fast, trying to do damage control. Paul and Frank are texted in the backcountry that the mission is a bust. They capture Caroline, wanting to know what she knows. They use Dusty as bait, initially, to get her to talk. Dusty is "toast" but they'll pull off their "dogs" if she tells them. The old "we'll let you go if you tell us." Why? Because if we know what the FBI has on us, we can play sleight-of-hand. Such things are in place that damage control is minimal and they will disappear with a minimum of arrests. She really knows nothing more than what they already have from Dropbox and the geek. This panics the interrogators. They know her too well to think that she has had any interrogation training, or that she is too callous to let Dusty die. She has been tailed, very well, by the FBI man, who calls in support. HRT comes in and gets Caroline at the company safe house.

SAR is combing the last seen area that Dusty's initial radio call indicated. Find the campfire and sweep the area. They drop Todd and Nora as hasty team. Snow complicates

things. No sign of anything or any indication of what happened or where Dusty is.

Up on the bowl, the cornices are heavy with accumulated snow, and sun and warming temperatures cause water weight to become worse. Dusty is avalanche-smart and manages to stay away from the worst. Several small, chute-oriented slides occur on the steep section above the pass, but no cornices have broken off.

At the safe house, one interrogator is captured wounded, but alive. They know Dusty is in wilderness because of the chopper evacuation, but now have no idea where everyone is. FBI calls it into SAR for "air search only: Do NOT, repeat, do NOT fly low enough to engage or be engaged!" Chopper heads up the valley to the point of company evac.

Frank is making his way up the bowl. He sees the avalanche danger and radios Paul, who is well up on the ridge. Dusty sees the shadow Frank leaves and knows at least one is on his tail. He's tempted to trigger an avalanche, but his personal as well as SAR ethics prevent him. There is a distant chopper sound, which alarms Paul. Frank can't hear it down in the bowl. Dusty foolishly stands up at the saddle and waves his arms. There is no viable LZ but he's getting desperate.

Todd sees him and radios in. Chopper sits back as far as it can, once the pilot sees the avalanche danger, but it is too late: the sonic waves trigger the already unsteady snowpack. Paul rides the top of it as the cornice underneath gives way, but Frank looks up as the whole mountainside slides down upon him.

Question is does the chopper trigger the other side of the bowl or will this endanger Frank more, not to mention Dusty who is already glissading down to get Frank. Paul,

although superficially wounded, mostly scrapes and such, is heading across the mess of snow and ice to where he thought Frank was: team integrity is thicker than water, so to speak. Since the mission is a bust, he is "professional" and is no longer interested in Dusty as a target. There is a Mexican standoff as they approach, which lasts all of 30 sec.

Then Dusty ignores him pointedly and pulls out his telegraphing hiking pole. Paul joins him. They see Frank's pack and work up from there. Frank is found after a great deal of search, unconscious, but still alive. The chopper's found an LZ less than a mile away. Todd and Nora head up the avalanche swath, both very aware of the impending avalanche danger above them. Although nervous of Paul, all work together for the good of the new "mission:" getting Frank out. They pack the litter and slide him down the wreck, carrying when it gets rough. By that time, a second team has been choppered in.

Paul says goodbye to the unconscious Frank and the chopper leaves. Things are still tense. Paul is armed. So is Todd and Dusty. Paul says that as far as he goes, it is over. There is nothing that Dusty's death wouldn't merely just make things worse and no good will come of it. The Company has called him off.

He leaves and they don't stop him.

Epilogue

Dusty and Caroline are united when she flies out from Chicago. The FBI already has her files and the geek's files. He turned them in. It seems he has been a contractor

for the intelligence circles. The scandal is now hitting the Beltway as the FBI starts collecting indictments.

THE END