

Excerpt from *A SERPENT'S TOOTH*
By Craig Johnson

"Do you think there are more crazy people in our county than anywhere else?"

We drove west of town in the direction of Barbara Thomas's house, and I turned down the air in the Bullet so that the fan would not blow Vic's dress any higher on her smooth thighs as she propped her cowboy boots on the escarpment of the dash.

"Per capita?"

"In general."

I redirected a vent in the direction of Dog, panting in the backseat.

"Well, nature hates a vacuum and strange things are drawn into empty places; sometimes oddities survive where nothing else can." I glanced over at her.

"Why?"

"That would include us?"

"Technically."

She glanced out the windshield, her face a little troubled.

"I don't want to end up alone in a house making lists for my imaginary friends."

I took a left onto Klondike Drive and thought about how Vic had seemed to be given to philosophical musings as of late.

"Somehow, I don't see that happening."

She glanced at me. "I noticed you didn't offer to share your experiences with the spirit world with her."

Vic was referring to the events in the Cloud Peak Wilderness Area that I'd had in the spring, an experience I wasn't sure I'd even fully processed yet. "It didn't seem pertinent."

"Uh-huh."

I gave her a look back and noticed she was massaging one temple with her fingers.

"How's your head?"

"Like hell, thanks for asking."

"You mind if I inquire as to what happened at the Basque Festival?"

She adjusted her boots on the dash and confessed. "I was traumatized."

"By what?"

"The running of the sheep."

I thought I must've misheard. "The what?"

"The running of the f***ing sheep, which you conveniently missed by taking the day off yesterday."

"The running of the sheep?"

She massaged the bridge of her nose. "You heard me."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it; you don't want to talk about your imaginary friends, and I don't want to talk about the running of the sheep." She played with the pull strap on her boot. "Suffice to say that I am not working the Basque Festival ever again."

I shrugged as we passed the YMCA and continued down the hill and past Duffy, the vintage locomotive in the park at the children's center. I took a right on Upper Clear Creek Road, then pulled up and parked under the shade of a yellowing cottonwood next to Barbara Thomas's mailbox.

"We're walking?"

"There's shade here, and Dog is hot." I lowered the windows to give him a little extra air. "Besides, I like to sneak up on my angels. How about you?"

She cracked open the passenger-side door and slipped out, pulling her skirt down. Boots and short skirts—a look for which I held a great weakness. "I'm not exactly dressed for a footrace."

I closed the door quietly and moved around to the front of the truck to meet her. "I thought angels flew."

"Yeah, and s****t floats."

We walked down the steep gravel driveway that ended in one of those old-time Model T garages and the tiny clapboard house that had been the headquarters for the T Bar T Ranch in years past, before housing developments had chiseled the land away. There was an abundance of raised flower beds and hanging baskets, and I had to admit that whoever the angels were; they were doing a heck of a job, especially this late in the season.

Her tarnished gold eyes flashed. "By the book?"

I looked at her lupine smile and thought about how you could take the patrolman out of South Philadelphia, but you couldn't take the South Philly out of the patrolman.

"Look, it's probably some kindhearted neighbor doing the old girl a favor, so let's not scare them to death, okay?"

"Whatever." She started for the porch, and I watched the faded purple dress flounce from her hips as she stalked off, unarmed. "Calling front."

I sighed and started around the back, slipping between the tiny garage and the house. I looked in the kitchen window and paused when I saw a set of legs sticking out from under the open cabinet doors of the sink. Covering the legs were a pair of olive green work pants, the kind custodians wear, and the feet were encased in a pair of heavy brogans without socks.

I shook my head and continued on, wondering which Good Samaritan from the neighborhood this might be. I climbed the concrete stoop that led into the kitchen, pushed the button on the newly rehung screen door, and announced myself.

“All right, mysterious home repair, who's . . .”

My voice plugged in my throat when an extremely thin young man catapulted from underneath the sink and braced himself against the side-by-side refrigerator. I had a few seconds to study him—he was an odd bird, looked like a scarecrow with the oversized pants tied at the waist with a piece of hemp rope and a tan work shirt that also looked to be about two sizes too large. His eyes were the bluest blue I'd ever seen—almost cobalt, wide and deep set. He had a noble prince look about him, but maybe it was the blond, Prince Valiant haircut.

I raised a hand in assurance and unplugged my voice. “Um, howdy.”

The assurance was short lived, and he leapt from the room straight into Vic, who was standing in the doorway leading to the living room and front door. He rammed his way past her, but to give her credit, even with a bloodied nose, she clung to his pant leg as he dragged her along with him. “Motherf***er!”

I made the four strides between us just as the pants slipped from his narrow hips. He darted into the living room, bounced off the room divider, and hurtled through the doorway.

I watched helplessly as he skimmed off the porch and was gone like a sidewinder.

I didn't even bother pretending to chase him, went back into the kitchen, pulled a dishcloth from the stem of the spigot, and dampened it. I got some ice from the freezer and held it out to my undersheriff as she stood and looked at me.

“If I'd had my gun, I would've shot the little asshole.”

“Did he hit you?”

“His knee did when he bowled me over.”

Tipping her head back, I leaned her against the kitchen counter. “I don't think I've ever seen anybody that scared before in my life.”

She held the cloth to her nose, muffling her voice. “Wait'll I get ahold of him again.”

I stretched the cord of the rotary phone over to where she stood, called 911, and pulled the cloth away to examine the damage. It was swelling, but it didn't

look as if anything was broken. "You're going to have a couple of beauties there."

The phone at my ear suddenly came alive. "Absaroka County Sheriff's Office; you have an emergency?"

"Yep, Vic is going to kill a fifteen-year-old kid."

"Sheriff ?"

I listened as Ruby's phone cradle jostled on his shoulder. "Double Tough, is that you?" I never was sure who was scheduled to rotate up from Powder Junction for weekend duty since Santiago Saizarbitoria, one of my other deputies, had run off to visit family in Rawlins for a couple of weeks.

"Yup, what's up?"

"I've got a fugitive on the loose over here on Upper Clear Creek Road, and sure would appreciate it if you caught him before Vic does."

I listened as he scrambled his way around my dispatcher's desk. "What kind of fugitive, Walt?"

"Male Caucasian, approximately fifteen years of age, blond hair, blue eyes with an expression like he's cleared for takeoff—and he was."

I listened as Double Tough started to sign off. "Got it."

"One more thing."

"Yup, Chief ?"

I picked up the pair of pants from the edge of the counter where I'd put them.

"He's naked from the waist down."

For the first time in the conversation, my deputy was given pause. "Well, that should make things a little easier."

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