

## An excerpt from *Found*

"Jesus, Eleanor, when's the last time you ate?"

Eleanor stuffed the last section of the bagel Elan brought her into her mouth, and gulped her coffee. Then she leaned back with her eyes closed in the passenger seat of the rented Jeep Liberty. "Dunno. Althea made something last night, I think. Thanks for breakfast."

"Sure. Maybe we'll even wolf down a sandwich later, upend a vat of soup. I'm not scheduled for duty until four. I checked in at the station, Inez's search is in full force, still concentrated on natural waterways and bodies of water, mostly, between here and Grand Junction. They've been all over the creek, already, Eleanor. What exactly brought you here?"

"Elan, I ..." She turned to look him in the eye. Took a deep breath. "I had a dream."

"Like, Einstein's dream of relativity, or Lincoln's dream he's flying in a coffin?"

Eleanor smiled. Elan lifted an index finger to his teeth to indicate a wedged seed between her incisor and bicuspid. She laughed. Fished it out and flicked it at him.

"So, Colorado Mountain College teaches dream theory?"

"Nah, that's HuffPost. And my abuelita, she was into dreams. What did your dream tell you? What did you see?"

"Steep canyon walls, really flat, and a river, but it wasn't headed to the ocean. It rushed toward nothing, or anyway, nothing I could see. What did you say earlier, about waterways?"

"I said the search team was searching the waterways between here and Grand Junction."

"No, no, what about the waterways...? They were concentrating on natural waterways..."

"Yeah, so? Probably not exclusively, though, given that Jesse was found in a ranch tank."

"Right, of course. But in the dream the water was moving, like a river but not a river."

"A canal? The old ditch in town was filled in long ago. No telling how many canals from here to Grand Junction. Another culvert?"

Eleanor stared at the picture of Inez that Catalina Escalante had given her, at the lake, at the shoreline. At the fish.

"Emmett and I used to take the kids to a hatchery a few miles from here."

A handful of tourists, seniors and parents with small children, pitched pellets at the Kokanee salmon and cutthroat trout in the long, straight raceways at Bristlecone Hatchery. Eleanor and Elan ran the lengths of the channels searching for an obstruction, but there was nothing. Elan asked the Parks & Wildlife technician on duty if there were any outbuildings or storage sheds onsite, and if she'd seen anything or anyone unusual lately.

"We keep the live transport boxes and bags with the oxygen in the shed over there, you're welcome to look. As we told the other officers, none of the staff has seen anything unusual, just parents looking for something to do with the kids besides the springs, the RV crowd, you know. This time of year, we mostly just keep the pellets stocked and run the video on a loop."

Elan found nothing in the shed or in the nearby woods, but Eleanor kept staring at the raceways, the concrete straits squirming with young brown trout and Arctic Graylings.

"Well, Eleanor, even my abuela used to say about her dreams, sometimes a cigarillo is just a cigarillo."

"No, Elan, there's something here, just not here." She looked at a carved and painted forest service-style map, like a child's rendition of a map, in wood. "There

are two more hatcheries within thirty miles of here, one north at Rifle Falls, the other south at Crystal River...let's go north."

Rifle Falls had dozens more visitors than Bristlecone Hatchery. It was a popular birding site, as well as a favorite summer day-hike destination, with a view of the 70-foot limestone cliffs and a cool mist from the waterfalls spritzing hot tourists coming off the paths. Elan thought it unlikely they'd find a living girl hidden on the property among the traffic.

They spoke to the hatchery tech, Phil, who climbed in his golf cart and drove ahead of them on a gravel road past the falls and a series of breeding ponds, to the storage building which housed their inventory of live transport boxes and polypropylene bags.

"Bristlecone PD was here just yesterday afternoon, seemed to me they looked around pretty good. Nobody said anything about anybody coming back out. You two don't look exactly official, either."

Elan pulled his badge out of the stretch waistband of his shorts. "This official enough for you, Phil?"

The two men faced off for a moment before the technician shook his head and huffed. Phil put the key in the lock and pushed. "That's odd," he said.

"Is something missing?" asked Eleanor.

"Well, I can't say anything's missing, for sure, but we counted these vessels just last week getting ready for a transport, and they're not stacked the way we left them. Could be one of our staff reorganized, though, maybe an intern trying to be useful. Or your people moved stuff when they were here yesterday. All I know is, the door was locked, all right."

"So, okay, Phil, the door was locked, but what about that window over there, wide open?" Elan scanned the ground below the window, looking for evidence—a boot mark, a dropped thing.

Phil tugged on the bill of his P&W cap. "Don't know what anybody'd want with some plastic bins, and we keep the oxygen in the office. Probably kids messing around, seeing what they can get into."

"Two police visits in two days, Phil—think about it. We're not about to dismiss potential evidence as 'kids messing around,' when, in fact, we're after a perpetrator who's been stealing kids, wrapping them up in all sorts of materials and leaving them for dead. Material like you got here. You been watching the news, Phil?"

Phil squinted. "Oh, yeah, I've been watching all right. I've been watching enough to know all about your woman friend. Hey, if you're here with her, does that mean you're not official police after all? I don't want to stir any trouble with my agency if that badge

you pulled out of your pants is a fake. Where'd she go, anyway?"

Elan pointed at Phil. "Don't touch anything in this room, Phil, until an investigative squad gets here." He turned and bolted from the storage shed. "Eleanor!"

He caught sight of her at the second in a chain of four ponds, enclosed by drawn curtains of rushes and cattails, tall and sturdy in the noontime stillness, swaying only when a red-winged blackbird swooped between green blades to land and balance on a tight brown spike. Elan trotted to catch up, ignoring clusters of red mites flowering and dispersing in the dust, currents of swallows chasing damselflies in a low-altitude ballet.

"Where are you going? Shouldn't we take the SUV?" Eleanor stopped and stared at the third pond. "Eleanor, those ponds have been checked. They're too shallow to conceal a...the kinds of things we've been finding." Elan tried to see what Eleanor was looking at. A small, man-made body of water, still but for a modest cascade at one end, rolling oxygen into the shallow depths. They stood there, watching the water fall and gently disrupt the surface, before Eleanor bolted down the path toward the main park, toward the roar of Rifle Falls.

"Eleanor!" Elan ran after, watching as Eleanor cut a clean swath through the vacationers up the trail

toward the falls, disappearing around a rocky turn. He ran through the channel of stunned hikers until she came back into view, scrambling over an outcropping of limestone as she raced toward three colossal columns of water. The only sound was the sound of water pouring unimpeded through the air, crashing green and foamy into a boiling pool of itself. When Elan caught up to Eleanor and grabbed her shoulder, she twisted and swung her free arm like a bludgeon at his head. Elan caught it, but was hit powerfully just the same by her feral glare.

With the same force she used to swing at him, Eleanor pulled Elan through the brush and around the edge of the pool. He understood they were headed behind the falls. The noise pushed everything but the fact of it out of his brain. As they approached the nearest column, he held his hands over his ears, but his elbow edged into the path of the water and the force pushed down into the pool, pummeling him under sheets of water bearing down on the surface, exploding into millions of stinging molecules upon contact. He scrambled out and made his way behind the wall, where Eleanor stood in a kind of hollow, too shallow for a shelter. She pulled him toward the next column, again protecting a little concave space, again showing no sign of Inez or any human. As they waded to the third and final column, Elan felt his brain convert the relentless

pounding to something like white noise, if white noise could contain the tenor of violence. In the enormity of the sound he felt a kind of helplessness, almost like peace. His heartbeat slowed as they slipped behind the wall of water, then surged when he saw that in place of the shallow niche of the previous two pockets, the space fissured and broke into a cavern. Eleanor lunged ahead of him. He ducked into the dark recess and could just make her out, on her knees, ripping at something pliable, shaking her head, mouth agape, emitting what would surely have been a blistering scream if he could hear anything besides the rush of water.