

OFF THE GRID

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You Can Hide, But You Can't Run

Blaine C. Readler



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Dedicated to Ken Weidele: the standard upon which friendship is
measured.

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MTB—many late nights, many red pens, never a complaint.

As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities.
—Voltaire

PART I



LILLY

Chapter 1

“See?” Carl yelled. “It just spits!”

The industrial-grade garden hose he held coughed like somebody realizing they’d swallowed piss instead of beer and splashed a spray of water across his face. “Shit!” he cried, wiping his sleeve across his face in an ineffectual attempt to remove the algae smell.

“It’s spitting shit?” Defoe asked drolly, taking Carl by surprise as the grizzled old head suddenly appearing above the edge of the bank. His neighbor had been checking the inlet thirty feet below, and he must have started up the side of the ravine before Carl turned on the pump.

He felt another eruption coming, and he quickly tilted the hose away. When it belched the next spray, Defoe’s balding forehead and thick, gray beard glistened with beads of water. His spare, rumped friend didn’t seem to care as he pulled himself over the bank and stood smiling.

Carl stared back, hesitating. He hated giving the old fart the satisfaction. Defoe just grinned, with his hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans. Carl knew his friend would stand there all afternoon if necessary, so he tossed down the hose and said, “What did I do wrong?”

Defoe nodded towards the hose, which jerked and coughed again. “*Horror Vacui.*”

Carl sighed.

“Nature abhors a vacuum,” Defoe translated. “Aristotle’s rebuttal of Leucippus’ atomic theory.”

Blaine C. Readler

Carl nodded and took a seat on a rock. It was going to be one of those explanations. “The ancient Greeks understood nuclear physics?”

He didn’t mind playing along with Defoe now and then, usually coming away glad of the result if he was patient with the retired college professor. The incurable academic loved sharing what he automatically assumed was welcomed knowledge.

“Not the atomic theory that guides the design of nuclear weapons,” Defoe explained, taking a rock seat for himself, “but not too far off the mark, either. The ancients couldn’t, of course, glean the inner workings of atoms, but Leucippus’s ideas represented a potentially important small step in the right direction. He posited that everything in the universe consists of either atoms—the smallest units of matter—or voids. Aristotle couldn’t abide the concept of the voids, and so set physics back two thousand years.”

“I thought you were a fan of Aristotle.”

Defoe had been a professor of philosophy at UCSD until one day, without warning or explanation, he packed up his office and walked away to settle up here in the Cuyamaca Mountains east of San Diego.

“Oh, I am indeed a fan—a veritable disciple. Aristotle studied almost every subject available at the time, and made significant contributions to most of them. It has been said, and I agree, that he was likely the last person to know everything there was to be known in his own time. On the other hand, nobody’s perfect, and along with his great achievements, he also pulled some real boners. He thought that the Earth was the center of the universe, that mathematics and physics were not related, and even that men had more teeth than women.”

“They don’t?”

Defoe ignored him. “But we digress.”

Carl looked at him skeptically.

“I stand corrected,” Defoe added. “It was I that digressed. What was the question?”

“You were going to somehow connect my busted pump with Aristotle’s phobia for empty spaces.”

The bright old eyes flashed with remembrance. “Indeed! We were talking about why your sprinkler system is not working. Your pump is not busted. It’s just positioned at the wrong end.”

“It’s at the wrong end all right—the wrong end of a long line between here and San Diego.”

Carl didn’t talk like this around Fels. Although she resisted accepting it, the whole transplant away from the city had been her idea, and it upset her when he expressed regret at their extreme removal from civilization.

“Turds,” Defoe disclaimed. “That suburban beehive of tourist frenzy and wireless techno-industry is no place for the likes of you and Felicity. Give it time, Carl. You’ll learn that when it comes to genuine enrichment of life, there’s nothing modern society can offer that the birds and flora don’t offer up for free.”

Defoe was the only person who called Fels by her given name, partly because he was the only person she didn’t correct. “What about cold beer?” Carl countered.

“You know I brew my own.”

“Yeah, but it’s not cold.”

“Wait until winter. Besides, beer was consumed warm for thousands of years before Americans decided they needed to appease the god of refrigeration that they foolishly freed from the depths of hell.”

“That sounds like a contradiction: refrigeration and hell.”

“Not if you contemplate the profundities of thermodynamics.”

“Can we contemplate the profanities of my pump instead?”

“That was profundity, not profanity.”

“I know, and I mean profanity, as in, ‘Let’s contemplate my goddamn pump.’”

The master of ancient and modern philosophy watched him a moment. Carl could almost see the mental gears turning. Defoe would be happy to protract the ambling conversation all afternoon. Human contact was the one thing his birds and trees couldn’t offer up. But Carl wanted to find out if he needed any parts to get the sprinkler system working. It was over an hour to the nearest hardware store at Alpine in Defoe’s old Toyota Tercel, and the first half of that was just navigating five miles of dirt track out to Route 79. Fels was due to return that evening, and he wanted to be back

Blaine C. Readler

before she arrived. He had already missed two promised deadlines to have the sprinkler system working, and now it looked as though he was tripping on a third. The three days that she'd been gone, working with her client in San Diego, seemed to have flown by, even though he couldn't point to one useful thing he'd done for their household. Life happily filled itself if you didn't force your own agenda.

"Did you know," Defoe continued, leaning back into a more comfortable position against a tree, "that refrigeration was first demonstrated in Scotland in the 1740's, and commercially used in meat-packing plants by the time of the Civil War?"

"Bullshit," Carl replied.

He said it as a pronouncement, not an accusation. This was the penalty flag he used with Defoe to end the game.

The professor indulged in a dramatic sigh before pushing himself to his feet. "A pump can only pull water up to about thirty feet in vertical height," he explained, finally divulging the answer. "Above that, atmospheric pressure can't prevent a vacuum from developing in the pipe."

Carl kicked the dirt. He remembered something about that. That was why they put water pumps at the bottoms of deep wells. "I have to move the pump down to the reservoir, don't I?" he pondered.

The reservoir was a fifteen foot-wide pool he'd made to catch and store rain runoff.

"Only if you want your sprinkler system to do more than spit shit."

Carl nodded in resignation. At least he wouldn't need more parts.

Like their relocation to the mountain pine forests, the sprinkler system was Fels's brainchild. The water wasn't intended to feed landscaping, existing or otherwise. In fact, with any luck, the pump would never be activated other than for testing. Global warming had produced a series of dry winters with no end in sight. The open-ended drought was desiccating vegetation, transforming the southern half of the state into a tinderbox. Arrayed across the roof of their self-contained little cabin, snaking around the solar panels, was a network of PVC pipes and sprinkler heads. A thermostat

turned on the pump when the temperature under the eaves reached 140 degrees. Should the thermostat ever trip the pump, Carl hoped that he and Fels would be far away.

The sprinkler system was actually the second line of defense. When the crew of Mexican laborers built the three-room home, part of the deal with the contractor was to clear the Black Oak and Jeffrey Pines within a hundred-foot radius. It broke Carl's heart to see the beautiful old growth come down, but buffer zones were now pretty much mandated for fire safety.

To the busy contractor, though, "clear" meant "cut down." As a result, the squat stuccoed homestead hunkered in the middle of a small sea of felled trees. Carl had toiled many hours the last two months learning how not to cut off his fingers as he worked his new chainsaw clearing the mess. He'd managed to strip most of the downed limbs, and now they were piled in a wilting mountain at the western edge of their half-acre lot. "Ready for a Texas-sized bonfire," as Defoe had dryly observed. Carl wasn't sure what to do about the entangled mass. It was already home to a growing metropolis of forest rats. Eventually it would attract opossums, raccoons, and God knows what else. Fels, always a cooing softie when presented with something mammal and furry, had responded with, "Cool!" Carl, however, grew up in the San Diego suburbs where his mother had waged protracted battles with raccoons hell-bent on harvesting the gooey, aromatic treasures hidden away inside bungee-corded trashcans, and he had suffered torturous flea itches from the opossums that lived under the deck.

No, he'd decided, the massive pile of limbs had to go. But where? They were surrounded on three sides by National Forest land. It was tempting to just haul the debris down the hill, but he imagined Homeland Security helicopters suddenly hovering overhead in the middle of the night shouting federal commands through bullhorns.

"I stopped at the Kumeyaay memorial on the way here," Defoe said, breaking Carl's brooding ruminations.

He looked at the scraggly philosopher and laughed. "You're still nursing that idea?"

The Kumeyaay were the local natives that had lived along the coast and throughout the Peninsular Range Mountains of southern

Blaine C. Readler

California and Baja Mexico for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. One November morning in 1775, a band of Kumeyaay, having had their fill of Spanish missionary forced conversion and slave labor, attacked the San Diego mission, killing the Padre. The Spanish soldiers quartered nearby grabbed their muskets and trotted off to exercise their trained skills, namely killing as many Indians as they could find, and then capturing many more to replace the unhappy slaves who had run off with the attackers. According to Defoe, the local chief Tekumewa led a dozen braves to hold off the guns, swords, and horses while the village women and children escaped. Tekumewa took four bullets before running his spear through the Spanish captain. Defoe insisted that he knew where the tribe had buried their hero leader.

“The Kumeyaay memorial is not an idea,” Carl’s neighbor replied. “An idea is a concept of pure reason not based on empirical experience. I can see and touch the Kumeyaay memorial, therefore it is not an idea.”

“Yeah, yeah. Mumbo-jumbo. Your cairn may actually exist, but the idea that it’s an Indian memorial is . . . well, just that—an idea.”

“Touché. However, the Kumeyaay that told me about it was very real.”

Carl looked at his friend with surprise. “That’s where you got the idea that this rock formation was Tekumewa’s burial site?”

“Not the idea—the information.”

Defoe had talked about the supposed memorial perhaps a half dozen times without divulging this obviously key aspect. The old fart enjoyed his little jokes. Maybe he was just pulling his leg. “Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“I promised the Kumeyaay I wouldn’t.”

“So, now all of a sudden you decide to break your vow?”

“No. Now all of a sudden the old Kumeyaay is dead.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

Carl was silent. Death always shut him up.

“You knew him,” Defoe added.

“I did?”

“The Shell gas station at Old Pine.”

In his mind, Carl saw the image of a brown and wrinkled face. “Sam?”

The old guy hung around the station, pumping gas for the ladies and occasionally cleaning a windshield or two. Carl was never sure if Sam worked there or was just tolerated. He seemed about as far removed from American Indians as Fels. His shiny new black pickup truck was plastered with American flags, and he had a distinctly southern drawl.

Carl shook his head. “Sam?” he said again. “No way was he an Indian.”

“Way.”

Carl blinked at the kid-talk. “How do you know?”

“He told me.”

“And you believed him?”

Defoe shrugged. “Why shouldn’t I? I believe the things *you* tell me.”

“Why would he tell you about the burial site when he was trying to keep it a secret?”

“He gave me the information in trade.”

“For what?”

“Whisky. He was visiting, as he did occasionally, and requested some libation. I told him that he’d have to tell me something I didn’t already know. I was only making light, and was quite taken when he revealed it.”

“You gave whisky to an Indian? Isn’t that, like, illegal?”

Defoe just looked at him through critical eyes.

“Okay, that was pretty dumb. But, why didn’t he want you to tell anybody?”

“Fair question. Either he wanted to avoid having the place desecrated by trampling tourists, or he was afraid I’d find out that he was lying.”

“He took you there?”

“It was the middle of the night. He described it.”

Carl squinted one eye at Defoe and shook his head. “Sounds awfully fishy. How did Sam even know?”

“His mother showed him. For a dozen generations, Kumeyaay mothers brought their sons to the site to pay respect. Sam was thirteen and visiting from Louisiana where he lived with his father.

Blaine C. Readler

It was forty years until he returned, but he said he could have found the burial site again with his eyes closed.”

Defoe looked at him, and his eyes seemed to twinkle with anticipation. “Would you like to see it?”

Carl wanted nothing more than to traipse off with his friend in search of ancient Indian traces, but he had promised Fels about the sprinkler.

“It’s not very far,” Defoe urged. “The exercise will do you good.”

Exercise was not something Carl lacked, living a self-sufficient life far from the helpful machines and infrastructure of civilization. And, he had promised Fels.

“Okay, but I have to be back in less than an hour.”

That should be plenty of time.

It wasn’t far, but lacking a path, the going was slow through the chaparral. After twenty minutes of tripping on roots and fending slapping branches, they broke out into a hilltop meadow. They were well into the National Forest, and this far from the marked trails, any others who might stumble upon it were probably lost and not contemplating the possibility of Indian burial sites. At the very summit, with unfettered views of the Cuyamaca peaks all around, was indeed a pile of rocks.

“This is it?” Carl asked.

Defoe stood with crossed arms, grinning as though one of the great wonders of world lay at their feet.

“It’s . . . just a pile of rocks,” Carl accused.

His cheek burned from the clawing scratch of a thorn. It stung when he touched it. He had worked hard to get here, and it was just . . . a pile of rocks.

“Rocks don’t arrange themselves into piles,” Defoe observed.

“Sure they do.”

Don’t they? he thought.

“Not at the top of a hill. Look,” Defoe directed, pointing at the heap, “they were brought from different locations. This one is granite, this one sandstone, and this one, why, this one is flint. They wouldn’t have left flint without a reason.”

“But, but . . . it’s just a pile of rocks!”

“You’re not understanding Kumeyaay sensibilities. Our world consists of manufactured fabrications. For you meaning is in form and function. The Kumeyaay lived with the Earth, suckled by nature. For them, it was the *place* that held the meaning. The cairn is just a location marker.”

“The cairn is just a pile of rocks.”

Defoe sighed heavily. “You are a musician.”

“Was, you mean. And, I’m not sure playing blues guitar qualifies.”

Just saying the words “blues guitar” made his knees weak with a loss and regret. He hadn’t even played any blues CDs since they’d moved into the clouds.

His friend waved off the detail. “When you follow the musical notation as you play your favorite piece, you surely don’t *need* the notes; they’re just a marker, a reminder. This pile of rocks is the musical notation for the Kumeyaay tribe.”

Carl looked to see if Defoe was serious. “Have you ever seen a blues band play?”

The gray beard wagged. “Not my cup of tea.”

“Most of the songs have exactly three chords. When I sat in with other bands, all I needed to know was the key.

Defoe absorbed this, clearly hearing new and astonishing information. How could anybody teach college and not know this?

“I get the point, though,” Carl said. “I have to get back. Maybe I’ll come again during a full moon and commune with Tekumewa, the brave Kumeyaay chief.”

His neighbor studied him.

“What?” Carl asked, starting down the hill.

“Be careful of what you joke.”

Carl stopped and turned. “You’re not serious. Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts.”

Defoe laid his hand briefly on Carl’s shoulder as he walked past him down the hill. “I reserve my beliefs for matters that involve me. But you don’t need to wait for a full moon to hear Tekumewa’s battle cry.”

Carl watched Defoe make his way carefully down through the tufts of grass. “Oh, come on!” He called and trotted after him.

Blaine C. Readler

“You’re telling me you’ve heard him? A dead Indian? An Indian that’s been dead for over two hundred years?”

His neighbor glanced at him and shrugged. “Probably just a sick coyote.”

“Now you’re patronizing me.”

Defoe laughed. “If you *want* to argue about something, let’s pick a subject that can possibly have a conclusion. How about Voltair’s oft mis-quoted pith, *I may disagree with what you say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it?*”

“How about we speed it up and hoof it back before I get in hot water with Fels.”

“Your house doesn’t have hot water.”

“She’ll boil it with the steam spurting out of her ears.”

Defoe snorted.

After a few moments, Carl added, “Um, no need to tell her what I said about the steam spurting from her ears.”

Chapter 2

Fels' pickup was already parked in front of the cabin when Carl and Defoe stumbled back into the log-cluttered clearing. They had gotten turned around and had followed the wrong dry streambed for awhile. "Perhaps I had better be going," Defoe said. "Marital debate is not my specialty."

"You mean the kind of debate that involves flying pots? Nothing to worry about; her aim is terrible."

Carl liked to pretend that Fels was a hard-nosed slave master, but the charade was obvious since she was anything but demanding. At least, with everybody but herself. She had always been an indefatigable go-getter, coming out on top in an engineering field dominated by men. Her energy sometimes bordered on manic, though, ever since her four year-old nephew's death eleven months ago. Little Tod was her sister's only child, and the he and Fels had been like brother and sister. After a neighborhood soccer-mom, fumbling with her cell phone, ran her giant SUV over him like so much road trash, Fels couldn't work for a week, but then earned a hefty bonus for eventually finishing two weeks ahead of schedule. Thinking that this total focus on work was just the ticket to pull her through, Carl was caught by surprise when she suddenly turned her back on the bustle of San Diego and set her sights on the solitude of the mountains.

"The forest seems to be getting crowded," Defoe observed, nodding toward the house as he climbed stiffly over a log.

A man was returning from the truck carrying a mesh case. He was about to enter the cabin when he glanced up and saw them. "Hey, Carl!" he called, waving with his free hand before continuing through the door.

"It's Rik!" Carl exclaimed.

Blaine C. Readler

What the devil was he doing here?

Henrik, known universally as Rik, was the founder of the company that Fels was working with under contract. GeneTrend did biotech research and had brought Fels in to configure and integrate a new database and quality tracking system. Rik was eloquent, erudite, and rumored to have gathered a pile of wealth from brilliant genetics patents—pretty much everything that Carl was not. He had also been Fels’s fiancé back in their college days.

“A Brother?” Defoe asked next to him.

“Her boss.”

“Seems rather young.”

“That’s just because you’re so old,” Carl replied, starting again for the cabin.

“Handsome devil. Are you sure she’s safe with him?”

“They’ve already gotten that out of their system.”

Defoe was silent for a moment. “I see,” was all he finally said.

Carl stopped and laughed. “I didn’t mean that they’ve had an affair. They were engaged a long time ago.”

“It couldn’t have been that long ago. You kids haven’t been *alive* that long.”

“What are you talking about? I’m older than most of my distant ancestors ever lived.”

“That is true. Interesting perspective.”

“You old goat! I got that from *you!*”

“Ah, yes. In that case, it is a *most* interesting perspective.”

When they arrived at the cabin, Carl heard the familiar swooping guitar pulls of Buddy Guy, one of the last surviving second-generation bluesmen. Inside, he found Rik reading the backside of the CD case. Without a word, Carl strode over and hit the eject button of the player and replaced the Buddy Guy disc with that of a light jazz band. Rik looked at him in surprise when Carl handed him the disc to put back in the case.

“Carl doesn’t listen to the blues anymore,” Fels explained, coming over to give him a hug. Her slim waist always felt like a perfect fit in his arms, and her soft, auburn hair tickled his nose in a way that made him tingle with desire.

“Sour grapes,” Rik declared, nodding slowly in understanding.

Carl had only met the genetics genius briefly a couple of times, but knew from Fels that the wonder-man didn't waste time with the usual social formalities, like basic manners.

"He's just broadening his horizons," Fels replied, going back to the stove.

"In that case," Rik said, eyeing Carl up and down, "I guess it's just a coincidence that he simultaneously decided to give up playing the genre?"

It annoyed Carl when people talked about him as though he wasn't there. He held up his left hand to demonstrate his crooked ring finger. "Not a decision, a consequence."

Unabashed, Rik leaned in to study the damage. "Looks nasty. I'm really sorry about that. Fels said you caught it in a truck or something."

And the thing was, Rik really did seem sorry. That's the way he was: dismissive one minute, and sympathetic the next.

"I was helping a friend move. I jumped from the back, and my wedding ring caught on a bolt. It broke the bone, and nearly tore the rest of the finger off."

"And that's the best they could do to fix you up?" Rik asked.

Carl took a moment to answer. The loss was still almost too much to bear. "Insurance," was all he managed.

"You don't have any?"

Carl couldn't respond. His vision was blurring from tears, and he turned to look out the window to hide them.

"We have insurance through an HMO," he heard Fels explain behind him. "The emergency room patched him up for the night, but told him he needed to see an orthopedic surgeon as soon as possible. As it turned out, 'as soon as possible' was over a week going through the HMO system. By then, the surgeon told him it was too late. The bone had already started to heal wrong."

"I don't believe they can't do anything about it. Christ, it looks like hell."

"Oh, they could make it look better," Carl said, turning back and wiping his sleeve across his eyes. "But they can't make it *work*."

Rik just looked at him, puzzled.

Blaine C. Readler

“To play guitar,” Fels explained. “The ring finger is the most important one for blues. He’ll never have the strength to pull the strings.”

“I see. Shit, that’s a real shame. You really screwed the pooch going with an HMO.”

Silence filled the cabin. There was nothing to add.

Except by Defoe. Stepping in from the doorway, he said, “Fate rarely sets before us a straight path. If it weren’t for calamities, our destinies would be limited by our meager imaginations.”

“Fate?” Rik said, turning. “That’s a load of horseshit. We might as well be talking about alchemy.”

The corner of Defoe’s mouth turned up a hair in anticipation of a worthy adversary. “Okay, let’s. Newton was an ardent student.”

Rik turned to Fels, obviously annoyed. “Who is this guy?”

“Uh, that’s Defoe,” she said, “our neighbor.”

“At your service,” their friend said, stepping forward to offer his hand. “I’m happy fate has allowed us to meet.”

Rik shook Defoe’s hand, but glanced back at Fels uncertainly.

“He’s a philosopher,” she explained, as though this would make everything clear.

At this, Rik laughed out loud. “A philosopher? How quaint. I’d have thought you’d all be dead by now.”

Carl started searching for some way to come to his friend’s defense, but saw that Defoe was smiling broadly.

“Philosophy may die when the last human is obliterated by our sun going nova, but that won’t be for a very long time.”

“Bah,” Rik scoffed, releasing the handshake. “The subject is already dead. It was made obsolete by the only real method of understanding the universe.”

“I presume you mean science.”

“Of course. What else?”

“The human mind.”

“That’s nonsense. The human mind evolved within a specific niche in the environment. It’s designed to interpret the subtleties of the African savannas, not the invisible world of molecules or the beginning of the Big Bang.”

“Designed?”

“You know what I mean—call it ‘structured for.’”

“The same African savanna mind invented science.”

“Of course. But just because a system is created my man, doesn’t mean that it can’t surpass—”

“Rik, you take coffee, right?” Fels interrupted, placing a steaming cup in front of him.

She spoke pleasantly enough, but Carl knew that tone. She wanted to head off a potential argument. Fels was a peacemaker, a blanket thrown over any fire about to flare. It served her in her consulting, as people came to expect meetings to end productively when she was there.

“Uh,” Rik replied, glancing from the cup to his host, “I think this is tea.” He flicked at the paper tab hanging over the edge of the cup to demonstrate.

“No. It *is* coffee. We use dunking bags—no coffeemakers up here.”

“Aha. No electricity out in the wild.”

“We have electricity. We’re off the grid, but we have solar panels and batteries. Not enough power for current hogs like coffeemakers, though.”

“Or clothes dryers,” Carl added. “Or toaster ovens, or refrigerators, or electric fans, or—”

“He gets the idea,” Fels interrupted, playfully bumping him with her hip as she walked by.

Rik looked at the blue flame hissing steadily on top the stove and raised one eyebrow.

“Propane,” Fels explained. “We refill the tanks in Alpine. We’re not back-to-nature hippies, you know. We just wanted to get away from the crazy rat race of the city. This place is all we could afford.”

Carl wasn’t about to contradict her, but for the money it took to buy the land and build the tiny cabin, they could have picked up a small house in Alpine or Pine Valley. He didn’t mind, though. The cozy three-room cottage was the first home they could call their own. They had a bedroom just slightly larger than their king-size bed, a small laundry room where Carl washed his clothes by hand in a tub, and the main area—what they called “The Great Hall”—which served as kitchen, dining area, living room, office, and library. Carl took showers outside under a sun-warmed bag he’d picked up

Blaine C. Readler

at a marine store. Fels took her showers at her gym in San Diego. She also took her clothes to a dry-cleaner in the city.

At first, she had washed her own underwear in the tub, but reluctantly let Carl take over so they would have more time together when she was there . . . which wasn't very often. The original idea was that Fels would work from home, using a satellite Internet connection. It had seemed logical at the time, but unlike software coding, systems engineering consisted mostly of meetings, and despite the high-tech nature of Rik's company, teleconferencing was not yet a welcomed substitute for a communications channel consisting of ten feet of table-top.

"Self sufficient," Rik declared dramatically. His grin suggested that the very idea was indeed hippy-realm.

Fels didn't seem to catch the sarcasm. "Exactly! Off the grid. Independent of the fragile structure of modern civilization."

Rik nodded in mock-serious concurrence. "Except, of course, for propane."

She shrugged.

"And shampoo," Carl chimed in. "And food, and soap, and batteries—pretty much everything on the shelves of the market at Pine Valley."

Fels stuck her tongue out at him.

He heard a rustling in the corner. The mesh case that Rik had carried in was actually a cage, and Carl could see, lurking near the back, brown fur and a pink Mickey Mouse ear. "What is it?" he asked.

"A ferret," Fels replied, going to the cage and opening the door. She lifted the limp animal carefully out and hugged it to her cheek, comforting it with affectionate cooing. "Isn't she just the cutest thing you've ever seen, honeybun?"

Uh-oh. Whenever she called him "honeybun," it meant she wanted something. He'd never seen a live ferret before, and he knew the reason: they were illegal to own in California.

Fels held the animal out for Carl.

"You're just trying to get me attached to him," he accused, taking the warm bundle of fur.

"He's a she. Her name is Lilly."

The ferret's small eyes were dark and shiny, hiding the little soul within, but Carl had the distinct sense that the animal was studying him intently, as though gauging the degree of friendliness, or perhaps competence, of the hands now holding her.

"Lilly," he repeated, letting her settle into his lap. A pungent smell of musk assaulted his nose. "Whew! You sure don't smell like a flower."

"Her real name is Lilake" Fels explained. "She's not supposed to smell like a flower, she's supposed to smell like a ferret—and I happen to like the smell. It's the smell of natural life."

"So is a skunk, but you wouldn't ask me to hold one."

"That means she has active musk glands," Defoe observed. "It probably means she hasn't been spayed."

"How do you know about ferrets?" Fels asked.

"My father kept one when I was very young. He used it for hunting rabbits. He would put the ferret down one hole, and we grabbed the rabbits in nets as they fled out the other ones. It was quite effective."

Defoe watched the animal thoughtfully as Carl softly rubbed the top of its head with apparent satisfied effect. "Lilake," the old philosopher mused. "That sounds familiar somehow."

"So, Defoe," Rik challenged with an earnestness that surprised Carl, "how *does* a philosopher make a living these days?"

The old man looked up from his contemplation in surprise. "This one subsists on a professor's pension. How does a founder of GeneTrend make one?"

Rik slung one arm lazily over the back of his chair and sipped his coffee. "Bio-tech is lucrative. Pretty much any company with the word 'gene' in the name is guaranteed venture funding. We even have grants from the NSF."

Defoe absorbed this a moment. GeneTrend was pronounced JEN-a-trend, and Defoe had probably never seen it written. "Genetics research?"

"That's right," Rik confirmed.

"Like genetically altered corn?"

Rik snorted. "Not quite."

"They do brain research," Fels offered. She sounded proud; happy to be working in such an advanced field.

Blaine C. Readler

Defoe's eyebrows shot up. "Impressive. Can we look forward to improvements?"

Carl knew his friend was joking, but Rik's scowl made it clear that he didn't find the question humorous.

"They're working on brain disorders," Fels explained. "They're trying to find cures for Tay-Sachs disease and Alzheimer's."

"Cures," Rik interjected sharply, "are a long way off. We're still trying to nail down the genetic mechanisms involved."

"They recently hired Dr. Weinermach," Fels added brightly.

"A doctor who makes hot-dogs?" Carl quipped, realizing that the joke was falling flat. "Are we supposed to know who this was?"

"The Nobel Prize winner for medicine?" Rik added a little impatiently.

"Indeed," Defoe said. "Something to do with bacteria that live in the stomach, as I recall."

Rik shook his head impatiently. "Brain research. He won the Nobel Prize for brain research."

"Ah. Well that would, I suppose, impress the Nobel selection committee a bit more than unicellular organisms that take up housekeeping in your gut. My hat's off to you, my friend," Defoe said, sweeping his hand dramatically across his forehead as though doffing an imaginary fedora. "You'll probably make a lot of money, but in the end, what matters the motivation when the result is vastly improved lives?"

Rik just stared at his coffee as he stirred it round and round.

Carl wondered why the entrepreneur didn't accept Defoe's olive branch. He decided to break the logjam. "So, what's up with Lilly? Ferrets aren't allowed in California, you know."

He caught Fels's eye with that, and she stuck her tongue out again.

"They're only banned as pets," Rik explained, seeming to come alive again. "Lilly was going to be used in the research."

"Was?" Carl queried. "As in 'We changed our minds'?"

"That's right—technical reasons."

"Don't they usually use, like, guinea pigs?"

Rik shrugged. "Guinea pig brains are too simple."

"And a ferret's isn't?"

His guest stared at him impassively a moment. “Not at all. A predator is always smarter than the prey.”

Carl laughed. “So what does that say about people?”

Again the impassive stare. After a couple of seconds, though, the corners of Rik’s mouth turned up in a smile. “I guess it means that we’re at the very top of the food chain.”

“Not,” Defoe offered, “if you happen to meet a polar bear in his own territory.”

Rik’s grin broadened. “Ah, perhaps the polar bear would weed out just those at the bottom of the top. The top of the top—the people who still carry useful survival genes—would end up eating the bear.”

Defoe met Rik’s grin with his own, relishing the sword-play with the worthy argument partner. “You would consider the ability to kill a polar bear still vital to survival? What about the ability to pick the right derivative investment? Or perhaps negotiating the best salary?”

“Nah,” Rik countered, flicking his thumb as an umpire might do to send the batter back to the bench. “So what if you have a fancier car, or a bigger house? How does that help your survival? Maybe if you need to drive away very fast from the enraged husband of your mistress. Or maybe you have more rooms in your house to hide in when he comes after you.”

“How about your children? They’ll get a better education.”

Rik laughed out loud. “No offense, professor, but I don’t see how a Harvard degree assures that your genes will be better propagated. First of all, it’s my experience that rich kids are more likely than the middle class to find an early grave from drugs and alcohol. Secondly, it doesn’t take a college education to beget offspring. Statistically, it’s the poor who are populating the Earth and diluting the gene pool.”

Defoe sat back in shock. “Heavens! You sound like the Nazis. There’s a word for what they were trying to do—”

“Eugenics, and that’s *not* what I’m talking about. I said dilution, not trait selection. Dilution simply means that the gene pool is getting larger and larger, and without fitness selection, those genes favorable to survival are being spread more thinly.”

Blaine C. Readler

The philosopher took a thoughtful breath and shrugged. “Then, what do you suppose *are* legitimate survival pressures in the modern world?”

The founder of GeneTrend raised both hands, palms up.

“You think there are none,” Defoe concluded.

Rik raised one eyebrow.

“What about times of economic distress?” Defoe offered. “What if we were to have another Great Depression?”

His adversary chuckled. “Do you seriously think that the poor were pruned during the Depression? For every baby that starved, two more were born. In any case, FDR’s bailout made sure the Depression didn’t narrow the gene pool.”

Defoe shook his head in amazement. “Well, bully for us then. We’ve managed to escape the bloody tooth and claw of nature.”

Rik grinned in knowing victory. “On the contrary. This is the very root of the problem.”

“What problem?”

“The extinction of humans.”

Defoe continued to smile, but his brow was furrowed. “Extinction is quite an extreme condition. Do you know something we don’t?”

“I know nothing more than any thinking man would—should—see. Evolutionary pruning has ceased in the human species, while population growth continues exponentially. Survival genes are spreading too thin to recover—too thin to manifest a viable compliment.”

Defoe shook his head again. “I still don’t see the problem. If there are no longer natural dangers to humans, why worry about survival genes?”

“Who said there would never be dangers?”

“What? Platoons of marauding polar bears invading from the Arctic?”

Rik shrugged again. “Perhaps an invasion of conquering space aliens.”

Defoe’s eye narrowed. “War,” he stated. “There’s your great pruner of mankind.”

“Indeed,” Rik agreed. “Unfortunately, modern wars affect only tiny proportions of the species.”

“Un-*for*-tunately?”

Carl could see that Rik was blushing. It was an event to note.

The genetics entrepreneur looked at his watch and got quickly to his feet. “I should be going. It’s a long drive back.”

Carl looked from Rik to Fels. “You’re going back already?” he asked her.

“No. Rik drove his own car. He left it back at the fire road.”

“I didn’t want to puncture my oil pan,” Rik explained.

“You could have come all the way,” Carl said. “The clearance is at least—”

“Not for a Lamborghini.”

“Oh. I see.”

Carl suspected that Rik also wouldn’t want to get it dirty.

“I’ll walk you back,” Fels said. “It’s only ten minutes.”

Rik jingled his keys as he waited for Fels to grab her jacket. At the sound, Lilly’s head jerked up in alarm. An instant later, she leaped from Carl’s lap and scampered behind the kitchen cabinets.

“Damn!” Carl cried. “How are we going to get her out from behind there?”

Fels laughed. “Don’t worry. She’ll come out when she gets hungry. Boy, Rik, she really doesn’t want to go back with you.”

“Wait a second,” Carl protested, catching on. “We’re keeping Lilly?”

Could this have been the only reason for Rik’s visit?

“Just for a while,” Fels assured, still chuckling.

“Why? We should have talked about this.”

“It’s my fault,” Rik explained. “I coerced Fels by letting her hold Lilly a moment.”

“I still don’t understand. Why is she staying here?”

“Oh, don’t be such a poop,” Fels reproved. “There’s a GAO audit next week, and Lilly would be a pesky glitch.”

“It’s a technicality,” Rik said. His tone indicated that the whole situation was too trivial to waste time on. “I don’t want to screw around with the permit procedures.”

Fels furrowed her brow. “I thought you didn’t want the auditors to start digging into the research you were using Lilly for. In fact, I thought—”

Blaine C. Readler

“I don’t care about that. It’s a permit thing. Come on, Fels. Let’s go; it’s going to get dark.”

“Wait a minute!” Carl cried. He felt like he was being bowled over. “It’s not legal for her to be here—permit or no.”

“Look, it’s not a problem . . .” Rik started to say testily. He stopped and took a deep breath, as though gathering his patience. “It’s the sort of law that’s only enforced when somebody complains,” he said calmly. “It’s only for a while. In any event, GeneTrend will take care of any problems, including any fines in the exceedingly unlikely event there’s trouble.”

Fels gave Carl her puppy-look. Before he had a chance to protest further, Rik ushered Fels out the door. A second later the door opened and Rik’s head reappeared. “Just to be on the safe side, though, don’t tell anybody about Lilly,” he said, and the door closed for the last time.

Carl listened to their footsteps and muffled conversation fade into the distance.

“It seems as though you are a daddy,” Defoe said.

Carl heard a slight scuffle, and Lilly’s head poked out from around the corner of the cabinet. She blinked once, and Carl could have sworn that the ferret nodded.

Chapter 3

“I wouldn’t take Rik’s views too seriously,” Fels said as she rinsed another dish and handed it to Carl to dry and place on the shelf. “He used to talk like that all the time. ‘What the human race needs,’ he’d say, ‘is another good plague.’ He hasn’t gone off in a long time. You have a talent for pulling the stuffing out of people, Defoe.”

“Well if that’s what they’re full of,” their friend replied, “then it should be pulled out.”

He had stayed for dinner, and was playing with Lilly while his hosts cleaned up. “Lilake,” he said, lifting the ferret’s head with his knuckle under her chin so that he could look into her eyes. “That’s quite an impressive name for such a little animal.” The wrinkles of the time-worn face huddled in thought. “I know I’ve heard it somewhere before.”

Lilly opened her little sharp-toothed mouth and let out a squeaky bark, as though encouraging the human to continue.

“It means trouble,” Fels said.

“Really? In what language? Old Norse perhaps?”

“The language of a moody boss. I was waiting for Rik in his office and happened to see some of her paperwork with her real name sitting on his desk. He gave me a good lecture about sticking to my assigned tasks instead of snooping around. The guy may be a genius, but sometimes he acts like a brat on a tantrum.”

Carl smiled to himself. That was exactly the sort of description he liked to hear about a former fiancée, particularly a handsome former fiancée who drove a Lamborghini.

Fels reached up to gently touch Carl’s face. “Where did you get this?”

He flinched “Ow! Uh, I must have scratched myself on a branch.”

She moved her hand and found another wound, then poked a finger through a rip in his shirt. “What were you doing? Wrestling a cougar?”

“No. We, er . . . Defoe, uh, took me up the ridge to show me a pile of rocks.”

Fels just looked at him with one eyebrow cocked.

“It was really cool,” he lied.

“Did you get the sprinkler system working?”

“Um, we found the problem. Actually, Defoe found it.”

“So the answer is no,” she confirmed calmly.

“Yes. Yes, the answer is no.”

She didn’t say anything, but instead put the leftovers in the plastic containers they would hang outside overnight where the cold mountain air provided refrigeration.

Sometimes he wished she’d get mad and yell at him. It wasn’t like she was going to sulk. In five minutes she’d be over it and that would be that. But Carl still felt guilty, like he was always letting her down. She was so damn efficient . . . and ambitious. She didn’t try to make him feel guilty, but he couldn’t help it. *He* made him feel guilty.

“The rock pile was inspiring,” he insisted. He knew that he was shoveling manure, but he wanted her to believe that he really did do something as important as the task he’d promised. “It’s the burial site of an Indian warrior chief. It’s, like, hundreds of years old.”

Defoe just sat watching him with a wry smile. The old turd knew exactly where he was trying to go with this.

“Really?” she said, carrying the plastic containers to the door. “It does sound inspiring. You’ll have to take me sometime.”

“You don’t have to patronize me, you know!” he yelled as the door shut behind her.

In fact, she probably hadn’t been. He had a special knack for recognizing opportunities to kick himself in the gonads.

After a few seconds of hollow silence, Defoe remarked that Tekumewa wasn’t a warrior chief.

“Eh?” Carl said, distracted by his own brain fog.

“Tekumewa’s clan hadn’t waged tribal war in generations. That’s why his defiance was so heroic.”

“No shit,” Carl snapped.

He tried to tell himself that he hadn’t wanted to make it sound so rude, but the the truth was that he had. “Sorry, Defoe.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. It appears as though I’ve gotten you into trouble.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad—”

Fels opened the door and came back in. She walked up to Carl, put her arms around his neck, and gave him a big smooch.

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?” he asked.

“You were never in trouble,” she replied. She then leaned down to give Defoe a kiss on the cheek. “Goodnight, our gallant philosopher neighbor. It’s been a long day and I’m going to go and curl up in bed and read my Bible. You staying the night?”

“Thanks,” Defoe said, “but these old bones will groan and moan all the long hours if they don’t find their own bed. Besides, I might miss an opportunity to observe a pack of coyotes executing a nocturnal hunt.”

“What if it’s you they’re hunting?”

“Coyotes are essentially cowards. I’ll intimidate them with a rousing speech from General Patton.”

“The days are getting shorter, you know. Are you sure you can find your way in the dark?”

“Set aside your fears, my dear. I could navigate these woods blindfolded . . . and drunk. Carl, shall we get drunk?”

“Okay,” Fels said. “But you be careful.”

Carl set a bottle of Jack Daniels on the table, and sat down. When she had closed the bedroom door, he said in a low voice, “We got lost a hundred yards from the cabin in broad daylight.”

“Ah, but we lacked the advantage of being drunk. So let’s get to it. What’s with Fels and the Bible? Was she joking?”

“I’m afraid not. She’s gotten onto a Catholic kick lately. She’s all agog about saints and angels and being in a state of grace, whatever that is.”

“A state of grace is when you’ve inched a bit closer to Christ and act as though he’s in your heart and mind. I suppose the next

step would be to speak in tongues. But I thought Fels was protestant. Fundamentalist, in fact.”

“She was raised that way. They didn’t even have a church. That would be too ostentatious. They met on Sundays in their living rooms—no minister; they each took turns leading the service. When I met Fels, she considered me gilded with earthly trappings, and my family is Lutheran, for Christ’s sake.”

“For Christ’s sake indeed. Catholicism seems to lie at the far end of that metaphysical teeter-totter, though. How did she end up there? Purely academic interest?”

“I wish. Did you know her nephew was killed nearly a year ago?”

“She told me. She seemed heartbroken.”

“Devastated would be more like it.” Carl leaned in close so that he could talk just above a whisper. “Her father decided they needed to help little Tod into heaven, so they held an accounting session.”

Defoe shook his head in bewilderment. “Something tells me this did not include balancing check books.”

“It’s an accounting of sins. The idea was that at three years old, Tod was too young to have experienced the encounter with God necessary for a born again conversion. They believe that’s a fundamental requirement to get into heaven. So they had sort of a séance. I’m not sure I really understand this, but the idea was to confess his sins for him. Somehow by laying them out on the table for God to see, Tod could be forgiven for them.”

Defoe’s brow wrinkled skeptically. “God needs these sorts of things to be laid out for him?”

“It’s not *my* religion; I’m certainly not going to try to defend it. Anyway, this sin accounting thing happened just days after Tod was killed. Fels was still reeling from the shock, and to sit and listen to her whole extended family go on and on about all the bad things the poor little guy did was too much. She stood up in the middle of the séance and just walked out. She hasn’t talked to any of her family since.”

He leaned in even closer and continued in a whisper. “I thought she was through with organized religion all together, but a few weeks ago she brought home the *The Passion of Christ* on DVD.

It was pretty intense, and a few days after that she stopped at the library while in town. Defoe, she has a stack of books on Catholicism sitting next to the bed in there.”

His friend stroked his beard thoughtfully. “You’re thinking it’s somehow connected to her nephew?”

Carl shrugged. “I’ve asked her about her new Pope kick, but she just brushes it off. The truth is, she’s always studying something or other, so it’s not like it’s unusual for her to bring books home.”

“Hmm. You know Catholicism is replete with methods for maneuvering one’s way into heaven both before and after one dies. By their doctrine, when you die, there’s not an instantaneous reckoning about your heaven-worthiness. Even after you depart your earthly body, there’s still a chance to navigate away from hell.”

“The idea of Purgatory,” Carl suggested.

“That and the funeral Mass itself. An important component is the prayers for the repose of the deceased. After all, why would you bother praying for their eternal tranquility at this point if the disposition had already been determined at the time of death?”

“So, you’re suggesting that Fels may still be worried about Tod’s soul?”

“Let’s say that I don’t think one can leave behind a lifetime of belief by simply standing up and walking out of a service, no matter how bizarre.”

Carl sat looking at the bedroom door, behind which his wife of four years lay contemplating ideas as foreign to him as Defoe’s occasional ramblings on Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Return. It was disconcerting. He’d thought he knew her so well, could almost predict what she was going to say sometimes. Now he imagined these new mental excursions carrying her farther afield than any business air travel. Suddenly, like a train engine latching securely to a line of cargo cars to form a new functional identity, Tod’s death and the relocation to the Cuyamaca forest linked together in causal synergy. For Fels, the move into the wilderness was an escape. He heard in his mind’s ear, as though the memory had been hiding, waiting for the right time to step forward, something she’d said about their apartment in San Diego a few weeks after her nephew’s death: the rooms were “full of Tod.”

“You okay?” Defoe asked.

Carl glanced at him, realizing he’d zoned out. “Yeah, sorry. I was thinking how the whole move out here was a flight from tragedy.”

“Fels’s or yours?”

“Mine?”

His friend pointed at Carl’s ring finger.

He hadn’t really gotten used to the crippled finger yet; the sight of it still shocked him. He sighed. “I was thinking that our little mountain cabin was Fels’s refuge from memories of Tod, but you’re right, it’s also my own personal refuge.”

“Also from memories?”

“From a future.”

Defoe watched him with calm intent. “A future that was lost when that ring got caught inside the truck?”

He nodded. His eyes blurred from tears. He didn’t want Defoe to see, so he got up and carried his cup to the sink.

“We all face an infinite number of futures every day,” his friend observed, making a point to poke at a callus on his palm so that he wasn’t looking at Carl.

“It’s not just the playing I miss; it’s the whole community. Some people have the idea that musicians are competitive. There’s always at least one guy in every crowd with a jumbo-sized ego, but in general it’s mostly . . . well, a community. At least for the blues and roots-rock crowd. If you’re not playing, you go to watch others who are, and more often than not they ask you to sit in for a set. I’ll tell you, sometimes I miss it . . .”

He stopped, knowing he’d start weeping otherwise. He kept his back to Defoe and used the washrag to clean out his cup for the third time.

“I know *exactly* what you mean,” Defoe said exuberantly. His enthusiasm contrasted the quiet contemplation of the minute before. “When I first moved out here, I desperately missed the interplay with my colleagues. The local squirrels are sufficiently argumentative, but they consistently fail to carry their logical structures to a satisfying end.”

Carl knew that Defoe understood his embarrassment and was providing a diversion. The old philosopher was a good friend.

A slight thump from outside, followed by a scraping and rattling, interrupted his thoughts. He opened the kitchen door, and there, in the light cast from within, sat Lilly on her haunches looking up at him. Next to her was one of the plastic containers Fels had hung for the night. As though she'd been waiting for him, the ferret grabbed a corner of the container in its teeth and dragged it into the kitchen. A length of the string Fels had used to hang it trailed behind.

Carl glanced at Defoe, who watched in surprise, and when he looked back down, Lilly was working at the lid, prying the corner up with her sharp little teeth while holding the rest of the container in her front claws. The lid gave way, and she pulled it off, and then, instead of diving into the tasty contents, sat back on her haunches and peered up at him.

"I'll be damned," he said. "You're into mischief already."

Somehow it seemed more than that, though. The animal's behavior seemed so . . . confident, as though Lilly had just executed a well-rehearsed trick.

"She is apparently waiting for permission to proceed," Defoe observed.

Carl reached down and picked up the end of the string. Lilly had chewed it through. She must have gotten outside somehow and crawled up the porch post to where it hung from a beam.

"Well," Carl said, "you've worked hard enough; you might as well dive in."

Instantly she jammed her head in the container and the sounds of smacking and chewing emerged.

Carl glanced at Defoe.

"Fels's boss wasn't exaggerating," Defoe said.

He was referring to what Rik had told Fels before leaving. He'd explained that Lilly had been selected for her intelligence. "Don't be surprised," he'd said, "if she seems to be a step ahead of you sometimes."

"I was going to warn you," Defoe went on, "about letting her outside. My father's ferrets could get distracted and wander off, never to be seen again. It appears, though, that Lilly is too sharp to fall for that."

“Still,” Carl said, watching as Lilly held the container in her paws as she licked the sides, “it won’t hurt to keep her in the cage for now. She’s obviously already found a way out of the house.”

“And speaking of a way out,” Defoe said, getting stiffly to his feet, “I had better be off. My pride will be severely battered if I don’t find my way home before sunrise.”

“What are you talking about? You’re not even a half mile away.”

“That’s a half mile as the crow flies, or as the competent woodsman walks. It could be a distance measured in leagues after I get thoroughly lost along the way.”

“What about navigating blindfolded?”

“Ah, I’m afraid it’s your fault, Carl, my friend. I was expecting to get sufficiently drunk, but now I am burdened with a useless sober mind.”

“Well give me a call when you get home. If I don’t hear from you in an hour, I’ll send Lilly out with a cask of whisky strapped to her neck.”

Phone calls were a well-worn joke, as neither of them had service.

When Carl turned from saying his good-byes, he found that Lilly had disappeared, leaving the empty container lying on the floor. He wasn’t sure what to do. Defoe thought that she was too smart to wander off and get lost, but on the other hand, his father’s animals had apparently done just that. The safe thing would be to put her back in her cage, but he wasn’t sure how to find her. She might already be outside, venturing off into the wild night.

“Lilly,” he called softly.

He didn’t want to yell too loudly in case Fels was already asleep. He carefully opened the bedroom door to check, and found that Fels had indeed nodded off with the Bible lying open across her chest. Next to her on the blanket lay Lilly.

“How the devil did you get in here?” he whispered as he reached over to pick her up. She seemed to give him a sullen look as he lifted her gently off, but she didn’t resist.

Getting her into the cage was another matter. She obviously valued her freedom, as demonstrated by new scratches on his arms. Once inside, though, she accepted her temporary fate and lay

watching him with what he imagined might be the look from a felon unjustly imprisoned.

Carl cleaned up the kitchen, slid a bowl of water in Lilly's cage, and fifteen minutes later slipped quietly into bed next to Fels. She stirred, moaned a little, and without waking, flopped one arm over him as she did every night. He smiled into the darkness, and lying motionless so as not to wake his wife, he too soon slipped off into a deep slumber.

* * *

Carl woke to Fels shaking him.

"Come on, hon!" she whispered urgently. "Wake up!"

He opened his eyes to darkness. "What's the matter?"

"Shhh!" she urged. "Do you hear it?"

He did. It sounded like a squeaky door continuously opening and closing, or maybe a baby's weak cry.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. It woke me up." Her grip on his arm tightened. "You went with Defoe to visit an Indian grave."

She said this as though in accusation.

No! It couldn't be. That was ridiculous. But he could well imagine the cry to be the pitiful wailing of a lost soul. Goosebumps crawled up his arms. At first he thought it was outside, but as he listened, it seemed to come from the Great Hall, just beyond the bedroom door. He rolled away from Fels and dropped his feet to the floor feeling for his slippers.

"What are you *doing?*" she whispered in a hiss.

"Going to see what it is."

He sure as hell didn't want to, but he was the man.

"You're staying right here," she said, grabbing his arm.

"What? We'll just lie here the rest of the night listening to it? It's probably just a . . . bobcat." That didn't sound good. "Or a raccoon. I heard they can cry like that at night."

"Well I'm going with you then."

He padded to the bedroom door and the sound suddenly stopped. Fels came up behind him and he could feel her breath on his arm. "Get back, behind the door," he ordered.

"No," she whispered.

He knew it was no use arguing. He turned the knob and slowly opened the door. Feeble light from the waning moon lit the Great Hall enough to show silhouettes of furniture. An animal could be crouching anywhere in the room and he wouldn't know until it sprang. He took a tentative step forward but froze at a rustling sound from the far window. A *sproing* of taut wire was followed by the same cry that had woken them, now distinct and imminent. "Oh Christ," he declared aloud, and flipped on the light.

"What is it?" Fels asked behind him.

He pointed at Lilly's cage where the ferret stood on her hind legs looking at them, her front paws clasping the wire of the cage.

"Ahh," Fels cooed, going to the cage and opening the door. "She's lonely."

Lilly stepped out into her waiting arms and she hugged the animal to her breast.

"If she had been sleeping," Carl said, "she wouldn't be lonely."

"She can't sleep. She's probably scared out here all by herself." She cuddled the ferret and rubbed her cheek across the soft fur. Lilly seemed content, having gotten exactly what she was whining for.

"I was the ones that was scared. I say we hang her cage outside in a tree and let her know what scared is really all about."

Fels gave him a dirty look. "Don't listen to daddy," she said into the ferret's fur. "He's gets grumpy when the world doesn't revolve around him."

"'Daddy?' In the first place, Lilly is not a child, and in the second place, if I can't have the world revolve around me, then at least I can have a ferret revolve around me . . . by her tail."

"Don't listen to that bad man," she said, holding Lilly in one arm and picking up the cage with the other. "He's insane," she added as she returned to the bedroom.

Carl sighed and followed.

Fels placed the cage on the dresser, which meant that Lilly was about three feet from Carl's head when she cried out again ten minutes later. He had just fallen asleep, and he sat bolt upright at the sound. "*Damn* it!" he shouted. "What the hell's the matter with her now?"

“Oh, calm down already,” Fels reprimanded, turning on the light. “You’re going to scare her to death.”

She opened the cage door and took the ferret in her arms again.

“I’m not going to scare her to death; I’m going to strangle her to death.”

Fels turned out the light, and Carl felt the bed move as his wife got in. “She may not understand what you’re saying,” she said in the dark, “but she can sense your tone.”

“Good.”

He lay listening, but only heard the sound of Fels breathing. “I’m in bed with a ferret.” he observed into the night.

“Go to sleep.”

After a few minutes, he felt Fels jerk slightly, and then her breathing became deep and regular. He lay quietly, wondering why he couldn't sense the animal that must be there somewhere. After some minutes more, he finally felt a stirring, and then soft steps as Lilly picked her way carefully to the foot of the bed. The slightest thud, no more than a feather pillow dropping to the floor, was followed by the faint sound of the ferret moving about through the room. A dim sliver of vertical light indicated that she'd nosed the door open, and the faint scabbling sounds faded into the Great Hall. Seconds later, he heard a distinct scraping and rattling. He knew that ferrets were world champions at navigating tight places, and he realized that Lilly was climbing out through the wood stove chimney that they'd installed, intending to someday buy a wood stove to go with it. This must have been how she'd gotten out earlier to retrieve her dinner.

If Lilly was lonely, it obviously wasn't for human company.