

LIGHTNING STRIKES a juniper on the ridge above Andrew Wright. Thunder claps, and the scudding clouds open. Hailstones the size of marbles—*shooters*, he thinks—pummel him as he clammers up the red sandstone boulders toward an overhang. At five-foot-ten and 170 pounds, he doesn't quite fit under the outcropping, and so he hunches there, the hail splatting and careening around his cross-trainers.

The hail turns to rain, large cool drops driven by the wind. Steam rises from nearby boulders. It's mid-afternoon in August in the Mojave, the temperature 108 on the desert floor and ninety-seven, even in the shade, at this altitude in Red Rock Canyon. Rushing water stains the canyon's sandstone and limestone walls deep red and dark gray. Almost instantly waterfalls, some five hundred feet high, spew silver and red torrents toward the canyon floor. Below him, the gravel washes are already filling. The pungent odor of wet desert rock and creosote permeates the air. And the rain douses him, soaking his khaki shorts and Yankees T-shirt.

The storm has come on suddenly, a wall of black advancing from the west, obliterating the sky. Wright is alone, high on the far side of the canyon, a good three miles from the pine tree where he left the motorcycle he'd rented on the

Strip in Las Vegas. He wanted to get away from the glitz—the grandiose architecture, the garish video billboards and jacked-up music, the stench of cigarette smoke in the casinos, and the constant electronic chitter and occasional sirencing of the slots. And he certainly has escaped. His producer and his camera crew knew about the motorcycle, but they hadn't a clue about where he was headed. Nor, really, had he. And now, though he is fit enough to have hiked up the dry creek bed far beyond the trail, he's not absolutely certain he's ready to slip-slide, drenched and dehydrated, along the treacherous, flooded wash back to the picnic area.

He notices a shadowy indentation above him to his left and in his mind traces a path toward it. Though he waits a couple of minutes for the storm to slacken, stronger gusts blow hail and rain at him horizontally. He scrambles over a boulder the size of a pickup truck, slipping twice and scraping his knee. He eyes the cleft in the rock still eight feet above him, nudges the toe of his shoe into a slot in a sheer limestone block, and stretches to grab for any purchase at the top. His fingers find a handhold exactly where he needs it, and he clutches tight, pulls himself up, turns on his stomach, and slides backward into the narrow three-foot-high mouth of a cave.

Lightning arcs and slashes from the blue-black clouds. Thunder roars. Water cascades down limestone and sandstone cliffs. Murky water roils down the wash. He takes a deep breath and inches farther into the mouth of the cave. On the wall to his right, a strange petroglyph, far different from any he's seen before, depicts a fierce beast like a winged lion with pointed fangs and extended claws. Above the etching are three concentric circles, and below it is a line like an arrow. He runs his hand across the rock. The

carving doesn't look all that goddamned old. *What is this place?* he wonders. Glancing over his shoulder, he can see only a dark shaft angling downward into the rock. This spot can't be seen from the trail or the creek bed, and, if he's wrong about the age of the petroglyph, he might well be the first human to see it in centuries.

Would this place make a story? A counterpoint and, frankly, an antidote to the stuff he's been putting out the last couple of days? The last eleven years, really. It's not that *The Wright Stuff*, his three-minute feature on ABC's *Good Morning America*, is all that bad. In fact, it's pretty goddamned good, having improved a lot over the years. Won an Emmy two years ago. But does any of it really matter?

Take these four stories in the series the New York suits are calling *The Fight to Save Vegas*. First, the already aired pre-bout promo on the upcoming Championship Fight ballyhooed as the super-event that will revitalize the city's failing economy. Except that it's not exactly clear that anyone cares about heavyweight boxing anymore. Then, today's story, *Ghost Hulks on the Strip*, about the bankrupt and deserted 63-story Fountainbleau, the scratched second Trump Tower, the struggling Sands Corporation's stalled St. Regis, Caesars Palace's suspended Octavius Tower, and the seriously scaled down CityCenter. The piece was visually terrific—the crew got just the right shots of all the abandoned construction cranes hovering atop the unfinished buildings. But after Maggie cut his line about the cranes looking like raptors stripping flesh from the skulls of ruminants, there wasn't really all that much of him left in the script.

Tomorrow's story features Benjamin Kupferberg, the owner of The Tahitian, the newest, most expensive hotel-casino in Vegas and an underfunded gamble that the world

will, despite the recession, throng to a dazzling and excessive pseudo-paradise here in the American desert. Wright has a say only on the fourth piece. And this spot might just be it, except that all those network suits won't get it. He can already hear them: "A red rock canyon, Andy? A sandstone cliff? That's not fucking Vegas! And who gives a rat's ass about petroglyphs, anyway?"

A cool, almost dank, breeze rises from the darkness behind him, sending a chill through him despite the afternoon heat. He takes another deep breath, exhales slowly, and cranes his neck. Is that a faint glimmer deep in the shaft? As he wriggles farther out of the rain onto the interior slope, another shiver ripples between his shoulders. He hears—or thinks he hears—a hum, something mechanical, above the drumming of the rain. Squatting on his drenched cross-trainers, he shifts his weight and leans away from the outside light. *What the hell is this place?*

Suddenly, he's sliding down the slope, plummeting into the darkness, his fingernails raking the loose rocks tumbling with him. The shaft steepens, and when he tries to slow his descent by jamming his left foot against the side wall, his ankle twists and his right shoulder and head bang against the other wall. And then he's sprawled at the bottom on a heap of stones, breathless, the taste of blood in his mouth. He lies there for a time before muttering, "Shit. God-fucking-damn-it!"

Sitting up, he catches his breath and takes stock. He's in a cavern, mostly dark, light filtering forty or so feet along the shaft he's just skittered down. His nose is bleeding, and his upper lip is cut. He runs his tongue across his teeth, relieved that none has been knocked out. His forehead is warm and damp, but he isn't sure whether it's blood, sweat,

or rain. His head aches, his elbows and knees sting, and his ankle throbs. He tilts his head back to slow the bleeding from his nose.

All in all, though, he's not seriously injured. In fact, despite his utter solitude, he feels more embarrassed than hurt. He's just biffed, goddamn it. Miguel and Arnuz will be doubled over in hysterics, and Maggie—he doesn't even want to think about her reaction. Sniffing and coughing, he pulls his iPhone from his pocket. The phone is dead, its face shattered. Not that it matters. There'd be no reception anyway, none at all in this part of the canyon much less under a goddamned mountain. As he stows the broken phone, he spits blood into the darkness.

He rolls off the pile of stones and stands tentatively. Dizzy and disoriented, he holds his arms out. The luminescent dial of his watch, a Timex that has despite the rock-ride actually kept on ticking, seems to hover in space. Although he turns a full circle, he touches only the wall below the shaft. Stooping and craning, he looks back up the shaft and mumbles, "Shit!" It's a goddamned chimney. The first thirty feet rise at close to a seventy degree angle. It'll be a slippery, difficult, even excruciating climb back up.

As his eyes adjust to the darkness, he looks for the shimmer he first noticed. Off to the right, a yellow stain spreads from a crack in the rock. And the mechanical thrum echoes, though he can't tell its source. Maybe there's another, easier way out. He creeps carefully, hands ahead and waving slowly so that the watch's dial cuts figure-eights in the darkness. Fearful of slipping down another drop he can't see, he scuffs his feet along the cavern floor, edging toward the pale smear. He turns once, to make sure he can still make out the shaft opening, and continues until the toe of

his cross-trainer stubs a wall. His hand grasps a rough, cool corner. When he slinks farther, following the contour of the wall, there's more light ahead. And that sound, too—the rumble of a motor?

He shuffles through the dimness, the passageway narrowing around him. The light emanates from a slit in the rock, and there's definitely a mechanical drone. He has to turn sideways and stoop to continue inching forward, anxiety beginning to well in his chest, stealing his breath. He leans toward the illuminated crack in the wall. Then, sensing something, he turns his head abruptly—but there's only darkness behind him. When he peers through the bright slit, he sees another cavern lit by three hanging bulbs. Five metallic canisters, each a little bigger than a fifth of scotch, line a table covered with bright red material.

He crouches lower and gapes through the crack to make sure he isn't imagining the scene. Three of the canisters are set parallel to the back edge of the table, and the other two form a perpendicular line from the middle canister toward the table's front. Each canister has a series of stenciled yellow letters and numbers—some sort of earmark. Below the ID, painted in glossy white, is the image of a human fist, the fingers clearly delineated. Hanging from a hook driven into the cavern wall behind the table is something that looks a lot like a NASA spacesuit.

And then he again senses movement behind him. Something brushing down his neck. The petroglyph of the beast flashes in his mind. His upper arm stings. A bite? Spider? Snake? He swipes his shoulder, rises, begins to turn, and stumbles backward. Swirling dizziness spins him about. And darkness.

2

LIGHT, IMPOSSIBLY BRIGHT. And a shadow, a moving shadow. Though his eyes blink open, Andrew Wright can see nothing but shapes in this deluge of light. The shadow speaks, the words unclear. And then the shadow, bending over him, blocks much of the light. A woman. He's lying on his side looking up, and behind her is a vast emptiness.

The woman's words begin to take form. "I have water. Lie still, but lift your head." Her voice is calm, firm, authoritative without any hint of imperiousness. Her English, though clear, has an odd lilt, a subtle difference in inflection. "Here. Drink."

His lips sting, but the water's cool in his parched throat. As he drinks greedily from the half-gallon plastic bottle, he breaks abruptly into a sweat.

"Not too much at once." She takes the bottle, pours water onto a white cloth, and returns the bottle. She mops his forehead, dabs his cheeks and chin. He guzzles more water as she wipes his neck.

When she lifts the cloth, it's brown with grime and dried blood. There's a metallic taste in his mouth. And an acrid smell. Himself? His memory suddenly returns—the storm, the petroglyph, the shaft, the dark cavern...the second cav-

ern and the canisters. “What...?” he croaks. Coughing, he clutches her wrist. “Where the hell...?”

“Slow down,” she says as she pries his hand from her arm. “You’re going to be okay.” He tries to get up, but she presses firmly on his shoulder. “I’m a doctor.”

When he rises on his elbows, two flies whirl around his head. His t-shirt, shorts, and shoes look like he’s been mud wrestling, but the ground around him is dry, hard-packed, as though it rained hours ago. He’s in the partial shade of a scrawny piñon pine next to a narrow road. He squints at a dusty black Land Rover Discovery standing ten yards away. Beyond the dirt road, the sun is low over barren hills that stretch to the horizon. In the other direction, the nearby Joshua trees and sandstone shards are suffused with light. Off in the distance, gray and red stone walls rise toward North Peak.

“What’s your name?” she asks as she shoos the flies away with the white cloth.

“Andy,” he answers. “Andrew Wright.” She’s wearing a blue work shirt, wheat jeans, and brown hiking boots. She’s around five-foot-six, nicely built, if a little wide in the hips, in her late-thirties, perhaps forty.

“Were you caught in the storm?” she asks as she brushes loose strands of black hair behind her ear.

“Yes.” Guzzling more water, he thinks of the cavern. “No. Not really.”

“Hiking?” One of the flies returns, and she snaps the cloth at it, striking it in midair.

“Yes.” Nodding back toward North Peak, he realizes he’s down the *other* side, the western slope beyond the canyon.

She rips open a cellophane bag and swabs his forehead, lip, and nose with a gauzy tissue that smells of disinfectant.

Both the odor and the tingling help clear his head. Her hair is black, naturally wavy, and her face is pale, oval, pretty. A prominent nose and a radiant smile. Her eyes are worlds unto themselves, darkly bright and deep.

“With friends?” she asks. There is nothing judgmental in her voice. She seems as though she’s simply taking a medical history.

“No. Alone.” Those eyes: What did the poet say, windows into the soul?—he can’t quite remember.

“Without water?” Perhaps, now, there’s just a suggestion in her voice that she understands all too well that Innate Male Idiocy—IMI, he muses—might be the primary symptom, if not the disease. When he doesn’t answer, she adds, “You’re a long way from any hiking trail.”

“I guess.” He doesn’t, in truth, have the foggiest god-damned notion how he got to this piñon pine. The last thing he remembers is...the sting. He reaches over and feels his arm, but there’s little soreness and no swelling. In fact, it’s no more sore than the rest of his body, which feels like, well, he’s fallen down a chimney. Did all that really happen? he wonders. He almost tells her about the cavern and the canisters, but it all seems so strange. Maybe he was hit by lightning, and he’s been wandering, dumbstruck and stupefied, through the desert. He peels the dried blood and dirt from his lower lip and says nothing.

As she screws the cap on the water bottle, she asks, “Do you think you can walk?”

Taking her free hand, he gets to one knee before he tastes bile. The desert undulates for a moment, then settles. He takes three deep breaths and hobbles to his feet. His left ankle won’t bear much weight, so he lays his arm over her shoulder as she wraps her arm around his waist. With her

support, he limps over to the Land Rover. She opens the passenger door for him, hands him the water bottle, and helps him into the seat. As she walks around the front of the Land Rover, he looks up and down the road and then back at North Peak—and he's still pretty perplexed by what's happened to him. He's on the goddamned *other* side of the mountain.

In stark contrast to its dusty exterior, the Land Rover's interior is spotless. The back seat is down, and the cargo bay is filled with five more water bottles lined next to a series of blue plastic tubs containing neatly labeled and arranged medical supplies under clear plastic lids.

"I've got a bike...a motorcycle," he says, "the other side of..." He points back toward North Peak and Red Rock Canyon.

She laughs, her teeth stunningly white and her eyes aglow. Still laughing and shaking her head, she reaches back into the cargo bay and slips the cloth, tissue, and cellophane bag into a ziplock garbage container. As she puts the Land Rover into gear, she says finally, "You have a choice, Andrew Wright—your hotel or my clinic. Or, if you want to risk public humiliation, I suppose I could drop you back at the Bureau of Land Management visitors' center. But I'm not sure your viewing public would be amused to see you in your current condition."

"But..." He knows she's right. He's going to have a tough enough time trying to explain things to his crew, much less anyone else. "You know who I am?" He's not really surprised; it's been years since he's been able to go anywhere without being recognized, even if the gray creeping along his temples gets brushed out each morning in the make-up chair. He's had to keep that youthful blond hair and adven-

turous good looks for the camera even as the crow's feet and the gray have begun their inevitable encroachment.

As she drives along the dirt track, the Land Rover trails a plume of dust. The stereo is on low—playing Chopin, the second piano concerto. "I get up early, Andy," she says. "And though I don't often watch the tube, I occasionally turn it on just in time for *The Wright Stuff*."

He can't quite tell if there is a note of irony in her voice; it seems as though she might again merely be stating a fact without any judgment. The western sun is hot, even through the tinted windows, and he takes a long swig of water. After nestling the bottle on the floor between his foot and the gear box, he wipes his damp hands on his grimy shorts and asks, "What are you doing way out here?"

"On West Canyon Road?" She gestures with her thumb over her shoulder. "I was checking on someone. A special case I see regularly." Still smiling, she adds, "And you're more than a little lucky I spotted you." She taps his watch band. "The glint caught my eye."

He looks more closely at her profile. She is, he thinks, in some way he's not used to, beautiful—the exact antithesis of a brassy Vegas showgirl. Her chin is firm, her lips full, her nose long, and her eyelashes lush; her hair, spilling over her neck, is luxuriant, so deeply black it seems almost gold in the sunlight. "Thanks," he says. The more he thinks about the cavern and the canisters, the more uneasy he is. Something happened up in that canyon, something that doesn't make sense and definitely isn't right. Not the goddamned *Wright Stuff* at all. But he's still genuinely thankful she found him, and he doesn't even know her name. "Thank you so much," he says. "I really mean it, Doctor..."