

Consumed with his thoughts, Ben hadn't realized he was close to Wakan Lake. He led Dakota down the well-worn trail past the towering boulders, then steered him to the grass-covered embankment. After he swung out of his saddle, the pinto moved to the water's edge and lowered his head for a drink.

Ben pulled a whiskey bottle from his saddlebag and took a long swig. As he wiped his mouth with his sleeve, a brisk wind ruffled the tall pines surrounding the lake, their deep green boughs reflecting on the surface of the water. Something bright orange floating high above the trees caught his eye. The reflection wavered in the water, then disappeared.

Ben searched the sky overhead. He lowered his gaze to the lake again. Must have been the sun's reflection on the water.

But there ... Ben squinted his eyes ... across the lake, an orange balloon-like object drifted over the treetops.

"What in blazes is that?" Ben grabbed his horse's reins and mounted. "Come on, Dakota, let's find out."

Winding through the dense forest of pines and underbrush, he reached the area where the object had come down. Tipping his hat off his forehead, he peered up through the heavy needled branches.

The deflated material hung high over the treetops, attached lines tangled around broken limbs. An image clung to the tree trunk. His gut tightened, his focus blurring in disbelief.

Who or what is that?

Dakota tossed his head, pinning his ears back and snorting. Ben gripped the reins. "Easy, boy," he murmured, stroking the horse's neck. He backed the horse a few feet to get a better angle at the form dressed in a strange get-up. The dark, dome-shaped head appeared to be looking down at him. Seconds passed before the image moved one of its arms and removed a glove. It lifted part of some kind of helmet to reveal eyes glaring at him.

"Thank heavens! I was hoping someone would find me."

Stunned, Ben tried to wrap his mind around what he was seeing and hearing. Whatever or whoever it was, it spoke English. He dismounted and looped Dakota's reins to a nearby sapling, then squinted skyward again. "Where in the hell did you come from?"

"Excuse me? Where do you think? I parachuted out of a plane."

He craned his neck, trying to get a better view.

"Somehow, I overshot the drop zone."

The voice sounded female. Suddenly off came the helmet and long, brown hair spilled over her shoulders. Yep, definitely a woman.

“Okay, cowboy, quit gawking and help me down.” She grasped lines connected to her suit and unhooked them. “Sure was a bumpy ride through these trees but glad to be in one piece.” She leaned over the limb she was standing on and held out the helmet. “Catch!”

Ben barely had time to react, throwing out his hands just in time to catch it. Frowning, he inspected it, mystified by its shape and light weight.

“Damn good G3 helmet, brand new. Scratched up now but saved my head and face from being ripped apart.” The woman flashed him a wry grin, two distinct dimples framing her mouth.

Pretty face, he thought. Shaking his head, he dropped the helmet on the ground. Hell, what was he thinking? All this was mighty strange and he ought to ride out of here before it got stranger.

“Not sure if I can climb down by myself.”

Ben heard the anxiety in her voice. He swept off his hat and raked a hand through his hair. Before he could change his mind and listen to common sense, he tossed the hat on the ground, unbuckled his gun belt and looped it over the pommel of his saddle. He untied a coil of rope from the saddle strap and hung it over one shoulder. Leaping up, he grabbed a heavy branch strong enough to hold his weight. He swung a leg over the limb, grasped a higher branch and one by one, climbed up to balance himself just below the woman. Tall as he was, he was now face to face with her.

She held out a hand. “Angela Moore,” she said. “Sure glad you rode by when you did.”

Not sure what he expected, but certainly not introductions. He wiped his hand on his jeans and took her hand, noticing a strange black band on her wrist. “Ben...,” he replied, “Ben Herrington.”

Angela tried to sound brave, but she was sure the man felt her hand tremble.

“The sooner I getcha down from here the better,” he said, peering down. He pulled the rope off his shoulder, coiled it around an overhead branch and through the slip loop.

He was about to tie the end of the rope around her waist when she stopped him. “No, I’ve repelled before, no need to secure the line around me.”

Angela wasn’t sure she trusted him. Dark shadows rimmed his steel-gray eyes. Black, shaggy hair framed the hard planes of his face and a dark, scruffy beard covered his jaw. Worst of all, the distinct smell of whiskey permeated his breath. Still, in her present predicament, she couldn’t be choosy. Besides, all the protection she needed was tucked inside her jumpsuit pocket.

She grabbed the rope and secured her hands around it. After making sure the rope hung straight and wasn’t caught in lower branches, she gave Ben a thumbs up and wrapping her legs around the rope, slid her way down.

With her feet planted back on Mother Earth, Angela let out a whoop of excitement. No matter the terror-stricken last half hour of her life, it was her fiftieth jump and she'd made another safe landing.

Her next thought was Gaby. She hated missing her friend's first landing. By now she and the jumpers surely would be searching for her.

About to try her cell again, Ben swooped down, dirt kicking from his boots as he swung next to her and let go of the rope. "Dang! That was higher than I thought," he blurted.

"Yeah, strange how I love diving out of an airplane from thirteen thousand feet, but scared standing thirty feet off the ground." She peered up at her parachute and lines entangled at the top of the pine tree. "First time landing in a tree. Gear's gonna be expensive to replace." She gave her jumpsuit a once over, surprised to see only one small tear on her sleeve. Although she felt stiff and probably had a few bruises, she was thankful she wasn't seriously injured.

She thought she detected a slight vibration in her sleeve pocket and yanked out the phone. She touched the screen over and over, eager to hear from someone ... anyone.

"Hey, Gaby, is that you?" No response, no activity, only a dark screen. "Damn!" Shrugging off her frustration, she glanced at Ben and was met with that same cock-eyed look he had given her before.

"I know it was fully charged when I left this morning." She blew a small bubble, popped it, then sucked the gum back in her mouth. "Could I use your cell?"

He glared at her again, his brows drawn together. She sighed. *Guess not.*

She glanced at her watch. Great ... it had given up the ghost too. "Listen, I really need to get to the airport and let everyone know I'm okay." She tried another smile, hoping to get through to him. "Be a long walk from here. Maybe I could hitch a ride on your horse?"

Ben picked up his hat from the ground, smoothed the hair off his forehead and fitted it on his head. "Lady, I don't understand half of what you've said. Don't know of any port ... never seen a contraption like up in that tree nor what you got in your hand."

He walked over to the pinto and yanked the reins from the tree branch. "I wasn't intending to head into town." He lifted a leather belt ringed with bullets from the saddle horn and buckled it around his waist, its holstered gun slung low on his hip. "It's a couple hours ride to Pineville. Be dark soon. Easier on my horse and us if I take you to the ranch house." He scratched the side of his bearded jaw. "Where you from anyway?"

She took a hard look at the man. Never mind the cowboy clothes ... the Stetson hat, chambray shirt, red bandana, leather vest, jeans, and spurred boots. What caught her attention was the bullet laden belt and holstered gun. Angela knew guns. Especially antique guns. Her adoptive father had collected them and won several sharpshooter medals in state competition. An avid enthusiast, Angela had won a few local contests with single-action Colts herself. She recognized the revolver in Ben's well-worn holster as a Colt 45 Peacemaker.

Her gaze swept past Ben to Wakan Lake and beyond. Where the four-lane state highway 41 should be, instead it was a narrow, dirt road leading through distant woods. She didn't see the familiar sign, Wakan Lake Park; no paved sidewalks circled the banks of the lake. Nor did she see the sheltered picnic tables with restroom facilities nearby.

Angela bit her lip, her mind a cloud of confusion and frustration. The landscape was all wrong. She put a hand to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut in an effort to clear her head.

Ben stepped closer. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay ...," she hoped she sounded convincing, "falling through those trees took its toll more than I thought." Again, she studied her surroundings. The high ridge of boulders around the other side of the lake was the only familiar area. "That is Wakan Lake, isn't it?"

He nodded. "The Sioux named it Wakan, meaning great spirit or mystery." He mounted the pinto. "Still didn't say where you're from."

"I live in Cedar Canyon, about ten miles from the Cedar Regional Airport."

Ben frowned, then shook his head. "The Pine Mountain Express Railroad goes through a bunch of mining and mill towns all the way to Denver. Strange I never heard of Cedar Canyon." He reined his horse closer to her. "These days, mines dry up, towns fold up, some renamed," he conceded with a smirk. He peered down at her. "You're small enough to ride behind the saddle. Short ride to the ranch."

Angela hesitated. "Maybe I should wait for my friends ... I'm sure they're searching for me." She scanned the dirt road, clinging to the hope of spotting something familiar. She'd hiked miles of well-maintained trails throughout the park and spent many a night in the campground facilities. Standing beside the lake now, she saw only overgrown, dense woods.

Dammit, where was she? And if she didn't know, how would anybody else know?

Ben's stern voice broke in. "Angela?"

She heaved a sigh, accepting her present situation. With the shadows of dusk surrounding her, it was futile to wait any longer for club members to find her. She'd call them as soon as she got to a phone.

"I don't want to leave my helmet here," she said.

Ignoring her, he unstrapped the flap of his saddlebag and pulled out a bottle. He uncorked it and putting it to his lips, took several swallows. He lowered the bottle and leaned down. That same smirk flashed in those steely eyes of his. "Want a pull? Look like you could use one."

She plucked the gum from her mouth and tossed it in the bushes, then picked up her helmet. "No, thanks."

Shrugging his shoulders, he took a last big gulp, then tossed the empty bottle into the brush. "Give me that thing." Ben took the helmet and looped the strap around the pommel. He leaned over and extended his arm.

Angela had ridden plenty of horses, but never double. Before she could question how to climb on, Ben had effortlessly swung her onto the horse's haunches behind the saddle.

"Hang on," he said. Angela circled her arms around his waist and not a second too soon before he spurred the horse into a gallop.