

Chapter 14

THEY SLIPPED out together, a ghostly pair wrapped in a gray white mist, one large, the other, horrifyingly huge. They moved with spectral precision, silent footfalls landing one in the pad of the other, yet leaving not a single print upon the sand as if erased by an eldritch enchantment.

The beach was deserted at this hour, as was expected. Only the beacon from the distant lighthouse shed any intermittent illumination into the black of a coastal horizon. The full moon herself was in hiding behind clouds carried up the Gulf Stream like on the ocean current.

But they did not need light, preferred to move without it. Their brilliant yellow-orange eyes saw the nightscape as if brightened by full sun instead of the moon. There was no crevice nor shadow their vision could not penetrate at any hour.

The larger wolf—the Silver—led the way, her companion trotting obediently at her flank. Every now and then, the young White stopped to nip at a washed-up jelly fish or stringy piece of kelp. A large broken clam shell snagged the youngster's attention. She clamped it in her jowls and carried it a ways down the shore before losing interest to drop it, only to replace it with another shell, which she tossed high in the air. It landed behind the pup, startling her, and she skittered forward into her mother's side. The Silver turned and with only a look sobered the pup's play for at least a moment.

The ocean rolled in on a low tide beside them, and when the waves roared back out, they left in their wake pillowy mounds of sea foam, thick and white like clotted cream. The youngster could stand it no longer. She broke from the Silver's side again and dashed amid the airy knolls, snapping and leaping from one to the other, as the sea continued to replenish her with play things.

The mother wolf sat on her haunches and watched the antics of the pup. She cocked her head to the side as the white wolf left the defenseless foam to begin attacking the waves themselves. She ran after them in their retreat, then fled herself when they turned and chased her to shore, their pearly crested tops growing ever larger until they plunged over the big pup, tumbling her off her feet in a comic roly-poly somersault with the tide.

Moonlight dancer, Find the night, Seek the star's redemption, And the melancholy of the sea steadfast, The universe your gift of salvation.

The words drifted from some faraway place in the Silver's mind, a poem called to remembrance by the playful surf and evoking complex notions that were merely impressions in the canine mind. *Redemption and salvation by stars and the sea.* Or the promise of the predator to its intended. What could be a greater gift indeed?

The Silver's black-rimmed lips drew back over her four-inch canines, a look to those who knew canids that could only be interpreted as a smile. A silly dog's grin, at utter joy of being alive and the sight of her sputtering pup staggering out of the water, no match for the ocean and defeated. The young one shook herself mightily. Diamond sea drops sprayed the mother wolf, and she turned her head away from the watery onslaught to look down the beach.

Down the beach. A figure moved, a form was taking shape out of the darkness. It was distant still but headed this way. The pup was beside her now, ears perked in the same direction. Down the beach. A faint sound carried up to them over the boom of the surf.

"Little Miss Caroline, ain't you a-lookin' fine, wish ob wish I had the time, to makin' you my la-a-dy."

A song. A man's voice. And a scent. The Silver knew it, but it was strange to the youngster. Liquor. The pup's nose wrinkled as the odd smell wafted toward them.

"Little Miss Caroline, wouldn't you like some wine? Sit with me and we shall dine, while makin' you my la-a-dy..."

Hobo Joe was feeling just fine himself. There was three hundred dollars in his pocket—cash—and he'd just dropped a twenty on this pert-near-perfect bottle of Jim Beam he was chuggin'. He was off work for six days straight (as for a hobo, Joe only aspired to the nickname; in truth he kept an on-again, off-again job gassing up boats at the marina). Six days to go through three hundred bucks in booze and women, a fine way to spend a week indeed.

"Little Miss Car—what the hell?" Hobo Joe's crooning and chugging came to a halt. "Who's up there?"

It was hard to tell, what with the black of the sea-oat-covered dunes molding uneven, hackled silhouettes to his left and the unforgiving wash of salty ink to his right drowning all sound. Farther down the beach, well beyond the little points of light that had caught Joe's attention, development in the way of condos and hotel high-rises offered a shimmering oasis of Vegas-lit beauty spooning with the shoreline.

But not up here. Up here there was nothing but sand, dad-blamed sand always blowing in your shoes or up your shorts and itching out your privates. Sand, and those four little pinpricks of orange light.

"Who's up there? I see the fire from your smokes. Hey, is that you, Raeford?"

Hobo Joe took a swig of Beam, then staggered on toward the glowing fireflies that bobbed at first and then had grown completely still at the sound of his voice.

“Got any smokes you can spare?” he yelled over the wind. “Anybody? I got a bottle of bourbon I’d be willing to share for a Pall Mall, if you got it.”

The four lights that had drawn the man up the beach were closer now, unwavering and welcoming. Hobo Joe could use some company. He could use a smoke too, maybe get his hands on Raeford’s Johnny Walker Red. Whoever else was with him tonight might have some jerky or a candy bar on ’em. He hadn’t eaten all day. “I’m singing you a song, good buddy. You best be a-joining me. *Little Miss Caroline...*”

The song sputtered to a halt. The orange lights had split up. Two went to the left of Hobo Joe and two circled to the right and disappeared. Joe rubbed his weepy eyes with his weather-raw hands. He looked about, a little lost at the moment. This was not his area of the beach, come to think of it, nor Raef’s either.

“Where the hell have I wandered off to? Who’s there?” he yelled at the ocean, which had seemed to swallow up the lights to his right. When he looked back, the other pair were gone as well.

Night was back, the lights were gone, but the man felt anything but alone. He had heard Salty Duck was full of haints, but all the years he’d lived here, he’d thought that to be just a bunch of jerkwater hooey to draw the tourists. But the prickles crawling up the back of his neck and the hair standing up on his arms was not from the steady breeze blowing in from the Gulf.

“*Little Miss Caroline...*” the man’s voice tried to pick up the song with the bluster and gusto he’d felt before. But the words now only squeaked out in tinny, stilted syllables before dying completely on the name of his long lost beloved.

“Caroline? Are you here? Are you haunting me, woman?” he whispered. “It’s the will-o’-the-wisp. Dad-blamed will-o’-the-wisp floating along the beach. Caroline! Get on back to your grave, woman!” Hobo Joe wasn’t whispering now. He shouted at the top of his lungs. Grand-daddy had told him about the beach lights that flickered eerily up and down the coast sometimes. Smarty pants out-of-towners called it the *ignis fatuus*—combustible gases produced from decomposing critters and plants in the marsh. But there was no marsh righ’chere, only the ocean and the sea grass and the dad-blamed irritatin’ sand.

Hobo Joe squinted up the shoreline. Ignis whateverus or haint from the other side—the glowing orange sparks had vanished and the only lights left now were those distant lanterns of civilization a half-mile away and the beam of the candescent full moon, peeping now from behind a rampart of hovering storm clouds.

He rubbed his head like greasing up a basketball. “It’s the booze, the no-good booze.” Hobo Joe pulled a second bottle from his pocket, a half-pint of Cutty Sark, and made like he was going to throw it. Common sense got the better of him, though; what was the point in wasting good whiskey? He turned up the Scotch and downed the last quarter cup, then dropped both empty bottles in the sand.

And then he felt it. A presence, something with him, near him.

“Caroline?” Joe’s back muscles tensed as the air around him seemed to compress.

Whatever lurked on the beach this night was directly behind him.

A breeze, softer and warmer than what wailed in from the sea, caressed the back of his neck like a lover’s breath. He heard another blow, barely audible, and then felt the warmth again.

Hobo Joe slowly turned around, and the lights were back, steadfast-still a good foot over his head. He looked up at them, into them, the disembodied embers of his dead wife’s ghost come to torment him.

And he saw.

Pointed ears, tufted triangles close to the head. An ebony-tipped muzzle, breathing hot only inches from his forehead. Jowls with fangs dripping saliva onto his upturned face. A thick, powerful neck ringed in bone-colored fur...

Hobo Joe looked into that furious, beautiful, horrific face, captivated, and could not look down to see the rest of what held him. But he would not have wanted to, for out of the darkness rushed another animal toward the shock-bound man.

His body shuddered as the force struck him midwaist from the side. Hobo Joe buckled forward. He grabbed the fur of the thing standing in front of him, his eyes still cast upward into those of the monster’s, pleading with it, it seemed, or praying.

Then Hobo Joe’s intestines slid out in long ropy loops next to his liquor bottles, and he released the fur to topple onto his ruined lower half. The devastation of his torso was immediately windswept with sand, and Hobo Joe’s last thoughts were of the mess of the sand in his gaping wound and how he would never be able to clean it...