

The Old Man of Castle Crag



Callie Whitman shifted her eyes from the steep road to the temperature gauge in her car. She bit her lip as she watched the needle nudge higher, well past the mid-point, and creeping closer to the large, angry red 'H' at the top. She sighed and eased off the gas just as one of the local drivers behind her honked their horn several times. She glanced at her rear view mirror, then back to the gauge.

Letting out another sigh and with a wave of her hand, she jerked the steering wheel to the right and glided into a shallow turnout. A ribbon of steam drifted from her hood. She leaned out her window and glared at the car speeding up the road. She could have sworn she heard the passenger make a snide comment.

"Have a nice day!" she shouted from her window. "Thanks for your help!"

Callie sighed a third time, slammed the gearshift into park and shut off the engine. It sputtered and hissed before finally coming to a stop. She caught a glimpse of the needle barely scraping the 'H' before the engine stopped and breathed a sigh of relief. Something popped and hissed under the hood and she jerked her hands in the air. White clouds of steam gushed between the hood and fender.

"Dammit!" she said and smacked her palm against the dashboard.

Callie reached down and released the trunk cable and got out of the car. She slammed the door so hard the cigarette lighter in the door handle flew across the cabin. She reached for the large ugly pink beach towel she kept in the trunk and lifted the one-gallon water jug out with a grunt. She wrapped the towel around her hand and upper arm and reached underneath for the hood release.

"I wouldn't do that!" A man's voice shouted above the sound of water hissing and gurgling in the radiator.

Callie stood up so quick she nearly lost her balance. For a moment she couldn't see past the steam swirling around her head. She stepped away from the hood and looked around for the owner of the voice. No one stood nearby. In fact there wasn't anyone, anywhere, except herself.

"What?" she said, her head twisting about in confusion.

A wrinkled, graying man, tall, slender and pale, smiled from behind the steam near the driver's side of the car. She moved away from the car and around the steam to get a better look. He sported a long gray beard -- no wait, it was pure white. And an unusual, floppy hat. His clothes appeared as old as he; a tan

trench coat, white shirt that laced at the chest, baggy jeans, bottomed-off with leather lace up boots.

“I said, I wouldn’t do that.” His gentle deep voice reflected that of a kind soul. “If a hose broke you would have been scalded for sure, my dear,” he said with a wink. His green eyes twinkled and the crow’s feet around his eyes deepened as he squinted in the daylight.

“Oh, yes. You’re right, of course.” She clucked her tongue and threw the towel on the hood. “This car. It does this crap all the time!”

“It is very old?”

“Yeah, it’s an ‘85.”

The old man just nodded and shrugged a shoulder. She watched as he walked over to the front of her car, and lifted his hands, palms facing the hood. Callie cocked her head as she thought she overheard him speak one word over and over. She thought he was waiting until the steam dissipated so he could fix the broken hose...or perhaps he just wanted to warm his hands...it *is* a bit chilly...

The steam stopped as suddenly as it had started.

“Give it a few moments before you put the water in, my dear. It is *still* very hot,” he said shaking his hands as if he had just dipped them in hot water.

“Thank you. What did you do? Do you...do you live around here?” she asked.

“Oh yes. Just over that hill. Dunsmuir is the name of the town. We are in the Siskiyou county area near Mountain Shasta. Do *you* live around here?” She shook her head. “I did not think so. Well, Callie, I hope you will be all right from

here on. Enjoy your stay!” His voice trailed off as he turned away and walked into the woods and down a narrow path.

“Thank you again. Oh! What was *your* name?” He did not look back or answer. Wait a minute. How did he know *my* name?

She shrugged and watched her hood for any signs of heat or steam. The only visual proof that the car overheated was on the hood where some moisture remained from the steam. She gingerly touched the metal to see if it was hot and discovered the hood wasn't any warmer than the rest of the car.

She spun around to look for the old man but she couldn't see him anywhere. She grabbed the towel and lifted the hood with it, then slowly removed the radiator cap. No steam issued forth from the radiator, only a wisp of condensation from the hot water left inside. She shook her head and poured the remainder of the water from the bottle into the radiator. A gurgling sound gave her pause and she glanced behind the radiator. She pursed her lips when she saw water dribbling out of a split in the hose.

Callie sighed and finished filling the radiator before capping it off and slamming the hood shut. Thanks to the old man, she took comfort Dunsmuir was not much farther away. Without complaining further about her dilemma, she jerked the key, started the engine, glanced at the hood, and hit the accelerator.

The hardest part about working as an intern for a newspaper is not so much the paperwork, filing, errands, coffee runs, and general cleaning...*well, ok, that is the*

hardest part! Callie smiled at her own sarcastic wit as she attempted to finish her very first story for the Valley Times.

She glanced at her reflection in the monitor and adjusted the clip in her hair as she contemplated her image. Callie Whitman, an attractive woman in her thirtysomethings, long red hair, a decent job, an apartment and a cat. Other than her cat, Arthur, her work remained the only companion. A taste for natural fibers and casual dress proved her distaste for playing dress-up or sporting business attire. Her small frame remained hidden under non-tailored clothes and make-up rarely covered her natural allure. She kept her hair in a pony tail or bun and the reading glasses finished off an appearance of a librarian waiting for the end of a long day.

Callie considered herself intelligent and witty, but definitely not a genius. She toyed with the idea, a number of times, to go on Jeopardy and compete with others in a battle of wits. She quickly dismissed the idea when a particular subject arose of which she had no clue. Modern history. After all, who needs to know what happened thirty or forty years ago? *Ancient history. Much better. Cooler. Way cooler.*

For nearly three years after finishing college, she went from small town newspapers, to large county periodicals and magazines to apply for work as a journalist. Although she managed to work freelance; submitting stories or articles for a meager sum, her dream had always been to work for the New York Times. *So why am I here in Los Angeles?*

Ah, yes. L.A. The city of opportunities. And of course Hollywood.

“Callie, would you be interested in attending a journalist convention in Washington?” her boss, Tami O’hare had asked.

“I would love to!” *Anything to get out of this office.* “What do I need to do?” Callie asked. This was it. Now I can rub elbows with someone who mattered, not just a small town, two fold, four page periodical. One CEO after another from major newspapers, magazines, and television news would bombard her with interviews and eventually sign her on in their prestigious company. *Ah well, one can dream...*

“Next week is when the convention starts, the twentieth, and goes until the twenty-fifth. If you leave tomorrow, you should be able to drive there well before they get started,” Tami said.

Drive there? There goes the weekend. At the least they could cover the mileage.

“Um, okay. What will I be doing when I get there?” Callie said.

“When you get to the Seattle Marriott, ask for the manager.” She handed Callie an agenda with addresses and names. “He will show you to your room, and then to the banquet halls where the convention will be held.” Silence followed. Tami cocked her head slightly as if to say, *can’t you read my mind?*

“Am I meeting with anyone else?”

“Yes. You’ll be meeting with new clients and giving away the swag, you know; brochures, free t-shirts, buttons, etc.”

Callie fumed to herself. *What am I, a spokesmodel? How am I going to fit all those boxes in my car?*

“You will be a representative for the company and answer any questions about us,” Tami said as if in response to her thoughts. “Oh, and write a report about it for your journalism internship. Who knows, we might actually get it in the paper?” she stated with a well intentioned grin. “Oh, and don’t forget to write down your mileage so you can get reimbursed.”

Whew.

Callie nodded and smiled as best she could without revealing any disappointment. *After all this time, you would think I could finally get my own stories to cover. Perhaps I am expecting too much? I should at least be grateful for this opportunity.*

She watched her boss wander through the maze of cubicles, silently lashing her backside with a whip in her imagination; yet at the same time, loving her. Tami was *always* fair-minded and honest. Callie considered the possibility that Tami’s intentions were to give her this assignment as a favor. Getting her feet wet, in the door, and...and to break the monotony. For the most part, Tami remained flexible when it came to hours, days off, and as many opportunities as *her* bosses would allow. They occasionally had lunch together, so there appeared to be no reason in Callie’s mind Tami did this as a malicious act.

Tami wasn’t much older than Callie. She preferred her hair cut very short, just above the collar, and highlighted to cover her premature gray. Her tall stature betrayed her approach when entering the offices, and she nearly always had a smile on her face.

Callie watched her rush from office to office, work to home, and back again, day in and day out. Where does she get all that energy? She found herself exchanging wishes to become a workaholic like Tami, or take a really, really long vacation.

Callie began making the round of calls to hotels and personnel in preparation for her upcoming trip.

Perhaps this is just the thing I need, right now. It would be nice to get away, and I have never been to Seattle! At least I will have some time to sight-see on the way up!

It took Callie a better part of the following day to pack, research Seattle's weather at this time of year, project the distance and time to travel. She lost herself on the internet investigating various sites to see, towns to visit, and possible side stories to write for the paper. She felt any story about other places relatively unknown to Los Angeles residents that could be placed in the travel section would be advantageous for her career. She plotted two courses; one direct route up the I5 through Northern California, Oregon, and finally, Seattle Washington. The other; one that took much more time, took her over the mountains, past Lake Tahoe, Lassen Volcanic National Park, and finally Mt. Shasta.

She packed so many extra batteries for her digital camera she could barely lift her bag. She then glanced at the little green light on the battery charger for her video camera that indicated *charged* and shoved it all into another bag. *And don't forget, plenty of snacks.* After clicking the last snap on the last bag, in the last minutes before she hit the road, she stood back to admire her handiwork. Then, after counting more than five bags packed, she started to unpack two of the larger suitcases.

I mean really, do I need all these clothes? Five bags. Now down to three. Keep going Callie.

After another hour of tossing and packing, she sighed with a smile, satisfied with her choices to take on her trip – just *two* suitcases. Well, not counting the digital camera bag, and the video camera bag...

Dunsmuir California. Hidden within the Siskiyou valley, and surrounded by beautiful mountain ranges, this little town emanates a gentle charm and small town feel. The population barely reached two thousand, with hundreds of homes scattered throughout the valley. It took scores of locomotives, attached to thousands of cars to travel through this area. The town was best known as a small Union Pacific base of operations. For a small population, Dunsmuir bustled with activity, tourism, and commerce. Nearly every resource needed could be found in the downtown area, or at least in the neighboring towns.

Callie inched the car into the nearest gas station; one of the few with a repair garage. She stopped right in front of the open roll-up doors and shut the engine off just as more steam sifted from beneath the hood and into the mountain air. A young, tall station attendant walked out with a smile on his face as he watched the cloud of water vapor dissipate into the air around him. Callie glanced at his shirt and saw the embroidered tag on his in bold letters that said, *Ted*.

“Hose busted, I’ll bet,” Ted said.

“That’s it exactly.” Callie said throwing her hands up over the steering wheel. She opened the door and gestured towards the hood. “Do you have water hoses to replace the one on this model?”

The attendant shrugged and adjusted the hat on his head which sported the name of the gas station. "I can look. It's an older car, so we may have to order the part." He reached under the front of the car and released the hood. After waving the air clear of the steam, he leaned in and inspected each hose. Once he found the broken hose, he nodded and wiped his hands on the cloth dangling from his pocket. "Be right back."

Callie nodded and decided she better let Tami know about the delay. She punched the quick dial on her cell phone and explained the ordeal to Tami who waved it off and told her not to worry about it. She told Callie that another rep would be present who will oversee the entire process so she wouldn't have to be there at any time in particular. Callie sighed with relief, thanked her and disconnected just as the attendant returned.

"Going to be about a day to get the parts. Have to order them from another town," Ted said.

"I see. Well, is it safe to drive for now?" Callie said, shading her eyes from the sun.

"Not really. If it continues to overheat, you could blow a head gasket. Better to let it sit until it's fixed." Ted leaned under the hood and grasped the hose, rocking it back and forth with his fingers. "I tell you what I could do. I could cut the hose where it's cracked, and reattach it, but it'll only be good for a short time, not for long distance drives."

"That'll work. How long will that take?"

"I can do it right now, won't take me but a minute."

"Thanks you." Callie placed a hand over her chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

The attendant gathered the tools he needed from a dirty, red, standing tool box, and proceeded with the repairs. Callie walked a block down the road to look for the nearest hotel and found a small, quaint, family-owned bed and breakfast; Seams N Lace. She decided to make this her temporary home in Dunsmuir and checked into the B and B that minute. She turned to Ted and told him she would return. A hand came out from beneath the hood and waved back at her.

Less than ten minutes later, Callie was on the road again, driving through town, and taking in the sights of the nearby mountains. On her way into town, she remembered seeing a sign for Castle Crag which piqued her interest. She decided to make that her first tour of the day and stopped at a souvenir shop to pick up a map. Once she knew how to get there she packed a sandwich and some sodas along with other snacks and made off for the mysterious Castle Crag.

The Crag actually lie six miles south of Dunsmuir, near where her car turned into a steaming mass, and the strange old man had paid her a visit. When she arrived, she realized she had been too busy worrying about the car to appreciate its beauty.

Soon, she saw a sign that read "Castle Crag State Park" and pulled into the entrance.

For the next hour, Callie wandered the leading out of the campground. She took and ungodly amount of photos and wrote a dozen pages of detailed notes on the unusual history of Castle Crag, including its name.

Situated along an ancient trade and travel route known as the Siskiyou Trail, Castle Crags has witnessed dramatic events. Strained relationships between 1850's California Gold Rush miners and the local native Indian populations resulted in the 1855 Battle of Castle Crags, in which the poet Joaquin Miller was wounded, and which he later described in an essay of the same name.

Exploitation of the land by lumber and mining operations encouraged concerned citizens in 1933 to acquire much of the land, which would eventually become Castle Crags State Park

During the Pleistocene, the water eroded much of the softer surrounding rock leaving the towering crags and spires exposed, from which the Castle Crags rock face derives its name. Exfoliation of huge, convex slabs of granite yielded rounded forms such as the prominent Castle Dome feature of Castle Crags.

Callie breathed deep allowing the fresh, high altitude air to fill her lungs. Regardless of the fate of her car, she enjoyed the time away and the opportunity to explore this new world. Born and bred in the bustling city, with playgrounds, local schools, and shopping malls, Callie actually felt comforted by her new surroundings.

Turning away from the trail and walking back towards the campground, Callie nearly knocked over the old man standing alongside the trail edge.

“Oh! Sorry! I’m sorry, I didn’t see you standing there,” she said as she inspected the old man’s clothes and head for injury.

"It is quite alright, my dear. I should have known there would be travelers on this trail. Not paying attention, that's it!" he said holding his hand up, the other leaned on a long branch, carved and decorated with an artistic flare.

"It's you!" Callie said when he lifted his head.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. The one who talked to me this morning when my car overheated?"

"Why, yes, that's right. How is your auto-mobile doing, my dear?" he said with a smile.

"I have to wait for a part to be delivered, so I am staying the night." Callie replied a little droll. She pointed to her car. "The mechanic fixed it temporarily, but I can't go very far."

"Ah. Sorry to hear you are delayed. I hope you are taking advantage of this time, then?" he added with a wink.

"Actually, yes. This is a *beautiful* area. I would love to stay longer but I have to go to a conference in Washington."

"Con-frenz?"

"Conference. Yes, for my company. I am a journalist...reporter -- for a newspaper," she corrected lifting her camera up in front of him.

"I see. Find any interesting...stories?"

“Only historical. Nothing out of the ordinary. At least this isn’t a total waste.” She indicated the Craggs.

The old man chuckled and started to walk further up the trail, back-tracking Callie’s steps. “Well, then, enjoy your stay, my dear. Until we meet again.” He waved and moved skillfully up the path; his staff tapped a fast rhythm against the dirt and rocks.

“Wait! What’s your name?” She shouted after him, but he vanished behind a steep hill on the trail. She sighed and shrugged and looked towards the west as the sun slid behind the Craggs. She thought it best to satisfy the growling in her stomach before retiring for the night.

Sitting in the large booth in the little café near her bed and breakfast, Callie watched locals and tourists come and go, carry on conversations, and take endless photographs of each other sitting at the table, eating, laughing, or just being silly. She ate her pasta slowly, taking in more of the atmosphere than the food, and nursed the light beer still near full on her table. The music from the back room drifted out to her ears and begged her to come and dance. She compromised by tapping her toes and taking a large swig of her beer.

“Did you hear what the wizard did today?” A woman said from the booth behind her.

Callie’s ears perked and she wiped her mouth, not feeling the least bit guilty leaning back in her booth to eavesdrop on the conversation between the couple in the booth behind her.

“No, what?” A man’s voice replied.

“Well, there was *supposed* to be no snow on the peak this afternoon, so they were going to shut down the slopes.” She emphasized *shut down* and sounded disappointed.

“But it’s early winter,” the man said, taking it personally.

“I know. The tourism board didn’t take kindly to that, so they spread the word around, and before you know it, the wizard made it snow on the peak!” She said with a snap of her fingers.

“Oh, you lie.”

“No, NO. My friend is a park ranger and she said she saw him do it.”

“Aw, come on, that rumor went around *last* winter.” A different voice said, and Callie heard one of them slap the table.

“Well. Still. There is something about that old man of the Craggs.”

Callie sat bolt upright, thumping her knee on the underside of the table and displacing her fork. It went noticed. The three people behind her stopped talking and glanced in her direction. She knew they had to be talking about the old man she saw already twice in one day. She took a deep breath and turned with a sheepish smile.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn’t help but overhear what you said about an old man near the Castle Craggs?” Callie said as she leaned further back to face them.

The woman whose voice Callie recognized nodded with wide eyes. She had long, braided, blonde hair. Her dark brows sat over brown eyes – definitely not a true blonde, and looked to be in her late thirties. Her t-shirt said *Mt. Shasta* in bold, glittered letters.

“Yes! You’ve seen him then?” She smacked the man sitting next to her. “Told you.”

“Yes. Well. Sort of. He spoke to me twice today and then just disappeared into the woods,” Callie said with a shrug.

The woman almost leaned over the entire table. “Did he have a long white beard?” She asked.

“Yes he did. The first time, he called me by my name, but I never *told* him my name,” Callie said. “I never did get *his* name.” Callie glanced at their faces and cocked her head. “Does *anyone* know his name?”

“No.” The woman shook her head as did the two young men sitting next to her. “We just call him *Merlin*...because he looks like an old wizard with that long beard, and floppy hat,” she said giggling as she mocked a hat on her head with her hands.

“Is that the only reason you called him a wizard?” Callie said as she got up and joined them in the booth.

The three of them leaned in as if they wanted to share a secret. The woman spoke first. “They say he has magical powers. There is a rumor that someone hit a deer on the road, and he brought the deer back to life...right in front of the person who hit the deer!”

The men rolled their eyes and sighed. The one sitting closest to the blonde was an attractive, older man. His beard growth, perhaps three days old, had already been trimmed with painful perfection. The hair on his head, on the other hand...well, he didn't have much. The receding hairline dissolved into wispy, dark tussles. Beyond the sunglasses buried in his short mane, Callie couldn't see if the baldness extended any further. He raised his hand behind blondie's head and made a whirling motion with his forefinger next to his temple. He smirked as she spoke of other rumors about the old man and he rapidly opened and closed his outstretched fingers, and mimicked a talkative posture with his mouth. The woman's eyes became wide and she whipped her head around to glare at him. He just smiled and shrugged even with the painful jab to the ribs.

"Anyway, they don't even know where he lives. He just appears in the area near the Craggs. Some believe he lives *in* the Craggs. I have seen him here in town, too."

"I see. Perhaps I should have a little chat with this man. He *did* seem to stop my car from overheating this morning," Callie said. "He held his hands over my hood, and poof! I mean there was no *more* poof."

"You go right ahead. Uh uh, I will *not* have anything to do with him." She sat back into the man next to her. Then she leaned forward again. "He *really* fixed your car?" Callie nodded. "Woow." She gave a satisfied glance to the man next to her and he just grinned and nudged the man next to him with her elbow.

"Thanks for talking with me. Is there anyone else who has talked with this old man? *Merlin*?" Callie said.

The other man on Callie's left spoke after being silent for most of the conversation. "Yeah. There is this Native American dude who lives near here. He talks with the old man all the time."

“Where does he live?” Callie brought out a pen and a small note pad.

“He has a store at the end of the main street. It’s a jewelry store. You know, Native American stuff. Bows and arrows and dead animal stuff.” He gestured in the direction of the main street.

“Thank you again. I’m gonna talk with him. See, I am a reporter and…”

“Cool!” The woman leaned forward so quick it made Callie jump. “Which paper? Los Angeles? New York? Hey Josh, I know a celebrity, ha!”

The man next to her rolled his eyes again. “She’s a *reporter*, not a *movie actor*.” He sighed and made an apologetic frown on his face to Callie. Callie covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. She then held her hand up and shook her head.

“I am *trying* to be a reporter. That’s one of the reasons I am on this trip. I am going to this convention as a representative and doing a report on it. This old man, however, seems to be a way better story.”

“Will you put *my* name in the paper too? After all, I *did* tell you about the wizard. I’m your, what’s it called?” She narrowed her eyes at the man next to her.

“Source.” The girl said with jubilation.

“Sure, why not? My name is Callie.” She reached her hand out to shake and they all introduced themselves; the woman, Sally Ann, the man next to her, Josh, and the other, Danny.

Callie asked a few more questions about Dunsmuir and Castle Crags and wrote notes from Sally’s interpretation of the old man, or the *wizard*. They talked for the

next hour before retreating. Callie walked up to the Seams N Lace and sighed, looking forward to her deep, soft bed.

When Callie arrived to her room, she dropped her bags to the floor, kicked off her shoes and pulled her t-shirt off, carelessly flinging it across the room. She plopped onto the bed and switched on the local news channel. A quaint smile flickered on her face as she watched the simple occurrences in a small town that served for exciting news to Dunsmuir locals and those in the surrounding area. She flipped from one station to another, hoping to get more information on Dunsmuir and Siskiyou county.

She sat up and leaned forward, her eyes wide as she watched a small fire burning near Castella, the town south of Dunsmuir near Castle Crags. But it wasn't the fire that she noticed, or the fireman that worked feverishly to put out the fire. There, beside the fire engine, stood the old man. He appeared to be gesturing, and the firemen didn't seem to notice he stood there. Before she could get a clear look at what he was doing, the camera panned back to the reporter who signed off.

"I gotta find this guy again. Who *is* this old man? Did he start the fire? Was he putting it out?"

The morning sky held a gloom over Dunsmuir with the approach of a storm. Callie did not want to wake up, so she compromised by pulling the covers up around her and watching television. She cocked her head as the sound of distant thunder rumbled in the air.

She called the gas station to see if the part for her car had arrived. Ted answered the phone and replied with a solemn *not yet*, and promised he would call as soon as he the part arrived.

Callie sighed and decided to start the day. She kicked the bed covers off, forced herself to stand and reached her arms towards the ceiling with a yawn. So much to do, and I don't even live here. She removed the oversized Los Angeles Kings hockey t-shirt her ex-boyfriend gave her as a birthday present, and hopped into the shower. The steam filled the bathroom and fogged the mirror reminding her of the reason why she stopped in this quaint little town in the first place. She stood for a long time under the almost-too-hot water before washing and getting ready.

The outside world appeared as dark as twilight while thick, black storm clouds rolled overhead. Regardless of the weather, Callie opened her car trunk and removed the umbrella, deciding to walk to the Native American store rather than risk driving. She opened the umbrella and glanced overhead in anticipation of the rain, and then walked down the street as quickly as she could.

After walking several blocks, pausing occasionally to window shop, she stopped at the gas station to ask again about her car. Ted smiled and shook his head as he wiped his hands with an oily rag. She asked the attendant if he knew about the Native American store. He nodded and gave her some quick directions. After a few more blocks she saw the store across the street and closed her umbrella. The rain fell in huge drops just as she reached the door.

The small store contained far too many items for sale, considering its size. Callie used her arms to push aside dangling feathers and strips of leather hanging from

dreamcatchers and hand crafted pipes. A large hand painted drum displayed the fierce image of a wolf, while another had been painted with an unfamiliar symbol. It easily took up half the wall near the window. On one counter, several furs with the face and empty eye sockets still attached draped across the glass. She looked closer and realized they were skins from a beaver. A bow with a quiver of arrows sat next to the counter, and dozens of dreamcatchers littered the ceiling. Beautiful works of art on canvas and mandalas on tanned skins stretched over a hoop sat along the floor and leaned against the wall. She had never seen so many pieces of Native artwork in her life. Her eyes searched the store for any sign of living human existence.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

Callie called out again and a voice behind her caused her to jump. It seemed to appear out of no where.

“May I help you?” The older gentleman asked.

From what Callie could remember about Native Americans, this man only slightly resembled what she expected. His salt and pepper hair, mostly salt, hung loose behind him, his face a deep brown, wrinkled from the sun and age. His eyes shined with a deep pool of brown; so deep she felt as if his soul spoke through them. His clothes were simple; a long sleeved t-shirt and baggy denim jeans. Sandals poked out from under the bottom hems.

“Oh! Sorry, I didn’t hear you walk up. My name is Callie. I wanted to ask you some questions about...” She hesitated, not wanting to talk about the old man right away. “Dunsmuir. And the Craggs. And, other stuff...”

He contemplated her for a moment. His eyes searched her face as if he read a book. She became a bit nervous when he didn't answer right away, then a bit annoyed.

"I'm sorry, did I catch you at a bad time?" Callie said.

The man shook his head and crossed his arms. "What did you want to know?"

"I am a...doing a report for my school project." She lied.

"I see. You want to know the history? Or about us?" he said uncrossing his arms and picking up the bow.

"Um, both. Really. And, other things of interest too. Like, myths and such."

"I see." He placed the bow back into its stand and walked over to the counter next to the cash register. "Did you want to buy something?"

Callie shook her head and looked around at the items, searching for something to purchase. *Maybe he wants me to buy something first. If I bought something in the store, he would give me the information I wanted.* She reached into a bowl full to the brim with arrowheads, and placed two of them on the counter.

He looked at them with a frown, then at her. "Arrowheads? Everyone gets arrowheads. Look around, there may be something more special. Just for you."

Callie started to protest, and then closed her mouth. She thinned her lips. *All right, I'll play his game.* She looked around the store again. Her eyes gazed at the dreamcatchers hanging above her head. She saw one about the size of her head painted with a cat and, since she *had* a cat, made the choice. She placed it on the counter, right next to the arrowheads.

The man frowned again. "Everyone likes the dreamcatchers," he said with a sigh. "I didn't know we had one with a cat on it" he deadpanned. His eyes rolled up at her as if to say *try again*.

This time Callie let out a short sigh before turning back to the store. She started towards the drums and then stopped, realizing she could be doing this all day. That and the price tag. *Three thousand dollars for a big drum that I could use as a coffee table? How would I even get it home? What does this guy want? This guy? Aha!*

Callie walked back to the counter and gestured to the items. "You know, I don't actually need any of these things. All I really want is to know your name."

The man smiled wide, his teeth shined bright and slightly crooked, and his eyes beamed. "My name is Sal. Welcome to my store!," he said with reverence and reached out to shake her hand. "Now what can I do for you. Miss Callie?"

Pleased with herself that she figured out his ploy, expressed her interest in the Crags and listened patiently and with interest as Sal gave his rendition of the last two hundred year history of the valley. He spoke about the migration of his tribe, the search for gold by miners, the railroads being laid and the first train that passed through the town. He showed her old pictures of his family, the town and the baseball team from the local high school dating back to 1937. Callie spent nearly two hours, both fascinated and riveted – not so much the stories but how he *told* the stories. Such passion and reverence for this land.

They shared a few laughs and she found him to be utterly charming. She did not notice how the rain continued to pelt the windows of the small store. With the sun covered by the clouds, and no watch, she didn't realize it was well past noon until her stomach gave her a kick.

"I had no idea it was so late already. She said glancing at the intricate clock on the wall. I need to get some lunch. Would you like me to bring you something?"

"Corned beef sandwich? A beer perhaps? Please?" he said with child-like eagerness.

"Okay then. Be right back."

After Callie dodged the pouring rain and made her order at the deli across the street, she returned with lunch for them both, and found him sitting at the covered patio next door, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. She shrugged and assumed this must be his home and set the lunch down on the table.

"Don't you want to eat inside?" She asked scowling at the rain.

"On such a beautiful day? Nonsense." As if in response to his statement, the rain let up and a streak of sunlight struck the mountain. She laughed and they both started in on their sandwiches.

"Thank you, Sal, for telling me about the valley."

"You are welcome. And thank *you* for the sandwich," he said taking a huge bite.

"I want to ask about something else. Well. *Someone* else. Do you know about the old man that lives in the Craggs?"

Sal became quiet, swallowing the bite of sandwich and then took a gulp of his beer. "What have you *heard*?"

“Nothing really. Rumors. I did talk with him a couple of times – briefly,” she said almost defensively.

“Nothing else?” he said narrowing his eyes.

“Welllll, a few of the locals told me they call him *Merlin*. They think he is some sort of wizard, or something.” She dismissed her statement with a wave of her hand.

“He is a medicine man. He is well known among my people.”

“He *is*? But...he isn't...he doesn't look...he's *not* Native American...is he?”

“He is not part of our tribe in blood but in spirit. He has a good heart and helps to heal illnesses. Even helps prevent bad things from happening.” He raised his beer and took a drink with a glance toward the sky.

Callie recalled the fire she saw on television. He stood right there, and watched as one fireman alone put out the flames very quickly. Within seconds actually. The size of that fire dwarfed the fireman. Not even his fire hose could have put out the fire that quickly. And then there was the overheating car issue...

“I don't suppose you could tell me where he lives?” Callie said.

Sal shook his head and took another sip of his beer. “No one knows for sure. There is a legend about a hidden cave in the Craggs. But no one has ever seen an entrance. He has no cabin or tent that we have seen.”

“I think I should check it out. Maybe I can find it. Or at least find – *Merlin*, again, wandering around in the forest,” she said with a chuckle.

“You might want someone to go with you. Don’t go alone. There are other... legends to be wary of.” His lips thinned and he rolled his eyes towards the Craggs.

“What *other* legends?” *This place was becoming more than just a vacation spot!*

“My people have lived in this valley a long time. Sometimes we see the old man, sometimes he is gone for many months. Sometimes Mother Earth shakes underneath the Craggs. And some of us have seen a great bird without feathers in the night sky.”

Callie sat back and the corner of her lips rose. *Come on. First a wizard, and now this. I am beginning to think these locals are just pulling my leg.*

“No, it is true.” Sal said as if responding to her thoughts. “I have seen it as well. There are pictures dating back two hundred years. Here, let me show you.” Sal stood and walked into his house. Callie sipped her tea and watched the locals come and go up and down the street, in and out of the shops, and chatting on the sidewalks. “I guess these stories help with the tourism”.

She heard the front door slam and Sal stepped down onto the patio, unwrapping the cloth from a large piece of what looked like tree bark. He tossed the cloth onto another chair and turned it around. A figure had been painted directly on the flattest side of the bark. In dark paint, silhouetted against the deep reds, pinks, and blues of a dusky background, a bird without feathers flew within the confines of the painting. *Strange looking bird. It almost looks like a ...*

Sal interrupted that thought. “This is what we have seen sometimes at night, since our people came to this valley. They say it lives in the Craggs. They say it eats large animals and stands as tall as some of trees in the forest. They say...its breath is like flame.”

To be continued...

A Dragon?

“Oh, come on. There’s no such thing as Dragons.” Callie tittered with a wave of her hand. Sal slowly lowered the picture out of sight behind the table and sat down. He considered her for a moment. She saw his eyes moving, apparently, looking at the features of her face and the depth of her eyes. Callie shifted in her chair and bit her lip and then gave him a look as if to say *what?*

“Miss Callie. Do you remember the tales of mythical creatures in the bible?”

“You mean like angels, and demons, and such?”

“Yes. And in the book of Revelation. A Dragon?” Callie nodded, and then nodded once more with deliberation as she understood.

“I see. So are you saying the days of rapture have arrived?” Callie said in a flippant tone.

Sal nodded with an almost condescending look on his face. “If you believe in your bible, then is this not possible?”

“Anything is possible I guess.” Callie settled back into her chair and sat with her arms laid across her lap. “Ok. So how can I see this *Dragon*?”

Sal raised the picture again and pointed to the full moon at the upper right hand corner. He raised his eyebrows as he looked up towards the unseen, cloud-covered sky. Then back to the picture.

“Only on full moons? Ok, When is the next one?” Callie leaned forward with interest.

“Tomorrow night. You will see.” Sal reached out his hand as if to help her stand. “Come to my shop tomorrow after seven o’clock. We will go and see him together.”

Callie arched her brows and clucked her tongue. The last thing she wanted to do was miss the convention, and staying in Dunsmuir two more nights would cause her to be late for the first day. She brought out her cell phone and called the garage to see if her car would be ready. The attendant said the delivery truck was delayed and would be there an hour before they closed. He wouldn’t have time to do the work since they already had too many repairs to do. Ted promised the car would be repaired first thing in the morning. She thanked him and shrugged as she dialed Tami’s number next. She mouthed *sorry* to Sal and he nodded. Tami. Although disappointed she understood her situation and apologized for getting her into this mess. Callie described the recent events in Dunsmuir and promised her a story to make up for the loss of time. Tami agreed and they said their goodbyes.

“All right Sal, I’m yours for tomorrow evening. Don’t make me regret it,” she said, a playful look on her sinking brow.

Sal smiled wide, revealing his crooked teeth and satisfied demeanor. They continued their conversation until the rain started again and Callie went to the garage to drop off her car. The attendant assured her they had received the parts for her car and she gave him the keys. She walked back to the bed and breakfast and relished in the comfort of freshly made bed.

She didn't intend to sleep so late. Either the fresh mountain air or steady dash of rain on the awning outside her room made for a deep night's sleep. Callie pulled on a pair of shorts and slippers and ran to gather the remains of the continental breakfast. A small croissant and an over-ripe banana. Great. At least there was still some coffee. She snapped a cover on her coffee, ran back to her room, washed up, and wrapped her hair in a pony tail.

Running out into the crisp morning air, Callie looked down the street towards the garage in search of her car. She hoped to see it in the lot, indicating it had been fixed. She couldn't see it anywhere and slowed her pace.

As she walked up to the garage, she noticed her car still sat in the stall, hood up, a mechanic practically laying on top of the engine. She rolled her eyes and sighed as she marched up to the man invading her car. She could hear a ratchet sound and a slight curse as the mechanic stepped back away from the hood and stood up.

"Try it now, Danny." He shouted to another mechanic seated behind the steering wheel. The car cranked slowly in protest then finally roared to life. Danny revved the engine while the other mechanic looked into the radiator neck with a flash

light. After a satisfied nod, he replaced the radiator cap and slammed the hood shut.

“Hi. Is this your car?” Callie nodded with relief. “We just finished. Danny, take it out front for her.” The one called Danny waved from the driver’s seat and backed out slowly from the stall.

“Sorry it took so long. We had to flush the radiator ‘cause it needed it badly. We also replaced the clogged air filter which can cause it to overheat. Now it runs like a gem. Even for an eighty-five. Come on inside and we can get this settled.”

After signing paperwork and swiping credit cards, Callie raced her car down the quiet road towards Castle Crag. Within a few minutes, Callie pulled into the park area for the campgrounds. She parked in the first space she found, gathered her notepad and digital camera and started walking around the entire site.

Callie walked around for over an hour before she finally made her way up one of the trails. She stopped to catch her breath and decided to take some photos of Castle Crag and the surrounding area.

As she snapped photo after photo, the audio on her digital camera releasing digitized camera clicks, she felt as though she was being watched. Paying close attention to her peripheral vision, she continued to take pictures as if nothing had caught her attention. But it did.

Her instincts proved to work in her favor. She caught movement in the corner of her eye and she swung the camera in that direction, still snapping pictures as she attempted to catch what she saw. She finally stopped when she saw the old man staring at her with a startled look upon his wrinkled features. She pressed the menu button on her camera to disable the sound and took more photos in silence.

“Oh! Hello again,” Callie said, feigning innocence as she lowered her camera. She kept her finger on the capture button and continued to face the lens at the old man.

“Greetings Miss Callie,” he said careful not to stare at her camera. “What brings you to my neck of the woods this time?”

“It’s a beautiful day.” She thought quickly. “Um, what are *you* doing here?”

“I live here, my dear. I have a cabin not too far.” He gestured indirectly.

“I see. Um. How well do you know this place?”

“Better than anyone here, ‘spose. It has been my home for a great many years,” he said with a deep smile that creased the lines below his cheeks. “Yes, a great many years,” he repeated with the emphasis on *great* and *many*. He gazed at the forest with great respect which reflected in the deep lines on his face.

“What do you think of my home, Callie?”

“It’s beautiful. If I didn’t already live in Los Angeles, I would love to stay here,” she said truthfully. Then she brightened. “Oh, I never caught your name, sir. You already know mine.” She reached out and offered her hand.

“Miss Callie, my name is Stanley. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” He took her hand and bowed.

Callie nodded in response and then lowered her eyebrows in disappointment. Would’ve thought he would say *Gandalf* or *Merlin* or *something* at least!

“Actually it’s not my real name.” Stanley said in response to her thoughts. “I just liked it. Didn’t care for my original name when I was a child.”

Callie nodded again. “I see. What was your name when you were a child?” She asked.

Stanley chuckled and shook his head and waved his hands at her. “Ah, it’s not important. Come. Let me show you the natural springs here.” He started towards one of the trails before she could protest and, with a shrug, followed his lead.

After walking for almost fifteen minutes in silence, Callie cleared her throat to speak. Stanley stopped abruptly and turned towards her. “Do you need to rest?”

“Well, maybe for a minute. I’ve already been walking around the area for some time. How long have you lived here, Stanley?” She leaned against a large boulder and fiddled with her camera.

“A long time. Have you ever been here before?” Callie shook her head. “Well you are in for a treat. Most people don’t know this, but the crags...” he gestured towards the rough mountain. “Is hollow.” He placed a hand alongside his face. “Has a lot of natural water inside and there is so much space, you could put ten families in there comfortably,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

“There isn’t anything about that, in town, or in the tour books,” she said cocking her head in disbelief.

“No there isn’t.” And he jabbed a thumb towards his chest. “I am one of the few who know about it. Most everyone else thinks it is only a myth.”

“Why are you telling *me* this?” She began to worry, now. The sun settled deeper in the late afternoon sky. She intended to keep her promise and meet Sal for

their moonlight adventure. *Why did I trust these people? It seems so odd to meet a perfect stranger, in the dark, in a campground...at night...in the dark.*

“You’re a reporter, right?” Stanley said.

Callie stood straight and fumbled with her camera. *How’d he know I worked for a newspaper?*

“Thought maybe it was time I let the secret of Castle Crag be known. The Native Americans that live here have already given me their blessing.”

“Are you sure about that? I don’t think the Native Americans would like people knowing about their sacred grounds. You’ve seen what people have done to other ones.” Callie frowned at the old man.

“I appreciate your concern, Callie. If you want more proof, ask your friend Sal.”

“Ask me what?”

Callie jerked as she turned to face the familiar voice. “Where did *you* come from?”

“You said you wanted to meet me here to watch for the fire bird.”

“That’s tonight. Isn’t it tonight? You’re early, it’s still light outside.” Callie exchanged glances between the two men.

“Why wait?” Stanley said.

Callie threw up her hands and gestured towards the Crag. “Why indeed. Lead on, gentlemen.” She felt a little better. It wasn’t that dark. Yet.

They walked for two hours straight, but it seemed an eternity to Callie. She stopped to lean against a rock while the two men continued up the path chatting quietly. She removed a shoe and shook out the loose pebbles and dirt that threatened to ruin her pedicure and made the bottom of her heel sore with a blister.

“Hey guys, wait up!” she shouted.

They both stopped and turned to each other with a grin. They took their time walking back to her, amused looks on their faces as they watched her rub her feet.

“What? This is a hard trail to follow. I’m a city girl, remember?”

“Yes we do.” They said in unison. Callie scowled at them and replaced her shoe. She then looked up at the darkened sky and saw the full moon lifting its bloated orange image above the distant mountain range. She sighed in awe and removed her camera from its case. She squared her field of vision on the viewing lens so the moon centered between the yellows, oranges, and reds of the sunset.

“You know, the size of the moon is just an illusion.” Sal said.

“I know.” She did not. “I just wanted to get some pictures before the sun completely sets.” She added. Moving about the trail Callie began snapping photos of the red sky and silhouetted mountain range as well as the moon herself.

“So Stanley. Tell me a little more about yourself. What do you like to do?” Callie said.

“Well, I like helping people around the trails. People get lost so easily around here. I believe it’s because they have lost their connection to nature.”

“Really? I would think living here would improve that.”

“There are other things to stimulate the mind now, such as television, cars, material items, cell phones.” He gestured towards her camera. “You know.” His voice carried a melancholy tone.

They walked for another thirty minutes before Sal held up his hand to stop them. He kneeled close to the ground, looked at the soil, and then pointed through the trees.

“Look there. There he is.”

All three peered into the forest and leaned forward to look at the object. In the dim, dusk light, they saw a stag walking through the forest past the stream. His antlers were fully grown and his coat thickened from the growing cold. Callie huffed expecting to see something more spectacular. They watched the large stag a few minutes before walking back towards the Craggs.

With a sliver of a deep orange light left along the mountain range, they finally reached the base of Castle Craggs. Callie leaned back onto her heels and raised her head as high as she could before straining her neck to look up at the craggs. She could only whistle in response and watched as Stanley placed his hands along the stone face.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Almost -- overpowering.” Callie said in a whisper.

“Shall we go in?” Sal asked.

“In?” Callie said in surprise. “I thought you guys were joking about the crags being hollow.”

Sal and Stanley glanced at each other with a smirk, then Stanley raised his hand palms up from his sides and brought them to rest above his head. A sound like stone thumping against stone startled Callie and she spun around to look at the face of the crags. She stumbled backwards, narrowing her eyes in the pale moonlight, the pungent scent of pine filled her lungs as her breath became labored.

Her jaw dropped as she watched a portion of the stone face crack and fall away. *Am I dreaming? Is that a door?* The stone door continued to open, small pebbles and dust clattered down the sides and onto the hard soil. The sound stopped and Sal walked into a narrow, dark opening.

“Sal?”

He vanished.

“Come on in, Callie.” Sal said from the darkness.

Stanley waved to her to follow and disappeared into the darkness as well. Callie stood still for a moment and called to them once more before moving slowly towards the dark cleave. She opened her mouth to call to them again when a flash of light from a torch lit the interior of the doorway. She could see Sal and Stanley standing just ten feet inside and they waved to her again.

“This is incredible,” she breathed.

She clicked her flashlight and aimed it into the doorway while she walked inside. Beyond the doorway, below where they stood, appeared to be a long, dark hall. Even the light from her flashlight and the torch wasn't enough to see more than twenty feet. Stanley held his torch against an object on the wall and a dozen torches lining the hallway lit up at the same time. Callie gasped and stared at Stanley incredulous.

“You sure this is a good idea, Stanley?” Sal asked.

“Yes, of course I am sure. The people need to know.” He stated and marched down the hallway. Sal shrugged and motioned to Callie to follow.

“What...what *is* this place, Sal?” Callie said clutching her flashlight against her chest.

“It is very old. It has been here as long as the crags.”

Callie peered down the hallway in search of Stanley, but she couldn't see him. She gave Sal a questioning glance and Sal started walking further down the hallway in response. Callie stared wide eyed at the walls and torches as she tried to keep up with Sal.

More torches appeared to flare past the end of the hall. Callie could see where the hallway ended and bore to the right. Sal stopped before he reached the turn at the hall and held his hand up to Callie.

“What you will now see has not been seen by anyone in modern times, save only a few of us. What you will witness must be kept as sacred as any private secret

you may now hold, and held, with great respect.” Callie nodded slowly as she stole glances around the corner. All she saw was another turn in the hallway. “Do you understand?” Sal said. Callie nodded again. “Come.”

Sal moved around both turns and stopped again at another doorway, this one made from a thick, rotted wood, covered in dozens of hieroglyphs and other symbols. She saw more around the frame; most of which Callie did not recognize. She knew they were not Egyptian, and the lines dissecting each other did not depict any known alphabet she had ever seen. Sal pushed the door open and it creaked on unseen hinges. The creaking echoed for several moments throughout the halls before subsiding.

Stanley’s voice echoed from within the chamber that Callie could see beyond the doorway. Only two torches danced along the walls near the door and Stanley talked to Sal for a moment while Callie looked closer at the symbols. Sal tapped Callie on the shoulder and held his hand out, beckoning her to enter. When she walked past the doorway and stood completely within the chamber, she drew in her breath at the sight before her eyes.

Four torches bathed the huge chamber in a golden glow. She could see more symbols on the walls in a striated pattern. The flicker of the torches cast shadows that caused the engravings to dance on the walls. The rectangular shaped room stretched high and the walls appeared to be made of a dark gray stone with veins of white ribbons stretching in all directions. She looked down and the floor matched the walls except for a huge carpet directly in the center of the chamber. Four tapestries hung against the walls, so tall they disappeared into shadows along with the walls. Callie peered upward but couldn’t see into the darkness; the torch light further impeding her vision like trying to view stars in the city. Against the northern-most wall sat a long, tall, wooden table that appeared to be made of oak. The table contained several candles, all lit, set in different sized holders.

“Welcome to my home.” Stanley said from the glow of the chambers. She looked down just in time to see him bow.

“This is where you live? It’s magnificent.” Callie said. She smiled wide while still clutching the flashlight to her chest. “But hardly a cabin in the woods, Stanley.”

Stanley chuckled and swept his hand over the ground. “Well, yes, I think so. Come. Let me show you the rest.” Stanley reached out his hand to guide her.

Callie looked closer at the walls and realized she didn’t see any doors other than the one they walked through. She didn’t see any windows either. *Well of course, they were inside a mountain, duh.* But, now she saw three more doors, one at each wall. Stanley led her through the west doorway and another torch flared as she entered. She hadn’t thought of asking how the torches lit themselves.

She noticed this room appeared to be a kitchen of sorts. An old fireplace with soot covered walls and a metal structure within appeared to hold a large pot. Other pots and pans, utensils, and cookery hung on the walls or on racks above their heads. A deep sink sat in the center of the room where a set of light gray plates sat.

“What do you think, Callie?” Stanley asked.

“How did you...?”

“It took some time to create this space. I cannot take all the credit I’m afraid. I had some help. Would you like to meet her?”

So Stanley isn’t alone. He has a wife. Callie only nodded and looked around the kitchen while peering into the next chamber. Well of course he had a wife, why not? I mean after all, Stanley didn’t look like the dish-washing type. They walked

by a couple of rooms that remained dark. No torches burned in them as they did in the rooms they had entered. Callie figured they only came on when people walked inside. How did they come on by themselves?

A deep resonating sound came from the largest, central chamber. Callie spun on her heels to look but could only see Sal standing at one end of the room, staring up at the ceiling.

“Callie. I would like to introduce to you, not only my helper, but my best friend as well.” Stanley backed into the large chamber and held his hands palms up towards the ceiling. “Be not afraid of what you are about to see.”

His statement made Callie afraid anyway. She slowly moved into the great chamber and followed their eyes towards the ceiling. At first she saw nothing. Then from the shadows she saw what looked like a huge lizard tail, yellowish green in color underneath, a deep, forest green on top. She couldn't tell for sure in the dim torchlight. She gasped. The tail descended further into the light along with two legs and foreclaws that dwarfed her in size. The figure grew larger and closer and now she clearly saw the skin was covered in scales upon more scales. They seemed to move with a life of their own, draped over the rippling muscles beneath the hide. She stepped back in fear, backing up against a wall and moving alongside; her hands searched frantically for a doorway. Any doorway.

She heard what sounded like slaps of cloth, like when you shake out a large bed sheet when you drape it over the mattress. Only it was much louder than a bed sheet. She blinked when a sudden burst of wind blew down against her and dust blew into her eyes. She blinked again and wiped at her eyes to remove the particles and they teared up in response. When she could open her eyes and see clearly once again, she saw, standing before her, the massive presence of a living, breathing Dragon.

Several more torches lit the great chamber and she could see the Dragon with more detail and looked up to see a loft high above the chamber floor. Callie assumed the Dragon descended from the loft; practically invisible in the darkness. She caught her breath, waited for it to attack. It did not. It merely stood there on all fours, green, scaly, and as tall as the roof of her house. She wanted to run but didn't know where and her knees buckled. Then she heard the voice.

"Do not be frightened, Callie Whitman. We are not here to harm you." Her eyes rolled from side to side, searching for Stanley. He walked from around the Dragon and stood by her side. She stared at him, wide eyed and shook her head. *How could this be? Am I dreaming?*

"Callie Whitman, meet Bestorex, my friend and companion for nearly two thousand years." Stanley said. His voiced echoed in the chamber as if god himself spoke from above.

Callie looked up into the Dragon's deep, yellow eyes and nodded. She realized the voice who told her not to be frightened was the Dragon's as she spoke again.

"Well met, Callie." The Dragon bowed her large head.

Callie bent down slightly as if to avoid being attacked by the Dragon's head. Then she stood up straight and nodded to the Dragon. "Pleasure to....Nice to....meet....you." On the last word, Callie rolled her eyes and promptly fell to the ground.

"Oh dear," said Bestorix.

Callie awoke in bed, yawned, and stretched as if she had slept for more than a day. Her eyes darted about at first as the last image she remembered was that of a large Dragon standing before her in an ancient and dusty stone chamber. She reached out in the dim light and felt the pillow next to her. She smiled and sighed, must have been a nightmare. Or just a really weird dream. Couldn't have been real, after all Dragons don't exist, neither do wizards. Gotta stop watching so much sci-fi.

She stretched again and sat up in bed. She wiped her face with her hands and sighed again, feeling relieved, and more than ready to take a shower. She smiled at the simple glow of the nightlight in her room and realized it must still be dark. *Wait...a candle?*

"I am glad to see you are feeling better." Callie turned her head around to face the voice behind her. Stanley stood in the doorway to her room now wearing what looked like a cloak, a simple, cotton shirt, and baggy, dark red breeches.

"Oh my god," Callie said in a whisper.

Stanley nodded and reached his hand out to her. "Yes my dear. This is all real. Do not be afraid. We are friends."

Callie stood and walked around the bed watching Stanley and glanced at the chamber beyond where he stood. She shivered a bit and hugged her arms to her chest. Stopping a few feet in front of Stanley, she ignored his gesture and he dropped his hand. Stanley walked out into the large chamber and turned to face the door, waiting for Callie to emerge. Callie moved towards the doorway, and

peered into the darkness. She jumped when she heard a loud hiss like steam rushing through a vent.

“Please come out, Callie. We wish to talk with you.” Bestorix requested.

Callie looked up at the Dragon from the small doorway. “How can you be real? Dragons do not exist. Dragons don’t *talk* either.”

Bestorix flapped her head and lowered her neck so Callie didn’t have to look up at her. “I am the last of my race. There may not be others that I know of, but I am very real. You see this with your own eyes. Touch me if you wish.”

For reasons Callie could not explain, she took Bestorix’s word to heart and reached over to touch her face. She gently slid her hand across the smaller scales on her jaw and jerked her hand away for a moment before placing her hand on her skin again. She rubbed her hand along the bottom jaw and up the side of her head to the horn above her snouth. Callie brought her hand back and covered her face with her hands. Tears ran from her eyes and she giggled. Bestorix gave her a puzzled look and glanced at Stanley.

“I’m sorry. Ever since I was a kid, I *loved* Dragons. I used to draw them and read books about them. But when society tells you over and over that Dragons don’t exist, well, you begin to believe it. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you!” she said and she flung her arms about the Dragon’s head.

Stanley walked over to Callie and placed an arm around her. Callie stepped back and hugged Stanley. “So *you* must actually be Merlin!” she said with giddiness.

“No my dear. No one of such a high ranking. I am a wizard, yes, but my real name is Tuireann the Green. I was once council to many kings and queens. I was healer, magician, and friend.”

Callie stepped back and looked at his face; every wrinkle, his gray eyes, long crooked nose and thin lips. She followed the length of his white hair and beard and finally his decorative cloak. "How long has it been?"

"I have existed for over two thousand years. I was already old when Bestorix came into my life. She is almost five thousand years of age. Between our magic and knowledge of herbs and astrology, we have lived for all these long years in hopes of one day becoming a part of a world that would no longer scorn our kind."

"So why now? I can tell you that many people would be happy to see you both, but there are even more who would fear and loathe you. It may not be safe."

"We understand this. I ventured out into the woods many years ago and met Sal here." He nodded toward the Native American who replaced a candle into a holder. "He was just a lad at that time and he took me to his people and they accepted me as one of their own. I became their healer, medicine man, and, much later, I introduced them to Bestorix."

"Up until then, it has been a long and lonely life for us, hiding within the crags and building the chambers here in which you stand. With Bestorix's help, we made a comfortable home for ourselves. The local Native Americans treated us well and at the same time kept our secrets. In return, we kept them safe and kept watch over this land. Until the settlers arrived that is, then many of us went into hiding for many more years."

Callie blinked as if she just awoke from a deep sleep. She wanted to believe everything but her logical mind battled to stay on top. Her heart fought to accept this and finally urged her to speak. "Tuireann the Green. Bestorix. I am honored you would place your faith in me. How may I be of service?"