

## THE LIVING LIE

Alice leaned on her walking stick and gazed at the landscape of mesquite bushes and cactus. She chastised herself, "*Lost is for idiots, lost is what happens when you are ten years old, not seventy.*"

In disbelief, she shook her sweaty head. A film of heat undulated above a carpet of orange poppies and purple lupine.

*May is my problem.* she thought, *the wildflowers drew me out. I got turned around.*

She focused her camera toward a flower-tipped saguaro.

A ruby throat-ed hummingbird drawn to a red tipped ocotillo drew her attention next. She snapped a dozen shots of the bird hovering and swooping, its long beak dipping into trumpet shaped flowers. Other than the whirl of the camera, the only sound was the hum of bees and a hawk's screech overhead.

*Finally back on my feet after Frank's death,* she thought. She wiped her forehead with a red bandanna. *Get with it girl, let's climb up on that ridge and get our bearings.*

The air was oven-hot. She hiked for three hours and in exhaustion, stopped and sat under a palo verde tree. "What's wrong with me? It's like I've never been in the desert before. I'm an old fool." She took off her backpack, retrieved a bottle of water, and sipped it slowly.

Squinting into the last rays of the sun, her lip trembled as she spoke to Frank, "You always were afraid I'd get lost. I'm in a bit of trouble now and I don't mind saying I'm scared. Wish you were here. I feel like an old coyote gone loco, but I can hear your voice telling me to shape up and make a plan, so I'll try."

Alice spread the contents of her backpack on the ground and took stock. There was a peanut butter and honey sandwich, an orange, a bottle of water, a book of matches and a large plastic bag. She picked up the plastic bag. "I'll use this for warmth tonight." *The sun will set in an hour or so, I'd better see what I can do for a fire.* Alice collected a stack of dry wood and built a fire in a clearing by the palo verde tree. The burning mesquite smelled like cinnamon and moss. The only light in the west faded to a thin band of orange. She made a neck hole at one end of the garbage bag and two for her arms and slipped it over her head. She sat near the fire hugging her knees. Trying to calm herself she thought, "*I'll be okay, I just have to make it through the night and Ned will come looking for me. I can do this.*" Exhausted from the daylong hike, she folded her backpack into a pillow and lay down on the hard ground listening to coyotes howl in the distance.

Alice fell into a dream. She floated above the desert with Frank. He held her hand and said, "Sorry Alice, I should have told you." Alice mumbled in her sleep, "Told me what?" He just shook his head, but it did not matter. They witnessed a sunset turning from orange to lavender with fingers of gold reaching into the evening sky. Frank put his arm around her and said, "Alice, I will always love you."

She woke with a start and sat straight up rubbing her eyes. It was dark and her fire had burned down to red coals. An owl hooted in a cactus burrow. A tall Navajo woman stood beside her wearing a woven skirt and a thick cotton shirt covered by a wool serape. Her hair hung in gray braids to her waist. She put her hand on Alice's shoulder. "My name is Haseya. Are you hurt?"

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"No, just tired. Glad you found me. My name is Alice Jensen. I got turned around. Stupid, really."

The Navajo woman bent down and added sticks to the fire and pulled a red and black blanket out of a cloth sack. Alice pulled the black plastic bag over her head and the woman wrapped the blanket around Alice's shoulders, adding, "You'll be safe now."

Alice leaned toward the warmth of the fire, feeling relief. "My son Ned must be worried. He's probably searching for me right now. Would you help me find my way out to Highway 60?"

Haseya's high cheekbones and smooth complexion glowed in the firelight. She sat down next to Alice covering her tan moccasins with her long skirt. She stared at the fire. "My son is coming. We'll wait for him. It's too dangerous to hike in the dark, but we will stay with you until dawn."

Alice frowned, "How did you know how to find me and where is your son coming from?" Alice wondered if she was having another dream.

"You are on our land. We saw your campfire from our home on the mountain." The Indian woman pushed the coals with a mesquite stick and added, "He should be here soon. He's been wanting to meet you."

Alice felt uneasy, as if a rattlesnake had coiled and was going to deliver a venomous bite. She stood up and crossed her arms in front of her, but felt dizzy and sat down again asking, "Do you know me?"

"I know of you. Frank spoke of you many times."

"Frank?"

"I guess he never saw the need to discuss us."

Alice searched the ground and found her bottled water. She took a drink but found it hard to swallow.

Haseya stared into Alice's eyes, saying, "Alice Jensen, I was recently widowed too. Your Frank and I were common law. We had a son."

"That's a lie!" Alice's voice went hoarse in alarm. *We* are talking about Frank Jensen. Her hands shook as she fumbled in her backpack for her wallet and his photo. Once found, she held up. "Here he is. See, you mean someone else because we were married for forty years. Not my Frank. I would have known if he had another family. I would have!"

Haseya took the picture and studied it carefully. "That's him."

"I don't believe it. How could you be so cruel?"

Haseya nodded her head. "Frank must have sent you to here so I could see your campfire and meet with you. Did you dream that Frank held your hand and said he was sorry he never told you?"

Alice felt chilled, in spite of the warm blanket. "That was a dream, how could you know that?" She rocked back and forth sensing the terror of her inner loco coyote, bone thin and ready to run into the night, run away from a nightmare she could not wake from. Beyond the campfire, she heard dry branches crackle.

Haseya said, "That is my son, Kai." The young man strode into camp and sat next to his mother, across from Alice. He said, "Father's spirit woke me and said to come find Alice."

Alice thought he looked familiar and asked if they had met before.

"No, but we saw you in town many times."

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Alice stared at Kai. He wore his black hair short and had light freckles covering the bridge of his nose. Startled, she saw an image of Frank.

She thought, "*This is his son.*"

"I brought food." Kai grabbed fry bread from his backpack and a small cook pan. He warmed the bread in the pan over the fire. He folded each tortilla carefully and handed one to Alice with a polite bow. "Please, you must be hungry."

She took the warm bread, but her appetite was gone.

Kai said, "I want you to know that my father was a good man. My mother and I knew about you and Ned and it was hard for me when mother made him leave for good. I hated him for going away. I don't think Frank approved of loving two women. He cried when he left us, we all cried."

Haseya sat back. "We met when I was thirty years old. I was gathering prickly pears for jam when a rattlesnake bit my leg. She exposed her calf to show a scar and tissue damage. I was ten miles from home and knew I could die. I managed to stumble to the side of the highway before I fainted. Frank found me and took me to the hospital. At first, they thought I'd lose my leg, but the doctors, medicine, and your Frank finding me saved my life. He visited me in the hospital every day. He didn't mean to love me, but we had similar hearts. We shared time together for seven years until my mother and father fell ill and I had to return to my people. Your husband was not mine, and he would not leave you and Ned. I had no right to be his woman. I'm sorry. And my family was ashamed when I returned to them with his son and unmarried. Frank must have felt like a snared rabbit in a trap with no way out. I made the decision for him."

Alice took a bite of bread and ate in silence. The truth dug into her like a cholla cactus barb. *All those years he was away from the ranch working, visiting friends and helping neighbors, he was with this woman and his son.*

"When I returned to the reservation, I made him promise never see us again. I missed my family and I know he missed spending time with you and Ned. When he comes in spirit to talk with me, he always says he would like your forgiveness, and mine too."

Alice swallowed hard, "It has taken me years to deal with this terrible grief after his death. I feel like he just died again."

It was dawn. The sun's soft light spilled onto the mountains casting purple shadows across the landscape.

Haseya held out her hand. "We should start walking now."

Kai said, "You can lean on us."

"Wait just a minute." Alice took out Frank's photo and let it fall into the fire. They all watched in silence as it turned to ash, and Kai covered the fire pit with sand.

They walked for two miles. A German shepherd approached them and circled, panting and whining. "Max! Good boy. This is my son's dog." Max wagged his tail and sniffed Alice's hand. She patted his head as Ned stepped into the clearing. "Mom!" He strode to Alice and hugged her. "I was so worried about you. What happened?"

"Such a fuss. I'm all right Ned. I got lost, but they saved me." Alice turned around to find that Haseya and Kai had disappeared into the desert.

"Who, Mom?"

Alice spun in circles and started to cry.

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“It's okay.” He pulled off her backpack and made her sit down. He gave her a sip of water and then picked her up and carried her the rest of the way back.

At the emergency room, a doctor instructed the nurse to begin intravenous fluids to hydrate Alice's body. Ned was told to wait in the lobby as his mother was being examined. He still had her backpack with him, and after a few minutes unzipped the largest pouch making sure her camera was still inside. He found a red and black Navajo blanket and studied the intricate weaving, thinking, *“I've never seen this before.”*

The entrance doors to the hospital splayed open and Ned noticed a Native American man and an older woman. To his surprise, they strode toward him with purpose. “Hello, Ned. We heard that your mother was found near our place and wanted to make sure she was okay. My name is Kai and this is my mother, Haseya.

The eastern sun streamed through the hospital windows and into the lobby as the brothers shook hands for the first time.