

**Excerpt from *A Deadly Wilderness***

**By Kelly Irvin**

A panicked voice penetrated the pain. “Mr. Ray! Mr. Ray!”

Small hands patted Ray’s face. He opened his eyes to a soft, blue sky dotted with tufts of popcorn clouds. Benny’s dirty face filled his vision. He sucked in air and immediately regretted it. The rank odor of decaying flesh made his eyes water and bile burn in the back of his throat.

“What the—” He tried to rise. Pain dug a trench from one ear to the other. He sank back. “What is it?”

Benny leaned in close. Ray heard his agitated breathing and smelled his little boy sweat. The dirt and leaves on his clothes told Ray he’d come down the side of the ravine in a slip-and-slide fashion.

“Marco fell on a—a body. You gotta get up. He’s dead. It stinks. It stinks bad!”

“Whoa! Easy, Benny, easy.” Ray grabbed his hand. “Are you hurt?”

“No! We gotta get out of here!” Thin features contorted with fear, Benny tugged from Ray’s grasp and darted toward Marco, who knelt a few feet away, his back to Ray. “Come on, let’s just go!”

“Marco, are you hurt?” Ray struggled to get up. A sharp pain in his ankle, coupled with the fierce pounding in his head, made the ground rise and fall. He sank back again. “Marco? Are you okay?”

Marco swiveled around. Tears streaked his face, but Ray saw no blood. His amber eyes wide, his gaze swung back-and-forth from the ground to Ray. He’d lost his cap; leaves clung to his shorts and T-shirt. “I landed on him. I touched him. Somebody cut his finger off!”

Marco’s voice cracked. He pointed. Ray followed the line of his trembling fingers. Three outstretched fingers pointed back, a bloody stub where the fourth should have been. The hand Ray had seen before he passed out belonged to a body, spread-eagle and half-covered by brush.

The man hadn’t been dead long—his features were recognizable—but birds and other animals had begun their work of tearing soft flesh from bone as San Antonio’s early summer heat baked the body.

“Move away.” Ray schooled his voice to stay cool and calm. He hated that Benny and Marco had seen this—they’d both had enough tragedy in their lives. First things first: he wanted them away from the

scene, then he'd shift from off-duty friend to on-duty police officer once they were calm. "Come over here so I can take a look at you."

Gaze still on the body, Marco stumbled to Ray, one arm dangling awkwardly at his side. Ray grabbed his thin frame in a hug. "Look at me, Marco. Does your arm hurt?"

Marco buried his head in Ray's chest. Ray felt a shudder rip through him. "Where does it hurt?"

"My wrist." Marco held out his swollen arm.

"Can you bend it?"

Marco's sharp intake of breath answered that question.

"You have to watch where you're going on these trails." Ray kept his tone soft. Marco had enough problems without this.

"I was thinking." Marco's tone mixed anger and shame. "About stuff."

"Yeah, about Mr. Ray and your mom." Benny piped up. Thin face pinched, he'd squatted next to Ray.

"Huh-uh! I was not." Marco gave Benny a look that said hush up. Benny ducked his head, showing his foster cousin his usual deference.

"Don't worry about it. We're gonna be fine." Ray understood Marco's preoccupation. Susana was never far from Ray's mind, either—not since the day the previous year when he'd helped his former partner move his sister from Corpus Christi to San Antonio. "Just give me a minute."

He touched the back of his head where pain pounded like a jackhammer. His fingers came back bloody. His stomach rocked and ears buzzed. He considered his options. With his ankle injured, it seemed unlikely he could hike out. And there was the body to consider.

If his cell phone had survived, and he could get a signal, he'd call Samuel, his boss and Susana's brother. It wouldn't be a pleasant conversation. Samuel was almost as protective of his nephew as Susana was of her son. "We'll have to wait for your Uncle Samuel to get the medical examiner and the evidence guys out here, and then we'll get you to the ER so they can fix up that arm."

“No!” Marco stopped, his lips pressed together. His skin had turned sickly gray. “Don’t call *Tío* Samuel. He’ll worry. I could hike back to the trailhead and get somebody. Benny can stay here and take care of you.”

“No.” Benny looked offended. “You fell down. I’ll hike. You stay here.”

Red spots flamed on Marco’s pale cheeks. “I’m the oldest—”

“Just hang on, guys, no one’s hiking anywhere alone.” The scene was already contaminated. The medical examiner’s investigator and the evidence techs wouldn’t be happy. He needed to move the boys as far back as possible. “Go sit by that tree over there. Benny, why don’t you look around, see if you can find our caps? And my sunglasses. Who knows where they ended up.”

Marco stumbled over to the Ashe juniper on the edge of the strip where they’d landed. Benny, hands on his hips in an unconscious imitation of an angry adult, started up the incline in search of Ray’s San Antonio Police Department cap.

After glancing back to make sure they weren’t looking, Ray let his head drop, jaw clenched, and tried to stand. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Giving up, he sucked in a breath through his mouth to avoid the smell and scooted close enough to get a good look at the body.

Blue shirt, jeans, hiking boots. Dried red stains cascaded down the front of the shirt and jeans. Blood. Too much blood for a simple tumble down a hill. The ring finger on the left hand was missing. Theft of a ring or a trophy? A breeze ruffled the man’s sleeve. Ray had the sudden sensation the corpse might raise its injured hand in a macabre wave.

No. This guy would never move again. Ray slid off his backpack and rummaged for his cell phone. It had survived intact, and he had a signal.

Samuel sounded preoccupied. “What’s up? I thought you were hiking with the boys.”

“I am—was.” Ray explained the situation. “The guy’s missing a finger and he’s covered with blood. It wasn’t an accident.”

“We’ll get paramedics up there for you and Marco.” Always the problem-solver, Samuel’s voice bounced around as if he were already moving. “Salvador is next on the rotation—I’ll bring him with me.”

“I can handle the investigation. Just send out Deborah.” Deborah Smith would love telling her colleagues that her new partner had walked off a cliff.

“You’re on vacation—and you’re injured.”

The vacation hadn’t been Ray’s idea. Samuel had insisted. “So? As soon as the paramedics get me fixed up, I want the case. I’m bored with this vacation thing.”

“We’ll talk when I get there.” When Samuel used his boss voice, there was no sense arguing. “I’m on the way. I’ll call Susana after I assess the situation.”

“I should call her—” Ray could already hear that conversation in his head.

“She’s at the hotline center. She won’t answer her personal phone on shift.” Samuel’s voice held a hint of pity. “Besides, I’m her older brother. She’ll just snap at me. You, she’ll chew up and spit out.”

Ray dropped his cell phone into the backpack and stared at the body. He’d tumbled head over heels several hundred yards, injured his ankle, and blacked out in order to find this guy. No matter what Samuel said, that made it his job to find out how the man had ended up at the bottom of a cliff. Dead and missing a finger.