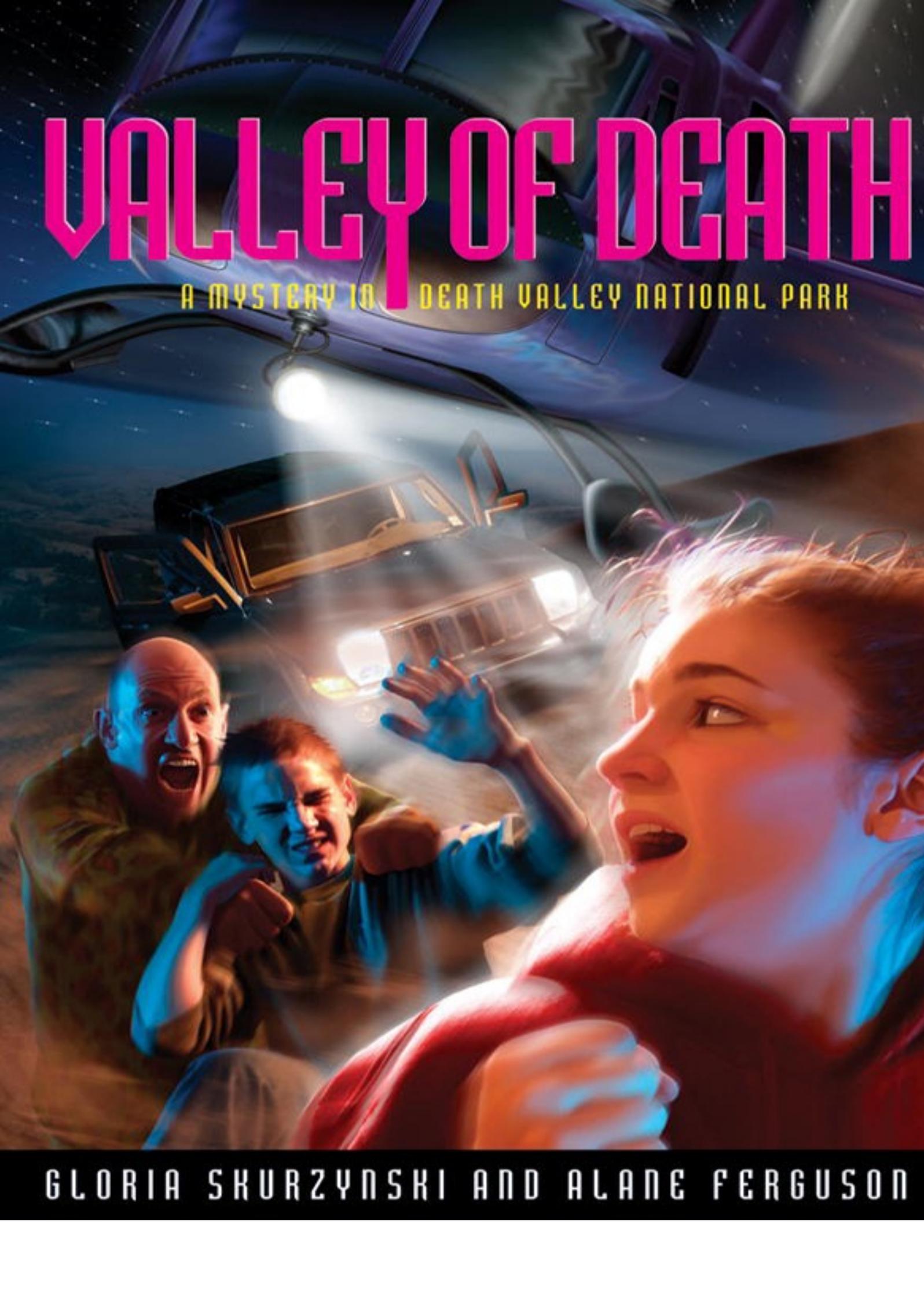


# VALLEY OF DEATH

A movie poster for 'Valley of Death'. The scene is set inside a vehicle at night, with a bright light source creating a strong lens flare. In the foreground, a woman with a shocked expression looks towards the right. In the background, a man and a young boy are also looking in the same direction with expressions of fear and panic. The man has his mouth open as if shouting. The overall atmosphere is one of suspense and horror.

A MYSTERY IN DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

GLORIA SKURZYNSKI AND ALANE FERGUSON



# **VALLEY OF DEATH**

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**A MYSTERY IN DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK**

**GLORIA SKURZYNSKI AND ALANE FERGUSON**



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Gloria Skurzynski and Alane Ferguson

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For Suzanne Patrick Fonda,  
*a great editor and a cherished friend*

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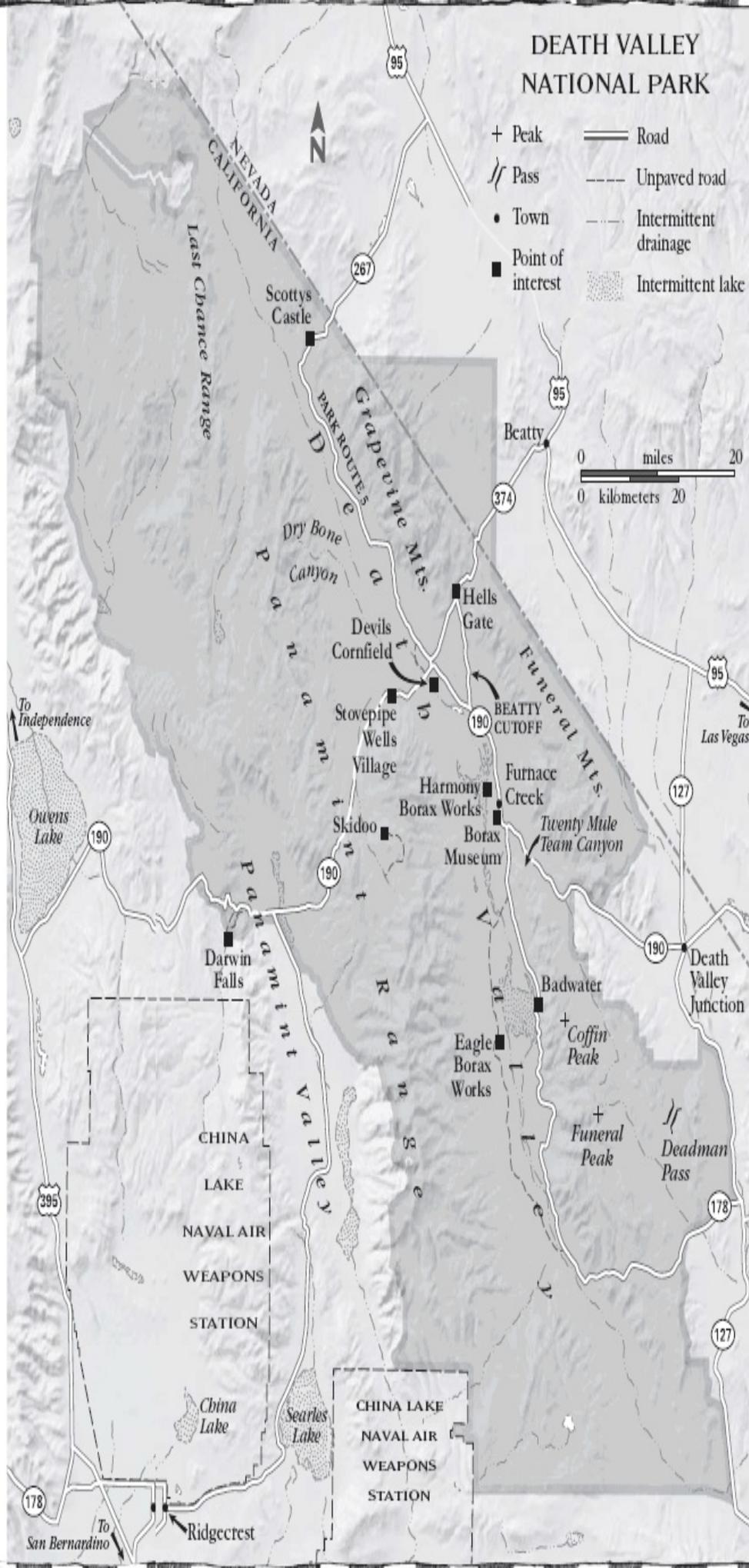
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**PARK DATA**

**States:** California and Nevada

**Established:** as a National Monument, 1933;  
as a National Park, 1994

**Area:** 3.37 million acres

**Extremes:** Highest recorded temperature in North America (134°F); Lowest point in North America (282 feet below sea level); Driest place in North America (1.92 inches, average annual rainfall)

**Natural Features:** Extensive dune fields, salt flats, and fossil deposits; a volcanic crater 600-feet deep; hot springs; and bristlecone pine forests



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**H**e'd been hiding in an abandoned mine shaft, but now it was time for action. The sand whipped his eyes, almost blinding him, but in the distance he could see the girl. She seemed to be searching for something. Good. That meant her guard would be down. If he were careful, she wouldn't see him until it was too late.

Circling so that he approached from behind, he poised to strike. In his camouflage fatigues he blended into his surroundings as if he were a ghost. But he was a ghost who could kill. With a .45-caliber Magnum strapped beneath his fatigue jacket and an eight-inch army knife hidden in his boot, no one had better try to stop him.

Dropping onto the sand, he radioed to his commander, "I see the subject at oh-two-hundred hours. She appears to be alone. What are my orders?"

"Get her. Now."



## CHAPTER ONE

---

Eerie organ music filled the room, floating up to the carved wooden rafters. The music rose and fell, chords crashed and thundered, notes soared to trembling trebles and descended to rumbling bass. No human created the music; no fingers struck the ivory keys. With not a soul near the keyboard, the organ played itself. Ghostly! Jack thought. Like so much else in Death Valley.

Like the girl Leesa, who looked ghostly, with her pale face and shadowed eyes. She was the latest of the foster children sheltered by the Landon family, and for the first time, Jack knew nothing about her. Always before, his mother and father had told Jack and his sister, Ashley, just why each foster child had come to them, why the child required temporary care, and how long he or she would be likely to stay. But not this time. For some reason, Jack's parents wouldn't say anything about Leesa Sherman, except that she was 14 years old and she needed a safe haven.

Abruptly, the organ recital ended. It seemed strange to applaud a mechanical organ that no one had actually played, but everyone did it anyway. "Wasn't that cool, Jack?" Ashley asked. "It was so spooky—I mean, seeing those keys go up and down all by themselves."

Before Jack had a chance to answer, the tour guide announced, "This was the final stop on our tour of Scotty's Castle, or Death Valley Ranch, as the real owner called it. You may exit through this door. Be careful going down the stairs."

The four Landons—mother Olivia, father Steven, Jack, and Ashley—held open the heavy door for one another and for Leesa. Just as they reached the staircase that descended to the courtyard of the unlikely desert castle, chimes began to ring in the clock tower.

"*Bong, bong, bong,*" Ashley intoned with the chimes. "Three o'clock, Mom. I'm hungry, and there's a refreshment stand right over there. Can I buy a smoothie?"

"Not now, honey," Olivia answered. "We need to get to Furnace Creek Ranch, and that's another hour's drive, or maybe even longer on these two-lane roads. After we're registered and settled in our rooms, we'll have dinner."

The Landons, plus Leesa, had flown from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to Las Vegas, Nevada, where they'd rented a Toyota Land Cruiser for the two-and-a-half hour drive to Death Valley National Park. Entering the park right at the California-Nevada state line, they'd come upon Scotty's Castle, an architectural marvel sprouting so unexpectedly in the bleak desert that they just had to stop for a tour. Designed by a millionaire in the 1930s, the buildings were amazing enough—stucco walls, red-tile roofs, the clock tower, and a Moorish-style minaret. Inside, the castle held even more surprises: Expensively furnished rooms with hollow walls cooled by flowing water, so that in the summer, when the temperature in Death Valley itself reached 120 degrees, Scotty's Castle was a bearable 85 degrees.

Throughout the tour, Leesa had stayed silent. In fact, she'd been silent since she came to the Landons two days earlier. If anyone asked her something, like, "Would you like another glass of milk?" she'd answer yes or no. But she never spoke up on her own, not even to say, "Pass the salt."

Leesa, the mystery girl. Ashley hadn't been able to get any information out of her, and Ashley could usually soften up the toughest foster kids. Funny, even though Leesa was 14 and Ashley was only 11, they looked a lot alike—petite, with matching dark hair that Leesa wore in one long braid and Ashley tied back with a scrunchie into a thick ponytail.

Then—surprise!—Leesa asked a question. Almost in a whisper, she inquired, "How did that organ play like that, all by itself?"

Jack's father answered "Ever hear of a player piano? It uses a paper roll with little holes in it

JACK'S father answered, "Ever hear of a player piano? It uses a paper roll with little holes in it, one for each key of music. The organ works the same way, but since it has more than a thousand organ pipes hidden behind the wall, the sound can get pretty powerful compared to a player piano. Did you enjoy it, Leesa?"

All the Landons turned toward Leesa, waiting for her answer. She must have used up all the words she was planning to spend right then, because she just nodded. After a minute, Jack's mother said, "Well then, let's all get into the Land Cruiser and drive to Furnace Creek."

What a name—Furnace Creek! As Jack studied the park map, he found other names that sounded just as harsh: Badwater, Last Chance Range, Deadman Pass, Funeral Mountains, Coffin Peak, Dry Bone Canyon, Hells Gate, Devils Cornfield—place-names that wouldn't exactly tempt a person to visit Death Valley. But the Landons hadn't come on vacation; they were there because Olivia Landon—*Doctor* Olivia Landon, wildlife veterinarian—had been called to help solve the mysterious deaths of the park's desert bighorn sheep.

Once they drove past the leafy green trees and date palms and Joshua trees that surrounded the oasis of Scotty's Castle, the Landons found themselves in the real Death Valley, the hottest, deepest, and driest place in the U.S.A. They passed miles of desert sand decorated with nothing more than rocks and saltbrush and creosote bushes. Then, ahead of them in all that desolation, something raced across the road.

"What was that?" Ashley cried. "Stop, Dad!"

Steven pulled to the shoulder of the highway just as Jack said, "It's a coyote. Look, he's standing right there, staring at us."

Like a welcoming committee, the coyote faced them, his eyes focusing on the Landons in their vehicle, his big ears straight up like radar.

"What a beautiful specimen!" Olivia exclaimed. "That's just about the healthiest coyote I've ever seen."

"Let me grab my camera," Steven said, but Jack had already reached into the tailgate to pass his dad's camera case forward.

The coyote's ears moved forward and then back, as though trying to pick up a signal. His coat—tawny on the head and back, cream-colored on the face and underside—shone thick and full, and rippled slightly in the desert breeze. When he turned in profile, as though posing for Steven's camera, they saw his tail, hanging long, thick, and bushy.

"He's licking his lips like he's hungry," Ashley said. "Since he looks so big and strong, he must find plenty of rats and mice and stuff to eat out here in the desert."

Olivia answered, "I have a suspicion that the exact opposite is true. The way he's acting—standing right there, not moving, not the least afraid of us humans—makes me think he's a little beggar looking for people food. He probably hangs around the road all day waiting for tourists' cars, and I'll bet half the visitors who see him open their car windows and throw him a cookie or peanuts or whatever they have." Olivia shook her head. "It's a bad, bad situation when wild animals become dependent on handouts."

Jack remembered Glacier National Park, where grizzly bears fed by tourists would invade campgrounds to look for food, causing trouble for themselves *and* the visitors. And Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, where the *néné*—geese that had almost become extinct—often got run over when they approached cars for handouts. Neither Jack nor Ashley would ever think of feeding wildlife, no matter how tame the animals appeared to be. They'd had that lesson drummed into them by their parents since they were little.

In a soft voice, Leesa murmured, "My dad says coyotes are varmints and all varmints deserve to be shot."

For a moment everyone stayed silent, surprised by Leesa's comment. Then, gently, Olivia asked

For a moment everyone stayed silent, surprised by Leesa's comment. Then, gently, Olivia asked, "Do you believe that too, Leesa?"

"I—don't know." Her deep-set, shadowed eyes lowered to stare at the floor. "I'm just saying what my dad thinks."

Jack had heard it before, that wolves, coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions were useless predators that harmed cattle and sheep and sometimes carried off little children—that part of it certainly wasn't true. "Our mom and dad teach us," he told Leesa, "that every living creature has its own value, its own reason for being on Earth."

Jack was in the backseat next to the open window, with Ashley between him and Leesa. Touching Leesa's hand, Ashley asked, "You wouldn't want to shoot something as beautiful as that coyote, would you?"

Leesa hesitated, then shook her head.

Starting the engine, Steven said, "We'd better get going. Jack, put my camera back—carefully—where you got it. It's close to four o'clock now, and I want to have us settled at the ranch in plenty of time to set up for pictures. I've heard that the sunsets are spectacular here at Death Valley." Steven, a professional photographer, usually shot pictures of wildlife, but he was always ready to photograph anything else that attracted him.

Throughout the rest of the drive, Ashley kept talking about the animals they'd seen at the national parks they'd visited and how each one had its place in the ecosystem. Then she started on the scenery they were driving past. "Look at this desert," she said to Leesa. "Some people might think it's ugly because there aren't any green trees or flowing streams, but to me it has its own kind of beauty. Like the colors in the rocks. The ripples in the sand...."

Leesa no longer seemed to listen. She stared out through her own window toward the Grapevine Mountains in the distance, dark, sculpted, limestone rock streaked with white calcite. What a strange girl, Jack thought. Where did she come from, and why was she with them? He wished his parents would fill him in on Leesa's background, but they were as silent about Leesa as Leesa was silent by choice. She didn't respond at all to Ashley's nonstop chattering.

Once more they emerged from sandy desert into an astonishing oasis of grass and palm trees and—a golf course! "This is where we're staying," Steven announced. "Furnace Creek Ranch." Before he finished speaking, a horse-drawn wagon rounded a corner and headed straight toward them.

"Pull over!" Olivia told Steven, and then, laughing, added, "I think horses must have the right of way."

It was an authentic, old-fashioned buckboard wagon, the kind people used for transportation a long time ago. Two patient horses pulled the wagon that rolled along on tall, metal-spoked wheels. Even though the Cruiser's windows were closed, Jack could hear the *clop, clop, clop* of the horses' hooves. The driver raised his whip in a salute to the Landons—or maybe he was warning them to stay on their own side of the road.

As they swerved to the right, the Cruiser hit a speed bump, knocking Leesa into Ashley. "Sorry," Leesa said, and giggled a little, the first time Jack had heard anything like laughter coming from her.

When they finally found their rooms and got all their luggage inside, they discovered that their sliding doors opened right onto the golf course. "Hey, I could go out scouting for lost balls and sell them back to the golfers," Jack joked.

"Check over there in front of the golf course," Ashley said. "It's a stable. That's where all the horses are. Can we go riding, Mom? Please?"

"It's too late now," Olivia answered, "and I don't know what my schedule will be like tomorrow. But it sure is perfect weather for riding."

Luckily for the Landons, they were visiting Death Valley during the mild month of February rather than in the searing heat of summer when hiking became dangerous and tourists often got into

warmer than in the scorching heat of summer, when hiking became dangerous and tourists often got into trouble. As always, when the family traveled during the school year, the kids had to bring along their homework and write papers about the park and its flora and fauna. That was an easy price to pay for the chance to see some of the greatest scenery in the United States.

“Which room is mine?” Leesa asked, picking up the shopping bag that held her clothes.

“Ours, you mean,” Ashley answered. “Whenever our foster kid—uh, I mean, our guest—is a boy he shares a room with Jack, and I sleep on a cot in Mom and Dad’s room. If the guest is a girl, we share a room, and Jack stays with Mom and Dad. So you and I will bunk together while we’re here, Leesa.”

“Don’t worry, Ashley doesn’t snore—at least not too loud,” Jack teased.

Ashley punched him in the arm, but Leesa didn’t even smile. She just stared through the window at the gathering darkness.



## CHAPTER TWO

---

“**W**hat the heck is borax?” Jack asked. “I keep seeing it on the map: Eagle Borax Works Ruins, Borax Museum, Harmony Borax Works, Twenty Mule Team Borax....”

Jack, Ashley, and Leesa were wandering through a collection of old wagons, machinery, and an actual locomotive on display in the Furnace Creek Ranch complex. In the restaurant nearby, Steven and Olivia still lingered over their breakfast coffee—Jack could see them through the window, their heads together, talking.

“Jack, if you’d bought the booklet in the museum like I did, you wouldn’t have to ask,” Ashley said. “It only cost me a dollar.”

“Why should I waste my money buying one when you already did? So tell me what borax is.”

Leafing through the pages, Ashley answered, “It says here that borax aids digestion, keeps milk sweet, gets rid of dandruff, improves your complexion, cures epilepsy, dissolves bunions—”

“Give me a break!” Jack hooted. “Nothing could do all that.”

Ashley laughed. “That’s what people were saying about it back in 1890. Too bad you can’t get some for your complexion, Jack. I noticed that zit on your cheek....”

Jack grabbed the booklet and swatted Ashley with it, but it was too flimsy to have any effect. Then he opened it and got interested in the story of borax, a white mineral mined in Death Valley. The best part was about the 20-mule teams—actually nine pairs of mules and a pair of horses—all lined up with a 120-foot-long chain running down the middle of them. The chain connected the team to two huge wagon loads of borax, plus a big iron water tank, with the entire load totaling 36 tons. Jack could imagine those poor mules hauling all that weight out of the valley in the boiling heat of summer. Even worse, sometimes the brakes on the wagons would fail, and the heavy load would thunder downhill on top of the panic-stricken mules trying to stay ahead of it.

“Hey! Give me back my book,” Ashley demanded.

Since Jack was now five feet seven inches tall, he had no trouble holding the book too high for his shrimpy little sister to reach. She kept jumping up to slap at his arm.

“Leesa, come help me,” Ashley begged, but Leesa didn’t want to get involved in a sibling tussle. She backed away to stand in front of one of the huge, old borax wagons on display in front of the ranch. Leesa was short to begin with, not much taller than Ashley, and next to the seven-foot-high rear wheel of the wagon, she looked like a Munchkin.

“Here, take your book,” Jack said, stuffing it down the back of Ashley’s T-shirt. “Mom and Dad are coming.” Sometimes, if he teased his sister a little too much, Jack got in trouble with his parents. Usually Ashley didn’t tell on him, though. She was pretty cool that way. Pretending to be serious, he said, “As I was mentioning, today borax is used to make glass and soap and certain cosmetics, which by the way, I saw you sneaking out of Mom’s purse—”

“*What* cosmetics!”

“Her lipstick. I don’t think there’s borax in that.”

“I put it right back,” Ashley said quickly, blushing a little. “OK, we’re even now. You don’t tell Mom about the lipstick, and I won’t mention your zit again. Truce?”

“Deal.” They gave each other a high five.

By then Steven and Olivia had reached them. “Did you see all the old mining equipment behind the Borax Museum?” Steven asked. “Back in those days, they made machinery large and heavy to do big jobs. It took a lot of muscle power to move those loads.”

big jobs. It took a lot of muscle power to move those loads.

“We’ll come back and spend some time here later,” Olivia told them. “Right now I have a meeting at the visitor center. Unless the rest of you would rather stay here, and I can go the visitor center by myself....”

“We’ve seen this,” Jack told her. “There’s probably other good stuff at the visitor center.”

When they got there, Olivia went into one of the offices in the back, while Steven headed straight for the photo books of Death Valley. Ashley started chatting up one of the interpretive rangers, and Jack was left with Leesa.

Silent as always, she at least walked next to him as they wandered past the displays of Indian artifacts and baskets. At the end of a large room they came to a glass case holding what a sign identified as a desert bighorn sheep, now mounted and on display. Its enormous horns curved in an almost perfect circle from the top of its head to beneath its jaws.

“That’s why we’re here,” Jack said, trying to start a conversation.

“Why?”

“Because my mother is a wildlife veterinarian, so when the national parks have problems with any of their wildlife, they call my mother as a consultant. Here in Death Valley, some bighorn sheep have died, and no one knows why. Just a few died, but there aren’t that many living in the park, and park officials don’t want to lose any of them. The sheep stay high up in the mountains.”

“Oh,” Leesa said.

Great conversation. Well, he tried.

A while later, while Leesa was studying a chart that showed how far below sea level different parts of the park were, Ashley came up to Jack and whispered, “Did you find out anything?”

“About Leesa? No. She doesn’t talk.”

“She talks,” Ashley said. “I mean, she talked to me a little bit last night when we were alone in the room. I think I figured out why she’s with us.”

“Tell me,” Jack demanded. It bothered him when his sister knew something that he didn’t.

Pulling him into a corner of the room, Ashley said softly, “It’s really romantic, like Romeo and Juliet. She’s in love with this boy, a ninth grader like she is. His name is Aaron. Well, she didn’t really say they were in love, she just said they were very good friends.”

“So?”

“So Leesa’s family doesn’t like this boy’s family, and when her dad found a note Aaron had written to her, he got so mad that he wouldn’t let Leesa go to school for three whole weeks!”

“Wow! What did the note say?”

“Nothing, really,” Ashley answered. “Aaron was just asking her to go to a movie with him. Then after she missed all those weeks of school, the principal found out it was her father who was keeping her at home, and he called Social Services. That’s why she’s here with us now, I guess, until things got straightened out with her father.”

Jack was puzzled by that. Lots of people pulled their kids out of the public schools for one reason or another. Home schooling was pretty common in Wyoming. And why would his parents be so secretive about Leesa if that’s all there was to the story?

Olivia came up to them then and announced, “I have five free hours, so we can go exploring. Since the biologists are waiting for a blood test to come back on one of the sheep that died, there’s no sense for us to keep speculating on the cause of death until the test results arrive by FedEx this afternoon at three o’clock. So where would you like to go?”

“Skidoo!” Ashley yelled so loudly that some German tourists turned to stare at her. She clapped her hands over her mouth, then said more quietly, “I’ve been talking to that ranger, and he told me all about this old ghost town called Skidoo. I really want to see it, Mom. We can get there and back in

five hours, no problem ”

five hours, no problem.

“Fine with me,” Olivia answered. “I’ll check with your father.”

Olivia didn’t think to ask Leesa whether she would be interested in seeing a ghost town. It was easy to overlook Leesa, since she always seemed to melt into the shadows. To be polite, Jack said, “How about you, Leesa? Would you like to see Skidoo?” Leesa just shrugged, which maybe meant “OK” or just “I don’t care” or “whatever.”

Once again the five of them were back in the Land Cruiser, this time with Leesa in the middle of the backseat between Jack and Ashley. She sat stiffly, being super careful that not a single part of her would brush against Jack, not even the edge of her sneaker. Jack had the feeling that if she’d had room to move even farther away from him, she’d have jumped at the chance. Not that he was at all anxious to make contact with this girl. Leesa was a high school freshman who probably considered Jack, an eighth grader, far down on the social scale. Besides, she already had a boyfriend, named Aaron. Not that Jack would ever want to be her boyfriend....

His thoughts were interrupted by his mother, who turned to tell them, “This morning I found out something that’s going to interest you, but first I want to give you some background information.”

Trust their mother to create a buildup like that and then make them wait for the exciting part. “Go ahead,” Jack said.

“As you know,” Olivia began, “I’m here because a few desert bighorn sheep have died mysteriously. There were no outside signs of trauma on the sheep, so we’re suspecting it might have been something they ate, or an infection transmitted to them from some other animal. Sheep are fairly sensitive to diseases from other species.”

Ashley leaned forward, interested, as always, in endangered wildlife. Leesa stared straight ahead.

“They found three sheep that had been dead long enough that not much remained of the carcasses—it takes no more than two days for even a large carcass like a sheep’s to be picked clean, down to the skeleton, by coyotes or ravens or mountain lions or all of the above. But they found one sheep in the throes of death, and were able to get a blood sample before it died. That’s what I’m waiting for—the analysis of that blood sample.”

Olivia seemed to be taking longer than usual to reach the point, but from the look on her face, she was getting closer.

“Well, now,” she said, “bighorn sheep don’t have many real enemies, but they do have competitors for food and water—the burros.”

“You mean like the gold miners brought in a long time ago?” Ashley chimed in. “The ranger was telling me all about them. When the mines ran out and the miners gave up and went home, they left their burros behind, here in Death Valley.”

“Right. And the burros multiplied and multiplied and multiplied some more until there were several thousand of them in and around Death Valley. They’re tough, feisty little critters that can live in a climate like this, but when there got to be so many of them, they ruined the area for the bighorn sheep. The burros trample vegetation and pollute the water supply.”

Jack thought his mother should have been a schoolteacher. Nothing delighted her more than explaining things to kids, especially if the subject happened to be animals. Her eyes would light up, and she’d make everything come alive. But maybe that was because she was talking about animals—her real love.

When Olivia handled any species—dogs or wolves, elk or deer, horses or even manatees—her touch was expert and yet gentle. It was as though animals knew they could put their trust in her. And so did the foster kids who stayed with the Landons. They found Olivia sympathetic and understanding.

She continued, “Since burros are exotic animals—” Olivia interrupted herself to explain to Leesa “That means they aren’t native to Death Valley. And because they had a bad impact on the ecosystem and the desert bighorn sheep, National Park policy decreed that the burros had to go.”

“How’d they get rid of them?” Jack wanted to know.

A shadow crossed Olivia’s face. “A lot of them were removed by direct reduction. That’s a polite way of saying they were shot. Others were trapped and removed. Then, in the 1980s, the park joined with the Bureau of Land Management in an Adopt-a-Burro program. People could adopt them and take them home to ride, or for work, or just for pets—but not, heaven forbid, to sell to slaughterhouses.”

Leesa moved forward, listening intently.

“How’d they get the burros, Mom?” Ashley asked. “Did they come here to the park and say, ‘You! The brown burro with the big ears. I’ll take you.’”

Steven laughed at that. “I wish it was that easy. I used to round up horses when I lived on a ranch and they never moved along without an argument.”

In Zion National Park, Jack had watched his father capture a wild horse, but that wouldn’t have qualified as a roundup. “Is that how they get the burros for adoption?” he asked. “They round them up?”

“Uh-huh. Of course, they can’t capture all of them that way,” Olivia explained. “The ones that live way up in the mountains may be too hard to reach and—well, sometimes they still have to rely on direct reduction.”

“Shooting,” Leesa murmured.

“It’s an emotional issue that nobody likes to deal with,” Olivia explained, “but you have to realize that wild burros tend to damage the environment pretty badly, especially for the bighorn sheep...” Then Olivia brightened. “But wild burro roundups save the lives of anywhere from two to three hundred burros a year. And guess when the next wild burro roundup is going to happen—right here in the park. The day after tomorrow!”

She’d finally made it to the exciting part, and it really had been worth the wait. That is, if—“Will we still be here? Where in the park? Can we watch it?” Jack and Ashley demanded, peppering their mother with questions.

“Yes, we’ll still be here, and to your last question, maybe,” Olivia answered. “Or maybe not. These roundups are carefully organized by the park and the BLM, with trained wranglers and helicopters that herd the burros down from the mountains and into corrals. Still, if we’re real lucky, and if we promise to stay far out of the way—” She turned farther in her seat to ask, “Would you like that, Leesa?”

Leesa’s expression was hard to read. “Yesterday,” she began, “Jack and Ashley said that every living creature on Earth has value. Now you just told us that park rangers used to shoot wild burros. So if it’s wrong to kill coyotes, why wasn’t it wrong to kill burros?”

The silence that followed was broken only when Olivia murmured, “It’s complicated. Coyotes are native to the park. They’ve always been here. Burros were brought here. They are the outsiders, and the Park Service feels that exotic species need to be removed.”

“I just don’t see why there always have to be two different sets of rules for everything,” Leesa told them. “I’m never sure which one is right.”

“It isn’t two different sets of rules,” Olivia explained. “It’s one environmental policy. The Park Service has been given a mandate to preserve and protect certain areas of our country for all Americans to enjoy. That means these areas must be kept exactly as nature created them. Nature didn’t intend for burros to live in Death Valley. They’re interlopers—outsiders. They have to be removed, but the removal is carried out in the most humane way possible.”

Leesa didn’t look convinced.



## CHAPTER THREE

---

Peering through the window, Jack stared across the barren valley floor toward the Funeral Mountain in the distance.

What would it be like to get lost in that wilderness, to wander without food or water—no, food wouldn't really be a problem. Before a person could starve to death, he'd die of dehydration.

The thought of wandering in the desert reminded Jack of the gift he'd received from his parents a few months before on his 13th birthday—a perfect present, considering all the traveling his family did to the different national parks. He grabbed his backpack, opened it, and took out one half of the gift. It felt good in his hands, with a nice heft to it. After he pressed the button that turned it on, he sat watching the little red light that pulsed on and off like the beacon on top of a police car.

“What's that thing?” Leesa asked.

“A two-way radio. Which means there needs to be another one just like it for it to work, and I have it somewhere in here...the other...,” he said, rummaging again in his backpack, “...unit.”

It might have been his imagination, but it seemed that Leesa cringed when he said the word “unit.” She sure was impossible to figure out. Oh well....

“Here it is. Now I'll show you how these work,” he said, and tossed the second radio to Ashley. “Face the window, Ashley, and I'll do the same on my side, then we'll talk real low.”

Ashley caught the handheld radio, then, turning it on, she whispered into it, “Go ahead, Jack, say something. Over.”

Jack pushed down the talk button on his unit and whispered back, “Can you hear me? Over.”

“I can hear both of you whispering anyway, so what's the point,” Leesa said, unimpressed.

“Mmm, this isn't a very good test,” Jack answered defensively. “If we were out in the open, we could talk into this thing and hear each other up to two miles away. Wait till we stop somewhere, and we'll give you a better demonstration.”

From the front seat, Steven said, “How about if we stop here to look at those sand dunes? I want to get some pictures.”

“OK, but not too long,” Olivia told him. “If we're going to reach Skidoo, we need to get there and be able to drive back in time for my meeting.”

The dunes were worth the stop. From a distance they looked like Egyptian pyramids: golden peaks, with flat sides rising and then narrowing to a point. Closer, they turned out to be huge heaps of sand sculpted by desert winds. “I'm going out to the closest dune,” Jack said, “so I can show Leesa how these two-way radios really work.”

“You better not, Jack—you're supposed to stay on marked trails in the national parks, and there aren't any marked trails here,” Ashley warned him.

“In this case it's allowed,” Steven said. “Wind constantly reshapes the dunes, so footprints left behind by hikers get blown away before the day's end. Go ahead, Jack. Walk out there so you'll give some perspective to my pictures of the dunes.”

“But make it quick, please,” Olivia told him.

Jack tried to run fast, but running in sand was like being in a dream where you want to get away from something that's chasing you, but you can only move in slow motion. With every step he kept sinking into the soft sand; finally, after he'd gone about a hundred yards, he gave up. “Ashley, do you read me?” he asked into the radio.

“Read you loud and clear. Say something else, and I'll let Leesa hold this handset so she can hear

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