

# THE GAME WARDEN



MARY FLODIN



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# THE GAME WARDEN

**MONDAY MORNING, MAY 1, 1999**

**Corralitos Creek**

**Santa Cruz County, California**

**F**ISH AND GAME WARDEN KELLI CAVANAUGH drove her truck along the narrow, winding forest road. As the half-ton Dodge 4x4 ascended into the coastal mountains, Warden Cavanaugh kept her eye on the creek that meandered from one side of the road to the other through culverts and under picturesque bridges.

She savored the hint of summer in the warming spring morning, feeling good in spite of the Cal Tip call that had brought her up here.

Someone had allegedly built a dam across the creek and was siphoning off water upstream during salmon egg hatching season

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— a critical time for maintaining sufficient water flow for the eggs to hatch and the juveniles to survive the summer. The same individuals were allegedly discharging raw sewage and other effluent downstream — a disturbing allegation, and serious violation of county riparian protection ordinance.

Native Coho salmon, a keystone species critical to the overall health and biodiversity of the redwood forest ecosystem, were on the verge of extinction. It was Kelli's job as well as her passion to protect them.

Fish and Game Warden wasn't just a job, but a lifestyle. She put her whole self into being *Guardian of Our Wildlife Heritage* twenty-four seven, in or out of uniform. She considered it her responsibility to be the voice for all of those creatures who couldn't speak for themselves, to explain to people how their everyday activities could — even unintentionally — have profound, far reaching, and sometimes extremely adverse effects on wildlife and habitat. She wanted every person she came in contact with to understand that everyone and everything is interconnected, through the ecology of the land, to the heartbeat of Mother Nature.

Kelli had grown up hunting and fishing in wild California with her parents and grandparents. When she was twelve, on a fishing trip in the High Sierra with her family, she'd had a life-changing encounter with a Fish and Game Warden.

The tall, strong warden had a gun, a badge, and a cool uniform, and had approached her brothers and her with such authority, she'd thought they might be in trouble. But from the first few minutes the warden spoke with them, they'd felt welcomed into the wilderness, and included in a special group of people that loved and cared for nature.

The warden seemed to know everything about the plants and trees, animals, geology, even astronomy ... And told such fascinating, and sometimes funny, stories about working in the Sierra that Kelli wished they could hang out for the whole trip.

That meeting had been an epiphany. Up until then, Kelli had assumed that, when she grew up, her only work options would be boring, demeaning, indoor jobs. But this Game Warden was a woman! Meeting a female Game Warden set Kelli free. She knew right then she was going to be a Fish and Game Warden, too.

From that childhood vision, her resolution never faltered. She completed her four-year university degree in Wildlife Biology, Fisheries, and Natural Resources Management at Humboldt State with highest honors, and then went straight into basic training at the Academy. She was proud of the fact that, of all the law enforcement training academies, the Fish and Game Academy in Napa ran the longest, most rigorous and comprehensive program.

And she was proud to be one of the 200 game wardens in the state, responsible for protecting more than 1,000 native fish and wildlife species, more than 6,000 native plant species, and approximately 360 endangered species, in one of the most exquisite natural environments in the world — an environment at risk. With 159,000 square miles of land, 36 million people, 1,100 miles of coastline, about 222,000 square miles of ocean waters, 30,000 miles of rivers and streams, 4,800 lakes and reservoirs and 80 major rivers, in addition to deserts, mountains and, of course, urban areas, California Fish and Game Wardens had a lot on their plates, and were understaffed, underappreciated, and underpaid.

*But hey, who's counting?*

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If she transferred to a job in any other branch of law enforcement, she could earn much more, and she wouldn't be putting her life on the line every day in remote locations without any backup. But she loved the freedom she had as a game warden, and the immersion in nature — food and balm for the soul — that she couldn't find in any other line of work.

Kelli checked her watch: 8:30AM. Not a trace of the coastal fog, which often clung like ghosts to the trees in the mornings.

Maneuvering the green Department truck around a bend in the road, she leaned out of the open window and breathed deeply, drinking in the welcoming smells of the forest: sun-warmed resins of Douglas fir and redwood needles, musty mushrooms nestled in the rich duff of the decomposing forest floor, and the cool freshets of the rapidly flowing creek.

All of Warden Cavanaugh's senses were on high alert, as usual. She wore her duty belt fully equipped today, even though it meant she carried about twenty-three pounds of extra weight. While she steered with one hand, with the other she double-checked each item on the utility belt at her hip: her holstered department issue semi-automatic Glock 22, a magazine pouch with two extra clips for her firearm, two sets of cuffs, pepper spray, a Leatherman utility tool, protective gloves, a folding four-inch Buck Knife, and her portable radio.

She'd tucked a small mag light into her pocket, leaving the department issue eight-inch aluminum flashlight and the 24-inch side-handle baton off her belt. Too uncomfortable and cumbersome, and not mandatory carry. Both the eight-inch and the thirteen-inch department issue Streamlights were in the truck, if needed. And the shotgun on the rack behind her was clean, oiled and ready for bear, so to speak.



Although not overly confident, Kelli did feel competent to defend herself. Since completing the arduous Academy program, she'd continued to sharpen her skills in defensive tactics, and had kept in shape through the physical rigors of a job in the wild. She also made a point of regular workouts on her days off. She trained in martial arts, went to a climbing gym, rowed on the bay, honed her aim on the firing range, and partner practiced using all of the equipment on her belt.

But today felt like a day she needed assistance. Something felt off. She scanned along the sides of the road as she drove, trying to suss out what it was about this investigation that raised the hackles on the back of her neck.

There were often days like today, when the other two field wardens in the county were off duty and, as the only Fish and Game Warden working, she alone was responsible for patrolling not just her own South County beat, but also the entire North County and Marine-Yacht Harbor territories. All three wardens overlapped only three days a week. But even then, she couldn't count on getting backup when she requested it.

*I've got to at least try to check in.*

Kelli turned the dial on her Pac system, hoping she could still get a signal from a nearby repeater this far up the mountain. She found the signal from the Loma Prieta repeater and contacted CENCOM — the Fish and Game and State Parks dispatch center. She reported her position and destination, and put in a request for backup. Then she went on the sheriff's channel and put in a request for backup, but she didn't have much hope that anyone would respond from the sheriff's office either, with only six Santa Cruz Sheriff's deputies on duty at any given time to cover the entire county.

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Kelli tapped her thumb against the steering wheel. Whatever she was heading into, she had a strong feeling she didn't want to go in alone.

She lifted her new Nokia cell phone, the first mobile phone she'd ever owned, off its cradle. Reception for these things was spotty, but no harm in giving it a try. She pushed express dial for the number Sheriff Charlie Rosa had given her.

She got his machine. *At the beep, please leave a message.*

"Sheriff Rosa? This is Warden Cavanaugh. Kelli Cavanaugh. I'm responding to a call about some suspicious activity at 30687 Strider Drive, on Corralitos Creek. The location is close to that abandoned meth lab we found last Fall, where the little girl went missing. Something feels wrong out here today, Charlie. Requesting backup."

The cell phone cut out.

*Reception dead zone this far up the mountain. Surprising I got any reception at all.*

As she drove, she continued watching the creek meander from one side of the road to the other.

Kelli slowed when she spotted her destination.

*Meth House.* The warning blinked like a neon sign inside her mind as she cruised by the lot filled with rusted-out, wheel-less cars and trucks, broken glass, tangles of barbed wire, overturned metal barrels, discarded decomposing mattresses, a couch with popping springs, and eroding piles of trash. A loosely nailed-together shack stood falling apart at the waterside.

Kelli parked and locked her truck in a narrow pullout a few feet beyond the driveway, then walked back down the road. She hesitated a moment in front of a "No Trespassing" sign nailed to a redwood tree at the head of the dirt driveway, then stepped onto the property.

Broken glass crunched under her boots. The area felt deserted ... almost. She shivered in the sun.

Nauseatingly strong, bitter ammonia-like fumes burned her eyes and nostrils. Her vision blurred as she teared up and stifled a cough. She pulled a kerchief out of her back pocket and held it over her nose and mouth.

At the end of the drive, Kelli unsnapped her holster, placed her hand on her gun's grip, and cautiously approached a black van parked next to a metal shed.

*Motor off. Hood cold. Empty.*

The door to the shed slumped open. Inside, wire cages — the kind used to transport large dogs — were stacked to the ceiling against one wall. Marijuana plants hanging upside down to dry filled the rest of the shed. The large outer leaves of the plants had been trimmed away, leaving small bright green serrated leaves and two-foot long resinous flowering colas, as thick as a man's arm.

*Prime sensimilla. Probably more than ten thousand dollars' worth.* The shed reeked with the skunky smell of drying pot.

Kelli pulled a small digital camera out of her shirt pocket, and took pictures of the cages and marijuana.

She walked around back of the shed, disturbing a swarm of black flies and wasps. The sickly-sweet smell of blood made her gag. Hanging from a tree were two freshly butchered deer carcasses, blood dripping on the dirt.

*Poaching. Deer hunting season is six months away.*

Flies settled back down on a pile of eviscerated deer organs next to an illegal fire pit. Kelli took photos of the mess.

*At the very least, on top of drug charges, these poachers are going to get hit with a \$1,000 misdemeanor citation, plus penalty*

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*assessments and six-month's jail time, not to mention restriction of their hunting privileges for up to three years.*

When she reached the stream bank, she photographed the illicit dam, the pump, and the discharge pipe, the empty cans, flasks, plastic tubing, and cooking vessels.

*Just what I expected: meth kitchen. They cooked here, and dumped their waste in the creek. So toxic! It'll probably cost more than \$150,000 to clean this HAZMAT site. Gross disregard. Idiots.*

Kelli inspected the area for signs of red phosphorous. *One sniff of that stuff can kill you.*

*Clear.*

*But wait. There's something ... sweet, pungent odor ... eyes tearing up ... ethyl ether? Careful.*

Hand on Glock, Kelli circled back up to the shed, sensing she might not be alone.

*What's going on here?*

*Well-educated chemists sometimes manufacture meth, but no — their lab would be clean, not filthy like this*

Kelli cautiously approached the dilapidated shed, careful not to trip as she stepped around some empty spray paint cans. She squinted at the tags, her face so close to the old metal siding, she could smell the rust.

*Not Hell's Angels.*

She turned her head sideways, puzzling out the calligraphy.  
*MS-13!*

Kelli's pulse spiked; her mouth went dry. *Since when have the Mara Salvatrucha been banging in California?*

Stealthily, she side-stepped to the open shed door and peered in. *Okay, I understand the sensimilla, but what are these cages about?*

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Hair standing up on the back of her neck, she held still, barely breathing, and listened.

*Water running in the creek, nattering squirrel, squawk of a Steller's jay. Normal sounds. Probably no one around.*

Kelli returned to the creek, and knelt to get a better look.  
*Even worse than I feared.*

Grieving over the staggering loss, she leaned over the water to take close-up shots of dead salmon smolts and fingerlings floating on the surface.

*Red flare. Head exploding!*  
*Pain!*  
*White light*  
*Black tunnel closing in*

\* \* \*

**TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1999**

**Corralitos**

**Santa Cruz County, California**

Kelli came to with a stabbing headache, curled in a fetal position on a hard, cold surface. She blinked to make sure her eyes were open. Pitch black. She lifted a hand to her face. No blindfold. But she couldn't see her hand.

*Am I actually blind, or just in a completely dark space?*

When she moved, even slightly, it hurt everywhere.

The smell of stagnation overwhelmed her. She gagged and wretched. Stinging bile burned her throat.

*Need water.* She worked some moisture into her mouth with her tongue, spit, and then swallowed.

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Little by little, she moved her arms and legs. *Pain on top of pain.*

Another wave of nausea.

As she moved, she realized that she was wet where her clothes touched the ground.

*Blood?*

Painfully sitting up, she explored her body for lacerations. *No wounds.*

A sticky stream of something ran down the left side of her face. The crown of her head was wet. She winced, then sniffed the sticky liquid on her fingertips.

*Blood.*

*Head wound. How bad?*

*Dizzy. Concussion? Need to stay awake.*

*The blood on my face is drying, flaking. From the head wound, then — no cuts on my face.*

*This liquid on the ground — not my blood?*

She touched the liquid beneath her, rubbed her fingers together, smelled it. *Something slimy and foul.*

*Where am I?* She listened hard for several minutes.

*A slow water drip. Another sound. Faint. Like a child's whimper.*

Painstakingly, she got onto her hands and knees.

*Concrete floor. Knees hurt. Head spinning.*

Carefully, she stood, rolling up through her spine. Before she could completely straighten, her shoulders hit the ceiling.

Panic and claustrophobia welled up. She took a slow, deep breath and forced herself to stay calm.

Head and shoulders bent, she lifted her arms and felt overhead. The ceiling arched. Her fingers ran into a fuzzy sticky mass.

Mary Flodin

*Spider web.*

She took two steps to the right and bumped against a wall. Then four steps to the left and she touched the other wall. The walls seemed to reach forward and back for a considerable distance.

*A tunnel? Should I start walking? Which direction?*

Suddenly, she remembered her service belt, and her hands flew to her hips. *The belt, with all my equipment.*

*Gone!*

\* \* \*

Kelli moaned and rolled onto her side. She opened her eyes, sat up and held her hand in front of her face.

*Still too dark to see. Or am I blind?*

Her heart raced. She focused on her breathing. Her senses woke to the cold stench in the air, and the wet.

*Must have passed out again. Did someone hit me, again?*

She closed her eyes and tried to recall her last conscious thoughts.

*No. No one's been here. I just passed out.*

Still feeling a little dizzy, she inched her way over to the wall and leaned back.

*Why didn't the attacker just kill me?*

With a start, it occurred to her she may have been raped. She felt at her shirt, her pants.

*Clothes intact, except for this tear on my shoulder. They ripped my radio mic off my shirt.*

*No pain down there.*

She had to pee. Cautiously, she stood. Head and shoulders bent under the low ceiling, she braced her hand against the wall,

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listening intently. The sound of her own breathing rasped loud inside her head.

*Something else. Water dripping.*

She held her breath and listened for a long moment. *Not another sound.*

She had to go, bad. She unfastened her belt, unsnapped and unzipped her pants, pulled down her trousers and panties, squatted, and pissed a long, warm stream. With relief, she noted that it didn't sting.

*No one touched me. Thank God for that.*

She shook herself dry as best she could and pulled her pants back up.

*How long have I been here?*

Gingerly she explored her head wound. *Blood still sticky. Hair matted and stiff.*

She remembered her camera and searched her pockets. *Gone. Must have dropped it when I was hit.*

She tried to swallow, but couldn't. The thirst was suffocating. A jolt of fear ran through her. She had to find drinking water, soon. She had to find a way out.

*I have to move, or I'll die down here.*

*Which direction?*

She took a small step into the blackness, toward the hollow sound of dripping water. Then another step.

Step again.

Suddenly, the ground fell out from under her.

\* \* \*

Kelli tumbled into the darkness, banging, clattering, and pounding against metal. By sheer instinct, her hands grasped for a hold.



She gripped a metal bar with both hands, her feet swinging in nothingness. She dangled over a void. Her arms ached. She struggled to keep her fingers wrapped tightly around the bar.

Stretching out one finger, she touched concrete.

*This bar seems to be solidly pinned into concrete.*

She swung, and her feet hit a dirt wall.

*Below this bar, then, the wall is dirt, not concrete.*

She kicked against it. Chunks of dirt and rock dislodged and fell. The sound cascaded down a very long way before tinkling, pinging, splashing into water.

Kelli swung like a kid on playground bars, and kicked against the wall again. And again, swinging higher. She got purchase. Her feet wedged and took a little pressure off her arms. She knew she didn't have much time before her arms and hands gave out and she dropped like that slide of dirt.

Taking a deep breath, she swung her feet up over her head with everything she had.

She caught the bar with one heel. Holding on for dear life, she worked her foot over the bar until she had one knee hooked around it.

Then, like a contortionist, she worked her other leg up and over the bar. Hanging upside down by hands and knees, she rested and caught her breath.

Blood rushed to her head. A wave of nausea and dizziness swept over her.

*Head spinning. Don't black out.*

She fought to stay conscious.

*Breathe. Hold on.*

Water drops echoed inside the cave of her skull.

*There's another sound.*

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The wave of vertigo subsided.

*That sound again, like a child crying.*

Carefully, she shifted the tension in her muscles from her hands to her legs. She pried one hand, slick with sweat, off the metal bar and wiped it on her clothes. Switching, she wiped the other hand dry, then tightened her grip on the bar with both hands.

For a split second, she imagined herself as a bat hanging upside down in a cave. She almost giggled. Just then, a beam of light flashed on the ceiling overhead.

*Light! I'm not blind!*

Flashlight beams cut across the cement walls and ceiling.

*Men's voices. Someone walking down the tunnel toward me.*

Kelli's blood turned to ice.

*Sounds like they're about ten feet away.*

The echoing footfalls stopped.

"Where the fuck is she? Wha'd you do with her, shithead?"

The high-pitched whiney voice made Kelli's skin crawl.

Flashlight beams crisscrossed above Kelli's upside-down perch.

"We brought her down here like you said, *patrón*. She was still knocked out when we left her. I put her right over there myself." *English speaker with a Mexican accent.*

"Did you touch her?"

"No one fucked her, *patrón*, I swear. No one touched her. We left her down here just like you said." *A second Mexican accent.*

"You stupid bastards." *The one called patrón again. No accent, so a native English speaker, but with that weird high-pitched whine.* "A fuckin' game warden. She would've just gone away if you hadn't of whacked her. Now we've got a balled-up mess here."

“*Pardón, Señor*, but you said your *cliente rico* wanted a white woman to go with the *niña blanca*.” *A different voice, speaking Spanish.*

“White woman, yeah. But a game warden is like a fuckin’ cop. You don’t kidnap a cop, you stupid son-of-a-bitch.”

“I’m sorry, *Señor*.” *The Spanish speaker, again.* “She must of come to and found the way out.”

“In the dark, she could’ve gone that way and fallen over the edge.” *Speaking English, with a different accent. Salvadoran?*

“If she did, all our troubles are over.” *Spanish speaker.*

*Men’s laughter.*

“If she found the way out, she couldn’t of gotten far.” *A second Salvadoran.*

“Let’s go. We’ve gotta find that bitch.” *Whiney voice again.* “She’s gonna have to disappear, for good.”

Kelli listened to the echoing footfalls recede.

*What incredible luck they didn’t shine their flashlight down on me!*

She shivered.

*Six voices. If I’d gone the other way along the tunnel, I would have run straight into those men.*

She dried her sweaty hands on her shirt again, one at time, and counted seconds. Then minutes.

*Muscles convulsing. Can’t hold on much longer.*

*A sudden squeal, and a nearby scuffle. Rats!*

*Move! Go for it. Now or never.*

Clinging to the metal bar with hands and knees, she tightened her abs, putting everything she had into a crunching sit-up. Straining, she curled her head to her knees. At the same time, fighting dizziness, she let go of the bar with one hand and reached up, slightly touching with her fingertips the next bar

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she'd gambled would be there. Trembling, she stretched, elongating her torso as much as she could, inching her fingers around the bar. A cramp stabbed her side.

*Ignore it. Push through the pain.*

Grasping the bar with one hand so hard it hurt, she lunged.

Once she was holding on to the higher bar with both hands and sitting on the lower bar, she carefully worked her right heel up under herself. She wiggled it until her whole foot wedged onto the metal, then shifted all her weight onto that foot, and painfully straightened her knee. Leg muscles cramping and spasming, she pulled up with her hands and pushed with her right leg until she could place her left foot on the bar.

Pieces of dried mud from the soles of her boots broke loose and clattered into the water below. It sounded like a long way down.

Kelli took a deep breath and stabilized herself. She was standing on a vertical ladder made of rebar rods cemented into the side of the drop. Her hands firmly grasped the rung above her feet. From here, it was practically a cakewalk to climb back up to the ledge she'd fallen from.

Thankful for the hours spent lifting weights, rock climbing, and rowing on the bay, Kelli pulled herself up over the ledge and rolled onto the wet cement of the tunnel floor. Lying on her back, she caught her breath, and listened. *Water dripping.*

*That other faint sound again, like a child crying.* It stopped. Water dripped in black silence.

Something poked her in the hip. She unzipped her back pocket. *The mag light!*

Kelli stood and switched on the flashlight. She swept its strong beam around the concrete tunnel. She'd seen places like this before. A World War II bunker. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S.

government, convinced that Japan was going to bomb California, built underground bunkers in the mountains all over the West Coast. This had to be one of those old military installations.

From where Kelli stood, the cement floor sloped gradually upward, a slimy green trickle running down its center. She started walking.

\*       \*       \*

When Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Detective Sargent Charlie Rosa got the alert, it hadn't taken him long to assemble a tactical team to assist. He wasn't going to let those two tattooed Salvatrucha demons slip through his fingers again.

Another child gone missing. This time it was the five-year-old daughter of a Corralitos apple rancher. He had a pretty good idea what would happen to this child if they didn't find her soon.

While Deputy Jim Jamison drove the curving road along the creek, Detective Rosa, riding shotgun, studied this new missing child's photo again. Blonde curls framed an innocent, cherub-like face. He put the photograph back in the file.

"We're not going to lose this one, Jim."

The young deputy nodded grimly, and checked his rearview mirror. Two vans followed, carrying the tactical SWAT team and dogs.

"I hope Warden Cavanaugh doesn't scare them off, Sir," the deputy said.

"Cavanaugh's a competent law enforcement officer. She knows how to handle herself. But I doubt she has any idea what she's walking into. Hell, we don't even know if our perps are really there, or what else is going on."

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“So yeah, Warden Cavanaugh’s definitely an extra wild card in play?”

“Yes. I just wish I’d gotten her cell phone message earlier,” said Detective Rosa. “I’m not used to these damn things. Didn’t think about checking for messages until after we got the missing child alert from dispatch.”

“Can’t beat yourself up about it, Sir. That’s what you always tell me.”

Detective Rosa drummed his fingers on the case file in his lap. “Judging from the time of Cavanaugh’s call, she must have reached the suspects’ hidey-hole hours ago.”

“Anything could have happened by now.”

“Right. Worst case, everyone’s gone, and they took Cavanaugh with them — or left her for dead.”

“I sure hope we get there in time. From what I understand about the way these Mara Salvatruchas work, Sir, if they’ve killed her, she won’t be in one piece when we find her.”

\* \* \*

*Crying.*

The sound grew louder as Kelli cautiously made her way up the tunnel. She kept her flashlight off and edged along the wall.

Her hand touched cold metal. *Feels like prison bars. The crying is coming from inside. Is there a guard?*

Kelli froze, and listened. All her senses strained to detect breathing, any kind of pulse or motion, other than the sound of crying.

*Can’t be a hundred percent sure.*

Tucking into a defensive position, she flicked on her light and swept the area. No goons.

Inside the cell, a child, hardly more than a toddler, lay curled up on a cot. She hugged a teddy bear and stared into Kelli's light with huge eyes. Tears streaked and blotched her chubby cheeks. She had a snotty nose. Otherwise, the child appeared unharmed.

Kelli moved the light out of the child's eyes and shined it on herself. She put a finger up to her lips.

"Shusssssh. My name is Kelli. I'm going to get you out of here, sweetie. I'm going to take you home to your mommy. You just need to wait here a little bit longer. Don't be scared. Stay quiet. I'll be right back."

The child hugged her teddy bear tighter, but said nothing. Kelli turned off the flashlight and moved away, up the tunnel.

In the dark, she could feel the slope getting steeper. The ceiling was higher here. After a few minutes, the toe of her boot hit a ledge. Carefully, she stepped back and merged with the wall. *Listen.*

*Silence.*

Ahead, she could see a thin rectangle of light. *A door, with daylight seeping around the edges?*

Kelli clicked on her flashlight. Concrete stairs led up to a doorway. Her toe had kicked the bottom step.

Heart racing, she hurried up the stairs.

She stood in front of an old heavy metal door, with a vertical bar handle. *What if they locked it? What if a guard is posted right outside?* Panic rose in her throat. She took a calming breath.

*Piercing squeal!*

A rat scuttled over her foot.

Her body jerked. She pushed on the door.

It swung open easily. Crouching just inside the bunker, she blinked, momentarily blinded by bright afternoon sun.

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Her vision quickly cleared, and she did a visual check of the area. Shoe tracks in the dirt led down toward the creek.

Something rattled in the brush.

She held her breath.

*Bird.*

Kelli smiled to herself and continued to scan her surroundings.

Built into the side of a hill near the top of the driveway, the bunker was well camouflaged. If you weren't looking for it, you'd never notice it.

Quietly, Kelli closed the heavy door behind her.

*Voices. Down by the creek.*

Kelli reached for the Glock at her hip, and remembered it was gone.

She tucked and ran out of the driveway. Her truck was still there!

Grabbing the hide-a-key from under the back bumper, she threw open the door and released her shotgun from the rack.

The short barrel 12-gauge pump action, when loaded with double-aught buckshot, kicked back hard against her hundred and fifteen pounds, so she didn't fire it unless she had to.

Now, without hesitation, she loaded the weapon. Cradling it in the crook of her arm, staying close to the dense huckleberry and Manzanita brush that lined the drive, she hustled back toward the voices.

*Shouting!*

A scream. Then another.

*Men screaming!*

Horrifying, savage sounds filled the woods!

*A growling roar like a hurricane, like thunder.*

*A roar like an avalanche.*



Shouts and screams of primal animal terror, like nothing she'd ever heard before, shook the trees.

\* \* \*

Shouldering her shotgun, Kelli stalked toward the uproar.

As she moved through the woods, fog swirled, rapidly engulfing the trees like a rising tide.

Sweet, pungent ethyl ether fumes floated on the fog, stinging her eyes.

*If I do have to discharge my weapon, I'll probably blow the whole camp, myself included.*

Chilling tentacles of fog wrapped around saplings, vines, fallen logs, and Kelli. The fog quickly grew so thick that everything around her took on an otherworldly quality.

Just as she stepped to the edge of the clearing, a human head went flying by her. Blood from the ragged severed neck sprayed her face and clothes.

A deafening roar shook her to the core.

She crouched behind a tree and peered into the clearing.

Standing on his hind legs, mist swirling around him, loomed the most enormous grizzly bear Kelli had ever seen. Blood clotted his shaggy fur and muzzle. A cord of intestine dangled from his mouth. Behind the monstrous behemoth, one of the deer carcasses lay on the ground, partially eaten.

In front of the grizzly, the torso of a man splayed out, its head and both arms missing. One leg had landed some distance away; the other twisted behind the torso at an impossible angle. The beast had opened the man's gut with sharp, powerful claws and had scooped out a mass of intestines. The stench of the grizzly overwhelmed the smell of blood and spilled bowels.

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With the heightened perception that comes from shock, Kelli studied a disembodied arm near her feet, its dead skin decorated with tattoos of spiders, skeletons, and skulls. A broken rifle lay in the redwood duff nearby.

Other bodies bled out in the dirt.

Kelli tried to sort out which ones belonged to the voices she'd heard in the tunnel. Two corpses were eviscerated, dismembered and decapitated. One body still had a head, but was missing an arm and part of a leg. The dead men's blood pooled and mingled with the drying blood of the hanging deer. Among the broken weapons scattered near the bodies, Kelli recognized her own Glock.

*Another blood curdling scream.*

Settling the butt of her shotgun snugly against her shoulder Kelli clicked off the safety and, sighting down the barrel, took aim.

The grizzly, on his hind feet, stood at least fifteen feet tall. He held a tattooed man in his front paws. The man was bleeding profusely. One tattooed arm dangled from a torn shoulder by tendons. The beast roared again, an inch from the man's face.

Kelli could feel the wind of the monster's breath. The trees around her shook.

Through thick, dreamlike fog, the scene unfolded in slow motion. The grizzly opened his mouth wide, exposing huge, carnivorous teeth and a vivid red tongue.

The bear roared again, shaking the ground.

Kelli felt the man's screams inside her own body. His face contorted in a mask of such horror it didn't look human.

As if viewing the strobing frames of an old-time picture show, Kelli watched the bear's mouth envelope the tattooed

man's entire face. Muffled screams. Crunch of bone and tendon. Spurt of bright red blood.

The bear's jaw pulled away with a juicy sucking sound, taking the man's whole face with it.

The grizzly released the limp body from his claws. The body dropped to the ground in a heap of blue ink and crimson blood.

Roaring again, the behemoth turned around. He sniffed the air, then looked straight at Warden Cavanaugh. His eyes shone with an ancient, eerie intelligence.

Suddenly, he turned his shaggy back on the game warden and, with one swipe of his great paw, knocked the second deer carcass to the ground. Dropping on all fours, the grizzly seized the deer meat in his mouth and disappeared into the mist-shrouded forest.

Kelli stood as if turned to stone for what seemed like an eternity.

Gradually, she became aware of sirens, of men shouting, lights flashing and dogs barking. She clicked the safety back on her shotgun and lowered it to the ground. Then she vomited, trembling uncontrollably.

\* \* \*

The SWAT team swarmed the area.

"Over here, Captain!"

"Jesus Christ! This one's still alive."

"Get a medic over here. Don't let him bleed out. Keep him breathing. We've gotta find out what he knows."

"Alert Medivac. They're standing by. We need to get him to the hospital fast! Hurry!"

## *The Game Warden*

“The dogs are going nuts! What the hell was that? Did you see it?”

“Hold the dogs! Don’t let them go after that thing.”

“Don’t fire your weapons, for God’s sake, or we’ll have an explosion!”

“Find the girl. Search the premises.”

“Kelli! Warden Cavanaugh! Are you hurt? Talk to me. Kelli!”

The smell of blood was so overwhelming, Kelli felt as if she were drowning in it. She threw up again. A strong arm held her shoulders.

Someone gently wiped her face with a cool damp cloth. It smelled like fresh laundry.

“It’s not her blood, Sergeant Rosa. No cuts on the face or neck. She appears to be uninjured, just in shock. Oh, wait. There’s a nasty wound on the top of her head. It’s stopped bleeding, though.”

Someone held a water bottle up to her mouth. She took the bottle and, with help, filled her mouth with cold fresh water. She swirled it and spit blood. Blood that had sprayed her from the severed head.

*Don’t look at it.*

Again, and again, she swished fresh, clean water, gargled, spit. Finally, she drank.

She met Detective Rosa’s eyes.

“Charlie, I know where the little girl is. I can show you.”

\* \* \*

The child was rescued from her cell and taken down the mountain to her parents.

The Medivac helicopter stirred the treetops as it sped away, carrying the lone survivor of the mauling, unconscious and barely holding on to life, minus an arm and leg.

The fog cleared.

The team secured the area. They photographed body parts from various angles, and made plaster casts of tracks. With professional precision, they collected fingerprints and DNA samples from the wire dog cages and the van, and scoured the grounds for other evidence.

Once the forensics team had completed their work, and the human remains had been bagged and removed, the county HAZMAT team would begin cleaning up the meth kitchen and restoring the creek habitat. Back at the crime lab, they were going to have a hell of a job putting all the pieces together again.

\* \* \*

Kelli sat in her truck with Detective Rosa. He'd finished taking her formal statement.

"We won't be getting a statement out of our two tattooed shooting suspects now," said Charlie. "But I think a forensics investigation of their remains will prove we found our perps for the Salvador Luna murder. We don't have to worry about those killers getting the justice they deserve."

Kelli squeezed an emergency cold pack to activate it, and held it to her forehead. "With any luck that scum bag who's still alive will hang on long enough to fill us in on all the other abductions."

"Sorry, Kelli, but sex traffic is a black hole. Those other kids could be anywhere in the world by now, if they're still alive — which is unlikely. At least we saved one child today, thanks to you."

“Plus we cleared out a nest of vermin,” said Kelli.

“Think we’ve accounted for all the voices you heard in the bunker? Did we just cut the whole cancer out?”

Kelli closed her eyes. “There were six men. Two were Salvadorans.”

“Salvadorans? You sure?”

“Distinctive accent. Those tatted Salvadorans are definitely dead. Yes. It seems like there’s a body to go with each of the other voices I heard, except ... Wait. One’s missing. I think the one they called *patrón*, with a whiney voice.” Kelli opened her eyes and stared into the forest. “Earlier, during all the screaming, I thought I saw a white man in a striped suit running into the woods.”

“None of the bodies we found were dressed in a suit.”

Kelli moved the cold pack to the back of her neck. “I think we’ll find human tracks leading away from camp, running in the opposite direction from that — that beast. Maybe *patrón* got away.”

“And the ‘beast’? What the hell was that thing?” Detective Sargent Rosa’s eyebrows pulled together. “Did you get a good look at it?”

“I’ve been trying to make sense of what I saw, Charlie. I was close enough to see everything. Too close. But what I think I saw just doesn’t compute.”

“It was a bear, right?”

“It was the biggest bear I’ve ever seen.”

“But ... we don’t have bears here in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Do we?”

“As a matter of fact, although sightings are still rare, the core population of black bears in the state has been expanding over the last few years. Most of them are in the High Sierra, but we know there are also a few in the Southern Coast Mountain Range. They’ve been moving into habitat that, a hundred years

ago, was grizzly territory. To date, I haven't heard of any bears as far north as the Santa Cruz Mountains, but, of course, anything is possible."

"So, it really could have been a bear, then."

"Well, yes, and no." Kelli's forehead furrowed. "If a black bear had made its way into this area, it certainly would have been drawn to the camp by the scent of those deer carcasses. But Charlie, that was no black bear."

"What do you mean?"

"What I saw ..." Kelli answered, "The bear I think I saw was, well ... It had that characteristic hump on its back. Charlie, that beast definitely looked like a California grizzly. But it was far larger than any other grizzly I've ever heard of, except for maybe Monarch."

"Monarch?"

"The mythical 'Big Bear of Tallac' — the captive grizzly whose picture is on the California Republic flag."

Sargent Rosa shook his head.

"California grizzlies were systematically extirpated in the nineteenth century. William Randolph Hearst hired a journalist, Allen Kelley, to capture one of the last known wild grizzlies in the 1880s, as a publicity stunt. Kelley caught the famous Monarch bear on Samhain, Halloween of 1889, and brought him to San Francisco. They kept Monarch on exhibit at Woodward's Gardens, and he lived in captivity for twenty-two years. Then, one day, he just vanished. Without a trace. It's said he embodies the heart, soul, and spirit of California."

"So then you're saying the monster that mauled our suspects was a California grizzly?"

"Well ... what I'm saying is: it looked like a grizzly. But ... our beast couldn't possibly have been a grizzly bear, Charlie."

## *The Game Warden*

“Why’s that?”

“The last California grizzly was shot and killed in Tulare County, near what is now Sequoia National Park, in the summer of 1924. *Ursus arctos californicus* has been extinct for nearly a hundred years.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After earning a teaching credential with an emphasis in Environmental Education, Mary Flodin worked as a naturalist in an Outdoor Science School for two years before moving into the classroom. From the mid-1980s until 2000, she taught in an elementary school surrounded by strawberry fields. Mary became involved in the struggle to protect her students from pesticide drift, and help found the environmental group Farm Without Harm, now known as Safe Ag Safe Schools ([SafeAgSafeSchools.org](http://SafeAgSafeSchools.org)).

*Fruit of the Devil*, her first novel, was a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Award for Socially Engaged Fiction and for the Pacific Northwest Writers' Competition. She was awarded a fellowship to the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and has participated in numerous writers' conferences, including BreadLoaf Orion and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE).

Mary lives in a cottage on the Central California Coast with her husband — a retired NASA climate scientist — and their dog, koi, chickens, and gopher herd. You can learn more about her world and works at [maryflodin.com](http://maryflodin.com).

**Fish and Game Warden is not just Kelli Cavanaugh's job,  
it's her passion. Now, she's fighting for her very life to save  
the watershed she swore to protect.**

