

HARD CACHE

BY Charles B. Neff

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Hidden Impact

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On the following pages, you will meet:

Mariela Fuentes, from Nicaragua and Spain, now living in Costa Rica

Magnus Torval, a former Swedish detective, now living in Costa Rica

Greg Takarchuk, a member of Swiftwater, Washington's police department

Olga Kirilenko, a visitor in Swiftwater from Russia

Leonid Kuzma, Pastor of the Family of Christ Church, near Swiftwater

Phil Bianchi, a former journalist, now Mayor of Swiftwater and Portal

Tom Cisek, Chief of Police for Swiftwater and Portal

Taras Takarchuk, Greg's uncle

Vladislav Ostrovsky, A Russian-American businessman, once know as "Petrov"

John Vasilich, an FBI agent

Luci Fuentes Nordberg, Mariela's mother

Jim Nordberg, Mariela's stepfather

Kris Behr, former Governor of Wisconsin

Kay Lyon, a foundation executive in Wisconsin, and Kris Behr's wife

Mrs. Miliuk, one of the "church ladies" at Family of Christ

Magnus Torval cursed the long pole that bent in a lazy arc instead of adding force to his sharp yanks. For good measure, he aimed his Swedish invectives at the bush by the river bank that refused to give up the hook snagged inside it. He knew that his beginner's fly fishing skills were the real source of his problem, and he'd get around to cursing them too if the hook did not come loose soon.

A fisherman who wasn't worried about breaking his line might have tugged harder. But in situations like this, Magnus never underestimated his strength. As a six-and-a-half foot, 350-pound, internationally-ranked power lifter, in his prime it had been nothing for Magnus to run with two railroad ties on his shoulders, or to haul heavy vehicles attached to a harness across his back.

He'd lost some of that strength after the poisoning incident more than a year ago. But he had more than enough left to snap a fly rod if he wasn't careful. He decided to put the rod down and wade to the bush. It was early October, so the rivers were low and slow. Water lapped at knee height on his hip waders.

The bush, bright red as fall approached, grew at the base of a large alder tree whose leaves were beginning to brown. Magnus' wayward hook had led the leader into a full turn around one of the bush's branches and was itself partly embedded in the branch's soft covering. Extracting it was simple.

Magnus paused to look around before turning back. He had learned that habit as a policeman. After you picked up and logged evidence, you always had one more look around to make sure you hadn't missed anything. His roving eyes were moving on when his brain registered an old, familiar signal: go back, there is something you ought to look at more closely.

That signal was not the result of anything specific, certainly not the product of a conscious thought. Magnus had received similar signals many times in the past. Usually they meant that his brain had detected a minor detail that was slightly out of place. Just as usually, the detail was insignificant.

And why should this one be any different? He was on a simple fishing excursion, at a place suggested by a new acquaintance, not far from a main road. According to the acquaintance, the place was not that frequently visited, even by locals. His gaze went lazily back, passing over clumps of bushes, some red like the one where he had dislodged his hook, others larger and still green. Nothing. Or, what...?

He saw the discrepancy. Near the base of another, larger red bush was a tiny patch of blue. He focused on it and could see nothing special about it. A candy wrapper, or a hat someone lost in a wind gust? Insignificant. Leave it!

But an old urge had already reared its head: the curiosity that turned a cop into a detective.

He climbed out of the river, up a short bank, and stood still on the narrow band of earth that divided the bank from the bushes. Now that he'd seen the dab of color, and since he was this close, it was a simple matter to look a bit more closely—that's all—and then go on fishing.

He found a way to the clump where the color had winked at him, dropped to his knees, and with his left arm effortlessly pushed part of the bush aside so he could get his quick look. The first piece of information to register was that the blue object, now no more than four feet away, was some kind of cloth, machine knitted. Then he noticed that the cloth was surrounded by dirt. And that the dirt was freshly disturbed.

He was too large and the bush too dense for him to push directly through. Rising, he circled first one side and then the other, seeking an easier path. Before kneeling again, he looked closely at the route he had chosen. He was not the first person to have been here recently. A crude and probably hurried attempt had been made to smooth over the ground, pulling leaves over the area as surface camouflage.

The former detective in him took charge. Most likely what he had noticed still added up to nothing. But, just in case, he began to treat the area as a potential crime scene.

Carefully watching for anything else that seemed out of place, he moved farther from the river, staying five long paces away from the bush.

Soon the bush was hard to distinguish from other growth that merged with it. When he was sure that the area around him had not been recently disturbed, he began to crawl.

At ground level, the foliage was less dense and, fl at on his stomach, he wormed his way to the base of the bush. On both sides of its base, he now could see clearly that small tree limbs and leaves had been pushed in to cover an area eight feet long and three or four feet wide. To each side of the covered area, a shallow natural trench extended in both directions.

Magnus guessed that the trench was a dry stream bed that would fill with water during spring runoff. He scuttled to the side by the river, and, reaching around the bush, explored with one hand under the limbs and leaves.

Right away he felt something that clearly wasn't forest debris. He was touching fabric. The way it moved under his hand told him that it was thick, about the weight of a heavy sweatshirt. Probing further, he realized that under the fabric his hand was feeling an arm, just above the elbow. A human arm.

Magnus stopped immediately, knowing that the worst thing he could do would be to disturb what he now was sure was a crime scene. Besides, uncovering the identity of the body, how it had gotten to this spot, and who had tried to hide it was someone else's work. He was an ex-cop, thousands of miles from his former jurisdiction, on vacation, and—he reminded himself—about to get married.

Mariela would not be happy if what he had just found interfered with the wedding. Mariela was deep into her planning mode and she didn't like changes. And, truthfully, though he thought the wedding was an expected but unnecessary social requirement, he knew, realistically, that he couldn't get on with anything else until it was over and done with.

Interesting, he thought as he pushed back from under the bush, that Mariela and her reactions were the first things that occurred to him. A real policeman would have been single-minded about the case. This last year had definitely changed him. But not so much that he couldn't shift back to considering what he needed to do next.

His cell phone wasn't likely to work this far from the towns of Portal and Swiftwater. He'd been warned about that. But to be sure, he got out the phone and tried calling his acquaintance Greg who was, coincidentally, a member of the Swiftwater police force. No service.

So he had to get to a land line. He also needed to be sure that he could lead the police to this exact spot. Greg's suggestion had taken him to the end of a side road and then to a trail that led him farther into the forest.

But the rest of Greg's directions hadn't helped much. Magnus had passed several similar places and had picked one almost at random. It could have been the one Greg suggested, but just as likely it was not. He took pictures with his cell phone, but was leery of the lighting and the narrow angle he could record. Neither allowed for much context. He probably could do better with sketches.

From his knapsack, he withdrew an 8x10 artist's pad. He'd been sketching since he was a boy, carefully hiding that interest from his disapproving father. Meeting Mariela had motivated him to reveal his amateur attempts at drawing. Amateur meant unskilled, not devoid of a talent. And professional lessons during the last months of enforced recovery had provided him with technical skills he had been lacking.

He set to work now with pen and ink, working fast, highlighting prominent rocks, unusually shaped trees, or shifts in the trail that a human eye would be most likely to notice. As he hurried back to the trailhead where his car was parked, he paused to add other photos and sketches. When he was finished, he was satisfied that his visual record could get the police back to where the body was hidden.

Jogging to his car, Magnus thought again about how to reach the police. He could stop at the next house on the road, but calling from a private home would raise the chances that a citizen would overhear. Despite promises to the contrary, he knew from experience that many people just couldn't help spreading interesting news. News became rumors and rumors made investigations much more difficult. Plus, the stretch of road he would follow back to Portal was mostly unpopulated.

When he and Mariela first arrived, they went exploring in Portal—not a very time-consuming activity in that compact old mining town. Magnus had been pleasantly surprised to find a Swedish bakery, neatly filled with breads, rolls and pastry he recognized. He had chatted in Swedish with the owner, an efficient and friendly lady from Uppsala. He could use her phone to report what he had

found. He might be wrong to count on the Swedish trait of discretion, but he was willing to bet that his words, even if overheard, would not be passed on.

Driving just over the speed limit, he set his sights on Portal.

_ 2 _

Blessed God,

Dawn has arrived and with it another day when I am trapped between the need to live and the desire to die. The Bible is absolute: I have broken the Sixth Commandment.

Why was he so stubborn? Couldn't he see that the salvation of his soul might be at the cost of the lives of others? Others he loved and otherwise fiercely protected?

How many long hours, often with tongues loosed with strong drink, did we go over the matter? Enough to reach the right decision, the one that would have kept us all out of danger. But he always found one more thought, followed by doubt.

How could I have not been angry? He was the one who disturbed the silence by the river, who suddenly put his rod aside and launched into accusations. No middle ground was left. He was completely right, he yelled at me, and I was completely wrong. Suddenly, he was different, threatening, filled with an alien strength. I felt him swell physically. I saw how he raised his arm like a prophet of old, taking steps toward me.

Could You not have stayed my right arm as I grasped that smooth stone, a stone that fit my grasp so perfectly I was hardly aware that it had found its way into my hand?

When the first rays of this morning's sun struck my eyes, I was blinded, just as I was blinded in that moment which since then assaults me, awake or asleep. I looked askance and saw clouds ringing the mountains turn deep pink.

But where I once saw beauty, I now see blood.

_ 3 _

Greg Takarchuk slumped back in his chair. A murder, rare enough in these parts, represented a major complication for a small police department. And the report of a dead body could be terrible news for him personally.

All right, so he was reacting too quickly. He needed to be a policeman now. Yes, his father had been missing for two days and so far no one had any idea where he had gone or might now be. After twenty-four hours,

Greg's imagination had kicked in, inviting him to think the worst. That was even more the case with his mother, who by now was inconsolable in her pessimism.

He looked at his computer screen, re-reading the notes he'd made while he talked to Magnus Torval. Greg already knew the side road that Magnus had taken because he, Greg, had suggested that Magnus follow it to find a good fishing spot.

If the body was his father's, he would definitely be taken off the case. So far, the department didn't know that anyone was missing. As late as this morning, Greg's mother had resisted reporting the disappearance, and had asked her son not to do so either. Though the "new Ukrainians" had been in the Swiftwater area for a decade and a half, some of them, like his mother, still thought their tight-knit immigrant group had to fend for itself. She, and others, had brought with them an inbred fear of police.

Greg was uneasy. He was new to the Swiftwater department and nearing the end of a probationary period. While there was no departmental requirement for him to report a missing father, he felt pretty sure that Chief Cisek, who liked to be aware of any developments that could involve his department, would have expected an informal heads-up. Greg had promised himself to brief the chief at the end of the day if no new information on his dad turned up.

His father, Dmitry, could still be alive, staying away from home for some unexplained reason of his own. It would have to be a good reason though, for, as far as Greg knew, he was of sound mind, not subject to memory loss or dementia. For him to leave home at all was far out of character. He was a man of discipline and consistency, always on time for his stints at the antiques store, at home for dinner every night by six pm, and either reading or watching the Russian language show on TV for the rest of the evening. There was also no reason Greg could think of why his father would have gone to the place where Magnus reported finding the body. Or how he could have gotten there. The Chevy truck that he alone drove was still in its garage and had been there for the last three days.

Yet for all his desire to remain the objective policeman, Greg couldn't help scanning his memory of his father's wardrobe for light blue clothing. He usually wore dark colors. A sweatshirt, as Magnus had suggested? That was not Dmitry's style; Greg had never seen him in a sweatshirt. Maybe a Pendleton shirt? Yes, Dmitry had owned—watch it!—Dmitry *owns* at least one of those shirts.

He kept the worry out of his voice when his phone rang and Tom Cisek's voice came on the line. Matter-of-factly, Greg reported Magnus Torval's information to the Chief of Police.