

The Clovis Dig by Teri Fink

(Excerpt)

An intense rain pounding on the veranda roof startled her awake. She blinked at a night gone impenetrable black. With great effort, she unfurled herself from the chair. She hadn't left any lights on inside the house, but she could navigate the place blindfolded. She gathered her glass and the near-empty bottle of whiskey and shuffled inside, stopping to lock the newly installed deadbolt behind her. Once in the kitchen, even without turning on the kitchen light she saw something that stopped her dead, heart in her throat.

The back door was open.

Before she could make sense of it, a sound froze her blood. A dry staccato sound, like old bones rubbing together, loud, came from under the table, very near her bare feet. The sound was horrifying familiar, one she had heard often on summer hikes through dry and rocky terrain. It was, without a doubt, a rattlesnake.

Her whole body turned cold, and both the glass and whiskey bottle slipped from her slack grip. The bottle hit the table and came to rest, but the glass fell to the floor and shattered.

The rattle-hiss ratcheted up even louder. Claire stumbled backwards, groped for the light switch, and flipped it on. She shaded her eyes from the stabbing glare and blinked. Beneath the table, inches from where she'd been standing, a rattlesnake coiled in the striking position, tongue flicking, head bobbing and weaving at one end, rattles raised and quivering at the other. She couldn't see the fangs, but she knew they were there, tiny hypodermic needles backed by a reservoir of poison.

What the hell was a rattler doing in her kitchen? She stumbled back to the front door, fumbled with the deadbolt, and ran outside, off the veranda and into the rain, instantly soaked. The shocking cold of the rain snapped her out of panic and sobered her up a little. She had no clue what time it was. *Think. Think.*

Bright lights swept over the house as a truck pulled into the driveway. Joe's truck. Joe rolled down the window and leaned out, engine still running. "Everything okay?"

"Hell no!" Claire shouted.

Joe killed the engine and trotted over to her.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a rattlesnake in the kitchen." She was trembling.

He took Claire by the shoulders, leaned down and searched her face. "Are you okay? Did you get bit?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, but it's still in there, for God's sake. I'm going to grab a shovel. Wait here." Claire took off toward the garage, returned in seconds, and pushed the shovel into Joe's hands. "Kill it with this."

Joe looked skeptical, but went inside. She followed him back inside and into the kitchen.

The snake had moved out from under the table, gliding sideways in S-shaped undulations.

Joe raised the shovel. The snake reared back in the strike position and hissed, jaws gaping so wide they looked unhinged. Joe took a swing. The blow landed smack in the middle of the long body. The rattler lunged, rattling furiously, cold-blooded eyes fixed on Joe. Joe brought the shovel down again, blade on edge, and struck just below the head. He drove the shovel down hard. The rattler's body whipped and writhed, striking Joe in the leg.

Claire inched past Joe to the counter and grabbed a butcher knife, fell to her knees and began hacking at the snake's tough flesh behind the shovel, adrenaline shooting through her like fire. The dry surface of the rattles smacked Claire's arm as she pushed and sawed until the steely flesh split. The head fell away from the body, both the head and body writhing separately, as if still alive. Claire, breathing hard, stood and the knife clattered to the floor.

"Why is someone doing this? Someone who wants the dig to stop, obviously. Who?"

"Like you, I only have questions, no answers."