

BLACK
ROAD
2012

BLACK ROAD 2012

Jeffrey A. Friedberg



Phoenix, Arizona

Black Road 2012

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FOR MY FATHER
FOR MY MOTHER
FOR MY BROTHER

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*From The Mile High Hurricane Shelter, Jeffrey A. Friedberg, April 28, 2009
ABQ, NM, USA, Earth—Milky Way*

THE HIGHWAY MAN

The highway man robbed and spent his life.
As if by some feathered curse out of a leathern pouch,
he was driven.
From the highway, he provided:
Food but not nourishment,
Clothing but not warmth,
Emotion but not love,
And life, but not purpose.
In the end, much later on, he died the way he'd lived,
alone in a small space.

- Jeff Friedberg, Albuquerque, NM, 10/7/2006

CHAPTER 1

Lieutenant Warchowski slammed me hard against the wall. "You killed Diana! That's your god-damned knife in her! Admit it Jack—you're psycho!"

I *had* killed my wife—an oracle foretold it, but destiny trapped me. Ancient evil rode me like a parasite. I knew too much about powerful worldwide forces and now they hunted me. I was tied up in the strangling knot of a terrifying Mayan prophecy—Doomsday, December 21, 2012—*my birthday*.

But what difference could I possibly make at the end of the world?

At the end of Time...

* * *

"This is the account of how all was in suspense; all calm, in silence; all motionless; all pulsating; and empty was the expanse of the sky."

—The Mayan Popul Vuh

I'd built the dance studio for Diana in our home. It was a high-ceilinged room with pale wood floor, mirrors on both sides, and a practice barre along the wall. She stretched in front of the mirrors, spandex shiny on her like paint on a Corvette. At twelve weeks, she wasn't showing yet, but it wouldn't change anything when she did.

She looked at me in the mirror and said, "What flavor is that?"

I chewed my gum. I lifted my eye patch to see her better. Green eyes gazed back at me over a tanned shoulder and high cheek bones. I said, "It's Juicy Fruit, but they changed it."

Hands on hips, she showcased her waistline and watched me in the mirror. She was half my age. I'd met her when she was a substance abuse counselor. Her name was Little Red Moon, but everyone called her Diana Rose.

"Smells good," she said. "Give it." She watched me in the mirror and wet her lips.

I tossed her the pack. She kept those green eyes on me. I felt like Tweety-Bird. She popped a stick of gum, chewed, and watched me in the mirror.

My throat hurt like a knot got tied in it. I loved her more than living. She'd saved me from my past. She saved me every day from my future. I'd been lost, and she brought me back. I'd be there again, but she held me here. My future would have been death alone in an empty room, but she found me, married

me, and saved me.

"I'm going downtown," I said.

She watched me in the mirror and stepped back in a feline *arrière*. Tweety tried not to blink. "Brush your hair, darling," she said. "You don't look like an ex-private eye."

"How's that supposed to look like?"

"Like the hero."

I shrugged into my shoulder holster. I don't like it to show, so I pulled a black leather Concho vest over it and buttoned two silver buttons—then my goatskin bomber jacket. The holster was my own design. I'd had it made for a custom .45 gun presented to me by a British official code-named Lady Aquarius. I'd done her a favor once.

The gun was forged steel, engraved with an ancient Welsh blessing. I'm half Welsh. I called the gun *Lady*, in honor of Lady Aquarius.

I rang Diana's brother, Little Boy. I wanted him to bring the big car around for me so I could go into town. He was a movie actor. He always carried his résumé and portfolio with him. At six feet tall and 260 pounds, Little Boy had played a heavy in *Apocalypto* for Mel Gibson. He lived over our garage and helped us out around the house—followed his tiny big sister around on chores like a big devoted bear.

Little Boy had moved in with us when we found out that Diana was expecting. For an ex Marine who'd done black-side stuff in Iraq, his eyes had gotten pretty wet and glittery about it.

Little Boy's tears had moved me back then, and for an old ex Green Beret, my eyes had gotten kinda wet too. I cry when I see other people cry. I cry for babies, kids, or animals. I cry at movies.

Little Boy finally answered the phone. "Yo, Jack."

"Yo, LB. Can you bring the Escalade around for me?"

"Okay, but, I gotta get rid of this thing first—remember that noise in the roof?"

"Yeah. The squirrel. You're gonna off him?"

Diana cut in, "The squirrel is a protector of twins..."

Little Boy said, "Not a squirrel, it's an owl. I gotta get it outta my roof before I can do anything else."

"An owl? Can it wait? I have to go in town."

Diana's eyes went wide. She mouthed, "*An Owl?*"

LB said, "No, Jack, it *can't* wait."

"Why not?"

"Owl's the Indian bird of death, Jack."

"Oh."

Diana was nodding fast and making faces, like, *The owl has to go!*

I said, "Okay, but I still need the Escalade."

Diana was waving fingers like her nails were wet. "Nope, uh-uh," she said. "Let him get that owl out of there. I need the Escalade but I'll get it when he's done. I'm reading to the reservation kids later, and then into Old Town for their medicals and lunch. You take *El Bebé* instead of the big car darling, it's already parked out front. He has to get rid of that owl, *now*."

"Sure," I said. I didn't bother wondering about the owl. The tribe was full of superstitions and taboos. Rituals and magic.

I tried to visualize myself jammed behind the wheel of her tiny BMW, all six-foot-three of me, 240 pounds of blubber. The scent of her would be there. I'd keep the windows up.

I was worried about Diana because she'd miscarried before, and she was doing too much without

help, like going into town. Her sister Maia and my other brother-in-law Ernest usually helped her with things like trips to the reservation and into town, but they were away.

Normally the three of them would spend hours chatting about the latest gossip from the rez', and about the spirits. For Natives, gossip and spirits were everywhere. They thrive on gossip, but they cannot live or die properly without the spirits.

Ernest was an ordained tribal Chanter and said Diana had a special connection to the spirits and gods. It was called Blood Lightning. The Indians were deferential to Diana because of it. But superstition and religious fanaticism turned me off. I tried to keep my mouth shut about it with them.

When Diana had miscarried, she nearly bled to death. I couldn't let that happen again, so I decided to open my mouth about that. "KC will have a stroke if he hears you're running around doing all these errands alone, sweetheart."

KC was her father. His real name was Ku Chu Makwik, "Bear Who Stands." He was medicine man of the Ojito Nation. He was old, lean, and leathery. Nobody seemed to know how old. They said he was a holy man and had mystic powers.

Diana smiled at me in the big mirror. I wondered what she saw there, what she watched. Something only *she* could see, silent, feminine, mysterious, a Native Nefertiti, emerald eyes inlaid with shining onyx.

Near her, in the mirror, there was a guy. He used to be better looking, thinner and harder. His hair used to be like coal. They'd called him Blackie back then. She watched the guy. What did she see? He reached for a big white Stetson. I tugged the brim down just to my pirate eye-patch. I got it where I liked it, checked myself in the mirror. *I'm good to go*, I thought.

I'm good to go? What the hell did that actually *mean*? It was New-Speak. Say it backwards and maybe it would mean something. *I'm go to good*. Nah, that didn't mean anything either.

I suddenly felt like a crotchety old-guy. I was a time traveler caught in the wrong Age. I'd gotten there the slow way—by living. I liked the old language. It was direct. I like direct.

"What's with the hat, cowboy?" Diana asked.

"Guy in a book—an old timey cop, 'The Hot Kid.' Thought I'd try it out."

She stared up at the hat for a moment. Her fine brow wanted to wrinkle. "No, darling. Please leave the hat here."

"Okay."

"And take your cane, please?"

I loved her, so Tweety said, "Yes dear," and fluttered to his cane. The goddess smiled and I saw how much she loved me. I was humbled. I couldn't argue. My leg hurt, and it cramped. Not as bad as the sciatica had been, but it was weak and atrophied from diabetes. She'd gotten me a black cane with a big feathered serpent down it, some old god, she said, for strength. But I felt more like an old car with parts falling off.

"I'll make an appointment for you with Dr. Lafayette," she said.

Doctor Lafayette was an eye specialist. She was a little older than me, very small, with short black hair, and dark eyes tilted up at the corners. She was devout and aloof, a French Celt from a remote village in Brittany. We got along well because I was a Celt, and spoke French.

Lafayette monitored my glycosylated hemoglobin because I was going blind in one eye from the diabetes. The light hurt my eye a lot, so she had me wear a patch over it. The patch made me look like Black Bart the pirate. Except my hair was streaked black and white, like the tail of a skunk.

One day Lafayette just suddenly froze and stared at me, wide-eyed.

“Jeez, Doc, what is it?”

“I see a destiny in you, Jacques.”

“What destiny?”

“A terrible destiny.” She trembled. “A dangerous providence.”

“What are you talking about, Dominique?”

She didn’t say anything. Her eyes were like quartz.

She rushed me, her tiny doll hands grabbed my shoulders. Her face was an agonized image burning with light on an ancient cathedral window. “*La lune rouge saignera de sang blanc. Les deux étoiles s’éteigneront. A cause de vos mensonges éternels, Black Jack Vane, vous êtes voué à l’enfer le plus sombre, et pour toujours.*”

She was a figurine in glass, ready to shatter.

She shuddered, and slowly softened. She seemed to come back from somewhere else.

“Doc? Are you all right?”

“No, Jacques, I’m not all right. Neither are you or Little Red Moon.” Her eyes filled with tears and brimmed over. A nervous hand fluttered to her eyes and covered them for a moment.

Holy shit, I was thinking.

She looked at me. She said, “Go straight home to your wife, Jacques—and stay there.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“Something is coming, Jack. But I don’t know what.”

Holy shit. It made my guts clench because she’d started out as her village’s *Devin*—a seer.

That scared me. I couldn’t make myself believe her mystic French quatrain. I tried to put it out of mind. I tried to forget what she’d said: “The red moon will bleed white. The twin stars will go out. Evil will arrive in light and murder the brightness of the night. Because of your god-damned eternal lies, Black Jack Vane, you are doomed to the darkest hell, and forever.”

“What does it mean, Dominique? What you said in French.”

“I don’t know, Jacques—I don’t know what it means.”

Anyway, that had been a while back. Now, girded with eye-patch and cane, I was ready for the BMW, and Albuquerque, and my lawyer.

When we were cops together in Philly, Nick’s cop-to-cop name had been “Nicky Pads.” To his enemies he’d been “Nick Dago.” Now, he was Mr. Nicholas D’Agostino, Esquire—lately of New Mexico.

Me, I’d escaped from Philadelphia in disgrace. I was hunted by the mob and ran for my sorry-assed life. I was a drunk back then, and I was always a little over the top anyway. I never really quite knew what I’d say or do in a situation, and I’d managed to offend the wiseguys. There’d been a contract let out on me, so I just ran.

In the process leading up to all that excitement, I’d wrecked my first marriage; I destroyed my detective agency; and I lost what was left of my self.

I’d floated through a dozen states, hunted by the mob. I was a black hole for booze. But Nicky snagged me into New Mexico, where he hid me at his private retreat, way out in Goddess Canyon where I couldn’t bother anybody.

He’d sent the word back to Philly for the wiseguys to lay off me—“please.” I still had a little pull of my own there too, favors owed for favors done. But Nick’s money was better than my contacts and he got to the right people. When things finally blew over, he filed papers and got me a New Mexico P. I.

badge—"tin," it's called. Tin. He let me work his cases.

Albuquerque was weird for a South Philly boy. "Get used to it, Jack," Nicky'd said. "They believe in spirits and channeling Elvis. The mayor wants us to plant trees on our roofs. They worry whether you like red or green."

"Red or green?"

"Yeah. *Chili*. Red or green chili. They worry about that a lot. You ask that question—red or green—and everything else stops for a discussion about chili. It stupefies them."

That was four years ago. But Nick'd just phoned to say he had a client for me. I told him I was retired, but he already knew that. I was totally out of the detecting game, but he already knew that, too.

The bastard.

He said, "Yeah, well, Blackie, you'll want this one—they're paying in gold, you gotta see this shit. You gotta hear this story. Get right the hell down here, got a shoebox full of coins for Christ sake—Krugerrands, American Eagles, you gotta see it."

I wondered where they got the shoebox. Were there ever shoes in it? What kind of shoes? Should I bite that apple?

"I'm out of the game, Nicky—permanent."

"Yeah."

"I'm done. No more detecting."

"Yeah."

I heard him lean back in his chair, it squeaks.

"So, you're an internet mogul now, Jackie." I heard a smile clench around the teeth, like one of those fake TV doctors. "So, how's the web business?" He tried to make it sound jolly, but it didn't come off that way. "Payin' the mortgage?"

"Business is great." The bastard. I didn't talk about my mortgage and debts, that I could lose the house, my life policy—that I could lose Diana.

I was suddenly desperate.

Christ, he was good, he had me thinking about that shoebox full of gold—one last job. How much is that in money, I wondered? *A lot*.

Then Diana came into the room with morning sickness. She lay down on the bed while Nick was still talking in my ear. Part of me watched her, and part of me was thinking there was enough gold in that shoe box to take care of her forever.

Who the hell would pay *that* much to an ex-sleuth? And to do what? Murder?

I suddenly didn't care what it was. Nothing else mattered, I wanted that money for my family.

I had a plan. I told Nick I'd be down to see him. "Just to get you off the hook with your client, but I promise you nothing." I said it loud. I looked at Diana as she watched me. I winked at her like, *That'll show him*. She smiled and mimed, "*I love you*."

We'd agreed before we were married that I would never go back to work as a private eye. No more bad people, no more smell of death on me. I'd sworn it to Diana on our life together.

So, I didn't tell her about this deal with Nick. I figured she didn't really need to know. It didn't matter what the deal was, I had a way to hide it from her. A guy. Called himself Fat Man. He was a Spanish Moroccan Jew, a rabbi, knew where everything was and how it worked, did favors for favors done. He could help me get rid of the coins like magic. Yeah, he'd disappear them into Muslim Morocco and materialize them in Bulgaria.

But there was a potential problem with me going into ABQ. Her name was Lieutenant Desdemona Warchovski. She was still pissed off that I'd dumped her when I met Diana.

Desdemona was vindictive. She was a crack shot. She was a weight lifter. She was part Comanche. And worse, a redhead.

I wondered what she'd do to me now that she hated me. Christ, when she'd been *in love with me* she threw me down a flight of stairs into a motel parking lot. Both of us were naked and drunk and she'd tried to kill me with a broken vodka bottle. We beat the crap out of each other. I did it to save my life, but she did it to kill me. The locals covered for her—the blue conspiracy—*cops*, “One for All,” and all *that* shit, and to hell with the little slime-ball P. I.

But behind her back they called her The Big Chick.

Six feet tall, two hundred pounds, black skirt-suit, black three-inch boots, black 10 mm Glock. Christ, the Glock rep' told me they used that caliber to hunt rhino in Africa.

But that was my past. I was into the present. So I crossed the studio and took Diana into my arms. “Bye, Honey, I'll call you after I get rid of Nick.”

I held her close and kissed those luscious lips. She crushed herself to me. She tilted her head back and looked up at me from under heavy lashes, her eyes a question. I kissed her again, longer this time.

“I love you, Blackie.”

“I love you more.”

I stepped out into the July desert blast of glare and heat. The humidity was three percent, and the air was too thin at 5500 feet above sea level. It was fucking *Mars*.

I glanced east at the Sandia Mountains. They blotted half the spotless sky. I'd read they rose there ten million years ago. They call New Mexico the “Land of Enchantment,” but it's more like just spooky. The region had been an ancient sea, and then a volcanic hell. Tremors deep in the earth happened all the time. The Native Indians said the earth below and the mountain were haunted.

Behind me, there was a 400-foot high plateau of ancient black lava rock—the West Mesa. It was full of dormant volcanoes. Not extinct: dormant. The locals used to toss in tires and watch the heat make them smoke. Indians believe the volcanoes are sacred entrances to the Other World.

Up on the mesa, coyotes yipped-yowled. I put on a pair of Ray-Bans against the Martian UV and watched the scraggly creatures trot by in a bloom of dust.

New Mexico was every old sci-fi movie I'd ever seen. All it needed was the giant ants. Nothing that happened there could possibly be normal. Giant ants would be normal.

I inhaled the searing Martian air.

I exhaled.

“Yeah,” I said to nobody. “But it's a *dry* heat.”

I squeezed into the BMW, and Diana's scent was there like a magical veil. I tucked in my elbows, lit the engine, and spun shots of the orange gravel that serves as lawn in New Mexico.

I found I-40 out in the seared brown sand and spiky scrub. There was nobody around but a little Mex guy, dusty, skinny as hell, walking along the side of the road with a backpack.

They're everywhere here like that—it's irritating how they walk, head down, never look up. Don't attract attention, don't thumb it, some pickup full of *amigos* will stop sooner or later.

But this Mex's eyes swiveled right at me as I smoked past him. Pigeon eyes, round, flat, glittery.

I thought I saw the gleam of a black Concho vest under his dusty jacket, silver buttons and medallions. But I was past him already. In my rear mirror, he waved at me, a tight white grin under his

black moustache.

Yeah, bye-bye to you, too, Pedro.

I let the little rocket do 70 toward Old Town. The clients would be there waiting in Nick's office. Nick would be telling them how we served together in the Major Crimes Unit under Frank Rizzo, the toughest police Chief and mayor who ever lived. If that story got boring, Nick would croon about our exploits as Green Berets in 'Nam and all over the world. He'd rhapsodize about it to the clients—how I was demolitions, and he was intel'. But that was okay, the tune would be a good one.

I buzzed the window down and spit out the wad of Juicy Fruit Fake. Martian air coiled around me and back out into the roar. My bicep pressed the grip of the engraved .45 under my arm. I felt uneasy.

So I checked my mirrors. The bastards were back on me again.

Whoever the hell they were, they were there yesterday and now they were behind me again. The same dark sedan and white compact car with blackout windows. Smartass bastards, I hate toughboys and wise guys.

They were the second and third cars back. They were taking turns being the lead car, hidden behind a civilian SUV. They thought the SUV between us gave them cover, but it didn't.

Not from me.

It's easy, if you know how to see what you're looking at. If you live it, immerse in it, if you're good—*really* good—and you're focused. Then no enemy can touch you. You're in an alternate reality. You're a shadow, a glimmer. You're invisible.

You're always ready.

It's a disease.

Christ, I hated those smartass bastards on my tail. I felt the adrenaline start. I surged, I got angry. I felt myself edge too close to the rim; I started to lose common sense. I wanted to feel the big .45 kick them in the ass. I wanted to hurt them with my hands.

I tried not to spill over the rim, but as I watched them in the mirrors, I felt myself grinning. I'd already gone over without knowing it.

I hit my brakes hard and so did the SUV behind me. To the rear of him, my two pursuit cars slammed on their brakes and crashed into each other in a shower of glass and metal. I downshifted, floored it and blasted the hell out of there.

My grin showed teeth in my mirror. I was high. I liked it that way. The hunt. Games. Money in shoe boxes. Who were those guys? I don't give a shit, just pay me. Whip it up. Tattooed Detective. *The taste in my mouth is me.*

Yeah.

Yeehaw...

But, something was missing. Diana's scent was missing. Something else was there, instead. The Martian wind was there.

My testicles clenched. Maybe I was getting too old for this shit.

Fuck it. I'd go into town anyway.