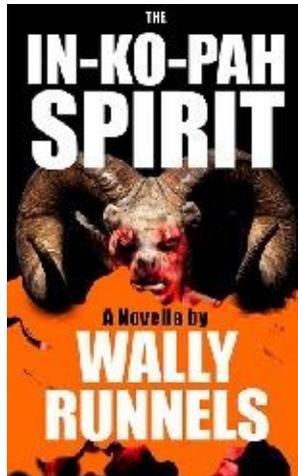


The In-Ko-Pah Spirit

By : Wally Runnels

Paranormal Events Haunt Mexicali Drug Cartel Quentin Tarantino meets the X-Files Rocky is how people know him. Only the doctors at the Navy Hospital in San Diego know his last name. He's a disabled Marine Corps sergeant who lost his left arm working with the CIA in Macao. That was then. Now he's a professional assassin who does wet work for the Mexicali drug cartel. He's been paid to track down a rebellious member of the cartel. The search leads to the In-Ko-Pah Mountains, an isolated region on the Mexican/American Border. Both the hunter and the hunted soon confront the ominous presence that inhabits the In-Ko-Pahs. Learn more at www.wallyrunnels.com.



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Chapter 1

Nothing to Worry About

Two men pondered in cloudy humidity inside a sweat hut behind a weathered cottage on the Manzanita Indian Reservation in California's Southern San Diego County. Around them, the In-Ko-Pah mountains broke and tilted the earth into a corrugated landscape textured by sage and redshank chaparral.

"Stay home, Rocky," John Blackfeather gasped, reacting to the heat. "Mexicali is a nasty place with Roberto Cruz and his crowd." Shiny with sweat, he sat naked, his body rolled with soft muscle.

"Could use the money," said Rocky. His body glistened as he flexed his right arm and watched the muscles articulate in crisp highlights. Grabbing his left appendage truncated above the elbow he worked it against the strength of his right. John watched and finally turned away with a distant look on his face.

Rocky crinkled a sage bouquet in his hand and the flakes made a pungent scent that rose with the steam. Although the two sat together in the tight enclosure, vapor-filled air sometimes made one invisible creating a sense of solitude for the other.

John Blackfeather knew Rocky was a hitter, a hired killer. He wasn't bothered. Like Rocky, he'd seen death in Afghanistan and the county, where he was a lieutenant in the sheriff's department.

Rocky found his work in Mexico. Neither man played in the other's backyard. Most people in the area knew Rocky lived by a strange code and so they left him alone. Rocky and John stayed in their professional cocoons and were friends.

"Pass me your cup. I'll pour you more sage tea."

"Thanks," said Rocky. "The stuff works."

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“Brings an overall wellness like nothing else,” said Blackfeather. He let out a big sigh. “Just be happy you don’t have my job. They got me on the rez. Gotta please the elders, make arrests without pissing off the families.”

“I usually only have one boss,” said Rocky. “Don’t have to follow some winding political road.”

“Well, I gotta listen to Ernest Birdtrot accuse Raoul Creekwater of stealing his stock.” Blackfeather shook his head. “Bullshit like that.”

“They go to you, ‘cause you got the badge.”

“Council has me talking to the *curanderos* now; shaman types. Magic guys say sacred game is being killed.”

“Is that what’s got everyone worried?”

“Supposedly got an angry creature roaming the hills that can only be whomped by a white man.” John gave Rocky a knowing look.

“Better call the DEA or the ATF?” grinned Rocky.

“Wish I could,” said Blackfeather. “A fella offered to smoke up my pickup with copal incense to keep away ghosts.”

Rocky knew better than to laugh. Nothing on the rez regarding spirits was ever funny. And he wasn’t sure how deep Blackfeather was in the mystery stuff. “How can a white man do something an Indian can’t?”

“Cause you’re ignorant of its power. Indian’d see it and turn to stone from fright.” John wiped his face with a towel. “You might want to hang hawk feathers over your doors to keep the bad things out.”

Rocky nodded and stayed silent.

“Some folks say they can hear the evil ones walking around at night, tinkling their little bells, hoping to lure someone.”

Rocky could only nod with a serious look on his face. He wasn’t sure how to react to John’s remark.

“Stick a totem up so something evil can’t get in your house,” said John Blackfeather. “Got two if you need ‘em.”

“Thanks, a single’s fine. Shack’s only got one get-into hole.”

Rocky really wasn’t superstitious, but he’d done too much peyote with his Native American friends to question their intuition.

“Be around tomorrow?”

“No, I’ll be in Mexicali. Can’t back out and get Roberto Cruz upset.”

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â Yeah, donâ t piss off that killing bastard.â

â Goes through a lot of oil drums,â said Rocky. â A body fits just right in one of those things.â He paused and took a deep inhale of the fragrant steam. â Did you know he came from a wealthy family? Went to UCLA. A captain in the Federales and runs a drug cartel.â

â Not exactly a poor Mexican, huh?â Blackfeather wiped his face with a towel.

â Says heâ s a Spaniard,â said Rocky. â His mom owns ranches and oil wells. Heâ s the only child.â

â You wonder why a guy with all that turns to crime?â Blackfeather sipped his tea. â Wonder what he makes a month?â

â To hear Hector talk he pulls in a million or two every month.â

Blackfeather jerked back, a look of surprise on his face. â Thatâ s good enough for me.â

â Buys art,â said Rocky. â Lots of Hockney, and some guy named Ed Ruscha.â

â Must be nice,â sighed Blackfeather. â Heâ s got a problem in Mexicali?â

â Another honest citizen,â wheezed Rocky against the heat. â I try not to go too deep into my work.â

â Just stay away from the mountains for a while,â said Blackfeather.

â I just hike the easy trails. Nothing up there to bother me.â

â Iâ m sure thatâ s what Custer was thinking when he was down on the Little Big Horn.â Blackfeather gave Rocky a sly grin.

Chapter 2

Dude, Nice Tie

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In Mexicali, Baja California, thereâs a small printing establishment. Neat, clean and well managed, like the mind of the proprietor. The shop squatted in a flat outlying area of low square buildings and narrow streets which, except for glass windows, TV antennas and cars, could have been Neolithic.

A figure stood outside the printerâs door. Black suit, matching open-collared shirt, boots with silver tipped toes, and a white Panama pulled over his eyes. The street was empty. At that time of day, locals took siestas.

He rubbed a small brass Buddha he carried in his jacket pocket. In a praying gesture he held his only hand thumb-up against his heart. He spoke his mantra in a low voice. â May I find peace. May I hold peace. May peace enfold me.â

Entering, he closed the door behind him turning the Open/Closed sign to Closed. Printing noise filled the room. It was like riding inside an MPC: Marine Personnel Carrier. At least the room didnât shake, but the sound brought back bad memories.

Busy with the machine, Gustavo Calles was unaware of the visitorâs entrance. XEMO radio blared American rock â n roll sung in Spanish.

A biting solvent, and the thick viscous odor of printerâs ink colored the air in oily fumes. The pungent odors reminded the new entrant of the chemical training chamber at Camp Pendleton. He poured a cup of complimentary coffee and selected paper samples of various colors. With a ballpoint pen attached to the counter by a thin chain, he scribbled doodles on several sheets.

In the center of the room sat a press built like a German Panzer. The Heidelberg Windmill letterpress was called the Prince of Presses. Callesâ silent visitor had researched this machine carefully. It would be his partner. He knew Callesâ local fame was based on his continuing crusade against corruption. In fact, that was the reason for his visit.

Technically called a Windmill because of the paper feeders, two inverted â Lâs with pneumatic grippers at each end moved with mechanical authority. Two arms hissed and gripped, rotating in quick jerks, feeding paper stock to the jaw-like platens, whose power was measured in tons; the platens then closed on the offered sheet, making an impression.

The stock, still held by the gripper, was then delivered to the drying plate. Each series of maneuvers produced a single impression. Fifty repetitions or more could be repeated in the period of a minute.

The visitor studied the exposed iron spoke flywheel. Like the drivers of a locomotive, it turned by rotating arms and elbows, sprockets, gears, spindles â all moving with a lubricated chunk and rattle.

Today was Tuesday. Calles would be wearing his Don Ho Special Luau Pink Orchid tie. He was. Calles was also famous for his wide brightly flowered neckpieces he ordered from a shop in Hawaii. Within the year, he never wore the same necktie twice. People knew what day it was by the tie that Calles wore. As always the floral cravat was inside his printerâs apron. One didnât wear loose clothing when the Prince was operating.

With an exaggerated flourish, the visitor removed his hat and placed it on the counter. He shifted his jacket over his shoulders like an Italian movie actor to hide the deficit of having only one arm.

Calles caught the action and looked up. Smiling, the perceived client quickly moved around the counter and handed the sheets of paper to Calles.

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“Hi, my name is Rocky.”

“Rocky?” said Calles. “You new here?”

“Not really.”

For a moment their eyes locked.

“Rocky, that is it?”

“Usually that is enough,” said Rocky.

“I am busy right now,” said Calles.

Rocky could hear irritation in his voice. “Just have a look,” Rocky said with a grin.

“Then I will come back.”

“I am chairing a meeting tonight,” Calles said, almost to himself. “About that crook, Roberto Cruz.”

Calles looked at the crumpled papers in his hand. Studying the sheets of bond stock, his expression became puzzled and then changed to a frown.

Frustrated, Calles looked up at Rocky, who held an aerosol can. A cloud of pepper spray blew into Calles face. He screamed and his hands went to his eyes.

Rocky took hold of Calles' necktie and fed it to the paper feeders. The Heidelberg Prince was the perfect accomplice. Its hisses and rattles sounded happy like a feeding beast, jerking and pulling Calles into its thoughtless embrace.

Rocky stepped back and watched.

“My God, no,” Calles screamed, still blinded. Using his left hand he tried to push away, but grabbed the spinning flywheel. Momentum pulled his arm inside the spokes. His left forearm snapped, severed at the elbow.

Something wet hit Rocky's face. He brushed his cheek and blood smeared on his fingers. He tasted it and watched the mechanical assassin pull its victim closer to its jaws. Calles' body jerked and bobbed like a badly designed mechanical component.

Calles struggled, screaming curses; the Prince pulled him closer to the opening and closing of its jaws. Fed like a sheet of paper, Calles' head exploded under tons of pressure. The radio played Rufus Thomas' *Walking the Dog* in Spanish, and Calles' legs acted out the lyrics.

Windmill arms cut into Calles' neck; their wiping motion flung a bloody spray against the wall. The Prince labored and smoke coiled around its motor casing. It struggled against the bony structure of the alien that now inhabited it.

Announcement sheets lay on the floor. The splattered silhouette of a black necktie was superimposed on each.

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Rocky walked to the complimentary coffee machine and removed another paper cup from the stack and poured fresh coffee. Sipping, he turned to look at his work. The press worked dispassionately, chewing, its metal bowels grumbling at the tedium of its labor.

Rocky looked on with a resigned languor. Calles might have been a nice guy. He could have bought Rocky's services to do Cruz. But he probably lacked the capacity for hate and survival that Cruz possessed. Rocky was an ex-Marine, now disabled, but still looked at himself as a soldier. A mercenary, he worked for anyone who'd pay him.

Satisfied, he stepped to the wall and with his finger lifted a teardrop of blood and brought it to his mouth. Exhaling a sigh of pleasure, he raked his tongue across his lips to extract a final savor.

He gathered his hat and walked out the door. Through the windows, his passing figure was divided into rectangles by the security bars that protected the shop. Broken into rough geometry, his black shape looked like a sinister David Hockney graphic.

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Wally was born in San Diego, traveled through Mexico, and Latin America. He was raised on the border at his family's ranch, whose original deed was recorded in 1870. Hanging out between two countries, he met a lot of unusual people: Hollywood types, Border Patrol Officers, professional trackers, smugglers, and people he won't mention by name. He'll remind you no matter how weird a story can get, it'll contain some grain of truth.

For more information visit: <http://www.wallyrunnels.com>

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