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Steven E. Sherwood

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Another Man's Treasure

by

Steven E. Sherwood

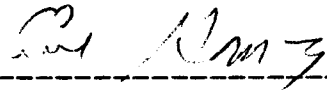
B.S., University of Colorado, 1977

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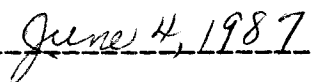
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## CHAPTER ONE

Ptarmigan Drive was narrow and steep, a high-altitude scenic highway that cut through the heart of the Colorado Rockies. From his battered pickup, Pickett scanned the shoulder for litter. He relaxed behind the wheel, comfortable in the knowledge of the highway's every bend and dip. It was seven o'clock, his favorite time of the morning. Orange sunlight tinted the snow near the summit of Bighorn Peak, a meadowlark--or was it a red-winged blackbird?--sang from the foggy marshlands along the Wapiti River. No Winnebagos crowded the road this early and Bighorn National Park's rangers didn't start work for another hour. Pickett had the road--and the park--to himself.

Or so he thought until he saw a rusting '56 Studebaker parked next to a solitary trash barrel. Leaning against the Studebaker was a woman in black so severely bent over a cane she seemed hunchbacked. She breathed out clouds of steam. A black net confined her ivory hair, but a few strands had escaped and blew in the wind.

As Pickett drew near, the woman began waving a handkerchief with the cane hand and nearly dropped the object cradled in her other arm: a large copper-colored container that resembled a covered flower vase.

She probably needed directions to the nearest comfort

station, Pickett thought, or wanted him to identify the tassel-eared squirrels that infested the park. Then he took another look at her flower vase.

"What the hell...an urn?"

The woman dabbed at her eyes with the hanky, coughed violently into it for several seconds, then spat something onto the ground.

When Pickett got out, the woman's breathing assailed him, the creaking wheeze of an ancient billows. He approached her slowly, hard hat in hand, tucking his gray uniform shirt into his forest green pants.

"Come closer, boy," she said. For a long time she simply breathed hard and looked at him. "What's your name?"

"Oscar Pickett."

"You ain't a park ranger," she said between breaths. "Are you?"

"I haul the trash," he said.

She looked relieved. "Can you help me?"

Pickett waited for her to go on, then asked, "What is it, are you ill?"

Her chuckle became a violent cough, but as he moved to assist her, she held up her cane. When the coughing subsided she gave Pickett a tight smile. "I'm ill all right, but there's nothing you can do about that. Only one can help me's the Almighty and he don't seem inclined."

Pickett noted the ulcerated sores on the backs of her hands, the bluish cast of her skin. Afraid he was about to face a medical emergency, he remembered that blue skin was a symptom of impending heart attack--or maybe it was respiratory arrest.

The woman looked at the object in her arms, her eyes shining. She began talking in bursts. "My husband Henry. Henry Provost. Passed away six days ago, God rest his soul. Last wish was to be spread over Bighorn Park by plane. Can't afford no plane. Trying to do it myself."

"I don't understand," Pickett said. "How can I help you?"

"Thin air's bad for my pipes. Close to finishing me. Can't drive no further. Can't go on." She coughed a while. "What I'm asking is can you carry on for me. Take Henry up the mountain. Spread him in some nice places. Where he can rest peaceable. Can you?"

Pickett scuffed the gravel with a climbing boot. He often dealt with death. The wildlife in Bighorn Park was so thick a person could hardly take a step without stumbling over one dead thing or another. Part of his job was to dispose of the carcasses. Human remains obviously didn't fit into his job description, and a superstitious person might object to starting off the day with a funeral, but these weren't valid reasons for refusing the woman's



request. He couldn't remember the last time someone asked him to do something so important. He extended his arms.

"I'd consider it an honor," he said.

She slowly handed him the urn.

"I knew you would," she said. "You've got Henry's kind hazel eyes. The same dark hair he had in the old days. Henry loved this park. And he knew it better than most."

"What do I do with it when it's empty?" Pickett hefted the urn.

The woman managed to chuckle without launching into a coughing fit. "You say you're a trashman? Well then, throw it away. And Oscar, thank you."

She walked herself along the Studebaker, bent nearly double. Pickett moved forward to open the door for her, but she stopped him with the cane.

"Thanks just the same," she said. "I ain't helpless yet. You just take care of Henry. He's a good husband."

"I will," Pickett said.

The woman U-turned and drove down Ptarmigan Drive toward the park entrance.

Pickett carefully placed the urn at the center of the truck seat, padding it with a ragged stuffed animal that had been in the cab for two seasons. He'd found the toy bear lying in the road, its button eyes and left

ear cut away by someone's steel-belted radial. At first glance, he'd thought the tan and black object was a marmot or a raccoon, but unlike a road kill it had been resurrected.

Pickett patted the urn, then took a fresh trash bag from a box on the floorboard and emptied the pull off's barrel. After he threw the trash into the pickup's enclosed receptacle and drove on, he wished he'd asked about Henry Provost. Who was he? Why was Bighorn Park so special to him? He lifted the urn's cover for a peek at the gray ashes inside, as if they might provide a clue to the man's identity.

The sight, like something one might find at the bottom of an hibachi, told him little but left an unpleasant taste in Pickett's mouth. This taste grew stronger when he saw, just ahead, a broad patch of dried blood that ran diagonally across his lane. He stopped the pickup, causing the load of trash in the bed to shift forward.

He looked at the bloodstain for a long time, resting his forehead on the steering wheel. The day was getting off to a great start.

"Please let it be something small," he pleaded, "a coyote or a deer." But there was simply too much blood for that.

On most mornings--if one stood well away from the pickup--the air smelled sweet, carrying the essence of

forests and snow from the surrounding peaks. Today he smelled in it something more potent than alpine primrose and wet pine.

He spied a brass rifle shell partly buried in the dirt beside the road. Slipping a twig into the open end, he held it up--a .30-.06. A bloody drag mark, flanked by several sets of boot prints, led into the trees. He followed it, dew from the chokecherry bushes drenching his boots.

It lay a few yards from the pavement, under a ponderosa pine: the headless carcass of a bull elk. Magpies pecked at strings of meat surrounding the exposed vertebrae. They scattered as he walked up.

"Christ," Pickett said. "What a mess."

He crouched down to compare the shell with a hole in the elk's right shoulder. They roughly matched. Whoever shot it had taken the head and the right haunch, leaving maybe seven hundred pounds of meat to rot. As he'd noticed from the road, the meat was beginning to stink.

The magpies squawked when a raven landed a few yards from the carcass. There were caws and the flutter of feathers as the bigger bird established a pecking order.

Pickett returned to the road, dropping the rifle shell where he'd found it. He took a red flag from under the seat and tied it to a tree branch to mark the spot

for the rangers. They'd want to investigate. Later, when the carcass was good and ripe, the bastards would undoubtedly want him to come back with a chain saw and haul it away.

When he slammed the door and let out the clutch, a faint groan came from under red wool blanket in the passenger seat.

The blanket fell away to expose LeRoy Calhoun's pale blond hair and flat nose. Pickett glanced over to see one blue eye open for a darting look around. The eye quickly resealed.

Pickett checked his Timex quartz. "Five more minutes. Then it's time to pick up trash."

"Where are we?" Calhoun asked, his voice was half an octave lower than normal.

"See for yourself. I've already hit the barrels at Beaver Creek. And I found a poached elk--"

Calhoun gripped the dashboard to pull his short stocky frame erect in the seat. He brushed hair out of his eyes and scratched his almost transparent moustache. Pickett noted that his skin had taken on the gray-green sheen of aspen leaves. With nothing but his Park Service uniform and the blanket to keep him warm, Calhoun's teeth chattered.

"Oh God, I feel terrible today," Calhoun said. He rubbed the lymph glands below his jaw with thumb and

forefinger. "I wonder if I'm coming down with something."

Pickett was warm in his mountain parka. "Gee, LeRoy, who can tell? Last week you had the stomach flu, before that it was altitude sickness and all through June you had symptoms of tick fever. What's left to have?"

From the glove compartment Calhoun took an aerosol spray device and shot some kind of medication into his lungs. After Calhoun's second hit on it, Pickett stopped the truck.

"There's a beer can."

Calhoun twisted to peer back down the road. "I don't see anything."

"Back about fifty feet, just off the fringe," Pickett said. "Looked like a Coors."

"We'll get it on the way down. Spud'll never know the difference."

"Spud always knows the difference," Pickett said. Maintenance Superintendent Spud Tyler could see through rocks and trees to spot polyvinyl chloride Coke bottles, mustard jars and other tourist droppings his garbage collectors missed. "Better get it now."

Draped in the blanket, Calhoun limped down the rocky shoulder. A moment later, Pickett heard a clang as Calhoun threw the can into the trash receptacle, then Calhoun appeared at his window, holding between two gloved fingers a Pampers disposable diaper.

In a mournful voice, Calhoun said, "How could anyone drive through the most beautiful place in the world, roll down the window and toss out a Pampers?"

It was a question they often asked themselves. It left Pickett brooding. In the old days, when first chosen from among thousands of applicants for a Park Service position, he assumed he'd spend his time building trails or giving camp fire talks. He'd always wanted to be a Park Ranger--that best liked of public officials, Boy Scout and Canadian Mounty rolled up into one--and felt that someone had made a terrible mistake when, on arriving at park headquarters, he was directed to the maintenance shop and issued a large box of trash bags.

During his first month on the job, proud of his gray and green uniform, Pickett had played at being a ranger, going out of his way to help stranded motorists and referring to the garbage run as a patrol. Then he realized he was fooling no one. His lack of a gold-plated badge and Smokey Bear hat was painfully obvious. The same people who worshiped the rangers, begging them to stand still for photographs, seemed to despise him, when they noticed him at all.

He'd been here three summers now, emptying trash barrels, picking up beer cans and disposing of carcasses, and had gradually learned to accept the darker side of his work. He'd even begun looking at himself not as

a simple trashman but as a conservation officer: he picked up where the rangers left off in their efforts to educate an environmentally ignorant public. As he saw it, while the rangers talked ecology, he and Calhoun got their hands dirty with it.

Deep down, though, Pickett knew this was nonsense. Days like today, when the poached elk and Pampers mounted up, he wondered why he'd ever taken the job.

"What the hell's that?" Calhoun asked.

Pickett glanced at the urn. The sight of it, and the memory that today he was doing something slightly out of the ordinary, something noble, made him feel a little better.

"Meet Henry Provost," he said. He explained about the woman's request to spread her husband's ashes. Calhoun told him to stop the truck.

"Why?"

"Stop the goddamned truck."

When the truck rolled to a stop, Calhoun got out. Pickett saw he was trembling under his blanket.

"I'm not riding with a dead man," Calhoun said.

"Dump it over the embankment and let's be done with it. One part of the park's as good as another."

Pickett draped an arm over the urn. "I made the lady a promise and I'm going to keep it."

Calhoun counted the federal regulations Pickett

was breaking by transporting human remains. Pickett tried to reason with him. "They're only ashes. See?" He lifted the lid. "What do you think they're going to do, wake up and grab you?"

A pained expression came over Calhoun's face. "I've never told anyone this before, but my Uncle Willard died when I was just a kid. At the wake, my cousins got hold of some of his ashes and--"

"All right!" Pickett said.

"--mixed them into my hot chocolate," Cahoun said.

Pickett grimaced and held up his hand. "I don't want to hear any more. I'm taking it back to the trash compartment."

When Pickett returned to the cab, Calhoun was already in the passenger seat rubbing temples with one hand sore glands with the other. From the glove box he drew an unabridged medical dictionary he'd found beside the road and began searching for diseases to match his various symptoms. They drove on, neither speaking until Pickett guided the truck into Two Moons Village, the compound of log cabins which housed eighteen of the park's rangers and naturalists.

"The usual?" Pickett asked.

Calhoun gave a halfhearted nod. They each took several trash bags and moved off in different directions.

Pickett's first barrel belonged to Jim Brock and



Darrel Hanes, a pair of backcountry rangers. Before emptying it, he picked through the trash, curious what the rangers had been up to. From a cursory examination, Pickett discovered Brock and Hanes had recently dined on fresh trout, Brussel sprouts, French bread and Gallo Chablis. For desert, a Sarah Lee cheese cake. After dinner...he fished out an empty tube of K-Y Jelly. The rangers were rumored to be gay lovers. Pickett had no direct evidence to support this--no eyewitness accounts--but they somehow consumed a four-ounce tube of the gel every few weeks. He sorted through the less interesting garbage: a Campbell's Mushroom Soup can, some soiled Baggies, an empty bottle of Head and Shoulders, orange peels, a milk carton, half-eaten toast, crinkled sheets of aluminum foil. Near the bottom he found a large leather-bound book entitled Scatalogic Rites of All Nations. The title and author's name--Captain John G. Bourke, Third Cavalry, U.S.A.--were in gold leaf. Published in 1891, the book looked new except for dark stains that made the pages curl at the edges. He was leafing through it, wondering what it meant in terms of the rangers' sex lives, when he discovered, written on the inside of the front cover: "Property of Captain Filth."

"That's strange," Pickett muttered. He started to call Calhoun over for a consultation, but decided it could wait. He tucked the book under an arm, replaced

the trash bag and went on to the next barrel.

Calhoun was two doors down, shoulders tensed under the blanket as he mined the barrel of Chief Ranger Tom Whitehead. Pickett watched him burrow in, at first finding standard fare like potato peels and a Cheerio's box. Finally, Calhoun waved a small sheet of lavender paper overhead like a flag.

On returning to the truck with three heavy trash bags, Pickett found Calhoun waiting with the lavender paper opened in his hands.

"Listen to this," Calhoun said.

Pickett threw the bags into the trash receptacle, careful not to disturb Henry Provost's urn.

Affecting a breathless passion, Calhoun read: "'My beloved Tomcat, come to me tonight at our secret love nest. Just the thought of you makes me warm and soft in all the right places. Say you'll come and don't be late. Your Pussycat.'"

This was the sixth Pussycat-Tomcat paper Calhoun had unearthed since May. Determining that Chief Ranger Whitehead was Tomcat and why the notes appeared on Wednesdays had been easy enough--Wednesday was league bowling night in Cheyenne Falls, perfect for a rendezvous. But it had taken Calhoun weeks of combing the park's trash barrels to unmask Pussycat.

If Pickett felt guilty about such spying, his guilt wasn't earthshaking. "So Whitehead and Abrahams are at it again," he said. "They should be more discrete."

Calhoun let out a harsh laugh. "I wonder where their love nest is. Might be fun to leave them a bottle of Andre's, compliments of Joe Abrahams."

"At least they're getting laid," Pickett said. "I guess that's more than some people can say."

Calhoun glared up at him. "We can't all be big studs."

"Relax, LeRoy, I wasn't talking about you. I mean, the way you were telling it yesterday, I assumed you'd worked things out with your actress friend--"

"Her name's Cindy!"

"Yeah, I know. Cindy, queen of the melodrama. From what you said, I figured you were set for the rest of the summer."

"She's not that kind of a girl," Calhoun said. "She wants to get to know me better before the relationship gets heavy duty."

"Oh."

"And that's fine with me. Unlike some people, I don't have to jump in the sack on the first date."

Pickett recalled that their first date had been in early June, almost two months ago. In a bid to change the subject, Calhoun indicated the book under Pickett's

arm. "What've you got there?"

Pickett held it up. "Scatalogic Rites of All Nations. I found it in Brock and Hanes' barrel."

"Let me see."

Pickett handed it over and waited for a reaction to the claim of ownership, but Calhoun flipped through the pages, stopping to read a passage about the Zuni urine dance.

"Listen to this," Calhoun said. "'In their dances the Zuni resort to the horrible practice drinking human urine, eating human excrement, animal excrement, and other nastiness which can only be believed by seeing it.'" He read for a while, making faces. "This has got to be the most disgusting book I've ever seen."

"It's a classic scientific study," Pickett said. "A note in the margin says it influenced Freud." He took it back and turned to the inside cover. "Look who owns it."

"That dirtbag?"

Pickett stiffened. "He's a friend of mine."

More than that, Pickett thought, Captain Filth was Bighorn Park's maintenance man extraordinaire, who hauled more garbage and dug more interesting artifacts out of the trash than anyone in park history. He had come home from Vietnam to fall in love with the park's hanging valleys and glaciated peaks. For years he stayed near

the bottom of the maintenance department, patching roads, building trails and cleaning pit toilets before finding his niche and his nickname. When Pickett hired on, Captain Filth had been hauling trash for eight years. He became Pickett's mentor, teaching him the finer points of the job: the proper way to toss a road kill off the pavement, the best places to hide from the park brass, how to read peoples' secret lives in their trash. He'd even come close to convincing Pickett to give up his dream of becoming a park ranger:

"How much do you make an hour?" Captain Filth once asked, after Pickett complained about the job.

"Six bucks."

"How much do the rangers make?"

"Four, but that's not the point."

Captain Filth had grunted scornfully. "Those Boy Scouts spend half their time fielding stupid questions from tourists, the other half playing cop. As drones, we're free. We've got no dignity to maintain and as long as we look busy and keep the place clean the brass leaves us alone. If a tourist asks how often we mow the tundra, we tell him 'Once a week,' or we laugh in his face--whatever feels right. A ranger would have to be polite to the asshole."

When Captain Filth moved up to the sewage detail, Pickett passed his wisdom on to Calhoun, but Calhoun

had never warmed up to him. Perhaps he sensed that, hard as he tried, he could never fill Captain Filth's shoes.

"All right, this classic scientific smut belongs to Captain Filth," Calhoun said. "So what?"

"It's a rare volume, probably worth a lot of money," he said. "What's it doing in Brock and Hanes's trash can? I've never heard of Captain Filth lending his books before. He covers them in plastic and stores them on special shelves."

Calhoun gave a huge yawn. "There's a first time for everything."

Quite possibly, Pickett thought, Captain Filth had broken with fifteen years of habit to loan a rare book to a pair of rangers he'd never liked, who, instead of returning it to its owner, had thrown it out with the leftovers. In any case, he wanted to be there when Brock and Hanes explained why Captain Filth's 1891 edition of Scatalogic Rites of All Nations was smeared with fish slop and K-Y Jelly.

\* \* \*

It was 8:10 and the day was warming up. Fog that hid the lower slopes of the mountains was beginning to dissipate.

Pickett poised at the center of Ptarmigan Drive, one end of a short stick in his right hand, the other

planted under the dead body of a chipmunk. He wore a fluorescent orange highway hazard vest over his Park Service uniform. Down the road, just around a bend, came the sound of a straining automobile engine.

"Get ready," Calhoun called from the pickup.

Pickett crouched like a tennis pro about to deliver a smashing forehand. A blue van filled with some of the day's first sightseers sped into view. Pickett uncoiled, the stick snapped up and out, and the limp broken carcass of the chipmunk flipped end over end across the path of the van. The road kill soared twenty vertical and forty horizontal feet into the forest.

He watched it pass between the saplings he'd marked as goal posts, then raised both arms in a V.

"Three points," he said.

He returned to the pickup, heedless of the sightseers' stares. The van, decorated by the Bighorn Park Company's logo of a bighorn ram, climbed on up the highway toward Ptarmigan Pass. There, Pickett knew, its cargo of lodge guests would storm the restaurant/gift shop, perched twelve thousand feet above sea level at the edge of a glacial cirque, to buy stale doughnuts and rubber tomahawks.

"Did you catch the lady in the yellow parka when that little chippy went flying by?" Calhoun asked.

Pickett drew a stenographer's pad and pencil from

the glove box and flipped through the pages. "Let's see. Three points for the field goal and three more for grazing the van--"

"You call missing it by fifteen feet a graze?" Calhoun asked. "Then maybe we'd better add a few graze points to some of my tosses."

"--That's nine hundred and eighty-one points for you, a thousand-twelve for me." Pickett penciled in the new score. "I'm ahead by thirty-one."

"The next road kill's mine then," Calhoun said.

Pickett followed the van up Ptarmigan Drive, but at a much slower pace. He watched for road kills while Calhoun scanned for litter. They were fifty yards from Wapiti Bend overlook, unofficially known as Kodak Curve, when he saw what at first looked like a medium-sized animal lying dead in the road. They drew nearer and he saw that in fact it was a number of smaller ones together in a single heap.

When Pickett pointed it out, Calhoun did a triple take, his eyes apparently refusing to record the gory pile.

"Here's your chance to catch up," Pickett said. "Better look for a good stick."

Calhoun combed the drainage ditch for what they sometimes referred to, in bureaucratic terms, as a road kill disposal implement. Meanwhile, Pickett pieced together



the chain of events that led to the deaths of so many animals in so confined a space. From what he could deduce, one of them--a Richardson's ground squirrel--was crushed while crossing the highway. Another went out to feed on it and was also killed. Then the rest of their family and friends went out, one after another, to die under the wheels of recreational vehicles rounding Kodak Curve.

He stared at them, surprised by a faint nausea. After sending so many of the little creatures spinning through make-believe goalposts--and after his recent encounter with a headless elk--he should have been desensitized.

Friends, who in the same breath told him he would never break Captain Filth's record for throwing road kills, insisted the Road Kill Olympics, a series of contests to determine who could throw a road kill the highest, farthest and most accurately, was a macho sham aimed at hiding his and Calhoun's revulsion. Looking at the bloody fur and intestines heaped in the road--the raw smell of which reached into the truck--Pickett wondered if they might not be right.

Calhoun stood near the pile, a fallen scrub branch in his hand. His pinched expression belied an otherwise professional manner.

"These are worth at least six points apiece," he

said, glancing up at Pickett. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"How many are there?"

Calhoun probed with the stick. "Eight. No, nine. I may need the shovel on this one."

"That's up to you, but you get no points for using a shovel. Whatever you decide to do, you'd better do it. We're behind schedule."

Calhoun hesitated, then, with a shudder, said, "All right, what the hell. Here goes."

Eyes averted, he began launching the ground squirrels off the road, going for speed and distance rather than style. Seven vanished over Ptarmigan Drive's embankment, doing tight aerial spins and cartwheels, before his technique failed him.

Calhoun had overlooked a small spur at the end of his stick. As he flicked his wrist again, the ground squirrel snagged and arched high above his head. He glanced quickly around, unsure where it had gone, and was about to look up when, with a dull splat, it bounced off his hard hat and landed on the paving at his feet.

He kicked it off the road with a discordant squeal. "Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick."

For a moment, Pickett was unable to speak. Finally he said, "That one's worth ten points."

Calhoun sterilized his hard hat with a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the glove box. He took a hit on his nebulizer, then lay back to let his stomach settle. Pickett's attempts to converse brought complaints about sore glands. As they neared Elk Basin trail head, Calhoun leaned into the dashboard, shoulders thrown back and neck arched as he stared ahead.

"Oh no!" Calhoun pounded the dash with a fist as they pulled into the spacious parking area. "I swear--one of these days I'm going to go bear hunting."

Throughout the pine-dotted meadow, under every picnic table, lay the contents of eight fifty-gallon trash barrels. Pickett studied the mess, unlike Calhoun feeling no compulsion to shoot the animals responsible for it. He pulled on a pair of leather gloves and got to work.

Calhoun followed, stuffing well-chewed melon rinds into a trash bag and discoursing on how life would improve once he graduated from the Colorado School of Mines. "Why do I keep coming back to this place year after year when I could be out finding oil for Exxon?"

Pickett threw away a bag of litter, then poured some of Henry Provost's ashes into a foam coffee cup and walked to the edge of the meadow. He stopped beneath a huge Douglas fir and looked up into the branches, then nodded. It was a good place for some of Henry to lie

Pickett sprinkled the ashes around the tree, then

focused his attention on what remained of the mess. He wondered--as he often had--how he could rig the trash barrels to give tourists easy access but keep out hungry animals. Last summer, at his urging, Spud had ordered two large boxes with heavy plywood lids. With the barrels placed inside, they kept the bears away but had the same effect on tourists, who took to leaving their paper plates and chili cans in tidy piles under the tables.

Pickett suggested the park buy the type of barrels used in Yellowstone, with locking lids and doors like mailbox slots. Instead, domed lids with hinged doors were found and Pickett told to do the best he could with them. He and Calhoun wired them on, but the bears had learned to work the lids back and forth until the wires broke. Each day they picked up the lids with the trash and wired them back on the barrels.

They were doing this when Darrel Hanes and Jim Brock drove up in a green Blazer, pulling a horse trailer.

The rangers unloaded their mounts without a glance at Pickett or Calhoun. They looked arrogant in their full field uniforms--dark green ties, gold badges, Smokey Bear hats and all. Hanes was slim, medium tall, with light brown hair and striking, almost womanly, features. Brock was taller than Hanes and outweighed him by fifty pounds. Black wire covered the backs of his hands, matching that of his moustache, beard and eyebrows.

Pickett worked toward them, bending every few steps to retrieve scraps of a paper napkin. He considered asking them about Scatalogic Rites of All Nations, but decided against it. After all, it was Captain Filth's business--and it wouldn't do to let them know he'd been snooping.

At a whisper from Hanes, Brock's massive shoulders shook with laughter.

"Yeah, I smell it too," Brock said in a high-pitched voice. He transferred a citation booklet and a .38 revolver from a rucksack to his horse's saddlebags. "Smells like garbage man."

The rangers laughed, leaving Pickett amazed as always at the contrast between Brock's machismo looks and soprano voice. He bent for more litter. When he looked up, the rangers were sitting straight in their saddles, doing their Royal Canadian Mounted Police routine.

"Makes you sick, don't it?" Brock asked. "But what can you expect from a schmuck who spends all day digging through muck?"

Hanes giggled. "That rhymes."

Pickett started toward the pickup with a pained expression.

"Can't you hear me, stinkhole?" Brock wheeled his horse to follow.

"I hear," Pickett said. He started to turn away,

then paused. "Before I forget, I've been meaning to ask what happened to the dog we turned over to you last week. The golden retriever?"

The dog had come out of the woods near Beaver Creek campground. On Pickett's approach, it laid back its ears and rolled over. He'd led it to the truck, where it lay across Calhoun's lap, dangling its head out the window until they flagged down the rangers. At the time, Brock and Hanes had seemed willing enough to take it off their hands.

Pickett had assumed they would see it safely back to its owner, but as he studied their faces he realized with a jolt what they must have done with it.

"Dead Dog Point," he said.

He pictured the amiable retriever being dragged to this mud embankment at the park dump, for a pistol shot behind the ear--a fate usually reserved for game chasers whose owners failed to claim them after a few days. Most other rangers didn't enjoy the killings.

"You sick bastards."

"What did you want us to do with a feral dog?" Brock asked.

"Feral! You shot someone's pet, Brock. He came right to me when I called and he wore a collar."

"Did you see a collar, Darrel?"

Hanes shook his head. "All I saw was dead meat."

Pickett threw the litter he'd gathered into the trash receptacle. "Maybe Tom Whitehead should know that two of his rangers shot a golden retriever with current tags for thrills."

They didn't look worried. "Our word against a garbage man's," Brock said.

Calhoun came out from behind the truck. "You ever noticed how one of these fruitcakes looks like Dale Evans and the other talks like her?" he asked. He turned a hard grin on the rangers. "Makes you wonder how they keep each other happy on the trail."

"Keep your midget under control, Pickett," Hanes said.

"Oh, but I forgot," Calhoun said. "Darrel's promised to be faithful to little Barry back in Pittsburgh. Right, Darrel?"

Hanes inhaled sharply. "You nosy little dwarf!"

"Let's go, LeRoy," Pickett said, too late. Calhoun and Hanes were trading insults like competing auctioneers, spitting them out faster and louder with every word.

"That's enough." Pickett drew Calhoun toward the truck. Brock and Hanes yanked their horses around and pointed them up the Elk Basin trail. As they left the parking lot, Hanes's mare lifted its tail and dropped several pounds of manure onto the gravel.

"Eat that, Calhoun," Hanes called back.

Calhoun pulled loose and snatched up a chunk of it in his gloved hand. Hanes saw him coming and kicked his horse, but Brock turned to look just as Calhoun threw. The missile flew past Hanes and hit Brock's forehead, knocking his round-brimmed hat to the ground.

For a moment Calhoun and Brock faced each other. Then Brock reached up to wipe his forehead and his fingers came away brown.

Calhoun streaked across the picnic ground, dodging trees and trash barrels, Brock and his black gelding in hot pursuit.

Pickett tried to follow them, yelling at Brock to calm down.

"I'll kill the little shit!" Brock shouted.

Calhoun feinted one way, then raced around a picnic table to the parking lot. Brock chased him for two turns around the Blazer and horse trailer, then Calhoun leaped the tow bar and ran toward the pickup. Pickett stopped to watch as Brock and the gelding closed in across twenty yards of open ground, but Calhoun beat them to the truck, diving into the trash receptacle.

Brock pulled up short, the horse's hooves skidding on gravel. He fumbled for something in his saddlebags.

"No." Hanes said. He rode up and grabbed Brock's arm. "Forget it, Jim. There'll be another time to settle with that turd."



Brock jerked his arm away, but Hanes grabbed it again. "We don't need the trouble right now. We'll fix him later, in our own time. Let's ride."

He took Brock's reins and led him away. As they passed Brock's hat, Hanes dismounted and handed it to him. As they rode side-by-side toward Elk Basin, Hanes wet a handkerchief with his canteen and reached across to wipe Brock's forehead.

\* \* \*

Park brochures called Nimbus Pass Junction the gateway to the vast Thundercloud Peaks backcountry. The main trail climbed northwest into four hundred square miles of wilderness, roamed by the park's experimental wolf pack. Another ran north along the river to Limping Mule Canyon and the abandoned mining district of Cibola City. The third, an overgrown track, led southwest to Ram's Rise, craggy haven for bighorn sheep, mountain goats and the park's only breeding pair of peregrine falcons--off limits to everyone but a handful of wildlife researchers.

Pickett worked the Cibola City trail head, glancing north into unknown country. The pit toilets, hitching rails and picnic tables were old friends, but what little he knew of the Thundercloud Peaks wilderness came to him secondhand.

To him, he thought, Nimbus Pass Junction was the gateway to twelve fifty-gallon trash barrels. He'd read

the brochures, but most of the places they described remained mysterious. Each day he watched backpackers from Texas and New York disappear up the trails, in their brief vacations learning more about the park's backcountry than he'd learned in three summers of weekend hikes.

"Someday I'm going up there," Pickett said, though he doubted it. "Just as soon as I can afford a decent pack and sleeping bag."

Calhoun grunted, his warmest response since he'd peered out over the tailgate at Elk Meadows, his face streaked by a brew of white gas, sour milk, beer and whatever else was pooled in the trash receptacle. Bread crumbs had dangled from strings of mozzarella in his hair. He'd worn a choker of chicken bones. Looking at him, Pickett had burst out laughing.

"For the last time, I'm sorry," Pickett said. "It was a nervous reaction."

"Forget it," Calhoun said.

Pickett gave him a look of concern. He admired Calhoun's capacity for fury, but could think of no way to tell him this without encouraging more of it. He went off to retrieve the smaller bits of litter that cluttered the parking area: gum wrappers, cigarette butts, cherry pits, Popsicle sticks. He was throwing a double handful of these into the trash receptacle when

a group of men and women in camouflage outfits left the trees at the other end of a meadow. They formed a skirmish line, looking at the ground. Every so often, one of them picked something up and put it into a wicker basket.

Calhoun thrust his chin toward them. "What the fuck are they supposed to be?"

"Outward Bound maybe?"

"Don't they know they can't pick flowers in the park?"

Calhoun stomped off toward the group's obvious leader, an older man about Calhoun's own height with long white hair and an unwrinkled face.

Pickett followed, hoping to tone Calhoun down a bit. As he approached the group, their faint smiles and oddly-knowing eyes made him uncomfortable. This feeling intensified as the skirmish line, whose members were impressively fit and carried what looked like combat daggers on their belts, came together to form a loose circle around Calhoun and him.

"Picking flowers is illegal within park boundaries, folks," Calhoun said.

The white-haired man gave him a serene smile.

"And whose law are we breaking, friend--man or God's?"

Calhoun stared at him for a long time. "The goddamned United States government, that's whose law."

"But I can assure you we're not picking flowers."

Calhoun crossed his arms. "What's that in the baskets?"

The white-haired man motioned to a woman with a sunburned nose and hair the color of wheat chaff. "Sister Margaret, please show our friend what we're collecting."

Sister Margaret came forward, bringing with her a sour odor of stale sweat Pickett always associated with winos and wet dogs. He looked over Calhoun's shoulder at a quantity of small gray-brown mushrooms in her basket. In reply to Calhoun's questioning look, the white haired man said, "Sacred fungi."

"You can't pick toadstools either--sacred or not," Calhoun said.

"Oh no? Then we'd better stop, hadn't we?" The white-haired man smiled again. "In any event, we have all we need for now." His people laughed, then turned as a unit and followed him across the meadow.

"Don't let me catch you around here again," Calhoun said.

As they disappeared into the forest, Pickett suggested they were harvesting the psilocybin mushrooms reputed to grow in the park.

"Well, whatever they're doing they give me the creeps," Calhoun said.

The mushroom picking and jungle fatigues bothered Pickett less than the notion that the group probably

knew the Cibola City trail better than he ever would.

Back in the truck, he turned to Calhoun. "You think we should hit Ram's Rise today? I don't feel like driving up there today."

"If we don't," Calhoun said, "it'll be the first place Spud checks."

Pickett hesitated. The trailhead's single trash barrel was at the end of a rutted Jeep road, used mainly by wildlife biologists. Not only was the road dangerous and the turnabout at the top difficult, but Pickett failed to see why the biologists couldn't pack out their own trash. Then again, the isolated trail head, perched five hundred feet above the river, was ideal for killing time when they got ahead of schedule. With its panoramic view of the valley, it was also a fine place to spread more of Henry Provost's ashes. Giving a resigned nod, he drove across a bridge over the Wapiti River and turned up the road.

The drive took fifteen minutes, most of which Calhoun spent fearfully eying the drop-off inches beyond his door.

When they rounded the last switchback and pulled up next to the barrel, Pickett said, "Why don't you empty it while I turn around?"

Calhoun took a fresh trash bag from the floor and got out. Pickett shifted into low gear and backed toward

the drop-off.

"You've got a couple of feet to go," Calhoun said. He lifted the lid off the barrel, but kept his eyes on the truck.

Pickett inched back, waiting for Calhoun's signal to stop.

"Oh...!" Calhoun cried.

Pickett slammed on the brakes. "What?"

He heard retching. Pulling forward a few yards, Pickett switched off the ignition and ran around the truck to find Calhoun on his knees beside the barrel. He knelt beside him. "What is it?"

Calhoun jerked his head at the trash barrel.

Pickett peered into it, but at first saw nothing to explain Calhoun's behavior, then his eyes adjusted to its shadowy interior. He took a step back. Among the usual trash at the bottom of the barrel, partially wrapped in a bloody T-shirt, was someone's left hand.

Pickett shaded his eyes and saw that the hand was clenched into a fist. "There's something tattooed above the knuckles," he said. The letters ran left to right from pinkie to index finger. He read them aloud.

"M-A-N-A-S."

Pickett sank down beside Calhoun. In a voice that sounded strangely remote to him, he said, "It's Captain Filth's."

## CHAPTER TWO

"Maybe it's not his hand," Calhoun said. He sat erect, his illness past.

Pickett stood beside the barrel without speaking. During the war, more than one Marine might have had Manas--short for Manaschanok--tattooed on his hairy left hand. The tattoo itself wasn't conclusive. But when he worked up the courage to look back into the barrel he felt sure he'd been right the first time: the flattened knuckles, the short gnarled fingers, the dirt under the thumbnail all pointed to Captain Filth.

"Wasn't he left-handed?" Calhoun asked.

Pickett glared at Calhoun's use of the past tense. "You think he's dead?"

"I didn't mean that."

Pickett slipped off the plastic trash bag. Averting his eyes, he carried it to the pickup, wrapping the bundle in Calhoun's blanket. He placed it in the trash compartment.

"We'd better take it in."

"Yeah, but where?" Calhoun asked.

Pickett knew of no formal policy dictating where employees should take recovered body parts. "Headquarters," he said. "Someone there'll know what to do."

Calhoun got behind the steering wheel. "I'll drive. You kick back for a while."

Pickett rested his head against the rear window while Calhoun turned the truck around. As they drove away from Ram's Rise trail head, Pickett probed a dull ache in his side with his fingers. He tried to keep his mind off of Captain Filth, but found himself remembering Sunday night, the last time he'd seen him. Captain Filth--whose seldom-used name was Bill Templeton--had sat at the breakfast nook in his double-wide trailer, pouring Wild Turkey with the hand they'd just found. Pickett had matched him shot for shot in an effort to keep him from drinking the whole fifth. Sitting there in a bathrobe and the tattered gray Stetson with its rattlesnake band, Captain Filth was depressed about something, but refused to discuss it until they broke the ice. Waiting for him to speak, Pickett took a quick look through the kitchen cupboards.

"Did you know, you own more shot glasses than water tumblers?" he asked.

Captain Filth tossed his whiskey down and grimaced, a crown glinting in his upper jaw. The crown had resulted from a two-day drunk, during which he slipped on a step and came down on the tooth. Unable to afford a dentist until payday, he'd driven his sanitation truck for five days with pink nerve tissue hanging from the ruins of his incisor. Pickett couldn't look at the crown without wanting to wince.



"My Uncle Zack," Captain Filth suddenly said, "is the only man I know whose pickup got totalled by a meteorite."

He paused to study Pickett's expression, then began telling the story.

"Zack was driving along an Oklahoma farm road, just off Route 66, when there was a flash and a bang and his truck stopped dead. First he figured he'd been struck by lightning, then he saw a hole the size of his fist punched clean through the hood and the engine block. Valve fragments were scattered in a stream of oil fifty feet long. Back where it started he found a black rock in a crater of asphalt. Zack knew right away what it was, but when he told the insurance company they denied his claim and cancelled his policy. That new Ford just sat in his yard and rusted."

Pickett watched him carefully. He sensed that Captain Filth had a good reason for telling him about Uncle Zack, but hadn't the slightest idea what it was.

"You ever been in a spot where you know something's true, but you can't tell anyone about it because they'd never believe you in a million years?"

Pickett shook his head.

Captain Filth looked deeply disappointed, leaving Pickett feeling inadequate as a friend. "Forget it," he'd said. "Let's get drunk."

\* \* \*

Bighorn National Park headquarters was an angular building of cathedral glass, mossy rock and weathered redwood.

Pickett stopped inside the door, cradling the trash bag containing Captain Filth's hand. Calhoun followed, looking uncomfortable. They seldom ventured into this nerve center, preferring whenever possible to avoid contact with the park's high-ranking bureaucrats.

A corridor to Pickett's left led to Park Superintendent Raymond Ash's office. From there, Ash handed down the edicts that too often disrupted the lives of lowly maintenance workers like them. Ash rarely left his desk, relying on the eyes and ears of assistants for vital data, and consequently knew little about what actually went on in the park. Or so it seemed to Pickett. By contrast, thanks to the trash barrels, the inner workings of headquarters were not entirely mysterious to Calhoun and him. From among the boring computer printouts that detailed the everyday business of running a national park, they sometimes uprooted a memo or personnel file that made the digging fruitful.

By recovering the draft of a letter from Ash to the Park Service district office, they'd learned a year earlier than The Denver Post that park officials would turn twenty Canadian timber wolves loose in Bighorn's

wilderness. The transplant went ahead in April, in spite of local ranchers' protests, just as Pickett knew it would. Being in favor of the project, he hadn't profited from the knowledge, but took pride in it. He assumed that truly sensitive secrets never reached the trash barrels, but nevertheless considered himself one of Bighorn Park's best informed.

"Now what?" Calhoun said.

Pickett nodded at the information counter. "Let's ask them."

The two VIPs--volunteers in the park--manning the counter were answering tourists' questions with martyred expressions. A bulletin board behind them listed various ranger programs. Glass museum cases held colorful exhibits on alpine ecosystems and stuffed and mounted members of the native species, including a glass-eyed bighorn sheep.

One of the VIPs, a plump brunette, was giving directions to a middle-aged couple. Pickett approached the other, a man in his late-thirties with sharp features. He'd seen him around, but didn't know him well because VIP trash cans were outside his jurisdiction. He gathered that, in addition to supplying tourist information, the VIPs acted as receptionists for the park's bigwigs.

"Can I help you?" The VIP wore a disapproving expression.

Pickett glanced at the tourists standing a few feet away and kept his voice down. "I hope so. We found something in one of the trash barrels--"

"Have you tried lost and found?" The VIP was already turning away.

"What the hell--?" Calhoun began.

Pickett touched his shoulder. "Look, we need to talk to someone higher up. Chief Ranger Whitehead or--" He hesitated a moment, having reasons of his own for wishing to avoid an encounter with Superintendent Ash, "--maybe the superintendent?"

The VIP looked amused. "I couldn't possibly disturb Raymond. And Tom is out."

"When do you expect him back?"

"I can't tell you that," the VIP said. "If you have something to bring to the attention of either gentleman, I suggest you go through channels, starting in the maintenance department."

Pickett didn't like the VIP's pronunciation of 'maintenance.' As maintenance workers, they were legitimate employees of the park. This...volunteer...who worked for nothing but room and board--and the privilege to wear a uniform--had no right to lord it over them.

Pickett squared his shoulders. "Get me Whitehead's assistant."

"I've just told you--"

"Page him," Pickett said. "Now!"

The VIP didn't move. Pickett felt himself growing furious, and mentally ran through their conversation to be sure he wasn't to blame for this absurd standoff. He heard the rasping of breath beside him, and glanced down to find Calhoun's fists clenched.

"Are you going to page him or not?" Pickett asked.

"No," the VIP calmly said.

Pickett hesitated a moment, then lifted his arm to expose, through the clear plastic trash bag, three pale knuckles. The VIP's eyes passed over them, then snapped back.

"Is that a human--?"

"Are you going to get me someone who knows what to do with it, or should I try lost and found?"

"L-law enforcement," the VIP stammered. "That would come under law enforcement."

He punched buttons on a phone and urgently whispered into the receiver. Pickett gave Calhoun a righteous nod. A moment later, a door opened in the corridor to their right and Assistant Chief Ranger Jerry Glidewell came up to them, frowning quizzically.

"Is that it?" He indicated the bundle in Pickett's arms.

Glidewell, only a few years older than Pickett, was Pickett's idea of what a ranger should be: erect

and red-bearded, with honest blue eyes and a rugged, no-bullshit mentality. If not overly-intelligent, he at least gave the impression of being unerringly competent. He looked like a man born to his work, with no thought of ever doing anything else.

"We'd better talk in my office," Glidewell said.

He led them through the law enforcement wing to a cubicle barely large enough to hold its battered steel desk, swivel chair and hard wooden stools. Pickett placed the trash bag on the desk, between a computer terminal and a pile of reports, then took one of the stools.

"Let's have a look," Glidewell said.

Calhoun's Adam's apple rose and fell. "You'd better have a strong stomach."

Pickett carefully shifted a sardine tin in the bag to give Glidewell an unobstructed view of the hand and the bloody T-shirt that partially covered it. For the first time, Pickett noticed that part of the pinkie was missing, severed below the second knuckle. They all stared for a moment, then, with a grimace, Glidewell drew it from the bag.

"We found it in the trash at Ram's Rise," Pickett volunteered. "I'm pretty sure it's Bill Templeton's."

"Templeton?"

"Captain Filth," Calhoun said.

"Oh." The ranger frowned skeptically. "Well, what

makes you think so?"

Pickett pointed out the dark blue letters of the tattoo.

"M-A-N-A-S?" Glidewell asked.

"Short for Manaschanok--a Thai prostitute he fell in love with during the war," Pickett said. "It's not just the tattoo. The minute I saw it I knew it was his. The question now is where's the rest of him?"

Glidewell gripped the clenched index finger and unsuccessfully tried to straighten it. In a detached voice, he said, "Rigor mortis. Which means it's been separated from the arm for six or more hours. When was the last time you emptied the barrels up there?"

"Yesterday," Pickett said. "We check it at nine-fifteen every day."

"Which means someone put it there within the last twenty-four hours."

Pickett nodded impatiently. Glidewell tugged at the T-shirt covering the wound. It came away with a tearing sound Pickett found unbearable. He turned away, noticing Calhoun also avoided looking at the exposed bone, tendons and blood vessels of the wrist. Glidewell checked the T-shirt's label.

"It's extra large."

"Which means it couldn't be Captain Filth's," Pickett said. "He's about Calhoun's size."

Glidewell turned the shirt so the trashmen could see the picture of a baby harp seal on the front and the slogan: "Stop the killing." Then he began examining the wounds.

"They're both clean, even cuts by a very sharp instrument--an ax or a large knife." Glidewell looked ponderously at Calhoun, then at Pickett. "Which makes me think both the finger and hand were deliberately lopped off."

Pickett had avoided speculating on how Captain Filth lost his hand, but realized now he'd let himself believe it was by accident--a slip with a power saw or the snapping jaws of a bear trap. He could formulate no logical sequence of events that would lead from such an accident to the Ram's Rise trash barrel--nor to the cutting off of the little finger--but hated to think of the alternative.

"Nobody just cuts off his own hand and throws it into a trash barrel." Glidewell searched for the right words. "If somebody else did it, things don't look good for whoever this belongs to."

Pickett started to speak, but Glidewell interrupted him. "We have no definite proof that it's Templeton's."

"It is."

"I hope you're wrong." Glidewell put down the hand. "I'll turn this over to the county coroner--maybe the sheriff's office can match the fingerprints. Meanwhile,



let's see if we can track down Templeton."

Glidewell punched buttons on his phone. "Put me through to Spud Tyler, please."

He waited a moment, then straightened in his chair. "Spud? Glidewell. Listen, how do I get in touch with your man Templeton? You know, Captain Filth...He didn't, huh? Anybody check his home?" He glanced at Pickett, then listened for a while. "No, it's probably nothing to worry about and it's a long story. I'll explain later, if that's okay with you...Thanks."

Glidewell replaced the receiver. "Templeton didn't come to work, but Spud says he's a drinking man. He probably tied one on."

Pickett slowly shook his head. "No."

"He's done it before."

"Not this time."

Glidewell stroked his beard. "I'll take a drive up to Templeton's--see if he's there."

"His trailer's on private property, outside the park," Pickett said. "You'd have to force the door to get inside, but I know where he keeps a spare key."

"I'll knock. If he doesn't answer, I'll probably turn around and come back."

"What if he's lying in there?" Pickett asked. "We'd better tag along."

Calhoun shifted uneasily on his stool. "Spud's

going to kick our butts for sitting here all morning. We should get back to work."

Glidewell nodded in agreement. "We may be talking murder," he said. "If someone's disposing of a body, I hate to think what you're going to find in the other barrels, but it could add up to a lot more evidence than I'll find at Templeton's trailer. I'd rather you just went on doing what you're supposed to do. I'll handle the coroner, the trailer--that whole nine yards."

"I want to know what you find up there," Pickett said.

"All right."

"Before the end of the day."

Glidewell thought for a moment. "I'll get a message to you through one of the patrol rangers."

Pickett studied Glidewell's face. "Okay, but don't hold out on us. I want the details."

"Fine."

The trashmen stood up. Pickett took a last look at the severed hand before Glidewell wrapped it in the T-shirt. Then he followed Calhoun out of the cubicle, past the VIPs and through the double-glass doors of park headquarters.

\* \* \*

A mile north of Nimbus Pass Junction, Ptarmigan Drive made a series of switchbacks that gained 3,500

feet of elevation in eight miles. This engineering marvel, carved out of vertical mountainsides by turn-of-the--century Chinese Coolies, climbed from the Wapiti River basin to ancient, twisted stands of bristlecone at timberline. Granite cliffs pinched the highway into narrow lanes barely wide enough for two cars. Cascading snowmelt suspended light-refracting droplets in the air. At every curve, beside every waterfall, was a scenic turnout. At every third turnout was a trash barrel.

Pickett scanned for litter as they entered the switchbacks, letting his trained eyes do the work. He clung to morbid thoughts of Captain Filth, but Calhoun was already returning to his normal frivolity.

Calhoun turned to him. "Know what I always fantasized about doing?"

Pickett continued to stare out the window.

Calhoun said, "I always wanted to walk up to some tourist who's feeding a chipmunk--one of those chubby ones--then whip out a .357 and blow the little chippy away, right out from under the guy's fingertips."

Pickett glanced at him. "You're even sicker than I thought."

Calhoun felt his forehead. "Now that you mention it--"

"Paper cup," Pickett said.

By the time Calhoun braked the truck, the cup was

forty yards back. Pickett retrieved it without complaint, glad for some time alone. He could almost understand Calhoun's callous lack of concern. Eclipsed by the Captain Filth legend, Calhoun deeply resented it whenever someone asked, "You two are related, aren't you? Brothers or cousins or something?" For they did superficially resemble one another, both being blond, stocky and quick to anger. But hypochondria and healthy doses of caution cooled Calhoun's temper. Once ignited, Captain Filth's burned unchecked, and had little to do with Wild Turkey. Drunk or sober he was dangerous when carelessly approached, and delighted in using Marine martial arts tricks on local toughs. Perhaps Calhoun looked at Captain Filth and saw his own worst-case future, while Captain Filth saw Calhoun as a watered-down, milksop version of himself. In any event, despite Pickett's efforts to make peace, they barely tolerated each other.

Returning to the truck, Pickett thought the prospect of Captain Filth's death probably relieved Calhoun. He quietly took his seat, feeling little inclination to talk.

"You know," Calhoun said. "I finally figured out who keeps tossing all this shit on the road."

He paused, but Pickett said nothing.

"It's the little bald guys from Detroit who spend fifty weeks a year living neat little lives, then pack

their families into RV's and head west for two weeks to trash the national parks."

Pickett had once believed a sightseer's urge to mess up his surroundings was the result of a defective gene, but three summers of bending over to pick up Pringles Potato Chip cartons had left him less esoteric.

"People litter," he suddenly said, "because they're ignorant slobs. And they come from everywhere, not just Detroit."

Calhoun banked through the second switchback, a smile frozen on his lips. Neither spoke until they pulled into Thundercloud Peaks overlook, a wide space outside the third switchback. Pickett scarcely listened when Calhoun commented on the tourists who threw Wonderbread to the overlook's pack of sluggish chipmunks.

"You want to get the barrel while I police around?" Calhoun asked. He moved off without waiting for a reply, already picking up film wrappers and peanut shells.

Pickett could not bring himself to insist on trading jobs. After all, Captain Filth was his friend, not Calhoun's. If someone was scattering parts of his body around the park, he felt honor bound to find them. He approached the trash barrel with none of his customary eagerness, afraid of what might be moldering within, but in the end found nothing more macabre than half a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Pickett's hands were trembling as he helped Calhoun pick up litter.

A young mother was letting her children feed the chipmunks not far from where they worked. Calhoun watched them for a moment, then told her, "I wouldn't let 'em get too close, lady. We've had reports that some of the rodents here carry the bubonic plague."

The woman panicked, herding her children to the family camper and shouting orders to wash their hands.

Calhoun followed along. "Won't do any good to wash," he said. "Plague's carried by fleas. Either they have it or they don't."

Back in the truck, Calhoun laughed at his practical joke. "Did you see the look on that turkey's face?" he asked. "I bet she runs her kids straight to the hospital."

"You know what's funnier, don't you?" Pickett asked. "Spending five hundred dollars on lab tests to make sure you didn't have the plague yourself."

"We handle dozens of road kills every day," Calhoun said defensively.

"That's true, but it still wasn't the nicest thing you've done this week."

"Serves 'em right for coming here." Calhoun glared at him. "And where do you get off with this 'nice' bullshit. You've done worse."

"Not lately."

Calhoun thought for a moment. "What about telling that Czech family the park was closed to citizens of the Eastern Bloc on the Fourth of July?"

"That was a month ago. Maybe I've had a change of heart."

"Well, I haven't."

"Did you ever ask yourself why we bait tourists?" Pickett asked. "Why everyone who works here, from Spud Tyler to the jerks who pump the gas feel the need to make fools out of the people they're paid to serve?"

"They're turkeys. When they leave their home towns, something warps in their brains. We don't need to make fools out of them because they're so good at doing it to themselves."

Pickett fought to steady his voice. "Sometimes my parents are tourists. I hate to think how some elitist shit-brain at Mesa Verde treats them. And we're tourists ourselves whenever we leave here."

"I'm a traveler--never a tourist," Calhoun said with dignity. "It's a difference in attitude."

Pickett knew what he meant. Whenever he visited another national park, he quickly let slip that he was Park Service. Unlike Calhoun, he clearly saw this for the cowardly act that it was. Oh, it sometimes led to friendships or insider parties, but mainly it kept him

from being mistaken for a turkey and receiving the contemptible treatment he too often dealt out himself.

"Do what you want," he told Calhoun. "I'm going to try to remember most tourists are intelligent people, out for a good time."

They worked their way through the switchbacks, finding nothing belonging to Captain Filth in any of the trash barrels they searched. Pickett's spirits rose. Fifteen minutes from Ptarmigan Pass, as they were looking forward to lunch at the summit coffee shop, a distinguished looking man in an orange Volvo sedan pulled them over. The sedan had Ohio plates.

"What are we, the fucking tourist bureau?" Calhoun muttered. "He probably wants directions to the nearest Marriott."

The man wore wool slacks, a Pendleton shirt and street shoes. They glumly watched as he walked up to Calhoun's window. They were, in turn, watched from the Volvo by an attractive blonde and three young girls.

Calhoun rolled down his window and stared impassively as the man leaned against the door and gave them a worried smile.

"Sorry to bother you, but could you answer a question?"

Pickett leaned across Calhoun, hoping to prevent a public relations disaster. "Sure."

"I feel foolish asking this..." The man hesitated.



"Is there some kind of ape native to the park?"

Calhoun's suppressed laughter blew out in a series of snorts. Pickett studied the man's face. "Are you serious?"

"Look, I know how this sounds, but about an hour ago we saw this tall, hairy ape-like creature...didn't we, honey?"

The woman in the Volvo nodded vigorously.

"Just as we started up the pass. We rounded a bend and saw it at the roadside, crouched over the carcass of a small animal. When we got closer, it stood up and ran into the woods--on two legs."

Pickett avoided looking at Calhoun. "You probably saw a bear."

"It was no bear." Muscles clenched in the man's jaw. "I didn't get a good look at it, but I'd swear it was some kind of anthropoid."

"I don't know what to tell you," Pickett said, trying not to sound skeptical. "Bighorn Park has no indigenous apes. For that matter, neither does North America--unless you count Sasquatch."

"Sasquatch?"

"Bigfoot."

The man suddenly looked hopeful. "That's got to be it," he said. "It was tall enough--seven or eight feet at least."

Calhoun made a disparaging noise. "Bigfoot."

Pickett tried to let the man down easily. "Some of the texts list Bigfoot as North America's only great ape, but most people think it's mythological."

"Has anyone ever reported seeing one here before?"

Pickett reluctantly nodded. When the man gestured as if to say the question was settled, Pickett added, "Every one of them later proved to be a bear walking on its hind legs."

"I know what a bear looks like and I'm telling you this was no bear." The man patted his Pendleton shirt and drew out a business card. "For the sake of my sanity, how about calling me collect if anyone else sees that thing?"

The card belonged to Dr. Milton Longnecker, a dentist from Columbus. "It might be a while, Dr. Longnecker," Pickett said. "Maybe never."

"I'd appreciate it, either way."

"Okay, then."

When Calhoun pulled back onto Ptarmigan Drive, Dr. Longnecker and his family waved. "There go some of your brilliant turkeys," Calhoun said. "Aren't you glad you were polite?"

They reached the Ptarmigan Pass summit at 11:30 sharp, in time for their regular lunch break. Calhoun

parked behind the ranger station and started toward the Bighorn Park Company coffee shop. Pickett went to the trash compartment.

"I just remembered Henry," he said, raising the copper urn. "If I hurry, I can make it to Rainbow Point and back before noon."

Calhoun hesitated. "I'm supposed to meet Lola for lunch."

Lola was a dark Cajun whose toothsome smile promised more than the greasy cheeseburgers she served. Like Cindy the melodrama queen, she'd been stringing Calhoun along for most of the summer.

Pickett waved him on. "I'll be back in half an hour."

A chill breeze blew off the peaks. Dark clouds threatened in the north. As Pickett zipped his parka, he realized he would be all but alone on the asphalt trail that climbed into the tundra. A few hardy tourists passed him coming down, their L.L. Bean hoods snugged around pink noses and cheeks. A pair of ptarmigans froze while crossing the path, as if hoping he wouldn't spot them. A few of their feathers were white, forecasting an early winter. From the orange, lichen-stained boulders above came the squeal of a pika, prey of the fierce long-tailed weasel. Lining the path were purple sky pilots and blue alpine forget-me-nots so delicate that,

stepped on, they might take fifty years to grow back, yet so hardy they somehow managed to thrive at 11,000 feet.

Walking above timberline elated Pickett. It wasn't the ego trip of looking down on humanity from the granite spine of North America, at least he hoped it wasn't anything so egocentric. It was more a quality of the air that blew off the glaciers and snowfields--a freshness found nowhere else. He'd read the reports proving that hydrocarbons and asbestos fibers tainted every cubic foot of air from New Zealand to the North Pole, but up here one could still buy the illusion of nature's purity, and for a moment forget the sights and smells of the trash run.

He walked for ten minutes before reaching Rainbow Point. Standing on the overlook, at the brink of a glacial head wall, he felt sure Mrs. Provost would approve of his choice--she might have picked this spot herself if her lungs held out.

He put his hand on the guard rail and peered over the edge. The gray cliff dropped a dizzying twelve hundred feet to the floor of a green U-shaped valley. Clouds passed below, casting shadows on the tundra. Sudden rains fell often enough to give the point its name. A damp, powerful updraft made it hard to breathe.

He backed away and uncapped the urn. He wasn't

particularly religious, but Henry Provost might have been. He wondered if he should say a prayer before emptying the ashes, but couldn't come up with one. When there was a momentary lull in the wind, he stepped up to the rail and upended the urn.

The earthly remains of Henry Provost fell together in a small gray cloud until the updraft caught them and blew them back into Pickett's face.

"Jesus Christ!"

He coughed and rubbed his eyes, wiping his fingers on his uniform pants. When his vision cleared, he watched the ashes widen into a vague circular pattern about five hundred feet up. Then the wind carried them so high he lost sight of them, scattering them better than any airplane could. Whatever Henry Provost had been in life, Pickett thought, he was now a part of Bighorn National Park.

By the time Pickett reached the Ptarmigan Pass store, the glow of his good deed was wearing off. The sight of Rick Nordstrom, a road patrol ranger, standing beside the pickup, doused what little was left of it.

On Pickett's approach, Nordstrom straightened his hat and shifted his gunbelt. He wore short red hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and large clusters of freckles. For a ranger, he was likeable enough--nowhere near as offensive as, for instance, Brock and Hanes--but planned

to make a career of the Park Service, an ambition that sometimes made him hard to get along with.

"I've got things to do too," Nordstrom said. "I can't stand around half the morning waiting for you."

"Sorry."

Nordstrom suddenly smiled. "It's okay. I mean, don't worry about it or anything. I just don't feel right unless I'm on patrol. Who gave you the black eye?"

Pickett rubbed at the ashes with his sleeve. "An old lady."

"Oh yeah?"

"Did you have a message for me?"

The ranger took a note pad from his pocket and leafed through the pages. "Let's see, I'm supposed to say Captain Filth wasn't in his trailer, but somebody tore it up pretty good. Glidewell said to be sure to tell you there was no blood. Blood!"

Pickett frowned distractedly, unsure whether the news was hopeful or ominous. "That's it? He promised me the whole thing."

Nordstrom nodded. "What's this all about?"

Pickett looked up at him. "You really want to know?"

Nordstrom seemed to weigh how such knowledge could affect his career. "Maybe some other time," he said and started to walk away. "Oh, and I almost forgot. Glidewell says the trailer's a crime scene and he doesn't

want anybody going near it for a while. If you had any idea of going there, for whatever reason, you should forget it."

Pickett said nothing.

"He wanted me to get your word on it," Nordstrom said.

Pickett gave Nordstrom an amused frown. "I won't go there."

"You promise?"

Pickett said nothing.

### CHAPTER THREE

It was dark outside. The glare from Pickett's flashlight turned the trailer's windowpanes into mirrors. He lay on the living room floor beside Ginger Ash and studied the reflection of empty bookshelves and blank spaces where photographs and posters had once decorated the walls. Ginger crinkled pages of literary treasures as she reached over to pinch his bare buttock.

"What is it about sex that makes the male go limp, body and mind?" she asked.

Pickett took Huckleberry Finn from the pile of books beneath them and placed it, tent-like, over his groin. Ginger snatched the book away and looked at the cover. "At least you didn't pick Moby Dick."

Pickett regarded her in the flashlight beam. She bordered on skinny, but had rounded thighs and upper arms. Her breasts were small and one nipple inverted, the slight flaw somehow only making them more appealing to him. With the end of her black braid, she drew circles around the inverted one and watched him with a sharp, affectionate gaze. Perched over a wide mouth, an upturned nose, and a jaw that came to a fine point, her gray eyes had whites so clear they were startling. Her expensive perfume--Halston?--mixed with the smell of spoiling meat and milk from the kitchen to form a musky scent Pickett found shamefully irresistible.



Ginger blinked her eyes. "How about aiming that somewhere else?"

He turned the flashlight on the books, magazines, tax records, cancelled checks and photograph albums that formed their couch, and halfheartedly began sifting through them. He was already deep into post-coital depression, guilt-ridden for having made love on this trash pile, consisting of Captain Filth's cherished possessions.

The urge took them just after they'd come inside. Perhaps, in part, it was the violence of the mess, still raw after twenty-four hours. Ginger had turned to face him and even in the reflected glow of the flashlight he had seen the muscles of her face softening and her chin drawing in as if to protect a vulnerable spot. They'd torn off one another's clothing with a degree of enthusiasm someone else had spent on the trailer. A few years ago, such passion might have gone to Pickett's head, but he could not even pretend to have aroused Ginger, knowing as he did her penchant for rubbish heaps--and trash collectors.

He started to get to his feet, but Ginger nuzzled his neck, running her tongue into an ear canal without warning. The giddy sensation of it made him squirm away.

She drew back. "Don't you want to make love again?"

He firmly shook his head. "Not here."

She bit her lower lip and walked two fingers down

his chest and belly. "In other words you can't get it up." She paused. "I don't know what I see in you anyway. I like my men hairy, with plenty of stamina."

Pickett could have told her he liked his women blonde, with normal nipples, but he'd have been lying. "I'll try to remember that."

"Don't pout," she said. "I like you well enough."

He checked his Timex. "It's 8:23. In an hour and thirty-seven minutes we'll have broken your curfew and the superintendent will come looking for us. Besides, I wouldn't want to start something we don't have time to finish."

"Uncle Raymond would never find us up here." She looked amused. "Stop acting so nervous. You remind me of our first night together."

Pickett recalled that evening, almost a year ago, with distress--the sudden pounding at his cabin door, his rush to dress and construct an alibi, peering through the curtains into a scowling face that hovered six feet eight inches off the ground, his innocent "Who's there?" that bought Ginger time to button her blouse and shift some pieces on the coffee table chess board, the superintendent's "Where's my niece?"

Superintendent Ash was surprised to find a chess game in progress. "What took you so long to come to the door?" he'd asked. Pickett nodded spasmodically

at the chess board and answered, truthfully, that Ginger had him in a difficult position. Ash ran a professional eye over the board. "Try queen's knight to king's rook five."

Nothing more was said about it, but Ginger's curfew was changed from midnight to 10 p.m. and although he was allowed to continue as one of Bighorn Park's garbage men, the fear of Superintendent Ash had been put into Pickett.

He glanced at the trailer door, half expecting to see the superintendent peering in. He hated to imagine what Ash would do if he caught them in the middle of one of their thrice-weekly chess tournaments.

"We should try to remember why we're here."

Ginger held out a hand, her mouth curved in sensuous challenge, her eyes sparkling. "This is why I'm here."

She lay back on Captain Filth's rare books, gasping as her fine skin touched the pages and plastic-wrapped covers. "Ohh...they're cold!" She wriggled her body, shifting books to either side with hips and shoulders.

Pickett swept his flashlight beam around the trailer's interior, trying to picture the room as it had been before someone made a shambles of it. The shattered ceramic lamps had rested at either end of the gutted sofa. The antique roll-top desk had dominated the opposite wall, but now lay on its side, its drawers and cubbyholes

splintered. Glidewell's message that someone had torn up the trailer "pretty good" turned the rest of Pickett's workday into a blur of paper plates and Baggies, but had not prepared him for such destruction. He shifted the beam. With a stab of regret, he saw a fragment of ornate wood sticking out from under a torn curtain.

"Damn it!"

Ginger followed the beam with her eyes. "What? Oh no, the organ."

Pickett pulled the curtain away. Beneath it--in several pieces--lay Captain Filth's beautifully-crafted Dutch street organ. Between weekend binges, he'd pushed this hurly-burly to busy intersections in Cheyenne Falls and cranked out polkas and classical waltzes for spare change. The lucrative hobby drew flak from ranger wives. They claimed it was no better than panhandling and demanded that Superintendent Ash either ban the sidewalk concerts or fire Captain Filth. Ash refused to interfere. Captain Filth later confided that forced to choose between organ and honey wagon he'd have chosen the organ, adding, "How do you think I'm paying for my double-wide?"

"Oscar."

Pickett glanced at Ginger. She smiled as though sure he would rejoin her on the books. He felt himself losing interest in the vandalism.

"We really shouldn't," he said. "Think of Bill."

"Later."

Pickett thought of Captain Filth, of the severed hand from the trash, of Ginger's calm acceptance of the news--"My God, how awful!"--as if they were talking about a stranger, not a man she'd once loved.

"You know," Ginger taunted, "Uncle Raymond thinks you're harmless. That all we ever do is play chess."

"Oh?"

Pickett returned to stand over Ginger, for the moment putting the investigation into Captain Filth's disappearance--and his own sense of self-repugnance--on hold. Coldly, and more roughly than he liked, he set about proving the superintendent wrong.

At five till nine, Pickett jumped up from the pile of books and pulled on a pair of crumpled jeans. He threw Ginger her bra. "All right, let's get started. We've got lots to do and we're running out of time."

Ginger yawned, slipped her burgundy sweater over her head, then pulled her braid free and let it fall down her back.

"Hurry up, Ginger. If you're not home in an hour I'll be out of a job and you'll have to find some other poor slob to abuse."

"Where are my shoes?"

Pickett snatched up a pair of powder-blue joggers

and held them out to her. When she didn't take them right away, he dropped them beside her.

"Bill acted strange the last time I saw him--worried about something," he said. "The next thing I know, someone's chopped off his left hand. If there's a connection, something in his special hiding place might clue us in." Pickett paused. "Any idea where it could be?"

Ginger was tying her shoelaces. "Here in the front room, I think, but he never really trusted me."

"Uh huh." Pickett carefully modulated his grunt to keep it non-judgmental. Ginger had walked away the moment Captain Filth was promoted to the sewage detail and, within a week, let Pickett know she wanted him. "Try to remember if he ever said anything that might lead us to it."

Ginger's memory worked too slowly to suit Pickett. He took the flashlight and started searching the room. With the larger pieces of furniture broken up and the smaller artifacts spilled onto the floor, he could do little more than rummage through piles and knock on walls. As he worked, he began to see the mess was not as haphazard as it seemed.

"It's strange," he said, "but it's almost like I'm following in the footsteps of the guy who did this--going to each possible hiding place just as he did, but a day

late."

He gravitated to the built-in bookcase which had held Captain Filth's rare books, romantically hoping to trip a hidden latch that would cause it to open out from the wall. After examining every inch of its surface, he decided it concealed no vaults of any kind.

"There's nothing here."

Ginger zipped up her jeans. "I've been thinking--"

"Oh good."

She raised her chin. "I remember once he told me he'd built it himself and that I could be sitting right on it and never know the difference."

Pickett looked at her sharply. "The couch?"

Ginger shrugged. "Could be."

"I hope not--they cut it to pieces. What about the bed? The toilet? The easy chair?" Pickett paused. "Come on, Gin, help me. We don't have time to search the whole trailer. Where were you when he told you this?"

"I'm not sure. It's been two years."

"Well, were you inside or out?"

"Don't pressure me," she said, "let me think."

Her expression turned inward. Pickett was about to speak when she said, "It was the Fourth of July weekend. I remember because I was out of cash and we needed booze for the party. Bill pulled out this huge wad of money and gave me a twenty. I said it wasn't smart to keep

so much cash on hand. That's when he told me about his hiding place."

"Where were you?"

Ginger's brow wrinkled in concentration. "In there, I think."

"The kitchen?"

From where they stood the kitchen looked as bad as the living room: broken food jars and Wild Turkey bottles, flour scattered everywhere, the stench of spoiled food wafting from the open Frigidaire. But from up close, Pickett realized the human storm that destroyed the rest of the trailer had lost some energy here. He flicked the light switch. The overhead light still worked. A box of Wheaties and a blackened banana were left unmolested on top of the Frigidaire. The glass in the oven door was intact. Ketchup and glass shards covered the breakfast nook but it was otherwise undamaged.

"It's as if two separate people did the living room and kitchen." Pickett nudged a half-eaten apple with the toe of his tennis shoe. "And this one didn't really have his heart in it."

Ginger went straight to the breakfast nook. "I was sitting here."

She crouched beside one of the benches and tapped its rectangular wooden base. Pickett heard the hollow thump and knelt down, crowding her. Ginger elbowed him.



"I found it," she said. "I'll do the looking. Just hand me the flashlight."

While she examined the left bench, he moved over to the right. It too had a hollow base. Curling his fingers around its padded seat, he tried to lift it. It wouldn't budge. He ran his hands along the edges of the upholstery, feeling for some kind of latch but finding only thumb tacks.

"Oscar! Come here."

She'd found a small square of wood at the edge of her bench which went at cross-grain with the rest. Slipping a fingernail into a crack, she slid the square toward her, revealing a recessed white plastic button.

"Look at this." She grinned up at him. "It's like a Chinese puzzle box."

She pressed the button and Pickett heard spring catches release. The hinged seat popped up a couple of inches and she opened it all the way. Inside, were a metal lockbox and a pile of documents.

Pickett swept glass shards off the tabletop. "Put them up here."

Ginger handed him the lockbox and the papers. They sat on the bench opposite Captain Filth's hiding place.

"What's in the box?" Ginger asked. "Money?"

Pickett shook it, causing a cushioned metallic clinking. "Probably, but there's no way of knowing without

the combination. It's the papers I'm interested in."

On top of the stack was a Mutual of Omaha life insurance policy. Pickett set it aside, along with the title to the trailer and the deed to the ranchette. As he scanned a moldy stock certificate for a Montana winery he'd never heard of, Ginger picked up the insurance policy.

She pointed a third of the way down the first page.

"Look who his beneficiary is."

Pickett read the name twice before it registered.

"Me?"

"He doesn't have any family, after all. You're his best friend--and his partner."

Pickett wasn't sure he qualified as a best friend.

"We were partners, sure, but life insurance?"

Their business partnership had started as an excuse to drink whiskey and bat around get-rich-quick schemes, but to everyone's astonishment brought a modest payoff. Irritated by the green and white bumper stickers of drivers who claimed to be Colorado natives, they'd printed up stickers of their own, identical in every way to the originals except for the lack of the 'T'--changing NATIVE to NAIVE. A tourist trap in Cheyenne Falls sold a hundred in a week, and paid three hundred dollars for the right to print more. They'd recently begun working the bugs out of another project, Pickett's idea for fluorescent

contact lenses. Alone, they might never have become entrepreneurs. Together--turning it into a game--they'd begun to believe they were on their way to riches. But as Pickett breathed the kitchen air, heavy with spoiling venison, he could not shake the feeling that someone had dissolved their partnership.

"Twenty thousand dollars," Ginger said. "It's a lot of money."

Pickett leafed through the rest of the papers: letters from people they didn't know, Captain Filth's discharge from the Marine Corp, a last will and testament, a folded topographical map. He put everything but the will and the map aside.

The hand-written will made no attempt to speak in legalese. Behind its words Pickett could hear Captain Filth's graveled baritone. He read it aloud: "'I'm probably going to die before I'm ready (my liver will go or some angry bastard will hurry me along) so I figure there's no better time than now to settle who gets what when I'm gone. All I have anyone would want is my GMC, land, trailer, books, organ and gun. I want the land, trailer and organ to go to Ginger Ash, the only girl I've loved these past ten years.'"

Ginger's breath caught.

"'Ginger, honey, if you're listening to this, I want you to have these things. We both know I should've

left you alone. I knew going in you were too young to love a hard-nosed fart like me. Christ, you weren't even legal then. It was my own damn fault, what happened, so don't blame yourself. I want my books to go to Oscar Pickett. Oscar, my friend, swear you'll never sell them. The pickup and gun are yours too. Use them in good health. I want just one favor. Throw a party in my honor. Nothing fancy, just a kegger for anybody who wants to come. Drink one for me, then get good and wasted. It was nice knowing the both of you.'"

Captain Filth had signed it William Templeton and dated it August 5--last Sunday.

Ginger self-consciously dabbed at her eyes. "It's just like him to leave me something after it's been torn to pieces."

Pickett unfolded the map--the kind sold at any of the half dozen backpacking stores in Cheyenne Falls. It showed Bighorn Park's distinctive shape, which always reminded Pickett of George Washington's profile, the nose aiming west. It carried all the standard features: Ptarmigan Drive, Timberline Loop, Bighorn Peak, the campgrounds, the backcountry trails. But someone had drawn a red line around an area stretching from Ram's Rise in the southwest to Cibola City at the park's northern boundary, including the upper waters of the Wapiti River and the Thundercloud Peaks backcountry. Scribbled over

Ram's Rise was what was obviously a date: 8/14. Drawn in bold red letters across the entire region was a single word that leaped off the paper: DEATH!

"Death?" Ginger said. "Whose death or what's death I wonder?"

Pickett stared at her.

"Not Bill's." She looked as though the idea had never occurred to her. "It couldn't be."

"Really?" Pickett felt a tug of jealousy, wondering if she felt the special link with Captain Filth that some lovers felt for one another, knowing even over great distances if the other has died. "Why?"

"If it were Bill, what's the map doing here in his hiding place?"

Pickett examined the question from all sides, unable to refute her cool logic. He absently traced a system of interconnecting pencil lines running into the circled area from the Forest Service land outside the park's north and west boundaries, then straightened and studied them more closely.

"What the hell! Are these trails?"

Ginger glanced at them. "They couldn't be. The only trail running through there goes over Nimbus Pass to Cibola City." She pointed. "See? Right there."

"Okay, so what are they?"

"Maybe someone bushwhacked through the mountains

and retraced their route."

"Maybe."

Pickett turned the map over to search for other markings. On the back, in the lower right-hand corner, a name had been penciled in and erased. With an effort he could just read it.

"F. McGraw," he said. "Wouldn't that be Frank McGraw, the chief naturalist?"

Ginger made no comment.

"What's Captain Filth doing with a map belonging to McGraw? And what does McGraw--assuming the map is his--mean by 'death?'"

Ginger took his wrist and tilted his watch face toward her. "We've got to go."

Pickett frowned at the map. "We still don't know what all this means."

"Come on."

He reluctantly returned Captain Filth's papers to the hiding place, but tucked the folded map into the waistband of his jeans. They left quickly, locking the front door behind them. They were halfway to Pickett's decrepid Triumph convertible when headlights lit up the trailer and its ramshackle garage, homemade sauna and empty buck-and-rail corral. The drab structures testified to the tackiness of Captain Filth's mini-ranch and left Pickett feeling terribly exposed. He stood his ground,

unsure who to dread most: the vandals or Superintendent Ash.

"Get in and start the engine," he said.

He handed Ginger the Triumph keys and prepared himself for the worst. Then the oncoming car stopped, and Jerry Glidewell got out.

"Christ, you gave me a scare," Pickett said.

Glidewell looked grim. "I've added this to my regular patrol on the chance that whoever wrecked this place will come back." He glanced at the front door, then at Pickett. "Find anything interesting?"

Pickett recalled his promise to stay away from the trailer. "Nothing but a lot of mess."

"I could take you both in for violating the scene of a crime," Glidewell said, but his tone indicated he had something else on his mind. "You were right."

"About what?"

"The fingerprints matched. The hand belongs to Captain...to Bill Templeton."

They were silent for a long time. "What now?"

"I already put out an all points bulletin," Glidewell said. "We'll have to wait for him to turn up and hope he's healthy when he does."

"Surely there's something else we can do," Pickett said.

Glidewell's gaze intensified. "Not without more

to go on. Listen, I hope the fact that you're here doesn't mean you're thinking of starting some half-assed investigation of your own. I appreciate your concern, but the last thing I need is an amateur going around mucking things up."

Pickett mentally tallied the evidence he'd compiled in his amateurish mucking: McGraw's map, the will, the severed hand, the copy of Scatalogic Rites of All Nations--

He froze in mid-thought, furious with himself. Until now, in spite of having made love atop Captain Filth's ruined library--perhaps because of it--he'd forgotten about the book.

"I think I may know who did this." Pickett said, indicating the trailer.

Glidewell looked amused. "Just like that? All right, who?"

Pickett told him.

"Brock and Hanes. The backcountry rangers?"

Glidewell's expression grew skeptical. "What makes you think so?"

Pickett described how he'd found the book, then outlined Captain Filth's lending policy. "They must have taken it after they trashed his place, then decided it was too hot to keep."

Glidewell shook his head. "I can't see it."

"Because they're rangers?"



"Because they have no apparent motive."

From the car, Ginger said, "Anybody could have thrown it into their trash barrel, Oscar. It doesn't mean they did it."

"I agree," Glidewell said. "Still, on the off chance, I'll do some nosing around--find out where they were last night, whether they know anything about the book, that whole nine yards. I'm sure there's some other explanation, but I wish you'd told me this earlier."

"It didn't occur to me."

"What else didn't occur to you?"

Pickett frowned, disliking Glidewell's tone of voice and his dismissal of such damning evidence against fellow rangers. What if he mentioned finding the map? Would Glidewell work in good faith to uncover its meaning or would he simply take it to McGraw and ask for an explanation? If McGraw were somehow wrapped up in Captain Filth's disappearance, this professional courtesy would tip him off or, conceivably, return to him the object of Brock and Hanes's search. Before handing anyone such a windfall, he wanted more time to study the map and determine McGraw's connection to Captain Filth.

Pickett looked up at Glidewell. "I can't think of anything."

"Let's keep it that way. And don't let me find either of you nosing around up here again." Before going

off to check the double-wide's doors and windows, Glidewell told Ginger, "Your uncle gave me a message. If I ran into you I was supposed to tell you to hustle your pretty little behind home or he'd ground you till the summer ends--his words, not mine."

On the drive to Cheyenne Falls, Pickett pushed the Triumph to the limit of its all but useless suspension system. The cold air cleared his mind of thoughts not directly related to steering the car through sharp graveled curves. It wasn't until they'd passed through the town and were accelerating along the winding pavement of Ptarmigan Drive, that Pickett glanced at Ginger. Her eyes were closed and tendrils of black hair blew across her face. He hated to disturb her, but wanted to know more about Chief Naturalist McGraw. In many ways he was an unknown quantity, his trash pointing only to a rather Spartan diet of canned soups and frozen fishsticks.

He had to shout to make himself heard over the engine. "What can you tell me about Frank McGraw?"

Ginger opened her eyes. "Uncle Raymond's had him to dinner a couple of times."

"What kind of man is he?"

"I only met him twice."

"Describe him," Pickett shouted. "Just the first words that pop into your head."

She hesitated, as if unwilling to humor him, then

said, "Brilliant, witty, potent, dedicated. An environmental purist with something, oh, very male about him."

Pickett nearly missed a curve, his recovery rocking the tiny car.

"Let's see," Ginger continued, "charming, virile, lucid...did I say potent? Oh yes, well I'll say it again. Handsome, with kind of a sinister smile. Rakish might be a better word."

"You weren't impressed at all, were you?"

"He's also hairy, and from what I hear he has plenty of stamina." She looked across at him. "You asked."

"Did you notice anything else strange about him? I mean, aside from his enormous sex appeal."

"No."

They passed through the dark entrance station and turned right toward the Park Service housing unit of Meeker's Thumb Village. Between roadside pines he could see the moon's reflection on Meeker Reservoir, where the Wapiti River paused on its way to the Pacific. The trees thinned, revealing a double row of cabins at the end of a narrow peninsula called Meeker's Thumb. To the younger residents it was known as Meeker's Prong. Pickett stopped before his small imitation-log cabin.

"I'll walk you the rest of the way," he said.

He helped Ginger over the passenger door, which

was permanently wired shut, and they walked toward the grove of ponderosa pines along the reservoir. Pickett eyed the curtained windows of one of the cabins they passed.

"Yesterday I caught Abrahams watching me through field glasses," he said. "Clay still thinks she's the one who let the air out of Katie's tires when she slept over last week. No telling what she's got planned for us."

"Pussycat?" Ginger scoffed. "She should be easy enough to manage with the kind of dirt you guys have on her."

Pickett looked at her, wondering how wise he'd been to tell her about the Abrahams-Whitehead letters. "You want us to break up two marriages?"

They passed through the trees to the lakeshore and followed the strip of sand left by last winter's drought. The lights of Cheyenne Falls were visible on the distant southwest shore. Somewhere on the reservoir an outboard motor whined.

"Pretty," Ginger said.

Pickett glanced at her, never knowing from one moment to the next whether he would find himself facing woman or girl. He felt a sudden rush of love, an almost fatherly desire to look after her, to protect her from...what? Himself? Almost as suddenly, remembering her response

to being told about Captain Filth's hand, the feeling soured. He stopped her.

"Something's been bothering me." He paused, unsure how to express it. "What if it was my left hand Calhoun found in the trash, not Bill's? How would you feel about that?"

When Ginger spoke, her voice carried a hard-edged practicality. "It wasn't your hand."

Pickett let this echo in his mind, taking it not as a statement of fact but as a profound utterance.

"No?"

Taking his face in her hands, Ginger looked into his eyes from an inch away. "No."

She kissed him quickly and started down the beach alone. She looked back once, but did not wave. Long after she merged with the shadows beneath the ponderosas in her uncle's backyard, Pickett turned and retraced their footsteps to his cabin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Its reflection of Avalanche Peak's sheer east face made Mirror Lake a favorite stopping place for tourists going over the Ptarmigan Pass. On the east shore of this small alpine lake were five picnic tables, two trash barrels and a pit toilet. Set back in the spruce and aspens north of the parking lot was the cabin of Chief Naturalist Frank McGraw.

Pickett studied the cabin for signs of life. He had anticipated this moment all morning, bitterly complaining about the time lost in hauling trash, but now felt uncertain of his next move.

"Think he's home?" Calhoun asked.

"I doubt it, but let's police the area first to be sure."

"You're not going to break in, are you?"

Pickett forced a smile. "I hadn't planned on it."

"After last night..."

"Ginger and I had a key," Pickett said testily.

"And Captain Filth would have wanted us to do just what we did." With one or two exceptions, Pickett added to himself.

"I can't afford to get mixed up in that kind of action," Calhoun said. "That's all."

"Don't worry, LeRoy."

On the shore, half a dozen fishermen began putting

away gear at the sight of their official uniforms. As usual, Calhoun briskly walked toward the one who looked the most guilty, in this case a gray-haired woman in pink and green jogging clothes who made beating motions with her hands and screeched at her young son to "Reel it in, will you?"

Her expression grew defiant at Calhoun's approach, then went slack when her son dragged a heavy string of trout from the water. She opened her mouth to speak, perhaps to explain that she had absent-mindedly left her fishing license at home. Her jaw clapped shut when Calhoun bent without a word to recover the cigarette butts at her feet.

Calhoun turned to mug for Pickett. The boy pointed at him. "Mommy, who's that man?"

"One of the retards who pick up the trash," she said, sounding relieved.

Calhoun started to speak, but the woman was already drawing back a pink and green arm to make a cast. Calhoun's hands leaked cigarette butts as he came toward Pickett.

"Did you hear that?"

"Forget about it," Pickett advised, but as they combed the rocks for beer cans and tangles of fishing line, Calhoun stopped to glare back at the woman.

"I'm getting a master's degree in geophysics, lady," he shouted. Calhoun's shoulders slumped and his feet

dragged as he walked off to retrieve some litter.

Pickett bent to pick up a cracked red and white plastic float. A fisherman sitting in the shade of a quaking aspen stopped digging through a large tackle box to smile at him.

"Howdy there, ranger."

Ordinarily, Pickett might have enjoyed the fisherman's mistake, even taken advantage of it for some laughs. At the moment he lacked the necessary patience for the pretend-ranger game--or any other. He'd felt this way all morning, refusing even to tabulate road kill points.

"I just pick up the trash," Pickett said.

"What do the fish bite on up here?" the man asked. "I can't decide whether to use spinners, flies or salmon eggs."

Pickett kept his voice neutral to discourage conversation. "I don't fish, but I'm pretty sure bait fishing is illegal within park boundaries. I assume that applies to salmon eggs."

"Oh yeah? Thanks for the information, but you work here. You'd have a better idea than me what the fish eat. I'd appreciate your picking something out for me."

He looked helpless and offered his open tackle box. Pickett reached into it and withdrew a six-inch-long red rubber worm.

"Try that."



"But that's for catching catfish on river bottoms," the man said. "I'm after trout."

"Sorry. Like I said, I don't fish."

Pickett and Calhoun circled the lake, tidying the busiest fishing spots. When they returned to the picnic ground, Pickett noticed among the parked cars a green Park Service station wagon driven by building and utilities worker Dana Hickey. Hickey was out of sight, probably scouring the pit toilet. Pickett glanced at McGraw's cabin, still reluctant to approach it.

"Let's get the barrels first," he said. Having found no body parts in any of the trash barrels for more than twenty-four hours, Pickett now approached them without fear.

After a moment's digging, Calhoun held up several sheets of pink stationery. "People should never throw their letters away," he said. "They should keep them or burn them. 'Dear Janice,' you know Robert and I broke up, but you've never heard the real reason--his name is Howie."

Calhoun laughed shrilly.

"I'm sure this sounds like something from an afternoon soap opera, but Howie is my gynecologist. He was fitting me with a diaphragm at Robert's insistence--you know all about Robert's fear of children--when we met. I couldn't keep my eyes off him--or my hands. Let's face

it, Jan, we're both adults. I don't have to justify myself to you. Let me just say Robert was a fine husband as far as he went, a good provider and a loveable huggy sort of Winnie the Pooh, but he was a big boor in bed. I don't have to tell you that--you introduced us."

"Poor bastard," Pickett said.

"No wait, the best line's at the end." Calhoun flipped to the last page and read: "'So don't shed tears over lost love on my account, kid. I've got me a new man, a new diaphragm and a new lease on life.'"

"Save it, it's a classic," Pickett said. He started toward McGraw's cabin, then stopped. "You can come along if you want."

"I think I'll stay here," Calhoun said.

Pickett circled the log structure. It was twice the size of his own cabin, equipped with a large stone fireplace. He told himself he had little cause to be afraid. After all, he'd established no definite link between McGraw and Captain Filth's severed hand. He wasn't even certain the strange map, stowed under the seat of the pickup, actually belonged to McGraw.

Two cords of split wood along the west wall reached to within peeping distance of a high window. Pickett contemplated climbing up for a look, but in the end opted for the back steps. He cupped his hands to block the sun's glare and peered through McGraw's kitchen window.

The room was a mess, even by Pickett's standards, with dishes stacked high in the sink and something brown crusted onto the sides of a pot on the stove.

An ancient Remington typewriter rested on the kitchen table among scattered pages of a manuscript. Beside a chair stood a grocery sack filled with crumpled sheets of paper.

What have you been writing, McGraw? Pickett thought. He hesitated a moment, but it seemed obvious by now that no one was home. He looked over both shoulders, then tried the door. It was locked.

Pickett knelt beside the trash barrel and began sifting through soup cans and frozen dinner trays, hoping to recover a few of McGraw's false starts. He found four editions of the Rocky Mountain News and the shreds of what looked like a sheet of office stationery, but no typed pages.

As he examined the shreds, two of which he peeled from inside a tuna can, he heard the scrape of footsteps on the cabin roof. Someone directly above him said, "Hey!"

Pickett looked up only when he was sure the muscles of his face had stopped jumping around. Instead of McGraw, staring down at him with a puzzled grin was Dana Hickey.

"What the hell are you doing up there?"

"I thought you were Spud," Hickey said.

His late-sixties hairstyle--bangs even across the forehead and lamb-chop sideburns the color of beach sand--gave him a forlorn, clownish look. His soft brown eyes furtively shifted from Pickett to the parking lot, as if he believed Spud would arrive at any moment.

"So you climbed up on the roof?" At Hickey's nod, Pickett said, "Don't you think when he sees your station wagon he'll know you're around here somewhere?"

"Yeah, but he won't know exactly where."

"Listen, Dana, I've known Spud longer than you have and I can see you're going about this the wrong way. The man's an ex-motorcycle cop. He can't help going for the jugular when he smells fear. If you keep running from him he'll chase you right out of the Park Service."

Hickey gave him a look of pure anxiety. "What can I do?"

"Stop hiding. When he drives up, make sure he sees you working and if he gives you any flak look him in the eye and give it right back to him."

Hickey nodded dully, then whipped around at the sound of tires crushing gravel. He disappeared and Pickett heard footsteps running along the peak of the roof, then returning to the point directly above.

"It's him!" Hickey whispered. "Please don't tell him I'm here."

Pickett slipped the shreds of paper from McGraw's

barrel into a shirt pocket. As he rounded the cabin and crossed the parking lot, Spud's pale green eyes locked onto him as if to demand a full accounting for some unstated crime. Pickett reminded himself that, like surprise inspections, ominous silence was simply one of Spud's management-by-terror techniques. He nevertheless found himself reviewing the morning's work to be sure he hadn't, for instance, forgotten to empty a roadside barrel.

"Well?" Spud said, as Pickett drew near to where he stood. This career maintenance man, a few inches shorter than Calhoun, wore a gray flat-top haircut, bi-focals and an impish grin.

"You want something?" Pickett asked. As he'd advised Hickey to do, he met Spud's gaze head-on.

The grin widened, but Pickett refused to let it lull him into carelessness. "What's this I hear about one of my trashmen playing detective?"

Pickett silently cursed Glidewell. "I don't know what you heard, but the way I spend my time off is my business, isn't it?"

"Like sneaking out of the superintendent's house before dawn last Wednesday?"

Against his better judgment, with Ginger's assurances that no one would ever know, Pickett had spent the night at the Ash residence while her aunt and uncle attended a Park Service conference in Denver. He'd left at 4:30

the next morning by the back door and crept along the beach to his cabin, going to the extent of setting his alarm so his cabin mate, Clay LeMunyon, would hear it and believe he'd slept at home.

"How--?"

Spud smiled modestly. "Raymond's a fair man. When he heard, he decided to give you the benefit of the doubt, but the next time you crossed the line...Well, he left this part of the punishment up to me."

Pickett let this sink in. "All right, you're obviously very well informed. So maybe you can tell me what's happened to Captain Filth."

Spud let his grin slip. "I don't guess I can, but I'll tell you this: for your own good, keep your nose in the trash and let the rangers do the investigating--just a piece of friendly advice."

He turned to Calhoun. "The Youth Conservation Corps needs an extra hand for a couple of hours--up along Timberline Loop. You're elected."

Calhoun groaned. "What did I do?"

"I saved something special for you," Spud told Pickett. "There's a carcass needs hauling just south of Two Moons Village. You can pick up the saw and gas mask at the shop."

"Spud, there's a quarter ton of meat on that thing."

"Nice and ripe," Spud said. "You could always quit."

Pickett did not seriously consider this. "I don't think so."

"Good, that'll give me the chance one of these days to fire your ass. If I was you I'd wear a trash bag over my uniform."

"What about our regular work?"

"When you're done, get Calhoun at the YCC project and finish up. Oh, and while you're doing this little job you might want to think about keeping your hands off Ginger Ash. Just--"

"Just a little friendly advice?" Pickett asked.

"I don't know how you can look me in the face, robbing the cradle like that," Spud said, no longer grinning. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Maybe I am," Pickett said. "Then again, maybe it's none of your goddamned business."

Spud told Calhoun to get his lunch and get into his Ramcharger. To Pickett, he said, "Don't bother dumping the carcass till quitting time. You'll be too busy making sure I don't find any litter on the road."

As he joined Calhoun in the Ramcharger, Spud glanced at McGraw's cabin and yelled, "Hickey! You get back to scrubbing toilets, before I have to fire your ass."

\* \* \*

Pickett struggled out of a trash bag poncho, doing his best to keep dark tissue and bone chips out of his

hair. It was well past lunch time, but he wouldn't be eating today. Technically, he thought, if one knew where to cut, butchering a rotten elk with a chain saw was a fairly straight-forward task. From any other standpoint, what with the leaky, war surplus gas mask--

Pickett sank down beside a ponderosa pine, racked by dry heaves. It was time to find the nearest river access and wash off his skin and clothing. He staggered to the truck, covered his seat in plastic, then sped down Ptarmigan Drive with both windows opened wide.

When he'd driven a couple of miles, a horn honked behind him. It took him longer than it should have to realize the Jeep Wagoneer tailgating him belonged to Superintendent Ash. He watched it in the mirror, too sick to fear a confrontation. Even so, he felt some relief when its driver waved a lanky, girlish arm out the window.

He pulled into an unnamed fishing spot, screened by willows. Ginger parked a few yards behind the pickup and got out.

"Don't come any closer," Pickett said. He made a pushing motion with both hands.

"Oh!" Her smile of greeting vanished and her delicate features pinched in disgust. "What is it?"

"Elk."

Pausing only to empty his pockets, Pickett ran a



few steps and made a shallow dive into the cold, sweet water of the Wapiti. He surfaced screaming. Standing in thigh-deep water, he energetically scrubbed himself. When his legs grew numb, he climbed onto a rock and lay shivering.

Ginger threw a checkered wool blanket over him. "I didn't expect to catch you so soon," she said. "I was hoping we could spend your break together--like we used to."

Pickett pressed the blanket against his face. The odor of wet wool brought back vivid memories of coffee breaks spent on river banks or under chokecherry bushes, the blanket cushioning their frantic lovemaking. For him, the thrill of these risky encounters was tainted by more recent times when, in order to satisfy Ginger, they'd crawled into the trash receptacle and bounced the pickup on its rusted springs, Pickett's head reeling from more than the kinkiness of it.

"I'm not feeling up to much of anything," he said.

Ginger regarded him scornfully. "I just wanted to talk."

Pickett muttered an apology, though he didn't believe her.

She was silent for a long time, then asked, "Do you remember the first time we met at the Nimbus Pass Junction?"

"You must have pedaled your bike, what, fifteen miles? I remember watching you ride up all hot and sweaty and eager," Pickett said. "I didn't have the heart to send you away."

"I guess that's why you worked so hard to convince LeRoy to stand guard for us." Ginger smiled. "Poor LeRoy."

"Poor LeRoy! Don't you remember? He charged me a dollar a minute, which added up to a small fortune over the summer. He got rich on our love--not that I would've traded places with him."

Neither of them spoke for a while. Pickett's reminiscences brought him roughly equal measures of pleasure and guilt. He had never grown entirely comfortable with Ginger's exotic cravings, but even so did his best to fulfill them. Even now, under the blanket, he fought a losing battle against an involuntary erection sparked by her proximity to the trash truck.

In a strained voice, Ginger said, "Oscar...I don't know how to say this, but I'm not supposed to see you anymore."

She watched him closely as if to gauge his reaction. "Uncle Raymond met me at the door last night. He knows all about your staying over--and about me being with you in Bill's trailer."

"I know."

Ginger gave him a puzzled frown.

"Glidewell must have called him from Captain Filth's," he said. "What did he do?"

"He was pretty mad."

Pickett waited for her to go on.

"He says if he ever catches you near me again he'll do more than fire you," Ginger said. "He says he might even, you know--"

"What?"

She pointed at his crotch and made a scissoring motion with two fingers. "Snip."

Pickett knew how Ginger liked to embellish a story. "That doesn't sound like him."

"He didn't exactly say 'castrate'--" Ginger began. When Pickett waved his hand as if to dismiss the subject, she added, "He said 'geld.'"

Pickett looked at her.

"It's just talk," she said quickly. "He thinks because he's my guardian he has to play daddy, but Aunt Virginia likes you. I'm still coming to your party Friday. She'll make Uncle Raymond take her out to dinner and a movie--as a gesture to young love, she said. We'll have to be a little more careful, but there's really no need to worry."

"Ginger--" Pickett said.

"I'll be eighteen in October," she said, interrupting

him. "He can't tell me what to do after that."

"We'd better take it easy for a while."

She looked down at him. "What do you mean?"

"Too many people know too much about us. I think we should stay away from each other for a few days--give your uncle a chance to cool down."

"What about the party?"

"It's mostly Clay's friends, anyway."

"No it's not. Everyone'll be there." Ginger's features sharpened in a way that made her almost ugly.

"You don't want me to come."

"You know that's not true--"

"Fine, I won't then."

"Stop it," Pickett said.

She started to walk away, but returned for her blanket. As she snatched it away, exposing him to the cool air, she said, "I thought you loved me."

"Ginger, goddamn it!"

Pickett wanted to say something to make her stay, but couldn't come up with the words in the time it took her to reach the Jeep. She was too young and impatient to use her impeccable logic when it mattered most, he thought, and he was too old to laugh off the idea of an angry uncle wanting to geld him. She backed out onto Ptarmigan Drive. He started shivering again. Too late to do either of them any good, he said, "I do."

The air was thick with the smell of death, but before leaving the fishing access Pickett took time to assemble the shreds of paper from McGraw's trash. He worked at it without enthusiasm, to get his mind off Ginger. With three of them fitted together, he discovered he'd assembled a blue italicized letterhead.

"Voice of the Earth, Stan Snowden, editor, Box 16720 Portland, Oregon," Pickett read. The zip code and telephone number were on a different scrap.

As he reconstructed the letter on his lap, the paper sticking to his wet trousers, his heart began to beat faster. Completed, the letter read:

Mr. McGraw: it is not my habit to personally write the authors of articles my publication rejects, but in view of your alleged position as chief naturalist of Bighorn National Park and the nature of your piece "Death, Decay, Destruction: the National Parks" I am compelled to answer you in the strongest terms.

"In reviewing your piece I found it difficult to believe that you hold a position of authority in the National Park system. Voice of the Earth exists to bring controversial, hard-hitting, responsible news reports on the environment to its readers. I stress 'responsible' for a reason. We do not and never will publish

the kind of warped reactionary proposals you put forward.

If I have misread your intentions, I apologize, but in my judgment as editor of this magazine your article speaks for itself. In the future please do not consider us a potential market for such work.

The letter's content excited Pickett less than McGraw's response to it. Before ripping it to pieces, he'd scrawled a single word across the page in red marker pen: "FOOLS!"

\* \* \*

The pay phone at the Ptarmigan Pass gift shop was located in the corridor leading to the ladies rest room. Tourists passed it in a steady stream, arms laden with covered wagon lamps and bear paw ashtrays. Pickett huddled in a corner, his head cocked against his shoulder to hold the receiver to his ear.

He traced the Mountain Bell symbol with his dialing finger while the telephone rang at the other end of the line.

"Voice of the Earth," a young woman answered, after the fourth ring.

"Get me Stan Snowden," Pickett said. His mouth went dry and he doubted he could lie convincingly over the phone. Before he could hang up, a deep impatient voice spoke into his ear.

"Snowden."

"Mr. Snowden?" Pickett said. "Jack Sinclair, environment editor for the Denver Post. Sorry about the noise. I'm calling from the airport."

Someone interrupted Snowden at his end and there was an urgent exchange. Finally he said, "Sorry, but this is deadline day. You'll understand if we have to talk fast. What do you want?"

Pickett glanced at the notes he'd jotted down on a sheet of stenographer's paper. "I got a rather strange article a few days ago from Frank McGraw--the chief naturalist at Bighorn National Park? It's called 'Premature Extinction: the Disrupted Mating Habits of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep.' In his cover letter, McGraw listed your magazine as the publisher of one of his other articles, 'Death, Decay, Destruction: the National Parks.' I was wondering if you could confirm that for me."

From the silence at the other end, Pickett feared he had somehow blown it.

"Let me get this straight," Snowden finally said. "You're telling me this McGraw character claims we published that piece of shit he sent us?"

"Well...yes, that's what he said in the letter."

Pickett held his breath.

"Then he's a liar," Snowden said. "Let me guess. Does he cover bighorn mating habits in six graphs and

spend nine pages arguing that game poachers should be shot on sight?"

"Close enough," Pickett said.

"The one he sent us had a whole section labeled 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a fang.' I can't believe the crackpot's a park ranger. Odds are he lied about that too. Hold on--" Snowden spoke to someone in his office. "Listen, got to run. Deadline to meet. Hope I've been some help."

The phone went dead, leaving Pickett wondering precisely what to make of Chief Naturalist McGraw. He replaced the receiver, knowing only that he somehow needed to find out more, and quickly.

On his way to the exit, through a gap in the crowd, he saw a redhead he'd dated once or twice before becoming involved with Ginger. He searched his memory for a name--Angie? Jenny?--something like that. She was talking to a man in his early-twenties who wore a black headband around dirty blond hair and was decked out like a Hell's Angel. The man examined a stuffed diamond-back rattlesnake which coiled on the counter top, fangs bared, among pieces of Indian jewelry.

Pickett watched as Jenny--Molly?--accepted two hundred dollars from the biker, who picked up the rattler by its rigid neck and started away.

"I could put that in a box for you," she called.



When the biker pushed on toward the door, her eyes passed over Pickett, then snapped back with a glimmer of recognition. "Hi there."

As Pickett approached the counter he stole a look at the blue and white employee name-tag tilted toward the ceiling by the curve of her substantial left breast.

"Hi...Penny," he said, recalling with her name that he'd liked her well enough. "Looks like you made a big sale."

"I thought we'd never get rid of that thing. It's taken two years for a creep with enough money to come in and buy it. God only knows what he'll use it for."

She smiled, her dark green eyes lighting up in a way that, for a moment, almost let him forget about Ginger. "Hey, how long has it been, Pickett? Weren't you supposed to call me in June or July--of last year?"

Pickett shuffled his feet in embarrassment. He vaguely remembered promising to take her hiking. "I guess I got sidetracked."

"I guess you had something more important to do." She glanced at his damp, stained uniform. "Like your laundry."

"Nothing as important as that," he said stiffly. "I probably mowed the lawn or took some newspapers to the recycling center. Sorry."

"Think nothing of it."

"Penny, I've got to run, but I enjoyed seeing you again." He paused on his way out the door to give her a sardonic smile. "I'll call you sometime."

"Sure you will," she said.

In the parking lot, Pickett dodged behind a Toyota van to avoid being run down by the snake owner. Riding a customized BMW motorcycle, the man rapidly shifted gears as he weaved through an obstacle course of parked recreational vehicles. The diamond-back's coils girded the motorcycle's tachometer. Its grotesque, spade-shaped head arched up between the butterfly handlebars--a two-hundred-dollar fender ornament.

\* \* \*

A final string of sewage dangled and fell from the holding tank of a sleek motor home parked beside the park's "Blue Columbine" exhibit and joined the gray-brown sludge that streamed across the parking area.

The motor home was a tasteful beige, more Greyhound Bus than recreational vehicle. Facing Pickett and Calhoun were picture windows and a door of frosted Plexiglas. There was a satellite dish on the roof and from the pickup they could hear the theme song of As the World Turns.

Pickett leaned on the steering wheel. Only twenty minutes away, at Beaver Creek campground, was a waste water pumping station where RV's could dump their tanks free of charge.

"What kind of jerk..." Pickett sputtered.

Calhoun looked ready to burst into tears. It almost quitting time. He had spent four hours among the inner-city punks of the Youth Conservation Corps, lifting heavy chunks of granite into the bucket of a front-end loader. When Pickett pulled up to the project, Calhoun had dropped a small boulder and raced for the truck. The entire crew yelled catcalls at him. One tall dark-haired girl contemptuously flung a rock, missing Calhoun but hitting the wooden wall of the trash receptacle.

Now, as they breathed the combined stench of rotting elk and raw sewage, Calhoun said, "I don't think I can take this."

"Let's get it over with."

They left the truck together but Pickett beat Calhoun to the Plexiglas door by leaping a tendril of sewage. Maybe the motor home's occupants saw their indignant expressions. In any case, although Pickett saw movement within, no one answered his knock. He rapped harder, while Calhoun moved from window to window, hopping up and down to see in.

"Sir," Pickett called, "would you please come to the door?"

After a long silence, Calhoun shoved Pickett aside and attacked the door with both fists. "We know you're in there!" He shouted. "Come out so I can rub your

nose in it."

He grabbed the door handle and twisted, but it was bolted shut.

"Nice going," Pickett said. "Now they'll never come out." As if to confirm this, the motor home's big diesel engine came to life.

"I don't believe it!" Calhoun screamed. "The son of a bitch!"

He sprinted to the front of the vehicle as it started moving. It jerked to a stop and Pickett heard gears grind as the driver threw it into reverse.

Rick Nordstrom drove up then, blocking the exit with his patrol car. He adjusted his ranger hat as he slowly walked around the sludge pool.

"Pickett, Calhoun," he said in greeting. He listened to Pickett's assessment of the situation and dutifully bent to examine the open holding tank valve. After a moment, he said, "I'll take care of it."

"Good enough," Pickett said. "Come on, LeRoy, let's throw some dirt on this stuff."

Calhoun planted his feet and pointed a finger at Nordstrom. "I want to look this turkey in the face. And you'd better give him what's coming to him or I will."

Pickett pulled Calhoun away, saying, "Come on. He'll do what needs to be done."

They unsheathed two square-bladed shovels from pipes

welded behind the pickup doors and shoveled dirt from the road embankment onto the sewage.

Nordstrom knocked several times before a white-haired man in horn-rimmed glasses and a blue jumpsuit opened the door. "I hope you have a good reason for interrupting our lunch," the man said.

Before Nordstrom could reply, Calhoun screamed, "Are we interrupting your lunch? Well go ahead and eat, but save some room. I've got your dessert right here."

Nordstrom led the man to a far corner of the parking lot. A middle-aged woman came to the door, but retreated under Calhoun's gaze. After several minutes, Nordstrom came over and began thumbing through his note pad.

"He says a young man in a camper dumped the sewage and drove away just as he and his wife were pulling in," Nordstrom said. "You didn't actually see him open the holding tank, did you?"

Seeing that Calhoun was gripping his shovel like a spear, Pickett kept his voice steady. "If he hadn't moved, you could see for yourself that the spillage started right below his valve and fanned out from there. We saw the last few drops."

"But you didn't see him open the valve?"

"No." Pickett thought for a moment. "But how does he explain his open valve? And why would anyone have a picnic over a cess pool?"

Nordstrom checked his notes. "They got here a minute or two before you did, he says, and the smell only reached them when I started knocking on the door. He claims he left the valve open earlier today when he dumped a load at the public waste water station in Cheyenne Falls."

"And you believe that fable?"

"Of course not, but he's sticking to it." Nordstrom turned to Calhoun. "Is it true you made threatening statements and tried to break into his vehicle?"

When Calhoun looked away, Nordstrom closed the note pad. "You blew it. I could throw the book at him, but if he takes his chances in court he'll have no trouble getting off. The U.S. magistrate in Cheyenne Falls hates the Park Service. He's already thrown out half my tickets this summer. Without material evidence we don't have a chance of convicting him."

"We got all the material evidence you need." Calhoun jabbed at the parking lot with his shovel.

"No," Nordstrom said. "Our best chance is to nail him on a lesser charge, one he won't fight--like littering."

"Littering!" Pickett frowned, then said, "I get it. What better way to sock the bastard with a five hundred dollar fine?"

"You're missing the point," Nordstrom said. "He'd be sure to fight a big ticket and would probably bring counter charges against Calhoun. If I write it for fifty

dollars, and let him know he's getting off easily, he'll be happy to pay."

"We're not interested in making the him happy," Pickett said, but Nordstrom was already going back to the man.

The motor home pulled away a few minutes later, its driver grinning and giving Pickett and Calhoun the finger. Nordstrom clapped them each on the shoulder and said, "I'm sure you boys understand."

Calhoun threw his shovel at Nordstrom's feet. "You'll be needing this."

Nordstrom looked at the shovel, then at the soiled parking area. "Oh no, that's your job not mine."

Pickett dropped his shovel beside Calhoun's. "You let him go," he said. "You clean it up."

They walked back to their pickup.

"Wait, you can't just leave it like this," Norstrom said. "Come on, Pickett, I've got a staff meeting in twenty minutes and three reports to write."

"Fuck you," Calhoun said.

Pickett hesitated as he gripped the door handle. "What's the staff meeting about?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"Is it about Captain Filth?"

Nordstrom hesitated before shaking his head.

Pickett carefully studied his face, trying to decide

whether to believe him. It was inevitable that sooner or later--as Bighorn Park's janitors--he and Calhoun would be assigned to clean up the mess. He might as well profit from it.

"You want the parking lot shoveled, I want to know what the meeting's about," he said. "We'll make it an even trade."

"No we won't," Calhoun said. "He's got nothing I want."

"All I can tell you is we're going to discuss how to protect an important visitor coming to Bighorn Park in the near future."

"Who?"

"That, I can't tell you."

"And you're positive it has nothing to do with Captain Filth?"

"Absolutely nothing."

Pickett let Nordstrom dangle as he thought this over. Finally, he said, "All right, take off."

"What a deal--for him," Calhoun said.

Pickett retrieved his shovel as Nordstrom drove away. Calhoun leaned against the pickup, his hands shoved into his pants pockets. With a sour expression, he watched Pickett scoop dirt onto the sewage.

"I'm not helping," Calhoun said.

Pickett continued working. "I don't blame you."



"I mean it."

"I know," Pickett said.

Calhoun said nothing for a long time, then swore violently and picked up his shovel. "If I left it to you we'd be here the whole fucking night."

Within fifteen minutes, a layer of dirt covered the sewage and they were heading down Ptarmigan Drive, Calhoun at the wheel. In their rush to get to the park dump before quitting time, they passed up several beer cans and a fast-food container--the kind meant to keep a hamburger warm for twenty minutes but composed of materials designed to last for ten thousand years.

"We'll get it in the morn--" Pickett began. He was thrown forward before he could complete his thought, bumping head and elbows against the dashboard. The truck screeched to a stop.

Calhoun was staring ahead with a pallid face, mutely pointing at something up the road.

Pickett looked in time to see a tall furry creature break its stride to glance at the truck, then dash on across the road, bending to snatch up what from a couple of hundred yards away looked like the carcass of a small animal. With the road kill in hand, the creature glanced once more at the truck then disappeared into the forest at the other side of Ptarmigan Drive.

Calhoun continued to stare ahead. "Did you see

it?"

After a long time, Pickett asked, "Did you?"

"That was no bear," Calhoun said. "It looked more like a tall hairy man."

"It rained last night. The ground should be soft enough to hold tracks." Pickett pointed up the road.

"Pull up to that spot."

Calhoun stopped across from the bloodstain where the road kill had been. From the cab, Pickett peered into the dense shadows beneath the pines. As far as he could see, nothing moved.

"Whatever it was, I'm sure it's gone by now," he said. "Let's take a look."

Calhoun left the engine running and his door open. They moved with quick, jerky motions across the pavement to the opposite shoulder, keeping an eye on the forest as they neared the point where they last saw the creature.

At the roadside, Pickett bent to examine several places where the gravel had been disturbed. Calhoun crept past him into the trees and a moment later cried out. Joining him, Pickett saw on the ground before them, perfectly preserved in the wet soil between two scrub oak bushes, the print of what had to be a size fifteen running shoe.

"Well, we've met Bigfoot," Calhoun said. "And he wears Nikes. Who do you think it could be? A nutcase?"

An escaped lunatic gone back to nature?"

Pickett shook his head, the question reminding him of another alleged lunatic. Distracted earlier by Calhoun's barrage of complaints against the YCC, he'd neglected to tell him about the phone call to Voice of the Earth.

This wasn't the time to go into it, but in the interest of keeping his mind sharply focused on finding Captain Filth, he refused to speculate on this latest mystery.

"Whoever or whatever it is," Pickett said, "We owe that dentist from Columbus an apology. Meanwhile, we'd better not mention Bigfoot to anybody else--they'd never believe us in a million years."

\* \* \*

Few sightseers had ever seen the Bighorn Park dump, tucked into an isolated box canyon at the end of a dirt road. This was a good thing, Pickett thought, for the sight of it would likely have horrified the average nature lover. During the daylight hours nothing moved on the dump's four acres of stripped earth but rodents, magpies and flies. At such times it was hard to imagine that this man-made desert--rich in metal, paper, plastic and glass--could play a vital role in the park's ecology. At night, it crawled with opportunistic black bears and other scavengers, grown dependent on the easy pickings Calhoun and Pickett brought them.

They stopped beside a green Caterpillar tractor

and backed up to a huge mound of trash.

"Time to feed the animals," Calhoun said.

With a journeyman's efficiency, Pickett unhooked the canvas flap that covered the receptacle opening, lowered the tailgate, and gave a thumbs-up signal. Calhoun revved the engine and the pickup's custom-made dumping bed rose, spilling most of the day's payload onto the ground.

Armed with a shovel and gas mask, Pickett took a deep breath and leaned into the tilted receptacle. He thrust the shovel blade deep into one of the corners, repeating this motion until a stubborn clump of rotting meat slid to the ground.

As he backed away to breathe the dump's relatively pure air, Calhoun joined him behind the truck. Pickett quietly surveyed the cluttered acreage for a moment, hating the sight of it but convinced there must be a way to put its resources to good use.

"At the library I found an article on the practical uses of waste," he said. "According to the author, some town in California is extracting gold and silver from raw sewage."

Calhoun looked intrigued but skeptical. "You're telling me people in California shit gold?"

"The town's near some electronics plants that use gold and silver in their manufacturing processes. Some

of it gets washed down the drain and the town makes millions leaching it back out. The point is, there's money to be made in trash. As long as we're out here, we might as well be in on it."

"So?"

"What if we went to the district office and offered to exchange our wages for salvage rights to the garbage we collected?" Pickett asked. "Do you have any idea how many aluminum cans we pick up in a summer?"

"No." Calhoun looked uncomfortable.

"Me either, but it must be in the millions. Figure it this way: we get two million visitors a year. If each tourist throws away one can that's two million cans."

"You can't figure it that way," Calhoun said.

"Some may throw out nothing but food scraps and paper."

"But a lot more toss five or six cans apiece," Pickett said. "It evens out. So start by figuring we pick up two million cans a season."

Pickett went to the cab of the truck and took out his stenographer's pad, writing down the figures. "How many cans does it take to make a pound?" he asked. "Ten? Fifteen?"

"We'd better get moving," Calhoun said. "It's almost quitting time."

"Let's play it safe and say twenty. That would mean we pick up one hundred thousand pounds of aluminum

in four months. The Coors distributor will pay, what, thirty cents a pound? Look at this!" He let Calhoun check his figures. "It adds up to fifteen thousand bucks each for the summer. We could triple what the park's paying us--just in aluminum. Then there's bottles, scrap iron, paper. I wonder what the going rate is for newsprint? And think what else is buried right here under our feet: old wiring, broken-down power tools--"

"Dead elk, toxic chemicals, used motor oil," Calhoun said. "Forget it."

"--enough copper wiring to make us rich. No more driving around in junk cars, no more scrimping through the winters, hoping one of my projects goes."

The idea was an old one, dating back to before Captain Filth. It was also eminently impractical. Pickett had tried salvaging cans before, but each time--after a week or two--had grown tired of the extra effort involved. This was the first time he'd bothered to figure out the poundage.

"Anyway," he said wistfully, "we should look into it."

Calhoun was no longer listening. He had bent to examine several gleaming objects at his feet, picking them up for a closer look.

"What is it?" Pickett asked.

Calhoun inserted a finger into the top of a brass

cylinder, then read the markings at its base. "Forty-one magnum. Looks like it would put one hell of a hole in somebody."

"Whitehead carries a forty-one," Pickett said.

"Maybe he shot a dog."

They took a quick look around, noticing a set of tire tracks beyond the bulldozer and, nearby, a confusion of human footprints. Without speaking they followed the prints on an elliptical path toward the mud embankment known as Dead Dog Point. In places, one set of footprints extended into long furrows as if someone had been dragged. Pickett followed Calhoun to the crest of the embankment and looked over.

Fifteen feet below, on the floor of an arroyo, lay a tattered gray Stetson stained by dark brown splotches. From its rattlesnake hatband, Pickett knew right away the hat belonged to Captain Filth.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The chatter of tourists at Bristlecone Point trail head broke off at the approach of a tall ranger who walked with an easy upright bearing. His neatly pressed uniform clashed with the tourists' windbreakers and Bermuda shorts. Nikons clicked as he smiled from behind sharp green eyes, gray beard and hooked nose.

"If you people will gather round for a moment we'll get started." The ranger let them draw themselves into a tighter knot. "I'm Chief Naturalist Frank McGraw, your guide this afternoon as we walk to the fascinating marriage of forest and mountain known as Bristlecone Point. In an hour and a half we'll cover two miles of trail, gain a thousand feet in elevation and observe over two hundred species of plants ranging from the Engelmann spruce to the alpine primrose.

"Walk softly and we may meet Marty and Molly Marmot, the heads of a family of yellow-bellied marmots who live up the trail. When we arrive you'll likely hear a loud whistle. That'll be Marty warning Molly she's about to have house guests."

McGraw paused for laughter, adjusting his round-brimmed hat to sit further back on his head.

Pickett watched grimly from the center of the gathering. The bit about Marty and Molly Marmot was perhaps the single worst line in current use by a park naturalist,



but did not actually prove McGraw was mentally imbalanced. It did conflict with the image Ginger had so glowingly drawn the night before--the part about his wit. Still, hadn't Pickett detected the slightest hint of irony in this Ranger Rick performance?

Hoping to blend into the nature trail crowd, Pickett wore an orange "Rocky Mountain High" T-shirt and khaki shorts. His vague intention of learning more about McGraw had grown urgent with the discovery of Captain Filth's Stetson. He'd dropped it by Glidewell's office after work, staying long enough to confirm that the brown splotches on it were probably bloodstains. Glidewell admitted the hat was the only bit of new evidence to come in, but volunteered little else. No, he hadn't got around to questioning Brock and Hanes. No, he couldn't explain why they'd found Captain Filth's hand at Ram's Rise trail head and his bloody hat at Dead Dog Point. Pickett left headquarters with the impression that Glidewell had other more pressing business--perhaps Nordstrom's important visitor--and that any further progress in the Captain Filth investigation was up to him.

Now, as two Oriental men aimed video cameras at McGraw, Pickett snapped a Polaroid picture of his own.

"I'm bound to remind you of a few rules before we start," McGraw said. He squared his shoulders and crossed his arms under his gold badge. "Anything you carry into

the park's boundaries you must carry out. Let me re-emphasize this: there will be no littering on this trail hike."

He ran through other laws of the trail: no pets, no short-cuts, no running, no straying from the group. "Oh yes, and one personal rule on all my nature walks. Please don't smoke.

"We'll be climbing to nearly eleven thousand feet above sea level, where two miles can seem like ten to flatlanders. Please be sure you're wearing comfortable shoes and that you're up to the hike. If you don't think you can make it, please don't try. I'm getting a little old to carry people out on my back."

Several of the hikers laughed, one man's nervous bray lasting long after the others were quiet.

"Any questions?"

A young woman tending two preschoolers, one of whom was dribbling chocolate down the front of his shirt, raised her hand. "Where are the bathrooms?" she asked.

McGraw pointed out a pair of pit toilets. "Anyone else? No? Then let's take a hike."

From ten paces back, Pickett watched McGraw climb effortlessly up the trail, stopping to point out Indian paintbrushes and mountain bluebells. The sky was the clean dark blue often found at high altitudes. A west wind freshened the air with the scent of sun-baked trees.

Despite his serious intent, Pickett began to enjoy himself, listening with as much interest as any other hiker when McGraw explained that the orange lichen covering a trailside boulder grew wherever pikas left their nitrogen-rich urine. His hope of seeing a sinister side of McGraw gradually faded with the pleasant regular thud of his tennis shoes against the packed trail.

McGraw stopped in a small clearing and asked them to look at three trees--a lightning charred spruce, a lodgepole pine stripped bare of bark for its first four feet and an aspen whose white trunk carried a heart-shaped scar and the inscription: Donnie loves Joline.

"As you see, each has been wounded by a different hand," McGraw said. "A lightning strike springs from the hand of nature, or God if you like. The second is the handiwork of a feasting porcupine which must eat bark to survive. I cannot begrudge him his meal, although he is a relatively recent immigrant to the Rockies. The third shows the hand of man, the most destructive force unleashed on the forest in all the eons of time."

He stabbed a finger at Donnie and Joline. "This is the grievous wound, the one that galls, because it never should have happened. Can anyone justify such vandalism? I think not."

"There's a man who's never been in love," a bald man in a Nebraska Cornhusker jacket said.

The other hikers laughed. Pickett perked up at McGraw's mention of vandalism, unexpectedly reminded of Captain Filth's trailer. McGraw's eyes narrowed as he grinned at the bald man. He was about to comment when a woman at the back of the group screamed.

A large gray and black bird flapped to the branches of the scorched spruce, carrying half a cookie in its powerful beak.

"My fig newton," the woman said. "That bird stole my fig newton!"

McGraw explained that the bird, a gray jay, rivaled the chipmunk in its taste for refined foods.

"As you see, some of our wildlife has become dependent on humans for survival. This is the first step in the breakdown of an ecosystem. If possible, please don't accelerate this decay." He looked at the woman. "Keep your cookies to yourselves."

The bald man turned to Pickett, standing nearby, and said, "If I wanted to hear this crap I woulda joined the Sierra Club."

The hikers were within sight of Bristle-cone Point when they heard Marty Marmot's distinctive whistle. The trail erupted with cries of "There's Marty...Hi guy ...Give our regards to Molly."

The marmot stood on a sliver of basalt at the edge

of a boulder field, poised like a giant prairie dog. It endured their greetings for several seconds, then gave the hikers an exasperated glance and scrambled swiftly away, flashing in and out of sight among the boulders.

Pickett looked past the fleeing animal to the dark spire of Bristlecone Point. Leaning out over the edge of a three-hundred-foot drop was a gnarly bristlecone pine. The trail zigzagged up a steep slope to the base of the point, where a series of steel ladders led the rest of the way to the summit.

During the slow ascent of the slope, accompanied by a chorus of pained breathing from the hikers, McGraw told them Bristlecone Point had formed when a molten basalt plug filled a volcanic vent, then cooled. The soft surrounding rock had since eroded away, leaving this narrow column.

Pickett spent much of the climb up the ladders encouraging the Oriental men, who eyed the void below them with obvious terror. The ladders were safely bolted to the rock and only appeared to be life-threatening, the height exposure broken up by staggered ledges on which twenty people could comfortably stand.

The summit was flat, perhaps forty feet in diameter-- its only large vegetation the thick, tenacious-looking bristlecone. When everyone made it up, McGraw informed them that Bristlecone Point was in reality a spur of

Parachute Peak, whose rounded cone dominated the landscape to the west. He invited them to savor what some believed was the finest view of the park to be had without mounting a full-fledged climbing expedition. He then moved to the bristlecone.

"For hundreds of years this tree has been exposed to lightning and high winds, but has somehow survived, a true miracle of nature," he said. "See how the roots have worked into every crevice, widening them over the centuries and giving the tree its precarious grip on life."

"Look, Melba, there's the Winnebago," the bald man said. He pointed to the parking a thousand feet down and two miles away.

Pickett looked north to Nimbus Pass and beyond to the line of jagged peaks that marked the location of Cibola Springs. For a moment he listened as McGraw explained that bristlecones were among Earth's oldest living organisms, with lifespans up to four thousand years. Then it was as if the scenery before him were transcribed onto Captain Filth's topographical map. With startling clarity the images of five large red letters flashed on in his mind, one at a time, running north to the pass and spelling: DEATH!

At that moment, the west wind that had blown all afternoon gave one last gust and died. Pickett felt

an irritating sting on the back of his neck. The other hikers began exclaiming and swatting as a cloud of mosquitoes descended on them.

"Stop that this instant!" McGraw cried. "Stop it! You're killing them!"

Nearly everyone paused in mid-motion to stare at McGraw. The bald man, however, had attracted an entire mosquito swarm and continued to beat himself on the head and chest. The hikers gasped as McGraw leaped across Bristlecone Point to catch and hold one of the man's beefy wrists, interrupting a descending arc meant to end the feasting of two of the insects.

"I said stop!" McGraw's grip tightened on the wrist, bringing pain to the man's face and causing the veins in his own hand to bulge.

"Let go," the man said, voice trembling. "What kinda nut are you, fellah?"

"One who will not stand idly by while you kill this park's wildlife."

There was a rumble among the tourists and McGraw glanced around as if suddenly remembering where he was. He dropped the wrist and its owner promptly destroyed the two mosquitoes.

McGraw gave the man a frightful look, but seemed for the moment to have regained his composure. "It's always the same, isn't it?" he asked sadly. "Wherever

you go, you go there to kill."

Pickett looked at the others, whose faces registered shock or curiosity. He didn't know what to make of this bizarre performance, but had the feeling the afternoon's walk had not been made in vain.

"You murdered the buffalo, the wolf and the grizzly just as you murder these mosquitoes. You enter another animal's habitat and when it gets in your way you wipe it out," McGraw said. "Well kill if you want to. That's your way. But these insects--small and annoying as they are--have as much right to be here as any of you. If they want a little of your blood to feed to their young that's their privilege. I, for one, will not kill them for doing what nature tells them to do."

Saying this, McGraw held out both arms as if inviting an embrace. A mosquito landed while the hikers looked on and began drawing blood, its proboscis pulsating like a tiny artery. Even as Pickett watched he was aware that the insect's thorax was swelling.

An obese man in a skin-tight polo shirt broke the silence first. Furiously chomping an extinguished cigar, he said in a raspy West Texas voice, "The man's a lunatic."

"Somebody kill it," the young mother shouted. She stared at McGraw's arm, shielding her children's eyes. The Oriental businessmen whispered in their own language and kept their video cameras rolling. Footsteps



crunched loose rock as the Texan lumbered toward McGraw, one hand raised to strike.

"Stay back!" McGraw said. A strange light in his eyes froze the bigger man six feet away. Suddenly laughing, McGraw shooed the mosquito away.

It was slow to remove its hypodermic. McGraw waved his hand again. This time the bloated mosquito launched into the air, and with a desperate sounding buzz attempted to fly away. It fell in an inevitable glide to the basalt floor five feet from McGraw. It did not move again.

\* \* \*