

Rock Dance

A Novel

By Jack Ballard, Jr.

1422 Robinwood Road
Alliance, Ohio 44601
330.471.8332

Prologue

A nondescript building in Denver decorated the otherwise bland street street. Some mediocre painter had delivered a sign with "Asalia Computer Design" painted on the front. There wasn't much more to it.

The neighborhood spoke mostly Spanish, and Protestant white people were looked upon at best with tolerance and at the worst, hostility or at least ethnocentricity.

Tolerance, because the neighborhood contained the best Mexican food in the state and locals were happy to sell it: hostility because felt the schism between the two cultures.

The proprietor of the nondescript building was called Hernando de la Cruz, but his given name was Ali. Born in southern Spain and raised in Mexico City, he was fluent in both Castilian and New World Spanish and Portuguese and could pass for a native in any one of a number of Hispanic cultures. The nondescript building's neighbors thought he had grown up in the orchards of Washington State.

Behind the painted sign was a brick façade, which stuck out in the Western town's wooden enclave. The "specials" chalked on the blackboard behind the dirty window panes pronounced laptops at unrealistically cheap prices, help to those less sanguine about their computer skills, and obsolete connecting vices doomed to give thrills to only Apple IIc aficionados, all of which gave the impression of a business front for a drug laundering escapade.

Hernando parked his 1963 Beetle on the gravel parking lot in the back, its typical Colorado dust hiding if not obliterating the hours of buffing and care by its owner. He slapped his "Club" on the steering wheel - classic cars

were way too easy to break into - and walked around its back. He saw the "wash me" scraped on the fender by an indolent finger and sighed. The project was almost done and he could let up a bit. The security detail had raised the bar some months back and he bowed to the inevitable. His idea of "clandestine operations" in the Hispanic ghetto had worked perfectly but had raised some serious security flags among the more ethnocentric in the head office.

The bell chimed as he walked through the door and as always, he smiled at the sense of humor that made him mount it there in the early days of the project.

"¿Que pasa?" he greeted the assistant. The man behind the desk silently and unsmilingly stood and led the way to an elevator. Rude idiot, he thought. He worked on the third floor and would have preferred to walk up the stairs by himself, but it "wasn't allowed." Security, he knew. The door closed behind him and he turned to the man.

"How is it?" he asked, pointedly.

"Excellent."

"Did they finish?"

"The beta master is done, but no copies as yet. They're trying to figure a way to somehow work it through an unbiased third party to detect bugs."

He shook his head. The more people who knew about this, the less likely it would remain secure. That was the whole point. Still, no sense sending out a beta version with possibly fatal bugs in it. Three years of R&D down the tubes and a major step backward in the War on Terrorism. On the other hand, this could be a major hurdle if everything went right.

The doors slid open and he stepped out. Immediately in front of him was a glass box, with several miniature

scanning devices set therein. There was a retinal scan, a voice print analyzer, and, just in case that wasn't enough, a slot for an I.D. badge. The beancounter that oversaw this operation had read too many spy novels. Either that or he just liked *The Incredibles*. He sighed and went through the routine. He felt it pointless: anybody who would have known enough to get this far would probably be able to pass in any case, but after three years it was habit. A rewarding hum sounded as the glass door opened into the Glass Menagerie. He smiled at that private of terms.

The DVD was like any other in appearance. The tech turned to him.

"We even put "The Two Towers" on it. Herb's favorite movie, sorry."

De La Cruz put up a patient hand dismissing it. He had his humorous side.

"You're sick," he said, grinning, "Very appropriate. There needed to be some sort of disguise, anyway." He held out his hand. The tech tentatively placed the DVD in it, not unlike that of a mother handing a newborn off to the responsible father. De La Cruz sat down at his computer and slid the disk into the superdrive.

"What improvements do we have?" He clicked on the icon as it appeared.

"The important thing is that we've been able to reduce the memory requirement by about ten percent. That'll make it even sneakier on the Internet."

Hector raised his eyebrows. He was impressed and pleased with his staff.

"But we think we can maybe reduce it by another thirty. One of the guys has an idea for a unique compression codec similar to mp3. The trick will be to get

the program to self-extract once it's in place."

Why the DVD? Hernando wondered, in this age of TB flashdrives and the Cloud? The techie answered his thought without a break.

"The DVD also has the menu and the whole movie. A TB drive or flash are too volatile and easily cracked. And of course, any Cloud or server resource is uncontrollable. It can be lost or even hacked." He held up his hand. "No matter how brilliant the coding is, remember there are those as good as we are who like the thrill and the money on The Outside and there are those willing to pay for it. Besides, once the virus goes on the 'Net anywhere, it's on its own. At this point, it's a one-shot engagement.

"Anyway, the DVD. A casual observer would get what he expected, even on the desktop. It would even automatically engage whatever viewing program the computer has, including commercial DVD players."

"Oh," Hector said. "Hide in plain sight, eh?"

The techie nodded.

"Exactly." He continued. "To get to the program, we put an easter egg into the film menu itself. Once the easter egg is clicked, the program engages and attaches itself to whatever email program is in the system. Here's the cool part: because it's a seed, it starts as a program common to any platform or operating system."

Hector looked up, questioning.

"How?" The techie nodded proudly. "All of the platforms use symbols of some kind. The program becomes a mini disk operating system using those symbols. It's self-contained: it doesn't care whether the server is Windows, Mac, Unix. It doesn't care if it's English, Spanish, Arabic or numeric, because it has its own internal operating

system, so to speak. So it stays alive and grows, adapting to whatever platform it finds itself in."

"Madre Dios," he breathed. The expletive showed his amazement; he never said vulgarities, much less blasphemies, however cultural. The techie continued.

"Herb calls it "One Smart Cookie," he grinned.

The "Smart Cookie" engaged at his command and he was immersed within its realm. The "program," code-named CRUCIBLE, was, in effect, a virus. It was also a "cookie," one of those tiny programs web sites used to communicate with, or more insidiously, infiltrate the logged-on personal computer. Usually they were beneficial, used to allow more complete interaction between the host site and the home.

Smart Cookie's purpose was to replicate itself on any contacted server or even computer, but well within the confines of its native operating system. Practically speaking, the system would never know it was there. However, it was also a "spy" in the world of virtual-dimension -- had to call it something, Hector knew, and "Agent VD" didn't work for obvious reasons. The virus would find the information it sought and send it clandestinely back to the original owner, in this case, Hernando de la Cruz and his company, under consultation with the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

For De la Cruz was a patriot. Although born overseas and growing up in an Islamic culture, his parents were Americans and, born American, he was American in his very soul. His birth name -- not his Spanish cover name -- was Arabian in origin, not Muslim, and when he was young he originally took pains to point out that his family had been one of those ostracized Christians living in a

fundamentalist Muslim community where even People of the Book -- Jews and Christians -- were anathema. Not anymore. His choice of CRUCIBLE as the code-name reflected his personal disgust of radical Islam and his hope for its control if not its eradication.

When the original "two towers" -- the World Trade Center -- were blown apart, he was twenty-three. He had already applied to the CIA, but now besieged his recruiter with anxious calls. His exceptional gift of languages (besides Spanish and its dialects, he also had a native's love of French and Basque, not to mention Arabic) ensured a position. But not with the CIA. He was not one of the Chosen and he fell back on management in the better-paying software industry. His skills ensured promotion.

At the age of twenty-nine, he was given control over what most considered a pipe dream, yet within three years he had achieved his personal goal. CRUCIBLE had the possibility of being the finest intelligence-gathering device on earth. "September 11" would never happen again. Not to his country and not on his watch.

He did not know the intricacies of programming, nor did he care. He could operate a computer well enough -- Windows, Unix or Mac, it didn't matter -- to work within pretty much any program. It was like appreciating a swimsuit model's body without being a doctor.

From what he saw, the program looked good for a beta version and the technician talked him through it. Two years, he thought, twenty-four/seven. The trick was not just making a virus, obviously. It wasn't even making a surreptitious virus. It was a matter of all of those, with the capabilities of weeding out Hezbollah and al Queda and other terrorist plots and delivering them to Uncle Sam

Intelligence. That took a lot of memory and a lot of code. Or more accurately, a lot of information brought down to a small size. And there was still months of work ahead, testing, improving, compressing.

A virus, though, whether biologically or technologically built, is mindless. It replicates through making copies of itself and that is its sole purpose. The biological one mutates in response to the environment given. This virus did not only mutate. It went one better. It began as a seed and grew into something formidable for it had to adapt intelligently to the new environment in which it found itself.

It was a breakthrough in artificial intelligence.

1.

Dusty was the name and dusty was definitely the game. He grinned into the blazing sun, squinting up at the cliff-face. Motes floated lazily down upon him.

"Gottit yet?" he yelled.

"NO! And don't ask again!" came the reply, then, "ROCK ROCK ROCK!"

Dusty cowered into the cliff face, trying to fit his entire six-foot body into the helmet. He bathed in a shower of stones and dirt, and Dusty was again very dusty indeed.

He inched out from under the overhang and squinted up again.

"So what the hell are you up to?" he yelled. He was expressly ignored.

Todd was the only guy he knew who could -- unintentionally, of course -- make a nice afternoon easy 5.8 climb into a 5.11 "epic," in climber's terms. Somehow he always got off route in the most consistent of ways. Dusty Palmberg resignedly grinned again at the situation he knew was developing above him. His dark brown hair poked furiously out of his helmet and his steely eyes blinked in the dirt-filled air about him. The rock was Rocky Mountain granite, sharp but gratifyingly solid and there shouldn't have been so much crud coming down. He had no idea what was up there, but suspected Todd had grabbed a ledge without looking and pulled rocks off. It was easy to happen when you tried a brand new route; nobody had been up there to clean off the loose rock yet. He eased his aching neck and gazed at the rock face only a few feet from his belay stance.

Suddenly his partner yelled.

"Okay! Off belay!" The shout echoed distantly off the surrounding faces but was clear for all that. He looked up.

"Belay off!" Dusty promptly finished the mantra and pulled the rope from his friction device. He quickly found the end of the rope and tied a figure eight bend into the end. The remaining few feet or so he pulled through his climbing harness and fed it back into the figure eight. He finished with a safety knot and looked up, waiting.

"Where are you?" he yelled and over the edge of the minimal overhand a suntanned hand flashed into the sun.

"I'm in!"

It always seemed long, but eventually the rope was pulled up fairly quickly. It became taut and Dusty felt the pull.

"That's me!" he shouted. A few minutes later came the response: "On belay!"

"Climbing!"

"Climb!"

Dusty started climbing. The route was a new one, new to them, anyway. In this part of northern Colorado there were literally hundreds of mapped, established climbs and, experienced as they were, it seemed that they were always finding new ones that were on the public maps, but not on their personal ones. Every once in a while a route "disappeared" through their inept map-interpretation, branched into incomprehensible "R" and "X" routes which could permanently damage your body parts, or dead-end completely.

This one was supposed to be fairly simple, 5.8 in the Yosemite system's designation of difficulty. It therefore required a decent amount of skill, training and physical

level, although weaknesses in any of these could easily be made up by the other two.

The hardest Dusty had ever finished was a 5.11c and that was after practicing on it for several climbs. His general limit was about 10c. He did not like to do climbs that ended up making him just tired and frustrated, unless he was working out or trying to improve his technique. No, this was supposed to be a "fun" climb, something Todd could do on his lunch hour and that Dusty could use to take a break from the consulting business.

The face leaned toward him in an intimidating fashion but sported a nice bulge just above his reach. There was a nipple of rock a foot from the bottom. He placed his foot and lunged for the bulge. Naturally, he pulled off the foothold but gained his other hand on the bulge. A pullup with the arms and walking up the face, he hooked his heel on the lip to the right and pivoted around the top of the overhang.

"Wonderful first move," he muttered sarcastically. Above him, it was a steep slope, not quite ninety degrees, but very "slabby." It would be fine with climbing shoes, assuming that the afternoon rains don't begin. There were two parallel cracks running up the face that he thought provided decent finger jams. At the bottom of one of these was his first stopping point.

"First piece!" he yelled, not bothering to look up. The "piece" in question was a "nut," merely a piece of elaborate wedge threaded with a small steel cable loop. A nut was good for cracks in the rock, and properly placed, even a tiny No. 2 piece one quarter inch thick would hold a leader's six foot fall. Dusty knew that from personal experience.

This piece was stuck. Damn, he thought, first piece and I already have to dig at it. This'll take forever. He was very glad he was on an easy ledge. There is nothing worse than hanging by the pinky of one hand digging away at a stuck piece with the other.

A shadow crossed over him. He looked up as a mild gust of wind caressed his face. Puffy clouds with dark, flat bottoms were riding the winds off the Divide, and it was comparably humid for a nine thousand foot desert climate. The afternoon thunderstorms were building early today. No big deal yet, but if rain made it to the ground, the rock would get a bit slick and reduce their climbing abilities by a couple of notches. The slab would get slippery even with climbing shoes and he would have to hang on to the cracks more than he would like. He sighed: and it would get cold. These storms were known to drop some sleet and hail, not to mention the occasional graupel, even in mid-summer.

He took out a tool and dug into the crack, working the nut back and forth until it finally popped loose.

"Climbing!" he yelled and felt additional tension on the rope as Todd took up what little slack there was. The route's two fist cracks degenerated into a series of smaller cracks into which he would slide his fingers as he worked his feet up on small nubs to either side.

Things went well to begin with, as the splayed cracks were obvious and his fingers and part of his hands still fit snugly into the space. A couple of times he could even feel little fingerholds on the inside and his feet never lost purchase as long as he stayed away from the temptation to fit them into the cracks.

The cracks branched out to the sides and faded, but the main route was clear and headed straight up the side of

the face. As he stopped for the second piece, a "cam" or camming device that expanded as one placed into an appropriately-sized space, a low trembling in the rock startled him for a second. Felt more than heard, he knew it was the storms in the distance transmitting the ultra-low frequencies of their electricity. He tried not to rush.

He finished four more pieces and then reached the difficult crux. It was an overhang, naturally, with a cleft that split it into two parts. The rock on either side were thinner, almost sheets in comparison to the bulky lower part of the route. The split above him formed an "off-width" crack: one too large to fit in any hand-work, but much too small to use a chimneying technique that require the insertion of the entire body.

He leaned away from the rock to get perspective and immediately saw where Todd had gone wrong. The very, very tempting holds to the right were the direction he should have gone, "escaping" out on to a ledge that set up for an (probably, he thought) easy Class-4 walkup to the belay stance at the top.

However, the rope led up through the split in this overhang, or roof, and as the cleaner, it was Dusty's duty to follow through and retrieve any pieces the leader left behind. He snorted. Even if it was Todd on his excursions. But "straight up" is often the mantra on a newly climbed route and that ethos was enough to lure the unsuspecting climber into that annoying 5.11-something Todd had complained about. Todd should have known better.

But it was understandable. The longer he looked at the off-width crack, the more it made sense, if difficult. He could do it. An arm jam? Maybe, but then how would he be able to swing his other arm around for the next move? He

looked more closely and noted a couple of small finger holds, no larger than quarters. He would have to reach inside with one hand, lean back on the

"Got me? I'm going to rest a bit before the next part. You picked a helluva place to get off, eh?"

"Whiner! You know, straight up, damn the torpedoes and all that rot," Todd finished in his best Eaton College accent.

The rope tightened even more.

"Gotcha."

He could not see him, but was close enough to converse without yelling, probably just over this lovely little piece of work.

A shadow passed over him as he rested.

The Asalia Computer Design supervisor walked briskly out of the building. To his neighbors, it was another day at "work," although his job had little to do with graphic design as they knew it. There were others, real artists and computer geeks who worked there and put the flesh onto the bones of that little façade.

Dusty looked up at where the obscured sun should have been. The much larger clouds were building up quickly today. It would rain, for sure.

A scuffling sound made him look over and down the steep, flat granite face. To his right was a fairly easy route -- 5.8 also -- and flowing blond hair tied in a bun. Below it was a black sports bra: the girl moved quickly. Too quickly. He leaned farther back and she came completely

into view. She had a chalk bag and shoes, and . . . that was it. No harness, not to mention rope or helmet.

Fool, he thought. He didn't care how good someone thought they were. A rope was always a good thing, and a helmet, too. Climbing magazine showed their advertisers' models without helmets and some of them ropeless, too, but while that made for good copy and got the wannabees' adrenaline flowing, it was the height of foolishness to think you were more powerful than gravity and rock combined. He'd had too many close calls himself and disaster had been averted only because he had taken precautions.

As if hearing his thought very loudly, the girl planted herself in a rest position and looked up.

"'Scuse me," she shouted, "Is this 'Blue Whale?'"

Annoyed by the evident arrogance, Dusty hesitated a moment. She obviously wanted him to notice her.

"Yes," he said finally.

"Thanks!" she grinned, somewhat condescendingly, Dusty thought. He half expected her to wave and lose her grip. But, then again, maybe that was just his crabby mood. She tucked her head again and proceeded working her way up the route called "The Blue Whale."

Well, excuse me for thinking more about my life than you apparently do, he thought. He looked over at the route Todd had climbed out upon and suddenly wished he could go that way. Above him was that annoying off-width with its tiny, tiny, tiny little nubs that someone apparently once-upon-a-time thought were valid handholds. He took a deep breath.

I hope you're ready to let me hang, he thought, then added to himself, then haul me up.

Aloud, he yelled, "Climbing!"

"About friggin' time!" came the answer. There was no advice or encouragement: there was an unspoken agreement to let the partner figure it out, unless asked.

He reached up and gripped the inner nub with two fingers and a thumb. He hung back and kicked his foot into the crack closest to the face, then turned it to wedge it securely.

Here goes nothin', he thought, and reached up to grab the outer nub with his other hand. It was another foot above the other and he had to pull up with the left and to even reach it. Then overhand, and again. He made the move, actually a series of moves that had to be done consecutively, and quickly.

A grunt here, a slip there, a second of "are you sure you have me?" with a couple moments of stark raving terror, and found himself pulling a handful of dirt toward him as he tried to press up to the grassy ledge.

Dusty stood up on the narrow ledge and walked over to the belay stance Todd had picked for the next pitch. He was sweating heavily, covered in his own salt.

"What is that?" He whined.

Todd grimaced.

"I think it's the 12R variation."

"You're nuts," Dusty groaned. "I would have left a piece and come back down."

"I couldn't. Once you got under that roof there was no going back. And it's an off-width that won't take any kind of 'pro' at all. Besides, you know what a miser I am. Even if I could place something, I wasn't about to leave a sixty buck Camelot stuck in a crack."

"Well, I'm glad you made it. I hate having to do

Search and Rescue stuff on my own partner when he falls. Looks bad."

"I'd say so. And inconvenient for me, as well."

A large, warm drop splattered on Todd's helmet. The wind turned colder and the sun now seemed more than just obscured. It might as well have left their universe. Dusty looked up. The clouds were swirling in a cyclical pattern caused by the terrain, culminating above them in a slowly meandering vortex. That was not good. Lightning might be their next company. Todd swore.

"Oh, shit, we're in for it," he said. "It's gonna be dumpin' in a bit."

"I figured," Dusty grumped. "Can we rap from here? Or do you want to keep going?"

"I don't have time even if the rock's dry. I have an appointment for dinner and too much work to do at the shop. We'll have to traverse over to Blue Whale where there are a couple of chains."

"What are you into now?"

"Nothing. Just some cams into this crack. No one does this route enough to place any kind of anchor."

"Dang." Dusty looked over. "There's some chick" a term he used only for those of the female persuasion whom he felt warranted the condescension "over on Blue Whale, free-soloing the thing."

Todd rolled his eyes. Also a Search-and-Rescue (SAR) member, he'd seen his share of what he termed "idjits" getting into dangerous situations. Fortunately, most of them somehow never got into serious trouble.

"The good Lord looks after drunks, children, and idiots, I guess. She know the weather forecast?"

"I doubt she'll know the forecast even after it rains."

It's an easy climb to solo, but it's mostly slab work on the upper end and even climbing shoes aren't going to stick very well if the rock gets too wet. Too steep in that spot." He thought for a moment and looked over. He could see her clearly now, working up the crack that designated the top fifty feet of the Blue Whale. The rain wasn't doing much, yet, just a few splatters onto the still-warm rock, which dried it in the high altitude air within seconds. He turned back to Todd and began organizing the gear hanging on his climbing harness.

"Okay," he said. "Belay me over and I'll set up an anchor at the chain. Then we'll just hang out until she gets up or chickens out."

"Sounds good."

Dusty traversed to the chains in question and set up a multiple anchor system. He also added a couple of extra runners for Todd and for the girl. He figured she'd want one. But then again, maybe not. He didn't have enough regard for her to think she had the brains or humility, or both, he thought, to ask for it. He hoped he was wrong.

He looked down. He could see her working toward that route's crux. She was good, he admitted, very good, and confident in what she was doing. The crack widened where she was into a decent chimney and was blocked by an exposed chock stone. She hesitated. Still, it only took something like a bee with an attitude, and it was sure nice to have that rope when that happened.

The rain came down consistently now and the arid atmosphere wasn't drying the rock anymore, although it would be a while before it got totally soaked. The cloud seemed to darken above him and he knew it would get worse as the turbulence tightened. The girl made it over the crux

-- a somewhat awkward maneuver around the chock stone -- and started up the next section. Above her was the crack, solid, but still challenging and then it narrowed and disappeared to about thirty feet of steep, knobby "slab:" smooth rock with occasional nubs for handholds. Technique on something like this involved putting your weight on the flats of your shoes so they stuck tightly to the rock. Beginners often tried to use the edge of their shoes to grip. That was fine if there were knobby holds, but fatal if there weren't.

She was clearly no beginner and she was definitely in shape, and Dusty wasn't worried about her in that regard, but the rock was now becoming very wet. Dusty looked at her face. Pretty, he thought irrelevantly, but the arrogance was gone from her face. She was nervous. What his friends like to call his SAR Radar came into play now. He looked at "possibles." If she fell, she would hit the chock stone. The question was whether she would stop there or bounce off, slide around and freefall twenty feet, hitting the steep rock below. From there it would be a painful slide until the bottom or the narrowing chimney stopped her. Multiple injuries. Likely a head injury as well. If she didn't fall all the way to the bottom, they would have to make a harness out of webbing to get her down.

Damn, he thought. What a hassle.

"Want a belay?" he finally said to her. She had not noticed him at the anchor.

"With what?" she asked snidely. She could not see the rope from him to Todd.

Reaction made him think "Fine!" but professionalism made him say patiently, "I really think you might want one. The rain's not going to let up. It'd be easy to rig one for

you."

"I'll be fine," she panted without looking up, "if you just shut up."

"Okay, I'm here if you need me. We'll wait 'til you get up then we'll rap down from the anchors."

"It'll be a cold day..."

Hernando looked out his windshield at the glowering skies, then at his watch. Four o'clock. Right on time. The afternoon thunderstorms on the Front Range were true to timing if not consistent in intensity. Big drops started splattering his car. He muttered a mild annoyance at the rain. The dust in the air and already on his car combined with the moisture coming down just made mud for his -- newly washed, meticulously waxed and brightly polished -- classic Beetle. Oh well, we need the rain, he thought, as he stopped for the umpteenth light on Wadsworth. He was in a good mood and no measly rain would mar the rest of the day for him. He could even deal with the traffic.

Dusty leaned into the slight overhang that sheltered the anchor. He maneuvered the rope into its device.

"On belay!" There was a muffled return from Todd. He pulled in rope as it slackened. He could hear the girl scrabbling on the face at the same time. He quickly glanced down without ceasing the belay motions. She had her hand wedged in the thin crack with one foot lower down. The other slipped on the wet rock to the left as she tried to get some purchase. Todd appeared around the corner and Dusty clipped him into the anchor as he sat down beside

him. He looked over the edge at the wet woman.

"You're 'off,'" he said, removing the rope from his belay device.

"What's she trying to do?"

"Didn't want a hand," Dusty answered in a low voice. It changed to a low growl: "Hmm, much pride, this young Jedi, hmm?"

"I'll bet. Pretty young Jedi, though. Even with that 'wash-and-go' hairdo. I wouldn't mind rescuing her in that wet t-shirt." The heavy rain would curb the ego of any woman who placed undue value in her hair, but raise the ego of one who was inordinately proud of her chest. The girl was now very wet as were both men. Dusty pulled his fanny pack off and got out an ultra light poncho.

"Be good, now," he said as he pulled it over his head.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Still. . ." Dusty grabbed the free rope and pulled it through Todd's belay device. He fed it through his hand so it snaked down the rock face to the "climber's left" of the girl. She pointedly ignored it.

The girl had given up on the move and was resting. Dusty bit his lip to keep from saying anything. He'd made his offer and he could tell from her excessive helping of pride that any new overture from him would just harden her heart.

She tried to do a pull-up on the hand jam. She was tired, they could tell, but the slope was so easy she should have been able to do it. If the hand held. The rain had not let up and it was probably slippery in that crack as well as on the face. She worked the left foot up and pulled up on the jam.

"Your right foot," Todd called out, "there's a hold

for it about mid-thigh and a foot to the right."

She grunted something that sounded like two words. The last one was "you." Dusty tried to hide the smile. Todd looked surprised. Dusty couldn't resist.

"Not someone you'd take home to momma, eh?" he murmured.

The girl deliberately ignored Todd's advice and reefed up on the hand jam.

"It wasn't her . . . words, it was her attitude."

"I do believe that that is what that particular phrase is intended to convey. Well, I guess she told yo . . ."

Dusty broke off as the scrabbling changed to a sliding noise. There was more scrabbling as he looked down at the struggling girl, who desperately grabbed at the wet rope hanging to her left. It slipped through her hand and she lunged at it with the other. Then she was voicelessly gone, sliding onto the chock stone and disappearing over the crux.

2.

De la Cruz pulled into his driveway, and zapped his garage door Just as the sun came out. Beads of water danced on the red car hood as he drove into the garage. He had been in this cover for so long that tradecraft had faded from habit and he did not notice the very mundane Ford Taurus behind him parked across the street.

"Crud." Dusty grabbed a bight of both ropes and shoved it quickly through his belay device. "Get on the horn and let Dispatch know we need help."

"Figure she's hurt?"

"No, if she'd stopped at the chock stone. Yes, since she's gone over. That lower half is a narrowing crack from that point down. If we're lucky, she fell into the crack and got stuck. I hope she didn't go to the bottom or we're probably looking at a body recovery instead."

He finished setting up the rappel. He wrapped the autoblock around the twin ropes and clipped it to his climbing harness. This would allow him to have his hands free to work without slipping even on a wet rope. The rain hadn't stopped but had settled into a cold shower. Before he headed over, he pulled off his poncho and wrapped it into a tight ball. He shivered, but wanted to save the rain gear for the girl.

"Look good?" he asked. He had learned long ago never to trust himself on an anchor, belay when possible, a rappel setup or even just putting on his harness, but asked for a visual inspection and confirmation from whatever

climbing partner he was with at the time. Todd examined his setup.

"Yeah. Go."

"On rappel."

Dusty pressed his hand to his hamstring, allowing the flesh to provide additional friction on the wet rope, and slid down the rock face.

"Springfield -- Sierra Forty-Two," he heard above.

"Sierra Forty-Two, go ahead." The experienced Dispatcher sounded bored and dispassionate as always.

"Be advised we have a climber down on Sheep Face, unknown injuries. Please page Search and Rescue, mountain team only. Sierra Twenty-Two and Sierra Forty-Two are on scene."

"Copy. Sixteen-thirty-five," as she timestamped the radio traffic.

The voices faded as Dusty passed the chock stone and a remote part of his brain registered admiration over the girl's skill. Below the crux was an overhang and the chock stone's nesting place: a chimney about five feet wide, narrowing to a crack as he descended. More like 5.9, he thought irrelevantly. Easy except for that one spot.

A blonde spot in the crack grew lighter as he approached the bottom, seventy feet below him.

"Hey!" he yelled. The spot did not move, but he knew she had matched his hopes and was wedged in the crack. He slowed as he reached her.

Her head was bowed forward and her body was sandwiched lengthwise in the crack, looking rather like a dancer in a waiting pose. She bled pretty badly from a head wound and her hip was cocked in a funny way. Not good, he thought, I hope we don't have a back issue in addition. He pressed a

couple finger lightly on her carotid and was glad to feel a faint pulsing under the skin.

He let the autoblock grip the rope and he stopped, his legs perpendicular to the rock and braced against one side of the chimney. There was nowhere to stand as the girl filled the space. He could see now; her hip was cocked by the way her legs had been jammed into the crack. One sort of rested on the edge, twisted oddly. A broken ankle or sprain, he figured. Behind it the right leg showed blood and bone. The lower leg looked like another joint, only there shouldn't be a joint where it was bent. There was a sliver of bone through the skin and the flesh was darkening below it as broken vessels pumped blood into the torn flesh. He hesitated. The leg was swelling, but not fast. Okay. Get her into an anchor first: first aid wasn't any good if she continued to fall to her death and he thought - - he hoped -- that there wasn't an artery torn. Judgment call.

He looked quickly for placements for his climbing protection and saw a couple of projections jutting out from the chimney. He had plenty of pieces left over from the climbing and was thankful he hadn't passed them off to Todd yet. He looped a piece of webbing over one, doubling back to cinch it down. A crack to the left above the girl's head was a perfect place to insert a camming piece and he placed a nut just below that. Solid, or "bombproof" as the saying went. The first thing was to get off the rope so Todd could help.

"Off rappel!" He yelled the moment he was secured and had pulled the rope out of his rappelling device. "Get down here fast! I'm out of webbing and she's not tied in, but she's not going anywhere at this point."

"Yeah!" The rope flopped like a snake as Todd maneuvered the rope at the ledge above. Dusty pulled his poncho from his fanny pack and threw it around her best he could. Dusty looked up and blinked into the misty rain drops. A shadow obscured the gloomy clouds as his partner leaned out over the chock. Moments later Todd was hanging on his autoblock and staring into the crevice at the girl.

"Not quite so sexy now, eh?" Dusty said drily. Todd was mildly offended.

"That's not necessary: I was just being obnoxious."

"Yeah, I know." Dusty turned back to the girl, still wedged into the crack. "Okay, you're the RN; you should have gone down first. But she's got a head injury and a compound fracture of the right leg. I don't think an artery's broken: swelling seems slow and nothing's coming out the top of the wound."

Todd moved toward the girl and looked her over as he spoke.

"You or me: not that big a deal. You were on the rope and speed was important. Take the radio and tell Dispatch the what's happening while I look at her. When you can, get together a Swiss seat and see if you can put it together so we can finish it without moving her. I agree. I don't think there is an artery issue here."

Dusty grabbed the radio.

"Springfield -- Sierra Twenty-Two."

"Twenty-Two, go ahead."

"Establishing Sheep Face Command. Patient is mid-30's, female. She is unconscious and breathing, break."

There was an obligatory pause as Dusty allowed the radio repeater tower to cool.

"Continuing. Major injuries are a head injury and

compound fracture of the lower right leg. Statist. . . , I mean vitals, to follow."

"Code Four. Sixteen-thirty-eight."

"Statistics? That's what you get in baseball," Todd's voice was muffled as he maneuvered around the girl's head.

"Whatever. So, what are they?"

"She's also got a broken arm, sport. Pulse is shallow and fast, about one-ten but she seems somewhat stable. At least enough for us to get her down. I can't do anything for her up here."

"`Kay," Dusty answered. "Todd, no way she's going to last two miles to the parking lot; I'm calling for Mobile Medic. There's a good LZ at the bottom of the cliff, and she's going to have to go to Fort Collins, in any case."

"Yeah, I agree."

"Springfield -- Sheep Face Command."

"Sheep Face Command."

"We're going to need Mobile Medic ASAP."

"They're on their way. Sierra Five requested it considering your location."

"Code Four. We believe we can get her down . . . Wait a sec, stand by."

Todd interrupted.

"No. Bang her up too much."

"`Kay. Springfield, we're going to try to stabilize the patient on the face until the Mountain Rescue Team arrives. Pulse is one-ten and shallow, BP unknown. Break.

"Continuing. Sierra Team will need lowering gear. The large vacuum splint is needed as well."

"Code Four. Sierra Five, did you copy?"

Another voice came on the radio.

"Copy. Break. Sheep Face Command switch to EOC."

Dusty dutifully switched channels to Emergency Operations Channel.

"Sierra Five -- Sheep Face Command."

"Sierra Five."

"Yeah, Mark, we're on The Blue Whale, about forty feet up at the bottom of that big crack that widens up at the top. She's at the bottom, pretty wedged in."

"How are you set up?"

"There's a decent crack system off this chimney and . . . stand by . . ." Dusty leaned back on the anchor, surveying the rock face.

" . . . A couple more to the right. It'll hold a rescue load. There is a five-foot chock stone above us if we need it, but it's pretty high above our position. The angle is only about seventy-five degrees so it'll bump her some, but Todd and I can handle both lowering and belay . . . We could use one more person to help us haul the litter up and attend her over the bumps. Pull out the ascenders: we have the two ropes fixed on the chains at the top of the climb so it's secure."

"Copy that. How's the patient doing?"

Dusty looked over at Todd. He gave a thumbs-up, then waggled his hand sideways.

"Could be better, but she's at least stable."

"Code Four. We're at 'The Beast' and it's ready to go. We're about twenty out."

"We should have things set up by then."

Twenty minutes was not much time to set up a complete system, especially with just their personal climbing gear, as enhanced for SAR ops as it was. For her sake, they needed to be ready when the cavalry arrived.

* * *

The man in the Taurus had a computer pad and he typed into it impatiently. Even were someone able to look through the very dark windows of his car, they would imagine him as a real estate agent making an assessment of the neighborhood or some house. That was understandable, for the insignia on the driver and passenger doors proclaimed as much. The phone number was even real, as was the web address. To keep up appearances, he actually made some money on the side in the business. The man typed some more, adding detail to the note.

<Subject MANO at home. No variation in routine.
1736>Bud1234

He closed the encoded laptop and got out with his iPad. The work was done, now the job was to add cover. He walked down the road, making (real) notes on the device. To complete the façade, he walked up to a house and greeted the customer. The owner was pleasantly surprised to see him for the visit was not scheduled. The FOR SALE sign in his front yard provided an invitation to any interested person, not to mention the occasional real estate broker.

* * *

Dusty pulled out a longish piece of webbing off of Todd's belt. He fashioned it into one loop with a water bend and unclipped a locking 'biner from his harness.

"Todd."

Todd looked up from his work on the patient.

"How's things?"

"Haven't found anything else, no bruising or anything. Getting her out of this crack is going to be fun, but at least she doesn't have a broken neck or anything. We won't know about the head injury until we have a scan at the hospital, but it looks like she just got dinged. No crushing or skull fracture that I can see."

Dusty held out the webbing. Todd looked a question.

"What's this?"

"A makeshift harness. Faster than a Swiss seat and in this case we don't have to disturb her by tying knots all over. Is there room for me to get over there?"

"Tight, but yeah."

Todd maneuvered himself to the outside of the crack.

"Let . . . me . . . okay, I got her."

Dusty slid over in front of the girl. He pulled the webbing under her crotch and up the front, clipping the 'biner into the loop. Then he moved his hands around her hips and split the remaining loop into two. These he pulled back around her hips and clipped them into the 'biner. He pulled a runner from his belt and clipped her into the anchoring system. In the entire operation, she did not move or was moved.

"Slick," Todd said, admiringly. "I mean, the harness."

Dusty gave him a look.

"So the head looks okay?" he asked.

"More blood than anything."

"Good. She must have taken the brunt of the fall on that leg."

"Yeah. Not good for the leg, but it could have been worse."

Dusty looked at his watch.

"Team's about six out if they're on schedule. I'm going to set up additional anchors for the lowering. Can you help, or are you going to stay with your lady-love?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Todd was getting annoyed at the banter. "Seriously, I should stay here, especially if she wakes up and shifts or something."

"I agree. Won't take me long in any case."

It was longer than expected. But at least the afternoon storms in this part of the Rockies usually lasted no more than half an hour. The rain stopped and the clouds lowered to meet the post-storm mist rising from the wet ground. The unmistakable thumping of a chopper's blades came up the valley. "Mobile Medic," the commercial name for the Bell helicopter based at the Springfield Hospital, began landing procedures in the Landing Zone, or LZ, below. It was a small clearing in the valley floor, about eight acres in size, set among the tall Ponderosa pines. The chopper pilots were gifted at squeezing their rigs into incredibly tight places. A lot of them were ex-Vietnam or Iraq pilots who had done SAR operations in much tighter places, and under fire at that.

Dusty could see two figures getting out. As they worked, he could see the litter, a couple of ropes and three bags of gear. He stopped what he was doing and pulled out the radio.

"Sierra Five, Sheep Face Command on EOC."

A pause.

"Sierra Five."

"Mark, I have a mini brake rack on my belt and all the prussiks we need for this end. We just need two low-stretch ropes for the main and belay lines. Stand by."

He looked up at Todd.

"For the sake of time, can we lower her on the climbing rope?"

"That's a lot of stretch and no belay with the added litter weight."

"It's only forty feet."

"Not without an attendant."

"Oh, that's right, forget it then." He turned to the radio. "Mark, we've got five separate anchor points. I'm using two for the main -- it's solid -- and three for the belay. The drop's only forty feet."

"Copy. That'll help on this end. We've got a foot team coming in for the carryout. They should be here in forty."

"Okay. The patient is harnessed and into the anchor. It'll be dicey getting her out of this crack so we'll be a while."

"Copy that. We'll see you in a bit."

The figures below were moving now, packs on back and carrying a litter full of rope and webbing. Three hundred yards to the chopper, Dusty figured, long enough for a traumatic bouncy ride for the patient, but short enough for a hasty team to hoof it up the mountain in quick-time. The chopper's engines shut down and the blades slowed. It was very quiet now that the storms had passed and the wind had dropped. There were even breaks in the cloud cover although the mist continued to rise from the valley floor.

He turned back to the anchors and hauled down on each one. Solid. He had been able to use camming devices or "cams." These were mechanical pieces that had the property of expanding outward as downward force was applied. Theoretically, the rock would give before the device slipped and so was optimum for an anchor expected to take a

lot of force. So the issue was less with the protection itself and more about ensuring solid rock and placing the device properly. And he had just proved he'd done that.

"Hey!"

Todd and Dusty both looked down. Mark was standing at the bottom with Nora, another technical team member.

"Dusty, I'm tying both ropes to the bottom of yours. We'll set up the litter here."

"The leg looks real bad," Dusty replied. "We're going to have to pull her out of this chimney and get her into the litter up here. We don't want to take a chance on her bouncing across the rock with that break."

"I see." He turned to the woman to his right. "You attend." He looked up again. "Is the rope free for her to ascend?"

Dusty looked at Todd.

"Two minutes."

"Fine."

Mark answered, "I'll tie both ropes to her."

Todd moved across to the anchor and tied himself in. He removed the rope from his harness and it dangled loosely. Moments later it tightened as Nora began working her way up on the ascenders. The devices allowed her to move quickly up the rope without having to take up valuable time rock climbing. The other two at the top began setting up the system for lowering: a brake rack to provide enough friction for a rescue load, and two sets of "prussik" setups for backup. The prussiks were eight millimeter cords wrapped around the main rope in a "prussik" knot. Tests had shown that they were the most effective in gripping and holding a rescue load under a shock force. As technical team members, Todd and Dusty had personal sets.

"Are we having fun, yet?" Nora pulled up alongside them and glanced into the chimney.

"So," she quipped as she began managing the low-stretch ropes attached to her harness, "is that the latest fashion in harnesses? Or didn't you want to loan her one of yours, Todd?"

Todd made a face and didn't answer. Dusty saved him.

"She was free soloing."

"Silly people," Nora clucked. "Admiring the pictures in Rock and Ice."

Nora clipped into the system with her carabiner, leaving the ascending devices free. A hail from below announced that the litter was attached to one of Nora's ropes. Todd made an end fast and he and Nora began hauling. Dusty leaned over.

"Mark!" he shouted. "Send up a couple of small pulleys, okay?"

"Yeah!"

These were tied to the other rope and hauled up. Dusty used the time to lengthen the patient's anchor by adding more webbing pieces, or "runners" to her system.

When the pulleys arrived, he clipped one into the patient's carabiner. Straddling the chimney above the patient, he pushed the upper jumar as high as it could go and clipped the other pulley into it. Then he secured the free end of one of the low-stretch ropes to the highest anchor and threaded it through both pulleys. The sound of metal against rock told him of the arrival of the litter.

De la Cruz fixed his food, Spanish *tapas* for tonight,

and settled down to the table. He was not married, and even his family ties were limited to some remote cousin in Gijon, in the Asturias region of Spain. His parents were both gone and his social life circled around a sports bar-and-grill on Sunday, where the people knew him only by sight and by first name.

He did not mind. His entertainment surrounded simulation computer games and books, and it was to a classic he turned to while eating, John Barleycorn by Jack London. He enjoyed obscure books that moralized. They made him think and such books motivated him in a way that morale seminars and pop-sociology books could never do. He took another bite, turned the page and kept reading.

The litter had been prepared at The Beast for quick and efficient patient packaging, with the spider webbing and the two low-stretch ropes properly attached. Todd ran the main line through the brake rack and tied it off as Nora rigged the belay line with the prussiks on the second anchor.

Dusty looked down.

"I'll be Control. Litter secure and ready?"

Nora nodded and positioned the litter under the patient.

"Okay. One, two, three go!"

Dusty hauled on the pulley system to lift the patient up, while Todd tried to guide her out of the crack. She moaned as the trashed right leg moved in directions it wasn't supposed to.

"Shit, you guys, take it easy!" Nora exclaimed.

"We are," Dusty grunted. "You ought to see Todd when he gets around most people."

The woman was hanging fairly freely at this point and Todd maneuvered her out of the crack to keep her from banging against the rock.

"Go, Todd, I can hold her here." Dusty pressed the rope against his rear end, sat against it in a body belay. "Before I lower her, make sure there's enough slack on her anchor line."

Todd checked and turned with a thumbs-up. He moved to the anchor to manage the mainline attached to the litter.

"Ready Main?" Dusty asked.

"Ready," Todd answered.

"Ready, Attendant?"

"Ready," Nora answered.

He lowered her into the horizontal litter. Nora laid her out as she settled gently until there was no weight on Dusty's line. They quickly secured her for lowering.

"Mark!"

"Yeah!"

"She's in. We'll package her and get ready to lower."

"Okay! The other crew is here. We're ready to take her down when you get her here!"

With Todd at the brake rack holding main and the prussiks backing up with the belay line, Dusty and Nora tied her in securely and tried to immobilize the leg. Dusty moved to manage the belay line and Nora clipped herself into the litter system.

"Ready Belay," Dusty said.

"Ready Main," replied Todd.

"Ready Attendant," followed Nora.

"Okay. Down slow."

The litter went slowly.

"Faster," called up Nora.

"Faster," repeated Dusty.

The rope finally slackened as those below grabbed the litter.

"Got her!" Mark called up.

"Okay!" Dusty replied. "Off main and off belay!"

He turned to Todd.

"We clear up top?" he asked.

"Ropes're hanging on the chains only," Todd answered.

"Cool. I guess we can clean things up now. Unless you're planning on falling."

"Not today. Could use a beer, though."

"I'll get it. My turn, I expect, since you got the last one."

"I won't argue."

"What about your appointment?"

"Just my brother. As long as I've got the story with all the gory details, he won't mind. Fred's sound good?"

"Yeah. Mexican sounds great right now."

They dropped the rescue ropes after ensuring that it was clear, and cleaned up the area until there was only the one climbing rope left hanging from the chains above. The evening had turned very cool and Dusty looked forward to his warm fleece packed in the bash pack lying by the trail below. The clouds were fading to the east as the sun dropped behind the Divide in the West.

Dusty rappelled first and Todd cleaned up the rest of the station after clipping into the climbing rope.

Ten minutes later, the helicopter lifted off with one patient and one attendant as Todd and Dusty watched from the climb's base. At the same time, Hector de la Cruz

closed the book, thought for a while, then turned in early.

3.

Everyone needs an intelligence service: especially the Company, which had a special interest in what the accountants recognized as "imaginative R&D." The government and other businesses less gently called it "industrial espionage."

What they needed in electronic intelligence (ELINT) they got as much from the Internet as from any other source. The more gifted of the Company scanned the Internet, hacked where they needed to, and looked for anomalies as well as information that related to competitors, industry, and even remotely impacting elements. Not the least, this included the governments - theirs and abroad - unrelated companies, uprisings, the black market and terrorist activities, and even remote changes in the weather. In short, they took note of anything that might, remotely or directly, impact the Company. One "R&D" imaginer thought he saw something interesting in one particular note from an intern in D.C. Silly, he thought, how open people were.

The intern in question worked for some congressman on a particularly sensitive oversight committee, it seemed; an area that approved certain "black" operations within the U.S. intelligence community. He typed. I'm good, he didn't quite gloat. He was better than good and the fact that he had broken into a most secure area proved it. The fact that he even recognized it as something "black" was even better.

The interesting "something" was a black operation, but didn't involve killing or infiltration: it wasn't even overseas. This fact piqued his curiosity and he typed some

more. Maybe he had stumbled on another NSA scandal? he wondered. That would be quite the coup: if he were back at the Post doing investigative journalism, maybe.

The words came up in the gibberish: CRUCIBLE and ASALIA. He had no idea what the first was. The second had to do with a known competitor who did some very, very low level work for the CIA. They knew of it, of course, but though there was smoke, there had been no fire and they had discarded it as unimportant analysis stuff. But this was a new flag.

He typed an I.M. on a secure link but still used code.

<Aviary implicated in crow population>Bud1234

"Crow" meant black. "Aviary" meant Asalia Graphics.

<Field research in place.>RAPTOR24

<Lab results to follow.>Bud1234

Springfield Community Hospital was typical of those found in most tourist towns. It dealt with the scrapes and bruises, broken and dislocated limbs, and occasional hypothermia and extreme trauma also typical of those places whose clientele were often displaced and naïve city folk, crazy adrenaline junkies or locals who just ran afoul of

nature. Dusty wondered how it was that they did not get four or five calls per week during the summer season with all he'd seen in the backcountry. There were folks who insisted on taking on Terrys Summit, 14,143 technical feet high, 12 miles total, in shorts, tennis shoes and a water bottle, and leaving the trailhead just in time to get to the summit during the storms. Although he "enjoyed" SAR, it was not because of the rather pathetic handholding elements inherent in the carryout of a whiner with a twisted ankle. Rather, it gave him practice in his skills in such a way that even saved lives on the rare occasion.

He cut through the greenspace that surrounded this part of the tourist town, dodging pine needles that encroached upon the trail. The late morning sun baked the needles and mixed the aroma with the wild yarrow that dotted the brown forest floor. It was uniquely Rocky Mountains. He stopped and closed his eyes for a moment, then sighed and walked on. The hospital was situated at the bottom of the hill he was on, surrounded by granite knolls.

He looked down at the hospital sign. It was reminiscent of a 1950's FBI movie in its all-aluminum façade, and completely out of context with the forest's organic demeanor. He proceeded down the hill, with somewhat reluctant steps, and considered things.

Did he really want to go in? He sighed.

The woman they'd rescued had a bit more wrong with her than they'd originally assessed. She'd apparently hit a spur off the chockstone and messed up some of her internal organs. No question they'd saved her life, her sudden fall notwithstanding. One week and two emergency surgeries later, he was standing in front of the stupid place, hesitating. He walked through the doors.

Kory Adams had asked for both him and Todd and her supervising doctor had emailed Dusty with the request. Todd couldn't make it -- probably embarrassed by his libido-charged comments, Dusty grinned, although he knew it was just his obnoxious sense of humor -- and it fell to him to "be nice." More handholding. It seemed that he still hadn't forgiven her for her arrogance and slight on the rock face, and he knew it was something he would have to work on.

The reception and nurses ignored him as they always did and he walked down the hall. She was expecting him, anyway, they'd said. A one-level institution, the hospital was doing its best to cope with the sneezes, sniffles and occasional car accident. That meant it actually had an ICU area and an emergency surgery section for stabilization purposes, mostly. Two surgeons were on staff for most emergency surgeries and with a long "loaner" list of docs in Denver and Fort Collins, the hospital was as well-equipped as any town of 3,000 could boast of unless time was an issue.

Room 121, said the doorway. Enough of this, Dusty thought, and put the best face he could on it. Given her original attitude, his lack of enthusiasm was understandable. She would probably ream him out for not forcing a harness on her. Another "victim," he thought, someone who could not accept personal responsibility, but he forced a smile as he pushed aside the curtain and walked into the room.

It was stuffy although the hospital was unique in that it allowed some opening of the windows to the outside breezes. He guessed it brightened things and lifted the spirits for better healing. The window was open now, but it didn't seem to be doing any good and it only contributed to

his unease and desire to escape, if that's what it could be called. He stood by the bathroom door and looked at her lying in the bed. She was trussed and tubed up. They'd apparently removed the tube from her throat very recently as the evidence of tape residue on her face showed.

She was still pretty, in spite of the bruise on her forehead and the wan look that post-trauma people always had even a whole week later. Maybe it was just that she looked pathetic, Dusty reflected, but he had seen her in her better days. He knocked on the doorpost of the bathroom. She stirred and opened the eye that was least swollen.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she groaned, but as empathetic as Dusty usually was, he'd seen too many people too beat up to let casual pathos work him over. He was right about the tube, for her voice had the rasp that came with an experience with tracheal intubation.

"Um, how's it going?" That was an equally pathetic opener, he thought. Her face wrinkled up around the bruises and he thought she was going to cry. He hardened his heart, however: past experience exempted him from feminine manipulation as he thought. He moved to the easy chair across the room. I want this over with, he thought.

"I guess I owe you some thanks," she said softly.

"That what we're here for."

"No. It's more than that. I owe you an apology, too."

His eyebrows lifted slightly in some surprise.

"I was arrogant," she admitted. "I wanted to look cool, to impress people, I guess."

"You're not the first," Dusty said. "We've all been there at one time or another. Our lessons just usually

aren't as dramatic as yours was. Some of the unlucky ones never have a chance to live out the lessons at all. And some never pay attention to them."

Her lip trembled and he thought she was going to cry again if it didn't hurt too much. Then she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, unconsciously mimicking the breeze that wafted through the light curtains. Dusty stood up awkwardly. That was quick and easier than he thought it'd be.

"I guess I'd better go," he said. "Do you need me to get you anything?"

"No. But I do have a question."

"Shoot."

"How did you get involved in Search and Rescue? Why do you do stuff like that?"

"Like what?"

She paused, then uttered, "You didn't even know me."

Except for the total innocence with which the question was asked, Dusty might have been offended.

"That's supposed to make some sort of difference?" he said defensively.

Her expression fell.

"If you weren't Jesus Christ, it does," she started.

"That wasn't necessary," he interrupted. Now he was offended, somewhat unreasonably, he knew, but he couldn't help himself.

She wasn't sure what to make of that comment. It hung in the air for a moment. He hated himself for the moment. He suddenly understood as if for the first time that one person's ethos wasn't necessarily another's. He had naively assumed that anyone would want to help anyone else at any given time. Especially if there was no personal cost to

them.

Dusty, who could never stand silence for more than a few seconds, suddenly said, "Maybe it's a way for me to . . . pay back, I guess."

She smiled.

"There's a story behind that, isn't there?"

Dusty grinned. The ice shattered.

"Well, let me tell you."

He sat back down.

The man stood in the alley, smoking nervously and watching the building across the street. The "Asalia Graphics" sign actually swung in the westerly wind that flowed down from the Front Range. He laughed inside. How American Western, he thought. Where's Clint Eastwood and tumbleweeds? The excuse for a restaurant he worked at was actually clapboard from a forgotten time just to add to the ruse. This was the dullest surveillance he'd ever done but it was necessary. The people he worked for paid him well. As if he'd had a choice. He stepped on the smoldering butt and turned to the door.

"Hey Gonzalez! Get your butt in gear!"

Su madre, he thought. It was one more galling thing about this job, but the abuse ensured a good cover if nothing else. It was not that he was any less passionate about the money than his brothers. It was just that he was cold and methodical and therefore enjoyed this kind of work far more than those who did more risky, if more glamorous, work. He was not interested in spending time as the government's guest in a place where the big guys called you "honey."

They knew who Asalia's manager really was, of course, at least generally speaking. They knew that a government agency of some intelligence-gathering vocation owned Asalia Graphics. They knew it was R&D. They also knew that there was something called CRUCIBLE made in that building that was somehow vital to Company interests. What it did, they had no idea but they did know they must get hold of it. All's fair, as they say, he thought. He'd found that true in love and war, both.

The "real estate" agent had done his surveillance quickly and thoroughly, and "Gonzales" had secured this job in response to both "human" or live intelligence sources. More to the Company's concern, they knew about the manager's house, his car and his plane. The house was wired securely and they didn't dare break cover by setting off the alarm for any reason. It was as good a way to shout, "We know!" as they could think of.

There was no reason for violence or to make any kind of move until they found what it was that he was so valuable for. To destroy wantonly was worth something only in certain moments and to possibly destroy the project that was somewhere would be the stupidest thing they could do. Stupidity was the last thing he could be accused of, much less his bosses.

A week in Houston for some "o'l" company, ("oil" to the rest of us non-Texans, he thought). He was driving up I-25 on the way home. It was a dry spell, and the clouds held little rain but a lot of virga hanging like beards from the flat bottomed cumuli. The plains were browner than usual, he noticed, before thinking about the rest of his

trip.

There was semi-distant family in Houston and he took advantage of the business trip to visit. Then a flight from there to KC to do some more handholding -- Dusty was distantly annoyed that he did as much in his consultation as he did in SAR -- and a side trip to a small food services company in Denver, of all places, and he drove home. It wasn't that he didn't like to travel. He liked exploring the world. He just liked it when he had time to explore and not just to get to places where he would be sitting in a bored room. No pun intended, he thought.

His uncle and aunt in Houston did their best to make him feel at home, but he would have appreciated it better had they not insisted on a pinochle party. Of course, there had to be a "fourth," and his cousin was "conveniently" out on a date with his girlfriend. So they came up with a fourth who just "happened" to be female, unattached and about Dusty's age. It was a disaster. They had been obviously "set up," and each was embarrassed for the other, ironically enough.

To make matters worse, Aunt and Uncle ignored the silent pleading of the two single adults and partnered with each other. They lost dramatically and after the first game, Dusty and the girl were ready to get out of there on any pretext. Setup dates were of such a nature as to discourage the very thing it was designed to do, he reflected.

KC was normal handholding, a client who had kind of implemented Dusty's recommendations but had not the patience to let things grow at their own paces. The client decided to then "fix" things on his own initiative, to make results happen sooner and in doing so had almost driven his

business into the ground. Dusty reassured him, fixed things as best he could and hopped on the flight to Denver. All in a day's work, he grinned. He didn't charge KC for anything beyond expenses but the client was so grateful that he scraped up an honorarium from his personal money. Good for him, Dusty thought, shows some integrity. Most people would have just wished him a good life and good riddance even if they were inclined to listen to the advice.

He skirted past the Fort Collins exits without a second glance and after another hour miles, turned west. The road dwindled to two lanes and climbed into the desert hills. The desert pinions had lost their verdancy as well, and the once-vivid color settled into the gray-green of late summer.

He cracked his neck on the rare Midwestern-flat, straight stretch of road and thought about Kory. Nice girl under that hard exterior, he thought, but probably too raw, even if he were ready to get into another relationship. Pretty, in her way, but she seemed a bit too aware of it one way or the other. She obviously didn't view herself as a beauty queen, although she probably could at least compete, if not win. Neither was she so feminist that she resented the not-infrequent looks from men. It seemed to him that she climbed and exercised to downplay her looks.

Dusty grunted. That was definitely a point in her favor, he thought. Her athleticism made her appreciate her body without glorifying it. Was that right? He shook his head. She was too complicated.

And too much hassle. He had a hard time, sometimes, dealing with anybody, much less women and the thought of dealing once again with the female psyche did nothing to encourage such a relationship. He could deal with her as a

friend and past experience showed him that a relationship could remain platonic and not creep into the realm of sex, not to mention romance.

Wasn't that bass-ackward? he grinned. The TV shows he infrequently watched showed everything opposite of what he was raised to believe. First, a couple meets. That was normal -- and necessary. Then sex, then love, then marriage, and if you were lucky, a relationship grew before the kid-thing happened. Not necessarily in that order.

The pinions gave way to ponderosa pines, and the cliffs rose on either side of the road. He was driving up the long river to the valley where Springfield was located, winding through the steep canyons where the terrain held attraction for only Dahl's sheep and human climbers. Pretty soon the cliffs were the only things around, a hostile environment to the more sensitive of flora. An apt description of the relationships in his life, he supposed. A lot of barrenness and he couldn't expect much to grow on that rock.

Every once in a while, though, it seemed a bloom rose inexplicably out of a crack, the more poignant in its contrast.

* * *

Kory was pretty "anti-man" at this point of her life, at least regarding a relationship, and certainly no less than Dusty. But he intrigued her. While she wasn't a stereotypical nature girl who would jump into bed with any guy who stirred her hormones, she'd had her flings from time to time. Maybe it was that dichotomy that made her

look on Dusty as somewhat of a challenge.

She turned in the hospital bed and groaned. The pain wasn't so much stabbing anymore but persistent aches that discouraged movement. She knew she was stiffening up. She also knew that she was about to be discharged for that lovely period of agony known as physical therapy.

She'd liked what he'd told her about his SAR interest and why he was involved. While attempting a less-climbed route in the Grand Tetons, he was stranded in an unusually bad blizzard. They had enough food for the obligatory day-and-a-half of climbing plus emergencies, but didn't expect to be stuck on the side of the cliff for three days. It seemed storm after storm just hammered at them and while precarious, their little crack was comparably -- "comparably" being the key word -- warm and dry, if not particularly safe.

When the weather finally cleared, they were out of food, almost out of water (in spite of the fact that storms tend to bring a decent supply of it; it was mostly of the frozen kind) and getting somewhat hypothermic. A chopper hovered over them and a technical team lowered ropes with a couple of attendants. Dusty was able to rap to the bottom, but his partner was too far gone to trust his rope skills and had to be lowered in a litter. Both survived, although his partner lost a couple of toes to frostbite.

When a thankful Dusty returned to Colorado, he immediately contacted the sheriff and signed on. It was the least he could do, he told them, and he had skills that, with a little training, could help in the same way he had been helped. And now it was Kory's turn.

She could do it, too, she thought. From what he'd told her, there would be a weeklong intensive work each in rope

and high angle technique, patient packaging and standard search techniques. She also needed to spend another week or so in a WFR (pronounced "woofer") course so that she was able to at least assist an EMT in medical work with a Wilderness First Responder card. Ideally, she should have been a nurse or EMT, but she didn't have, and had no interest in getting those skills. Then, they would practice, practice and practice again. Oh, and did he mention "practice?"

She did recognize that a lot of her interest in Dusty was based on her thankfulness and the way he didn't seem to condemn her out of hand. She had been embarrassed by her actions on the rock and understood that the experience really was a good thing, however physically painful. She would have to deal with that humiliation in time. But at least he seemed to have understanding even if no one else did. And she supposed he was right: everybody got a severe lesson from time to time. The important thing was to learn from it. And she was determined to.

The door opened.

"Good, you're awake." The sixty-something nurse popped her head in. "Ready for our pills?"

"Our" pills? Kory thought. The nurse was nice enough, and although firm, matriarchy couched in a mildly cloying grandmotherly demeanor. She came to the bed and started doling out the latest installment of drugs.

"P-T starts tomorrow morning. I want you all nice and rested before they start. It can be tough in this early phase."

Kory nodded. The nurse smiled, privately glad to see resolve, for a change, in one of her patients.

"We can still transfer you to a Denver hospital," the

nurse continued. "They have better P-T facilities and you can take it a bit more leisurely. We can check on the insurance, if you want."

"No," Kory said, somewhat abruptly. "I live here and I'd just as soon do it quick and dirty and get it over with."

"Well, they won't be too hard on you to begin with. You can't do anything yet with your injuries beyond just getting started. But I live here, too, and I understand."

No, you don't, Kory thought. It goes way beyond that. But I'll get better in record time. You can count on that. I want out of here and not just transferred, but back to my home and ready to go back to climbing.

4.

The CSAR lunch meeting had gone better than he thought as he sat at a table in the back of the hotel boardroom. He felt for her. Nobody liked to be taught a lesson in humility and it must have taken a lot for Kory to stand up in front of CSAR, thank them, and admit she'd goofed. Months, now, after her accident, she walked back to him confidently, straining to hide the limp she still had and minimizing the use of the cane she leaned upon. She sat down. Dusty noticed beads of perspiration on her forehead, otherwise inexplicable in the dry processed A/C.

"Much pride, this young Jedi," Dusty thought again. She was a member now. She'd work support -- read "official getter of coffee and radio gal" -- until she healed and was able to get some tech training under her belt. He congratulated her and they both silently turned to the dessert that had been laid out during her talk.

He remembered his lesson. Cold nights after bad ice climbing tend to impart humility to the human soul. As he'd said, it remained for the person to take the lesson to heart. Too many people did not, and some died because of it. Hers had been harsher than most and she had survived.

They did not speak beyond politeness and left the hotel in his car. He drove her home, and then headed up to his own cabin a few miles away.

Dusty pulled the jeep into the driveway. The good news about his job was that he could pick his own times to work. The bad news was that it required a lot of discipline and in the Colorado Rockies it was too easy to take off the afternoon for climbing and other things. He still worked

for the enjoyment. He had money from his dead parents, but resented the label of "trust fund baby" some of the uninitiated might hang on him. Working also allowed him to do some good beside SAR. He offered his consultation services at a very minimum rate. Churches, parachurches, social services and other non-profits did well by his knowledge and the only reason he charged actual money was to avoid offending some people and to hold others accountable.

The house was empty in that mid-afternoon stretch when the high altitude sun beat through the tall windows and the tick of the clock accented the permeating silence. He heard the buzz of a fly high up on the window: out of reach, of course. It seemed to make the silence deeper. The place smelled of the mixed woods of the furniture and the construction. He opened the windows and the sun flashed in and out as clouds moved across the sky. The afternoon showers would start soon and draw off the heat. It was warm for September.

He made coffee and set his laptop on the kitchen counter. Email was innocuous and he called up a spreadsheet to do some prep work.

<yo' bro>

An Instant Messenger flashed on the screen. It was from "MDwannabee:" ironically, his brother who had left the West for his Ph.D. He had been with County SAR and the indoor-focused lifestyle he presently led in the Midwest was a bit less exciting and grated on him. Dusty typed.

<what's up?>

<have any "fun" lately? ☺ >

By "fun," of course, he meant a SAR operation. He knew about Kory, but that had been almost a year ago now.

<not really. Pretty quiet. Had an INS on Monday.>

<some wetback?>

<That's not PC anymore. No. *INS* interfering with natural selection. Some fourteen-year-old kid scrambled up a cliff in the 'Park, in spite of the signs to stay off. he spent the night.>

<good. Needed a lesson. I take it he survived>

<yeah. Good exercise for us, though>

<you bored?>

<not bad. You? How's the doctor?>

<can't wait 'til it's over. I'm outta here in a year.
groan>

Dusty grinned and typed back.

<yeah, well I took yesterday off, drove down to Longs, and climbed zuni's chimney with jim>

<life sucks, don't it! I'm crying 4 u Lol >

<I'll suffer with it lol >

<so when are you going to take her out?>

<who?>

<don't gimme that: that cute gal you pulled off blue whale last year. even if she's up and running, she probably still needs help getting around ;-)>

<whatever. Ain't gonna happen>

<you need a climbing partner who's prettier than todd.>

<how would you know? You got married and two kids and you ain't seen a rock in months>

<now fight fair, that's not quite true.>

<forty feet in Columbiana county doesn't count.>

<hey, I'll be out there in the summer, as always.>

<do that. You got a place, you know>

<I know. Count on it. Gotta go. Class.>

<hang in there>

His brother signed off. Dusty sighed. His own time

back East made him feel for his brother's situation. Well.
Back to work.

He tapped, but it wasn't at the keyboard. Bud1234's fingers drummed in frustration on the mahogany desktop as he leaned back into the ergonomic chair. It had taken months, months, to get the miniscule information they had and it hadn't gotten anywhere except that CRUCIBLE was software of gargantuan size. That had been difficult to pick up in itself, but the sources they'd squeezed had absolutely no idea what it was. That meant it was was really black. He sat up and wearily typed into the computer for the umpteenth time:

- I. What is CRUCIBLE?
 - a. DVD
 - i. DVD is a cover?
 - ii. Massive information requiring a DVD?
 - b. ~~Detrimental????~~ Of interest to the Company (unconfirmed, but fairly confident)
 - i. New product? Then why so hushhush? Get the jump on the competition?
 1. Feds? Maybe under contract. ~~A branch~~
 - ii. Intelligence? (maybe)
 - iii. Virus? (why?)
 - iv. Program (what for? Purpose? NSA????)
 - v. Information only? (possible see iv.)
 - vi. Valuable
 1. Huge contract?

2. Homeland Security?

vii. ????

II. Who?

- a. MANO -- Firm admin, Christian Arab, b. Spain, March 5, 1972, etc., etc.
- b. Role? Computer geek (????) but too high up to really do programming

III. Where?

- a. AG certainly
- b. Copies?
- c. How secure is it?

And the cursor sat in its spot, blinking infuriatingly once again. He leaned back. Where? That was the question.

It must be on his person or back at the office, that oh-so-very-secure office they could not break into, legitimately or not. They had tried plenty of times, even cold-calling the place for "a job." The polite, but firm, negatives they had received confirmed the nature of the place, although they hadn't had any doubts. He smiled in recollection of his Navy days as memories of submarine hunting surfaced: if you can't find where it is, look for the hole where it "isn't."

They couldn't get near his car and the house was too secure to have any hope of encroachment, much less invasion. They didn't want to destroy the man: they wanted the project he was working on. They could poison him, but there would be no guarantee that he would have it on him when he croaked and they would never find it with cops and almost certainly even government agents crawling all over the place. CIA? He shrugged. Now there's an interesting thought. Homeland Security, DIA, NSA, FBI and whatever

acronym you wanted to assemble. One of them. It was pretty obviously government contract. He couldn't prove it, but he'd bet his soul, if he had one.

If they couldn't steal it, maybe they could "convince" him to cooperate.... No. His disappearance or even death -- except by incontrovertible accident -- would be a major heads up to his employer (whomever it was) and the government. The DVD information, whatever it was, would be compromised. Then it would be pretty much worthless to them. They only had one chance.

They couldn't screw this up. The real stuff would be forever inaccessible at that point. Ideally, they needed a way to get the project without its ever being missed, but they needed a copy of some sort in any case.

Spring the following year was an interesting time for Dusty, if somewhat awkward. Kory became clearly attracted to him and although he climbed with her from time to time -- contrary to his assertions to his brother -- he kept her at a distance. She didn't seem to mind. If she was interested in him beyond the Florence Nightingale Syndrome (he supposed that applied in a roundabout way), she had the patience of a saint and the determination of a bulldog.

It was more interesting to watch her during the high angle training. He and Todd were not amiss in their assessment of inordinate pride. She had all that and more, and to be in on a team practice where there was no recognition for the individual exercised her restraint to the breaking point. To it, but not beyond it, he thought and hoped.

On the first day out, they drove to the meeting place,

a trailhead leading to a high promontory 300 feet above the valley floor. It was not difficult, and angled only about forty five degrees. The exercise was for a low-angle rescue, designed to introduce new members to elements of raising and lowering, patient packaging and rigging in such an environment that, were anything unusual to happen, consequences would be injurious only, not deadly.

The team was especially attentive to her in one significant way. Normally, everyone carried a fair amount of team gear as well as their personal stuff. This included extra ropes, twelve millimeter thick, 300 foot low-stretch rope designed for carrying heavy rescue loads, the litter and packaging gear, protection cams, devices and webbing for secure anchoring, and pulleys and other specialized gear for raising and lowering patients and attendants. It could weigh a lot and in deference to Kory's healing body the team manipulated things so she would take the lightest gear while others shouldered heavier equipment.

She was not blind and this, of course, grated on her. Although not a "man-hater," she was still very much a feminist and had the "anything you can do, I can do better" philosophy many of that sort were known for. That attitude rose to the surface as loads were divied out and she was persistently skipped over. She looked in disgust at the comparably light pack she was left with. Although the team had tried to be nonchalant, it was clear they had sorted gear with her in mind.

As the rest started up the trail toward the training site, Dusty took her aside.

"Don't be stupid," he said.

"What?" Her body leaned back and she actually crossed her arms. He smiled inside.

"This," he said, "is a team effort. A team effort, you get it?"

"Yeah. I know. So?"

"So, attitudes are not welcome."

She relaxed a little as she consciously tried to assimilate the facts.

"What do you mean?"

"Here, the objective is the goal. You do whatever it is that you have to do to get the objective done. If it means you do nothing but grunt at the end of the line, you do it. If it means you're not needed for anything but grabbing water or tearing down or carting out garbage: you do it. The objective is the goal. Period."

She listened, impatiently. He continued.

"That also means lifting up a member who is behind, or hurting or whatever. The best thing about this particular team is that we've had highly technical trainings for the last ten years and not once -- not once -- did we have any kind of injury. Once we had a member who came on a training exercise with a GI bug of some sort. Had the trots all the way up Snowy Peak and halfway up the couloir. We bailed on the exercise because of lightning and without orders, two members tagged him all the way down. A good thing, too, because he almost lost consciousness several times on the trail and actually collapsed at the cars. An EMT had to string up a saline IV to re-hydrate him."

It was silent for a moment.

"We didn't achieve the goal that time, but the team sacrificed a meaningless goal to support a team member."

It was time for the knockout punch.

"If it's anything to your pride, there's a second reason besides teamwork."

"What's that?"

"Your bones are still knitting together. They're still at eighty-five percent. The doctor signed off on you, but I'll bet only with qualifications, didn't he? Throw all the weight you wanted to on it and how long would it last if you stepped wrong up there? How much help will you end up being if your leg snaps and we have to interrupt an important training to haul you back down? They'd do it -- gladly -- but that's not the point."

Then she relaxed a bit more.

"Okay," she said. "I was out of line. Look, Dusty, I'm learning. I've been solo so long, this team thing is weird to me."

"I know. That's why I'm telling you now. Now, let's head up the hill."

Several months passed and concern in the Company built. They had no idea if the software had left the AG office, although nothing had come through indicating otherwise. MANO did not leave the area and he did not send anything off, either by courier or other conventional methods. If CRUCIBLE -- whatever it was -- needed a DVD, then they thought it was too big for even fast internet, much less secure. They still waited for that one in any case, but apparently It was too sensitive to even consider sending it over phone lines, cell or even satellite no matter how encrypted.

Wow, R&D man thought, that was really paranoid. He smiled: that said government if nothing else did.

Six months after the initial intelligence, word came from the airport. There was a source who worked in various areas, gifted at surveillance and too valuable to waste on any overt assignment. The Company had learned that more damage could be done if one acted on intelligence and used a certain amount of patience. It was in this that they were more dangerous to their competition.

Their agent said that MANO had filed a flight plan for Salt Lake City. It seemed to be for vacation, but she had her suspicions.

Salt Lake City, he thought. Why there? The Internet beckoned as it did and as he hacked his way through various amenities in the Salt Lake area, he found one or two references to MANO as a . . . client? He was amused. The mark was fairly anal-retentive and he planned things extensively. Good for him. Good for us. One of the amenities was for a foursome at a medium-priced golf club dated several days after the flight plan. So, pleasure for sure, he thought. He frowned. Surveillance would be a royal pain in the ass.

He went back to the report from their airport source. Why did she think it was more? The report was, unfortunately, mostly word-of-mouth -- they could not trust just the written word for obvious reasons -- and things could be literally lost in the translation. He referenced the typescript.

RED FLAG SBJCT, MANO, FILED FLT PLAN SLC OUT OF
DEN, 062210. VAC TION? STR NGE PLCE. FIND
RSRVTNS. CIA CNTCTS LOCAT ? NO FRTHR INFO.

CIA? Why CIA? Not for the first time, he wished he

could debrief their source in person. He would never be able to directly crack the government or Firm computers: he knew that. But he could find out the locations of significant contacts for code name MANO. If there were something to this, they would have to move quickly.

The aspen leaves began turning colors as they did in the beginning of September. Cool nights and warm days alternately froze and baked the duff under the trees, producing an aroma unique to the high country autumn. Dusty breathed it in. He and Kory were hiking in the backcountry on their way to some remote cliff nobody had ever heard of. Only two pitches, it was some sort of extrusion of granite formed when the earth made the Rockies. Probably a lot of rotten rock, he thought, but that made it part of the challenge. He stepped again, shifting the pack as he did so to ride better on his hips.

Kory limped slightly, so slightly that only people who knew her recent history picked up on it. Her obsessive application to P-T paid off. The natural strength in the muscles in her legs especially made up for the healing bone and supported it well. She could carry a decent amount of weight and habitually carried her "bash" pack on any trip, even a day hike of only a couple hours.

A Search-and-Rescue bash pack basically contained anything that a member might need on an overnight, or even multiple night, search or rescue in the mountains, including food, water and filters, layers and emergency gear. The pack was the perfect balance between being light and being effective, and Dusty was confident of survival if

not comfort in the event of bad weather, injury or, God forbid, they lost their way. That was unthinkable, not to mention embarrassing, and Dusty would seriously consider quitting SAR were it to happen. He might even move out of state. Kory also brought her helmet this time. Even "pre-injury," she was not foolish enough to climb on rotten rock without some "brain bucket."

Dusty stopped at the base of the extrusion and looked up. The rock sloped up as a fin poking up out of the grassy hillside. The grass gave the impression that there was little height concern, but Dusty could see that the deceptive fin was more vertical and the grass actually ran almost as vertically as the cliff itself. Either two pitches or one long one: he really wouldn't know until he climbed it. It might even be a two-rope top-rope. That would be convenient in case his nieces came out to visit. A top-rope had an anchor at the top through which a rope was threaded. The belayer and climber both stood at the bottom and the belayer pulled the rope through the anchor carabiners as the climber moved up. It was ideal for working with beginners or practicing on climbs too advanced for the climber to lead. He got the rope out: Kory had the protection.

"Your lead or mine?" Kory asked.

"Depends on the meter," he answered.

"Meter?"

"Music term. I'm better dancing the jitter-bug than waltzes."

"Ha-ha-ha." She was clearly getting used to his bad puns.

"You can do it if you want. I'll have the helmet on, that's for sure."

"Thanks a lot."

"No prob."

She'd gotten about fifty feet up when she knocked off the first and only piece. It was decent sized, about the size of a basketball. Immediately she screamed the obligatory "ROCKROCKROCK!" and Dusty did the obligatory getting out of the way, and quickly. The rock bounced off the bottom ledge and glanced off his helmet. Technically it wasn't that big a deal. He had a headache for a couple of minutes, but that was it.

They had known what they were getting into by trying an unclimbed rock, but it was enough to freak her out. She put in a solid anchor for him, even though she was still a hundred feet from the expected belay point and signaled him to lower her.

He took her weight and she leaned back, perpendicular against the rough granite. He lowered her and she walked backwards down the slope. He could tell she was nervous - not about his belay, he thought - but things came to a head as she kicked off a couple of pebbles, which came raining down. Her legs buckled and her foot slipped off the near-vertical face. She narrowly missed having her face smack against the rock before she got her hands up and fended off. She twisted around as she bounced away, then time stopped as she tried to get her composure. He could hear her breathing deeply from where he was. Somehow she managed to make it the rest of the way down.

At the bottom she was trembling and still breathing far more heavily than she should have been after just being lowered. Dusty noticed her hands shook as she untied and she was muttering, nonstop.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry," she sputtered. "I can't

believe I hit you. I almost killed you."

"Is this pride speaking or are you serious?" He realized suddenly what a cruel thing it was to say. It just came out, probably as a result of all the inane things he had been thinking, on and off, for the last year, even if they had some basis in fact.

She slapped him, hard. He stared at her. Notwithstanding movie culture, a slap hurts, but good, and especially when there is both the passion and athleticism of a woman behind the slap. She stared back and suddenly realized that she had hurt him, in yet another way, and tears began to well up.

Then she embraced him, sobbing. Dusty didn't know what to do. He didn't hold her and he was in no danger of kissing her, thank God. He knew the moment -- he'd seen it before -- and wouldn't succumb to the physical and emotional temptations that were right in front of him. He tentatively put his hands on her bare shoulders and left them there, hoping she would not read into them that which was not there. And yet, he hoped that she would read it as an acceptance of both apologies, spoken and unspoken.

There was silence, except for the afternoon zephyr humming through the pines around them. Very awkward, all of a sudden.

"You bastard." The words were low as he realized she'd suddenly stopped gripping him. "You are the coldest person I ever knew."

She pushed him away suddenly, and he let her. Her demeanor was once again defensive, and the shields were up, impenetrable. Cold, huh, Dusty thought. There's the pot calling it.

"Not that it matters now, but I was joking," he said.

He suddenly understood it was the second stupidest thing he'd said that afternoon. He should just learn when to shut up. It wasn't the first time his "honesty," if that's what one wanted to call it, was greater than his tact or wisdom. The tongue truly was the most untameable of all God's creatures, he thought.

"Helluva way to joke," she replied, reaching down to untie her climbing shoes. Her tone distinctly discouraged more conversation, reflecting the more important point of his body language. Or lack thereof, apparently.

"You don't know me as well as you think you do," Dusty answered. He was about to say that it was his nature - some might call it bad habit - to lighten tension by joking, but then figured it was a waste of time.

He wasn't about to try a first ascent with a pissed off belayer, so he didn't try to stop her from putting her gear away. The piece she had lowered off of was only thirty easy feet up and she had put enough protection for self belay to be an option. He turned from her and tied the two ends of the climbing rope off. She didn't seem to notice until she sat down to change her climbing shoes into her boots, and saw him tying his prussic into the double line.

This only made her angrier: his reluctance to use her as a belayer was clear and she took it personally. She packed her gear and left, without looking back to see how he was doing. Dusty was disappointed: you never leave a partner in the backcountry and she was still apparently working on the teamwork concept, or at least he hoped so.

He painstakingly retrieved her gear from the rock face and prepared to pack and leave. He hoped he had instilled enough team ethic in her to override her obvious and immediate distaste for him. It would be too bad if the SAR

team suffered because of it.

A radio-controlled event was the best way to do it. Disable the aircraft, but don't blow it up. Bring it down in an area controlled by them. In America, that could only mean an inaccessible place, not too hard to find on the route from Denver to Salt Lake over the Rockies.

Bud1234 mused. It could be a detonator. They may have been able to manipulate a fly-by-wire computer system, but the bastard's de Haviland Beaver was too archaic for that to even be a consideration. Pinpointing a crash site would be tricky this way and timing would have to be perfect. Fortunately, this particular plane could not go very high and so the glide path would be short: less variation in direction and distance. The trick was to send a reliable person or persons there with a remote controlled detonator, with the skills in the backcountry to access the crash site, no matter where it was.

Maybe a Stinger? he mused. As low as the plane went it would be a piece of cake. But then they would need additional agents in place to fire the missile and the effects were uncontrollable. Even the most incompetent investigator would know it was not an accident. Retrieving the disk without anyone knowing it was the highest objective. A small disabling detonator, then, was really the only option.

But what about airport security? Tight enough after 9/11, it could kill the best-laid plans. Still, it was an option, albeit one that needed to be done most carefully. Contrary to terrorist groups, they did not want credit for

their work, for they wished to remain the Unknown Shadow. The competition might know, but if so, it would only make them intimidated.

He knew whom to call. While he could handle this end - - he hoped -- he needed an experienced mountaineer who could retrieve the disk. He knew someone who lived very near the suspected flight path. He grinned as he typed in a new code name. HERMIT -- the title reflected the time this one spent in the wilderness. He could pick other members to cover other areas, but HERMIT would coordinate the search if necessary and be much less noticed.

By gaining control of the aircraft and bringing it down where they needed, they could cover up or at least minimize the theft of the DVD and hopefully no one would know where it had gone. Or at least, that they had it. Then they would be one notch above the competition.

He looked at his online map of the flight path. Certainly, there was a way, he mused. What way would ensure retrieval of a plane...accident...? Suddenly he knew.

He dialed his cell.

"Yes?"

"Is Jeff there?"

"Did you say Jess?"

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

"It happens at times."

He took a breath.

"I have an idea." He explained for a minute. The cold voice at the other end remained silent until he had finished.

"This help is to be trusted?"

"A mercenary, ex-military. There'll be a price, of course."

"How much?"

"No more than we can afford. They'll cooperate."

The R&D Imaginer leaned back in his office chair as he spoke and smiled. Done deal.

"Hello?" There was a pause, then a series of clicks as the computer engaged on the other end. The listener was about to hang up when the next words froze the action.

"Hi, I'm Jeff, from your local paper." It was a recorded voice, the type that annoys diners throughout the country every evening.

HERMIT turned pale. Absolutely pale.

The voice continued.

"We have a great deal on want ads this week."

Dusty was amused. He read the "Personals" part of the classifieds as part of the routine: he devoured every bit of the paper. He didn't read the personals for the obvious reason, but got more humor out of it than the somewhat mediocre "funnies" that the small-town paper could afford. By the time he got past the "Love-Lorne Lady" and "Hound Dog Harry," he felt satisfactorily entertained, although probably not in the way the publisher or the submitters originally intended. Did "WWF" mean "World Wrestling Female?" he thought and laughed.

Another reader did not think it so laughable. HERMIT dropped the paper on the kitchen table and sighed. The main

information came electronically or even a series of dropoffs or brush passes: old but effective techniques anyone could learn in a Clancy or LeCarré novel. It worked, even in industrial espionage and was very effective for large, detailed information stored in very small flash drives. According to the juxtaposition of the same two personals that had so highly entertained Dusty, HERMIT was log in to a very, very secure, little-used email account. A job, the new employee grouched, I thought I was done with it. How did they find me?

Small and very cleverly designed, a mere blasting cap "conveniently" lost from a construction site made up part of it. Small and insignificant, it easily slipped into the carcass of a large Sharpie marker and its carrier brought it onto the airline grounds. The other part, the radio receiver, was smuggled inside an iPhone case that mimicked the real one the courier habitually wore.

The courier in question was a mechanic who seemed to have had a fourteen-year history with the flight company. The security manager looked up.

"Transferred from Houston, eh?"

She nodded silently.

"One moment."

He turned to make a phone call, literally, to Houston. The fraternity of airports, while not quite espionage-secure, was actually tighter in its informality than many so-called secure areas of other parts of the government. An anomaly popped up very quickly among the workers within the

system and a phone call should take care of any attempt to encroach upon security, TSA or no TSA.

However, impeccable credentials ensured her to be above consideration as far as the security personnel were concerned. The best operatives always were, she thought smugly. She didn't rely on that alone, but concentrated on the entry points where only men monitored security. Her gender helped minimize even obligatory searches: women had no qualms about searching more intimately. Sexual harassment issues made men paranoid and so she did everything she could to play the easily offended woman. She obviously didn't look like a professional anything, much less an espionage professional. She smiled to herself as the man turned back.

"I'll send someone with you."

She was not displeased. When the younger guard came, he was all business. He would watch closely, his supervisor said, but she could understand how tight security had to be. She nodded knowingly.

The utility cart motored to the airplane in question. Chocked with a myriad of other planes, the more glamorous and new aircraft stuck out. She looked at a clipboard and pointedly examined the identification numbers on the aircraft tails. She found one and half an hour later had completed a maintenance check, including fluid levels, instrument readout, engine assessment and other things. She went back to the clipboard and found the next assignment. No observer would have thought her doing anything other than ordered maintenance for customers.

Several hours later, she reached the Beaver. This one was not on the "official" list, but she broke into the classic aircraft as easily as if it were. She started the

engine, checked the fluids and assembled the device she had brought. The tests she ran were not all on the aircraft and the odd one out ensured that the device worked as promised. She put it in a strategic place, which disabled the engine when activated by a specific radio, cell or satellite signal, collected her gear and went on to the seventh airplane on the list, her main job done.

The guard watched on, oblivious.

* * *

MANO did not succumb to airlines, first class though he may have been entitled to. Neither did he hire a private jet, which was a "flag" all by itself to those who cared. He was supposed to be merely the owner of a shop in the ma-and-pa class, after all. As the security risks they were, he did not like them and the less other people knew about anything, the fewer problems he would encounter.

Besides, he enjoyed flying. A licensed pilot and mechanic, no one but his staff and the Director knew that he didn't really own Asalia Graphics.

The final version DVD burned in his pocket. The techs had added that necessary of disguises -- the cover to the Two Towers motion picture -- and no one would have a clue that he was on any trip beside his occasional pleasure flight over the Rockies. He felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension, all mixed together in that nervousness that accompanies the end of a major project.

He had picked up the disk with its cover and literally slept with it under his pillow, right next to the Glock automatic pistol he habitually kept there. The field teams had "generously" wired the house against intruders and gave

him no reason to believe his sleep would be interrupted for any sinister reason. He woke refreshed in the morning. Breakfast -- a spicy omelet of his own design accompanied by a particularly greasy chorizo the local deli excelled at -- went down with coffee and he closed up the house for what was actually not a "cover." A real vacation beckoned and he looked very much forward to it.

He turned off I-Seventy onto what the more earthy of the local taxi drivers called Penas Street. He snorted. Few locals blamed them. As the main drag to the airport, Peña Avenue was to many the apex of arrogance in the bureaucrat of the same name.

* * *

The man stretched under the fifty-pound load and shifted the weight riding on his hips. His back snapped out the cricks as he braced against the timberline wind. It was early enough in the season that it wore the remnants of summer storms, but prophesied the snowy winter to come. He debated layering down yet one more fleece but decided against it, as the intense sun of the high altitudes kept disappearing. Very warm in the sun, but very cold in the shade.

He admitted to himself that he wasn't really used to it. Gym work didn't really cut backcountry work, but he enjoyed it nonetheless and came out any chance he had. It wasn't so bad until you got to the steeper angles. Then your gluteus maximus gave you pains, even if you were decently in shape. It was worse than usual this time. Something to do with the design of his new pack, he figured, but he hadn't gotten around to getting a better

fit and his constant adjusting didn't seem to be doing any good.

He was just cresting the pass over the Continental Divide, when he stopped for lunch. He was still a couple of miles from the approaching legitimate timberline. He loved it at this altitude, with the trees struggling for survival at the limit of life. The firs became scrub whose asymmetry betokened the fierce winds and snows more amenable to northern latitudes. Well, not the end of life, he thought, but at least a change of it. The low junipers blanketed the area where he was, providing him some protection from the wind and retaining the fleeting sunshine. Below him, the scrub firs grew in solidity, growing more formidable as they grew higher.

He started down the trail. Another four miles to his destination and all he had to do was set up camp, get out the hardware, and wait.

5.

Not a breath of conspiracy reached the Agency's semi-omniscient ears, either through their own resources, those of government clients or brother intelligence services. Since 9-11, the pissing contests between them were, if not eradicated, at least reduced to a grunt level "my dad can beat up your dad."

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, thought Perry. At that level you could still go out and get a beer with your counterpart and even maybe, maybe, he reminded himself, actually share some low-level info. At any rate the world presently emitted comparative peace and profit. Nobody minded.

And so the email he got from a friend at the FBI tweaked his interest and he called it up.

<have an interesting hit on the web. Might be nothing, but would like you to look at it. Check out the following address:
WWW.ENDANGSPECIERESESEARCH.ORG/MEMBERS/BB.HTML>

The tone of a bulletin board committed to the preservation and research of endangered species had rung bells in the back of his counterpart's head. One part, in context, really seemed funny, he said.

<who will tag the raptor?>Bud1234

<the biologist is waiting for the bird to fly>RAPTOR24

<check continental migration>Bud1234

Weird. The time factor was odd. "Waiting for the bird to fly." "Waiting" on a bird seemed strange, considering that raptors wouldn't remain sedentary for more than a few minutes. Not that he knew a whole lot about birds. But still. . .

Just for the fun of it he typed:

<Has the raptor flown?>Fnkydude

He waited for quite a few minutes.

The man panicked for a moment. Who the hell was this? Muttering profanities that were or were not acceptable in his idea of religion, he dialed a secure cell phone. He heard a series of clicks as the redundant cutouts engaged. A voice finally answered.

"Yes?"

"Is Jeff there?"

"Did you say Jess?"

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

"It happens at times."

The code finished, the man continued.

"I think we have a breach."

There was a short pause. Then, nervous beyond logic, he went into a concise description.

"Most important," he concluded. "you're not supposed to be able to post unless you're a member of the organization. We control that, of course."

The voice stopped him.

"That's all?"

"Yessir."

"I suspect it's merely someone playing games. You knew that a bulletin board might have that consequence. That is also why it is in code. Our enemies cannot see the forest for the trees and something so obvious will not occur to them. Some teenage hacker got in, that's all."

The man expressed his doubt.

"Not that I'm doubting you, sir, but I would point out that it was my concern from the beginning. That's why I didn't want to use social media. That is way too insecure and a private bulletin board is barely less so."

"I understand. Still, it is the best way to minimize broadcast time to all members."

Another pause punctuated the voice's concern.

"Do you know who he is?"

"No, sir, the firewall's too good."

"You are good enough on this to lead this joker - for that is all he is - down a dead end. Give him some trees so he can't see the forest." He smiled behind the cell at the persistent image.

The man thought a moment.

"Yessir. I have an idea."

"Be indignant, but not stupid."

"I understand."

And so he typed.

Perry had an automatic refresh function programmed into his browser and so when the web page refreshed he sat up and scrolled down to the latest conversation entry.

<who is fnkydude?>Bud1324

<birdlover>Fnkydude

<this is a serious aviary research organization. Posting to this bb requires membership. How did you get on?>Bud1324

<I managed. Sorry, just interested.>Fnkydude

<be advised you may read, but not post. If you are interested in the subject, you may want to donate to one of our grant organizations. I can give you a list.>Bud1324

<understand. Not at this time. Out>Fnkydude

Perry sighed. So much for fun at the end of the day. He continued to read.

<this is for aviary tag No.243009A. Did the biologist manage to tag the bird?>Bud1324

<Yes. Bird is roosting.>RAPTOR24

<good. Suspect unusual migratory patterns in this one>Bud1324

<chickens'd be easier, eh LOL>RAPTOR24

<run `em down!>Bud1324

<sign off>RAPTOR24

Perry had no idea that the tag number indicated a breach warning. It warned all members and he had no clue as to what his momentary flippancy might have done to Homeland Security or CIA, much less the agency. Do raptors actually "roost?" he thought. He had no idea. He leaned forward and logged out of the computer. Half an hour later he was merely one more bureaucrat stuck in the rolling conveyor belt of D.C. traffic.

<bird has flown. Successfully tagged. Retrieval at 1620, UTM coordinates logged, available at site ECHO CHARLIE>RAPTOR24

<concur. Grad assist acknowledge.>Bud1324

<acknowledged>NONPROFIT

But there was no one else to read it. HERMIT put the

smartphone away and walked up the hill.

For the sake of security, MANO planned to meet the Director in Salt Lake City. The Beaver chugged along above the ridges of the Front Range. A warm day, and it took a little extra energy to make it over the tops of some of these saddlebacks. He hoped the weather forecasts were right. He smiled. "Chugging" was the right word, he thought, but he still liked the old beast. It was his baby. He never trusted anything that flew remotely "fly-by-wire," or computer-driven. One lightning strike and, "poof!" you were screwed. It was one thing to lose your computer in an office and curse heaven because of the work lost. It was quite another to be several thousand feet above terra firma with no way down except for a parachute which may or may not open in time, given the altitude available above the actual ground. Part of it also was his love for old technology, in spite of, or because of, his career in the new fields. At home he drove a '72 Beetle and listened to LP's vinyl records on a turntable he bought fourth-hand ten years ago. Such a Luddite, he knew.

He flew out of the pattern and turned west when he got to sixteen thousand feet. The plane's limit barely cleared the highest peaks in this part of the Rockies. He snorted. He'd heard of one pilot who took friends up for a sightseeing tour, only to get sucked into the valleys that grew too narrow for him to turn around in. As the mountains grew higher and the weather sunnier and warmer, the valley sides grew closer together until the warm air and altitude sucked off the pressure needed for lift. It was a mere

matter of time before he ended up landing in the top of the pine trees at 11,000 feet. Fortunately, convention rated MANO's plane for several thousand feet above that and he had not heavily loaded it in any case.

It was clear today. He particularly loved the autumns in Colorado. Chilly nights, warm days. Snows sugarcoated the cliffs and the contrast brought out the dark rock beneath. Aspen changed color and, although "peak" was not quite here, they did their own share of contrasting with the darker conifers, especially at the higher elevations. He settled back and enjoyed the flight, as only a pilot can really do.

The man sweated in the cool autumn air as he wound in and out of the short firs growing at timberline. He found an optimum spot and took out his gear. A small tent hit the ground, followed by various stuff sacks. Each one held a variety of backcountry gear, such as cooking and food supplies, medical gear, and clothing layers. Several contained a satellite phone, GPS and plotting equipment, maps and other devices not normally found in the normal backcountry pack.

One of these he hurriedly put together and ran a few tests. It worked perfectly. He was excited, for this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance and the gear could not be left to the slightest chance of failure.

At that moment he heard the buzzing of a plane. A bit low, he thought, for a small plane negotiating the Divide.

The land-line telephone rang without answer. She's still mad, Dusty thought. Really mad. That, or she didn't really value her climbing pieces. It had been a week and it was unheard of for a climber to not claim three forty dollar camming devices inadvertently left after an afternoon's event.

It wasn't that he was interested in a relationship with her beyond friendship: a resolution-oriented guy like him merely wanted to make up. The voice mail came on.

"Hello, this is Kory and I'm not home right now. You can reach me at work or on my cell. Otherwise, leave a message."

Dusty dialed the cell: he'd already stopped by the outdoor shop Kory managed in town.

"Yeah?"

The crackling voice confirmed the existence of a person at the bare edge of the cell coverage.

"Kory? It's Dusty."

"Yeah, I know who it is." She sounded annoyed.

"I just called to . . ." She cut him off.

"Kiss and make up?"

"Well . . ." He wasn't quite sure how to answer that one.

"Look, I'm still a bit ticked at you. Right now I'm driving to a nice little hike in the backcountry, and I am by myself very intentionally. Let it burn off a bit and maybe when I come back I'll be in a mood to talk to you."

Dusty was very patient.

"Yes, 'dear,'" he murmured. Unfortunately, it wasn't under his breath enough.

"What was that?" she replied, testily. Dusty cleared

his throat.

"Um. Sure. Whatever you think is best...Where are you?"

"Think I can't handle myself back here?"

"Don't get defensive, I'm just curious. Besides, its just smart."

He almost heard her bristle at the other end. Both parties let out their breaths: one trying to be patient and one in the realization that, yes, it was smart. Her voice moderated slightly.

"I'm up Wildcat Canyon about thirteen miles. I'm going to try to make it up Jefferson tomorrow morning."

"I'll wait to hear from you, okay? Might be some weather coming in."

"I suppose."

"No, seriously, when you're ready to talk, call me. Please? Promise?"

"Very well. Now, let me go my way, okay?"

Resisting a more meaningful if too honest, "fine!" Dusty said goodbye and refrained from slamming the phone down. He hated these emotional chess matches that could be frustrating even in the most platonic of relationships. They were infinitely worse when only maintaining a friendship was his ultimate goal. These things must be done delicately, he thought.

The plane putted overhead and the man looked up. Wow, that was low: he wouldn't expect any plane to be that low, even over the highest Rockies. But he was no pilot and had no idea. He looked at his watch. The rendezvous was late.

He looked back up. He realized why the plane's altitude was low. It was a small, older plane with a lower altitude rating than most adventurers in this neck of the airspace, and he reflected that it wasn't so low as he was so high.

The Asalia manager wagged his wings over the man. He appeared to be the only human in existence since the cars he saw below him in Nederland. He flew over some pretty remote country and his familiarity with the "fourteeners" of Colorado's high country kept him on course. He knew his flight plan must look crazy to some more "legit" flyers, but he enjoyed it, and doggone it, it was his vacation!

Suddenly, a small explosion burst from the front of the aircraft. A puff of smoke from the engine slid over the windshield and the RPM's dropped to near zero. That was weird, he thought. Don't panic. He'd never heard a sound like that before. The plane continued on its path, but with no thrust to maintain flight it began a slow descent. Don't panic, he thought again. He breathed deeply.

As with most men, he analyzed the "why" before he thought of the "how," as in "how the hell am I going to get out of this." That sound did not indicate an engine malfunction. It didn't sound right. It was a definite "pop," sounding like the cherry bomb favorite of delinquent adolescent boys.

Therefore, planted? His institutional paranoia had kicked in. If so, then by whom? If merely the competition, he thought, he wouldn't be trying to land a disabled aircraft: he'd be spread over a mile of rugged

mountainside. Maybe a fizzle, a bomb that did not quite go off as expected, simmered in the compartment in front. Still, maybe the engine just malfunctioned. It was possible, wasn't it? He knew anything breaking under high stress could sound like an explosion or even just a pop. He shook his head. No, he'd heard an explosive device of some sort, for sure.

There was nothing now but the rush of wind by the windows. He was thankful for his archaic plane, now: fly-by-wire might have been another issue, had those who had disabled his plane had access.

The lack of thrust did little to support the aircraft, but he was able to do something. The little plane cruised downward, at an alarming rate, true, but it sure beat a nosedive. If he nursed it just right, he could maybe crash-land on the downward slope of some mountainside. That was the first priority. Surviving the night in a hostile environment would be a concern only after this was taken care of.

The fire grew and an amazing amount of smoke obscured his view. Oil, he was sure, and he smelled the heavy, cloying musk of rubber mixed in it. Some mounts or seals were burning, now, he thought. He eased the stick to the left and right and was gratified to see that he had some turning ability without losing too much altitude. He pulled back on the stick. The plane responded slightly and the rate of descent diminished. He did not dare pull back too far lest he stall.

Through glimpses captured through the smoke, he saw the grassy tundra come up quickly and he rode over the saddle separating two thirteen thousand foot peaks. He'd better put it down, but quick. There was no way he could

nurse the plane over the next ridge and he sure didn't want to plow nose-first into it. With no visibility, the situation was getting dicey in any case.

The hiker eyed the path of the airplane as it disappeared over the saddle before him. It hit with no explosion or anything so dramatic: the buzz of the engine suddenly stopped, culminating in the prolonged, nerve-grating scrape of man-made things foreign to the silence of the tundra.

He looked at his watch. Three good hours before solid darkness set in. He selected enough gear for overnight survival, plus his stove and food, and began a power hike in the direction of the downed plane. Every moment counted.

6.

"Sierra One, Sierra Three on EOC."

The call startled Dusty. Like most long-time SAR members he wore both a pager and a radio, or a radio-pager combination as well as a cell phone. At this point he was in the middle of some work that shouldn't be disturbed and so had changed his radio setting to the EOC channel. This meant nothing came through -- no radio chatter to disturb him -- unless some emergency happened that directly involved him.

"Sierra One, Sierra Three on EOC." Sierra 3 was Harry Linkletter and one of the volunteer organization's higher officers. An older man, he was skilled in communication arts and gifted in "tinkering" in electronics. He ran sound at his church although he had a tin ear simply for the reason that he could take the whole sound system apart piece by piece, and then rebuild it from memory. Blindfolded. With one hand. With crying toddlers in the background. In SAR, he usually helped coordinate command and radio operations from the county courthouse, ensuring coordination of the different sub-commands during the operation.

"Sierra Three, Sierra One, go ahead." Sierra One, "Andy" Anderson was the county deputy in charge of SAR operations. As a Vietnam Vet, he'd "seen the elephant," and significant people both inside and outside the law enforcement community respected him highly. Suddenly the FCC formality dissolved as participants acknowledged SAR's private channel.

"Yeah, Andy, I've got an aircraft beacon somewhere up in the Jefferson Wilderness area. Someone went down up

there."

"Code four. I'll have staff call the airports to check flight plans headed our way. Keep monitoring and give me the best location you can."

"Gottit. FYI, weather's starting to deteriorate. We've got a front coming down in the next twelve hours and it's bringing the first snow of the season."

"Good news-bad news, huh? We can use as much snow as it can throw at us, at least on a normal day. Well, we'll deal with that when we can. Okay, I'm switching to Red."

Dusty twirled the knob switching frequencies to the "Red" channel, the frequency assigned to the sheriff's department. While Dispatch monitored EOC if requested, it was not the normal routine.

"Springfield, Sierra One."

"Sierra One."

"Be advised we have detected an aircraft beacon in the Jefferson Wilderness area, location to be determined. Page Search and Rescue, Mountain Rescue Team only, to stand by for a search and possibly technical rescue."

"Code Four. Sixteen thirty-five."

Moments later the odd tones permeated the radio waves and he knew pagers around the county were screeching. The model he once had strapped to his belt beeped very loudly and was not really adjustable, as far as the page signal went. One time he had been volunteering at a youth camp and the pager went off at five o'clock in the morning. His roommate just about hit his head on the ceiling when he jumped. It had been rather entertaining at the time. He was thankful that his was integrated, now.

But this time, Dusty already had his "bash" pack ready to go. He knew from the traffic that the search needed

winter gear and might extend at least overnight. That was if the team was able to pinpoint the plane right away and had practical helicopter support.

The pack contained wickable clothing, food, medical gear and water containers. Dusty considered his mountain gear, then decided he could always dump it if necessary. He expected it wouldn't be technical, but you never knew. It also contained emergency gear, a signal mirror, fishing line and hooks and other assorting things for extended survival living off the land. Most of his friends laughed at Dusty for overdoing it and even Dusty had to remind himself to pull this gear out every once in a while for cleaning and updating. Still, you never knew. He didn't expect he would actually fish in the backcountry to survive, but line could be used for many things and by now it was in the kit out of habit.

He filled the water containers and slung the black and green pack over one shoulder. Forty pounds, he figured. Not bad for a winter bash pack. On a thought, he grabbed his light, running pair of snowshoes on the way out the door.

Since SAR was only on standby, he did not muck up the airwaves advising his availability, but merely drove to the courthouse. He would get whatever information he needed there. On a second thought, he dialed Kory on his cell phone. There was no answer. Kory, he figured, was somewhere in a remote canyon. Although he did it himself on rare occasions, he didn't really like it when friends went into the wilderness alone. Things still happened to experts.

Subject MANO groaned. He still had his sense of humor, although it faded in and out along with his consciousness.

Damn good landing, he thought, although I doubt if I'll be able to walk away as the saying goes.

He had initially landed on a nice "soft" field with a season's worth of growing grass cushioning the aircraft. That was the good news. However, that same grass made for a nice slippery ride down the steep side of the mountain for about half a mile of bumpy, roller coaster ride, and right into a pile of rocks marking an escarpment. Good thing he hadn't gone over, he thought. He had no idea how far down the cliff went and didn't really want to know.

He knew he had been beaten up pretty well. The plane had bounced from rock to rock like a die in a pinball machine and had twisted the cockpit into a corkscrew. His legs had gone the same way. They were both broken and mangled and there was no way he could move from his seat.

The last thing he thought before he fainted was the DVD.

* * *

Other people from the team were already at the courthouse, Dusty saw with no surprise. Todd lounged there - the "wild horses" quip was particularly appropriate in his case - sipping on a particularly vile cup of boiled coffee with a couple of others. Dusty walked over to see if it was worth picking up a cup while he waited.

"The EPA has given notice," Todd mentioned. Dusty cocked an eyebrow. "They think this is the latest oil spill."

It looked like it. Dusty smiled and poured anyway. He was not one to give up on the more exotic forms of caffeine intake: even institutional Folgers baked in an unwashed

urn. He added the chemical creamer and absent-mindedly stirred with a wooden stick while looking around.

Mark stood beside Andy pointing at a map and Nora chatted with Jim. And that was just about it, Dusty reflected. There were others although they were mostly trainees like Kory. This was pretty much the mountain team. With some of the work he did in managing volunteers, he got frustrated with the widely variable amount of dedication he saw in any organization. In his opinion, if you signed up, you should be there if at all possible. The five qualified team members who responded were experienced and dedicated, both. He figured about three other members couldn't show up, however willing they might be. Family took precedence, even in his life and he respected that. But for others? He shook his head. In the mountain resort communities, responsibility often took a back seat to what locals called "The BBD," or the "Bigger, Better Deal." Namely, that meant that if something cooler came up, it took preference, more's the pity.

All that to say, the team unity corresponded directly to those who made it a priority and he valued both his friendship and team integrity with these who were here, now.

Nora would be considered by city folk a "granola." Contrary to her alter ego in SAR, most of the time the thirty-something woman wore the stereotypical granny skirt of 1970's California nature lovers. She was somewhat of an enigma, for if you listened to her talk, her political values were somewhere to the left of Gloria Steinem and Vladimir Lenin. But Dusty found that in practice, she was far more moderate, if not conservative, than she let on to be. She worked a moderately successful bed-and-breakfast in

town during season and "sat around" (in her own words) the rest of the winter. She had her MSN and was PRN ("as needed") at the hospital during the off-season, which, along with her technical qualifications, made her particularly valuable on the "hasty" team. Dusty had dated her once upon a time, but there had never been much beyond friendship and professional respect.

Why she didn't seriously start something with Jim, he had no idea. Jim was Navajo and almost as environmentally "green" as she was. He grew up in Arizona, the grandson of a legendary "windtalker" from World War II, and the military had beckoned to him through the family genes. He was a decorated Delta Force member from the First Persian Gulf War and a more solid team member couldn't be found. He ran sledding tours - with real huskies - in the winter and gave tours on whitewater in the summer. His eyes showed that they had seen much and the closed mouth indicated many memories unlikely to be brought up.

Mark was the oldest member of the team. He was from New Hampshire and had run an outfitting service in the White Mountains for thirty years before moving to Colorado. He had lost a toe and a pinky to frostbite when he was in college and still joked about it, writing off the experience as a valuable lesson to a real tenderfoot on Mount Washington. In his 60's and retired, he was the most experienced SAR member and directed the Mountain Rescue Team (MRT) in both operations and trainings.

"Anybody else coming we know about?" Dusty asked.

"You know how it is: if you're not here at the standby, you're not really here," Nora quipped. She was ready. The granny dress was conspicuously absent in the presence of skin-tight running pants and capilene shirt

more commonly seen on a Denver DINK during her power breakfast morning run.

"We know anything?"

"Will in a bit," Todd said. "We're to hang loose for a sec. Enjoy the caffeine."

"Hmm. Enjoy, eh?" Dusty grimaced at the poison swirling beneath his face. "At least you didn't try to call it coffee."

Andy turned to the group.

"Come into the conference room and let's hash this out."

The group filed into the tiny room and Andy called up the GPS software on the computer. The projector fired up as the "Smartboard" rebooted. Mark handed out hardcopies of the relevant quadrangle map to the seated members.

"A plane went down around 1630 this evening. Harry got a bearing of 310 and Granby County SAR found it at 160. That puts it . . . here." He pointed to a spot on the Smartboard display.

"As close as we could get by triangulation, we believe it is at or above timberline on the southwest slope of Jefferson. There is a strong cold front coming in. It is not a dry front typical of this time of year, but it carries a lot of snow. They're predicting up to three feet in the high country and I don't need to tell you the chances of an injured flier in that case. Between that and sundown, we have limited time to get people back there for aid."

The pause allowed Dusty's input. He raised his hand.

"Andy," he said. "Kory is back there already. She has a cell, which has questionable reception depending upon where she is, and she has a county radio. If she's remotely

clear, we ought to be able to raise her for assistance."

"She's not officially on the Mountain Response Team, yet," Mark put in doubtfully.

"She's qualified for high-angle, though, and she put her time in regarding training sessions," Dusty returned. "And she may be in the best position as it is. She can always grunt gear even if it's not a technical situation."

"Okay," Andy said. "We'll try to raise her if we can. Another one on scene never hurts, and if the weather shuts us down, she may be the pilot's only chance." He turned back to the board.

"We'll begin on this section here, labeled Alpha. The beacon's signal was reasonably clear and so we're hoping that the Box was high enough for the signal to clear some of the rough terrain. Dusty, you and Nora will take Alpha Section. The chopper's spun up and on its way. He should be on the rooftop anytime." He looked at Mark, who nodded.

"About 'three' out," he said.

"Okay," Andy continued. "Try to raise Kory on SAR, EOC and cell as you go and we'll hope for her help. Todd and Jim will go on the next trip with Mark if he's available."

Todd grumped, "Great, another day of hoofing it ten miles while you babies ride." Dusty grinned.

Using two civilian choppers was unusual, just for expense, if not for practical reasons. The helicopters county SAR used were also very limited in capacity because of size and because of the demands high altitude put on their lift capabilities. They barely handled four people at a time plus gear: the pilot, patient, nurse/EMT and one other SAR member.

"Don't worry. You'll be flown in," Andy said, getting a noticeable reaction. People sat up. "At this point, we

only have the one chopper until the Air Force gets Special Ops on this one. Todd, you and your team will deal with Bravo Section in the event that Alpha proves vacant in the next hour."

Air Force? The members looked at each other. Andy was flying a significant number of people in, plus the pilot, plus gear. He noted the looks.

"We're receiving some, uh, help, from the Feds on this one. It seems one of their people was on vacation in a little Beaver and ran into some problem up there." He tried to smile. "What the hey, it's a little free help, eh?"

Jim rolled his eyes, which did not go unnoticed by his colleagues His experience in federal government did not inure him to the politicking that was inevitable in a case like this. Nothing was "free" when the feds got involved. We're the government and we're here to help, is the old cliché, Dusty thought, watching him. I guess being both military and Navajo gives you a perspective on that one. Andy continued.

"So, actually we have our chopper, plus a large one from Air Force Special Ops and an extra assistant."

"Assistant? What the hell?" The words were the same from all present, but rather chaotically spoken. Jim's eyes weren't the only ones rolling now.

"He's an expert in wilderness search and he's from the Fort Collins FBI office. His name is Kelly Frey and you actually may have heard of him."

Dusty had. There had been a manhunt several years ago involving the kidnap of a state official's child. The child was held to sway the vote on an upcoming bill, but the kidnapper had inadvertently given a few too many hints as to his location. The ensuing manhunt was very subtle, under

the guise of a lost hiker, but in two days they had found the man and more importantly, the child alive. He supposed he could deal with someone with a background like that.

"Your maps have been already been highlighted in the areas each team should search. Dusty and Nora, get going. I want the hospital pad clear ASAP."

They stood and walked out of the city building. The platform was on the top of the adjacent hospital and was conveniently placed for both THE hospital and for SAR operations. The helicopter purred above them and they hurried across the street as best they could under their loads of winter gear. Fortunately, it was a short elevator ride to the top - they both had the sensible attitude that taking the stairs may be macho, but drained energy on the literal eve of a mission, no matter how little. It would also be embarrassing - read, "move away from town" embarrassing - to break an ankle on the stairs of the hospital before a job.

As they exited on to the roof, Dusty noticed the sky had lost its vibrant high altitude blue to a layer of cirrostratus clouds. The light cast was reminiscent of late fall, not the warm days of September and a sense of foreboding grew on him. He shifted his pack and hoped that its contents were sufficient or the mission short.

The blades spun up slowly as they made their way to the chopper door, taking the usual care to stay in front of the back door. Television "ER" episodes to the contrary, anyone who would come close to a helicopter knew to avoid the spinning rear blades like the plague. Things still happened, of course, but stories of those things and the training in LZ management had scared most people enough that there had been no incident on this SAR team, at least.

Bob was the pilot, as a Vietnam veteran and a former army SAR pilot could lay a chopper in the smallest landing zone imaginable. Dusty had managed an LZ in the backcountry while evacuating a patient - the lady had broken a hip falling from a horse - and Bob had slipped the helicopter in fifty feet from the patient. In a twenty knot wind. Among hundred-foot firs. Very impressive.

Dusty secured his pack in the available back seat. The snowshoes encumbered him, but he figured they were handy "just in case." If even one person had them, that was one more advantage if the front carried as much snow as the National Weather Service warned. He tapped Bob on the shoulder and as the pilot looked back made a circling motion with his hand, ending at the co-pilot's door. Bob nodded and Dusty jumped out. He made a wide circle around the front of the aircraft and came to the door. He hopped in, secured the seatbelt, and donned the mic-ed helmet handed to him by the pilot. He looked back at Nora in the other back seat who gave him a thumbs-up.

"Ready!" he shouted unnecessarily into the mic. Bob nodded and the chopper lifted off into the dim afternoon light. It swung toward the hills.

Kory walked several miles south of the hillside where the crash-site was. She had seen the plane go down and watched its toboggan run down the slope. She drew in her breath sharply as it approached the one-thousand-foot-plus escarpment and let it out slowly as the plane slowed, stopping against a fence of boulders encrusting the edge. She shifted her pack and headed up the valley.

Her cell was off, but the radio was on, a standard condition all SAR members were asked to comply with when in the backcountry. It had crackled soon after the plane had ditched, but only noisy, broken signal came through. Harry must have picked up on the plane's beacon. The signal was too faint to do anything with, but the more powerful sheriff's band might help. She changed the channel.

"Springfield, Sierra Fifty-One."

Nothing.

"Springfield, Sierra Fifty-One on Red." There was still nothing and though she tried several more times, she knew she was in a "shadow:" too deep in the canyon for radio signals from her meager unit. There was no way her cell would work anywhere here: she'd already tried earlier on her trip. She turned the radio down in irritation and looked at the hill ahead, trying to find a way around that cliff-face. It began below the timberline and stretched to several hundred feet above it.

The GPS showed her at give-or-take 11,300 feet at the valley bottom and the forest was sparse enough to allow an unimpeded walk in any direction without resorting to game trails. But from here, it would have to be straight up to reach the plane unless she circuited widely around the escarpment. She found a tree blasted by lightning next to the cliffs and dumped her pack at the easily recognizable waypoint. The large top of the pack was easily switched to a fanny pack and she added her medical supply as well as some food and - she looked up at the barren tundra above her - stove and fuel. She had no idea if anyone was alive, much less if she could get to him by herself in a decent amount of time. It might not even be accessible, but she had to try. She turned to the slight gulley to her east and

headed straight up it to the ridge.

"Sierra Fifty-One, Mobile Medic 1 on EOC." Bob's voice came over the intercom loud and clear, but Dusty had no idea what impact it was having on Kory's radio. The chopper moved quickly over the timbered land. Hills rose to either side, morphing into mountains of eleven, twelve and thirteen thousand feet. The aircraft lurched suddenly. The pre-front winds were picking up and roiling in the rugged terrain. The chopper could do little but follow suit and Bob did his best to pick what he thought was the smoothest ride. That was relative, of course, Dusty thought. Even in the noisy helicopter, Dusty heard a subdued groan and turned to see Nora clutching her stomach.

"Hey!" he yelled, "no puking allowed!" Nora gave him the Hawaiian good luck sign and looked out the window, still with her arms folded over her midriff. Dusty grinned and continued his own search.

"Sierra Fifty-One, Mobile Medic 1 on Red."

* * *

"Sierra Fifty-One, Mobile Medic 1 on Red."

Kory wasn't sure she'd heard the first one, but this one was halfway intelligible. For a split second, she considered not answering, but figured it was pointless since Dusty knew she was up there anyway. Besides, it didn't sound like Dusty and it was official lingo. She grabbed her radio.

"Mobile Medic 1, go ahead."

"Sierra Fifty-One, switch to SAR." SAR was an FCC-designated frequency used by Search-and-Rescue organizations all over the country. It was on a "simplex" system and as such did not use a "repeater." The repeater was a sophisticated piece of radio gear designed to take signals of a certain frequency and re-broadcast them more powerfully, increasing distance and clarity. A simplex channel could only be heard "line-of-sight" for only as far as individual transmitters were able to project on their power, be they hand-held, mobile or stationary. Sometimes, since the SAR channel broadcasted locally, the signals were clearer and less garbled, since there were few other signals clamoring for the same frequency or energy.

"Code four," she answered and dutifully switched.

"Sierra Fifty-One, Sierra Twenty-Two." This time it was Dusty against some serious background noise. She sighed.

"Yes, Dusty." SAR's simplex protocol allowed a bit more informal conversation.

"We have a plane down near you. Can you assist us?"

"No prob, I'm right below it. I saw it go down."

"What's the situation?"

"Hang on, let me get above this ridge."

She was only twenty feet below the edge and groped her way to the top.

"I can just see it from here. If you have a topo, you should see a severe cliff face on the southwest side."

"Gottit."

"The plane slid to the very edge, but it seems secure: there's a bunch of decent-sized boulders lining the edge. The position is about halfway up the ridge, right in the

middle of the cliff-face. I don't have glasses and don't have much detail, but I haven't seen anyone get out of the plane. It's pretty dead up there. I don't know how secure it is, but it doesn't look like it's going anywhere soon."

"Okay. How far away are you?"

"Maybe a quarter a very tough mile. It's straight up hill from here, but I have to detour around this side of the cliff face and then traverse to the crash site."

"Right. Do you have your topo? Can you give me your Lat-Long coordinates?"

"No, it's at my bivvy site, but the plane's right on that cliff face. Look for a notch in the cliff band - j that's the gorge I'm in now - then look about North-Northwest up the escarpment.

Dusty traced his finger along the topographical lines on his map.

"Got it. Stand by."

He scribbled the UTM coordinates on his notepad and showed it to Bob, who glanced at them and made an adjustment. The lurch he caused was not as pronounced as the growing turbulence.

"Weather's going to get bad," Dusty said over the SAR channel. "We've got maybe two hours before the Jell-O hits the fan."

"That's enough for me to get there and stabilize the patient, if he's still alive. I'm no EMT, though and I hope you brought one with you."

"Nora's on the chopper here. I need to sign off and pass this on to Courthouse. Hoof it up there. We're maybe twenty out, maybe more depending upon what Bob has to do in this weather to get us there."

"Copy."

* * *

The hiker sweated in the unusual warmth of the altitude. He thought the temperature felt weird, but, then experience told him that something nasty was probably coming in. The increasing wind and thickening cloud deck would have clued a blind man, he thought. He crested the ridge and looked down on the wreck, some five hundred yards below him. Damn, he considered, what a mess. Too bad, too: that looks like a classic bird.

The tail was oddly crumpled. Oddly, because the nose was accordioned into the cockpit, so that was obviously the primary impact. It had lost in its challenge to the immutable boulders in its path. One wing had been sheared off and lay smashed some yards away; the other was miraculously not detached or even damaged, but pointlessly sheltered some burrows inhabited by the pika rodents amidst the boulders.

He quickened his stride.

"Courthouse Command, Mobile Medic on EOC."

"Mobile Medic, go ahead."

"We have general coordinates given by Sierra Fifty-One in the field. The actual crash site is a mile or so up the slope from this position. Will advise for best position, but this is the best we've got for now. Stand by for UTM."

"Ready to copy UTM."

Dusty read off the different numbers. SAR used the UTM

method for its ease and grid capabilities. It was easier to transfer to a map and reduce to very specific waypoints, which was easier in a search. Mobile Medic used classic "Lat-Long" coordinates and waypoints often had to be translated from one coordinate method to the other.

"Mobile Medic, be advised Air Force Delta-niner has lifted off with its passengers. They are forty out."

"Courthouse, be advised weather is beginning to deteriorate quickly and turbulence is increasing. Tell 'em to get out the barf bags."

"Copy that. WTDX 746 clear."

The woman appeared out of nowhere, materializing by the plane. Her red parka flashed in and out of the drab rock, easy for him to spot her. She didn't see him and once she'd gotten onto the tundra, circled the Beaver. The hiker hailed her.

Nora wasn't just clutching her stomach anymore. The increasing turbulence started to make Dusty sick as well but he concentrated on the rushing ground beneath him.

"We're about two out from your waypoint!" Bob yelled into the mic.

"Yeah! She's probably a ways up from that by now, farther up the ridge!"

"Copy that!"

The aircraft was stretched to its limit in this weather but the immutable Bob showed no sign of

nervousness as he danced it up the darkening valleys. It was the time of the Scotland-like gloaming, made longer and earlier by the building cloud cover. The light was bright enough for Dusty to see a bright red dot moving above the mile-long cliff, and farther up, the wreck itself.

"Hello!" the hiker shouted into the wind. The woman circling the plane turned her head and stopped in her tracks. She was obviously surprised at finding someone else in this remote area. She started toward him.

"What do we have?" he said, advancing. He had a faint, very faint, but definitely there, accent. British? South African? It was enough to annoy, but . . . she shook it off. More important things now.

"I just got here," Kory replied, "but it looks like the pilot's dead. Saw the crash about an hour and a half ago, I guess, from the valley and headed up."

"I'm Dr. John Harrington, by the way."

"Doctor?"

"Not that kind, unfortunately. Biology and little to do with anatomy beyond the undergraduate courses. I was supposed to meet a few friends up here who were going to help me in some research. Chemical changes in altitude-grown tundra life in the light of waning sunlight hours. Literally, that's what I do."

Nerd, she thought.

They turned toward the plane and stood under the wing and the boulder wall, which provided some shelter from both wind and the imminent snow. It looked no better from close

observation and Kory had her doubts. Harrington dropped his heavy pack and peeked in through the window. The pilot was not a pretty sight. The telescoping engine compartment had crushed his legs and slivers of broken bone poked through the skin of one thigh. Couldn't feel good, Harrington considered. His torso seemed fairly intact but the head lolled to the right in a position that God had never designed a body to perform. Kory saw it at the same time and took a deep breath.

"I say, are you alright?" he asked. She looked a bit pale. She nodded.

"Neck's broken, looks like," she stuttered.

"Yes, the plane must have bounced around quite a bit on his ride down the slope. Merciful, though, I hope. A lot of people die instantly the way that neck looks. Lucky his head didn't snap completely off. Now that would be a nasty sight."

There was a sudden "clump" and Harrington turned around. Kory was out like a light and crumpled on the grassy tundra. He sighed and turned to her. He was enough of a backwoodsman to know basic first aid and he had some ideas.

Dusty pointed up the slope. Bob nodded and the chopper swung to the right. The experienced pilot would take the slope itself, unknowingly following the same path Kory had used. It would make no sense to challenge the winds around that cliff-face and if they got decked by a downdraft, God forbid, they would at least have something of a "gentle" slope to land on.

It was more tundra than scree, that slippery pile of rocks and dirt that was the bane of any casual or professional mountaineer. Tundra gave a solid footing, while scree ensured a two-step drop for every three feet attempted. It was still green in the fading autumn but this snowstorm would cover it for the next six months unless they had a dry year, something nobody in the Rockies ever wanted. Graupel spat from the lowering clouds even now, bouncing off the cool rock. Dusty shouted and pointed up the slope. Bob nodded, but instead of continuing up the slope, he set it into a hover.

"Can't do this much longer!" he shouted. Dusty nodded. He was amazed that Bob had pushed it this far, but far be it from him to dictate to this kind of pilot when to quit. There was a large bench on the ridgetop, about eighty yards around and Dusty pointed to it.

"Drop us there! We'll hoof it!" Bob nodded and moved the collective. The helicopter swooped down on the improvised landing zone and Dusty swallowed nervously. He could tell by the smell -- cold, refreshing ventilation notwithstanding -- that Nora had lost it some time ago and was thankful she wasn't wearing a mic-helmet. Breathing through his mouth was the only thing keeping him from participating. The chopper touched down.

"Thanks! Sorry about the barf-o-matic back there!"

"Happens all the time! Good luck!"

Dusty took off the helmet. He indicated to Bob his intention to circle the front of the chopper and Bob nodded. He hopped out, opened the rear port door and dragged his gear out. Nora was already out. He checked that his gear was clear from the landing struts of the helicopter and fled the area, moving forward into Bob's

line of sight. Seeing that Nora was clear, as well, he gave the thumbs-up and Bob took off. The squall swirled around them but visibility was still about one-half of a mile.

"Mobile Medic, Sierra Twenty-Two on SAR!"

"Go ahead!"

"You might want to let Alpha-niner know about the conditions!"

"It's not as bad as you think," came the answer. "The wind's not bad below timberline, but I'll advise!"

Dusty shook his head. "Bad" was relative, he supposed. Bob was a bit of a cowboy sometimes -- a very safe cowboy, he admitted, but the pilot relished a challenge, be it SAR, weather or a time-sensitive patient delivery. You didn't dare tell him he would lose at a casino, but what he would drop \$100 just to prove you wrong. There could be a hurricane blowing above timberline, and he would fly up to it just to see if it was really so.

"Code Four! Break! Kory, you on?"

7.

Kory was not "on" in the most literal meaning and Harrington was not radio literate. Although her radio was turned down, there was enough for him to realize someone was calling someone else and he picked it up and pushed the "TALK" button.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Who's this?"

"Uh. John Harrington. If you're calling your friend here, um, I'm afraid she's fainted or something."

"What? What's wrong? How did you get this radio?"

"We're at a plane that went down and I'm afraid she was not ready for the rather nasty sight of the pilot."

Dusty groaned inwardly. It was only one "click" to the site and he had to get up there fast. Nora ran up to him.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Kory apparently faints at the sight of blood. Pilot's dead, I guess."

"Great. I hate body recoveries. I hope we don't have to carry her out, too."

"Be nice."

"Right. I'm working on it."

Dusty looked around at the failing light and increasing snow as he stripped off his layers. He hoisted his pack.

"Carry-out is the least of our issues, right now. We've got to get to the plane, fast. I saw it straight up the ridge from here and that jives with what Kory said. Stay to the right; that cliff edge could be dicey and we're losing visibility."

They headed up the ridge at a walk-run. Basically,

that meant a smooth jog, but with more horizontal movement than up and down. It was no fun jogging with a heavy pack jerking around, and even minimized by the walk-run, weather and stripped to shirt and leggings, they sweated heavily in the increasing snow. Minimally layered as they were, they were in optimum condition to minimize overheating. The wind pushed from behind them in gusts.

Dusty barely noticed the thinning vegetation to either side. Soon they were at a point where only the hardy evergreen bushes stubbornly clung to the nutrient-poor soil. The snow thickened noticeably until Nora only saw Dusty's shadow moving vaguely in front of her. It made her nervous. What if they missed the plane altogether?

"You sure you're on track?" she yelled.

"Yes!" came the reply. "The topo showed a cliff band running to the left of the ridge! We should be reaching the boulder field on its edge any second!"

The boulders in question began to replace the stunted bushes and Dusty slowed to a walk. He didn't want to miss the crash site in the growing dark nor challenge the steep escarpment.

"Hello?" he yelled.

Kory "came to" faster than most who faint usually do, and only because of a growing sense of cold. Harrington hovered above her, his hands dropping little bits of snow and debris on her. She shook her head and sat up.

"Stop! That's enough!" She looked at him.

"What did you think you were doing?" she asked.

"Well," Harrington replied. "I'd heard that cold was a

good way of bringing someone out of a faint, but it's only just started snowing and it was rather hard to get."

"Shit," Kory mumbled, "and people let you camp out here?"

"What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing. Wait!"

A cry in the howling wind sounded eerily across the tundra. Kory's energy returned completely to her and she got up and headed into the dark. The voice was familiar.

"Dusty?" she cried.

A form materialized out of the grey haze that covered the hillside. It was Dusty and behind him, Nora. The boulders-and-wing shelter was getting more effective as the storm grew worse. Dusty and Nora dropped their packs inside and pulled out shells.

"Man, that's getting bad. So, what's the deal?"

"Pilot's definitely dead," Kory replied. "Neck's broken and legs compound-fractured all to hell."

"Who's this?" he gestured at Harrington. Harrington stepped forward with an outstretched hand.

"John Harrington, Ph.D." Immediately, Dusty was annoyed. He had his doctorate in economics and never had the urge to introduce himself with the lettered back-end. But he shook hands anyway and filed the information in the back of his head. He turned to Nora.

"Nora, try to raise Courthouse and inform them of the situation. Also get hold of Alpha-niner directly. They should be monitoring EOC at least if not SAR. Unless they're really stupid, they've turned back before now. There's no point in more of us being stuck here for a dead guy."

"Stuck?" she queried wryly. "And here I was, worried

about something to do this weekend."

She pulled out her hand-held radio and turned away from the group.

Dusty gestured toward the fuselage.

"Let's get another look."

"What for? It's nasty enough," Harrington was no wimp, but neither was he so inured that he could do autopsies for fun.

"Partly to see if we can move him. If we can get inside the fuselage, it'll be cramped, but it'll be a sight more comfortable than out here. I don't think we'd like to sleep with a corpse, now, do we?"

"I see your point," Harrington answered, "but still . . ."

Dusty looked through the grime-besmeared windows and grimaced as he looked at the corpse. Yes, it was nasty enough, but he hoped they could -- with all due respect, of course -- pull the poor guy out and wrap him up somehow. He'd spent some time in lousy weather, but this was definitely setting up for a nasty night.

Suddenly a heavy gust grabbed the wing and the plane lurched. Dusty jumped back, grabbing Harrington as he did so. As they backpedaled from the aircraft, a larger gust hit the wing and in a convulsive move, the airplane was flipped onto its back. The rescuers looked at the plane in a variety of emotions: horror, chagrin and annoyance. Dusty looked at the others.

"Anybody still want to spend the night in that? With the wind like it is?" Nobody answered for a second. Then Nora piped up.

"Gotta problem," she said. "The other chopper is still on its way, weather or no."

"You've gotta be kidding," Kory answered. "Bummer if the rest of the team goes down. I couldn't care less about the Fed."

"Now, let's not be naughty," said Harrington. His accent got more pronounced with condescension and did not endear him to anyone at that moment. Cheerio and all that rot, Dusty thought. Kory gave him a rather nasty look and turned to Dusty.

"I cached the rest of my gear in the valley. The trees down there are sparse but clustered and about thirty feet tall, you know what I mean?"

Dusty nodded. She was describing the exact flora at 11,000 feet on an alluvial bottom. It cut down on the wind and would provide some sort of fuel for fire.

"Good thought. Let's plan on that if we can get down."

"There's a gully on the far side of the cliff. It's the only reasonably safe way down, but it is a way."

"Sounds good," he replied. "A couple of things need to be done first. Since there was no fire, thanks to the flying skills of our dear little friend over there, there's still fuel in the plane. The plane's upside down and there might be some fuel sloshing over the tank cap so we won't have to siphon. At least, I hope so. Anybody have a bladder or water jug to sacrifice for the cause?"

"Mine'll do," said Harrington. He obviously wanted to make up.

"Great, go to it." Harrington grabbed a liter jug and started emptying it onto the ground. Nora grabbed his arm.

"Don't waste it." He nodded and took a big swig. The others followed suit and the man shook out what he could of the remaining drops.

"Second," Dusty continued. "Kory and I -- Kory, you

okay with the body?"

Kory nodded, obviously embarrassed at her past lack of control. "Yeah, I'm ready. Now."

"You and I will grab the pilot and bring him back here. We'll pile a small cairn over him so he'll stay put until or if we can come back with Mobile Medic. Nora, you keep working the other chopper. They've got this Frey guy in charge of things, but who knows who's really running the show? If you can't get them to turn back, for pete's sake get them to land in the valley if they can spot an LZ. We gave everybody the coordinates down there, so that should help. Then pray. If they've got some ignorant desk jockey pushing them, they're screwed without some outside help." The others nodded sagely. "Okay? Let's go."

Kory and Dusty went "outside," a purely relative term, with Harrington close behind. Harrington continued to the wing tank and the other two crouched beside the co-pilot door. MANO almost looked normal, his head hanging straight down from the seat belts. Dusty thought it was a good thing it was cold. He looked over at Kory who pointedly looked back, her chin slightly in the air. He didn't think he'd have any trouble with her this time.

"This is going to be kind of unpleasant," he said, "but we've got to get him out of here."

"Yes, I know," she answered testily. "I can handle it."

I hope so, Dusty didn't say. The boulders had crushed the engine compartment and although damage didn't seem to extend to the door, he knew it wouldn't take much to jam something. He reached for the latch and pulled back. So far, so good. There was a small opening as he pulled back and Kory inserted her fingers. They pulled and the door

shrieked as it suddenly gave. Dusty smiled.

"That was the good news, now for the bad." He started forward and Kory grabbed his arm.

"Are you sure you want to do that? It's one thing being out here where we could jump away, but stuck in there...?"

"It's okay. This time the wind is pinning the wing down, instead of lifting it. I'll be quick," he added reassuringly.

He took a deep breath and crawled in.

The plane's movement seemed more obvious now that he was inside and he hoped that they were far enough back from the cliff face to afford some stability from the wind. The plane shuddered with each gust as it was, but the wing was closer to the ground and the storm couldn't find a purchase.

He unlatched the seat belts and the body slopped down upon him. The legs were seriously broken, but not completely trapped, for which he was thankful. He would have been happy to leave this guy alone, were it not that the Feds obviously wanted him badly enough to endanger three civilians plus one of their own. Plus, the plane could be gone by morning and be practically irretrievable. Depending upon how the wind shifted once the front passed, it could still go over the edge. He just didn't know.

Kory reached in beside him and pulled on the body. She showed an amazing amount of guts, considering her initial reaction. The cabin roof below MANO was fairly obstacle-free and once the corpse had fallen, it was easier to drag it out the door. They breathed heavily for a moment, then heaved at the body in spurts as they dragged it to the nearest stack of boulders.

Dusty heard a clatter amidst the sound of wind and looked down. A plastic case had slid out of the breast of the body and fallen on the rocky ground.

"Hold it," he said to Kory, and reaching down, picked up the case. Weird, he thought, he must like Tolkien a lot to stick a DVD in his coat pocket. He hurriedly stuffed the case into the large breast pocket of his shell and nodded to Kory. They continued carrying the body to the limited shelter where Nora was.

Dusty pulled a couple garbage bags out of his pack. Convenient in the backcountry for any number of things, this time they were a makeshift body bag. After they covered it with the plastic, they put the body into a crevice between two large boulders and began piling the ice-cold rocks on top. He turned to Nora, breathing heavily.

"What's the latest?" he asked.

"I told them to rendezvous at the mouth of the valley at the parking lot, but they're still coming in."

"Idiots. They'll never make it. It's too rough and getting dark."

Harrington showed up then. He held up the water bottle, about three quarters full of fuel.

"Here we are, about as much as I could get. I had to lever the wing up high enough to get to the bloody cap, so I hope I didn't startle you. I got a bit wet, too, so don't any of you jokers do a cigarette around me."

"Great," Nora answered. "We can use you in the valley to get a light going." Harrington did not know what to think of that comment.

"Okay, everyone got their packs?" asked Dusty. "Bundle up and head down. Grab your headlamps if you got 'em, but

we still shouldn't need them for a while."

They threw on their packs and lined up for the not-too-appealing trot to the valley floor. Kory was in front by unspoken consent: she'd been there, done that, and nobody wanted to follow his imaginary trail over the edge of the cliff. Two inches of snow had already fallen, Dusty thought, and he knew it was only going to get worse. The wind had driven the snow heavily and its depth varied from bare rock to knee-high drifts. The worse part at this point was the uniform grey that permeated the vision. It was at that late point of twilight that allowed the snow to magnify and disperse what little light there was. All definition faded as the shadows disappeared and all he could see in front of him were ghostly shapes, wavering as the wind gusted. The goggles prevented the minute icicles sandblasted by the wind from slicing the eyeballs, but did nothing for visibility, per se.

Dusty concentrated on the moving shadows -- the other shades transformed into slightly more distinct boulders as he passed them -- and trudged down the slope. He was distinctly thankful that it was downhill. Going uphill in this would have really sucked.

Kory was fairly confident in her ability to at least find the gorge she had come up. It was not too difficult: a blind cave animal would have fallen in it were it headed in the right direction. They hoped the wind would drop once down its steep, forbidding slopes so they could see better. Nora and Harrington followed her in silence, experience telling them not to waste words or energy in futile conversation: as if "yelling" could be considered "conversation."

The southwesterly wind accelerated as it rushed up the

cliff and hit consistently on the right side of their faces and Dusty could tell that the wind chill was dropping with the light. It wasn't dangerous yet, for the afternoon warmth still remained somewhat and the snow was heavy and wet. Still, they needed to move into the valley before the temperature dropped too much. He reached up to feel his face and rubbed the cheek. Still there, still felt cold and not numb, which was a good thing. His assessment seemed right and he perked up a bit.

Kory turned and shouted something.

"What?" he yelled.

"Gorge!" she shouted and pointed at her feet.

"Great! Careful now!"

She disappeared over the edge. There was no trail, but plenty of scree and the sintering snow hid a sliding mess of stones and dirt. She half-walked and half-skied down the side of the gorge. The vegetation seemed to increase as they went lower, but the increasing snow covered much of the smaller stuff and only made the larger plants more slippery.

Dusty followed, with Harrington and Nora bringing up the rear. He relied on his high-topped winter boots as the rocky mess slid from underneath him. He slid to the bottom with surprisingly few scrapes and bruises and the others caught up. They stood panting for a few moments as the snow swirled around them. The wind did lessen quite a bit and breaths were audible in the rocky alcove.

"Having fun yet?" Dusty said, in breaths.

"Oh yeah," Nora answered. "What now?"

Kory pointed down the gorge.

"It goes down about two hundred yards more, then turns due south to meet the river. We escape at that point and go

up on to the upper bowl. There's plenty of forest there and some downed timber, so we should make out alright."

"Did you bring a tent?" Nora asked. Kory shook her head.

"Bivvy sack only. You?" she nodded to Harrington.

"Same, I'm afraid," he answered. "You know, trying to save weight, and all that. But if we're all in that boat, we should be fine, if rather isolated."

"We'll try to put together some windbreak," Dusty said. "For warmth and efficiency if not for morale. And a fire." He shifted the pack. "In the meantime, everybody rested? Okay, onward."

Kory led off. As they followed the contour of the gorge's intermittent stream, the grade became easier and although the snow still made things slippery underfoot, it was still much easier than the uncertainty of the scree. The trees grew slowly taller the lower they went and the wind eased up markedly as it was stifled by the firs. Nora yelled up to Dusty.

"Think the chopper'll make it?"

"No way of knowing! That wind above the valley has got to make a wicked shear!"

The gorge eased off soon and they turned toward the bowl. Now it was Dusty's turn to struggle uphill for a change. This slope was much shorter and at least it was out of the wind. It wasn't long before they found the lightning-blasted tree with Kory's pack underneath. Although she didn't say it, Kory was more than relieved. One never knew.

"Is this the best spot?" Dusty could talk without shouting in this more sheltered area.

"No. There's a decent spot about one hundred yards

downstream from here. There's a hollow cut into a cliff band below the gorge. Trees butt up against the base of the hollow and there is decent firewood, I think. I was going to bivvy there tonight until the stupid plane went down.

"The stream is year-round, looks like, and hopefully will not freeze even if we have a hard drop in temperature tonight. Runs pretty fast."

"Sounds good. Lead on, MacDuff." It was Harrington who rolled his eyes this time, as much at the blasphemy against the English National Poet as the inane cliché.

Dusty was concerned and his use of cliché showed it. Normally the most precise speaker of American English, it often went southward when he was stressed. The chopper should have been here by now: it had only taken Bob forty minutes to reach the LZ and Alpha-niner had left well over an hour ago.

They reached the hollow and as Tolkien had called it: "one wall and no roof mean a house." As a mere indentation in a long cliff band, it at least cut down some more of the wind and the snow didn't seem to lie so deeply in there.

Dusty tried raising the other helicopter as the others began to build camp. "Sierra Five, Sierra Twenty-Two on Search-and-Rescue."

There was nothing. He switched to Red and hoped that the signal could reach the repeater. There was nothing. He pulled out his cell phone, but there was nothing there either: no signal and only the annoying beeping indicative of that. Their camping spot was probably the deadest area in the county for any long distance communication, at least.

Dusty pulled out a wire-saw and began cutting selected green-neededled boughs off healthy trees he thought could

spare them, not taking more than two or three from any one tree. The others searched for dry wood, of any kind. The cliff face with its boulders would make an ideal heat reflector and the trees around it were fairly close. The snow swirled ever faster and the two inches on the ridges had translated to a full six inches at the base of the cliff.

Nora and Harrington made a find. During a high water, the stream had washed some long branches and trees into a narrow section of the canyon, forming a dam. They pulled about fifteen ten-foot poles and brought some of them to the hollow. They piled some rocks and boulders between the trees and formed the long poles into a roof. It was low, but with the fir boughs piled on top, kept most of the snow out.

Kory poured a little airplane fuel on a tepee type fire.

"Stand back!" she said. She lit a waterproof match and gingerly tossed it onto the fire. There was a loud "poof" and the fuel caught quickly, spreading to the wood.

"Good job," Dusty said. He pulled out his radio and tried the chopper again. It was very crackly although something came through on Red. Nothing on SAR. He walked through the trees to the meadow at the valley's bottom and tried again on SAR. The SAR channel was monitored by the pilots and nothing else seemed able to make it out of this dead area, anyway. If they were close, they should be able to hear him. But, he reflected, if they were close he should be hearing chopper blades thumping the air and echoing up the valley.

"Sierra Five, Sierra Twenty-Two on Search-and-Rescue." The answer was surprisingly swift.

"Go ahead, Twenty-two."

"Yeah, Mark, we're bivvied in the valley about two clicks downstream and southeast from the Lat-Long I gave you an hour ago. You should have been here, what's the holdup?"

"We had to put down about five from where you are. Rather forcibly, I'm sorry to say."

8.

Mark continued.

"Pilot snagged a fir with his tail rotor trying to stay below the shear and we came down but hard!"

Dusty drew a deep breath. He could hear the others assemble the camp as he considered the implications. Things made sense now.

"How's everybody doing?" he asked.

"Minor injuries. Good pilot here, brought us down safely enough, although his career's in deep doodoo."

"Too bad," Dusty said blandly. A court martial was bound to happen, although he had hoped the pilot had enough balls to stand up to whomever had ordered him into such a precarious spot. "What's the situation?"

"We've got a fairly large space in here and can spend the night. Last forecast calls for three feet of snow and there's another storm behind it. There's no way another chooper's going to make it in before morning and after this, I've warned them off anyway. We'll make due. Wait, stand by." There was a short pause, then, "Todd says to tell you it wasn't his fault. Really."

Dusty laughed.

"Copy that! I take it Courthouse has been notified."

"Negative. We just went down."

"We're set up here. I'll give them the bad news. You just get set up there to ride it out."

"Sounds good. The others are on it already."

Dusty switched to Red and tried to raise HQ , or "Courthouse." Courthouse was obviously not pleased at the news. There was an interesting - read "bored and official" -- tone in Harry's voice and Dusty wondered if there was

someone looking over his shoulder. Probably some Fed poking his nose in.

Dusty mentioned the dead pilot of the airplane had been removed from the cockpit and secured under boulders. There was a significant pause.

Courthouse responded testily.

"You were apparently supposed to inform us before doing anything else."

What was this "apparently" jazz? There was definitely "Fed" written all over that statement. That was odd. Who was that dead pilot? Dusty did his best not to sound defensive, however he may have felt.

"I did what was best under the circumstance. The plane had already flipped over once and there wasn't a guarantee that the post-frontal wind shift wouldn't drop it over the edge. If we wanted a body recovery of any kind, we needed to do as much as possible, soon. I'm not going to risk SAR personnel over a dead pilot." He considered adding, "No matter who he is," but held back.

"Stand by."

Courthouse came back on after a minute.

"Stay put. We'll send another chopper as soon as the weather clears."

"Copy that. We have enough food for a couple of days if necessary. Be advised that we'll be turning off all radios but one tuned to Red to save batteries. Sierra Twenty-two clear."

"Courthouse clear."

Annoyed, although he realized he didn't know why, Dusty turned back to the shelter. He brightened up once he saw what had been done. Although no Astoria, the interior was at least warming up and the atmosphere palpably cozier,

made more obvious by the heavy snow coming down. The cliff face threw a respectable amount of heat and the wall of trees and bracken made a doable wind break, if not better.

"Looks like we're here for the long haul," Dusty said. "Hope you got some steaks in that bag," he added to Kory. She looked up and smiled at him for the first time in several weeks.

"Comfort food," Dusty reflected, "is whatever 'comforts' you at the moment. Even hot Jell-O."

"Amen to that," Nora said with feeling.

The "hot Jell-O" was the dessert to the evening meal. Harrington and Kory both had enough freeze-dried meals to last a week and Nora and Dusty were grateful at their insistence to donate to The Cause. Two or three days of nothing but "energy bars" is not likely to lift morale, and although Dusty's bash pack prudently contained packages of ramen noodles and oatmeal, the freeze-dried meals and short-term fresh food definitely made the dinner more enjoyable.

"Interesting stuff, this," Harrington commented, sipping his Jell-O. "How did you ever come up with this idea?"

"My climbing mentor told me about it. Technically, it's supposed to be comforting -- I wasn't kidding about that -- but it was originally supposed to be an instant injection of pure protein. Gelatin, after all, from animals. But nowadays, you have to look at the package and be a purist about artificial flavoring and all. I'm not sure, but I suspect that a lot of Jell-O desserts actually

have no gelatin at all. 'Zero protein.'"

"Cynic," Kory replied. "It's worth it without the protein. Besides, the sugar'll give you a lift, if nothing else."

Harrington was thoughtful for a moment. He lifted his head.

"I say," he said. "I'm a bit concerned about my colleagues."

"Your colleagues?" Nora asked.

"Yes, I had planned an outing on the tundra to do some time-sensitive botanical observations. A couple of professors from my university were to meet me at timberline on Haynes Peak before sunset. They were rather late and I daresay they're a little worried if they made it to my cache."

"Are they experienced in the backcountry?"

"One of them is. He's trekked over Canada and knows how to deal with this sort of thing. The other has camped out in Scotland, but is not used to adverse weather, at least in the Rockies."

"Well," said Dusty, "since one of them knows how to survive out here, I wouldn't be too concerned. When the chopper comes for us, we'll send them over to make sure they're okay. Too risky to do anything now. I'll let Courthouse know at the next communication."

The others agreed. Harrington seemed to relax a bit. He stared into the fire as motes of snow swirled into it and kept his thoughts to himself.

The chopper was cold and it would get colder in spite of the several stoves fired up inside. Todd muttered a

curse and shuffled closer to his cooking meal. The food for the next day or two -- or three, he pessimistically considered -- was limited to what the bash packs had and it wasn't much. He yelled out the door.

"How would you like your power bar today? Fried or boiled?"

The others were seated around a campfire that burned a prudent distance from the chopper's fuel tanks. They had built a fire reflector from branches and fir boughs, similar in function to the cliff face of the other camp.

"Frozen," Mark said.

Todd held up his finger and sagely evaluated the weather.

"Nope, not yet," he said. "I'll bet it gets down there tonight, though. So, what's up with our dear little friends?" He thumbed back into the forest in an indeterminate direction. Mark shrugged.

"Doing what 'dear little friends' do, I guess. I suspect he's kissin' up to the 'crats for bungling a mission. Passing the buck to the pilot. Not his fault, but you know what they say."

"Don't I though," Todd said. He looked at Jim. "I'll bet you've seen enough of it yourself."

"Ugh, me no savvy belagana talk."

"Bullshit. Just makes me glad I never did anything for the Feds."

"Oh, it wasn't all that bad," Jim replied. "Got me off the Rez. Good discipline and all."

There was a rhythmic "poof, poof" in the deepening snow and the "Fed" tromped up to the fire. The pilot, David, followed. They sat down to the warmth of the flames.

"What, no wood?" Todd quipped. He was obviously no

admirer of anything that smacked of "federal government."

Kelly Frey started and looked up.

"Huh? What? Oh. Sorry, I had other things on my mind."

"Oh, like job security?"

"Knock it off, Todd," Mark stood behind him with a couple of water bottles. "I'm off to the river. Back in ten." He patted the shoulder of the FBI agent as he passed. "Don't worry about him, guys. You should see the way he treats his friends."

Kelly Frey was a garbage man. "Pooper scooper" might be more appropriate, he thought. When things went south on an operation, he was known for being the one to analyze a problem and come up with a face-saving solution for everyone. Rare enough in civilian business, it felt to him like his type was practically non-existent in government circles. If it weren't for his superior skills in backcountry work, not to mention personal preferences, he might have been in D.C. a long time ago. Unfortunately, pooper scoopers were an embarrassment to those whose asses needed covered and a job well done in this area was guaranteed to be a job best forgotten. Still, he was glad enough to let superiors take the credit and stay in the background himself. It kept him un-promoted and unpaid but living where he liked. He'd heard about D.C. summers.

In this case, he was told to board a chopper with his gear and fly post-haste to Springfield Courthouse. Don't question, he was told, just go. Secure the pilot ASAP, dead or alive and secure any non-aircraft item that may be floating about. That meant luggage, wallet, trinkets and gear of any kind.

When the weather socked in, he called his superiors -- the ones in Denver who'd tag-teamed the locals - to tell

them they had personnel on site and were aborting the second chopper's mission. He was told in no uncertain terms to continue on in. It was over his adamant protests and backcountry expert though he was, they overrode his judgment.

Damn me, he thought, I should have gotten out of this business a long time ago. He wasn't serious, of course, it was just that he was one of those whose persistence saw the end benefit in spite of the bureaucrats who got in the way. He picked up a stick and, like a cub scout on his first overnighter, dug into the flaming coals thoughtfully.

Thoughtful, also, was the look Todd gave him. He'd heard of the guy, of course, and this one didn't act like the normal Federal employees that he'd worked with. Even rangers in the 'Park were wrapped up in their own little world of promotion, politics and maneuvering to "get ahead." And he actually didn't mind them. He'd learned to live with it, there. It was true what Mark had said: he really wasn't being hateful. It was just his way. Todd sighed and poured some hot chocolate into his mug. He offered some to Jim and Kel, but at the negative responses just settled down to the fire.

The night passed slowly for both parties as the storm blew. At about four o'clock in the morning, the weather broke for a moment as the front passed and a wakeful Dusty could see stars peeking out amidst the clouds, set in a dark, velvety blue curtain like the stage ending a fifth grader's Christmas pageant. The moon was bright, and the new-fallen snow - a little over two feet of it -- threw the

increased light onto the trees. He got up and put on his snowshoes. He did not bother with his headlamp in the magnified moonlight. The others slept.

The temperature had dropped and there was a crystalline quality to the air as he stepped out into the forest. Instead of freezing the lungs, it enlivened them. He considered running, but didn't want to sweat too much until daylight and a breakfast fire to warm up the chilled perspiration. The crunch of the snow from his 'shoes echoed for only about three feet, it seemed, before it was eternally dampened by the white insulation. He broke through the silent firs onto the central meadow. Nothing moved and the snow rolled out smoothly in undulating curves. His breath poofed into miniature snow clouds as his heart rate slowed. A walking pace on snowshoes was still a good workout. Especially the first time of the season.

Dusty got out his radio and turned it on.

"Courthouse Command, Sierra Twenty-two on Red."

Nothing. It didn't surprise him. He was sure it was getting through, but however eternally vigilant Harry could be, there was no reason not to grab some sleep when possible. Especially if nothing was happening. He tried again.

This time Harry's sleepy voice came back loud and clear.

"Go ahead," he said with his characteristic patience.

"Lovely morning, Courthouse!"

"Yeah, where's my coffee?"

"Isn't that Sierra One's job?"

"Right. Let's switch to EOC and see how the repeater works it."

"Code four." Dusty switched and after the obligatory

protocol, said, "How's that?"

"About four by five, but good enough to work with."

"One by Five" was poor, "Five by Five" was perfect.

"How's the weather radar looking up?" Dusty asked.

"Clear as a bell up here."

"Hang on. Let me check. How you guys doing up there?"

"Fine. Long night, but everyone at Jefferson Command, at least, is code four. We got about two feet of snow last night, so with the intervening miles to the nearest road, don't even think of asking us to lug out that body!"

He could hear laughter in Harry's voice as "copy that!" came over the waves. Then after a pause, Harry's voice came back.

"Okay, here we are. Forecast calls for a break with snow showers this morning then increasing clouds starting at dawn. Sorry to tell you this, but we're continued under a winter storm watch until midnight tonight. Radar shows. . . stand by. . .

"Radar shows that break with snow showers starting just south of you then running for about a hundred miles northwest. Then there's a pretty heavy band of precip -- rain in the valleys, snow higher up and all that. That mess stretches for a ways beyond that. Looks like you're going to be there for a bit."

"Copy that, and not very happily. Any chance some of us could get picked up? Team 2 at Chopper Command are pretty limited in their gear, I think, especially the chopper crew. They'll survive but if we can start carting unnecessary personnel out, it would streamline things a bit."

"I'll check," Harry answered, "but my gut feeling is 'probably not.' Nobody's dead or dying out there?"

"No, fortunately, I guess."

"Well, that's that, then. Aside from the desperation that's coming across my desk from the Feds, the window as far as the weather is concerned is pretty small. I don't think we'd get a chopper close to you in the time we have before the next wave hits, and nobody's taking the remotest chance on losing another 'plane, Feds or no Feds. Sorry."

Dusty breathed a curse. What the hell was going on that the Feds should be so involved?

"When you say 'Feds,' who do you mean?"

Harry hesitated. Dusty could almost sense the tense atmosphere across the radio waves.

"You name it, but mostly, FBI, CIA and Homeland Security."

"'Mostly?' You mean others are in on it?"

"'It' is a pretty big deal. A bunch of other acronyms seem involved as well. They haven't told us, of course, what's going on, but they want that pilot pretty desperately."

"How come? Criminal type or something?"

"Oh no, opposite. Apparently, he's somehow attached to the CIA, some multi-agency contract op, and loyalty runs pretty deep there, I guess. Hang on, someone's coming."

There was a pause, then Harry came back on, his voice very formal.

"Thanks for the update, we'll let you know when we have transport available. Unless things change, we don't expect any extraction until at least 0100 hours tomorrow morning. Hang in there."

"Copy that. I will check back with you regardless at 1200. WTDX 746, Clear."

And with that, Dusty snowshoed back to his "bed."

Jefferson Command awoke with the sun, pretty much at the same time. There was some meat among the supplies of the "weekers," Kory and Harrington, and although powdered eggs are never the best at any time, they were far better than another round of energy bars. Nora and Dusty were grateful. Dusty had coffee - his one culinary weakness -- in his pack and by pooling things for the common good, the team made out fairly well.

Dusty stood up.

"Thanks for the grub," he said. "Now. Anybody got 'shoes besides me?"

Kory nodded.

"Really? What were you doing with snowshoes this early in the season?"

She looked at him with disgust.

"www.nws.noaa.gov," she said. "I checked the forecast."

"Right," he answered foolishly. "How about making a trek down the valley with me and seeing how the chopper crew is?"

Kory hesitated, then got up.

"Sure, I'll go. You need someone to hold your hand."

"Gee, thanks. You guys got any food we can spare? With the new storm coming in, they might be glad of it instead of energy bars and ramen."

Harrington piped up in his Yorkshire accent.

"Yes, I've got a few day's worth. My research is pretty well shot this time anyway, what with the snow and this little - how can I put it? -- 'interruption' in my

travels."

"Great."

"Same here," said Kory. "Between the two of us, we can split our food and have enough for both teams for a day or two."

It didn't take long to divvy the food and put it into the two packs. The packs were not heavy and Dusty and Kory threw in a bit extra for themselves: they were determined not to be short-handed if they needed to bivvy when coming back. Nora got on "the horn."

"Alpha-niner, Jefferson Command on EOC." The radio crackled and came to life."

"Jefferson, go ahead."

"We're sending some grub your way. Can you give us your UTM and a description? Ready to copy." The numbers crackled over the radio. Mark continued.

"I have the map out and command posts are plotted. I have you almost two miles up Jefferson Creek drainage. There's a nasty drop below you of about two hundred feet and we're right below that, about five hundred yards. I know, we're lucky we didn't plow into the waterfall. It's on the west side of the drainage in a clearing about one hundred yards wide."

The radio crackled during the pause.

"You can't miss the chopper," he added dryly.

Dusty looked at the lowering sky and held up two fingers to Nora.

"They'll be there in an hour or two," she said.

She rang off.

"Think you guys can use your shovels and build us a real shelter?" Dusty asked.

"Sure," Nora replied. "Nothing better to do. Tudor,

Cape Cod or Frank Lloyd Wright?"

"Just 'warm,' hmm?"

"Sounds good. Snow's pretty powdery on top, but most of it's wet enough that a couple hours of sintering should help. I figure we can use this thing we put together as the frame and make a quinsy out of the rest of it?"

"Whatever you think is best. Don't get too bored while we're off playing!"

Then he and Kory shouldered their packs and took off through the woods.

"Just to let you know, the way I came up was over that ridge," Kory shouted from behind him. He turned and stopped.

"I didn't come up the drainage," she said. "I was on the ridge for much of it, then came down."

"Great. So you have no idea what that cliff-face is going to be like."

"No. Haven't seen it."

"How long going the ridge route will it take us to get down there?"

"I really don't know. Maybe two hours, three. It goes quite a ways around the drainage. I don't know. I swung over from Dry Creek so I have no idea what this valley's like below this upper section aside from what the map says."

The "Map" had showed an escarpment wrapping all the way around Chopper Command, creating a bowl that was normally seen at the upper end of valleys, but could occasionally form around a waterfall. Although there was no formal trail marked on the USGS map, Dusty had assumed Kory had found some sort of game trail navigating the crags.

"Well," Dusty smiled. "Weather says we have no time

for that. Willing to take a chance? I have my harness and twenty-five meters of rope. I have plenty of webbing: if we have to, we'll rap."

And getting back up? she didn't say. She didn't feel like hanging around the military personnel much less giving them a demonstration in rock climbing technique.

The truth was, Dusty didn't feel like taking a ten-mile hike to cover only two as the crow flies. Neither did he feel like being exposed above timberline when a nasty bit of snow was coming in. This time, however, he may have goofed. The odds were good, he reflected, that there was a way down this cliff. Wherever it was, he hadn't found it in the grey morning.

The rope snaked down a nasty fifty-foot section. The cliff was rocky enough, but a missed hold could be fatal. Technically a "fourth-class" ascent, both Kory and Dusty could have whipped down this in the dark if it weren't for this little slippery section below them, made worst by the sub-freezing temperature and ice glazing.

They had dropped the packs onto the end of the rope and lowered them to the next ledge. Kory followed and now Dusty was on his way down. He looked below him and saw the "cliff" easing off into a steep, rocky hillside down which the main stream -- frozen night notwithstanding -- still freely flowed. He plopped down beside Kory.

"Now that wasn't too bad," he said.

"If that was a commentary about my rapping style, I'm not sure I would go off that rope if I were you or I just might give you a shove."

"Testy still, eh?" Dusty smiled to remove any possible

kind of offense. If she didn't understand his humor a week ago, she wouldn't understand it now and now was a bad time.

This time she smiled back: what it really meant, he had no idea.

"No, more important things are on the agenda beside pushing you off the cliff. Besides, probably too many Fed types looking around to be worth it."

He unclipped from the rope and looked up at it. The rest of the climb looked easy so they could leave the rope "fixed" for their return.

"I think I'll leave this here. If we find another way up, we can undo from the top. Otherwise we'll prussik or self-belay. It's only a 5.6: maybe not even that, but I wouldn't want to do it without a rope if it's snowing."

Kory agreed and once again they donned packs. They moved down the hill and Dusty's gear clanked. He didn't want to waste time dropping his harness for only a couple of hundred yards.

A clearing stretched below them and the chopper absurdly decorated the upper section of the meadow, the man-made machine jarring the consistency of the forest. Equally out of place, a solitary fire sent a pillar of smoke, identifying the location of the camp and the figures moving around it.

Nora looked at Harrington. He was not a strong man nor big, and certainly didn't look imposing. She could handle herself, thank you very much, and actually appreciated that the others had confidence in her abilities to do so. As for Harrington, he was not the type to impose on a woman in any

form, forcibly or not, but he enjoyed socializing. Nora habitually carried a pack of cards and they spent the morning playing poker on a piece of wood, using fir cones and stones for chips.

The radio came on, on EOC. SAR couldn't reach over the escarpment, being strictly line-of-sight. Nora looked at her watch. It was 0945 and the timing was about right for the Dusty and Kory to reach Chopper Command.

"Jefferson Command, go ahead."

"Nora, we're here. Since it hasn't started snowing, we'll go ahead and head back up your way. The guys are fine, and say thanks for the food."

"Gotcha. Courthouse, you copy?"

"Courthouse copies. Just to let both of you know, we almost sent a helicopter to get some of you out of there, but the weather's too iffy. We're seeing the first snow now. IFR only right now at the airport, and it'll get nastier up your way. You may have a half hour before it hits you."

"Copy. We're heading up. Sierra Twenty-two, clear."

The first real flakes hit when Dusty and Kory reached the top of the cliff and they both breathed a sigh of relief. Doable, but not fun, is a climb on wet rock in a snowstorm and they were glad to be past that. Dusty stowed his rope and harness and they trotted into the woods. They had only two miles to go.

But "two miles" can be a relative term, and "two miles" on snowshoes in the woods at 11,000 feet during a heavy snowstorm is vastly different from "two miles" on a sunny day in Suburbia, U.S.A.

I thought I was in shape, Dusty groaned. Kory was keeping up with him, but just barely. The snow came down heavily and already over six inches had been added to the two feet tromped down earlier that morning. It meant breaking new trail. Add to that a thirty mile-per-hour wind, and the visibility that had dropped to only about forty feet in the trees. Dusty halted.

The temperature had dropped radically.

"We . . . still . . . on . . . track?" Kory panted behind him. Her teeth were chattering.

"Yes. But I'm thinking we should take a break. You don't sound too good."

"I'm fine. But a warm-up would be good."

Much pride, this young Jedi, Dusty thought once more. She still has a long way to go. But, for now, the important thing is to get her core temp up. He got out the radio and turned it to SAR. Nora was on quickly, bored, apparently, or just losing too much virtual money to Harrington.

"Yeah, Dusty?"

"We're about halfway to ya," he said. "We've got almost three feet of snow on the ground, all of it soft and between the wind and cold, we're getting pretty worn."

"Wuss!" she cracked. "Taking a break? I could use your help up here."

Dusty turned to Kory with a quizzical look on his face.

"Having trouble with our guest?" he said back into the mic.

"You're not kidding," she answered. "I owe him \$58.42 and that with penny-ante. I thought Brits weren't supposed to know how to gamble anything other than whist!"

Dusty smiled.

"Well, don't you have too much fun. We'll break here for an hour or two to warm up and then head up. I'll contact you before we go in any case and update you."

"Gotcha. Clear."

He turned toward a particularly dense copse of firs, which seemed sufficiently high as to minimize the snow making it to the ground. He entered the enclosure and looked up. The space between the trees was about eight by eight feet. The boughs and the treetops leaned over and the collected snow was only a few inches deep. He could deal with that. Kory followed, still shivering.

He set the pack down and motioned for Kory to do likewise. She sat on his pack and he turned to the overhanging boughs. There were a few dead ones and he broke them off, tossing them into a pyramid formation in the middle of the copse. Then he went outside and did the same thing, collecting a healthy amount of branches before returning to the camp. He pulled out a piece of firestarter -- although pride made him want to do it legitimately, hypothermia wasn't something to fool with and uncontrolled shivering was the first stage -- and lit the pyramid. To their gratification it caught quickly and the snow hissed around it as the fire gathered momentum.

"We'll get you something to drink, as well," he said, breaking out the inevitable hot jello packet.

"H-how much do you c-carry in that pack?" Kory tried to joke.

"Enough," he replied. "Doesn't take much to make a nice cup and I have four packets in my pack at all times for a winter rescue possibility."

His emergency pack contained an enameled cup: a bit heavier than a plastic mug, but infinitely more versatile.

Enamel didn't burn when placed on a fire and therefore a hiker didn't need an extra pot to get water hot. He poured some water into the cup, added a handful of snow to stretch the bottle's supply and set it among the now-hot coals on the edge.

The next part would be rougher, in some ways. At least, more awkward. He had her straddle a pack, unzipped his shell and fleece, and took off his capilene shirt. Then he put on the fleece and jacket, leaving the front open to his bare chest. He pulled up the layers on her back, leaving it bare and moved up to her as close as possible. He wrapped his fleece and coat around them both as best as he could. The fire sent some warmth into the cold air.

"I'll bet you're enjoying this," she said. There was nothing he could detect in her voice. At least, it seemed, she was a professional and recognized, he hoped, that the best way to cure hypothermia was skin-to-skin contact. He was glad she wasn't any worse. That meant crawling into a bivvy sack -- in the interest of speed and considering the comparably short distance, they'd left their sleeping bags at camp -- with the least amount of clothes between them. He didn't want to think of the complications that would have entailed.

"I am, but not the way you probably think," he answered. She seemed past caring as she slowly relaxed. The warmth from him and from the fire soaked into her body and her shivering ceased in spite of the light snow that made it past the smoke and the overhanging trees. She felt very tired.

"What's this?" she asked.

"What?"

"This book thing. The thing in your jacket?"

Dusty was confused and for a quick moment thought that one of them had gone deep enough into hypothermia to be losing it mentally. Then he remembered the thing he'd picked up from the pilot.

"Oh. It fell out of the pilot when we moved him to the boulders. A DVD, The Two Towers. Must be some sort of Tolkien fan to be dragging it around in his jacket of all things."

"Must be. Why not just put it in your pack?"

"Never got around to it, and you know how it is: you put something in a shell's many pockets and you kind of forget it's there after a while."

She turned a bit awkwardly and looked at him.

"Really. So what other forgotten treasures from boy scout days do you have in here?"

9.

Frey was not having a good day. Aside from the humiliation of his case gone cold, there was the literal cold of the weather and the considerably colder demeanor of his comrades. The chopper crew was understandably angry still for being ordered into harm's way. It wasn't that they weren't willing to do so when necessary, but in their view a corpse that was way past caring in the middle of a high-altitude snowstorm certainly had not been critical, and overriding their judgment went way beyond proper cooperation. It was clear that they felt it was bullying and stupid, to say the least. When the chopper grazed the tree, the pilot actually took the time to turn his head and give him a look that plainly said, "I told you so." All this and at the same time doing his utmost to land them comparably safely. In the flyer's jargon, a good landing is one you can walk away from and in this case it could have been called a "good" landing. Career ending, maybe, but "good."

Frey didn't blame them and didn't waste time trying to explain himself or pass the buck to his superiors, which amounted to the same thing. He had the same choice in disobeying his boss as the pilot had in disobeying his. It was all still very confusing.

What was not quite understandable was the coldness of the SAR team. He had done nothing to them -- beyond the obvious perceived misjudgment -- and had hoped that his local reputation ameliorated the typical local authority's animosity toward the Fed.

He added more fuel to the waning fire as the radio came on again. It was Dusty, but even he wasn't concerned

about them.

"Jefferson Command, Sierra Twenty-Two."

"Go ahead."

"We're on our way."

* * *

"Jealous, are we?" Dusty sighed. Nora had just made some comment about him and Kory keeping warm.

"Naw, I know you too well. Just giving you a bad time."

"I know. I'm just a bit tired and took it wrong. It's a bit sensitive, you know. Look, I know it and you know it, but Kory, well, is a little, uh, confused about our relationship, I think, and it might be a good time to just pass on such comments."

"Yeah. Sure," she answered. "So. How did you make out?"

"Well, we started by kissing, you know, just a peck on the cheek, then . . ." Dusty stopped to look at Nora's face. Then she broke into a smile and gave him a shove.

"Yeah, whatever."

The snow still came down heavily and the wind had not stopped. More people were losing to Harrington playing poker now that Dusty and Kory had returned, and boredom had set in as a serious disease. The degree of monotony was obvious in the fact that the pile of wood had grown three times since the excursion to Chopper Command, rather than diminished and many of the trees in the surrounding area now had the trimmed appearance of a meticulously kept arbor. Nora and Harrington had also built a "quinsy," a sort of igloo, out of a large pile of snow they shoveled

earlier in the day. They had rather ingeniously incorporated it into the back of the lean-to and the extra snow insulated well. It would be a trade-off. The fire was definitely warmer in radiant heat, but impractical to sleep by for four people, and it was destructive, of course, to build it too close to the quinsy. The inside of the quinsy could reach sixty degrees from body heat alone and was sufficient to keep them comfortable during the night.

Dusty switched his radio to the weather frequency.

"Good news and bad news. What do you want?" he asked the others.

"Bad," said Harrington carelessly. He at least was in good spirits. He was holding a straight and confident he could win back the \$2.50 or so that Kory had just fleeced off his mediocre hand. It wasn't the money: it was that he'd read her face completely wrong.

"Storm total: five feet. That means we'll have to find a decent LZ, then clear a spot for the chopper. On the other hand, the forecast is for clear and cold after midnight. We'll have to make some adjustments, maybe to stay warm. It'll get down to the single digits."

"Ooh, that could get interesting," Harrington joked suggestively. It wasn't lost on Nora.

"Only you," Nora answered, "could think of sex when you're fully clothed and shivering with three other fully clothed and shivering people." Their relationship had obviously gotten casual over umpteen rounds of cards.

"Who said anything about sex? It'll be a challenge just staying warm. Like I said. 'Interesting.'"

"Yeah, right," said Dusty. "Shouldn't be a problem. Unless, of course, anyone wants to do night-hike to Kory's very snowed-in car through the three feet we have so far.

It's cozy enough in here, now that we have some snow to provide insulation. Nora, let Courthouse know we should have an LZ shoveled out by morning once the snow stops. And make sure Alpha-niner is doing the same thing. We should be able to get out of here by dawn or even sooner."

"Gotcha."

"Still, a bit of a warning to them. They'll know that the winds are supposed to shift to the north as the low slides to the east. That can cause cornices on that northwest angled ridge on Jefferson and with the heavy type of snow we've gotten makes for a bad avalanche risk. We're kind of close to that."

"Right. Wonderful."

"Camp's in a good spot, though, so we should be fine."

After dinner, Dusty took the DVD out of his jacket and looked at it for a moment. He really should have put it back into the pilot's coat, but the conditions had been very difficult up there and he had forgotten it was even there. Tacky, tacky. He shrugged and put it into the very large fanny pack attached to the top of his expedition pack.

He pulled out his bivvy sack with the others and added the obligatory extra fleece to his layers. The quinsy was designed in such a way -- and Nora and Harrington had done an exemplary job building it -- that a large bench stretched across half the structure. It allowed them to sleep together, each in his or her sack, and space blankets around all of them reflected body heat back in on them. Kory and Harrington had sleeping bags and pads as well as the boughs they'd collected and the combination would provide a sort of mattress for all of them. It should keep them in comparative comfort compared to the night before.

A final check on the radio and it was time to turn in. Alpha-niner was "Code Four" and everybody settled in for another night.

True to the word of alchemists at the National Weather Service, the snow ended precisely at midnight and the temperature dropped abruptly. Dusty awoke in the darkness. Quinsies are lousy on reflective light and are often pitch black in the absence of sun or moon. He felt a stirring on his right and in his sleep sensed rather than saw the person next to him get up for the call of nature. It was Harrington. Someone else got up soon after. By that time, he was sufficiently awake to feel his own full bladder and eventually went outside in spite of the warm comfort of his sleeping bag. By scrambling up to the top of a boulder that was wind-blown and had marginally less snow than the others, he was able to look out over their part of the valley.

The moon in its final quarter rose before him. The stars were out in their majesty and the snow reflected all the light to reveal a Christmas scene that John Kinkade could only dream about, much less paint. The upper bowl of the valley stretched before him and black dots of firs trickled down its sides. The north wind had freshened and he could see streamers of snow on the ridges curling into cornices as he watched.

He looked at the flats before him, where they had tentatively spotted the landing zone possibilities and shook his head. There were about five feet of snow on the valley floor and that meant the upper bowl was primed for

avalanche. The snow had been too heavy and there was too much of it to be otherwise. The camp was low enough down the valley and near enough to the forested gully as to not really be a worry, but he had no idea what the noise of a helicopter in that confined space would do. He should have thought of that before. They would have to find an LZ somewhere deeper in the trees and farther from the cliff-band. They could walk to the lower LZ at Chopper Command, he supposed, but with only two snowshoes, that left two of them to "post-hole" it best they could. Not really an option in five flat feet of snow, not to mention the inevitable drifts.

He looked at his watch. It was five o'clock. Two hours before sunrise, but there was no way he could go back to sleep. Even in plain starlight, he could look for an LZ and even start to shovel. He stretched and his back snapped as he turned toward his gear. He brushed off his pack the dusting of snow that somehow fell through the lean-to. The zipper was open to the fanny pack and some of the snow had fallen in. Stupid, he thought, I can't believe I did something that dumb. He zippered it up and hoisted the pack onto his back. He grabbed his snowshoes and took them outside. He stepped into the 'shoes and lifted each one to tighten the straps, then stamped down a sloping trail onto the top of the five feet outside.

Dusty followed the faint trail Kory and he had broken earlier and kept his eyes open. The visibility was quite good and he had no trouble picking an LZ well into the middle of the valley. Looking around, he decided that anything but the momma of all avalanches would stop well short of the landing zone. In any case, it was close enough to camp for them to hunker down if it approached.

He took off his pack, pulled out the backcountry shovel and went to work.

"Glutton for punishment, eh?" Kory commented on his return.

"Gotta figure some way to warm up," he answered.

Harrington handed him a cup full of the last of the hot Jell-O. Dusty took it gratefully and sipped slowly. The predawn was in the sky and the choppers were on their way. The others had been awake for an hour: the cold and the anticipation of an early morning extraction tended to discourage sleep. A few minutes later, Harry called.

"Jefferson and Alpha-niner, be advised that the choppers will contact you on SAR."

"Copy." From Mark at Alpha-niner.

"Copy," said Dusty. "I just reconned a new LZ and took a look around. We are in a bowl with high, repeat, high, avalanche danger. We will stay at camp until the chopper circles to loosen anything. We're very well protected here, but I want to make sure about the LZ's position should anything loosen up and fall.."

"Code Four. I'll pass that on to your aircraft. He'll be aware before he's in range and will approach accordingly."

Dusty looked at the others.

"You all got that?" They nodded. Kory spoke up.

"Wouldn't it be safer in the middle of the valley than here?"

"I thought of that," Dusty replied. "There's a slight chance -- slight, I know, but still a chance -- that one

bad avalanche could reach all the way down. Here, we're still somewhat protected, by the cliff and by the fact that we're actually next to the gully instead of in it. Any snow coming down would get sucked into the gully or pass over us if by some rare chance it came over the cliff. The plane is right in the middle of an earlier avalanche swath, though," he added. The others nodded again: they could see what he was thinking.

"Jefferson Command, this is Mobile Medic on SAR." It was faint and crackly, but the "scan" mode still picked it up. It was on so Dusty could monitor all relevant channels and he turned the "transmit" button to SAR.

"Go ahead."

Bob's voice continued. Although he was still a bit out, much of it was still understandable. "[crackle]. . . received the info from Courthouse. Where . . . LZ in relation to your position?"

"It is two hundred and fifty yards due southwest of us. We're about fifty yards up-valley from the mouth of the gully you let us off at."

"Gotcha. Stand by."

It was a long two minutes but eventually everyone could hear the "thump-thump" of the blades as the aircraft approached. Mobile Medic came on again, this time five-by-five.

"I see the crash site from here. I can see your smoke and I assume that open stamped area in the snow southwest of you is the LZ."

"Affirmative."

"Confirm you want me to circle around the valley for a bit?"

"That's correct. I want to make sure that anything

loose is going to come down before we're in a bad position."

"It'll have to be high up. I don't want to take the chance of losing altitude or control from the avalanche winds, much less get caught in one."

"Copy. Do what you need to. F-Y-I, the center of the valley seems very calm at ground level, at least during the winds of the night. We'll monitor this channel from here out."

"Right."

The team hunkered down under the cliff face around the dying fire. The chopper settled into the valley and the sound of the blades was unnerving in its volume. Then suddenly it jumped several hundred feet in altitude and moved away.

"Good thing we checked," the pilot said over the radio. "We have a mid-sized slip starting from the northwest side of Jefferson, higher up than I expected."

The earth began to shake and -- foolishly, he knew -- Dusty walked out a few paces on his 'shoes and looked up. Rumbling came from farther up the bowl, above the cliff. Damn, he thought, it's right above the plane. That's going to be a headache sometime. The volume of snow increased in both meanings of the word and Dusty ran back to the comparative safety of the cliff. They were well away, but if peripheral or sympathetic slides started, he didn't want to be remotely at risk.

Few people have the opportunity to see a slide of this magnitude in the backcountry and live to tell about it, and even by Rocky Mountain standards, this one was impressive even if it was a "mid-sized" slip. It was surprising, he thought, what only five feet of new snow could do. The

massive snow leaped off the cliff face a half mile from them and arched its way to the valley floor. Like thunder on a particularly stormy night the low frequencies of the slide died away last, its echoes rumbling off the vertical faces around the bowl and trembling through the ground beneath their feet.

Dusty thumbed the mike.

"Wow," he called, "That was impressive from here. What's the status on the plane?"

"What plane?," replied Bob. "It was right in the middle of the slide. From what I could see, it went right to the bottom of the cliff. It's buried in tons of snow and rock. I hope the family doesn't want his luggage."

"Copy that! I don't fancy digging in that right now or ever! How's the top at this point?"

"Snow-wise, it's been completely scoured. There's nothing left on that edge but rock. Not even grass. I can't think of a more effective way to bury a body than this!"

"What's your status? Are we ready for pickup?"

"Let me do another sweep. I suspect that that particular slide was it. That north slope of Jefferson is a steep son-of-a-bitch and the cornices on the top kind of primed it. The other slopes are much more moderate, so I think we're okay but let me make sure."

"Right. How far down the valley did it reach?"

"About two hundred yards from the cliff. LZ's clear by a long shot."

"I'll give you five to make your sweep and then we head out to the LZ."

"Works for me. Here goes."

The chopper swept up and around and in "five" minutes the team made its way to the landing zone. It wasn't far

from the camp, although far enough not to have been affected by the avalanche: the meadow was still fairly free from snow, thanks to the early morning calisthenics of Dusty. His morning workout also broke a fairly solid trail and those without 'shoes still had to posthole, but in much easier conditions than anyone expected.

Dusty quickly pulled some fluorescent flagging tape and tied them to some outstanding trees. The "tell-tales" showed a northerly wind at about five miles per hour and any pilot could see at a glance how that would affect his landing.

"Mobile Medic, ready when you are," Dusty spoke into the mic.

"Pick your two first victims. I'll take them down to Alpha-niner's LZ, then back for you."

Harrington and Kory went first: they had been in the backcountry the longest. It didn't take long and the helicopter was back in surprisingly short order. Dusty took one backward look at the cliff. That was going to be tough to get to any time soon even if they had an Indian Summer. It didn't look like anything was going to happen in the next month or so in any case.

They took off and wheeled to the east, over the area where Harrington had said he was supposed to meet his professorial colleagues. There was no sign of any human life and, as the county emergency management team had not received any "overdue" phone calls regarding them, it was assumed that they had considered discretion the better part of valor and stayed home or at least in a nice hotel in Denver instead of heading up into the hills.

It was not long before both teams were back at the courthouse and commands terminated. Frey received the

report from Dusty with consternation: the whole mission was a bust in all senses of the word. The body was unrecoverable in the near future, the plane could not be searched, much less removed and certainly, he had not recovered anything from the pilot's body. Not to mention that wreck of a chopper several miles below. Forest Service would be pissed about that, he was sure: the two wrecks were effectually nothing more than HAZMAT garbage as far as that institution was concerned.

After a quick debrief, the dissatisfied team members went to respective homes, acronymns or organizations, and telephoned relevant people about their adventures.

10.

He leaned back in his chair. So, the Asalia guy was dead. Too bad, in a way, but it didn't really matter: they had the DVD. Good thing the SAR team rescued it before the plane was buried. Oh well, he thought. He hoped the material was on the DVD and not hidden in some random slip of magnetic media.

He typed on his computer.

<Raptor is flown and will not return. Recovered transmitter, though.>BUD1234

<Good thing. That's an expensive piece of hardware>RAPTOR24

<Back to the drawing board, I suppose>BUD1234

<No question. Who has the transmitter? We can't afford to have one out of circulation for long: we don't have an unlimited grant!>RAPTOR24

<Our field researcher will deliver it to the office by tomorrow and it will be checked there for further use.>BUD1234

<Great. I will notify our benefactors at the next meeting>RAPTOR24

He breathed a sigh of relief. Done and done.

Perry scratched his head. There it was again. Nothing for several days, then suddenly this. He had typed a report detailing his work time -- the bean counters loved to catch computer geeks playing around on company time and every interaction was logged for accountability's sake if for nothing else -- and it was put on his list to keep an eye on for a few weeks. As if he had nothing else to do.

Should he type again? He wondered. He'd gotten chewed out by this aviary society last time and if there was something, which he didn't think there was a chance, it'd do more harm than good. His superiors were intrigued, but a little nervous about his interaction. It was one thing to flush the pheasant: it was another to scare them out of range.

He logged it in again and printed out the conversation. He did computers. He was no analyst. That was for someone else to figure out.

Dusty was back to the old routine in the days that followed. In his absence, there had been three phone calls. One from his brother wondered where he was and what the "action" was. Second, from a new client in Massachusetts who was interested in having him come out to his vacation home for the week. Vacation in Martha's Vineyard would be fun, even if it was "work." He would consider that. The last one was from Kory. Wow, she must have jumped on the phone as soon as she got home, he thought.

"Hi, Dusty, it's Kory. All in the name of professionalism and all, I decided to call as soon as I got home. If you're not doing anything tomorrow, I was planning

on going to Fort Collins and picking up a few things at the mall. If you can go, give me a call."

Sure, why not. He figured she had thawed over the last "professional" endeavor and this was her not-so-subtle way of making up. He needed a few things anyway and a family birthday was coming up. As the uncle, he bought gifts that were predictable, but welcome: games of sorts for the nephews and clothes for the nieces. His brother's girls were fifteen and twelve and just at the right age where they welcomed "hip" clothing at anytime and his brother welcomed good, modest influence.

"Hi, Kory, it's Dusty. Sure, I'd like to go down. I've got a couple things to do in the morning, so how about eleven? I'll pick you up."

The man behind the counter had a smooth brown complexion with black hair and brown eyes. Combined with a classic, angular nose, they really did recall a Bedouin ancestry that would have stopped him in any airport had they still allowed racial profiling. The man was proud of his heritage. While he was leery of most films, he had some years ago actually gone to see Hidalgo when it came out and, inaccurate though it might have been in his mind, still walked out of the theater with a prouder step than when he had gone in. And not because the American had won.

He was also a lady-killer, a handsome man whose infective charm made him a lot of money at the gift shop. Set in the middle of the mall, he watched American culture in its most decadent form. Not really the most decadent, he reflected, he could be living in Las Vegas. He hated the

job and hated the way Americans spent money on silly knick-knacks and whorish clothing that showed off every curve of their women's bodies.

It was the perfect cover and when the call came, he was ready.

* * *

Harrington spent the night in a hotel, courtesy of Dusty. He was appreciative of that kind of hospitality. Dusty recognized a blown exercise when he saw it and felt a bit obligated to thank him for putting up with a SAR team effort, especially one that took him completely away from his research. It didn't do to mention that in such a storm, SAR might have been there anyway for his sake instead of the pilot's.

He had called his colleagues' cell -- that was a true story -- and was gratified to learn that they had never been in the backcountry at all and were desperately worried about his well-being. They had heard the forecast and, not being experienced in winter survival, had turned back within four miles of the trailhead. Where was he and why hadn't he called? He'd tried, he said. It seemed Courthouse Command had no idea where they were or how to get hold of him: the stereotypical absent-minded professor, Harrington had forgotten the cell number until he got back to his car. He wondered why his colleagues hadn't notified SAR and they admitted that it didn't dawn on them. He was the expert wilderness trekker, anyway, they said.

The next morning he put his gear in the rental car and headed down the mountain. He had business in Denver and in a few days would fly back to the East Coast university he

came from.

That would include some necessary shopping for his girls before he returned.

It seemed a couple of days of high stress, backcountry work had burned the team out on small-town culture. Even though Fort Collins is a fair sized town, when one considers "shopping" one usually thinks of "mall," and that narrows down the square mileage of possibilities considerably. Jim, Todd and Nora were there in some capacity. They all ran into each other at Jack's Trading, a combination outfitting, army surplus and souvenir shop found in that cluster of peripheral retail stores that glean from the mall's attracted customers. Team members frequented Jack's when buying gear.

"I would have given you a ride if I had known you were coming," Dusty said.

"Last minute," Jim answered. "Didn't you get the message? Frey wants to talk to you ASAP."

"Debriefing at the courthouse wasn't good enough for him?" Kory asked.

"No, he was rather dissatisfied with the cursory way we blew through it yesterday and wants a bit more detail."

"What time?"

"Oh, no time, he said it was real casual and wanted to pick our brains for a bit. Something really important about this guy who died up there, I guess."

"More C-Y-A in the federal bureaucracy, I guess," said Todd. "Guy blew a mission and is covering his ass."

"Probably. Anyway," said Jim, "give him a call. He's in the office all day today."

The group split up and Dusty picked up a bunch of freeze-dried food and energy bars to replace what he had lost. He'd learned his lesson about the food, and freeze-dried didn't weigh enough to eliminate it completely from the bash pack inventory. After the last few days, the idea of energy bars for three days' bivvy made him shudder. Kory came up to him at the counter.

"Ready for the mall?" she asked.

"I guess," Dusty answered, "I'd like to get this interview with Frey over with."

"Right," she said, reluctantly. "Well. Let's do it."

They drove over to the FBI office and asked if Frey was in, giving their names as they did so. The receptionist raised his eyebrows.

"Oh. Right. He's expecting you."

Kory and Dusty exchanged glances: that sound ominous. There's nothing fun about being expected by a Federal agent of any kind. Bad I-R-S jokes popped up in Dusty's imagination.

He directed them to an office in the back. The door was open and they peeped in. It was in a room with glass windows, but with enough audio privacy for conversations. It actually afforded a nice view of the Front Range. Clearly accountability and confidentiality could reside together happily in this one little place and it was designed to put primarily its owner at ease, and secondarily, his guests.

Frey was seated at his desk, chopping away at a computer's keyboard. In contrast to his appropriate -- if non-regulation -- backcountry outfit, he was dressed in regulation suit-and-tie preferred by government investigation services. Dusty knocked on the open door.

Frey looked up and waved them in.

They entered and Frey stood to shake hands.

"It's really good to see you guys again," he said. "I mean it. You have no idea how much good it does me to get out of this place." Dusty smiled

"I have a degree in economics and know what the inside of an office smells like, so I think I have an idea how you feel."

"Well, I won't detain you long." Perfunctory greetings over, he sat back down. "Have a seat."

Dusty and Kory followed his example.

"First things first," he said as he gestured to documents neatly arranged on his desk.

"There are some non-disclosure documents that need to be signed. Naturally, there was no chance to do so during the exercise, and nothing of importance was found, anyway. But, bean counters need their pound of flesh and some of what I can tell you shouldn't be public knowledge. It's not really sensitive, or anything, but bad PR in the press is bad PR and neither CIA nor us needs it."

The two SAR members duly signed. Why not? thought Dusty, it'll only get more interesting. Frey continued.

"You weren't given much detail on the pilot because you were in the field and burning up radio time trying explain irrelevant details was not expedient or necessary. For now, I'll give you the little I'm allowed outside of the 'spy' circles.

"You may know that the pilot was a man by the name of Hector de la Cruz. Nominally he worked for a computer company in Denver, but that group was actually under a consulting contract with the CIA."

Dusty and Kory exchanged looks. Frey smiled.

"Not quite cloak-and-dagger," he said with his habitual humor. "It was low-level stuff, mostly data processing and analysis, but they do handle some material that could be sensitive. CIA's pretty paranoid about who even cleans the toilets, so they still keep a pretty tight tab on those types of operations. More importantly, as the CIA liaison, he had some good friends in high places.

"Do you remember the fiasco about ten years when Park rangers were told to go recover a body up on Uaiwam Peak?"

The two nodded. A friend of a high government official had smeared his plane all over the snowfield at 12,000 feet. One of Dusty's climbing partners had overseen the recovery mission.

"Remember that the conditions precluded a recovery of any kind because of heavy snow, accessibility and avalanche risks. The danger was thought to be too high to risk the lives of rescue workers. Because of his connections, though, Park rangers were told to recover the body, 'or else.'"

He raised his hand.

"Guilty. I was the liaison that time, too. This time, I was also told 'or else.' The last few days have been the result of 'or else.' To my everlasting shame, the chopper crash was technically 'or else.' Seeing it was going to be done with or without any backcountry brains or advice, I had decided someone who knew what he was doing should go. They at least decided right on that account and allowed me to oversee the operation itself until and if time permitted 'higher authority personnel' "-- he dramatically raised his fingers in quotation marks--"were flown out."

Dusty was impressed with the way he said this. There was not a hint of arrogance, but he simply told it as the

truth. He leaned forward in his chair.

"So, now that all the crying's over, what do you need us for?"

"A couple of things. First, it's not really over, as you know, until we can get in there and recover the man's actual body."

Dusty leaned back and blew out a sigh. "That'll be tough in the best of conditions. We have no idea where it could be, on top of the shelf or below the cliff. Or the man might even be in pieces." Kory looked at him distastefully. "The area is likely off-limits until spring unless we get a seriously warm Indian summer."

"I know. But we don't have to worry about that quite yet. We'll also have to try to get to the plane itself. Forest Service is hopping mad and the Air Force is on their shit list as well for letting that chopper go down on their turf. That was a total cluster and it'll be interesting to see how AF is going to get that back." A shadow of regret and his composure was back.

"What I need now is a bit more detailed debriefing than what you gave yesterday at the courthouse. It deals less with the operation than with the pilot."

"We'll try," Kory said, "but this'll likely be a very short meeting."

"Thanks anyway," Frey said. "You may have information without even knowing about it."

He asked them for descriptions of the plane, the condition of the pilot and other aspects of the crash site. As far as he was concerned, those were the only aspects of importance.

Dusty wrinkled his face. His confusion showed.

"We brought all this up in the debrief."

Frey ignored him.

"Where was his luggage? Did you see any of it?"

They shook their heads.

"At that point," Kory said, somewhat condescendingly, "it was a body recovery. Personals were kind of down the road at the time."

Frey ignored the implications and Dusty was too used to her to be annoyed.

"What about the logbook, charts, ID, wallet, anything like that?"

"Nope," said Dusty. "When the plane flipped, we had the opportunity for the body and that was it. The avalanche danger was nil at the time, but the southwest wind was freshening and there was some concern about the stability of the aircraft. We weren't going to risk anyone just to pull material that we could hopefully get the next morning."

"Right. Anything remarkable about the body itself? Personals, clothing?"

"No, I didn't notice anything." He looked at Kory who shook her head.

"Wait," she said, "there was one thing. A DVD popped out while we were moving him."

"I'd forgotten about that," Dusty said. "It was just a movie, one of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Kind of weird, I thought at the time, must have been some sort of Tolkien geek."

Frey lifted his head from the notes he scribbled.

"Really? Do you still have it?"

Dusty nodded.

"I put it in the pack when I got to camp . . . no, that's not quite right. I had it in my jacket pocket and

forgot about it until we dropped food off to you guys the next day. I put it in my fanny pack when we got back to the camp."

"Where is it now?"

Dusty gestured toward the parking lot.

"Right outside. The pack's in the jeep."

Dusty got up and went outside. This time of year, he had the hardshell on the jeep and the back was shut and locked. A twist of the key and the handle and he looked through the open back. The pack was there and he jerked it toward him. He opened the zippered top and felt around. There was no disk. He split wide the opening and looked all around. It was a fairly large fanny pack and he'd lost things in there before, but a DVD case in a backcountry pack should stick out like a heavy metal drummer in a Wagnerian opera orchestra. But it simply wasn't there.

Perplexed, he walked back and was again escorted into Frey's office.

"It's not there," he said in confusion.

Frey muttered a low level "shit."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Positive."

"Could it have fallen out somewhere? In your car or -- I don't even want to think about this -- on the trail somewhere?"

"Nope." He reflected for a moment then went on.

"Well, I guess anything's possible, but I doubt it. That fanny pack's been zipped since I put it in there." He paused. "No, no it hasn't. I found the zipper open yesterday morning before I went out to scope the LZ. I didn't think anything of it and zipped it back up. But if it fell out, it must be back at the camp."

"Great," Frey said sourly. "What a hassle."

"What's the big deal about a commercial DVD?"

"I don't know, honestly. We've been asked to help find anything that has to do with disks or software. As I said, CIA is pretty paranoid about leaking any kind of information. Why he would take data processing stuff on vacation is beyond me, but, hey, I just do the job."

"Right."

"They'll make me go back up there and find it, avalanche or no."

"I wouldn't worry: this was a once-in-a-fall storm and the snow will likely pack up pretty quickly with some warm days. That south side got scoured and unless another storm comes in, there won't be any heavy stuff on the slopes to slip."

"Yeah, but finding it will still be tough."

"All I can think," Dusty mused, "is that someone rummaged through my bag for something they didn't have and left it open. What's wrong, Kory?"

She had turned rather pale.

"It was me," she said. "I was looking for the double-A spares you said you had. My headlamp was fading. The DVD must have dropped out when I put them in the 'lamp. I guess I flipped the fanny pack part over or something and it popped out then. It's funny, I didn't notice it. I was sure I zipped it, though."

"So it's still there," Frey stated.

"I guess," she admitted.

"I'll report this conversation and let them know of the DVD. It probably means nothing. As you said, he was probably just a Tolkien fan."

Perfunctory handshakes and the two SAR members walked

out: another hassle done, another "T" dotted and their "I's" crossed as Dusty liked to say.

"Mall?" Kory asked. Dusty shook his head.

"What is it with women and malls?" he said, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly. He ducked as she faked a backhand to the face. They were apparently back on terms, whatever those were. Dusty still had no idea.

The problem with a "black" operation is that it is often so compartmentalized that nobody knows about it. Even in the CIA, it was a general CYA -- Cover Your Ass -- scramble down to the lowest grunt involved. The people who really knew what the DVD was didn't know the Asalia manager was missing until one of them read about a plane going down in the Rockies. Even then, there was no connection for a while, for the man didn't tell anyone that he was going to deliver the DVD on his vacation. Finally, once a connection was made, it would take numerous phone calls to break through all the glass ceilings, walls and floors to someone who could really do something. That included the DDO who was annoyed that de la Cruz never showed up in Salt Lake City. He didn't even know what the Asalia man was coming to see him about, just that it was the report of a certain "black" operation that he had inherited from his predecessor.

Secrecy is a vital thing in an intelligence agency, but it was carried it too far. If it is too secret and nobody knows about it, bad operational things can happen. Frey, the one government agent who could tell them the most about the crash, would be completely uninformed of exactly how important he had turned out to be.

"A fine purchase," the man behind the counter said. He would have said that whether the item had been a Peyton Manning bobble-head or an expensive piece of Navajo turquoise.

"Yes, a gift for the family," the customer said casually.

The clerk responded.

"You may wish to consider something more uniquely 'Colorado.'"

"I suppose. What else do you have in local gems?"

The statements, innocuous in themselves, announced clearly that the two were players in the Company. The clerk continued.

"I do have some turquoise in the back. We just received a shipment from a very good local company. Authentic stuff. Follow me."

The two made their way to the back room. The clerk was as good as his word and showed several pieces of local jewelry that were actually quite good. HERMIT paid for them appropriately and also handed over the DVD.

"I swear, I think it's a genetic thing," Dusty commented on the way home. "How women can actually enjoy shopping beats me."

The traffic was commensurate with the time of day, and as CSU, CDC, HP and other corporate acronyms vacated the buildings, the cars on the road increased to the local bedroom communities. Loveland was worse, he thought, as it probably sucked in the 'Fort's workers as well as Denver's.

It would thin out as they headed up the Hill.

"You didn't do so badly yourself," Kory retorted.

"Yes, but men plan it out ahead, go in, get it, and get out. It's done in a minimal amount of time. They're on a mission."

He paused.

"I guess it's window shopping that I mean."

"I'll grant you that," Kory responded. "I've never met a man that actually likes that. Although, you must admit that they'll do their share browsing in a store that they really like."

Dusty considered. He was rather guilty on that score: he loved to read and would waste hours in any bookstore.

"You're right, I guess. Depends on the store, though. DIY'ers live at Home Depot. It's a black hole."

He was momentarily distracted by a trucker who cut him off. In old days, he would have flipped him off or honked, but years of perspective had mellowed his road rage. Somewhat. Now he was less annoyed by the inconvenience than by the sheer discourtesy. It was a symptom, he thought, of a cultural disease that seemed to be getting worse and worsed. He signaled and passed. Granted, he thought that obscene gesture very loudly as much as he tried to resist.

"So," he said, "what do you think about our dear little friend?"

"The cold one or the warm one?"

Dusty burst out laughing.

"Man, you're morbid!" Then he laughed even harder.

"Which is which?" They both laughed together.

Dusty finally sighed.

"Whew! Well," he said, settling down, "what do you think?"

"Classic Fed. They don't know what they're looking for."

"Seems like it. But that still seems pretty anal for even bureaucrats. Still, I think it's weird that some 'crat is flying around the state with an old movie in his jacket."

"Maybe he just liked it. Maybe he just purchased it at some local shop before heading to the airport and he and stuck it there. I've done that before."

"Maybe," Dusty said doubtfully.

They received it with much rejoicing, as the saying goes. They popped it in and their resident computer geek went to work.

He returned in half an hour.

"It's not there."

The man lifted his eyebrows.

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing on there that shouldn't be. It's a DVD of The Two Towers and nothing else."

"You went through the whole disk? Through everything? No easter egg even? Nothing more insidious?"

"Yessir. No matter how they would have tried to hide it, I would have found something."

"That's impossible! HERMIT cannot afford to make mistakes like that!"

"It is possible. No matter how clever our friend may be, that bastard may have been cleverer. I suspect that the DVD -- the one we want -- is either back at the graphics store, at his home or car, or back up at the crash site."

He shook his head.

"It's not at the house."

"How can you be sure?"

"We went in."

"Are you nuts?"

"We made it look like a normal burglary. There was no alarm and no cops and no DVD. He wouldn't have just left it."

"We have to have it."

The multiple contacts were made and the communication process started. The chagrin felt about missing the real software was nothing compared to the annoyance. It would be impossible to get into that valley for a while, unless nature sent a series of Chinook winds to warm things up. It could even be months. But the agent knew HERMIT enjoyed playing in the backcountry regardless of reason and, barring overtly challenging Mother Nature in the line of avalanches, actually liked being on the edge of things.

It might not be "convenient" to go back, but that's what the Company asked of its members. And its employees, willing or no.

11.

<so that's it, eh?>

He could tell his brother was dying to get out there. Dusty grinned. Of course, he could've saved the pilot, the plane and both teams single-handed. He typed back.

<That's it. pretty lame for a false alarm.>

<i'll say. when you going up again?>

<I don't know. I guess when the higher-ups say the weather's pretty enough to get that body out of there. That'll be nasty.>

<you're not kidding. i never had to do a body recovery when i was out there>

<Me neither, unless you count that arm.>

<you mean the one where the doctor buried the amputee's...?>

<that's the one.>

<that doesn't count. it wasn't particularly nasty compared to this one.>

<I know. I'm not really looking forward to it, but I would like to see if that DVD is up there. That's bugging me.>

<why? i've got a copy if you need to watch it. AGAIN!>

<*LOL*. YOU'RE the Tolkien geek!>

<i suppose>

<gotta go. Business line is ringing.>

<have fun. back to teaching young skulls full of
mush.>

<right, Rush Limbaugh.>

Dusty missed the call, but grabbed his voice mail. A new one, this time, referred by another customer. Los Angeles? he wrote. This one was in sports paraphernalia. A bit outside his experience, but advertising was advertising and once you got inside the culture, people really were the same all over. He was often very right and very wrong, but at least not in this case.

The Air Force chopper that went down was unfixable on-site and would have to be pieced out. In this case, the only way to do it was to literally chop it up into smaller pieces and haul each piece out by air. It would be time consuming and logistically very taxing. The Forest Service was in a tizzy to get it out of their pristine area with the least amount of hassle and damage, the Air Force wanted it out of there ASAP to do an investigation and the CIA

surreptitiously hovered around everyone else, hoping that the plane crash site several miles up the valley wouldn't be approached much less disturbed. Not that it was very easy to get to: only the original SAR team knew exactly where Hector had been buried, and after the avalanche even that was in question.

Everyone was annoyed with everyone else, but nothing could really be done until winter brought a more solid snow base to minimize damage to the area's geodynamics. Given the melting snow that the warmer weather brought, the area would be a mud pit in the best of times and the Forest Service refused to allow the high environmental impact that a contingent of military engineers would bring. That depended upon the weather and in this part of the Rockies it ranged from an autumn of heavy snows to a warm fall with no precipitation at all.

"I need your help."

The voice over the phone was familiar, but Dusty couldn't place it for a moment. Then he nodded as it came to him.

"Mr. Frey," he answered.

"Call me Kel," Frey replied. "I need to meet with you regarding this incident up on Jefferson."

"Again? I told you everything I knew."

"I know that, I just want to talk to you privately."

"Um, sure, I guess. Where?"

"I'm coming up there tomorrow afternoon. Anyplace up there is fine."

"Do you know where MacLeod's coffee shop is? It's on

the creek walk just up from the climbing gym."

"Been there, like it. About 1500?"

Dusty smiled at the 24-hour clock: he'd only gotten used to it because of the time-stamping on the sheriff's channel.

"Sounds good. See ya then."

<Transmitter was incorrectly calibrated. Imperative that you recover correct transmitter>BUD1234

<Understood. You know that the raptor is unrecoverable at this point>RAPTOR24

<I know. We hope that the transmitter is somewhere near the raptor's body, although coyotes have probably picked it off. I'm assuming it's still transmitting?>BUD1234

<Intermittently. I'm afraid some scavengers may have chewed on it, but we shouldn't have a problem. We have a general location>RAPTOR24

<Does our researcher need some help?">BUD1234

<It could help. The raptor's remains could be scattered and finding the transmitter tough. The scavengers must not get it or the whole project's blown.>RAPTOR24

<We'll send one in. Meet him at the usual place and

make arrangements there. He's no expert in the woods, though, so you might want to take extra care of him.>BUD1234

<Gotcha. Tell him to bring boots and water *LOL*!>RAPTOR24

<Will do so. Good news is he's athletic so should be able to keep up.>BUD1234

Perry read with interest. He sure was learning a lot about ornithology, or at least tracking birds. Still, that first line was troubling and he had no idea what it meant, if anything. After "Raptor" and "Bud" signed off, he copied the conversation and emailed it off to the analyst assigned to it. More government waste, he thought. As a stereotypical Republican, he thought government should be trimmed down and obviously wasting an analyst's pay on an aviary society was a definite waste of time and money. Oh well. His not to question why, but . . . his non-literary mind still filled in the ending.

The analyst received it soon after and put it with the rest of her "in" pile. When she did look at it, she also thought there was something funny, especially in light of the other 'board conversations, but she couldn't point it out. The problem was, if it was code, it was cleverly done in that there was no way for an outsider to identify what was truly important and what was "slush:" that annoying extra stuff that merely dressed up the "cover" environment.

She leaned back and looked at the conversations. Then

she printed them all out. Sometimes looking at hard-copy was different than at a computer screen and things tended to jump out at you in a different way. She groped for the half-eaten bagel sandwich on her very Spartan desk -- computer people range from the anal to the creative and she tended to be messy, but only on her computer. Her desk would not provide sustenance for a cockroach much less a mouse.

Still chewing on the bagel, she began to search for this "aviary" research group. Wherever the server was, she could find it. Maybe the group was even registered somewhere. They'd said something about a "grant" and that meant they were on a list at some beneficent society that wrote the checks. She emailed Perry back. She was not the whiz on the computer that he was and he could save her a lot of time. That's what he was for, after all.

He found he actually liked Kory and began spending a lot of time with her. It was amazing, he thought, how people their ages could spend the evening on the couch watching a movie without cuddling, much less making out. She reluctantly respected his hands-off demeanor and seemed content to leave it at friendship. Good friends, granted, but friendship nonetheless.

She came with him to MacLeod's on the day he was supposed to meet with Frey. She had said she needed to do some shopping in town and could he give her a lift? He was reluctant to tell her about his meeting and it seemed that she didn't mind his evasiveness at this point. It was only 1300 by Dusty's watch and he had fortunately brought his

laptop. She noticed it in the back seat.

"Ah," she said, "computer games and latté, huh?"

"I wish," Dusty said, braking around a hairpin turn. He was gratified to see that the state had put up a guardrail at this particular point: the drop over the edge made sky diving a boring way to go. It had killed too many good drivers in icy mountain conditions.

The weather had warmed up somewhat with those cold nights and toasty days high mountain autumns were famous for. Dusty loved waking up to frost on his sleeping bag, knowing that once the sun got up it was only a matter of an hour before the temperature climbed into the sixties or even seventies.

He braked again behind a "touron."

"You know what a touron is?" he asked.

"No, what?"

"A cross between a 'tourist' and a 'moron.' Like this guy, doing seventy on the straightaways and twenty on a forty mile an hour curve."

"You're not very patient are you?"

"Yes, I am, just not with selfish people."

"Just remember," she reminded him. "if tourons weren't around, we wouldn't have anything to do on SAR!"

"That's true," he responded.

He stomped on the gas pedal. There went my gas mileage, he thought. He drove around the touron in question and settled back down to the speed limit. He looked in his rearview mirror at the flashing headlights behind him. He smiled, then continued.

"You know what else they call them?"

"No, what?"

"Terrorists."

"Oh, right. So what do you call the people who actually use their brains up here?"

"Hmmm. Have to think about that one. I know they exist. I met one once. Of course, he really didn't count: he'd lived here for more than two years before he moved to Ohio. He was technically a transplanted local."

"Watch OUT!"

He braked quickly. As they slowed, the elk stared unconcernedly at the touron in front of them, then wandered off the road. There didn't seem to be any more of the animals on the side of the road and Dusty picked up speed.

"God, I hate that," Kory said. "That'll give an adrenaline junkie a bigger rush than bungee jumping.

"That's nothing. You ought to see it when a touron stops on a sixty mile an hour blind curve to snap photos of the Peak. Straddling the road across the center line, even. That'll give you a thrill. The elk are nothing."

On the one straight spot in the road, Dusty passed another van. He didn't look behind him this time.

" 'Visitors,' " he said casually.

"Huh?"

"I'd call smart ones 'visitors.' 'Tourists' smacks of stupid people with too much money and no ethic. There are visitors, those who appreciate the local culture and don't try to make up for their lack of courtesy by tipping. Not that they don't tip, but money doesn't make up for plain rudeness." He was digging himself into the hole. He quite trying.

"Oh." There really was no rejoinder for that.

"By the way, how long you going to be?" He stopped the car at the only real light in town.

"In town?"

"No, in New York. Of course, in town."

Kory thought.

"I don't know. I'm shopping . . ."

"I'll pick you up at nine next Sunday morning, then. Then I'll send SAR after you."

"Don't be nasty. I'm also meeting a friend coming up from Boulder."

"Is she cute?"

She gave what he thought was a snort of disgust: at his comment or for some other reason, he did not know.

"No, it's a guy I went to college with and no, I'm not interested in him. It's my brother-in-law. That'd be a bit creepy."

"Oh, so the gal has a history?"

"Maybe I'll tell you sometime."

She collected her leather bag and jacket.

"Okay, how about five?" she said. "You can join us for dinner at Ernie's."

"Sounds good. Where do you want to be dropped off?"

"Anywhere's fine."

He parked at the library and she gave him a perky smile before walking off toward the downtown shopping district. She was quite a looker, he thought. And he did like her. But he'd just soon wrestle in a pit full of rattlesnakes as get into a serious relationship with her. She was volatile and he'd been there before. He smiled back at her back and grabbed his laptop.

He had driven this road many times, but fall up the creek was always impressive. Although it lacked the variety

of colors in his native Virginia, the firs made the colorful aspen stand out in neon glory. Frey was equally hampered by "tourons" but learning to drive in an East Coast town will either teach fortitude or drive one to an almost homicidal frenzy. Fortunately, both for his career and his personal well-being, Frey leaned toward the former. It just meant he would be five minutes early instead of the fifteen he had planned.

The vista opened as he came out of the deep canyon and Springfield spread below him. Five minutes later, he pulled into the same library parking lot as Dusty's SUV. Dusty waited for him at a table, pecking on a laptop and drinking his fourth, now mostly cold, cup of decaf. Frey sat down.

"One sec." Dusty typed quickly, hit "Save" and closed the laptop with a snap. He looked up.

"Want some coffee? I need a warm-up anyway."

"Sure," Frey replied as they both stood and headed for the counter.

"They hate me here," Dusty mentioned.

Frey raised his eyebrows. Dusty smiled.

"They lose money on me!"

"Oh. I get it. I don't love coffee that much. Things settle here a bit?"

"A bit," Dusty answered. "Tourist season, with hunting, colors and all that. We'll probably get a call in the next couple weeks or so. Some hunter is always shooting himself or falling off a horse he has no business riding."

"Seen that before. City folk assume a lot of things they shouldn't."

Dusty raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah, I was SAR in western Virginia when I was in college. We pulled a few guys out of the woods who thought

it was macho to escape the big city and bag a deer. No problem. Should have paid more attention to their firearm safety courses. Or taken them in the first place."

"Yeah, we used to call it the three B's."

Frey raised eyebrows.

"Bullets, Beer and Bubbas!" Dusty grinned, and Frey laughed.

They paid for their coffees and sat back down. The table was inconspicuous -- meeting a Federal agent in a "dark corner" was kind of melodramatic, but it had been the only one available -- and afforded some sort of privacy. The shop had many corners in its unconventional design and customers took advantage to read or work or just get away.

"So," said Dusty, "what's up?"

Frey leaned forward, although no one could possibly hear them.

"There's more to it than what I told you."

"I figured. Why now?"

"My butt's in a sling. Aside from any pressure that my superiors may put on me, I've also got a personal ethic that gets pissed off any time my skills are called into question. By anybody. I want to finish this thing."

"I thought you said the DVD was nothing."

"It may be," Frey replied. "I wasn't kidding about that. But there are people who are really and truly freaked out about this body of theirs lying at a crash site in an un-secure area."

"Oh," thought Dusty aloud, "where 'anyone' can get to it and to whatever is around it."

"You got it. I need to get up there and go through the plane, even through guy's pockets if I have to. I was told to grab anything, anything that could contain information

or data in any form."

"Why FBI? If he's a CIA man, why don't they do it? Why haven't they been in there already?"

"He's not CIA, actually, just contracted to them."

Dusty shrugged it off. Frey continued.

"Snow's been too deep to search and CIA is, shall we say, 'limited' on their back country resources, especially here. They have them, and there's always Spec Ops, but I'm the local expert, I guess. I know the area well and I have a reputation for wilderness skills, believe it or not. And I'm government law enforcement. Plus, it's internal U.S. With the Homeland Security and greater cooperation since 9/11, people are a bit more willing to do some cross-pollination. U.S. investigation is, after all, our turf. I do report to a couple of CIA desk jockeys on this as well as my own superiors and I have some analysts to support me if I need help, but I'm pretty much on my own."

"And my role in this?"

"You were commander at the site. You know where you buried the body and saw where the plane went down in the avalanche. I hate to mention it, but you're the one who found -- and lost -- the only possible data link that de la Cruz might have had. If that's what it was."

"And they're letting you go in without some bean counter to look over your shoulder?"

"Surprise, surprise. Yeah. The impression I get is that he was fairly low-level: some sort of bureaucrat. They're nervous enough to want me to look into it, but there's more going on in their other turf to waste resources on this if I can do it by myself. FBI's turf, anyway, you know."

He took a measured sip of coffee. A drink of any kind

was good for dramatic pause, time to think, time to make the other person nervous. It was for all these reasons that he drank. He liked Dusty, but it was habit. It didn't work immediately on the other, though. There was silence as the clouds overhead began to cast shadows through the skylight above them. Dusty didn't want to commit too much, and wanted his response measured.

"You're sticking your neck out," Dusty finally said, taking a chance. "I thought all investigative agencies were compartmentalized to the point of -- forgive me -- stupidity, much less bringing in civilian help."

Frey waved it off.

"You're right, unfortunately. I think it's probably the biggest mistake of the FBI, especially. They think that if you don't pay someone -- either on staff or CI's -- the help outside people can give is not worth the effort. I'm a bit of a maverick in this, for I believe in tapping community resources, even peripherally. They think I have some uncanny intuition, but the fact is I listen a lot and I gather sources that most agents turn their noses up at. I really wish they would take the skill that's offered them when they have the chance."

"So they don't mind me?"

"You've been checked out. Your file is well established, since you got fingerprinted for that children's camp a few years ago, and we did an in-depth on you."

He hesitated.

"Kory, on the other hand, we had trouble going into. And that's why I only called you in. "

Dusty raised his eyebrows. Frey held up his hand.

"Nothing we could pinpoint. She's clean, as far as we

could tell and" he shrugged "since we already had you, we didn't really need to make a big deal of it. Her file only goes back so far, then it either peters out or fades into some mundane, grey scenario. You know, Podunkville HS of '04 kind of stuff. She's one boring sister, I'll tell you."

Dusty almost laughed at that description, but held it back. Frey grinned.

"Well," Dusty said. "I have some freedom for the next couple of days. I can head up there with you. Do I have to do anything to satisfy the powers-that-be?"

"No, you've already signed non-disclosure documents. Sooner we go, the better as far as I'm concerned. The weather's supposed to be warm and dry and should not interfere with our work."

"Forgive my asking this, but is anyone staking the place out? I'm not sure I want to run afoul of Double-Oh-Seven out there and get popped for my efforts from some CIA newbie trying to win his spurs."

Frey actually smiled.

"No," he said. "CIA sends a plane over the area once a day, but even that'll peter out the next couple of days. That avalanche you guys sent down really did a number: the plane is pretty much buried from all accounts and CIA's even happy about it. Nobody's been in the area, if it comes to that and there's no sight of the plane."

"Well, what's the point then?"

"I don't know but maybe we can see something they don't. Weird things happen in this business. We get breaks at the oddest times in the most unlikely of places."

"And you can't just sit on your butt," Dusty prompted.

"I suppose," Frey answered. "What about hunting season? Any problems there?"

Dusty thought.

"Elk are below that and only an ignorant out-of-stater would try to bag game up there this time of year. No outfitter would, that's for sure, unless they're trying to fleece a tourist and no one I know around here is that sadistic. So," he finished, "it shouldn't even be an issue. It doesn't start until next week in any case."

"And by that time, we'll have seen all there is to see."

"We hope. Bring your gear tomorrow, early, and we'll head up around dawn."

"Got it here. I planned on spending five days up there, frankly, with or without your help. I am all set. Mind if I crash on your couch?"

"Got a spare bed, and you're welcome to it."

12.

The Sandman cometh early and Dusty's eyes felt full of the gritty stuff. He lay in bed for a few moments, forcing his eyes open and letting the tear ducts gear up and wash his eyeballs for another day. He loved the dry air, but sleeping in it made for some raw awakenings sometimes. He dressed in his polypro and capilene layers, threw on a fleece sweater and went out to the kitchen to make coffee. That'll make some noise, he thought, but what the hell, Frey needed to wake up.

Frey jumped a bit at the sound of the freezer opening, much more to the whine of the coffee grinder. He drifted awake, but by the time the espresso machine was hissing, he was ready for breakfast. He looked at his watch.

"Ready to head out already?"

"Hell, no," Dusty looked at him in disbelief, "I'm loading up on the protein and carbs before I even think about walking anywhere. So, how do you like your cholesterol?"

"Fried, crispy and hard, bacon and eggs, respectively, I suppose you mean."

"Done, and done."

Frey threw on his approach shoes -- somewhere between a running shoe and a hiking boot -- and walked out onto the porch. The early morning was surprisingly warm at this altitude. Springfield was low enough that there was sometimes a hint of the western desert and it seemed that the term "warm" extended down to the forties this morning. There was a wind blowing, coming off the high country, and although it was no more than a zephyr, it caused the very clear stars to twinkle en masse. Dusty came out with two

cups of coffee.

"Nice, eh?"

"You have no idea. Valley's okay to live in, but it ain't nothing compared to up here."

Breakfast was casual and at the end of it, they washed the dishes together, then threw the packs into the back of Frey's jeep.

Dusty dialed his cell.

"Hey Todd," he said, "just a heads-up. Frey and I. . . yeah, our dear little friend from the Feds -- we're going up to the 'site to see what we can see . . . No, I'm just helping. Anyway, we'll be there for three days. Should be back out on Wednesday. As always, don't call SAR until Saturday, 'kay? We're set up for the long haul this time . . . Yeah, whatever. 'Love' you, too," he added sarcastically. "Thanks."

He hung up.

"'Dear Little Friend?'"

"Yeah."

"So I'm the resident dwarf, eh?"

Dusty raised his eyebrows.

"Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia. Prince Caspian, even."

"I know, believe it or not. You just didn't strike me as literary, much less up on Christian apologists."

"'You still know nothin' 'about me,'" Frey hummed. He continued, "Just in case CIA's still playing games up there, I sent up the description of us and of my jeep. Double-Oh-Seven knows we're up there so 'lost' is not a problem and we won't get shot." He grinned.

"Good thought." Dusty was impressed.

They took off through the lightening sky and headed up

into the hills. The Forest Service road appeared at the end of the pavement and Frey stopped the vehicle to engage the hubs on his old-fashioned CJ-7. The road was muddy from the melting snow, and according to Dusty, deteriorated badly several miles from the National Forest border. They continued bouncing up the valley as the warmth of the sun baked the decaying aspen leaves. There was snow here, but it was solid, having had the benefit of a few days to settle under the trees, but it wasn't too deep for the jeep. No one had been up this way for some time, at least since the big snow storm.

The road faded gradually, and split into mere trails made by hunters' ATV's. At Dusty's direction, Frey finally stopped at a wide spot. There was no trail, he noticed, and pulled out his GPS. He felt gratified to have made it this far, considering the snowpack, as much as it had settled.

"Heading straight up the hill, eh?"

"More or less," Dusty answered, pulling out his pack. "We'll start up the valley and in less than a mile, we turn to go up the ridge. The valley is full of waterfalls and we don't want to get 'cliffed out.'"

"I know. That'd be a bummer. As I remember, there was a bad one just up the creek from us that you and Kory had to deal with."

"Yeah, wasn't fun, but there are more between here and there, I think."

As the two men were already clothed and booted, gearing up consisted of throwing the packs on their backs and they soon moved up the valley. The snow increased, but was never more than two feet deep. The warm autumn had already taken its toll on the five feet left by the storm.

They reached Alpha-niner's position by one o'clock and

took lunch there. The Air Force helicopter was there in all its glory, looking as pathetic as a heron with its wings clipped. Frey shook his head.

"That'll be a pain," he said. He turned to Dusty. "Really, I had no choice in the matter. If it wasn't me, it would have been someone else and at least I knew something about the country."

"I can see that," Dusty said, noncommittally. It was the age-old sin in any army: "But, Mr. Nuremburg, I was ordered to." His understanding was balanced by his condemnation and both were brought up short by the realization that he, Dusty, might not have acted any differently in the same situation. He sighed.

"Yeah. Sucks." But Frey was already on another wavelength.

"Rumor has it that they won't start to move it until later this winter when a solid snow base forms. Too much mud now, with the warming weather. A pain logistically, not to mention the mess it'd make in the Wilderness. National Forest geeks wouldn't appreciate it, much less forgive it. Not only that but the military wheels only move so fast and detailing the groups to this means moving them from some other equally. . . pointless job." He finished the energy bar that had helped sustain them through lunch and pointed up to the cliffs.

"Up that?"

"Yup. Unless you want to hike an extra two miles to go around."

"Not really. Still, I'm not the greatest climber in the world. 5.8's about my limit."

Dusty laughed. If he only knew.

"Ya wanna lead?" he said maliciously.

"Oh no," Frey recoiled, "it ain't me, I'm no fortunate one, as the song goes."

"No prob. It's only class four. Looks worse from here."

"I thought you and Kory whipped up that thing pretty quickly. I figured it was just the fixed rope."

"You're partly right. We didn't want to take chances with snow, wind, slippery rock and all that, so we depended on the rope more than was really necessary and we had the prussiks to back us up, anyway."

It was easier than Frey thought. Far from being the vertical ascent it seemed from a distance, the cliff was a series of easily navigable ledges that he had no problem with. They reached the top and hiked into the upper forest. After a mile, or so, Dusty stopped.

"It was in one of these small groups of trees," he said, pointing to several clusters. "There's evidence of a fire in the middle of one of them, and that's where Kory and I stopped to warm up. Look close, because I try to low-impact an area I camp in."

They scouted around for a while, but the copse was surprisingly easy to find. Frey picked up on it and called Dusty over.

"Okay," said Dusty. "I'm pretty sure I had it back at the camp after this, but you never know. I had my jacket open and Kory called attention to the DVD."

Frey lifted his eyebrows. Dusty grimaced.

"It wasn't like that," he said. "She was getting badly hypothermic and we had to put together the best way to get her core temp up."

"I know," Frey grinned. "Can't resist a jab."

"Since my jacket was open," Dusty shrugged, "it is

quite possible it popped out then, although I don't think so.

They scouted the small area, kicking over snow and scuffling around, but there was no sign of the disk. True to his word, there was no evidence of human occupation, except for the small charred wood in the middle, and even that was minimal.

"I hope it's at the camp site," Frey began.

"If it's so trivial, why don't we let it go?"

Frey sighed.

"Can't. After the screwup last week, I've got to come up with something and that's the last lead I had. If the plane's remotely accessible, I've got to check that out, as well."

"Great. That'll be fun."

Dusty didn't quite grumble because he knew Frey was only doing what he had to. He felt it was pointless to dig for the plane unless it was clearly visible somehow and they didn't know what they were looking for anyway.

As the afternoon aged, they continued up the valley and approached the campsite. It didn't take long to see the cliff and the lean-to Nora and Harrington had built was still there. The snow had settled quite a bit in the warm air, and the quinsy's roof had collapsed, but a little shovel work, he thought, would give them a wind break around the drying fir boughs.

After dumping their packs at the old site, he lit a fire and began dinner. Frey munched on a power bar and stared up the valley at the imposing cliff face.

"Wow," he said, "quite a drop."

"What's that?" Dusty answered. Frey turned to him and pointed with his fist holding the bar.

"That cliff. It's quite a drop."

"Yeah," Dusty said, "five hundred feet if it's an inch. I think the topo shows seven or eight from the edge to the bottom, although the straight drop is quite a bit less than that."

"And you say the plane fell that whole way?"

"That's it. Scoured clean off the top by the avalanche. This one was very cool. It must have jumped a hundred feet out from the edge just by the momentum. If we head up that way," Dusty pointed, "You'd see the mess of snow and crap that far out of the cliff. You ever been in one?"

"Nope. Saw some blasting at a ski resort one morning, but that was several miles away and across the valley."

Dusty poured his jerky into the boiling water. A minute of this and he would throw in the dried vegetables and ramen and voilà, dinner was ready.

"You'd never forget it. This one was scary enough and it wasn't really huge. Big enough, of course, and we were glad we were where we were, but not huge."

"Did you go up to the plane after the storm?"

"No, no time for it. Chopper was here and there was no point in looking for something that was gone and buried, anyway. I know it's not up there. Aside from Bob's eagle eyes, even I could see that the avalanche wouldn't leave a thing."

"Got binocs?"

"Yeah, opera glasses. Might help." He reached into the top of his pack and pulled out a small pair of opera glasses. Only a few power, but good enough to make a difference in spotting across a valley or up a peak and still light on the pack weight total. Frey took them from

him and scanned the cliff base.

"Well, the good news is that I can't see the slide from here, which means it's below the trees. If it's that low, we may have less snow to worry about."

Dusty rolled his eyes. It still meant digging into heavy, sintered snow, not to mention the rocks that got carried with it. He knew his attitude was deteriorating at this point, and it wouldn't help anything in its present state. He sighed and stood up.

"I'm thinking we should go up top sometime and maybe check if that pilot is still there. We dropped him into a shallow crevice and I'm thinking that even if the boulders were swept off, he might be okay."

"Good point," Frey answered, lowering the binoculars. "How long does it take to get up there?"

Dusty thought for a second.

"Say, maybe an hour."

"It's early. Can we do a quick dinner and try before sunset?"

"Man, you are a glutton for punishment, aren't you?"

Frey shrugged.

"You do what you gotta do."

"Sure, why not. Didn't bring my guitar for campfire Kum Ba Ya anyway."

It didn't take long for the dinner to finish cooking and they ate it as quickly as its heat would allow. Dusty grabbed his fanny pack from the top of the expedition gear and they headed up the gorge. They did not take snowshoes for he hoped that the snow would not be a problem. It should have been fairly windswept to begin with and solidified if not. If it was a problem, they'd just come back down and try in the morning.

HERMIT's companion pointed to the ant-like figures crawling up the ridge and cursed.

"Someone is up there."

"I see. Should be no problem. I suspect it may be two Search-and-Rescue volunteers coming back for the body."

"They should not be up there!" the man said. He was obviously not used to the altitude and was breathing heavily.

"No, they should not. But, if they are who I think they are, it should not be a problem if we handle it right. You may be on your own for a while as I work with the issue."

"Here?" The man was no stranger to harsh conditions, but was out of his element in the high Rockies.

"Yes. You'll just have to deal with it."

"What are you going to do? Kill them?"

"I don't do that anymore."

* * *

Going up the gorge was no more fun than going down. What was eliminated going up -- namely the slipping and sliding -- was compensated by the steep angle and both men struggled in the snow-dusted scree. Soon, however, they made it to the gentler slope of the ridge and trudged up its bony spine. There was no danger of avalanche here, both in the amount and in the type of snow. What little was left after the slide was compacted by wind and sun into a thin

but compact façade of white. Their boots were powdered with the dirty snow, but they found it easy going and it took them less than forty-five minutes to attain the crash site.

Dusty whistled appreciatively. The view was impressive, both in its natural aesthetics and in his before-and-after mental images of the site. Many original small and mid-sized boulders had been sheared off and an entire new set was in their places. He wondered if he would recognize the actual crash site.

They walked forward and the former shape of the hill began to manifest itself in his mind as contours formed in front of him. There, was that funny little ridge that defined the southeast edge. It, at least, hadn't been changed. He nodded. There, were the twin boulders that stuck out on the south side of the crash. It should be under that.

The plane had been swept over an unlikely section where the boulders on each side had formed a little defile. Obviously, the wind of the storm had helped maneuver it into place, just in time for the slide to push it over the edge. It was quite possible that the plane was not too badly buried: mangled but not completely buried. It shouldn't take too long, he hoped, once they found the wreck site below. It still depended upon Frey's stubbornness.

"It's under those two boulders," Dusty said, walking forward.

"That easy? Great." If Dusty was intimidated by the phantom of a decaying corpse, Frey wasn't: he'd seen his share and was inured to the sight. They approached the area and Dusty saw that the temporary grave was located under several feet of rubble, snow and scree that the slide had

pushed up against the boulders.

"Want to dig through that?" he asked.

Frey frowned.

"How deep, do you think?"

Dusty shrugged.

"Deep enough. We didn't bring the snow shovels, which are no good in dirt, anyway. I'd say at least two feet of pretty heavy snow and dirt and there are some good-sized rocks mixed in. If you still want to do it, should wait until tomorrow."

He pointed up the hill, sweeping his arm dramatically over the slide's pathway.

"You can see how this slope is actually a shallow upper bowl. The cornices at the top of that south ridge broke off -- it doesn't take long for dangerous ones to form under a consistent, strong wind -- and started the thing. It was concentrated in this bowl and what would normally be a short hundred-foot slide this time of year collected into a fairly decent-sized avalanche, all building up speed in this one area. It was just lousy placement for the crash site and a lot of snow in one series of storms."

Frey nodded. Although he was no stranger to avalanche theory, he knew that Dusty was more experienced, both in the principle and in the locale. Dusty continued.

"Slides move a healthy amount of rubble, especially on a scree slope. As far as our friend is concerned, there's no way we're going to get to him easily. He's under several feet of junk and it's as effective a burial as any sexton in a New England Methodist churchyard could do.

"It's very unlikely that anybody making it back here without chopper support is going to have a garden shovel

and probably a pick, too. As far as CIA is concerned, they should just put a monument here for his family's sake and call it good."

He hesitated, recalling the scene.

"Really, I don't remember anything unusual, like disks or anything. I got the only thing of any size when I picked up that DVD. He might have a flashdrive or something in one of his pockets, but I wouldn't know."

Frey had to agree. If the man who was actually here thought the body inaccessible, then what was the likelihood of a casual hiker stumbling on state secrets? CIA may not like it, but they would have to agree or do their own digging. It's out of his hands. If they wanted the body that badly, they could get it themselves. He felt bad about not getting the wallet, but he had pinpointed the cairn, in any case. Suddenly he pointed down to the gorge.

"You put the fire out, didn't you?"

Dusty was annoyed until he saw the smoke.

"Yes, I did. And I know how to make sure."

The smoke was not white, as steam from a doused campfire would be: it was blue and so contained the incomplete burned ash of softwoods. They walked as quickly down the hill as the terrain permitted.

There had been nothing else to see, and so the two Company employees had left. They did not really expect anything, but HERMIT recognized the pack as belonging to SAR.

"Sierra Twenty-two, Sierra Fifty-One on SAR."

It was awkward, trying to stop on that annoying scree in the gully, but Dusty at least slowed as he tried to grab his radio. He switched to SAR and answered.

"Fifty-one, go ahead."

"Hey, Dusty, how the heck are you? Just can't stay away from here, eh?"

Kory's voice was easily recognizable: they were close enough to the campsite they probably could have shouted and be heard. At least it was a "known" person crashing their site.

"Yup, duty called."

"Oh yeah? Man, you're morbid. You must like it, eh?"

"What are you doing up here?" he asked, somewhat testily.

"Trying to collect the rest of that interrupted 'trek' as our friend Harrington would say. Look, I'm down here at the camp. Mind if I stay with you guys?"

"I thought the 'trek' was to be solo."

"Hey, I'm not pissed anymore. Can you tell?"

"Yeah. Good thing. That was not fun."

Dusty could almost hear her roll her eyes.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"What?"

"If I stay with you?"

"No, go nuts."

The radio crackled silently for a moment. She got back on.

"Who's that with you?"

Dusty hesitated.

"Frey."

"I figured. Can't let it alone either, eh?"

Frey bristled, best he could on the steep slope.

"Guess not," Dusty answered noncommittally and looked at Frey. "Look, let's not burn batteries; we're up on the gorge and we'll be there in less than twenty, 'kay?"

"Gotcha. See ya in a bit."

It was almost dark when they walked into camp and the rather incongruent smell of dinner met them. Kory was eating the remainder of her evening meal and a new pot of water was on the small fire. She looked up as the men walked into camp.

"Hidy ho, neighbor," she greeted them. "Place got pretty trashed while we were gone, eh?"

Dusty and Frey looked at each other.

"What do you mean?" Frey asked.

"Oh, logs turned over, lean-to was pretty shot. I fixed a lot of it before I called you. The fallen lean-to covered the packs and fire before I even knew you were around. I just cleaned things up and started the fire again. "

"I don't understand," Dusty wondered. "It was fine when we left."

"Bears, I guess?"

"Too high for this time of year. They're feeding their faces for winter down in the valleys. Any tracks?"

"Pretty messed up. That's why I knew it wasn't just you, though. It looked like there were three or four big animals or even people, but I'm no tracker."

Dusty turned toward his pack.

"By the way," Kory called, "Why'd you make a fire, anyway? I thought it was all wilderness ethic, no-impact

camping with you!"

Dusty turned.

"I don't know how long we're going to be here, and the time we spent last week made a pretty big dent in the fire pit as it was. Just conserving gas."

He looked at the pack. It was untouched, as was Frey's. Curiouser and curiouser. Some animal, he guessed, maybe a loner bear still lingering for berries or something. Still, a bear would have ripped through the pack no matter how they tried to seal the food. That was rather foolish, he thought, not stringing up the pack in a tree, even for the short time they were gone. He shrugged and pulled out a tea bag and cup. He gestured to Frey with it.

"Want some?"

"Sure."

Kory finished her dinner and pulled out her own downfall: hot chocolate. Dusty grinned and pointed with his cup.

"Chick thing, huh?"

Kory smiled back.

"You better believe it. No Sam's Club special, either: special order Ghirardelli's, no less. Can't do without my chocolate. Zinc depletion in women just gives me an excuse."

They settled back with their respective tonics. Kory sighed with pleasure.

"Love it," she said. "So, I figure you're" she gestured to Frey "not up here for your health. Collecting souvenirs?"

"More or less. Leaving no stone unturned for the powers-that-be and my own satisfaction." He sarcastically made the sign of the cross and leaned back.

"That's a bit anal, isn't it?"

"To some, I suppose."

"I mean," she answered, turning to Dusty, "he's dead. And probably gone?"

Dusty nodded.

"Emphatically. There's at least two feet of rubble on top of the gravesite, probably more like six or seven. And I mean heavy stuff, basketball sized and bigger."

"I'd just leave him in peace," Kory put in, "but who knows how obsessive the spy company's going to be?"

"Who knows?" Frey commented. "Fact is, I don't want them coming back to me six months from now while I'm working a far more important case and wanting me to catalogue every little bit of stuff up here. I'd just soon get it over with. Plus," he grinned, "I like spending my time in the boonies, and it's a good excuse to get away from Denver."

"Hear, hear," Dusty grinned and leaned forward to clink mugs. Although he still didn't relish the thought of digging through avalanche garbage, he did love it enough up here to do anything for a hike. A good excuse, indeed.

The man watched the three hikers from his vantage point and shivered. He did not like this assignment and did not like this place. He had been told to be patient and keep watch on this collection of intruders. In the silence of the gloaming, he could pick up their voices indistinctly and even catch a word or two, but he had no idea who they were. They were just in the way. HERMIT was observing from another place close enough to hear better. He had his own idea of what to do, but HERMIT had given explicit orders and he was relegated to a flunky's position. It grated on him. He was supposed to be the one calling the shots, but

HERMIT had a reputation. It would be a long night, as if he could sleep, anyway.

13.

The morning was just like the crystalline morning when the chopper had picked them up and Dusty breathed deep. It was warmer, and the wind coming off of the Divide seemed to melt the crunchy snow beneath him as he stretched. It was surprisingly above freezing already and the sun was barely up. It would be a warm one and might actually make their job easier. He'd brought an ice ax in case, and combined with the two snow shovels he and Frey had, should be sufficient if the plane were even reachable.

The snow was firm and he left his snowshoes at the camp. He walked up the valley a ways toward the avalanche site, "post-holing" occasionally in the softer snow, but generally able to walk on top. The cliff to his right was tall and forbidding, dark in the morning light. Its shadow was over him and although he wasn't superstitious by any stretch of the imagination, centuries of Celtic heritage in his genes combined with the ghost of the dead pilot to make him shiver.

At the base of the cliff a huge mound of snow crept up its side. To his amazement and delight, a red tail fin had slid to the bottom, indicating that the plane may actually have settled on top. Upon reflection, it made sense. It had been butted up against the boulders, which fringed the cliff's edge and probably resisted the initial onslaught of the avalanche until the very end. That meant the rest of the plane was on top half of the mess and more accessible given the warm weather since the event. At least he hoped.

He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. He supposed there were another four hours until the sun even came close to that pile of snow. He did not relish digging

through old snow that had sintered, melted and frozen over the course of the last week. He preferred to let the sun soften it for a while and make the work that much easier. He supposed they could climb up to the top of the mound and fool around for a bit. He didn't know if the plane was intact. So much the better if it was: everything, including luggage, would be inside and if they could get to it, an intact plane would save them much time in searching, not to mention digging.

He walked back and talked to the others, who were cooking oatmeal. They agreed and settled on examining the plane at ten o'clock. Kory wanted to come and as Frey had no orders one way or the other regarding her, he agreed. She was on the original op, so why not? He figured she had already signed her non-disclosure papers as well.

They took their time, cleaned up and closed down camp. Dusty told them of the snow conditions and everyone agreed to only take one pair of 'shoes and ice axe for chopping steps if necessary. At Dusty's suggestion they also threw in a set of avalanche poles he habitually put in his winter pack. They threw on fanny- and day- packs and set out.

The man watched through binoculars, tracking them as they moved up the trail. He could see the big slide and figured they had maybe a mile to go, but no more. He bit his lip in frustration. He wondered if he should follow or merely observe. He, also, had no orders one way or the other. As time flew, he impulsively leaped off the rock into the hollow where his pack lay. He hesitated as he passed it, leaned over and pulled out a rather nasty looking Ruger 22 LR. He slipped it into his parka and stepped through the rocks.

Altitude aside, it was like climbing Denali, Kory thought. The steep angle made it tough enough, but without crampons, the packed snow made them carve steps every few feet. Fortunately, it was a small hill of snow and after a half hour of fairly solid work, they reached the top.

"Well," she panted. "Now what do we do?"

"Dig?" Dusty said. Kory glared at him meaningfully and he grinned back. He pulled out the poles and assembled them. The brands varied in length and strength and were designed to be transportable, but easily and quickly put together. The idea was that an avalanche survivor would poke the thin, smooth cylinder through the surface of the snow and when it hit a more "solid" object -- namely a body or pack - everybody left standing would converge on that spot and dig. It was surprising how many people could survive an avalanche while completely buried. At the same time it was important that companions rescued them quickly. It was a known and sad fact that once Search-and-Rescue was notified, it was time for a body recovery, not a rescue. The poles supplemented avalanche location beacons, which were normally unnecessary this time of year. Good thing they didn't need them last week, Dusty thought dryly.

He poked through the skin of ice covering the snow base and the pole stopped after three feet. Probably a rock, he thought, but you never knew. Even a week in warm weather might very well solidify the snow to the point of being impenetrable in spots. One could never tell.

In any case, the plane was a large object and so he moved a few feet down the slope, taking care not to slip. The pole dropped two feet, this time and he looked up at the others. It was too easy. Frey smiled and gave him a

thumbs-up. He moved farther down the slope and poked. The rod went in six feet and he frowned.

He moved laterally several feet and hacked out a small ledge. Once again the pole stopped at three feet. He looked up and nodded to the others.

"It's not supposed to be this easy," he said. "The plane must be right on top. I very much doubt any rocks would be this high up this pile of snow."

"I agree," said Kory, expanding the compact snow shovel she'd brought. "Let's do it."

It didn't take long before the bright red, albeit severely lacerated, skin of the Beaver revealed itself to their dedicated digging. They continued along the line of the successful contacts Dusty had made and dug a trench in the snow around the aircraft. There was as yet no indication what part it was and the noon sun was getting warm. Dusty stopped and looked around, wiping sweat off his forehead as he did so.

"Say, you sure no one's up here except us?" he turned to Frey.

"Shouldn't be. CIA's pretty tight on this place and sends an air patrol every once in a while to drive off busybodies."

"Well, someone's down there." He pointed down the slope.

"I don't see anyone."

"Just wait."

They watched for a time, but nothing happened.

"A marmot or something," Kory began.

"There!" There was something moving among the rocks. Frey was the first to react.

"Great. I wonder what he's up here for."

"I don't know: lost hiker?"

"You believe that if you're into your fairy tales. All I can think is that it's a CIA guy who's checking up on me."

"What for?" Kory asked.

"What, the most paranoid organization in the world and you have no idea of 'what for?'"

"Point conceded."

"Well, let's get back to work," Dusty commented. "If he's CIA, he's legit, if not, he won't know or care what we're up here for unless he's a muckraker from the press."

"Good point," Frey answered.

HERMIT looked into the valley. Damn him, was the thought, he's was supposed to stay out of sight and observe. This could ruin everything.

The trio continued to dig for a while until it was apparent that they had only uncovered the severed wing of the plane. The setback was enough to call them to lunch and they sat down on the now-dry skin of the Beaver wing. Dusty always enjoyed the baking feel of the sun at high altitudes, especially when among the snow. It was like being in a tanning bed, without the claustrophobia. The air moved over them gently and he fell asleep.

The man cursed as he put the injured foot down. What a damn fool thing to do! He thought. The slope down which he had been moving was treacherous with snow and his clandestine movement into the valley was interrupted by a hundred-foot stumbling slide. Shouting, "here I am!" was slightly, but only slightly, more conspicuous. His head was

justifiably forfeit, aching as it was, and the man felt that the Company would be less than forgiving. Still, he was the only asset in the area and hoped he could redeem himself.

He twisted the foot around. The end of the slide had ended in a nasty "runout," with rocks at the end. In the neatest way one could imagine, his foot had been sucked into a crevice between two of the largest boulders, crushing it. It hurt, but did not seem to be too badly damaged. Sprained only, probably, nothing broken. He flexed it and the pain was not acute, but the foot felt like one big bruise. At least the ankle wasn't really damaged. He settled into place in the copse and pulled out the binoculars again. The subjects lounged at the other end of the valley. He shook his head. What dedication, when it would only be wasted! It saved him from digging, so he did not mind.

When he woke from his doze, Dusty saw that the sun had shifted significantly. The others were talking quietly at the top of the wing. Lunch had to be short, he thought, as the afternoons in the high country this time of year were short on light. He was not looking forward to doing any more digging in the inconsistent snow. He turned.

"You guys ready to try Phase Two?" he asked.

Frey popped his head up.

"Yeah, let's do it. Think the fuselage is under the wing?"

"I have no idea," Dusty answered. "If it is, how're we going to get under the wing?"

"It's not wide, just poke around to the side. We may be lucky."

Dusty pulled out the trusty avalanche pole and poked a few times to either side of the wing. The fourth stab stopped short at four feet: two feet below the wing. Dusty looked up and shrugged. Kory shouldered her shovel and gingerly moved down the slope to the spot. She didn't want to fall into any incidental crevasse. Frey followed.

The red skin of the Beaver's fuselage reflected off the covering snow as they got closer. The pink-looking snow deepened in color and on the next shovelful, Frey hit the plane. It didn't take long to clear the area from there, even though it still meant moving several vertical feet.

Although the wing had been somewhat intact, the fuselage had buckled. Six feet from their initial find, Dusty found a big opening where the plane had broken in half and lay in a ninety-degree angle. Frey and Kory, it seemed, were working on the tail section: the main cabin was to the side and right below him.

"Check it out, guys." They came over and looked where he pointed. Frey whistled.

"Wow," he said, "that's pretty impressive. It looks pretty solid down there. Think it goes all the way down?"

"Seems like it," Dusty answered. "I think I can squeeze down there: it seems like the break happened right at that back luggage area, or whatever you call it."

"Be careful," Kory said. "I wouldn't trust this hill to remain stable."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Dusty said. "It's had a few days of sintering and freezing. I think it'll hold."

She snorted.

"Think," she said, "is not really a good thing to

base your life on."

Dusty turned to her.

"Well then, how about, 'In my personal professional assessment, based on years of experience in the backcountry, this snow will not shift for the next twenty-four to, hmm, say twenty-five hours, thirty-seven minutes and fourteen seconds or so. Give or take a couple of minutes, of course.'" She gave him a look.

He sat on the edge of the cavity.

"You can have my pack if I don't come out after that time."

"Well, now, that makes your claim worth it," Frey answered.

"I claim the fanny. Fanny pack, I mean," quipped Kory.

"You going to be able to get back up?" Frey asked.

"I'll climb on the ribs and seats. Should be easy. But that's a good thought."

He unbuckled his fanny pack and after rummaging about for a bit, brought out a bundle of cord.

"Here's my eight-mil. There's thirty feet or so. If I have trouble, secure it to the middle of the shovel, put that over the opening and drop it down."

He swung his legs into the fuselage and scrambled for a bit, then disappeared.

"How's it going?" Frey asked. "Can you see okay?"

A hollow voice drifted up.

"Yeah! It's so bright up there that you couldn't see down, but enough light's filtering down so it ain't so bad once you get used to it."

It was rather like playing in a MacDonald's playground set with all the tubes and diversions: small enough for kids, but adults had a tough time getting through the tubes

made for smaller bodies. Dusty squirmed down until his foot hit something soft and yielding. Probably a seat, he thought, and was thankful that there had been no passengers. He crouched on the back of what he thought was the seat and looked down. It was actually a carry-on case, complete with luggage wheels and handle. Well, he thought, that's convenient. He looked up through the narrowing cone above him. No way to get it through that. He yelled to Frey.

"Found some luggage!" he shouted. "I'm going to go through it! That's the only way to get any of it out! It's too big!"

"Go for it!" Frey's voice seemed to drift down and settle on him. "Get what you can!"

Awkwardly, he unzipped the main compartment. Pretty much what you'd expect: clothing and toiletries. Nothing that looked like CIA computer media although, he reflected, it was probably disguised, along with the cyanide pill . . . he smiled at the totally inappropriate joke and closed the compartment. Other compartments were equally innocuous and he did his best to move the suitcase to the side.

"Nothing!" he yelled.

"No computer stuff or anything?"

"Nope! No papers, I.D., cards, magnetic stripes or anything! I looked hard!"

" `kay! Keep looking!"

It was a good thing he wasn't claustrophobic, he thought. His brother would be freaking out about now. He moved down between the seats. Below him he thought he could see another case and a smaller, square object.

The square object turned out to be, of all things, an ordinary briefcase. Against the popular notion of the spy

business, it had no lock -- at all -- and no handcuff for security. It wasn't even made of indestructible aluminum, merely leather. He reached down and hauled it up, setting it on the seat.

"Send down the rope!" he shouted.

"Can't get out?" Kory's voice got annoying when she didn't know when to quit.

"Yeah, I can, I just need you to haul something up!"

The rope dropped on him and he tied a figure-eight knot into the handle of the briefcase.

"Haul away!"

The case moved quickly up the shaft. It bumped annoyingly in a couple of spots and got stuck crossways near the top, blocking out all light. Apparently, one of the people above was able to grab it and turn it for the light suddenly returned.

Up top, Frey turned over the 'case and snapped the latch. It was completely undamaged and opened easily. He shuffled through the papers: nothing there. There was no software and the papers contained nothing but pilot's log, a couple of magazines and brochures on some resort in the Wasatch. Investment stuff. He shrugged, closed it and was only then aware that Kory's curious eyes were watching over his shoulders.

"This is rather private," he said to her. She shrugged in response.

"Sorry. Didn't think it was any big deal."

"Yes. Well, turned out not to be, but try not to poke in the future."

She made a face as Frey leaned over the hole. Pompous G-man ass, she thought.

"Nothing here. Anything else down there?"

"Hang on!"

Dusty went through the remaining carry-on. He had enough room to turn it over, albeit awkwardly, and unzipped the side pack. Five or six DVD's popped out, a Minidisk, some CD's and a thumb-sized flashdrive.

"Bingo," he murmured under his breath.

He did a quick look through the rest of the cabin, making sure he did not miss anything. He went back to the carry-on and stuffed the software in his shirt, hoping it would stay put on the trip up. It would really suck if one of the devices dropped out and he had to dig down among the foot pedals for a tiny device. He zipped his shirt up tightly and made sure it stayed solidly tucked in before starting the climb up. It was slightly easier, if not actually comfortable, since he could see his way. He got to the opening and Frey stuck his hand down. He grabbed it and climbed out into the now-intense afternoon sun. He blinked several times, trying to get used to the brightness and pulled out his sunglasses.

"Whoa," he said, "bright out here."

"Whatja find?" Kory's curiosity, it seemed, was unbounded today.

"Jackpot. At least as far as Frey is concerned."

He pulled out the software and laid it on the wing next to the briefcase. Frey opened the 'case and placed them inside.

"Good haul. I figure this'll keep them occupied at the office. Probably nothing here, too, but that's what they wanted."

Dusty picked up the DVDs and went through them.

"Hmm, here's quite the eclectic selection. Tombstone, Porky's, Midnight in the Garden of Etc, Etc. Here's an odd

one out, not something you'd expect a bureaucrat to enjoy: Monty Python's Holy Grail. 'Bring outcher dead!'" He quoted it in a very bad Cockney accent.

"Boy," said Kory, "that was tacky, considering where we are." It was his turn to give her a look.

He pulled a box set out.

"Check this out. The Lord of the Rings, all in the new trilogy set. All films are in there, too. That's weird. Why would he have all three and then an extra one in his jacket?"

"Beats me," commented Frey. "Maybe the other one was that extended edition or something."

"No, these are all extended. My brother's really up on it -- trust me, he's a serious Tolkien geek -- and he said the gift package had all extended versions."

He placed the set into the briefcase. Frey placed the CD's, which were no less eclectic -- Sarah McLachlan alongside Dan Fogelberg was half expected, but the fact they were placed next to Linkin Park, Chicago Symphony and Katy Perry was a bit more outside -- into the 'case and forced the latch shut. He looked up. The sun was lowering and sat within a degree or so of the western ridge. The temperature was submitting to the melting snow and absent sun. Kory shivered.

"Didn't bring a layer up here? Thought you'd know better." Dusty was not averse to riding her once in a while.

"Of course, I did. It's on the wing." She gestured and turned to get it while Dusty collected his eight-mil rope. The three treasure hunters turned toward their makeshift stairs. Dusty leaned down and began hacking the soft steps deeper, into a supportable trail.

The binoculars revealed a square brown object he took to be a briefcase dangling from the FBI agent's hand. The man grinned. He had seen the material being passed from Dusty's shirt to the agent and could only assume it was important enough to haul out of the wreck. HERMIT would be pleased, he guessed, assuming this was the material they had been sent to get. He was to wait for orders and the Company was meticulous about orders followed exactly at this level. Still, he patted the Ruger in his pocket and grinned. He limped back up the hill and this time was unnoticed as he passed from tree to tree.

HERMIT was concerned. Killing them would complicate matters, even if it were an option. Those damned radios! One "radio check" from the courthouse and the place would be swarming with SAR, FBI, OHS and any number of companies one could think of. And the CIA would be hovering about, wringing its hands. There was no way they could clear the area without being discovered.

On the other hand, stealing it and leaving Frey to talk about the loss would completely undermine the effort to not let CIA know they had it. Could they steal and make a copy, back in town? No, for Frey was sure to keep it tight and it was unknown whether he would stay in town for the night or head down the mountain. It all depended upon when they would leave. It was late today and would be dark by the time they got down the mountain. Tomorrow morning,

then, and Frey would unquestionably go straight to the office.

They could follow and hope for a break. Stealing it was still an option as the night wore on. HERMIT and the assistant -- although one wondered what good he had actually done besides alerting them to the presence of other hikers in the area -- would just have to move quickly and in an entirely unknown direction to avoid detection. Frey hadn't had time for a real inventory and even if something was lost, it might again be written off as a wilderness issue. If they did it properly, no one would know that the FBI agent had discovered anything and CIA would write it off as an unfortunate incident. At least long enough for the Company to make use of whatever CRUCIBLE was.

The "Assistant" was actually eating an energy bar. What an incompetent!

"Keeping a good watch?"

The startled man dropped the energy bar and HERMIT thought he was going to pee his pants. Definitely not one for the outdoors no matter how good he was in the city.

"Uh, yes. Sorry," he stammered, "I'm not used to the quiet."

"You are good for some things."

The man was told what needed to be done. The man grated at the delay. Obviously, he thought, some people had not thought this out and HERMIT was among them. The Assistant would have to approach the camp during the early morning, when reactions were slow, while they were lying asleep. Should be easy.

But, he thought, some things were easier than others, and HERMIT was not playing the game right. That's what you

get for farming out things better done by Company people, he thought.

Dusty leaned back with the obligatory hot jello. Lemon, this evening. Frey sat on a log, cleaning his gun. Kory plopped the wood onto the pile. She had been collecting since they had gotten off of Snow Mountain, as she referred to it.

"Should last for tonight, at least. Then we can go to your precious environmentally friendly stoves in the morning."

"Yeah, yeah."

There was bonhomie after what at least Frey considered a successful mission. Dusty and Kory both wanted to dig through the briefcase -- there was something glamorous and mysterious, both, about a dead CIA agent -- but Frey was adamant. Besides, he said, it was purely routine stuff. The agent was a bean counter, nothing more, and he couldn't think of anything more pointless than going through ledgers of some obscure operation investigating. . . the bad dating habits of isolated scientists in Antarctica, for all he knew.

"Besides, unless you brought your laptop or walkman, the disks will just look pretty with the rainbow colors: can't watch 'em."

And that pretty much shut things down as far as that was concerned.

"Sounds like another 'suit' answer," Dusty said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Probably what it sounds like," Kory commented,

tossing another piece of wood onto the fire. "Whether you like it or not, Feds have a 'rep.'"

"Yeah," Frey answered dryly, "I could tell last week. Fact is, you watch too many movies."

"Oh, so you think all movies are Hollywood bias, eh? The liberal media and all that bullshit."

"No, it's just that they don't portray it accurately. I don't mean that the media's liberal: I think it's generally even-handed, as much as they could be."

Kory looked at him with surprise.

"What?" he said, a bit defensively.

"Well, I thought all law enforcement people were hard-core conservatives. You know, Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, rah-rah the military and all that."

"Not this one. Remember a lot of the FBI were originally lawyers. There's a fair amount of folks who go into investigation because of social concern and, say what you will, the social-concerns crowd tends to be liberal."

"Granted," said Dusty. "What I don't get is how a liberal can be so socially conscious and into secular humanism at the same time."

"What do you mean?" Kory asked.

"Concern for the dispossessed, pacifism and environmental stewardship are all Judeo-Christian values. If they deny some sort of spiritual accountability, they deny any reason to have all those values."

"Now, wait a sec," Frey began, but Kory cut him off.

"So you're saying so-called born again Christians should be liberals instead of the conservatives they and everybody else think they are."

Dusty thought.

"You're being extreme, but I see what you're saying."

In some ways, you're right, I guess, but the problem is a lot of liberalism generally denies a true accountability to absolute morality. The funny thing is, the more accountable you are to it, the more -- not less -- concern you should have about those issues.

"For example, the more power you have, the more accountable you are regarding that over which you have power. Adam named all the animals. Naming something indicated ownership and dominance, but more important, acceptance of responsibility. That included the assurance of the ruled to be able to call on the 'owner' for help at any time. By that logic, Jews and Christians should be more responsible regarding the environment than atheists or even Earth Mother worshippers. Kind of puts a different twist on conservationism, eh?"

They looked at him and didn't quite roll their eyes. Then Kory stirred.

"Thus endeth the lesson," she said neutrally.

"What?" Dusty threw up his hands.

"I'm done," said Frey and he got up and went to his bed. He removed the clip to the gun and got in his bag.

"What's with the gun?" Kory asked.

"Habit," Frey answered. "You didn't notice last night?"

Kory shook her head.

"Well," Frey continued, "I have it handy on a mission."

"This," she said, "is a 'mission?'"

"I know. It's silly, I suppose. I mean, I don't expect to be popping bad guys. I've never had to shoot anyone on any operation I've been on, much less on something this dull. But, like I say, it's a habit and it's policy. I keep

my 'chops' up and have qualified, each time the exam comes up, of course."

"Well." She stood up. "Between guns and fundamentalists, I'm pretty done in."

"First time I've ever been called that," Dusty complained. "I'm just too logical for my own good."

"Logical, eh? Well, maybe it's just too much to handle after a long day," said Kory. "Besides we've got a long hike out tomorrow."

"Oh?" Dusty wondered. "I thought you said you were catching up on the 'alone' time you didn't get last week."

"Oh," Kory said, pensively. "I guess I did. Well, I guess today's work kind of made me enjoy the company more than solitude." And she gave Dusty a breezy smile and went to her own sleeping bag.

* * *

The Assistant moved stealthily. At least it seemed so in his own mind. Indigenous creatures heard foreign, loud noise from a long way off and scurried out of his way. The snow's surface had hardened in the hours since sunset and try as he might, he could not help crunching through the crust. He cursed silently.

Dusty stirred in his sleep. The outdoorsman was tuned to the backcountry and in any case he never slept well in the confines of a mummy bag. He needed to spread out, even in sleep. Kory lay awake, listening, heard nothing and closed her eyes.

The man moved again. He was learning, and learning quickly. When the infrequent breeze moved the trees, he moved and the crunch of the snow could be marked down by

some listener as some natural phenomenon inherent in the night sounds. Still, the snow was a physical, as well as tactical, barrier and he did not have HERMIT's ability to negotiate one hundred yards, much less the half mile from his observation post to the camp. Why him? He grumbled and slipped, his mind distracted from the problem at hand. He was not one of those whose lifestyle made backwoods stealth a second nature. HERMIT used to be better at this part of it, anyway. A wimp in the killing game, though. He shrugged his shoulders silently and moved to the next position.

It took him a long time in his own estimation, but his business required stealth and patience, and whatever you could say about his wilderness skills, he was an expert in the first two areas. As he approached the camp itself, he found rocks centuries of erosion and avalanche had flung from the cliff. Their dark faces had soaked up the daytime heat and were bare of snow. This prevented the crunching sound, but he had to be careful to keep from slipping or falling on loose boulders. The campsite appeared through the trees in front of him and he slowed down more if that were possible.

The fire glowed red in its dying phase, an unexpected spurt of flickering gas providing the only additional light to the nighttime. The tiny unexpected flash of light burned into his retina and he quickly closed his eyes to prevent night blindness. By feel he pulled out the Ruger and avoiding the fire's light opened his eyes to see his targets. The gun came up.

Dusty's eyes flew open and his brow wrinkled in confusion. In the intuitive way of Miss Clavell of Madeline fame, the outdoorsman knew "something is not right," and sat up suddenly. There was a double impact in the mummy bag

behind him and the simultaneous snap of a silenced pistol came to his ears. A pistol with a silencer is not completely "silent" as portrayed in spy movies and in the dead silence of the snowy high country it might as well have been a cannon. Dusty couldn't place the sound in his groggy state, but he did know enough to move quickly. He rolled over as a third shot hit his place at the fire. The Assistant struggled to connect, but, the cursed shadow kept moving. His foot pained him and the loss of night vision combined to make his shots more random than they should have been, professional thought he was.

Frey jumped at the first shot. At three in the morning, his movements were not what they should have been and he reacted not knowing whether he was dreaming or awake. The only thing that saved his life was the enclosed configuration of the lean-to and the diffused light of enclosed nighttime: by getting a clear shot at one sleeper, the Assistant could not clearly see the others and he was wasting time shooting at Dusty in his frustration. Frey hadn't remotely expected adversaries here -- after all it was merely a body and personals recovery, not a "mission," per se. He rolled his bag over the packed floor of the lean-to, crowding into the trees that provided its very sparse wall and unknowingly rolled into the assassin's line of sight.

The Assistant cursed fluently as his initial target, Dusty, disappeared, but his peripheral sight picked up the dark flash of Frey's sleeping bag. In a reaction born of paramilitary training, he whipped his arm over and let off a couple shots. The agent's scream told him he had hit at least once, but not killed him, which, of course, was the mission. But the mission was a bust at this point. Still,

hitting the agent had stopped this party from moving anywhere for at least a few hours. Then the chopper support would come in. The radios once again saved lives by their mere existence.

He let off a couple more shots into the writhing dark mass, then moved quickly into the lean-to's entrance. Dusty was still huddled behind the packs and the Assistant ran to them with his gun raised. Dusty incongruously raised his hands, not knowing that here was an assassin with a mission, not a mere holdup: he was worth nothing alive, but very valuable, dead. Suddenly, the shooter grunted and pitched forward on his face as the blast of Kelly's gun pulverized the morning silence. The whole ordeal had lasted less than a minute and except for Dusty's scrambling and the lighter sound of the Ruger, in silence. Frey's gunshot put an end to that.

Kory's eyes flew open and she sat up from her prone position. Dusty stood up and looked in amazement at the inert body below him. He turned to the others.

"What the hell?" she yawned. "What happened? What was that noise?"

Dusty didn't answer, but shifted his gaze to the agent's bag and saw Frey's hand poking out of the mummy's opening. It gripped his service gun. Dusty was amazed. He had been so charged with adrenaline that he hadn't even heard its discharge. As he watched, the arm, exhausted, dropped to the floor and relaxed. Frey's white face showed in the darkness and fell back onto the sleeping bag's soft down. He closed his eyes. Dusty jumped up and ran to him.

"What's up? Why are you guys up?" Kory said.

Dusty ignored her.

"Frey, Kelly, how bad is it? How bad are you hurt?" He could not tell at first if the agent were conscious or not and his hand flew up to the neck to check pulse. The eyes opened.

"I have no idea," Frey answered. "My bag's full of blood and my leg hurts like a sonofabitch."

"Let's get you out. Holler if I hurt you, 'kay?" Frey nodded painfully.

"Count on it," he grunted.

Dusty's knee hurt suddenly and he looked down. The metal edges of Frey's service piece cut into his knee painfully and without thinking, he picked it up and tossed it onto Frey's sleeping bag. He turned back to Frey and unzipped the bag as far as it would go. Fortunately, it was not a traditional closed mummy, but one of those hybrids that allowed for movement while economizing in weight and warmth. He gently pried Frey loose from the bag and when Kory came over, they managed to place him on top. The bag was also synthetic-filled, so retained its warmth in spite of the blood.

He had been shot in the hip and the upper thigh, about ten inches apart. Fortunately for immediate benefit compared to the alternative, unfortunately for pain, the hip shot had hit the pelvis, breaking it, but not lodging in any other area. Frey figured he'd be dead otherwise: anybody with the skills or sources to obtain or build a silencer could easily get soft-nose or scored bullets and the assassin probably had. No sense taking a chance. The bullet probably nicked the hip before fracturing. A direct hit would have been deadly. It might still be for all he knew. He fainted.

Dusty rolled him over gently and examined the back.

There was only one exit wound, but the fragmenting slug made it very large. The ragged edges oozed, but there was no blood pumping out. Dusty shook his head in amazement. Somehow the fragments had missed the femoral artery and vein, he thought.

The thigh, on the other hand, was shattered, confirming suspicions about the type of bullet. It was low enough for a tourniquet. That was a good thing, for it was pumping blood at an alarming rate. Dusty told Kory to put pressure near the groin where the artery ran close to the surface and he ran to his pack to get webbing for a tourniquet. He almost stumbled over the assassin's body and the otherworldliness of the moment made him pause. Then sense came to him and he pulled the webbing from his emergency pack as well as the first aid kit. Although the fire threw a bit of light onto the scene, he knew he needed more to see properly and grabbed his headlamp from his sleeping bag as well.

They had laughed at him when he gave a lecture on his emergency bag. The sanitary napkins were definitely out of order in a man's pack, but as he'd explained, they were just the things for sterilely dealing with a lot of blood. He was sure glad he had them now.

He took them out of their packages and pressed one to the entry wound. He had no idea what the bullet did on the inside beyond breaking the bone and the artery and didn't care beyond seeing that his charge didn't die from loss of blood. He slapped a napkin onto the large exit wound. For all the effectiveness of the exploding bullet, the assassin may as well have used a shotgun. He tied the webbing around the upper thigh and used a short branch to tighten it. Then he tied it down to the thigh to secure the tourniquet and

to act as a temporary immobilizer. He turned to Kory.

"I'm going to call Dispatch. Just keep an eye on him and start the pressure again if it starts bleeding. You okay for a while?"

She took a deep breath and nodded, white-faced, and he walked to the packs. The radio was in the fanny section. He pulled it out and turned it on. The warbling tones sounded, indicating a sufficient battery and he switched the channel to Red, the most far-reaching, dependable band they had from that point in the canyon.

"Springfield, Sierra Twenty-two."

Nothing.

"Springfield, Sierra Twenty-two."

Still nothing. Odd. He clicked the mic key, hoping to hear a "chunk" from the repeater. If the radio reached the repeater, he would hear his own mic click coming back to him. There was nothing. He switched to EOC and "chunked" the repeater. Nothing again.

"Kory," said Dusty, "I've got to get into a free area."

"Why isn't it working?"

He shrugged.

"Conditions. Maybe someone burned out the repeater and it shut down. It may even be we were lucky the other time and we're in a shadow. Maybe it's my radio . . . I don't know. Where's yours?"

She nodded to the pile of backpacks.

"Top compartment. Like yours." He dug through her pack and found the hand-held. He turned it on. Or tried to. There was no light and no tones.

"What the . . . ? Where's your spare battery?"

"Huh?"

"You've left it on. You left the radio on! It's shot! What the hell?"

"I . . . I only brought one," she stammered. "I wasn't planning on using it except for emergencies and was saving weight."

For someone so hard-nosed, she looked close to tears. He threw down her useless hand-held to the ground in frustration and grabbed his again. He spoke through clenched teeth as he tried to maintain professionalism, if not composure.

"I'll have to go up on the ridge. Stay here and keep an eye on him."

He headed out what passed for a door in the lean-to and stalked off. Of all the stupid things to do! he cursed. For someone who was so "with it" in the outdoors, she had done something virtually unforgivable and he kicked at the snow in his frustration. It was a sore trial on his patience and even his habitual grace to others. But, really!

He reached the gorge and walked up its steep banks as quickly as he could without endangering himself. Once he reached the lower section of the ridge he pulled out the radio and tried once again to establish contact. There was nothing, not even the repeater. He shook his head in confusion and looked at the radio. Still okay, he thought. Battery's in, getting power, for sure. Light's on. He unscrewed the short antenna and saw everything looking normal. Switches were fine, but the fact was, he was not getting out. He tried other channels for the chance of it, but as he expected, there was still nothing.

He pulled out his cell, although that held less hope than the radio. They'd tried it before, but there was not

even the glimpse of a tower in this part of the Wilderness. He speed-dialed Todd's number even though the symbol showed no signal. The phone gave the familiar, unwelcome tones indicating an error.

He had been too long on this hillside and he started down. Kory was competent, he knew, but things could happen and he wanted to be there for her and for Frey if something did. He realized that the assassin or whatever he was could have had an accomplice and quickened to a trot. Talk about stupid, he thought.

The early morning was quiet and he noticed the cold as he entered the lean-to. Adrenaline and exercise had warmed him up, and now he felt the chill in a new way. He looked at Frey, who was white-faced and still. He turned to the left and grabbed Kory's sleeping bag, draping it over the unconscious man. Several minutes had passed and so intent was he on Frey that it was only after bundling the man that he realized how quiet it was. He looked around. He and Kelly Frey were alone in the lean-to. Kory's pack was gone.

14.

Maybe there is an accomplice, Dusty thought, and she's checking the perimeter of the camp. What was she doing? Why had she taken her pack? He ran to his prone pack where the radio lay with his fleece and shell. He looked for the briefcase and only saw where it was not. He stumbled back to Frey to ensure his work on him had been successful then stoked the fire. First and foremost was to keep Frey alive. The crackling fir boughs threw more light onto the morbid scene and he turned off the headlamp to save batteries.

"Dusty."

The feeble moan came from Frey who had returned to consciousness. Dusty crouched down beside the wounded agent and opened a Nalgene bottle of water.

"Yeah. What do you need?"

"Bitch."

"What was that?" He thought Frey was losing it.

"You heard me. 'Bitch.'" The effort was a lot for one who had lost so much blood. Dusty was a lousy liar and Frey knew it before he began to speak.

"Um," began Dusty, "she's checking the area for other. . . uh, hostiles."

"Bullshit," Frey breathed. "She took off. She did something to the packs, grabbed the 'case and took off. You were busy, but I watched her. She's got the briefcase and her pack."

"Whatever for?" Dusty leaned closer.

"Some water. Please." Dusty put the Nalgene bottle to his lips and tipped a small amount of water ever so gently into the dry mouth.

"Something in the software," Frey continued, "I guess.

I don't know."

One of Dusty's great virtues as well as faults was his belief in the best of the worst of people. He could not believe that Kory wanted that material so much, much less why.

"Why didn't she finish you if she was that bad?"

"I don't know."

Dusty shook his head.

"No way."

Frey grabbed his wrist.

"Radio?"

Dusty shook his head.

"I can't get out even from the ridge."

"And you suppose that's coincidence? Doesn't take long to clip and remove a wire." Frey nodded ever so slightly. He was not surprised.

"What about a cell?" he asked.

Dusty shook his head again.

"Way out of range. We're miles from a signal."

"Top of the ridge . . ."

"That's a two-hour hike, even if I could get out from there: you'd be gone by then."

"Go after her," he said. Dusty shook his head again, this time in frank defiance.

"No. Not while you're hurt here."

"I'm gone. I know it."

"Hell you are," Dusty said forcibly. "We'll get you out of here and to a hospital."

"I'm gone. With the radios gone what are you going to do? A signal fire would take too long even if there was anybody to see it. As for the CIA patrol, who knows when they're going to come around next? I told you they've been

ramping it down for a week. Hike for a signal on your cell and I'm dead anyway. Go after her. If it's so important she'd kill me for it -- and yes, yes, she's killing me as if she had pulled the trigger and you know it -- then it's damned important and you have to get it."

Frey was right. Dusty knew it but refused to acknowledge its validity.

"Look, go to sleep. I'll keep checking on you. It looks okay. You'll probably even save the leg."

"I'm. . . gone." Frey drifted off to sleep.

He couldn't stay, but there was no way he could leave him. Frey had convinced him, but it wasn't high on his list of priorities, no matter how important someone else - much less the government - thought it was important in light of Frey's life. He didn't understand what Kory did or whom she did it for and he resented the circumstances that made him doubt her, but he couldn't go after her. Not yet.

The remainder of the night stretched on, all two hours of it. Dusty set his timer for half-hour intervals. Upon hearing the first alarm he rose, put more wood on the fire and loosened the tourniquet for the shortest of minutes while he put pressure on the wound. If he didn't the man might lose more than his leg. When he was done, he couldn't help but doze. He was afraid he would have to go after Kory, and he would need the rest. If she was hoofing it out of Dodge, she'd be exhausted and he'd be able to catch up with her in any case. He hoped that her leg might slow here down after the first couple of hours of stressing it. The snow was not so packed that he couldn't follow her through the backcountry and he was no mean tracker in the worst of conditions.

The crisis came at about six in the morning, just

before the next alarm was about to go off. The false dawn lit the sky but the gloomy shadow of the lean-to covered all but the dying fire and its illumination. Frey moaned and began to thrash in his sleep. Dusty started from his doze and leaped to the dying man's bed.

"Wake up, wake up, man," he said. Conscious and not thrashing was a vast improvement over the alternatives, considering issues like blood loss. Frey opened his eyes convulsively and saw Dusty, concern on his face and in his actions.

"You okay?" Dusty asked, not thinking of the incongruity of that remark.

Frey smiled, lucid, fortunately, and he lifted his hand weakly.

"I'm gone."

"I know, I heard you before," Dusty said, denying the possibility.

"No. I mean it. I'm not just nicked in the pelvis. The damn bullet shattered, I guessed, but it tore my insides. I'm bleeding out on the inside."

"Shit! No! You can't!" Dusty's hand hovered impotently over the bag where he thought the torso would be.

"Can . . . and . . . am," Frey answered weakly. And that was it.

Dusty bowed his head, stricken. It hadn't taken long and although he had seen death in his volunteerism and world travels, it hit him harder this time, that black-and-white veil between life and death. Once again, he was made more than aware of the numinous, that Dread that the philosopher talked of, and that journey from which no report ever comes, but one.

Well. He had no appetite, but needed the nourishment

and down-time to gather his thoughts and determination. If nothing else, it was his responsibility to fulfill Frey's last request, even were he inclined in his personal ethos to forgo justice. He pulled the interminable energy bars out of his pack. He looked at the assassin lying at his feet. There was no question he was dead. At least he was incapacitated and no one would lie face-down on packed dirt for that long unless he were comatose, beyond life or downright deceased. He tugged at the man and turned him over. Nothing there. He had no idea who he was or whom he worked for. He figured there had to be something important in the briefcase that Kory had taken.

HERMIT hoofed it through the woods, carrying the briefcase and struggling to adjust her pack as she moved. She hoped Frey lived long enough to give her a head start, for she knew Dusty would not leave him as long as he was alive. She cursed the assistant the Company had forced upon her for the incompetent woodsman he was and left it at that. For someone who had been so good at killing, he sure blew it when it came to tactics. She didn't want killing. They hadn't needed killing. There were better ways. More than that, there were other ways that were more effective. Killing was, oh so 1960s.

Then again, she shrugged, it was fate, Providence, Buddha, Allah or what-have-you and it/His/Her interference that had Dusty sit up when he did. She was not necessarily sorry. She could not have done it in any case, practically or personally. Frey was too experienced an officer not to notice her pulling a "piece," her own personal pistol, out

of her pack and reacting accordingly, and about Dusty...well, what about him?

Kory went quickly up the valley. She had to get up to where the wind and post-storm sun had cleared the stones of snow. A blind man could track her in the valley, but the rocks on the plateau would leave no sign, although she knew Dusty was an experienced tracker and had little hope in that. Still.

After about twenty minutes, she reached the long section of scree that tumbled down from the valley's end, results of glaciers and avalanches in millennia past. She turned and scanned the valley. No sign of him and that gave her an easy mile start, best she could figure. Hard to pick out among the jumbles of stone, he might even miss her climbing up the scree. She put down her pack and made room for the material they had placed in the briefcase.

The Company had not specified the nature of the software and she wasn't stupid, so she pulled all the DVD's as well as CD's. De la Cruz had fooled them once, and she wouldn't take the chance of a double whammy. There was no forgiveness in the people who had hired her. She scanned through the papers. Pretty boring stuff, but free intelligence was a gift and there might be something even in these. After a moment's hesitation, she shoved these into the pack, as well, then threw the briefcase as far as she could off her trail and into the boulder field. She pulled out the topographical map of the area.

The topo faithfully showed "her" valley at the foot of Jefferson Peak. The ridge continued around and grew to a high flat plateau, just northwest of Jefferson. There was no shorter way to a road than going over the plateau. She couldn't take the chance of going back to her car. The CIA

airplane patrol might see her. Frey had said the flights were sporadic, but what that meant would be fatal if she guessed wrong.

Dusty might stop her. He might even get out while she was still driving a marked vehicle down the national forest road and she couldn't take the chance that he might get out on his cell. Besides, she was pretty sure she was up to this long trek.

The plateau was large, ten miles across by twelve miles and it was all bare tundra. That was no good. Even with the undulation in the plateau, Dusty would see her a mile off. She smiled at the thought of him. It was too bad. She had loved him in her own way as well as his, but duty was duty, and she knew that if she refused to do her duty for the Company, they would hunt her down for a permanent accountability.

She mentally shrugged, putting aside the issue once again, and concentrated on the nonexistent trail ahead. It didn't matter at this point. She had to follow through on her mission or she was dead at her "colleagues'" hands.

North of the plateau was a defile that grew into a formidable valley. There was a hunting lodge near the mouth of the valley, and she would rendezvous there with other members. She would try to call on her cell from the north end of the plateau and hope to get reception. Otherwise, she would spin a tale for the outfitter and, frankly call over the open line. The numbers, connections, cutouts and names were all innocuous enough that no one would suspect a thing. The down side on that was the extra couple of hours it would take for an extraction.

* * *

Dusty shifted the fanny pack on his hips. He had dragged the assassin's body out into the woods. He had no compunction about leaving it for the scavengers and his energy was too precious a commodity to waste burying this idiot. Frey, however, he dragged to a spot in the cliff, which, like the pilot's grave, opened in spots to provide a ready-made crypt. The cleft ensured that it would not take long to cover the body with rocks. He stood over the rock cairn he'd placed over the body with his head bowed. The moment of silence and respect. A prayer. SAR would recover the body later.

A moment later and he sorted his gear, putting the emergency pack, water and food into the fanny pack. Light weight was all that counted. The last thing to go in was his rolled-up bivvy sack, then he tied the layers he wasn't wearing on top. It might be awkward, he thought, but better than the whole pack. He was ready to follow Kory.

He thought back on things as he began a long paced, mile-eating lope up the trail and tried to read her mind. He could catch up to her, he was confident, but when? Why didn't she head down the valley? She must have known he could track her in any case. He had to assume that she had compatriots ready to pick her up north of here but didn't want to risk a marked vehicle on the highway.

It must have been Kory who took the original DVD. If she had it, why did she come back? he wondered. Maybe there wasn't anything on there that she'd wanted. Maybe they suspected there was more, as there certainly must have

been. In any case, she was several miles ahead of him, and he would have to seriously move if he had a chance of catching her. Aside from the implied vendetta Frey had left him with, his own relationship with Kory, as equivocal as it had been, made him want to call her to account.

It was about six-thirty in the morning when he set out. Kory was well on her way to the plateau, and although Dusty wasn't familiar with the plateau, he knew that a determined hiker would hit the state highway if he kept going north in a fairly straight line. Kory was good enough in the woods to do that. The only good news -- if he could call it good -- was her health. It wasn't one hundred percent and even then he was her superior in strength, and certainly in endurance. The leg would certainly hold her back and she would have to rest it. He was no doctor, but he would bet the still-knitting bone in her leg was nowhere near up to the stress she was putting on it.

He wasn't looking forward to this, for a lot of reasons, the least being his aversion to long distance running. He had paced for a friend of his doing the Hard Rock 100 -- a 100-plus mile, 30,000 foot vertical endurance race in southwest Colorado -- and swore never to do it again. He couldn't imagine actually doing the race. And here he was doing something close to it in the early morning light.

Kory stumbled along. She stopped and emptied most of the gear in her pack, wondering why she hadn't done so in the first place. Force of habit, she supposed: she never hiked for any distance in the backcountry without enough gear to spend the night and she was so used to the weight of an expedition pack that she didn't even think about reducing the amount of gear. The hardware went, as did the sleeping bag. She kept the bivvy sack as well as the emergency pack, although if she got lost or injured, the Company would hunt her down and kill her as a lost cause whether she survived the wilderness or not. Water and a couple of the everlasting energy bars went with her but she tossed the rest of the food.

She was at the north end of the plateau and thought the I-70 corridor might afford her a cell. She popped out her cell phone and dialed.

"Yes?"

"Is Jeff there?"

"Did you say Jess?"

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

"It happens at times."

She took a breath of relief. It was an old technique, but effective. The routine ensured that the Company had not been compromised. An "under-duress" code used a different combination of words on both ends.

"I need support. I have the real item this time and I'm about fourteen miles from a road. There is an outfitter at the end of County Road #532, south of State Highway 43."

"Check. There will be a courier."

"I'm being followed as well," she said testily. "When I said 'support,' I meant 'support.' Five personnel should be enough."

There was a slight hesitation at the other end.

"That's not very covert."

"I realize that, and I would not ask for it if it weren't necessary. There is one behind me, but I don't know if he'll be alone by the time I'm at the rendezvous."

"I don't know if I can get that many at this time."

"You have sources." Her voice got colder. "You got me, didn't you?"

She let that sink in.

"Use Option Four," she closed with.

Option Four was the impersonation of county officers, sheriff, police, coroner or EMT, as available on a short notice. It would avoid alarm as well as inconvenient conflict. The whole point, after all, was to make as few waves as possible.

She threw the much-lighter pack onto her back and trudged on toward the edge of the plateau. "Trudge-mode" was what Dusty called it, she thought wistfully, remembering all the hikes and climbs they had done, and the other times they'd spent together. Oh well, there had been nothing there between them anyway and her life had just taken an irrevocable turn. For the worst? she wondered. She didn't know, but had no choice. If nothing else, she wanted to save her life. She moved on down the trail.

He panted. The plateau seemed interminable in the setting sun and images from Dali's paintings juxtaposed with reality on the barren table. The fanny pack bounced heavily as he ran and he was constantly reaching back with

both hands to steady it, or grabbing at the belt to tighten the straps. There was no water here on the windswept mesa, sun and elements having scoured snow from the rock. Though he was sweating, he did not dare grab a swig from his bottle or even stop to take off layers. He shut his mind to his pain and tried to concentrate on placing his foot in the least dangerous steps.

Thoughts rolled through his head like tidewater: back and forth, massaging each idea as it passed through, thinking back to the incongruities of the last week. Irrelevancies popped in, but even they illuminated the subject within.

SAR had stumbled onto something really big, he knew. He now realized how odd it was and way too damn convenient for Kory to be in the backcountry by herself right when the pilot went down, then five days later to pick up the briefcase. He should have seen something funny about it even then. He jumped as a small tundra animal screamed close to his right, then went on concentrating without losing a step of his loping gait.

He wondered why the pilot went down in the first place. It wasn't the first time a plane had gone down in the back country around here, but it was usually for a stupid reason, such as flying too high for the plane's rating or getting lost and running out of gas. Of course, mechanical breakdown could always happen, but rarely with the devastating effect this thing evidently had. If the pilot was CIA-linked -- he didn't doubt Frey on that score -- there must be a motive to bring him down. No one would take down an agent if organization membership was the only criteria. He snorted. CIA recruitment would be at an all-time low if that were the case. He must have been carrying

damning documents.

What he looked at was a mission gone south. He thought about the disappearing DVD -- the one that he had taken off the pilot -- and how he had found the zipper to the fanny pack open. It was somewhat gratifying that it wasn't incompetence on his part, but it annoyed him that he had been taken advantage of, in more ways than one. It explained Frey's "bitch" comment: he must have felt the fool knowing that he had invited Kory into his office and filled in whatever information she didn't already have.

The sun set into a painting of clouds building from the north. That can't be good, he thought. More snow? Maybe just rain, this time.

Kory set down the pack. It was late afternoon and she was pretty tired. Worse, her overstressed leg was hurting badly and she was afraid that it could break under slight stress, such as slipping on a rock in the dim light of her headlamp once evening came. She looked up at the rim of the plateau behind her and was thankful that she had made it down that, anyway.

The dark firs surrounded her, much in the same way they had at their original camp. She would move off the main fall line of the valley to a copse that had some sort of view and settle there. Each little group of trees looked like another and she hoped she could have at least an hour's rest before Dusty got off the plateau. That would still give her a mile head start and he would still have to navigate that boulder field above her. That would get her to the end of the road, at least, and she hoped support

would arrive at the outfitter's ranch by that time.

She pulled out her gun along with another snack. She didn't dare light a stove, much less a fire, but she needed some sort of sustenance and she dug into the food as she also pulled out a small set of binoculars. Scanning the steep bowl down which she had climbed, she saw nothing. Good. That meant at least an hour, and last time she'd checked on the ridge above, the plateau was free of any life. Could mean longer rest, and boy, could she use the time.

She leaned back against the tree and ate a couple of bites. The sun left a gloaming consistent with the fall season. She put a couple of naproxen sodium in her mouth and swallowed it. That would lower the pain, she thought and closed her eyes.

He stopped and pulled out his phone again. He was thankful that she didn't know he had one, or it'd be gone as well. Once in the valley he'd never taken it out as it was pointless. He'd reached the plateau and tried to get a cell, but there was no signal whatever. This close to the northern lip he hoped that he could get something from the Interstate corridor, which had cells in place for at least ten miles north and south of the freeway. The phone lit up as he activated it and, wonder of wonders, a single bar showed up against the LCD's light. He slowed to a fast walk and dialed quickly.

"Central Dispatch."

"This is Sierra Twenty-Two . . . "

"Yeah, Dusty, what's up?"

Nice to know the help, he thought, if a tad unprofessional.

"We have a serious situation up here on the Boulder Flats. I need you to call Russet county sheriff to meet me at the trailhead up Big Timber Valley."

"What happened?"

"Kelly Frey's dead, shot by some unknown guy with a silencer." The dispatcher's gasp came over the line and the phone cut out on her answer.

"What was that, you cut out."

"Continue," she said, reverting to professional demeanor.

"Kory is implicated . . . "

"Shit!" She had lost it again, but to her credit was only momentary.

"Kory," he repeated patiently, "is implicated in the shooting and is running north over the Anderson Plateau. The little sign I've seen and logic both indicate she's coming down the Big Timber. I'm about an hour behind her, I think, maybe less if I'm lucky."

"Copy."

"My radio was sabotaged and . . ." he cut out for a moment . . . "my cell will be out of range for the next fourteen miles, once I go down the upper bowl in the Big Timer."

He hesitated.

"Get Jim and Mark. They've got law enforcement background and we need some cops who know the backcountry. I don't know about the Russet County guys, but obviously have them send their backcountry cops if they have any. It's vital they catch her. She's stolen some important material. This goes way above my pay grade," he added.

"Will do. How long before you're 'out?'"

"It's tenuous right now. Gotta go. I have to catch up to her."

"Bye. Stay careful."

"Will do."

The sun dropped behind the horizon and the Rockies' version of the Scottish gloaming got deeper as the clouds crept overhead. At this altitude, the temperature dropped immediately after the sun disappeared. A day during this time of year could be in the high eighties and drop forty or more degrees after sunset. He moved faster against the coming of the night and the new precipitation.

Kory slept. Every minute, Dusty gained another step in the race from the frontier. It wasn't until well after a late moonrise behind sporadic clouds that the dream woke her up to the feeling of cold flakes hitting her face. It was unsettled, a mish-mash of profound thoughts and enigmatic images and even though it was completely unintelligible, it scared her so badly she jerked awake. There was no transition, for in the second that it took her to realize where she was, she understood that she had gone way beyond what was prudent in her quest for rest. She looked at her watch and the tiny light glowed a surly four forty-five. There was no time to waste and she threw on the pack, thankful that nothing had been unloaded for her break.

Suddenly, she was aware of a commotion in the upper bowl. The slope above her made some clattering noise; it was less than a quarter of a mile away, but clear and loud

in the silent montane ecosystem. She froze. She had not lit her headlamp yet and she moved back into the trees, dissolving into the shadows..

The scree slid, clattering in the night until it dwindled into the tinkling of tiny stones. There was nothing. It may have been nothing, she thought. She was good enough in the wilds, though, to hold still for another ten minutes, waiting for some telltale sign of a large animal's -- possibly human -- presence. She straightened, a joint popping in her neck sounding like a rifle shot in her hyper-sensitive ears. She paused, listening. Still nothing. She let her breath out slowly and buckled the pack's belt.

She debated using her headlamp and decided against it. The quarter moon helped slightly, when it deigned to show itself, and an attentive hiker could pick out the blue moving light from miles off. That was too much advantage to give someone like Dusty. She would have to take her chances until she was well into the valley and in the heavy forest. A few bends in the creek bed and one couldn't see more than a couple hundred yards, light or no light. And that was enough for her.

Before she could start, she heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow. So the scree had not been a random fall, but Dusty sliding down a bad stretch. She froze and the footsteps passed her by. She would wait a few minutes, then had no choice but to follow him -- at a very discreet distance, of course -- until she found the outfitter's lodge.

Dusty, on his part, passed by her without a clue. So

intent was he on catching up that the subtle signs of the deviant trail running to the side passed him by. He was a quarter mile down the valley before he realized that the sign had completely disappeared. He stopped and cursed himself for being so stupid. He took some comfort in the fact that the hooded layer he had put on killed much of his peripheral sight, not to mention the attenuated moonlight. Still, he only had one choice and that was to backtrack. He had no idea how far that would have to be and didn't know if she was now on his trail, or if she had taken off in an entirely different direction. Her inerrant straight path along the top of the plateau indicated desperation for speed and he had been certain she was making for the Big Timber valley. Deep signs of postholing in a couple ancient drifts had shown he was right, but he hadn't seen anything since. It had been on the edge of the plateau and that meant a good mile of sign that he had passed up. He sighed and turned around. Damn! That also meant uphill jogging. Through a snow base with a two-inch fresh powder on top. Great.

Kory cautiously followed. There was a chance that he would realize he was not following her trail and double back. His movement had not really been all that quiet, but he was fast, she had to admit. So she adopted a move-listen-move routine and it held her in good stead. After ten minutes, she heard the crunching footsteps in front of her and pulled the gun she had hidden in her pack.

15.

Dusty almost ran into her, so intent was he on the ground before him. Something made him glance up at the last second and she stood before him in the grey cloudy light. Very fetching, he thought, irrelevantly and leaned over, panting. It was over. He still had the silenced gun he had taken from the assassin, but there was no way he could get to it with her gun trained on him. If she was so motivated as to be a part of Frey's killing, she might even leave him for the buzzards. So he was surprised at her next move.

"I really did love you, you know," she said. Dusty could not believe his ears, but there, she had said it.

"But," she continued, "I have higher priorities."

"Really," he said with all the sarcasm he could muster. It was childish, pointless, and totally out of place in the wilderness where it didn't matter a whit. He was suddenly aware of the silence and the incongruity of the moment struck him. The trees seemed to listen as they towered over them.

"I do. It's called my life, as in 'staying alive.' So, when the call came, I had to go. Your rejection of me actually made it easier."

"Just do it."

She really looked confused there for a moment, then brightened.

"Oh! You think I'm going to kill you!"

He looked up at her.

"Yes, you are and I'm too tired to run just to have you ham-string me then pop me in the forehead."

She looked hurt, and he felt vaguely surprised.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said, "but neither can I afford to let you stop me from doing what has to be done."

Dusty shook his head.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The people I work for have been after a DVD the pilot carried for months, no actually over a year now. They wanted it without CIA knowing we had it, but that idiot they sent out to 'help' me screwed it up. Once you were up the side of the mountain for your radio call, I had the opportunity to pick up the software. I couldn't take the chance between you uninjured and Frey, injured, but with a gun and able to shoot. So when you went to the ridge, I waited for Frey to pass out, which was inevitable. I took off and hoped Frey would live long enough to at least delay you."

"Great. So it wasn't just being 'nice,' huh?"

"No, strictly practical all the way. It was him or me. I guess Frey's dead?"

"Yes, he lived only another hour. There was nothing I could do."

"Well, I'm sorry. Really, I am. He was a nice enough guy. Casualty of war and all that, I guess." It seemed glib, coming from her.

Dusty could think of nothing to say to that but another "Really." He had no idea what he could do. She had the gun and he knew she would shoot him if he made a remotely threatening move.

"I am rather glad he didn't kill you," she said.

"Oh," Dusty answered, sarcastically. Although he knew he probably shouldn't antagonize her, he couldn't help himself. "I am so relieved. What's the point since now

you've got to kill me anyway?"

"Stop being a baby," she said with disgust. "I told you I won't kill you."

"How do I believe that? You might as well have pulled the trigger as let that killer do it."

She leaned forward.

"No," she said quietly. "I didn't know he would do it, and I don't work that way. Short version is, he was an idiot. Killing is a last resort, in any case."

He lifted his head a bit and looked her in the eyes. There was so much behind those hooded eyelids that he had never seen before. There was an element of desperation, of wanting him to some how understand her. And defensiveness. She was way beyond his comprehension and she couldn't forgive him for his lack of insight.

"You just don't understand," she whispered. Something wet dropped on the bone-dry sand beneath them. Then she straightened up.

"I'm a pro," she said coldly. There had been a switch that clicked off in her head and any sentimentality she had was gone like the professional she claimed herself to be. She lowered the gun. There was another suppressed shot like those he'd heard that morning and Dusty collapsed in the snow. He felt a burning pain along the outside thigh muscle and if there had been any doubt, the ground turned dark in the night light. He had never been shot in his life and thought he was dead already. He would be if she had hit an artery, but her next words informed him of the details, at least as she saw them.

"I'm not too bad at anatomy," she said. "No artery was hit or I'm no judge. I hit you in the muscle. It's merely a flesh wound as the movie says, but it'll hurt like hell and

it'll keep you from following me. Well, I suppose you'll still follow me, but not at that annoying pace you were doing earlier. You should get an award for that." She smiled.

She put the gun in her pack belt loop and walked around him.

"And you called me cold," he whispered, clutching his leg. He had not really intended her to hear him, but apparently she did. She leaned down as far as she could with the pack.

"Honey," she said in a low voice. "The Company would've insisted I kill you right now. By not doing so, I may have just committed suicide. I wasn't kidding. I did love you once upon a time. I still do but I don't know why. Be thankful for that much.

"For all I know this might save your life."

After the cryptic remark, she turned convulsively and disappeared down the trail. If he hadn't felt so bad he would have maybe tried to pull Frey's silenced pistol, but there was no time anyway. He wasn't sure if he could shoot anybody in cold blood, much less someone whom he had camped, climbed and practically lived with for the past couple of years.

He was thankful that he only had a fanny pack and didn't have the crushing burden of an expedition load on his back. He was also thankful that his whole emergency bag fit in it and he unbuckled the fanny pack and pulled it out now. The wound was pretty much as Kory had said. There were definitely different bullets in her gun from the one carried by the assassin for it didn't shatter when it hit him, merely passing through. She was also very lucky or skilled. It bled without the spurting, bright red blood of

an arterial hit. He went through the pack. He didn't have much absorbing material left after binding up Frey, but after searching found a single pad.

The night was dark, but his headlamp illuminated the patches of snow in front of him. He crawled to one dark patch that had been melted by the sun, finding late-season yarrow plants. Yarrow leaves help pain and can staunch the flow of blood. He pulled as much as he could, compacting two mounds into poultices. His fingers pressed the weed into the entry and exit wounds and he almost fainted from the pain. He pressed his teeth together and shoved more into each hole.

He pulled a water bottle out. Aside from any aesthetic sentimentality it may have had, the duct tape wrapped around it provided him with enough sticky cloth to bind things fairly tightly. He tore at it as gently as one does with duct tape, and succeeded in pulling off a couple of feet before the cloth tore. He wrapped his thigh and was gratified and concerned at the same time that local shock was setting in. It had settled to a dull ache as long as he kept his hands off the holes, and while it hurt during his self-ministrations, it didn't jab and it didn't bleed any worse. His last act before resting was to pop a couple of Tylenol into his mouth.

Exhausted, Dusty leaned back on the wet grass and looked up into the night sky. It had finally cleared, and the starry sky far outnumbered the clouds lit by the waning and setting moon. One could see how the Milky Way got its name. It lit up the earth and the snow reflected its light. He turned off the headlamp, which he didn't need anymore. It was very silent, although he imagined he could hear the crunching steps of Kory trying to make good her escape,

probably half a mile down the hill if she stuck to the trail. The thought made him sit up. He couldn't just let her go without some attempt at stopping her. He owed Kelly that much. He looked down. The leg looked better and had stopped bleeding and even if it still didn't feel much good, at least the pain had settled further into a dull throb.

He rose to his feet unsteadily and rocked for a moment before things stopped spinning, or maybe that was his overly melodramatic imagination. He had prided himself on supposedly having a high pain tolerance: well, here was the time to prove it, he thought. There was a windfall branch not ten yards away and he stumbled toward it. The leg ached but the stiffness was what concerned him. He almost gave up, but in this case thought it was more important that he drive Kory to the north into the waiting posse. He pulled out a now-nauseating energy bar as he rebuckled his fanny pack, and wolfed it down limping down the valley. He also wanted to understand her.

Todd was his usual obnoxious self, but Mark and Jim thought it best to ignore him: he was only concerned. Andy had decided that an "officer down" was a good enough reason to justify another chopper and as they flew over the Jefferson Wilderness Area Bob kept high enough to avoid suspicion from whatever was going on below.

The vague report they'd received from Dispatch disquieted them, Todd excepted. Mark wondered what had gone wrong, who was the mysterious assassin and of all things, how was Kory "implicated?" Jim was his stoic native

stereotype and kept his thoughts to himself.

"I don't get it!" Todd complained. "How did Mister Fed Man allow them to get caught by this guy? I thought he was a pro!"

"He was!" Mark shouted. "A 'nice guy' who finished last! Somebody got his 'six!' He let up!"

Jim grunted, his comment unheard in the roar of the helicopter engines. Then he spoke louder.

"What's the flying time once you get to Big Timber?" he shouted to Bob, the pilot.

"Two hours plus reserves, total!" was the answer. "I should top off if we're going to have any search time!"

"Do it!" Mark told him. "Russet sheriff's heading up to Beal's Ranch! You know it?"

"Think so!" Bob yelled over his shoulder.

"Okay then! The handle's 'Big Timber Command.' Drop us off there and then go! At best, Dusty and Kory could only be a few miles north of the plateau! We've got a little time!"

Actually they were farther north than that, but Kory was tiring quickly and Dusty, two miles behind her and falling farther behind, was no better. The leg throbbed, but he didn't dare look at it, lest he stop altogether. At least he was able to move, with the help of the walking stick he'd picked up. Stopping would only give it the chance to stiffen completely and he'd never get rolling again without help.

He had never been in this area and he vaguely registered the new surroundings. On a casual hike, it would

be called rugged and beautiful with the high cliffs in the setting moon shining like a fairy tale. Right now, it could only be called rugged, an obstacle to get through. The timber reached above him, dark and mysterious in the predawn, huge firs darkening the trail. The trail itself was clear: a game trail that was used often enough by both animals and humans to be maintained by the constant weight of hoofs, paws and feet over the year regardless of season.

Dusty hobbled along. Kory had figured that he'd give up, or couldn't follow fast enough to be a problem, for she didn't bother going cross-country at this point. From what he could see in the moonlit snow, she took the easy route, apparently thinking that the fast route was better than the clandestine, but slow, path.

The outfitter sat down with the one cup of coffee. He jerked his thumb to the pot, now simmering on the wood stove. The unsmiling men in his great room ignored him and he shrugged before taking a welcome sip of "horseshoe" coffee.

They had entered his lodge with all the grace of an elephant in Swan Lake, looking very official and officious. They vaguely flashed a badge and pulled out some serious weaponry in anticipation of some sort of resistance. Not on his part, he knew, and smiled. Badges and guns: those were two things that ensured his cooperation with officials, no questions asked.

Seventy-eight year old John Beal leaned back with his cup. Something bothered him about this group of men, but he could not place it. People did not come to this backwoods

lodge in the autumns unless they were hunting and right now it was between seasons. Must be something important. Yes, he saw SAR operations here occasionally - it made a great headquarters and he was ever the considerate host to community efforts - but not that often, and very rarely in off-season.

The deputy in charge explained quickly. Apparently they awaited the arrival of an important fugitive. A "Talk-about" or some such model of radio crackled. The deputy grabbed it and spoke quickly in response. Indecipherable chatter sounded and the deputy spoke again. He turned to the others.

"Time to hit the road," he said. He pointed to a couple of men. "You guys head up the trail right now. The rest of us will wait for Tim and then follow." The two men left.

He nodded to Beal who raised his cup. He and the other men exited noisily and vanished into the woods. Beal still wondered what was bothering him. Then it came to him.

They had been dressed as Russet County officers and SWAT team members. It was quite possible that the SWAT came from the Denver or other area. Russet was too rural to be able to justify, much less afford, such a team and if he was desperate enough, Sheriff Connolly would have called them out from another, better-equipped county. But still, he should have recognized the two dressed as deputies: he'd been in the county long enough to know pretty much everyone on the force. Then came the sound of a large SUV crunching on the road-base gravel that made up his drive.

Running footsteps slapped at the ground outside and he stood up suddenly, spilling some of the coffee. This can't be good, he thought. A man leapt up the lodge steps, two at

a time. He did recognize the under-sheriff for the county.

"John! You in there?" Warren McCusker appeared in the open door.

"We need your place for a bit, John, we got a fugitive coming down Big Timber."

Oh shit. Who the hell was that who just left?

"Trudge-mode" was all and good. It is the important mile-eating hiking style that an exhausted person resorts to at the end when closest to that oh-so-welcome vehicle that promises warmth and comfort. But it has its dangers. Such a hiker gets into an almost hypnotic state as endorphins massage the brain and thoughts trail into irrelevant channels. The mind drifts into other worlds, an almost dreamlike state, while the eyes are open and the body moves from habit. The eyes somehow see the rocks, logs and obstacles in the turnings of the trail and a portion of the mind somehow registers the need to step on, over and turn in response. The more experienced the hiker, the more automatic the response. The danger is that of the unseen. The eyes will see said rock and the legs may respond by stepping on it, only to have a loose rock that the mind would otherwise have registered turn over and twist the ankle.

In the rugged country Kory hiked in, there were steep slopes and escarpments that needed intelligent negotiating, certainly something more engaged than the mindless trudger. The trail was fairly faithful, waxing and waning as the wildlife's need for it varied, but it disappeared at the

cliff bands and it took a watchful as well as experienced mind to follow the ledges. It was on one of these that something neither she nor Dusty nor the Company nor SAR could really foresee or prevent.

In the early morning, when the dawn was still changing the sky, she trudged along the edge of one of these escarpments. Lack of attention or tiredness or both kept her from reading the rotten rock as it was and she trod heavily on a loose boulder just at the wrong time. The foresight in lightening her pack saved her life for the lessened weight allowed her to twist quickly as she and the boulder fell. The weak right leg underneath her broke resoundingly and pain inundated her as she grabbed at the more solid rock. The boulder bounced off the rocks below.

Still, she was unable to cling to the holds for more than a few seconds and she slid down the slab face, desperately scrabbling for holds. Her broken leg twisted and bent as her boot caught and released on the jagged edges of the slab and though she caught at holds once in a while the stabbing pain made her reflexively pull off of each one. However, the attempt slowed her gradually and a small three-foot ledge stopped her abruptly, about sixty feet above the bottom of the cliff. The pain of the newly broken leg hitting the ledge almost caused her to roll off the little bit of safety she had. She fetally scrunched into the cliff as close as she could and promptly fainted.

16.

The chopper refueled in a minimum amount of time and lifted off. They headed up the valley toward Beal's cabin, whose extensive pasturage afforded a good LZ and staging area.

"Big Timber Command, Sierra Five!"

"Sierra Five, go ahead."

"We're about three out from your LZ."

"Code Four. Wind's negligible at three mph north-northeast."

"Copy that!"

"We have an LZ manager standing by. We think we also have an added problem."

Mark looked over at the other two, who had understood little of the chatter over the helicopter noise.

"Copy!" he answered.

The emerald green spot in the distance was God-made for chopper landings and Bob settled in like the pro he was. The three men jumped out with their packs and ducking their heads, ran to the edge of the meadow as Bob spooled the rotors down.

"This'll have to be quick," Mark told the others. They took the steps of the cabin mimicking the undersheriff before them. Big Timber Command was standing at Beal's kitchen table, hovered over a map. McCusker was entering data into his iPad. He looked up as they shut the door behind them.

McCusker filled them in on his concerns and suspicions. There was no question that Dusty's last communiqué had unsettled everybody and weeding through his enigmatic statements took the most time.

"So what the hell's going on besides the fact that we have four unidentified people with some serious firepower playing cops and robbers in our backyard?" he asked, when his side of the story had been told.

"We don't know," Mark answered frankly. "We do know that an FBI agent was killed by an unknown assailant sometime last night. Two of our SAR volunteers were assisting him in his investigation at the time, but one of them appears to be somehow implicated in the killing. She has also stolen some sensitive material, possibly national security level. At least, Homeland, FBI and CIA are all in a tizzy about it.

"It is unknown if she is armed or dangerous, but we obviously must assume so. What worries me is this 'law enforcement crowd' that set up at here."

Warren looked down in embarrassment.

"We also had a vehicle disappear. We found the vehicle here where these guys were spinning their bullshit to John."

The debate was whether they should send in a foot crew into a dubious situation or just let the chopper do the search. Extreme caution was the mandate and those present on the Springfield SAR team were experienced in law enforcement or military command.

"How experienced are your guys?" Jim asked. "No offense," he added hastily.

"None taken. No one wants to die!" McCusker replied. "We have five ex-army or marine guys. One of them was Delta Force and he's forgotten more about paramilitary ops than I'll ever know. He and three others saw Persian Gulf action. They also know the country. Local boys. Two others are ex-military, but new and haven't seen action. I know

the country and have seen some action, strictly civilian."

The under-sheriff shook his head.

"I don't like it. I only have three of them here right now. Nobody's trained for this kind of stuff in years."

Mark raised his eyebrows. McCusker smiled grimly.

"What, Mark, you think those boys were just city folks getting a jump on the season? With SWAT gear?"

"This could be fire-fight," Mark replied, "worse case scenario."

"Could be we precipitated something by coming here. How were we to know they'd use the same lodge for a staging ground?"

Mark shrugged.

"It's us for now. Cavalry won't get in for an hour or more."

"Who the hell are these guys?"

"Whatever they're after is important enough to kill for, that's for sure," Todd contributed.

Mark went over to the topographical map Beal had considerably laid on the great room table. Russet's major metropolitan area, a small town of 3,000, lay at the junction of the Big Timber and Highway 43. The county road meandered to the vagrancies of the Big Timber River south from there to Beal's lodge. He pressed his finger on an area south of the cabin.

"From what Dusty said, the suspect was within two miles of the northern escarpment at about zero five hundred this morning." Todd and Jim exchanged a look. Even Mark could not bring himself to call her "Kory" anymore.

"Warren," Mark continued. "Take the three military guys up the trail and follow those . . . five?" He looked at Beal, who was nursing another cup of coffee in the

corner. Beal nodded. "Five known suspects up the trail. There may be more, but that's all our host here says he saw. Stay away from them at all costs. They'll be good at what they do so stay out of sight. We have no idea what they're up to, but we have to assume they're hostile, given the firepower they took up there.

"You're good enough trackers to do that?"

McCusker nodded. Mark continued.

"We don't want any confrontation until the Feds arrive."

McCusker concurred.

"We called the Feds," he said, "first thing we knew about the five. They're bringing out their local version of HRT and a spec-ops unit from the base is also on its way. HRT is about an hour out."

"Once they arrive, your three will have to act as guides to HRT only, or even back off if they ask you to. Your role is to contain this bottom end, in case something gets by. It's a bottleneck thing and unless they want to get cliffed out to the north, they'll have to come down the draw. If you see any hostiles, just observe. If this ends up being a paramilitary thing, we'll have to let their teams work."

"Gotcha."

"So the three you've got are reliable? No gung ho loose cannon types?" Mark grinned to take any implied insult out of his voice."

Warren smiled back.

"Don't worry. They're solid and they understand better than most the idea of team integrity."

"Excellent. We'll communicate on White, since our duplex frequencies are different. State Patrol concurs and

several troopers are on their way as well. Let's go."

Bob would take the Springfield group south as well and if they saw them on the way, well and good. Otherwise, they would find a distant LZ somewhere near the plateau's northern escarpment and sweep north.

The crews left the command post and went on their respective missions. The chopper lifted into the air and swept up the valley. Todd saw the tiny figures below him leave the cabin and head up the trail into the wilderness.

It was a full painful hour before Dusty came to the same place Kory had fallen and he had more excuse for being in "trudge" mode. Aside from covering the same distance in twice the time Kory had, the last mile had included gradual loss of blood and shock. It was this that caused him to almost pass by the inert figure on the ledge below. He moved gingerly down the sloping edge. It was fortunate for Kory that the early light had grown to the point of perceiving color, or he would not have noticed her at all. As it was, the blue pack, bright against the muted olives and grays of the rock, stuck out glaringly and his peripheral vision picked it up immediately.

"Kory!" he called. The figure didn't move, but as he looked he could see the broken leg bent in the wrong way he'd seen over a year before. Fortunately, it hadn't gone through the skin, but the bone itself was clearly damaged and he suspected there was serious swelling around the break. Hardened though he was to similar sights, he felt the blood drain from his face and he sat down quickly.

There was nothing he could do for her but stabilize

her and treat her for shock, then wait for the cavalry to arrive. The question was "if" they found them before the situation became worse. His own wound would stiffen from just sitting while he attended her and there was no way he could go any further as it was. He was surprised he'd made it this far. It was providential and good for her that he had decided to follow after all.

He hadn't expected to deal with a rock rescue, but the emergency pack held a small amount of webbing and his eight-millimeter cord. It was ten meters long and came in handy for a small-scale rescue. He had only one carabiner; more might have made things slightly easier, but it was added weight and it didn't matter. Knots would work for the other stuff.

He eased out on the ledge after pulling the gear out.

"Kory!" he called again. Still, she didn't move. He hoped things weren't as grim as they seemed. The rock was solid in spots, especially along the ledge where loose stone had already fallen off. He kept his head though, not trusting anything better than concrete. A few more yards.

He saw her leg, swelling in response to its trauma. That was good news, he supposed, since it must have just happened. It'll take one gifted orthopedic to deal with that after all the abuse she's done to it, he thought. She would limp for life for sure this time. He reached her and set about securing her to the rock.

He used his knife to cut the webbing into smaller pieces. One three-foot section he made into a loop and threw it over a projecting flake of rock, after checking the anchor's solidity. Another he tied into a loop, then a knot, and jammed into a solid crack. They would hold as primary and backup anchors and were better than nothing,

since they wouldn't have to take the strain of an actual fall but were there just to secure her. In his condition, he didn't think he could hold her if she leaned the wrong way.

He ran the "eight-mil" rope through the two anchors' loops and passed it through Kory's pack loop used for hanging. He checked that she would not slip out of the pack and saw she was securely buckled in at both the hip and breast. As a makeshift harness, it would have to do. He couldn't lift her into the loop harness he'd done on his last rescue of her. He smiled grimly at the memory. How things change!

He broke his makeshift staff in half and immobilized the leg, using small gauge wire in his emergency stuff sack to tie both pieces to either side and softening the wire and wood with cloth. Then he used the remaining eight-mil to tie into his belt. It didn't need to take force of any kind either, just provide some sort of anchor to keep them from sliding off the ledge.

At that moment, the sun broke over the ridge to the east, illuminating the other ridge. He looked up and was torn between welcoming the warmth and dreading the specter of dehydration as the morning progressed. He hoped Dispatch expedited things. Still, they wouldn't be hypothermic, which could be worse in their conditions.

He pulled out his water bottle and sprinkled some water over her face. He hoped she was just in a faint, although the movement of the leg should have awakened her. Her eyes came open, but he could see she was nowhere near completely conscious.

"Dusty?" she asked, sounding like a three-year-old after an early morning nightmare.

"I'm here," he answered. "Don't move. I've got you."

He fumbled in his emergency pack for some Tylenol and handed it to her with the water. She obediently swallowed both before settling back into him. He did the same. She relaxed as she fell asleep or fainted; he was not sure which.

The sun rose higher over the mountains, but it would take another hour before sending light their way. He took out his rain poncho and spread it over both of them, hugging her to conserve warmth. She was shivering, from shock and exposure.

The chopper moved quickly up the valley. Mark knew he was alerting all personnel on the ground, hostile and otherwise, but he could not help it. From what Beal said, the enemy combatants - Mark had switched to "conflict" mode and was no longer thinking in civilian terms - were only a couple miles up the gorge even if they were moving fast. He expected and hoped that they weren't native to the high country and not acclimated to the altitude. That would give the local posse one more advantage in containing a mission if it decided to go south.

"Timber Command! Sierra Five!" Mark yelled into his hand-held.

"Go ahead!"

"I see hostiles below! Stand by!"

Mark checked the map, then looked at Jim. Jim held up three fingers, then an additional two and waggled his hands to indicate he was not sure.

"Timber Command! We've confirmed three and possibly

two more at the major bend of the river half a click north of the second bridge! They've heard us, so let's hope we find Dusty and the suspect before they do! Ready to copy coordinates!"

"Go ahead."

Mark read the coordinates and signed off. The chopper continued its way up the narrow gorge.

The leader cursed in his frustration. It was supposed to be a simple extraction and he had provided a car and a minimum number of support personnel to pick up HERMIT and the DVD. The firepower they had was minimal and more in keeping with their cover than was actually practical. Now he was afraid they would end up in an all-out firefight. They had no radios beside the Talkabouts, no flash-bangs or even grenades and worse, they had no idea who might be waiting for them up ahead. HERMIT had just said she was followed; she gave no details.

The thump of the chopper faded in the distance, up the valley and toward HERMIT and the SAR volunteer who was with her. The leader would have liked to increase speed, but, in shape as they were, the altitude made them suck air like a couch potato on the first day of community softball season. He unnecessarily motioned the others up the trail.

First things first, Dusty thought. Save the physical, then deal with the rest of the garbage. He was no saint, but did have certain moral convictions that kept him from

pushing her off the edge. He sighed. His was not to wonder why, etc., etc. After all, there were very clear warnings in the back of his head telling him not to judge. He remembered reading "To Kill a Mockingbird" in high school and one line came back very unequivocally, something about not condemning someone until you've walked around in his shoes a bit. Obviously, there was something in Kory's past that he had no idea of, much less could empathize with. One thing was certain: he had never walked around in whatever shoes she was wearing.

He stirred, trying to keep his good leg from falling asleep. His butt was numbing on him already as the hard rock bit into him and he didn't want to even think about the injured thigh. She had really known what she was doing when she plugged him. The wound was closed and to his vague surprise had stopped bleeding. There was only a small amount of serum infiltrating the bandage. He closed his eyes, tired as hell.

Kory stirred in her sleep. She woke up.

"What happened? Dusty? My leg hurts. You're bleeding, what happened to us . . . ?" She really was out of it.

"Shhh. You fell of the ledge and broke your leg. Don't move; go back to sleep."

She leaned into him even more and closed her eyes. Dusty's suddenly remained open. Above him the faint, very faint, sound of a chopper's blades pierced the silent early morning air.

* * *

They swept the terrain with binoculars.

"There!" Todd said, pointing. "One o'clock, level!"

The bright blue of Kory's pack stuck out from beneath the even brighter fluorescent orange of Dusty's poncho. In the low altitude of the aircraft, they seemed on a level with the searchers.

"I see four legs sticking out of that!" he continued.

Something was clearly amiss, Todd thought looking down. Either that or Dusty was holding on to her trying to keep her from running away. He lifted his binoculars again as they approached. I'll bet her leg went, he thought.

"Got 'em!" Bob replied. He was already seeking an LZ near the cliff-face and pushed the collective in that direction.

The helicopter landed in a nearby meadow near the top of the cliff. Bob kept the rotors going at a semi-hover in case the snowy and muddy ground was too soft for its weight, and the three SAR members got out. The late-season meadow was firm and Mark leaned back into the chopper.

"Solid as a rock!" he yelled. Bob nodded and backed off on the engine. The chopper settled, but he kept the rotors going at an idle. No one trusted the lead they had on the enemy below.

"Keep it going!" Mark shouted unnecessarily. "Let Command know we're here while we get set up! I'm going to need you to be Command radio!"

The team got out of the chopper with their gear and walked quickly to the site.

"Big Timber Command, Mobile Medic on White!" Bob called on the State Patrol channel common throughout the state.

"Go ahead!"

"We've spotted a couple on a cliff face! Appearance

and timing say they're our missing people!"

"Code four. Keep us informed. We'll notify our deputies to stand by. Will you need assistance?"

"Stand by on that one! It appears not, but will keep you informed! We'll be quick! We are at least two miles above perps!"

Mark monitored the radio traffic as he and the others walked to the side of the meadow. They stopped with mutual consent and Mark laid out his plans.

"Okay, we can assume it's Kory and Dusty." Todd rolled his eyes. Leave it to Mark to assume the obvious. "I think we can also assume that the danger from a fugitive no longer exists, but that we're in a technical situation. Those five below are on their way up, though, and we have to be quick. Todd, describe what you saw from the air."

"From what I saw," Todd said, "at least one person is injured. There was some sort of messy bulk on one of the legs sticking out which could mean a break. I'll bet Kory did it again to her leg. Probably stressed it or something. They were about half way down the rock. I think we should raise instead of lower them so we can use this LZ."

"Jim?"

"Nothing closer for an LZ," Jim agreed. "Tougher than a lowering, but a fast jaunt to the chopper and it'll give us some more time. Last thing we want to do is put the chopper in an awkward situation if those guys down there get up here too soon and if they are really hostile. I can figure Bob wouldn't want to play with any contrary winds in the bottom of the valley, in any case."

"Okay," Mark responded. "I want a serious heads-up at all time, though. We'll buy more time from the top of the cliff, but the exposure is also greater."

The others nodded.

"There's no time to get tech gear from Command. We have one 100-meter climbing rope and a few extra 'biners beside our personals. Is that enough?"

The others nodded.

"I have a couple light pulleys," said Todd, "and three rescue grades, as well."

"With personal gear," said Jim, "we can double the rope for both rappel and main."

He shrugged.

"The rope is springy," Jim continued, "but since we don't have a litter, the load will be a bit lighter and it's only thirty feet or so from the top, I guess. We can do one at a time, if necessary. With one person, we shouldn't even need a pulley system."

"Okay," Mark said, "Jim, I'd rather have you Edge as well as attendant, but that means no belay."

"What about Bob?" Todd asked.

Mark shook his head.

"I want the chopper spun up and ready to go. We're under crunch time as it is and I don't want to take a chance with those jokers below. I also don't want to take any chances in getting them up the cliff so even though we go sketchy, we go safe." He considered, then spoke.

"Todd, set up a simple tandem prussik for belay. We'll just have to stop on occasion to take up slack and to rest if necessary. We will haul on a simple two-to-one, rope to rope, which won't take up any time to set up.."

He shouldered the climbing rope.

"Okay, let's go."

I wish that noise would stop, Dusty thought. His leg had stiffened and the slow but consistent loss of blood on the trek down the valley made him woozy, not to mention no sleep for the last thirty hours or so. He drifted in and out of sleep, vaguely aware that there was a good reason for not falling over. There was also a constant thumping that echoed inside his head and he wished it would go away.

"Hey! Dusty!"

The foreign sound brought him to complete consciousness and he looked up. The slab face sloped up and away to reveal two very familiar faces. Jim and Mark leaned over the edge. Todd grinned down at him.

"You ol' devil, you!" he said. "I knew you'd end up spending the night with that girl one way or another!"

Dusty smiled back up wearily.

"Yeah! You ought to try making out on a ledge! It's a thrill!" It wasn't really very witty, but he couldn't not answer them and couldn't think of anything better. He leaned back against the rock. Kory came out of her last faint/sleep. Two of the figures above them disappeared. Todd remained watching them.

"So! What's her batting average?"

"Yeah, yeah," Dusty replied. "Busted that same leg as last time, but nothing else seems hurt."

"Wow. You really stopped her. Whatja do? Pushed her over the edge when she wasn't looking?"

"No, came on her like this. I've got a gunshot wound as well, thanks to our little friend here. Superficial, but hurts like a sonofagun."

"There are easier ways of seducing a woman. When will

you learn that 'no' means 'no?'"

Dusty had to laugh at that one. And it hurt when he did.

"You guys stable?" Todd continued.

"Stable enough. Comfortable, definitely not!"

Todd nodded.

"We're setting up a system," he said. "We'll get you out in no time, maybe ten or so! You good?"

Dusty nodded.

As the leader of the mercenary band passed the bend in the trail, the large cliff face came fully into view and the accompanying "thump" of the chopper blades with it. His stomach knotted as the implications hit him. One of his partners nudged him and pointed to the other side of the cliff from the rotating helicopter blades.

They were still a ways from the cliff and he could barely make out a bright orange dot about forty feet, he guessed, down the face. He cursed himself for not bringing his binoculars. He signaled to the other men and they gathered around.

"We need to traverse up the valley side." The others nodded. "I don't need to tell you what exposure on that cliff band could mean, especially if they are armed. We must assume so. It will take longer, but we head up the west side of the valley."

In Dusty's arms, Kory stirred and woke up groggily.

"Huh? What?"

Dusty hugged her tighter.

"We're okay," he said. "SAR's arrived."

She turned her head to look at him and winced as the broken leg moved slightly. He saw tears in her eyes. She seemed more in control of herself.

"I'm dead," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"They'll get me," she said. "I'm dead."

"What? Who?"

"The Company. I failed."

Dusty was torn between the truth and platitudes, all in the name of making a patient have the positive outlook. He decided to tell her the obvious and sugar coat it with conjecture.

"No, you didn't. There was nothing you could do. If they'd wanted you to kill me" he mentally shook his head at the silliness of what he was saying "it would have still put you in this situation. Only you might have fallen by now and had something worse than just a broken leg."

"No . . . excuses," she said. "I'm dead. No forgiveness. No tolerance. You don't understand these people. Once you're in, you're never out."

She faded in and out. Dusty checked her pulse. One-ten and medium light. He leaned back slightly and shouted up the rock.

"What're you jokers doing? She needs to be up there ASAP!"

Todd's face appeared above him.

"What are you blabbing about?"

"Her pulse is one-ten and light, and she's really groggy!"

"We're working on it! Won't be long now!"

Above them, the team searched for anchor points among the trees. They had enough personal gear to provide some sort of raising system. With only three members -- four, if Bob shut down the machine and helped -- raising even a small load like Kory over the awkward rock would be tough and they didn't want to take any chances.

At his side, Kory faded back in.

The truth.

"I can't give you the material," he said. "It's not yours or mine to give."

"Huh?"

"The stuff you took from the briefcase."

She really was out of it, he realized. Understanding came into her face as she processed what he was saying. He could see that she really didn't know what she had stolen or why; just that it was an order and something that she had been compelled to do.

"What am I going to do, now?" she said. Dusty decided he could give part of the truth and encourage her at the same time.

"Can you say 'Witness Protection Program?'"

She looked puzzled.

"I don't understand," she murmured.

"Turn State's Evidence. Talk to the FBI, and they'll help you out."

She shook her head.

"You don't understand. They'll hunt me down."

Dusty smiled at her.

"Don't worry," he said flippantly. "Be happy. I've got an idea that might work."

The team finished with the anchors. They "backtied"

each initial anchor with rope stretching to another anchor behind it. Two were enough and they had no chance for any more. Once the first was set, Jim clipped into it and rappelled down to the couple. Dusty didn't move, although his butt was still numb. The Navajo stood on the ledge.

"How're we?" Jim asked.

"Great. Come to hang out for a while?"

Jim nodded to Kory.

"Can she help?"

"It'll be iffy," Dusty replied. "She's in and out. She also can't put any weight on that leg. It's the same one she tweaked last time."

Jim nodded in a different way this time.

"How about you?"

Dusty gestured at his own leg.

"Gunshot. Just a flesh wound and I've lost a bit of blood, but it's stiffened up badly over the last few hours. I can do a bit, I guess, but consider me forty percent."

"'kay," Jim answered. He jerked his head toward the others at the raising station. "They're about five out. Give me a hand here."

The only person who could have told them of the impending Company squad was unconscious again, much less lucid. The squad was still a couple of miles from the cliff face; enough to see the dot of orange that stuck out like a pimple on a prom queen, but not nearly close enough to do anything about it. If SAR had known, they may have expedited things and trusted a single backtied anchor.

Jim pulled out a twenty-foot piece of webbing. Dusty helped him harness Kory up, then Jim clipped her onto a prussic attached to his rappel rope. Anchored solidly, now, they pulled the pack off and set it onto the ledge, still

tied into Dusty's makeshift anchor. Then they tied a figure-eight knot into the other end of the climbing rope and worked it through her harness.

Dusty tried to wake her.

"Stay with me. Stay awake," he encouraged her. "You're okay."

"'kay, whatever you say," she mumbled. She did not move and did not open her eyes.

He pulled away from her entwining arms.

"Kory."

He slapped her face lightly. She responded slightly.

"You bastard," she slurred, "what're you hitting me for?"

"Come on, Kory," he answered gently. "I need your help."

She took a deep breath as her eyes fluttered open and focused. She was coming back to him, albeit slowly.

"Yeah," she acknowledged. "I'm hurt, though."

"I know, but it'll make you feel better in the long run. You need to try to stand on that one leg when I tell you."

"'kay," she said, simply. "I'll try."

Dusty nodded to Jim. He unclipped her from the prussik and shouted up to the others.

"She's in and ready to come up . . . One, two, three, up slow!"

When Mark and Todd hauled up on the rope, Jim steadied Kory, who fended herself off with her good leg as long as she could. Dusty could see that it hurt her badly.

"Stop!" That inexorable of SAR commands rang across the cliff band. The rope stopped. Jim got on his Talkabout radio.

"Mark, give me a sec while I shinny up for edge management."

"Copy."

Edge management involved a person or persons of excellent strength. Because the rope was cutting against the edge of the cliff, its weight against it ensured that whatever load was on the other side could not come up. An edge person pushed out against the rope, acting like a human pulley and the load would come up without bouncing against the rocks. That's the theory. In practice, it is much more difficult.

Jim scrambled up the steep slab, adjusting his prussik safety as best he could. Once on the lip of the cliff, he got under the rope, which angled from the edge to its high anchor on a large fir behind him. He pushed up and grunted against the sudden pressure.

"Ready!"

Mark gave the "up" command and the rope came up with its load on the end. Dusty watched from below. Kory was still conscious and pushed off the cliff with her hands and good leg.

Sweat poured off their faces as they puffed up the narrow animal trail. More sporadic than the main trail and also more clandestine, it allowed for their quick movement up the valley as the deer runs, but not as the crow flies. They were slightly above the cliff face in altitude, now, and could see it through the breaks in the trees. The leader stopped at one of them. He motioned to his second-

in-command.

"How good are you?" he inquired. The second nodded as he unslung his rifle. His rifle was a bit more specialized than the others. He packed the high-powered rounds himself: much more in keeping with the shooter whose target is marked in hundreds of yards, not feet. It was his preferred weapon of choice and was the only specialty gear they could risk bringing along.

"It'll be tough. I wasn't expecting a sniping excursion."

"Do what you can."

The leader looked up the valley at the cliff face. It was about 800 yards. Challenging for a good shooter. Very challenging for one without his preferred rifle. He continued.

"I want them stopped with one shot. My thought is to aim for HERMIT: close enough to make them think she is the target. Gottit?"

"Yessir."

"Don't hit her. She may still have the item."

"Not a problem. Just a sec to catch my breath."

The delay was annoying, but necessary. The precision required by any sniping operation could not be influenced by even a small aberration such as uncontrolled breathing. The leader waited patiently.

After a couple of minutes, his lieutenant propped the rifle on the branch of a convenient tree and fired.

17.

The rope moved up as the men pulled, and Kory moved with it. Dusty guided her up as best he could and as far as he could reach given the short length of his eight-mil and the anchor. Suddenly the rock splintered inches from Dusty's head and he jumped, falling, and ducked for cover. He had no idea what had caused the rock fall, for that is what he thought it was. Immediately he regretted leaving Kory to herself. He looked up from his prone position on the ledge. Only a few feet above him, she was shriveled into a tiny ball, huddled against the rock face. She looked like she had fainted again. Not good timing. Not good at all.

"You almost hit her."

"Yessir. There must be a downdraft off the rock face."

The activity on the top of the cliff indicated some success, at least.

"Be careful. We don't want to shatter that DVD and we have no idea where it is at this point. It may be in her pack but might also be in her jacket."

"Yessir."

"Move," the leader admonished his crew, and they continued up the hill. He turned to the second.

"Stay here and pin 'em down," he said. The second nodded. He raised his sniper rifle.

* * *

Jim hit "the deck" and the rope, under tension slammed him to the rock. Todd

"Shit! Did you hear that?" Todd shouted.

"That was a rifle shot!" Jim answered. He had just scrambled out from under the rope and was already moving toward the trees.

"That wasn't a bee!" Todd just heard something zing past his ear, but had put it down to that ever-present insect of the field. It had taken time for the gun's report to reach them. Mark's military background came to his aid and was quicker than the naïve Todd to respond.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. "Find cover and let the prussiks hold for the moment. We can't do anything if we're dead."

They let go of the lines, which jerked, and followed Jim behind the trees. As they were designed to do, the tandem prussik knots held the lines holding Kory.

Mark was already on the horn. The others were seriously intimidated for they had never heard Mark in combat operation mode. He was cold, methodical and distant. They looked at each other. Jim was more comfortable, but Todd had never been under fire.

"Timber Command, Sierra Five!"

"Five, go ahead."

"Be advised we are receiving sniper fire at this time!"

There was a muffled curse from McCusker on the other end.

"Copy that. Situation?"

"They've got us pinned down. Nothing worse, and either

the guy is a lousy shot or he really knows what he's doing. In any case, they obviously don't want a rescue, or at least our escape. Prussiks are taking the load, but we can't do anything about it without exposing ourselves. Dusty and Kory are bull's eyes on the side of that cliff."

"Copy. Stand by."

McCusker called his team and warned them of the situation. This was worse-case scenario for the expert teams couldn't be there for at least another thirty minutes.

Todd gestured to Mark from behind his tree.

"We gotta grab that but quick: she's not going to last long hanging in that webbing." Mark nodded.

"There's enough line so we can haul from the trees, I think," he said, stoically. "Ready? On the call, move to the ropes and haul on the count. Don't do anything stupid." Todd nodded agreement. No problem on that account, he thought.

"Wait for me," Mark said.

"What're you going to do?" Todd asked.

Mark didn't answer, but smoothly ran to the dangling line. They had been downhauling to allow gravity to help, but he thought they could angle it into the woods. He stayed low and moved as quickly as he could. Another bullet plowed into the grassy knoll, but it was too little, too late.

"Okay," Mark said. "Move over here on my count. Ready? One, two, three."

They ran quickly to the rope and on command began to haul. The angle made it more difficult without the added pulley and they were sweating in spite of the cool autumn morning.

Kory had only a few feet to go before she was on the comparably flat granite. Mark spoke to Jim, who was now hauling with Todd.

"Jim, you're going to hate me for this, but you're going to have to go back to the edge. Mind a little exposure to nasty people on a fine afternoon?"

Jim grinned.

"Need a little spice in my otherwise boring life anyway."

Mark took up slack and Jim ran to the cliff, weaving his way around whatever sparse cover there was. There were a couple of spits from the sniper, but he was too far away to be that accurate if he were trying to kill him.

Jim braced a painful shoulder underneath the rope and leaned into it more. Kory got to the edge and had enough strength to struggle over it. Suddenly, the effort was way too much for her and she fainted in the midst of the grueling upper body effort.

"Grab her! She's going!" Dusty yelled up from the ledge. Jim whipped his strong right arm down as he leaned even more into the rope and grabbed her coat. She was completely deadweight. His eyes teared up as the rope ground into his neck and he grunted as the full weight of the woman came at him from all directions. Another spent bullet glanced off the cliff below him.

"Slack!" burst out of him. He hauled back as another bullet potted the ground beneath them. It hit a rock and ricocheted into his calf. He cried out and the two people collapsed on the ground.

Three figures burst through the woods carrying some very intimidating weapons: guns that discouraged any sort of resistance.

Dusty heard nothing: the edge of the cliff ensured his deafness to anything happening beyond thirty feet over the edge. He sat there with Kory's pack at his feet and waited for the rope to come down. He was confident in his ability to negotiate the ledge and the fairly easy scrambling it would take to get back to the top, but that was in ordinary times. Certainly he didn't trust himself with the pack. So he waited. And waited. No bullet came near him although he did everything he could to make as small a target as possible.

He came out of his thoughts and realized that nothing was happening on the cliff edge. He noticed that the sniper fire had stopped. When, he had no idea. Suddenly there was shouting. A couple of shots echoed off the cliffs around him and he started. There was certainly more than just a distant sniper. That was close. Damn close.

It was thirty feet to the top of the cliff. He reached into Kory's pack and scrambled around for her gun. She must have put it back after shooting him. It made sense. What other enemy did she have to worry about besides him? He had never shot a handgun of any type: shotguns and hunting rifles were his picked poisons. Still, how hard can it be? He knew the principles of holding it and was aware of its "kick" ruining aim, but that was a chance he had to take.

He rifled through the pack and couldn't find it to save his life. He smiled grimly and hoped it wouldn't come to that. He looked again and patted himself down. Idiot. It was in one of the numerous pockets his shell had, which was draped around Kory. He left it there: he wouldn't be able to climb with it, anyway.

Next problem. Climbing. Could he climb up with his leg? He had limped with it over the trail before he had to descend to help Kory, but for the last couple hours he had done nothing but sit. He'd told Jim "forty percent," but right now it felt more like negative five. He put some weight on it. It was stiff, certainly, and hurt like hell, but it was barely possible.

He looked at the pack. The briefcase material was the obvious Eldorado for whoever was up here. The only shooting in the last twenty-four hours had come from someone wanting that briefcase.

He looked over the edge. It continued to slope for a couple of feet at that steep seventy-degree angle, then dropped precipitously. The total drop was about eighty feet and culminated in a hodgepodge of trees, brush and talus. Hoping he was quick enough not to get shot, he grabbed the pack, hoping whatever was worth killing people for was fairly protected and heaved the thing over. It slid, fell a clear sixty feet, then bounced off a fir limb and landed in a copse of willow bushes. He grunted, satisfied. The red, leafy branches of the autumn willow brush covered even the blue of the pack.

He looked up and wondered if he should follow it: whatever happened up there, he could do nothing about, gun notwithstanding. He looked at the ledge by which he came. Could he move along to the side without being noticed? He started moving and suddenly, the rock splintered again: this time too close to be merely a scare tactic. He froze and did not move again.

The sniper nodded with satisfaction, although he was slightly annoyed that he missed. Wind, he thought. Dammit. When his leader and the team confronted the SAR people, he had stopped to reload his rifle. He obviously didn't want to hit his compatriots, but he also wanted to be ready to lend some sort of support if needed. His peripheral eyesight had picked up the movement of the bright blue backpack falling down the cliff, but he was too late to see what it actually was. Then he noticed Dusty moving along the cliff face and decided he needed to put a stop to that. He had been aiming to kill, but he at least stopped the moving target.

His earpiece crackled.

"What are you doing?" His leader sounded understandably annoyed.

"There was movement on the cliff," he answered. "You've still got a live one sitting on a ledge about thirty feet below you."

"I hope you didn't kill him," the leader intoned.

"No, but is there a reason?"

"Yes, the DVD is not up here and he may have it. We can't take a chance on its being destroyed and shooting him may do that. You don't want to save his life by shooting the media, do you?"

The shooter was humble in his reply.

"No sir. I'll check him, but not shoot him."

The leader was suitably mollified in return.

"That's fine. Good eye," he added approvingly. "He's a complication we don't need."

The shooter said, "Yessir," and turned back to the cliff. What was that flash of blue he'd missed? It annoyed him. He scanned the cliff again.

It was the same as he had first seen it, without HERMIT gracing its face. The man was still there, and lying on the ledge beside him was a bright orange poncho. He shook his head. Too large for a water bottle. A coat maybe? Whatever it was, he couldn't afford to miss any new development.

The leader looked up suddenly at a disturbance in the area. The whump of a chopper's blade was more felt than heard, but the extremely low frequency made everyone else look up as well.

"Hold still," he ordered the SAR team, back on track. There had been no move, but he didn't take chances. "Who else is on the way?"

Mark kept silent, but Todd, inevitably, couldn't keep quiet. Fortunately, everyone thought, he said the right thing.

"Russet County SAR," he said. "There was a call out on an injury here, and technically it's their jurisdiction."

"Joint operation," he added.

The leader didn't believe him, but it was evident that things were closing in on him. The last thing he wanted was to go to oblivion, much less with nothing to show for it, he thought.

The Company man moved slightly, rustling the leaves. He could hear the talking and subtle bullying, but was not able to understand what was being said. The leader and his two companions waved their guns around as the SAR teams

faced them. He had been placed there for backup. There was a ninety-nine percent chance that the SAR sheep would go placidly to the slaughter, but the mercenary arm of the Company had not survived by gambling: even on 99-1 odds. He remained alert, concentrating on the drama below him, aiming the rifle accordingly. If there was a move, he would be ready.

As the chopper landed farther up the valley, the FBI Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) split into two factions. One moved directly toward the cliff face. The second headed to the side to flank the terrorists and to take out the sniper. Ironically, the second needed to be first, for obvious reasons. It wouldn't do to secure the cliff top just to have a marksman take everyone out.

The leader gestured with his gun toward the cliff edge.

"Get him up here!" He knew time was running out. He didn't know who the chopper was, but had to assume the worst.

Mark shrugged.

"He's been shot. He can't do anything anyway and your sniper disabled one of my best men. The woman's worthless at this point." He gestured to Kory, who was unconscious on the grass. "We need more personnel to get him up here."

The leader was torn between sheer frustration and chagrin. It could be true, he thought. Still . . . he waved the gun at Mark and jerked his head toward the cliff, then

spoke into his mic. Mark knew he had tried and failed, and walked to edge. The leader turned to his mic and spoke into it. Mark leaned over and saw the tousled brown hair below him.

"Dusty!"

Dusty, wedged into a miniscule crack to avoid the sniper, leaned out - marginally - and looked up.

"Our friends," Mark intoned, pointing over his shoulders, "have requested your presence at a party given in your honor."

"Right," Dusty answered sarcastically, "tell them I have previous engagements and to go to hell."

"I don't think so, unless you want me to go first," Mark said dryly. "If I body-belayed you, can you clip in and scramble up here with your leg?"

Dusty hesitated. He was not in shape, really, but dying was motivation enough to give the effort. He nodded, more to himself than to Mark.

"Barely," he shouted. "But I can try. Give it to me."

The rope slithered down, and he clipped in to his belt. After the belayer's mantra, he moved up the cliff face. "Scrambled" would have been an outright lie: "climbing" was not much closer to the truth. "Dragged up, kicking and screaming" was close to accurate, though and he left a few bloody smears on the way up.

The sniper watched. The leader's admonition to cease and desist was fine with him: it gave him nothing to do except watch the action on the top of the cliff. He leaned forward to watch the interaction of the players through his rifle's telescope.

He was so intense he did not hear the soft footsteps on the trail behind him until it was too late. The cold barrel of a gun pressed behind his ear and nothing needed to be said. Captured, he thought, and he understandably cursed. With all the fatalism of the most fanatical of hardened mercenaries, he turned, his hand chopping at the gun to his head. The silenced gun fired and grazed his neck. His sniping rifle hit the ground and the other hand was bringing up the deadly knife when a second silenced gun spat and he went down, permanently.

"Sorry, sir." The second gunman looked at the body with frustration.

"It's what you're trained for," the first FBI agent whispered, following his gaze. "Can't help it sometimes."

He spoke into his mic.

"Two."

"Two, go ahead."

"One sniper dead. This area is secure."

"Copy. Continue to objective. Remain in support."

"Copy."

The Hostage Rescue Team from Denver FBI office continued up the trail.

"Where is it?" The leader spoke calmly, his gun doing the shouting for him. Dusty shrugged.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Without hesitation, a second terrorist reversed his gun and slammed the butt into the reopened wound on Dusty's thigh. Dusty went down immediately and things around him hazed up as the pain went past the point of tolerance. The

leader put his hand out in reprimand. The second man stepped back. Nothing else needed to be said. Todd was impressed in spite of himself. This wasn't your naïve thuggery. It unnerved him.

The HRT responsible for securing the upper valley moved cautiously down the hill. Although one of the world's best-trained teams in counter-terrorist and hostage situations, they knew there was a lot of acreage to cover and little time to do it in. According to the local sheriff, there were only five of the enemy and spotting from the chopper had seen three on the cliff. One was accounted for by the team below. The last was not and they stayed alert.

Dusty stayed on the ground trying to get his bearings again. He looked at Kory, still unconscious on the ground. He took a chance.

"I destroyed it." He didn't like lying, but it was likely enough to be true. A sixty-foot drop couldn't be good for anything, much less delicate storage for a computer if that's what they wanted and he hadn't seen anything else in the briefcase. He decided to add the absolute truth.

"I dropped it off the cliff." He sat up. "Even if you shoot us all, it'll be for nothing. You can head down to the bottom or send one of us, but you don't have the time."

He looked at Todd and Mark and took a chance.

"Todd's full of bull, as usual. That was no SAR

chopper. It was probably spec ops coming to take you out. If I were you, I'd get while the going was good."

Todd was surprised to see the third mercenary lick his lips. It was the first crack in a well-trained group that he'd seen. The leader saw it, too, and knew that there was no reason for CIA to keep a DVD intact if there was a copy in existence somewhere. And there probably was. He pointed with his gun.

"Face-down."

They were dead, Dusty knew. Novels and movies to the contrary, professionals were fairly devoid of sympathy and the expedient thing to do would be to pop them all while they lay there to prevent any loose ends. As if the two able-bodied among them were inclined to take on three or more armed men!

"What, and let you shoot us as we lie?"

The leader shrugged.

"There is no reason to." His eyes shifted and Dusty knew he was lying. Mark picked up on it.

"That's right, if you're stupid."

"Huh?" The leader was caught into the argument against the warnings his subconscious was screaming at him.

"That's what I would do," Jim put in.

Mark turned to him.

"That's right, you used to be SEAL or something like that."

Jim snorted.

"Pussies," he said. "Our group was so hush-hush you never heard of it."

"Bullshit!" Todd snorted. "You can sling the bull better than anyone I ev. . ."

There was a double spit and one of the perpetrators

went down. The two spits that followed were milliseconds apart. The Hostage Rescue Team - both One and Two - stepped into the opening. The three lay in front of them, carrion in the woods. Dusty thought how quiet it had suddenly gotten.

He hadn't even had a chance to bring up his rifle, much less do anything with it. He hadn't even seen them. For the life of him, he had no idea how he'd been missed much less had missed them.

HRT was a crack team, he knew, and not about to miss anything but there was an amazing amount of wilderness to cover and a minimum amount of time in which to do it. He thanked God he'd been picked as the remote observer and outside of the HRT's swept area or he would be dead now. He didn't dare move and hoped everybody would be happy with the DVD and living people and just go home. He continued watching as "cleanup" took place.

HERMIT, he thought, was a lost cause. She didn't know much: the structure of their organization ensured extreme compartmentalization. Although captured, she couldn't tell anything of importance and any codes, connection, cutouts or leads would take literally seconds to erase or change. Still, they would have to go after her for discipline's sake. If they were to maintain order in the group, they had to make examples of any who defected or were even arrested. The second was worse, in a way: it screamed incompetence in an organization that could not tolerate it.

The HRT met together as he watched. He was good in the woods, and he hoped he was better than most of these city

guys, no matter how much Evade training they'd had. Time to move out. He looked up at the escarpment above him. The rocks would hide his track and his departure, if he were careful. He turned back to the valley and watched as HERMIT was packaged in the litter and carried to the LZ. It wasn't his job, but someone would have to follow this loose end and terminate it.

The HRT broke up and went into the woods on either side of the meadow. The man headed up the hill and made good his escape. HRT would spend the next two days combing the area without finding a trace as the man took care to leave none.

On the meadow, SAR assisted the injured. Mark and Jim went with them in their chopper, for weight's sake. The little SAR helicopter couldn't handle more than the four people plus gear that they had. Somehow, everything got collected and transferred to Beal's ranch, where Dusty led a little 'field' debriefing. All except for Kory, Bob and Jim, who flew to the Russet County Hospital.

Epilogue

His web page was up almost immediately. The Fox News homepage, with all its lurid headlines, glared at him. In a little, un-highlighted section below, he clicked on the headline.

"RUSSET, CO (AP) Two people were killed yesterday during a firefight with drug dealers in Hamilton National Forest. The injured survivors, Dusty Palmberg, 41, and Jim Peters were treated at Springfield Medical Center and released. Kory Adams, 33, and Kelly Frey, 37, were pronounced dead.

The bi-county SAR teams had been engaged in a joint exercise in the Jefferson Wilderness Area north of Springfield, when unidentified gunmen began shooting. According to SAR officials, volunteers had stumbled on a major drug operation.

"The national forest has plenty of access for those with the vehicles," said William "Andy" Anderson, director of emergency management for Springfield County. "It looks like backcountry sites may have been used as transfer locations for distributors." DEA and FBI authorities declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

Frey pulled his service gun and killed unidentified shooters after being shot several times himself. An employee of the FBI who was also a SAR volunteer, Frey died at the scene. Sheriff deputies, assisted by FBI Hostage Rescue members secured Palmberg, Peters and Adams. Adams was pronounced dead on arrival at Fort Collins Memorial

Hospital.

"We're going to miss her in SAR," Anderson said. "She was one of our most promising members and a good friend."

He also praised the joint operation between Russet and Springfield county sheriffs.

"With the rugged country we have on our borders, we need all the cooperation we can get and yesterday, we got it," he said.

Jim Contrell and Teri Thibault contributed to this story.

Related stories

This merely confirmed what the asset on site had just reported. Adams, though had been alive, the man swore. He shrugged. It was possible she had gotten hit by a stray bullet. There seem to have been plenty flying around. He would do some "research," although he wasn't sure it really mattered and it was pointless to waste assets on a literally "cold" case. He grinned at his morbid humor.

He started typing.

Perry watched the screen. The bird foundation was talking again.

<Transmitter irretrievable rpt irretrievable.>BUD1234

<Too bad. Next option?>RAPTOR24

<Both researchers quit the foundation. One transferred to another research society.>BUD1234

<We need to try to get him back. We need experts in the field. That will close this operation.>RAPTOR24

<I agree. I'll send someone after him when opportunity arises.>BUD1234

<We'll have to make a final accounting. Contact our lawyer and inform him so.>RAPTOR24

<Will do. Webmaster will close this account, as well.>BUD1234

<See to it. Stay in touch through my home phone.>RAPTOR24

Well, thought Perry, I guess that's it. That was a complete waste of time. He didn't really mind. He got paid one way or the other and every once in a while he got on to something that was a real lead. Not like this one.

He had no idea how wrong he was.

Dusty sat in the supervisor's office impatiently waiting. An adjoining door opened and an aide wheeled Kory in. She sighed.

"Phase One is over."

"Excuse me?" he answered.

She waved her hand dismissively.

"Just my label for it. That was the first debriefing of many. I gave them what I knew, which wasn't much."

"Really?"

"No, really. There were too many cutouts. It was too clean. I didn't even know the shooter until he met me."

"So," said Dusty, "what happens now?"

She shrugged.

"I really don't care. They promised me Witness Protection, but how far that goes, I don't know. I didn't have that much information. The worst they gave me was conspiracy and they dumbed down the state secret issue to 'tampering with evidence.' I didn't kill anyone. Although I did shoot you."

Tears again formed in her eyes. He could tell she couldn't forgive herself for that, no matter how many excuses about the Company she could come up with. He stood and walked over to her. He smiled kindly.

"So, the lady does have a history."

She nodded.

"I was accepted into a special ops unit," she said. Dusty's eyes widened. That certainly wasn't something he expected.

"For a while. I, I washed out in the end. I guess I wasn't really made of the right stuff. When I left, I had all the skills I needed and no money and no job short of hiring out for some low-level security thing. And then someone approached me. They said they'd been watching me and they needed someone of my...skills. The money was too good to pass up and I was too immature to think through the implications.

"I did a couple of things. They were simple, to prove

my worth. But they progressed. I so wanted to be accepted, to prove that I could make up for not making the spec ops group that I swallowed anything they offered. I never killed anyone, didn't have to, but they made it very clear that my training and my job might one day make it happen."

A glimmer of self-disgust passed over her face.

"As I said, I was naïve," she continued. "One job went seriously south and I shot someone, not fatally, thank God. I had a serious come-to-Jesus moment."

She dropped her eyes and wouldn't look at him.

"They don't let you go."

She had tried, she explained, for she did have personal morals, at least up to a point.

"Before the aircraft went down," she continued. "I got a phone call. I thought I'd escaped, but if they could know about me in the military, they have threads into everywhere." She looked up at him.

"Part of the reason I was so cold with you, Dusty, was I really loved you. I was afraid for you because I knew what they would do to my friends if I didn't cooperate. My life, I could handle. Yours, I couldn't."

"I know," he said, "that what you wanted from me was more than I could give. That hasn't changed. But I want you to know that I do love you, even if it is just platonic."

She nodded, tears coming to her eyes.

"Why? Why still? It wasn't personal."

He smiled. "Really?"

She frowned.

"You bastard," she muttered. "It sure as hell was. My shooting you might have saved your life."

"I know."

"So, why?"

"It goes beyond me. I'm held accountable far beyond what you imagine. Although you just might have a clue."

She looked up with confusion.

"I'll explain it sometime. But the important thing is that I'm here for you as long as you need me. At least until the government sends you away."

She looked resigned. She knew that was coming but she felt that she had finally had one honest relationship in the man before her. And now they were taking it away. No, she was honest with herself. She was merely paying the price for her decisions.

"So I guess that's it, then."

"Yes," Dusty answered. "That's it. But we still might have some time."

THE END