

# *Devil's Mountain*

by

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DEVIL'S MOUNTAIN

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## *Summer, 1971*

*Jane studied the map with a certain degree of apprehension she could not explain. Protected by a wood framed structure with a slight overhang, it detailed the network of hiking trails that spanned the Devil's Mountain Reserve. It also displayed camping regulations and wild animal warnings.*

*Great, she thought, wild animals. All I need is a black bear joining me at my tree-side lavatory, then I can play dead with my pants around my ankles.*

*Will had remained in the ranger station getting the most recent weather forecast and hopefully finding a trail map they could carry with them. They'd both just filled their canteens and used a real bathroom for the last time before starting their three-day trek.*

*Jane had enjoyed conversation with the park ranger on duty—he'd seemed a man who enjoyed his work and genuinely cared for his mountain. He had taken great care to explain what trails would be most enjoyed and most appropriate for a three day excursion; had shown them the best spots to camp, where to find fresh water, and where to find shelter if the weather turned sour.*

*He had also taken their full names and emergency contacts. "Just in case, we like to have an E-plan," he'd*

*said. The ranger had expressed gratitude for their having registered at the station. "So many campers don't bother and we don't even know they're up there. If something happened to them we'd never know who to look for or where to begin!"*

*Despite this logical explanation, Jane had felt uneasy about the need for his 'E-plan.'*

*Will now approached, a wide smile on his face. He'd been looking forward to this hike for five weeks now, ever since they had planned the time off work. They had decided on using vacation to take some down time, kick around the house for a bit, take a short hiking and camping trip. Since they were still paying off the wedding, they figured on this plan being cost efficient compare to gallivanting around the Caribbean somewhere. Now, with all the new gear that Will had purchased for this little trip, they might as well have gone to Vegas.*

*They helped each other shoulder their new packs, filled with all the new gear. They bounced the weight around to properly position padded shoulder straps (an exercise Will had made her practice at home with bags of wet towels in her pack), then tightened the straps and buckled the fasteners.*

*Gazing into the tree line, Jane again wondered why she had agreed to do this. "What did they say about the weather?" she asked.*

*"Perfect. Couldn't have asked for better. Cool dry days, cooler evenings. Perfect campfire weather."*

*She had been hoping for an excuse to go stay in a bed and breakfast instead of enduring the hike to come.*

With one last glimmer of hope she asked, "What about a trail map?"

He looked at the large map in front of them and took a step in that direction. "They don't have any paper maps, just this one in the shed here. Each trail is marked by colored shapes—see, this one is green circles—all we have to do is remember what markers we're following, no sweat."

She should have known that not having a trail map wasn't going to stop Will from taking her up the mountain. Not wanting him to know that she didn't share his enthusiasm, she tried her best to sigh inaudibly.

She studied the map for another moment, then turned to face him "So we're just following the orange triangles then, right?"

He studied her beautiful face. Her puppy dog brown eyes, her long silky brown hair, her fair complexion. She was every bit as beautiful to him as she had been on their wedding day two years ago. She was wearing tiny blue jean shorts with a flimsy baby doll shirt that barely covered her navel, leaving her firm tan belly exposed. Beneath her thin shirt he could see the pattern of her lace bra supporting a healthy bust. Her hair was done, curled that morning and pulled back slightly leaving thin wisps of golden brown dangling in front of her ears and over her forehead. Mascara accentuated her eyes and lip liner made her already full lips seem even more supple.

As long as he could remember she had always wanted to look and feel her best, both for him and for anyone else

they might encounter, stranger or not. Today she did again. He thought she might as well be here to model the new gear, instead of actually putting it to use.

He'd considered persuading her to wear something that might be more comfortable, but instead of insulting her and try to explain why it wasn't an insult, he decided he'd rather just enjoy the view. A tent in an isolated area after dusk would be where they could really enjoy the great outdoors—he knew she wasn't as happy about spending three days in the woods and hoped the experience as a whole might change her perspective on things.

Besides, if their first child were to be conceived on this trip, it would surely be something to talk about.

With this motive in mind, he considered his response to her question. The ranger had suggested the orange trail was 'accommodating' for their intended hike. Will hadn't let on at the time, but he'd had no intention of taking that route.

The orange triangles marked a base trail, which followed the perimeter of the reserve. It had a lot of traffic, no views, and practically no privacy. The ranger suggested it because of the easy terrain, and the designated campsites with fire pits proximate to some basic outhouse facilities and fresh water springs. Not to mention that the ranger probably liked keeping as many campers away from the tougher terrain as possible—it would make his job easier in the event he needed to use his 'E-plan.' It was, no doubt, the most comfortable alternative to what Will had in mind.

He looked back at the map and pointed to a different

trail. "Actually, I thought we might take this one."

Jane's brow crinkled. "That's not the trail the ranger suggested."

"I know...but that trail...it's not a hike, it's a walk. There's always a bunch of people on day hikes—no privacy—and there aren't any views. Half the fun of hiking is seeing something you don't always—"

She cut him off. "Views? How high up the mountain did you want to go?" Her voice was slightly shaky and roiling with skepticism.

"I've been told the view from the summit is stupendous. You can see for miles around in all directions. Not to mention the stars at night, clear as can be. Plus, no one else would be camped out anywhere nearby."

Jane was suddenly dreading this trip. She instantly envisioned all the discomforts of what her husband was proposing: a long, difficult climb; a cold gusty campsite; sharing her space with all kinds of wild animals; having to expose her bare behind to the sharp brittle wind while squatting on a ledge that looked over a hundred foot drop.

She vividly imagined herself: naked (the animals would have stolen or shred all her clothing), knees to her ears, gusting snow all around her (even though it was mid July) trying to pee over that ledge, losing her grip (on the sapling she'd no doubt be hanging onto for dear life), and tumbling over the edge, falling for what would seem an eternity (only to land in a bunch of thorny bushes).

Despite the humid summer air, a shiver rolled down her spine.

Will saw her shudder, and on her tan face he could read the concern in her paling expression. He knew beforehand that she wouldn't be happy about this idea, knew her fears.

He also knew that once he got her up there, she would thoroughly enjoy it.

"I guarantee you'll have fun, the hike is not that bad, the weather is gonna be warm and beautiful. We'll be the only one's up there overnight. It'll be great!"

She knew there could be no changing his mind. She gave him 'the look,' as he so lovingly referred to it.

"Trust me," he said with a seducing smile.

She also knew she was probably overreacting, but nevertheless she tried to find some reason, some excuse why they shouldn't go that route.

"We're not supposed to camp up there. The map clearly shows the designated camp sites."

"No one will know we're up there—they don't check the trails at the end of the day to see where people are camping. If anyone is around when we get up there, we'll just wait till they leave and find a good spot for our tent. Don't worry about it, okay?"

He found himself startled by his own words.

No one will know we're up there.

After the ranger thanking them for registering, Will now felt as though he were betraying the man's trust. He thought briefly about going back and telling the ranger where they'd actually be camping, but realized he couldn't—they weren't supposed to be camping at the summit.

*Don't worry about it...*

What he'd said was true. Instead of the positive he was trying to emphasize, he'd inadvertently left a negative note ringing in a never-ending refrain. No one will know.

*No one.*

Jane had looked back to the map. Will's own gaze had returned there as well. Unaware of what the other was looking at or thinking, they both observed how the blue squares representing the summit trail wandered up the side of the steep incline, and stopped at the topmost point of Devil's Mountain.

\* \* \*

### *Summer 2001*

Jake planted his butt on the running board of his 4-Runner and bent down to tighten the laces on his new Merrell hiking boots. When finished, he stood up and looked around. There were very few cars in the parking lot this day, which meant he wouldn't have to contend with too many other bodies. He'd be able to enjoy the peace and solitude of the woods, alone.

He was here for a day hike, had been referred here by

some friends with similar interests. They'd told him it was a great hike. A 'heart-pumper' they'd said, and the view from the top was superb.

They had also told him the mountain was haunted.

Today was a clear dry day, the weather channel had told him so. He was looking forward to eating a packed lunch perched on a rock overlooking the world below. He took a deep breath of fresh air and lifted his day-pack off the ground beside him. With one smooth motion he slid an arm in and threw it around his back to catch the other. He secured his vehicle with the telltale chirp of an alarm system and headed off.

Next to the parking lot stood a rather splendid ranger station, newly built and surely much larger than necessary for its purpose. An elaborately carved and finished wood sign was mounted over the double glass doors: DEVIL'S MOUNTAIN STATE RESERVE. My tax dollars hard at work, he thought bitterly. He'd rather have seen the money spent on expanding the reserve or enhancing the trail network. There was no need to provide such an enormous house for two public bathrooms and a radio room for the rangers.

He bypassed the station and approached the trail map. The map itself was housed in a large wooden shed like structure with an open front. The wood was rotting, the base of the structure covered with moss, the Plexiglas cover cracked and clouding in more places than not. It had to be over thirty years old.

He looked at the ranger station and sighed.

Without looking at the trails, Jake's eye went

immediately to the faint tan contour lines that indicated changes in elevation. The closer together they appeared on the map, the steeper the terrain, and where they formed tight circles, one inside another, each smaller than the last, it would indicate a peak. Inside the last circle would be the elevation, measured as feet above sea level. He scanned for the highest point—that was where he would have his lunch.

The contour lines indicated a ridge that ran along the length of the reserve with three individual peaks. The highest elevation was on the north end of the ridge, but the map indicated no trail leading to that peak. The second highest was in the middle of the ridge, but was several hundred feet lower than the first—a trail marked with red circles led to the 'overlook'. The third was a baby hill and of no interest to him.

His shoulders dropped dramatically as disappointment set in—the highest peak did not seem to be part of the trail network. He tried to imagine why this would be, was the terrain too difficult for a hiking trail?

As he studied the map, he realized that it had been altered. It appeared that a trail leading to the summit did exist, or used to exist. Someone had attempted to hide it on the map with white paint, but the blue squares were still visible in spots.

Lower down on the map appeared the same trail, marked by the same blue squares—it stopped just over halfway up the mountain, shortly before the terrain became increasingly difficult. From that point on black circles indicated the TURNBACK TRAIL, which wound back down the mountain and joined a walking trail around the lake. He noticed that the black circles were stickers—

apparently not part of the original map, as though that trail had been added since the map's original posting.

For Jake, this was not acceptable. He wanted to go to the top. Not just the highest point the trails led to, but the top of the mountain. That was what he came here for.

And the fact that the old summit trail had quite obviously been closed at some point, and likely for a good reason, did not occur to Jake until much later in the day.

\* \* \*

### *Summer 2001*

Bill "The Bat" Bantam looked up as the young man entered the ranger station. He could tell the kid was upset—the young brow was lined with frustration and his shoulders were visibly tense. He was used to this sight—had learned how to read it. He'd been dealing with this reaction from hikers for almost twenty years.

"The Bat" had earned his honorary nickname for years of service as a forest ranger. He was, by far, the senior ranger of his staff, not just by age, but by years of experience—he'd been working the mountain for a little over thirty years, by choice. And even with his sixty-four years he could still outpace most hikers on his hill. Once overheard saying he could cross the mountain in the dark without skipping a beat, he was then forever dubbed "The Bat."

Of course it had only been an expression. Since that night in 1971, none of the rangers, including him, would be caught on this mountain after the sun's shadows ceased to exist.

He'd been dealing with upset hikers, and campers, for years. They always want to know why they can't climb to the summit, why they can't do any overnight trail camping. He always had a hard time telling them the reasons he'd had to come up with—he couldn't possibly tell them the truth. If the state found out, he'd be out of a job. He'd be out of a life.

Bill stood up behind the desk as the young man approached. "Good day to ya! How may I be of service?"

"I noticed the map's been changed. I want to climb the summit, but it seems the trail has been erased?"

Bill paused, tilted his head down toward the desk and smiled thoughtfully. He could feel the youngster brooding, but he took his time to create the desired effect. "Son, I can't count the number of times I've been asked that question." He looked back up as he spoke and their eyes met "Over the years we've had numerous injuries on the upper section of that trail. Terrain is extremely dangerous. With time the ledges have become brittle and washed out." He paused and let the smile fall from his face. "We just couldn't keep justifying all the R&R operations up there, so we shut it down."

"R&R?"

Bill smiled, knowing he had the kid's attention. "Yes, Retrieve and Revive—emergency operations."

He studied the young man's face—wanted to see if the words had made the desired impact, but the boy just stared at him.

Bill continued: "We've cut a new trail to the overlook—splendid hiking—waterfalls and steep terrain. And one hell of a view up top. I don't think you'll be disappointed." He pulled a paper map from the pile on his desk and passed it across the counter. "If you take the lake trail around to the overlook trail here, it's marked with red—"

"I've seen the map," he barked, then he turned and walked towards the door.

Bill called after him, "I'll be making the climb myself in a short while so maybe I'll see ya up there!"

The Bat had no intention of making the climb, not right now anyway. It was another part of the design—make the hiker feel like he'd be missed if he weren't on the right part of the mountain.

\* \* \*

Blue squares on trees alongside the trail were always visible—by the time you passed one, the next one could be seen nearby. The terrain thus far had been relatively simple. The lake trail, which had passed by the overlook trail and led him to the old summit trail, had been flat but scenic. It wasn't until Jake started moving away from the lake that he'd begun pressing uphill. Now, as he got higher into the base of the mountain, he had starting breathing hard. His chest began to tighten and a cool film of sweat formed on his brow.

He rounded a corner and saw a black circle for the first time—the Turnback Trail. Jake stopped to catch his breath and drink some water from an insulated bottle in his pack. He was at the top of a small crest looking

into an old stream bed that began somewhere uphill and ran down toward the lake. Looking downhill from his crest, he could see the stream bed littered with little black circles painted on the rocks—the bed was the Turnback Trail.

Looking uphill, Jake saw a dramatically different landscape than what he'd been hiking—the terrain ahead took a drastic turn toward the heavens. He looked hard at where he thought the original summit trail might have continued from this point. A wall of thick shrubbery blocked his path—tight tangles of brittle, thorn-laden undergrowth—and he wondered if it occurred naturally or had been planted to prevent passage.

Jake had wanted to see this for himself. He was too curious and too stubborn to accept what the ranger had told him as the plain truth. Until this moment he wasn't even sure he really wanted to risk his own safety just to have lunch on the summit, but now his curiosity peaked. He replaced the water bottle and shouldered his pack. Before moving on he took a moment to absorb his surroundings—it was indeed as beautiful a day as the fake meteorologists on the tube had predicted. Clear blue sky, cool dry breeze. The birds sang and the squirrels played.

Too nice a day to not have lunch on the summit. Plain and simple.

He listened for any other hikers on the trail nearby but heard nothing. Having traversed the thorny brush, hiking downhill on one side and uphill on the other, he returned to the same spot thirty-five minutes later, on the other side of what was now obviously an intentional

barricade.

\* \* \*

*Summer, 1971*

“Can we stop for a bit?” Jane asked pleadingly. Both she and Will were in excellent physical condition—they both went jogging at least four out of seven days a week, and often visited the YMCA for weight training and to swim laps. They had enjoyed these activities since they'd first started dating several years ago, and it had continued through the years as a bonding activity for them, keeping their relationship strong and their bodies trim.

He looked at her flushed face. Despite being in good shape, he agreed it was time for a breather—they'd been pushing hard, Will hoping Jane wouldn't take the time to think much about where they were going, or how far they'd already come.

They sat side by side on a boulder off the uphill side of the path. He removed her water bottle from a side pocket on her pack, and she did the same for him. They'd come a good distance in a short time, having already traversed the lake and picked up the summit trail, they were now following the blue squares on the well beaten path and had covered most of the base terrain.

Will looked toward the eminently steeper grade ahead of them. The climbing would now get difficult, and it would take them considerably longer to finish reaching the summit than it had to get to their current position. He wanted to make sure they'd have plenty of time to set up camp and collect some firewood before dark. He was eager to push on.

Jane leaned forward, forearms on her knees, thereby resting the weight of the pack on her legs. The humid summer air was leaving both of them drenched in sweat. Jane's hair was sticking to her neck, the front of her shirt was damp and the previously tight material was now stretched, the neckline sagging to reveal much more than intended. Looking around for the first time since they'd stopped, Jane saw what lay ahead.

They stood on a small crest. Before them the trail dipped into what looked like a large stream bed—trickling slightly from recent rains—then rose on the other side into a straight-up climb. She imagined herself having to crawl to pull her weight, along with that of the pack, up the incline. It looked to be steeper than a flight of stairs. The path itself seemed treacherous. Cut into the side of very steep mountainside, it jiggled and jagged through tree roots, loose rocks, sharp ledges, fallen trees, and mossy stones.

*No way. There is no way I'm climbing that with this stinkin' pack on my back. No way.*

She knew that it was too late to turn back. Will wouldn't let her. She knew he would find some way to talk her into it, make her feel capable of getting there, make her feel weak if she didn't try. She knew she was beat before she even began to fight.

She turned to him, a sour look on her face. Her heart was beating faster already. "If you expect me to climb that with this pack on my back, you'd better be the most patient man in the God damn universe."

"I am." He smiled coyly, and she knew his response referred to more than just this hike.

"I'll go first. I will set the pace," she sneered. "Do not push me to go any faster than I'm comfortable with. And you will catch me when I lose my grip and tumble backward from the weight of this stupid bag you've strapped to my back."

She had turned away from him, looking up the hill him while speaking. Without looking back, or waiting for a response, she started marching forward.

Will let her get a few steps ahead of him. He stood there smiling, watching the back of her sweat glazed, shapely legs, tone muscles flexing with each step. He couldn't wait to camp. Couldn't wait to ravish her glistening naked body under the stars. It was a full moon tonight. He hoped to not even take the tent out of his pack. Sleep under the stars, make love under the stars.

He didn't look at the sky before he started after her. He had no reason to. The forecast had not called for any concern. But the forecast had been wrong.

\* \* \*

The beat up wooden structure that was the ranger station in 1971 was a flurry of activity. Bill Bantam was still fairly new to his post and he'd never dealt with something like this. The severity of the situation had caught all of them off guard—hell, just moments ago he'd been outside the building flirting with a couple of gorgeous college girls who'd just come off the lake trail after a morning walk.

Now the weather had taken control of the day. It had started out beautiful, and the three-day forecast had

been for clear skies, warm days and cool nights—ideal for the full moon tonight. That had been only hours ago. Now, around mid-day, the weather service had issued severe storm warnings and predicted the worst band of weather these parts had seen in a decade.

Bill didn't know anything about meteorology, didn't really understand the terminology, but he'd listened through the static of the NOAA radio broadcast, trying to understand why things had so suddenly changed. What became clear was that nobody had expected or even anticipated this sudden shift in weather, and now the rangers had to deal with all the hikers and would-be campers in the reserve. Things weren't due to become severe until even after dark, and that gave them the majority of the afternoon to evacuate the park.

As it turned out, there had only been one registration for overnight camping, and Bill had signed them in himself. He remembered them, especially because of how taken he'd been with the woman. He'd been flirtatious with her, even with the husband right at her side—he couldn't help himself. They'd planned a three-day hike and two nights camping. He was thrilled with the possibility of seeing her again. He and the other rangers would go evacuate the campsites; she would, no doubt, be there.

\* \* \*

### *Summer, 1971*

The last leg of the climb had been more like rock climbing than hiking. They'd taken their packs off and pushed them up ahead of them in order to scale the face of the ledge just below the summit. For the first time since

crossing the parched stream bed, Will had gone first, finding the footholds and coaching Jane up behind him.

Now he pulled himself up onto the plateau that was the summit, then turned around and hoisted her up with him. Panting, they stood up and looked around, and the breath escaped them.

They could see for miles in all directions. The view was spectacular. A hawk floated on the breeze, slowly and effortlessly hovering on the current—it looked right at them, a moment later it dipped out of sight and was gone.

The summit was small rocky area, with sandy patches filled the space between protruding boulders. To their left the peak continued to climb slightly, the area strewn with thick bushes and tall gangly trees. Atop a small crest of rock and brown wispy grass stood a large dead tree. It had no color but the pale brown of the trunk; three large limbs hung precariously like the clumsy, mutated arms of a giant beast. The tree was a spectacle compared to the beauty of the summit—it seemed entirely out of place. To their right the peak slowly declined, converting to pure rock ledge, then dropping off to oblivion.

Opposite of where they'd emerged was a rock edge with another drop—easily three hundred feet straight down. Will approached it with caution and stared down: the trees look like miniatures from a model train set he'd had as a kid. A breeze moved through the lower altitude, swaying the tiny treetops. From his perspective it appeared as though the forest was one large entity, its backside moving sinuously like the skin of a giant snake

*slithering along the mountain's base.*

*Jane did not like how close he was to the drop. She took a step towards him, then stopped, not wanting to get any closer. A strong breeze caught her back, gently nudging her in Will's direction, and she suffered a brief moment of panic before gaining her footing and enjoying the cooling sensation the air brought to her sweat soaked skin.*

*"Can you please get away from there? You're making me nervous."*

*Will turned his head to smile at her. "You've got to see this—amazing."*

*"I'm sure it is. Come here please." She tried to flash an alluring smile, but it was tainted by concern.*

*He backed off, turned on his heel, and walked over to her. She seemed relieved, not only that he'd retreated from the edge, but that they were done climbing. Her previous irritation had faded and she was definitely in better spirits. Wrapping his arms around her slender waste he kissed her passionately.*

*After a moment she pulled away. "What now, stud?"*

*"Well, let's get naked and set up camp." His expression remained perfectly serious.*

*She grinned, knowing he was teasing. Nevertheless she debated the idea of stripping down just to shock him, then suddenly remembered the wild animal warning she'd read that morning and thought better of the idea.*

*The sun was getting low in the sky. It had taken them most of the afternoon to reach their destination. Will wanted to get camp set up before dusk so they could enjoy what was sure to be a fabulous sunset. He glanced at the sky and his mind quickly became troubled. The western sky defied what the weather forecast had told him this morning. He could see a vivid front of dark, angry looking clouds building in the distance. For a brief moment he worried about the weather going bad overnight, but he was banking on what he wanted for this night, not what the sky was telling him might happen.*

*Nonetheless, he committed to setting up the tent just in case, and he looked for a spot that might provide some degree of shelter from wind. There were none. He could set up on a sandy patch between rock ledges, or under some trees in the midst of thorny bushes. The choice seemed obvious.*

*\* \* \**

*Bill was becoming concerned. He'd visited five out of six of the designated camping sites and found only one couple. They had not registered with the ranger station. He had warned them of the pending weather, and they had quickly begun packing their gear. They'd expected him to give them a ride back to the base, and were disappointed, almost annoyed, when he'd explained he had to continue looking for others. He'd had shown no empathy towards them—they should've registered.*

*The sixth site was empty. Now he could only assume the worst. The couple he was seeking, must have decided to camp off trail, where Bill could now not find them without searching the entire mountain from top to*

bottom. They could be anywhere.

He felt a surge of anger towards the woman's husband. She had seemed excited by the idea of campsites near water and bathrooms. It had to have been his idea to go elsewhere.

They had sent other rangers on foot to sweep as many trails as possible, informing hikers of the impending weather conditions. They would leave bulletins at every trail intersection to inform those they might have missed. The trail to the summit would be the only one they couldn't cover, it was too long a hike, too far to go and come back before dark, before the storms arrived. They could only assume that anyone at the summit would surely be down before dark.

\* \* \*

### *Summer, 2001*

Jake figured he must be at least halfway between the summit and the barricade behind him. He had no way of really knowing, he could not yet see the top. What was left of the trail proved to be exceptionally difficult. Without maintenance in any form or fashion for decades, nature had taken her due toll. Fallen trees littered his efforts, mud slides had washed out large sections, loose rocks played with his new boots on every other step, and vegetation had overgrown the once well worn path. At times, he'd had to stop and look back just to make sure he was even on the path any more. Each time he questioned his position it only took a moment to find a faded blue square on a tree somewhere.

Just ahead, two large boulders sat on either side of the

would-be trail. Between them a washout—an dry pile of deadwood, probably gathered by rushing water in a heavy summer rain—had been wedged between the rocks. Like a beaver dam, they held and restrained more and more ground clutter, building a formidable structure between the two rocks.

To the left side of the obstruction was a severe drop—Jake could see over the tops of trees downhill from the trail. If he tried going around on that side, he might as well jump and save himself the anguish.

The right side proved treacherous as well. The far side of that boulder snuggled up against a rock ledge with massive spiked outcroppings. Climbing it would be similar to wrestling on a coral reef.

He would have to go over the washout.

He'd just begun pulling loose pieces from the top of the pile when it happened the first time—Jake suddenly caught a chill. Not the kind of chill that might accompany a morbid thought, but the kind you would feel if someone left a window ajar on a blustery winter night. He felt cold. His skin crawled, the hair on his arms stood on end, and goose pimples rolled over every inch of his body. He felt like winter itself had exhaled down the back of his neck. He felt like—

Jake whipped around to look behind him.

He immediately felt foolish for feeling startled. He found nothing behind him but the ground he'd just covered. The sensation of cold air had ceased, but he glanced at the trees around him, searching for evidence of a breeze. They did not stir.

*Obviously there had been a current of cool air sliding down the mountain, he thought, then returned to his work on the pile. He had a strange sense of urgency about getting beyond his current challenge. He couldn't fully shake the sensation that something was behind him, and he longed to put some distance between himself and the washout.*

*Reminding himself that he was on a restricted section of the mountain without permission, he suddenly felt very alone.*

*Finally he found enough firm footholds to attempt ascending the downhill side of the pile. After taking three steps up the tangled wood, he looked back—he was only four feet off the ground but because of the downhill slope, he felt like he was considerably higher. Immediately on the other side of the pile was a young tree, no more than three inches in diameter. He lunged from the pile, sending loose sticks and brush flying behind him, and grabbed the tree. His weight and the force of catching the tree caused it to bend, gently lowering him to the ground.*

*He was exhilarated. Thrilled with his gymnast-like maneuver. He had a childlike urge to climb the pile and do it again. He also had childlike fear urging him to move on, to get away from here.*

*Just a cool breeze. Nothing but a cool breeze.*

*He looked up through treetops at the sky. Still bright clear blue. Not a cloud in sight. It was turning out to be a warmer day than they'd predicted, or at least if felt so to Jake. He was covered with perspiration, the front of his*

*T-shirt dark from moisture.*

*Walking forward again, he strained to see the next blue square. Though he'd previously had no trouble, this time the markers eluded him. He could not find even a hint of one anywhere. He stopped and looked back down the trail, but the washout blocked his view beyond. He was sure he'd been on the trail before that point. Sure of it.*

*He was about to turn back around and press on to the summit when he heard a howling gush of wind behind him. He froze for a moment, questioning his own senses. Standing there, he felt cold air rush over him—this time not just on his neck, but his entire body. Damp from sweat, it felt like someone had plucked him from a warm shower and thrown him into a blustery winter night.*

*He turned around abruptly, expecting to see the trees swaying from the force of the wind.*

*As he spun, he found himself in darkness.*

*Confused and bewildered, Jake crouched into an instinctually defensive posture. He realized was not complete darkness, but more like the dim lighting of night in the woods. He could see the silhouettes of trees, a faint glow of moonlight. It was raining. Pouring. A harsh wind drove the falling rain like silver bullets, stinging his skin.*

*Lightning flashed, and rumbling thunder immediately followed. Another lightning flash, this time striking a tree uphill. Fire, sparks, smoke—the crunching, ear-splitting sound of wood exploding. Wind blew so hard that large trees seemingly stood on their sides, and some lay over dead, enormous root systems purging themselves*

*of their rocky soil.*

*Jake realized he was shivering, his teeth were chattering. He could not understand, fathom, or even begin to comprehend what he was seeing and feeling. His mind was not even capable of offering any explanation.*

*He closed his eyes, swiping away moisture with the back of his hands, and suddenly all was quiet.*

*A bird sang in the distance.*

*He slowly opened his eyes to the serene summer day. There was no evidence of the storm he'd just witnessed. The ground was dry. Bone dry.*

*Instinctively he looked uphill to where he'd seen a tree hit by lightning. There stood an old stump, huge splinters of wood, worn with time and pocked from wood eating insects, still reaching for the sky. In the storm the top portion of the tree had burst in two—those pieces now lay on the ground, a memorial to the damage of a long-ago storm. The fallen sections, now rotted and covered with moss, were soon to become soil for the next generation of woodland growth, small saplings already taking root in the decaying limbs.*

*Jake saw the damage from the lightning strike he'd witnessed, but he could tell that what had happened to that tree had occurred many years ago.*

*He closed his eyes again, rubbing his eyes, not trusting what he saw. Shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, he felt dizzy. Confused. His mind was playing tricks on him.*

*Heat exhaustion. I'm suffering from heat exhaustion.*

*Jake sat down and removed his water bottle. He was a firm believer in staying hydrated and knew the consequences of not getting enough water: headache, upset stomach, fatigue, and sometimes even hallucinations. He took a long drink from the bottle, then unscrewed the top and poured a little over his face to cool off.*

*After resting for a few moments longer, he stood up and continued his climb to the summit.*

*\* \* \**

*Summer, 1971*

*Jane was inside the tent changing. As the sun had receded, the air began to cool, and a sharp wind accentuated the chill in the air. She emerged wearing navy blue sweatpants and a tight white cotton sweater that embraced her figure. Her boots remained loosely laced for ease in removal when she reentered the tent.*

*Will had already put on a sweatshirt and had tried lighting a campfire, but the constant wind exhausted his efforts. So far, his perfect camping trip was not quite going as planned. The air was cold and getting colder, and his visions of enjoying the evening fireside were fading fast.*

*They had at least been able to enjoy the sunset. It had been sensational and dramatic. A fireworks show of oranges, reds, pinks and yellows. They had watched together silently, atop a protruding boulder, hand in hand, sharing a long sensuous kiss after the last of the*

splendor dipped away. Behind them, beyond the bluff they'd scaled just an hour ago, they had not seen, nor looked for, the looming front of clouds encroaching on that opposite horizon.

Will regarded the rather large pile of deadwood he'd collected. Finding it had been easy. He assumed no one had ever had a fire up here, and the dead tree he'd observed at their first arrival provided plenty of dry, brittle wood. Now it just sat there. Hoping the wind would die out over night, he would use it in the morning and make breakfast over a nice warm fire.

With the onset of darkness they both returned to the tent. The flashlight wedged between his boots stood up on end and cast a soft light. Without turning her head, Jane looked at Will from the corner of her eyes. "If it's this cold now, how much colder will it get tonight?"

"It's only because we're at higher altitudes. It won't get much colder, it's the middle of July!"

As if on cue, the word *July* summoned a rumble of thunder in the distance. They both froze, then slowly turned to look at each other with wide-eyed disbelief.

Jane's prior expression of loving tolerance had rapidly faltered. "Is that what I thought it was? Tell me it's not going to rain."

"Probably just a storm in the distance - you can imagine how far away you can hear stuff being up this high. No hills or trees to block the sound."

Not at all convinced, she just stared at him with pursed lips.

He sighed deeply. "I'll go out and see if there's anything to look at."

He'd slipped on his own sweatpants, handed the flashlight to Jane to hold, and just finished putting on one of his boots when another rumble of thunder came. This time it was incomparably louder, vibrating the rocky ground beneath the tent.

Without looking at Jane, he quickly put on the other boot, unzipped the flap of his new two-man tent, and escaped the tense air. Once on his feet and fully erect, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, hung his head and sighed. This was not turning out anything like he'd anticipated. If it rained, they would be miserable. The tent was not waterproof, simply water-resistant. It was colder now. Much colder. He figured the temperature had easily dropped thirty degrees since mid-day. And the wind had picked up even more. Their tent, barely sheltered beside a rock outcropping just slightly taller than the tent itself, would not withhold any kind of windstorm. The pegs were sunk loosely in sandy ground, and there was nowhere else to tie the lines.

Will felt a stir of panic, then forced himself to be calm. He hadn't confirmed that the thunder they heard was a storm coming their way. It could be miles and miles away, moving on a parallel course, the sound just traveling abnormally well on the winds at this altitude. He opened his eyes and looked around.

Beyond the tent and the rock outcropping shielding it, beyond the rock face they had emerged from earlier, he saw fiery pulses of light illuminating the sky. It made him think of kids under bed sheets playing with

flashlights. The white currents of energy danced across miles of dark, looming clouds.

The moon was hidden behind the storm, but it backlit the upper perimeter of the clouds creating a dazzling view. If he'd been at home, standing in his front yard, he would have called his wife to join him—to enjoy nature's splendor—then they could recede into the sanctuary of their home.

But he would not call his wife to share this view.

As he was thoughtfully gazing at the oncoming storm, the wind suddenly changed direction, gusted cruelly and challenged his balance, striking him with unexpected strength. He found himself having to lean forward in order to retain his stance. His hair thrashed violently at the sides of head, his ears throbbed from the pressure of the air, his eyes overflowed from dusty tears. Behind its rock shield, the tent rattled coarsely in an eddy of the gust.

He could see Jane moving around inside—the beam from the flashlight bounced off the material. She called out but it was not audible over the pounding wind.

When the gust finally faded, she called again: “What’s going on out there? What do you see? Will?”

She sat wild-eyed looking for a response, throwing her glare around the interior of the tent as though expecting she would suddenly be able to see through the material and have a clear view. The zipper on the tent flap began to move. It was with deliberately slow motion that it continued through the distance of its track until Will pushed it open and stuck his head inside.

“Looks like we might get a bit of rain.” He had somehow managed to conjure up a convincing smile, as though this were a good thing. He climbed in and closed the flap.

“Rain?” She frowned and stared at his boots as he removed them. “Is the tent waterproof?”

“It’s water-resistant,” he said, trying to sound optimistic, but not making eye contact with her.

“What’s that mean, we’re gonna get wet? Should we pack up and go down? What are we gonna do?” Her questions had become laced with panic.

Before he could respond she added, “Man, I don’t like this, I really don’t like this. It’s cold out there, really cold. If we get wet we’re gonna freeze.”

He wanted the same answers as she, so he spoke to her as well as himself. “We won’t get wet unless we touch the sides of the tent, they’ll repel the water, but if we make contact with the material, our hands, heads, sleeping bags, they’ll get wet. So don’t touch the tent if it starts raining. Otherwise the material will repel the water. And no, we can’t pack up and climb down. It’s pitch black out there, we’ll fall and kill ourselves, not to mention that if the storm does hit us, we’d be out there, in the dark, and a lot more wet and cold than we’ll be in here.”

She started at him abhorrently. “Storm?”

The word had stuck with her—previously he’d only warned of a little rain. Tears welled up in her eyes. “It’s so cold,” she whimpered.

Thunder rumbled again, closer still. Another strong gust of wind rattled the tent. Will could hear bits of debris dancing on the material. Or maybe it was rain.

He looked at Jane with empathy. He felt completely responsible for her discomfort and concern. It was up to him to make her comfortable and happy. Perhaps making love to her would be the best thing to get both their minds off the oncoming storm.

He got to his knees and said, "We should get into our bags to stay warm. The wind is penetrating the tent. Here...let me try something..."

Will unrolled both bags, unzipped them and then zipped them together, forming one large bag they could both get into. He slid his legs inside the makeshift pouch, pulled off his sweatshirt and beckoned her to climb in.

Thunder rumbled loudly, its finale a long growl that seemed to linger forever.

She just looked at him, doubt and anger dancing in her gaze, but then smirked coyly, pulled off her sweater. Her hair fell over her shoulders and the resulting darkness surrounding her face gave her an exotic appearance. Will flipped back the top of the bag, allowing her to crawl in.

Once inside, they both removed remaining clothing and lay together naked, sharing their body warmth. Outside, rain began to fall.

The air in the tent became tepid as they made love. The setting wasn't quite what Will had envisioned, but he

was gratified nonetheless. For the moment they were comfortable, and Jane was glad she had agreed to the climb.

A blast of wind shrieked across the summit - it whistled through the brush and trees announcing its presence with an ear-piercing squeal. The tent flapped furiously - exerting its stress on the poorly anchored support lines. The pegs slid out of the sand, thrashing around on the end of their lines.

A short time later, the rain turned into downpour. A moment later Will and Jane terminated their embrace—the downpour had turned to hail.

\* \* \*

### *Summer, 2001*

Jake had almost reached the summit. He could see a break in the trees above him. He could also see a steep rock ledge that he would have to scale to make the final ascent.

He'd had no more bouts with heat exhaustion, making sure to stop and allow himself brief cool-down periods and water breaks.

The terrain had become more extreme, the drop to his left placed him a good distance above the treetops below, and he could imagine himself lifting off the ledge with a hang glider and soaring alongside the circling hawks.

He'd discovered he could follow the remainder of the old trail easily enough, not because the blue squares were prevalent—he hadn't seen one in quite some time—but

because at this point, and for some time now, there was only one way he could have gone, only one path the trail could have taken. To his left was a suicide drop, to his right was unconquerable ground—a virtual wall of sharp protruding rock. It was almost as though the trail had been cut into the rock face. Amazingly enough, plant life continued to thrive here. Trees found whatever vulnerabilities they could in the rock, their roots growing over, around and under. He was still able to enjoy shady cover.

Pressing on, he was glad he'd gotten such an early start. His lunch would be a bit late, but he'd have it his way. And there should be plenty of time to return to his car before dark. The return trip shouldn't take him nearly as long as the climb had.

An eagle flew by his left side, then glided out over the drop. It had come so close he could've reached out and plucked a feather from its wing. It floated above the treetops with such grace and strength that Jake surged with sudden envy for the birds freedom and carefree life.

When he turned back to the trail, he faced darkness.

Cold wind bit his face. A downpour of rain soaked his clothing and skin. Within moments the rain turned to hail. Slowly at first, small pebbles of ice, then it grew exponentially. Golf ball sized chunks of ice bounced off the ground and rocks around him creating an ear-thumping clatter.

Initially he couldn't understand what he saw. When he realized the implications, realized the potential danger hail this size could pose, he instinctively thought about finding shelter, but there was none to be found. He was

exposed, pinned on the ledge. As he frantically looked down the trail behind him, the wind roared past him, seeming to climb up from the drop to his left and trying to lift him into jagged rocks to the right. He was having trouble maintaining his balance.

Hail began falling harder. It seemed the rain had altogether subsided, making room for the vast quantity of ice pushing its way from the clouds. A chunk of ice whacked him on the shoulder. He cried out and ducked, throwing his arms over his head, attempting protection from the inevitable barrage. The noise from the hail was deafening, slamming off rock surfaces, ripping through the foliage above.

Pop rocks. Really really loud pop rocks, he thought, then realized he felt crazy for thinking it.

Gale after gale kept him off balance. Hail pelted him with increasing ferocity. He took several blows to his arms as he flailed about trying to find handholds. Several bloody welts emerged on his forearms and the backs of his hands. Balls of ice burst on impact with the rock, sending shards of ice flying—each impact like a miniature hand grenade.

He glanced to his left, where the eagle had been just moments ago. It had vanished, but what Jake saw in its place made his legs falter, his throat seize, and his eyes bulge.

In the relentless flashes of lightning a massive funnel of swirling clouds climbing up the mountainside towards him.

\* \* \*

## *Summer, 1971*

Hail pounded the tent. Indentures formed in the material with each strike - then rebounded once the ice had slid or bounced off the surface. Eventually the tent walls began to rip, and the flimsy aluminum poles that made the support frame started to buckle. Space inside the tent began to recede.

Jane had covered her face with the sleeping bag, not only in an attempt to stay warm, but also in a lame attempt at protection. Will was sitting up on his elbow, watching the inside walls of the tent with severe concern.

Frustration came next. Not just frustration—he was angry. Angry at the weather. Angry at the tent. Angry at the mountain and that moronic ranger with his pitiful weather forecast. How he would love to wrap his hands around that idiot's neck right now. This situation was all his fault.

The walls of the tent began to buckle. Initially he thought the ice would simply bounce off, and if the wind hadn't been so damn brutal, perhaps it would have. Now the hail was striking with maliciousness. He watched small rips in the material appear right before his eyes - they were quickly followed by rainwater seeping in through the gaps.

He crawled out of the bag, pushing the material beneath him so he could sit on it without uncovering Jane. Cold. He was naked and it was cold. He had worked up some perspiration inside the bag before this pestilent weather had interrupted their love making, now the moisture on his skin glistened, and simultaneously chilled him to the

bone.

He hurried to dress, foregoing his shorts and pulling his sweatpants on over his legs. He was digging through the pile of clothing, boots, and packs, looking for his sweatshirt, when Jane yelled something to him. He could not make it out—the noise inside the tent was deafening. The wind outside moaned, whistled through the trees, sounded like a howling pack of demonic wolves. It was a permeating sound, backed up by the rattle of rain and the pounding of hail against the tent, and it was all superseded by the continuous crackle and earth-splitting roar of thunder.

The tent flapped in the wind, the sagging walls whipped violently with a strong gust. Pegs, long since free of their sandy graves, snapped around at the end of the lines they'd once secured.

Will wanted badly to get outside. His anger filled him with a burning desire to face the storm, to fight it, teach it a lesson, show it who's in charge, send it running, tail between its legs—leave him to have what he'd come to enjoy.

He hurriedly unzipped the flap and scrambled outside, leaving the tent door open behind him, and turned around just in time to see an onslaught of brilliant white light descend from low clouds and strike the dead tree on the mount. The tree vaporized instantly—the wood so dry and brittle, the magnitude of electrical current so cogent and forceful. It simply vanished into a plume of electrically charged dust and splinters.

Knocked of his feet by the shock wave, he landed hard, right on the tent, collapsing it completely, and putting it

out of its misery. He was sure he felt Jane beneath him when he landed, but he couldn't hear if she'd cried out over the noise of the storm. Shards of wood riddled his skin and clothing, he rubbed his eyes and wiped his wet face. His hands came back wet with blood.

Scrambling to his feet, Will was on the verge of panic. Things were getting way out of control. Their lives were in danger. His mind flipped a switch and his attitude turned from angry to protective. He rolled off the tent and realized that the hail had not stopped.

Balls of ice pelted his body, his drenched clothing providing little protection. As he raised arms up over his head, the hail grew in size—rocks of ice were not just falling, but shooting at him like a barrage from a deadly automatic weapon.

He squatted down next to the tent, enduring the beating. He could now hear Jane screaming, even over the noise, the ear piercing shrieks replaced by sobs only when she stopped for a breath. Her body writhed inside, trapped naked in the bag and under the collapsed tent.

Naked or not, he had to get her out of there. He had to do something.

Will looked up to the sky, silently pleading with the storm for mercy, and saw the funnel cloud—a deep black furry of energy, backlit in the darkness by throbbing pulses of yellow-red light. The forward wall of the funnel floated toward him, littered with debris, sucking the life out of everything it touched. It appeared swollen, like the belly of some overindulging beast.

The tornado was practically on top of them—just beyond

the edge of the summit, about to take a gratifying bite from the rock face they had climbed that afternoon.

Will froze in awe. He could not move. He tried to yell to Jane, to warn her, to tell her to get out, but no sound came from his gaping mouth.

The storm snarled at him, and the force of its voice shook the ground. Hail mutilated him, ripping his clothes, gouging his skin.

Still, he could not move.

A sudden gale caught him in the gut, whipped him in the face, lifting him off his feet.

He never landed.

But through the dust and dirt in his eyes, he could see Jane's head finally emerge from the tattered remains of the tent as his weightless body floated away in the wind.

\* \* \*

### *Summer, 2001*

Hanging on to a sharp rock for dear life, his hands shredded and bleeding, Jake stared at the furious storm. The funnel cloud was a dark earthy color and frighteningly full of debris—he could see entire trees floating around the perimeter. The energy of the storm seemed to speak to him, to mock his concerns for safety. The cloud growled, a low disturbing rumble that sounded like the ground beneath him being torn apart. The midsection of the funnel swayed left, then right, doing a dance, a shimmy, like the back end of a kitten

about to pounce on a toy—on its prey. Its forward motion seemed to falter, as if collecting itself, then it lunged forward.

There was nowhere for him to go. Looking down the drop in front of him, he watched as the base of the funnel plucked trees from the ground and flung them out of the way. He glanced up the trail, and for some inexplicable reason it seemed safer than going back down, as if getting to the summit would make it all go away, end the nightmare. He scurried up the trail, tripping over tree roots and loose rocks.

Lightning struck a tree at the bottom of the drop to his left. He could feel electrons dancing in the supercharged air, and the moist hair on his head and arms tingled, sizzled. Below he heard the thwap of a tree being barbecued—the sound of the explosion easily rising above the roar of wind and hail. The smell of charred wood became heavy in the moist air.

He did not stop to look at the destruction around him. A few steps further, after the noise from the strike had faded, he heard someone yelling.

Suddenly realizing that he'd been climbing with all fours—hands grasping the ground, feet pushing forward—he stood up to listen. The hail turned to rain again, and incredulously large drops of water smacked his face. He winced and pierced his eyes while trying to see what he'd heard.

To his left was the drop, so far down now that there's no way he could have heard someone down there, besides they would probably have been swallowed in the storm by now. Ahead, the trail approached the final rock face,

leading to the summit.

*Was someone up there? Did they know he was here?*

To his right, the sharp rock wall had been left somewhere below, and he could now see the tree-laden plateau that the ledge supported. In the midst of it a large rock formation protruded from the otherwise level surface, and atop the rocks a mid-size tree stood upright. It seemed unaffected by the winds of the storm, as though sheltered by some unseen force. Unlike the trees surrounding it, its leaves were not stripped or withered. Instead the foliage remained a vibrant green, seemingly aglow against the storm. And the leaves stood still, oblivious to the swirling funnel of viscous winds nearby.

Jake stood paralyzed. His mind telling him to move, but his body frozen with awe. He just gaped at that strangely isolated tree—couldn't take his eyes off the dead man.

One branch protruded from the trunk, parallel to the ground. It was only about four feet long, coming to a blunt point at the end, but thick where meeting the tree. The branch had no leaves, instead it dripped with dark moisture along the length before the skewered body.

The body sat upright but limp, head hung with chin to chest, arms and legs sagging. The branch protruded from the dead man's stomach, blood coating the limb in front of the body, moist redness shining in the dim light of the storm and flashing like a streetlight when lightning flared nearby.

Jake stared, his gaze fixed on the blood dripping off the stub of branch.

*He heard a voice again...distant, muffled, female. It screamed for help.*

*Jake snapped out of his stupor and looked towards the summit. The screaming stopped. The tornado growled behind him, ever closer, but he dared not look. The wind had become so forceful and unrelenting he thought it amazing he could hear anything or even keep his eyes open against the flying debris. Panicked, not sure where to go or what to do, Jake simply sat down and looked toward the dead man on the tree.*

*And the dead man looked back.*

*Jake jumped—his body jerking enough to send him into a small slide on his back—slide down the wet trail. He caught himself after a few feet, his gaze having never left the dead man's face.*

*The corpse stared at Jake, eyes open, blood dripping from its lips, silently mouthing unheard words.*

*Jake wondered if the man was alive. He stood up and leaned toward the tree. The skewed man seemed to become enraged, the stiff expression turning quickly to animated anger. The mouth began moving again, and this time Jake could hear. "Help us... please... Help us..."*

*The voice sounded surreal—booming like a loudspeaker, rattling Jake's skull, but echoing like the inside of an auditorium. There had also been a feminine quality to it, as though a woman's voice was overlaid with the man's. It had sounded possessed. It had sounded haunted.*

*The mountain's haunted. You were warned. They told*

*you. Told you. You didn't listen. Didn't listen, you stupid cocky bastard!*

*The dead man fell silent, head hanging limp once more.*

*The rain again turned to hail.*

*A chunk of ice the size of a tennis ball, tossed from a storm cloud and whipped by winds, whizzed past the skewered body, hissing like an angry snake, and colliding with the bridge of Jake's nose.*

*He fell, barely conscious, somewhat aware that the top of his nose had just receded into his shattered skull. His knees slammed into rock with a splintering crack. Before there was time for his limp body to finish crumbling to the ground, the force of the tornado plucked him from the ledge and sent him air bound, back into his tranquil summer afternoon.*

*Had anyone been present to witness the events of that fine sunny summer day, they would have seen Jake appear midair, twenty feet up, in motion, hurdling effortlessly through the warm mountainside air. His body sluggishly tumbled head over feet before slamming back first into the protruding limb of a large tree. The blunt point of the limb tore through his spine, piercing his innards and popping through the front side, sending blood and stomach contents flying back in the direction from which he'd come. Momentum carried him slightly, sliding his body up the branch, plowing leaves and smaller branches off as he went, and tearing the hole through his torso into a larger collar for the tree limb.*

*Jake hung there upright for a moment until a breeze came up and gently nudged him, setting his top-heavy*

body off balance. He toppled over and swung upside down on the blood lubricated branch, swaying briefly like a pendulum before coming to a stand still with stiff legs pointing to a crystalline blue sky.

Bloody saliva dribbled from his mouth, catching in his upturned nose, overflowing the nostrils, then falling to the ground, where ants scrambled together to enjoy a newfound treat.

\* \* \*

### *Summer, 1971*

Breathless from a struggle to escape the confines of her sleeping bag, Jane poked her head out from the mutilated tent. Wrought with panic, her eyes bulged, her face flushed from pounding heart, her hair was in tangles from wrestling with fabrics. She looked around the summit in wild jerks, eyes wincing from the wind and stinging rain.

"Will? Will! Where are you?! Help me please!" Her attempted yells produced only whimpering cries.

Driven more by panic and fear than any sensibility, she climbed completely out of the tent. Her body weight removed, the tent surrendered to wind, lifting and flying past her, the zippers on the flap whipping her back as it passed, leaving a bloody lashing behind.

Unfazed, in shock, she stood naked, her rain soaked body glistening with each flash of lightning. The wind whipped her hair. Projectiles of assorted debris lunged past her. Hail exploded on the rocks. She leaned forward, braced against the wind, staring into the tornado.

Thrown suddenly off balance by an impromptu gale, she stumbled backwards towards the drop that Will had peered over just hours before. She flopped to hands and knees to stop momentum, breaking the skin on her knees as she fell.

Another gust caught her chest and lifted her upper body, throwing her backward over her heels. She landed and slid on her butt with a jaw-snapping thud, her tongue catching between teeth and pinching off the tip. Her mouth filled with the warmth and bitter taste of blood.

Jane was now only inches from the drop.

Hands flailing for something to hold, she managed to find a small sapling making a run at growth, weakly embedded in the rock ledge just a few inches from the ledge. She clung to it mercilessly.

Warm blood dripped down her chin.

She also felt warmth on the inside of her thighs.

Looking down, expecting to see a wound gushing blood, she realized she was urinating. The warmth dribbling down her inner thigh felt like boiling water in contrast to the frigid rain drenching her bare skin.

The wall of the tornado grew larger, climbed onto the edge of the summit, swelled with its own sort of excitement, and advanced on her.

As if to announce its presence, another snarling gust of wind and dust lashed at her body, throwing her back once more. The sapling she had clung to failed, slender roots sliding out from their rocky bed.

*She tumbled backwards into wind-ravished darkness.*

*The storm's fury ceased as she fell past the ledge, behind the protection of the rock face, and her ears rang in the relative silence. For a brief moment she thought it all a bad dream, until her stomach lurched with the sensation of weightlessness. She felt so cold, shivering, the air rushing around her body as she plummeted. She thought, *where is Will?* and her long hair, trailing upward and flapping at her face, distorted her final view of the lightning-riddled sky.*

*\* \* \**

### *Summer, 2001*

*Bill "The Bat" Bantam led the mountain recovery team up the trail. They were in no hurry, the kid had been dead for two days now, and the situation was not going to get any worse. Or different.*

*Two days after speaking with him in the station, the kid had come up missing. Calls from friends and family had alerted the local authorities, and they had, in turn, alerted the ranger station. He recalled speaking with the arrogant kid, remembered his intent to climb to the summit. Bill had immediately shouldered his emergency pack, laced his boots and climbed the old summit trail.*

*Upon reaching the blockade, Bill had been astounded by its growth. He hadn't hiked this part of the mountain in fifteen years, and even then he'd been astonished how much the shrubs had grown since he and some others had planted them some twenty years ago.*

*At that time he had been a young man. Nevertheless, the shock of losing those two campers in the storm had been devastating. Not just due to the loss of life, but because Bill had taken personal responsibility for that couple—he'd been the one on the hill looking for them before the storm hit. He had also taken quite a liking to that young lady.*

*Using clippers he'd brought with him, he had cut his way through the thinnest spot in the shrubby wall, leaving the hole through which he now led the mountain recovery team.*

*Just fifty yards up the hill the birds could still be seen.*

*Ravens, circling the corpse—picking at what was left of it—just as they'd been earlier that morning when Bill had first found the body. And just as they had been thirty years ago when Bill had seen this same sight for the first time.*

*He was relieved to have found the kid so close to the barricade. Bill had not wanted to climb towards the summit, had not wanted to see it again, and had even considered sending another one of the rangers. But he knew what he would encounter—no reason to subject someone else to the experience. Then he'd just have to explain it to someone else. He was the only one left who had seen it all before. He knew that if he hiked that far up toward the summit, he'd end up in that god-awful storm, just like he had all those years ago when searching for the young couple. Just like he was sure this poor schlep skewered to the tree had.*

*Standing just beyond the barricade, Bill watched the recovery team climb to the tree shrouded with birds. He*

sensed their hesitancy when they had gotten close enough to see what it was they were to retrieve. He wasn't surprised by their reaction, his had been the same when he'd seen Jane's husband skewered to the tree just below the summit. The authorities at the scene decided it had been high force winds.

Bill had seen the same phenomenon five times since. This was number six.

This, however, was the first time since the barricade had been planted. It had taken ten years of inexplicable events for the rangers to close this part of the mountain. No one had wanted to believe in what they saw happening. No one could grasp the fact that the death of that young couple was being replayed over and over, killing innocent hikers. No one could fathom how, or why it could happen.

But Bill knew. He understood that this part of his little hill was now somehow occupied by that young couple. And they were angry. Suffering. They were stuck. He'd seen them—the ghosts in the storm, crying for help. But whatever help they required eluded him to this day.

Jake was the first one to bypass the barricade and venture into the storm, and now surely he would be the last. The forest service had all but forgotten the obscure deaths of the seventies, but now this kid's arrogance had brought the whole thing to light once again. Consequently, the entire reserve was to be closed to the public. The spirits caught in their storm would not be disturbed again. Not, at least, until the next hiker who didn't want to listen.

Bill wondered what would become of the land he'd spent

thirty plus years patrolling. He wondered what would become of him. The forest service had offered him another job, which he'd declined. Thirty years was a decent career. Maybe it was time he retired.

Perhaps he would do some hiking. And he would sure pay close attention to the weather if he did.