

Lexa. The unphoned.

He grabbed up the car phone that had been forced on him by Bing in one of his publisher moods, then realized. While he'd been busy writing down Lexa's phone message with the ring-around-the-rosy directions for getting to the party place, Shyanne tornadoed back into the cubicle to snatch up her cherished review video of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, and he'd missed the phone number Lexa was giving. Nor, he found now, was ~~Directory Assistance~~ about to hand out the phone number of Aaron Frelinghuysen, latest cybernaire.

All Mitch knew was what everybody knew, that the guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had pirhanaed his way into the techieville food-chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him.

But, tough luck for the man who had next to everything, the prime mansion sites along Lake Washington had been used up by the earlier generation or two of computer bigfoots. So now the mode was to pick a spot along the next woodsy body of water, Lake Sammamish, and build something whopping. Mitch drove and drove and drove in the tangle of lakeside streets that turned into lanes and less, stopping four times to decipher Lexa's directions. Finally he found the driveway where, amid vehicles that

surely had cost big digits, sat her purplish VW van with *Do-Re-Mi Catering* standing out in firm white script.

When she'd first found that van, it was painted in a flowery fantasia with scarlet lettering rampant, reading LOLLAPALOSER.

"The guy gave me a deal on it," Lexa had marveled.

"I'll bet he did." Mitch had circled the vehicle, twice. "You know, Ingvaldson will have a stroke if he sees this in the driveway."

"Henry should visit the twentieth century before it's too late."

Carefully Mitch tried again:

"Are most people going to want their finger food delivered in something that looks like it's been orbiting the planet since 1967?"

That struck home. "I'll paint it royal burgundy," she said.

The Frelinghuysen house much surprised Mitch. Cyber barons had been building their dreamhouses the size and decor of airport terminals, but this one, while extensive, was low and restrained, nestled under fine old undisturbed cedar trees.

He was let in by a physically perfect member of the household staff, all courtesy, who pointed him in the direction of the kitchen.

On Mitch's way down the hallway, though, a wall-size glass case of coastal Indian masks suddenly loomed. The fantastic oval eyes, the playful exaggerations of proboscis and incisor and claw and ear, the unquenchable life in the wooden grins and leers and anguished expressions floated like a sorcerers' seance. Haida, Tsimshian, Tlingit, the tribes of the greatest carvers were all represented in this hallway Valhalla.

Overawed by the art collection, he dawdled along from mask to mask until he came to a thunderbird headpiece with an imperious nose so hooked that it circled back on itself, abalone-shell eyes eternally wide awake, and skull^{top} ears which had little faces in them.

"Thunderbird, old buddy, you're worth more than what I'm driving," Mitch muttered, meaning it.

"Thunderbird," echoed a rather too pleasant otherworldly voice.

Mitch spun, startled, as the wall behind him blued into a computer screen. The thunderbird mask appeared there for a moment, then dissolved. Outlines of templates, various sizes and shapes, revolved onto the screen until one descended into place and took form as the thunderbird's hooked beak. Then the template ghosted out of the beak and ascended, twice, and made the ears, the identical basic form as the beak. Ovoid templates spun into place and made the eyes, and then the equally mighty nostrils

in the beak, and then smaller versions of the same template form made the littler eyes in the faces within the ears. White on blue, other lines formed themselves, the ceremonial mask inexorably growing in detail and power. Mitch realized he was watching a schematic of how the ancient carver had created the thunderbird head. For an instant the computer-modeled mask hovered there in the pleasant blue screen, then cedar texture sheathed over it, then paint applied itself where the carver had done so. It was as hypnotic as it was spooky. Mitch knew that the original peoples of the coast loved to play with transformations, have two or more of the ^{one} creatures they carved meld with ~~each~~ ^{an} other in the same space by sharing body parts. Now the computer was taking apart the art by which the carvers had taken apart time and space and being.

He got out of there, caught his breath, and went on to the kitchen.

He found Lexa bossing her food help as if building the pyramids of Egypt. It always unnerved him, her flinty way of running a crew. He had known her to fire the most charming kid on the face of the earth, *kapow*: "Told you once already, Jason, learn to read your Mickey Mouse watch and be on time."

Now she leveled a look across the kitchen at Mitch and said:

"Well, hello there. So, lucky, how was San Francisco?"

"Breath-taking."

He swapped quick greetings with the crew, Allison and Guillermo and Kevin, and went right over to Lexa, aware he was more than a little late. "Bridge traffic," he alibied reliably. "Anyway, hi." He inclined his head back toward the computer extravaganza. "Video night at Potlatch Acres, have we got?"

"Everybody shut your eyes while I make out with the bartender," Lexa directed. She stood on tiptoes and planted a gale-force kiss on him. "Mmm," she assessed in a voice low enough for just him to hear, "a person of your lip description used to sleep with me."

"Used to? I thought that came with this job instead of Social Security."

She looked serious. "You did get together with Jocelyn?"

"Approximately." Mitch seized a fistful of carrot sticks.

Lexa poked her hands into her apron pockets, her no-bullshit-allowed-on-these-premises stance.

"Gory details later, how about," Mitch bargained. He munched and tried to look semi-willing for her. "Reporting for duty. Honest. More or less."

She gave him one more testing gaze, then said:

"Okay, right this way. The bar setup is over by the windows. You'll draw spectators."

He followed her into a living room with a cedar-beamed cathedral ceiling and a glass wall out onto darkening Lake Sammamish, the lights of the other houses along the shore sparkling off the water like necklaces tossed down in tribute. Taking his station at the opulent bar and trying not to sound edgy, he maintained to Lexa: "No prob, boss. Let the sipping hordes come."

"Crowds are your life, right, footballer?" she teased like a chirpy cheerleader. "I never worry about penalty calls when the game is in the hands of the old Iron--"

"Don't get going on that, okay?" he hastily whirled into the work waiting behind the bar.

Lexa pretended to adjust the tail of his tent-sized white bartending jacket, surreptitiously pinched his butt, then headed once more for the kitchen to shake up the troops there. But she stopped at the doorway to glance back at Mitch, bulking there against the nightblack water, the big man she had traded Alaska for.

Sitka was still dark, she was still the lawful wedded wife of Travis Mudd when the call came, Travis on his side of the bed saying into the phone, "God, they got it stopped? They don't? Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can get hold of a plane."

Lexa rolled over toward him, batting her eyes as he snapped the bed[#]light on and dove for his clothes on the chair.

“Got ourselves an oil spill.”

He sounded like the usual Travis, apologetic and put out, but yanking on his pants in the sallow bedroom light he looked eager along with those. Lexa would think, after, of something her grandmother had said about men when they had a forest fire to fight: *They turn back into absolute boys.*

She had to ask Travis “Where?” twice before he glanced around from the vital business of tucking in his shirt tail.

“Hnh? The worst. Valdez.”

That dim Alaskan morning, everything that could go wrong at Valdez was racing to do so before sleepy-eyed officials could begin to catch up with the dimensions of the disaster--the thousand-foot-long tanker having daggered itself so thoroughly on a reef that eight of its eleven cargo tanks were spewing oil, the spill⁼ response equipment too little and too late; then the next inevitable ^{misfortune} ~~thing~~, the wind picking up and spreading the oil slick ninety miles down the shores of Prince William Sound. Estuaries went black-dead under the killing coat of muck, as did stream mouths where salmon spawned; fish, seabirds, eagles, the intricate food chain of the Sound was being smothered or poisoned as the oil

bled from the tanker and kept on spreading. All those first nightmare days of the *Exxon Valdez* cascade, Lexa wanted to grab Alaska and shake it: *See! See! You and your fancy wages for that pipeline!* She was already packed and ticketed for Valdez when Travis called to suggest: "You might as well come on up. I'm going to be here a real while."

The emergency bird clinic by day, a swing shift of cooking meals-to-go for the fishboat crews who took it upon themselves to fight the oil away from the Port San Juan hatchery--Lexa had never worked harder nor more hopelessly in her life. The oilport was a crazyhouse, with money rather than mirrors bending everybody out of shape. Sky-high hourly wages for scrubbing oil-befouled rocks, boat jobs skimming the oil off the water of Prince William Sound, opportunities galore in provisioning the oil company's army of spill consultants and the stunned state agency honchos and the environmental feds and the media invasion; she vowed not to let the boomtown-of-catastrophe atmosphere get to her, but it constantly did. As did the tarred dead birds, the dead sea otters, the dead seals, the dead this and the dead that of Prince William Sound.

Feeling about half-sick as usual, she was disposing of the floppy carcass of one more cormorant that she had tried unsuccessfully to soap-rinse the oil from, when Travis came around with the familiar man whose size made him unmistakable around town.

"Montana, right?" Lexa said the instant Travis introduced him.

“Does it still show that bad?” Mitch sounded none too pleased.

“We had Roziers in the Two Medicine country, where I’m from,” she elaborated.

Her eyes lifted to the black wavy hair, the rocky set of his face. “You look kind of like their kissing cousin.”

With the barest of smiles he owned up to that, saying that his family in Twin Sulphur Springs had shirt tail relations north there in the Two country, all right.

“Probably they’re the ones who got born with some sense.”

Lexa held her tongue about that, and by now Travis was saying, “Giving him the full tour. Mitch’s following this for his paper in Seattle.”

A notebook was swallowed in Mitch’s hand. “L-E-X-A, do I have it spelled right? Last name same like Travis’s or...same, got it. You’ve been washing birds? How many of them pull through?”

The photo came then and there, Mitch of course asking if she minded but already cocking the camera as she collected the next oil-slicked cormorant against the chest of her rainsuit. This one was a beach find, she gave Mitch the vocabulary, maybe not quite as far gone as the floaters they found flopping out there in the actual curd of oil atop the water. She would remember that he then had question after question for her, and a barrage of others for Travis in his capacity as the state’s wildlife monitor of this mess, before the

uproar broke out at the town dock nearby. A fishing boat had tied up, grimy and loaded with ^{five-gallon} ~~herring~~ cans of oil the fishermen had scooped up by hand. Photographers and reporters jammed around the fishermen who claimed they were capturing as many gallons of oil as the fleet of fancy skimming equipment combined. Then the crowd surrounded an embarrassed oil company spokesman, who had to call over even more reluctant executives into the clamor.

All at once Mitch Rozier recited:

✓
*"When in danger,
 when in doubt,
 run in circles,
 scream and shout."*

Still watching the dock commotion, the three of them shared an unfunny laugh.

"Sounds like what we work with every day, doesn't it, Travis?" Lexa couldn't help saying. "Where'd you get that?"

"Something my old man used to say about the army, is all. The pipeline," Mitch was abruptly back to questioning [^] "Were the two of you up here during the construction? What was that like?"

She could say of herself, later, that she had started off not particularly well disposed toward a newspaper word merchant. She'd had one for a brother-in-law, an ungovernable piece of work named Riley Wright, until Mariah came to her senses and bailed out of that marriage. So Mitch the writing man did not win anything much from her at first except civility--not even any real Montana kidding, as he seemed to feel pretty far removed from where the foundations of the Roziers were poured. Of course she was curious, as exiles everywhere are about ^{one another} ~~each~~ other, but not enough to make life tricky yet. Meanwhile Travis and he chimed with each other, Travis keen to have somebody for once interested in the ins and outs of the whole coastal ecosystem instead of coming around for thirty seconds for the latest body count on wildlife. Out of that, she could later tell herself, came their pipeline flight.

They lifted off in a white and yellow Cessna 207 at first light that Sunday, Travis professionally laconic in talking to the tower. Stuffed into the ^{co} ~~co~~ pilot's seat, Mitch watched out the side window for the airborne moment from the times he had been up with the Lighthawk pilot--the plane wheel halting its spinning an instant after takeoff and sitting motionless in the air. He half ^g ~~g~~ expected to see Mount St. Helens rise beside the climbing plane.

Travis first circled out over Prince William Sound, the fleet of oil-skimmers and collecting barges below like beetles on an oddly sheened pond, the filthy bathtub ring around Prince William Sound stretching toward the Gulf of Alaska beyond the horizon. Then he aimed the plane back over Valdez and the farm of storage tanks, and the silver worm of the pipeline stretched ahead.

Mitch no longer liked flying, and he never had liked having someone looking over his shoulder. The coppery presence at the corner of his eye caused him to glance back every so often.

Perched on the front edge of the jump seat behind Travis, Lexa thought to herself *Hey, bud, this is Alaska, life is close quarters here* and rubbed it in:

“I hope this is okay, me hitchhiking along?”

“Oh, sure, fine,” Mitch lied. Couldn’t say much else, with her husband doing the flying. He eyed Travis sideways, though, wondering how they sorted things like this out, how much Lexa mixed into his work. Stuck her spousy nose in, so to speak, although it did seem to be a fairly acute nose.

Wrapped in the sounds of the Cessna, the steady force of its engine and the vibrating thrum of the cockpit, they settled back for the long day of flying, the oil aqueduct of Alaska constantly there under them, the land threaded with forty-eight-inch

pipe from its arctic shore to Valdez's channel into the Pacific. Mitch's hands stayed busy with his notebook, trying to make the Alaskan earth say words. Here at the start of their route north every horizon was crazily corrugated, the mountain ranges like lines of icebergs off the end of the big one, Denali.

Lexa watched him work, trying to figure out what registered on a housebroken Rozier, writer no less. *Ones I knew, even our shepherders thought were shagnasties.*
He got out someway.

Eventually they were skirting Fairbanks, bushplanes parked like pickup trucks along the airport runway in the middle distance, surprise suburbs claiming the ridges. Then the pipeline out in the open, climbing some ridges with a wink of gleam and disappearing into others.

They came above country now which was naked of anything manmade except the pipeline and the haul road beside it. At irregular intervals, a side road would run out a few hundred yards and turn into a flat graded oval--like a giant frying pan, with the side road the handle. Mitch puzzled over the pattern of this for a while before pointing and guessing, "Helicopter pads?"

"No, those're gravel pits," Travis raised his voice in answer. "Takes a lot of gravel to keep the haul road from sinking."

It all floats, Mitch's column began to form. The pipeline and its road are levitated atop tundra and permafrost by the most expensive construction project since that orchard in Eden. Even before the Prudhoe Bay oil is pumped aboard a tanker at Valdez, it defies gravity and other concerns of earth for eight hundred miles...

Travis was saying over the plane noise that the weather ahead wasn't the greatest, but he figured he could keep under the worst of the clouds.

"And above the ground, right?" Mitch answered, calculating the skimming landscape not very far below.

"Bear!" Lexa shouted then, sounding inordinately happy about it and pointing past Mitch's nose out the side window. To his further confusion, next she yelped something to Travis about getting out his tattoo kit.

Travis grinned at her like a boy given candy and yelled, "Let's go see him." He stood the Cessna on its right wingtip and zoomed the plane into a tight circle. The tundra fanned beneath them, little squib lakes appearing then quickly erasing, the three of them on their sides there three hundred feet in the air and Mitch concentrating on not giving in and reaching for the sick/sack, until at last Lexa pointed to the wingtip and the galloping clump of fur under it. Travis made a couple of swoops, so they could view the bear from each side of the plane, then he put the Cessna atop the piped path of oil again.

They flew across cockeyed rivers, channels bending back on themselves as if trying to make knots. One such set of kinks, unruly and silty, was the Yukon. And constantly the pipeline...

...goes and goes and goes, tracing its bright solo strand across our largest state.

It is true that it is a mere thread in the carpet that is Alaska. It is also true that this single thread has magically dyed the rest of Alaska to the color of oil money...

Two-thirds of the way to Prudhoe Bay, Travis put down at a skimpy village for refueling. The wind coming through the pass in the Brooks Range ahead rocked the plane even on the ground. The three of them piled out laughing and doing *scissors, paper, rock* for first turn at the outhouse behind the trading post. Lexa lost to both men and complained that the laws of chance as well as anatomy were rigged against her. "You can at least both go at once and have some kind of a contest, can't you?" she urged.

By the time that was taken care of and an industrious native named Fred had raced out on a three-wheeler to gas up the plane with Travis watching, Mitch had ducked into the trading post. He bought apples for a dollar apiece, entertained at how Bingford's eyes were going to pop at this on the expense account, and jogged back across the gravel runway.

Ululating howls of sled dogs rose from behind every house in the village. Lexa, as if back at bossing ranch dogs, commanded over her shoulder: "Hush, you huskies!"

That made Mitch give her a smile, somewhat on the speculative side. Across certain stretches of the flight the sameness of the landscape and the mesmerizing drone of the plane had sent him daydreaming into Travis's life in this big land, a willing wife with him. It didn't take much bumpy air to jostle that drift of thought, though. Marnie would have gagged at setting foot on a fishboat or even into one of the scabby Alaskan towns. And he himself? He had grown up in not much of anywhere and had pulled out of there as soon as he could, too. He doubted he was Alaska material.

"Here." A little late, he thought to offer the apple sack. "Have some on my publisher." They huddled out of the wind next to a ratty-looking snowmobile shed and watched Travis go about his plane chores. Lexa dug into the apples.

Conversationally she said, "Guess you know you're in Bob country north."

He certainly did know that, but was surprised she did. Then put it together, that the Forest Service's Bob Marshall Wilderness Area lay just west of where she had grown up, along the same spine of the Rockies where Mitch had, far away there in the ~~Lower~~ ~~Forty-Eight~~. Up here Marshall, in his twenties and made of luck, had plunged into the

Brooks Range and come back with a preservation paean to the colossal wild country at the gates to the Arctic. And a pipeline runs through it.

Brow corrugated with interest, Mitch studied off past the aluminum-sheet roofs of the village to the storied peaks all across the sky ahead of them. "Travis's work ever take him into the Brooks Range?"

"Only flying through Atigun Pass, like today." Lexa studied the apple in her hand as if it had just reminded her of something. "But I've been pretty far back in, on the headwaters of the Anaktuvuk River."

He felt major-league stupid. She cooked for all kinds of backcountry expeditions, Travis had made mention of that.

She showed him an askew smile, then contemplated the mountains. "Spent a solid week in a sleeping bag, back in there."

"May I ask, doing what?"

"Trying to keep from starvation."

She hadn't liked the setup from the minute the bush pilot dropped them off on the upper Anaktuvuk, a guide she'd never worked with before confidently insisting the camp be put up out on a gravel bar, right there handy to the river for his clients to flail their fishing lines at. One couple from Japan, the other from Florida, Dopey the guide, and

Lexa, then there they were at streamside when a cloudburst cut loose in the elevations of the Brooks and every drop of moisture on the North Slope started coming down the Anaktuvuk. They were lucky to flounder across the backwater to shore before the river took the gravel bar. They had managed to grab one tent and their sleeping bags and a provision pack that would feed six people for three days--Lexa knew it was going to be a long week before the plane could get back in to fetch them. The Floridians proposed hiking out. *Meet a bear in the tundra and it isn't going to go hungry*, she pointed out. Dopey made hero noises about thrashing his way downriver for help. *Right, bushwhack for a hundred and fifty miles to the Beaufort Sea and hail a passing iceberg?* Along with Lexa, the Japanese couple wasted no more time arguing in the rain but climbed into their sleeping bags to start saving their body warmth and energy. The other three gradually came to their senses and bedded in too to wait for the weather to lift and the plane to come. An eight-day week, it turned out to be before they heard the marvelous drone of the engine.

She gave Mitch only the quick version, but it was enough to knock his Seattle socks off. She shrugged and sent him a glance. Somehow demolishing her apple and managing to speak at the same time, she asked as if suddenly curious:

“Ever wonder if you’re doing any good at all? The things you write, I mean.”

“I don’t have the world straightened out quite yet,” came back from him. “But it maybe doesn’t hurt for me to keep poking around at it.”

“Lots of us poked at this pipeline project as hard as we knew how, and here the sucker came anyway.”

“You’re not big on oil, it sounds like.”

“I’m not big on watching the spillionaires go at it. These are the same people Travis and I knew when they were milking money out of the pipeline construction.”

Now Mitch was the one curious. “What keeps people like you and Travis in Alaska?”

“Travis loves it up here.”

As if hearing himself cited, the long-legged figure across the runway gave them a thumbs-up sign and beckoned them back for takeoff.

City habited, Mitch glanced around for where to deposit his apple core. He noticed Lexa was emptyhanded. “What’d you do with yours?”

“Ate that part, too.” She shrugged. “Old habit. My grandfather got us to doing it,” she said as they started back to the plane. “Most of his life he was a forest ranger, there on the Two, and when he used to have us kids out hiking or camping he showed us how to keep taking little tiny bites on our apple core until all that’s left are seeds and

stem.” Lexa inclined her head to watch up at Mitch as she finished. “In the wilderness, you don’t want to leave any more of yourself than you have to.”

—————

They had been back from the pipeline flight several days when Travis suggested to her at breakfast:

“Come on down the Sound with me this morning. Something you need to see.”

At the first stretch of oil-smearred rocky beach, a barge-like craft with what looked like artillery aboard was moving in close to shore. Travis’s boss from the Juneau office, Timmons, was on hand. There was much consultation, and then a cannonade of high-pressure water jetted onto the rocks, spray and crude-oil sheen flying.

It was like watching a powerful fireboat at work, only the target here was not fire.

“Whoeee!” With the first hope she had felt in a long while, Lexa jiggled Travis in the ribs. “This is going to do it? They can just hose away the oil?”

“That’s the deal.”

Travis looked odd, taut. The two of them watched another blast of water scour away at the scummed-up rocky beach. After a minute he said as though thinking out loud, “We have to hope they don’t get too much into your line of work with this.”

Lexa gave him an inquisitive ^{look} grin. "The bird washing? Hey, they're not going to hose my sick birds with that thing. Over my deadly body."

"No, your other line of work," Travis said shortly. "We've got--there's still marine life under those rocks. Protozoa and micro-organisms, on up. Bottom end of the food chain, you might say." Travis inclined his head toward the hosing operation. "That water has to be hot to take the oil off. Scalding."

Lexa stared at the gout of water. Then at him. "It might *cook* anything that's still left alive under there?"

Travis tightened his jaw. "Timmons signed off on it. I had to, too."

"On--?" Lexa felt a little dazed. Alaska, oil, Valdez: were slippery answers all they ever had?

Neither of them said anything more, right then. Travis had told her just enough, then counted on her to cut him some slack; she knew the symptoms. She made it through the day, sneaking reluctant looks at the hosing operation, and at the pack of \$16.69^{an} an ^{hour} workers mopping up around the rocks that had been hot-blasted. She made it on through her galley shift on the fishermen's command-post seiner. When she got home, she snapped the bedlight on in Travis's eyes.

"You're letting them kill the rest of the beach to clean it?"

He wrenched himself up against the headboard, his excellent shoulders and slimboy chest bare to her. Blinking hard a couple of times, he had it ready for her. All too ready, she thought.

“We don’t know how to get around some biota loss from it, all right? But--”

She didn’t say anything, waiting.

“Lexa, I am not a marine biologist. Timmons and I think this is the only way we can get a certifiable cleanup. Otherwise what are we going to say--‘No sweat, don’t bother picking up that oil’? You can see where that’d put us,” he practically pleaded.

“We’d have the world on our necks for letting Exxon off the hook.”

“Instead you’re going to have a dead beach.”

“A *cleaned* beach. Which is what Timmons and I are supposed to make happen. After that, we’ll have to see how things ~~re~~^{again}-establish.” Travis took a major breath.

“There’ll be studies then. They can second-guess us then, if that’s the way things turn out.”

His eyes quit meeting hers. “Some sleep might improve both of us,” he said, and snapped off the light.

When she went to Mitch Rozier in the morning, the first thing he did was to mutter: “Why do these things always have to happen on deadline?”

Before he began phoning around to marine biologists he knew down the coast, he paused.

“Travis must’ve figured he didn’t have any choice.”

Lexa’s eyes looked dull, but her voice wasn’t. “That can get to be a habit.”

Glancing at her as he made notes, Mitch spent the next hour cornering people by telephone. One way or another, all the researchers he could get hold of said they wished there could have been more research before the beaches were scoured, but none of them wanted to be quoted ^{by name} as opposing the oil cleanup. After the last one, Mitch hung up and told Lexa:

“You’re right. They’re flying blind on this, to get the beaches cleaned while the oil company is still hysterical enough to do it. Got one more call to make.”

Bingford’s voice in Seattle went rapidly up the scale:

“Are you in the same Alaska as everybody else? All they’ve been writing for weeks is Prince William Sound polluted to the max with oil, and here you come tra-la-la *against* the cleanup?”

“Only the hosing with hot water. The scalding part.”

“Hot water, right, that’s exactly what you’re trying to get us into, Mitcho.” Bing made him go over it again, then at last asked: “Who would we hang the story on?”

"I can't use the ^{source's} name."

"Mitch, guy," Bing began, which he always did when he thought Mitch was getting in over his head.

"But it's somebody who knows somebody. It's solid."

"Only if you cover our ass--"

"You don't have to tell me that again, Bing."

"--every which way with--"

"Bing, you little craphead, I do know that."

"--reaction quotes from the poor bastards who signed off on the hot hosing."

"I was about gonna go do that," Mitch said, meeting the eyes of the woman whose marriage he was about to wreck.



I always knew, with Travis, that winters were going to be the worst. When we could get out, have some room around us, we didn't do too bad. But cooped up together, that's when we'd start biting the doorknobs.

Posted by the kitchen door, Lexa was keeping watch on the expressions of the guests starting to circle the table of food. A bit of peering and comparing was good; slow stares at, say, the curl of the lettuce leaves were not. This crowd seemed to be automatic

grazers, and she at least could breathe a sigh of relief at that. The space of white jacket across the room was less easy to map.

Mitch would be the same season all year long, if the world would let him. That's a lot of if. I hope I'm not feeling winter coming, again.

Lexa pushed the kitchen door sharply with her hip and disappeared to cutlery duty.

Meanwhile Mitch, with a touch of panic, was finding out that bartending had changed dialects since the last time he filled in at one of Lexa's feeds. Somewhere a switch had been flipped and everyone who had been drinking bottled spring water that cost more than perfume now could not get along without boutique beer. He had finally mastered the dozens of water labels; now here was the new zoo of brew. Still, he managed to maul the requested brands out of the army of dark little bottles until a pallid guy with hair like a headful of quills came back to the bar complaining that he had been handed a Fort Apache Amber Ale when he'd asked for a Forklift Amber Ale.

"Time⁼out!" Mitch boomed to the waiting semicircle of thirsties, and clinked bottles around until he had them scrupulously alphabetized, Anchor Steam to Zyggurat Pale Ale.

While Lexa hovered at the table and trafficked this or that onto people's plates-- she always had the urge to pat a party into shape--Mitch whipped beer out like a Las Vegas dealer. Tribal talk among the techies was of stock options, it seemed; Mitch wondered whether stockbrokers talked about computers at their parties.

Another spurt of beer aficionados, latecomers, and then the physically supreme specimen who had let him into the house came through the line, accompanied by an equally blonde and tawny woman. *Sheena @jungle.com*, Mitch thought. They were so gorgeous together they practically hurt the eyes. Mitch handed them a matched pair of beers and they strode away like cheetahs.

Amid his collection of pangs, Mitch singled out hunger as one he could do something about. He slipped over to the food table while Lexa was there inspecting its remnants.

"What do you want devoured?"

"Celery sticks."

"How come you never say the Swedish meatballs?"

"Vegetables are healthy for my profit margin, Rozier."

He remembered to ask: "How's business been while I was gone?"

"Weddings up the wazoo," she said quite cheerfully.

“Really. In this day and age.” Crunching away on the celery, he scanned the room curiously. “So where’s our host? Off trying to morph himself into Bill Gates or something?”

Lexa gave him a funny look. “You just served him a beer, doofus.”

“*That’s* Frelinghuysen?” Mitch yanked his head around to stare after the blonde muscleman. “Life is unfair, I can take. But this guy has more going for him than Jesus did.”

~~Lexa shrugged. “What can I tell you, some jobs come with better perks than others.”~~

A series of blunt chords indicated the band was tuning up. Lexa rolled her eyes. “See you around,” she said and fled for the kitchen.

Mitch went and settled himself in back of the bar while the black-clad band avalanched into its first set. From rock through grunge to ska, musicians seemed to be turning from butterflies back into cocoons. Driven by lots of horns, the music was very fast, very loud, very happy, very everything. Through that set and a bunch more, Mitch tried to keep himself tuned only to the industrial-strength music and dispensing an occasional beer.

Lexa sailed out of the kitchen only once and only long enough to snatch the last few slivers of smoked salmon away. She had on her hunkered-down-in-a-hailstorm expression. Mitch vamped a couple of dance moves for her benefit and she stuck her tongue out at him. He loved big helpings of sound and could not see why she clung to voovy-groovy jazz; "There's no whang to it," he kept pointing out. (On the other hand, musically speaking, more than once she had shown him, as Paul Desmond's make-out alto saxophone toyed with "Two of a Mind" on the CD player, that there is only one playful curlicue of vowel between sax and sex.)

Now the band reached the end of another musical peregrination, and silence rang out.

"Primetime," someone near Mitch said. "Fre's going to play."

The band looked sour as Frelinghuysen ~~came~~^{vaulted} up to share the stage, but hey, it was *his* stage. They shuffled around wanly while he went to his musical weapon of choice, which proved to be the synthesizer. Cries of encouragement chorused from the guests, Frelinghuysen deprecatingly waving them off. Then, ten of the world's richest fingers flexed themselves once, twice, and began to caress the equipment:

Pling pling NEE-NYEE
pling pling pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling
 WAH DAH DAH DEE DAH DUH...

That *Chariots of Fire* theme suddenly conjured a wall of runners behind Frelinghuysen, the movie's familiar slow-motion frieze of British milers training on the beach for the 1920 Olympics. Except, everyone in the room caught on within nanoseconds, these were not those ancient Brits in frumpy shorts, these were younger and Lycra-clad and led by a significantly familiar figure.

The guests roared and applauded as the golden head rhythmically bounded along at the front of the pack and its still-golden current version bobbed over the keyboard.

"Fre did cross-country at Lakeside," Mitch overheard. "High school state champion."

The theme music underwent another electronic metamorphosis and abruptly another wall turned into a stadium with a cinder track, this time a newsreel-gray figure striding and striding in gawky detachment. Roger Bannister at Oxford in '54, breaking the four-minute mile. But the runner at his shoulder nobly setting the pace for him was no longer Chris Chataway, it was Frelinghuysen. Fascinated and appalled, Mitch suffered the realization that he was the only person in the room old enough to remember when

Bannister's historic mile happened, rather than having it cooked into his mind by television's backward glances. He peered as hard as he could at the spectacle playing out over Frelinghuysen's fingering, but the simulation, the templates or whatever they were--the mask of Frelinghuysen shouldering history along before he was born--looked utterly seamless. Just as Bannister burst his historic tape, a mountain came into the room and two figures were loping its African slope, Kip Keino training with the playful and predatory cyber-Frelinghuysen shadowing him up through the thin air of Kilimanjaro.

When that magnificent duo scampered into a mist, Mitch thought he had endured all, but the music reverted to the movie theme's *plings* of portent and another beach took over a wall, this time unmistakably the Oregon coastline, broadloom of sand between forested capes and haystack rocks with surf grandly breaking. At a distance, a shimmer of tiny figures was coming. As they grew ever closer, several dozen of them undulating in the satiny running, their track uniforms took on brightness against the tan beach and green bluffs; colors from a fever dream, maroon, lemon, vermilion. By now it could be seen that two runners were moving well out in front, like the quickest in a flock of sandpipers. The righthand one of course was the requisite Frelinghuysen. The other was longhaired and mustached and as intense as the shaped flame of a cutting torch. Steve Prefontaine, running the sand like the die-young competitive demon he had been.

“Pre!” the party guests shouted in media-reified recognition. Then began the chant:

“Pre! Fre! Pre! Fre!”

Ai yi yi, thought Mitch, and reeled to the kitchen.

Lexa was superintending the cleanup. Scraping, washing, and pouting, Kevin and Guillermo appeared to be in agony at missing the music. She sent them a look that jerked them back to their chores, then turned to Mitch. “What in the name of Elvis is going on out there?”

“New group,” he reported wearily. “Cyberman and the Synthetics.”



Afterward, going on out to her van and his car, Lexa provided:

“That was different.”

The mutter from Mitch sounded something like:

“We can hope so.”

After a couple of tries they found their way out of the lakeside maze of streets and Lexa in the lead zoomed for home. She was the type of driver who gobbled up yellow lights like grapes. After three intersections in a row flashed red in the windshield of his Honda, Mitch grabbed the car phone and punched her van’s number.

"Lexa, suppose you could slow down to the speed of sound, so we can talk?"

The van ahead shot along for most of another block, then out came an arm signal he hadn't seen since the ~~Driver's Ed~~ handbook, Lexa's arm right-angled down to indicate coming to a stop. Also downpointing was her extended middle finger. After the van jarred to a halt at the next stoplight, in went her arm and her voice came over the phone:

"I thought you were in a strong silent mode tonight."

"Just because a guy doesn't say anything doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say."

"You lost me there in the *doesn'ts*. So, what's to say, that can't wait until we get home?" *He wouldn't dump me by car phone, would he?* The phone clapped to her ear, she peered into the sideview mirror, trying to glimpse Mitch past his headlights. The honk of the Honda's horn made her jump. The light had turned green.

"Make up your tiny goddamned mind!" she ~~yelled~~ ^{shouted} into the phone and put the van in gear.

Mitch said mildly, "I only wanted to report that I missed you like hell."

"So much so that you call me about it now that you're finally back, huh?"

"Can't you think of it as call waiting?"

"*Never mind!*"

They drove in silence until the VW van and the Honda sailed in file onto the Evergreen Point floating bridge, ^{watery heavens of} shoreline lights reflecting toward them on Lake

Washington. As they neared the western shore, Mitch inquired:

“Is this a fight?”

“It’ll do until one comes along,” Lexa said. “What *is* eating you?”

What could he answer, the bowels of the earth? ~~The~~ traitorous incisors of Bingford? ~~His~~ daughter the serpent’s tooth? ~~The~~ golden gullet of ZYX?

“Been a day of win one, lose about a dozen, Lex.” To start somewhere, he recited to her Bingford’s scheme of turning *Cascopia* into a freebie paper.

“Wuh oh, sounds wrong from here,” commisseration instantly came into Lexa’s voice. “Our family motto always was, free stuff is that price for a reason.”

“It’s not just the freebie part,” Mitch resumed after a moment. “It’s--oh, hell, you name it. Too many times up and down the field, I guess.”

They drove in silence, Lexa waiting him out. *It’s his damned cell call.*

Finally Mitch’s voice arrived again, with forced brightness:

“On the other hand, I get the deck chair on the *Titanic* to myself now. Shyanne grabbed her herbarium and jumped overboard.”

Goodo, at least he's not cradle-robbing. Lexa gunned the van toward the next changing light, remembered, and reluctantly gave in to the brakes. As the Honda's headlights eased up behind her, she put to him:

"What, then, Mitch? If it isn't just Bing giving away the store, what's freaking you? Jocelyn give you a tough go?"

"Could say that, yes. It seems I've been awarded the permanent blame for trying to limit the damage, back there when her mother and I split."

"You knew that then. It'd take brain transplants to ever get those kids of yours to change their minds about that. Maybe that's what kids are for, one of life's little ways of telling you family trees don't come cheap either. Mitch? You still do know the blame was worth it not to carve up Jocelyn and Ritz, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I was just reviewing for the test, I guess."

The Ballard neighborhood was tucked into its bungalows for the night. The vapor lights at the ship canal locks glowed blue in their nightlong duty, and there was the salt scent of Puget Sound as they parked both vehicles, bumpers nearly touching in the skimpy driveway. As Mitch came up to help carry her catering gear in from the van, Lexa broke a laugh at him.

“What now?” He peered at her in the dimness outside the house. “Were you expecting one of those Fortune 500 geeks to follow you home?”

“Can’t stand to quit work tonight?” She poked an indicative finger into the stiff white fabric still tented on him.

“Yeah, well,” he glanced down at the bartender jacket he had forgotten to take off, “if you want me to say bartending is beginning to grow on me, so could fungus. Come on, let’s get this stuff in. I’m about to crater.”

The phone message machine on the kitchen counter was blinking red-hot as usual.

Lexa headed straight for it while Mitch arrowed up to the bedroom.

“It’s probably my dad,” she soothed. “Reporting in from the latest footprints of Lewis and Clark.”

Shucking shoes and clothes right and left in the bedroom, all he could shed of the day, he felt a craving for sleep, geysering up out of his body’s subterranean regions in the form of yawns. He made it as far as pajamas before Lexa came into the room.

“Mitch?” Something in her voice. “The phone message. It was *your* dad.”

He closed his eyes as if to see what it was like. Then blinked them open, looking at her with his face gone bleak.

“It would be,” he said.

III

Part Title:

The Springs

THE SPRINGS

one

“Mitch? Guess what, kid. Aw, you’re never gonna guess. I landed a buyer.”

The old hated tone of voice. Lyle Rozier proclaiming he had the world on a towrope and a downhill pull at last. Rubbing his opposite ear as if the words had gone right through him, Mitch winced into the phone that next morning. How many times had he heard this, or something an awful lot like it? There had been his father’s geiger-counter period, when uranium prospecting was going to put him on Easy Street. Then the pipedream of raising rabbits--*Think about it, Mitch, all they do in life is copulate and populate*--to supply dog food manufacturers. Somewhere in there, that genuine-Rocky-Mountains-rustic-gateposts scheme which skinned a hillside and everyone involved. From the sound of it here came another one, some surefire and doomed deal, Lyle style.

“Imagine that, a buyer,” Mitch held himself to. “For what this time?”

The voice on the Montana end immediately rose. “The property, what the dickens do you think? The Rozier Bench!”

Mitch might have laughed if he hadn't been concentrating so hard on heading off his father's latest fit of enthusiasm.

“Better start at the start, Dad, okay? Lexa's on with us. I asked her to be.”

“Oh. How's every little thing, Missy?”

“Swell, Lyle,” Mitch heard her say in the kitchen and echo on the phone. And more than half-guessed the part she was thinking: *Do I really want to be in on a Rozier family gutspill when I'm not any kind of a Rozier?*

“The bench deal took a while,” Lyle swept on, “but we're about to close on it. Why I'm calling.” Mitch's wince was sharper. The benchland at the edge of his father's town of Twin Sulphur Springs was as speckled as a pinto pigeon egg: every dot a rock, or a clump of them. Some vagary of a glacier had left the elongated heap, topographical kin to the other low flat-topped buttes of that country but so stony it grew only stray tufts of buffalo grass. All those years ago Lyle typically had not outright purchased the acreage from the XY ranch; he had gained title in a shortsided swap by doing the ranch's haying in exchange for the useless bald bulge of ridge. Mitch, seven or eight at the time, could recall his mother's fury, her tight repeated asking what they were supposed to use for money that

summer while his father was being paid off in dirt, *no, rocks, Lyle!* And every time Lyle had answered: *Adele, it's a chance to get hold of property.*

"What's your buyer want the famous bench for?" his skeptical son asked now.

"What it's good for. Gravel."

"Since when does that country need any more--"

"Gravel's only the gravy part of the deal, of course. That's why you've got to get yourself back here and do some eyeballing. There's all these papers, with the place here in town involved and all. You have to be in on them. You're the heir, you know."

"Wait a minute. Your *place*. You just now said the *bench*--"

"It's all gonna go. The house. The stuff. Unless there's any of it you want. I keep telling you, that's why you've got to come and eyeball--"

"Dad, where are *you* going to go?"

"Aw, I'll think of somewhere."

Oldtimer's, Mitch thought in a panic. "Listen, don't do anything--don't sign anything, understand? We've got to talk all this over, do we ever, but for right now whatever you do don't--"

"Mitch, you been listening?" Lyle's sharpness of voice did not sound like a person coming down with Alzheimer's. "I sure as the devil am not signing anything by myself, you're the one who's got to come and be in on the paper^g-pushing. Lexa? You still there?"

Is his hearing all right? And if he hasn't worn his fingers off driving a typewriter, he can come and dab his name on a little paperwork, right?"

"He's got enough fingers left for most purposes," Lexa attested, giving Mitch a lewd grin around the kitchen doorframe. Flushed, he produced a rigid digit to her, readily enough.

"Mitch? I know you don't like coming over here much," his father spoke now in that old rhythm--bluster and wait, boost some more and take advantage--that Mitch knew like elevator music. "But this is one time you've just got to." The significant pause, then the harpoon: "Never bothered you on any of this before, now did I."

Mitch believed he could make the case that *bother* was the name of the game between them, approximately the past thirty-five years. But specifically this, bunching up everything in his possession and throwing it away--no, Lyle Rozier had not resorted to this before.

1.1.1.1
 "I'll I can get there sometime tomorrow if it's so goddamn life-and-death. But promise me you'll sit on your hands until I show up, all right, Dad?"

"Deal," said Lyle, and hung up.

Lexa was already coming into the living room as Mitch whammed down the phone receiver. "Not much for goodbyes, is he."

"I hate this! Why can't people divorce their parents!?"

His outburst drew from Lexa a gaze postmarked San Francisco and Jakarta.

"All right, all right," Mitch said with a hard swallow. He rubbed his forehead as if trying to start things moving in there. "If I'm going across the mountains to stop that father of mine from screwing up royally, I need to call Bing for time off. If there's still anything to have time off from." But he turned back from the phone to Lexa. "I don't suppose you could come along? Ride shotgun down the avalanche?"

"Can't. Mariah."

Mitch blanked on that.

"My sister is flying in," Lexa said with red-letter enunciation. "Tomorrow."

"I knew that." He sneaked a glance toward the refrigerator message center.

"Only child." Lexa shook her head. "You guys always got the whole birthday cake to yourself."

She watched Mitch stand there as if gathering himself.

"Before I go," he announced. He held out his arms and tried to smile. His voice dropped. "Hey, lady, want to wrestle even if it's with clothes on?"

She puckered as if thinking it over, then stepped into the hug, nuzzling under his jaw with the top of her head. *So we're both in for a dose of family.* Her mind lingered on that briefly as she breathed hot encouragement into the hollow at the base of his throat.

two

Time zones from Scotland to Seattle balled up within them, the zombied passengers of flight 99 from Prestwick were being gradually disgorged from the Customs area, dragging baggage and an air of serious expenditure as they made their way toward the concourse exit where Lexa watched as keenly as though counting sheep through a gate.

Here came a milling Elderhostel tour group with fresh crushes on ^{one an} each other like eighth-graders, trudged after by ruddy Scotch-faced geezers who all looked like ex-Mounties, trailed by a cloned-looking Silicon Glen clan whose minds were plainly ahead on their software presentation in Redmond--

There. Announced by her hair.

“Mariah! Over here!” Lexa lifted her right hand from its pocket perch and wigwagged it as high as she could reach.

Mariah, all footwork and grin, cut a sharp angle through the concourse crowd. Bangles probably from Timbuktu flashing from her ears, and her gray eyes the quickest anywhere.

“Hey there, cowgirl. Aren’t you the sight.” They hugged the breath out of each other, *mmm*[≡]*mmmm* in near-identical timbres.

The sisters pushed back to arm’s-length, gazing with frank investigative smiles into the family mirror they provided each other. Mariah as ever wore her contradictions like a gorgeous breastplate: she was starting to look her years, but those were only forty-two and most of them devilishly flattering to her. Her narrow quick-fox face was tanner than tan from her year of summers in both hemispheres. The fetching mouth, between tiniest parentheses of wrinkles, was expressive in more ways than one. Nose, eyes, eyebrows were the full set that had come down to her from their regal grandmother, Beth McCaskill, guaranteed to still hold beauty when Mariah was twice forty-two. Looks aren’t everything, Lexa one more time tried on in self-defense. *They’re a hell of a lot, though.* She would not have bet on how she herself was holding up, but knew for sure that she would have Mariah’s reading on that soon enough. She felt the familiar stir, the forcefield of all the years of love and contention. Reuniting with Mariah always gave her a buzz on, a

complicated one, heart and head kicking in at different times. There was nothing remotely like it, these first minutes back together with someone you have known as long and acutely as yourself.

“Brought you stuff,” Mariah was already at. “Your little Norskie bungalow is going to look like the United Nations powder room before I’m done.”

“Hey, all right. In that case I didn’t absolutely waste the trip to the airport, ~~did I.~~”

Lexa poked her sister’s ribs as best she could through the protuberances of photographic gear slung on Mariah. “Come on, you walking camera shop, let’s get you home. So how was the big silver bird?”

“Can you believe it?” Mariah’s hair flung vividly. “We’re flying over the North Pole, there’s the ice cap and the sun out on the Arctic Ocean and every iceberg in the world, and what happens but those stews--”

“--flight attendants, Ms. Politically Uncorrectable.”

“--those dumb-ass stews come around asking us all to pull down our shades to watch a rerun of some freaking television program. I wouldn’t do it. Would. Not. Do. It. Told them that until television gets as rare as that ice~~cap~~, I’ll look out the window I paid a junior fortune for.”

“You didn’t happen by any chance to be *shooting*, did you?” Lexa teased.

“Me? Shoot pictures in public? Which reminds me. Jesus, you look good, squirt. Your own catering must agree with you. I want to take a bunch of new shots of you while I’m here. You and Mitch looking domestic as canaries.”

“No guy around the place at the moment,” Lexa started to explain; “Mitch split--”

“The bastard!” Mariah’s eyebrows were up like battle flags. “What, the curse of the McCaskill sisters strikes *again*?”

“No, no, no. He split for Montana for a few days of family stuff, that father of his, is all. He’ll be back as soon as--”

“The *un*bastard!” Mariah momentarily dropped a couple pieces of baggage to make an erasing motion in the air. “St. Mitch! *Good* Mitch!”

“Damn your sweet hide though, Mariah,” Lexa said, laughing but a little spooked at the Mitch sonata, “there’s still no conclusion you can’t broadjump to from a standing start, is there.”

Mariah gave her younger sister a glance so affectionate it all but ruffled her hair.

“Now you’re sounding like our own wild card of a father.”

—————

“Listen, you’re going to take the big bed, upstairs. With Mitch gone, there’s no reason--”

“No, now, I’m not going to run you out of your bedroom and that’s that. Tsk, Lexa, what would a shrink make of that?”

Arguing by rote until Mariah finally gratefully surrendered, the sisters then put their strenuous selves into wrestling her baggage collection up the stairs. As they clattered back down, Lexa asked over her shoulder: “So how long can you stay?”

“Couple days to shake the jet lag, if that’s okay?”

“You bet. I can stand some company; mooch your absolute damnedest. The wonders of Ballard are at your service, Ms. Fujiship, ma’am.”

The silence from Mariah caused Lexa ^{to} look around at her.

She had followed Lexa to the kitchen and propped herself in the doorway, arms crossed, lanky but enough of her in all the right places, a figure pined at by half of Montana that Lexa knew of and probably now by a goodly proportion of the world. For once, she was not wielding a camera, and the absence showed. *Hey, what, she looks--distracted, abstracted, whichever word that is*, Lexa’s mental antenna went up in surprise. Mariah always arrived anywhere like a cavalry charge, and to see her retreat into herself just like that was cause for concern. Watching her, those deft long fingers holding only herself in the arms-clasped pose, the alone look of someone outside her own country still on her, Lexa had to wonder what she ought to do next toward this particular out-of-kilter kin. Like all families these days the McCaskills sometimes could get as various as trail mix--the last

occasion that had brought Mariah and Lexa under the same roof was when their father was getting married to Mariah's ex-mother-in-law. But these two, growing up together in the peopleless miles of the ranch, had known each other like set habits. Now it was always a matter of trying to keep that going. Knitting her brow in what she hoped was a significantly sisterly way, Lexa probed:

"Sorry it's over?"

Mariah blinked and stirred. "It's not, by a long shot. My so-called job is sitting there; the paper wants me back doing it the minute I get unpacked. Then there's the photo show; the Missouri River Museum is already biting my rump about that schedule. I've got a gazillion prints I have to do. And then the--"

"Whoa there. The going-around-and-around-the-world part, I meant."

"Had my fill of airplanes, that's for sure. What's up here, you feeding one of your cash-flow multitudes tonight?"

"I'm going to feed *you*," Lexa stipulated. "Just a little veggie stir-fry? And Dungeness crab? And sourdough bread?"

"Oh yes," Mariah for once sounded reverent.

"Here, earn your keep, peel some carrots."

Mariah picked up the peeler so that it balanced delicately between her thumb and forefinger like a compass needle. "Which end do I use, again?"

Lexa swatted at her with a stick of celery.

Whittling away at a carrot, Mariah mused: "Riley said once, we ate out oftener than long-haul truck drivers. You suppose indigestion was the real reason we split?"

"What do you hear of Riles?"

"Still in California committing mayhem three times a week in that column of his.

And wouldn't you know, he has a radio talk show now."

Lexa's eyes went mock wide. "Since when does Riley need radio for that?"

"And?" Mariah prodded, starting to destroy another carrot. "As long as we're doing The Exes' Files--"

"Yeah, well, old Travis," Lexa said reluctantly. A tender area, this. All the other McCaskills, Mariah and their father and mother, had been as fond of Travis as if he was the family mascot. All the other McCaskills hadn't had to look across the table at him at every meal and wonder when he was ever going to evolve beyond boyish charm. "He's sort of Travising through life. Been put in charge of another environmental assessment of Alaska, last I knew. You watch, he'll suck his way up to being Head Druid in Charge of Paperclips yet."

They left that and yakked on while Lexa cooked and Mariah kibitzed--*So where do you want to go back to?-- Mmm, that's easy, nineteen seventy-four. You of course were too wet behind the ears then to remember, but Nixon got a stake driven through his putrid*

heart, and the Eagles' song that year was "Take It to the Limit," and I was going out with Hal Busby, finally somebody who knew how to neck, and.... Quit! Geography, worldgoddamntraveler, not your own old hornyography. What'd you see that you would go back to, first?.... What really got to me was the Bell Rock lighthouse.... A Scotch rock? your favorite thing in the whole world was a Scotch rock? The Fuji folks should get a refund on you--then they ate lustily to the inescapable tune of family catching-up--So before I left I gave my old camera bag to our ^{beloved} new step-mom Leona, the one with MMcC branded into it, remember? and told her I guessed she'd have to change her name to ^gMeona ^gnow, huh? She gave me one of her damn smiles and said that really wouldn't be hard, the tough part had been changing to ^gMcCaskill. ^gAnyway, where are our esteemed delegates to the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Planning Committee by now?... Uhm, somewhere south of Mandan, last postcard said. Dad claims if Lewis and Clark had traveled by motorhome along with forty-eight other committee members, their expedition would've taken a whole hell of a lot longer than three years--and finished to Mariah's groans of satisfaction and Lexa's pleased glint.

^g"And you of course saved room for--"

"Hey, no. Lexa. You scamp. You didn't--"

“Coming right up. Set your mouth for it.” Lexa whisked to the kitchen and the refrigerator, to come back triumphantly bearing a glass bowl of black cherry Jell-O studded with tiny pink marshmallows.

Mariah giggled as if caught peeking in a Christmas stocking. “How’d you know I *dreamed* about this stuff, the whole time I was away?”

“Oh, just a shrewd guess based on the fact that we’ve been sisters for a combined total of eighty-two years, going on eighty-f--”

“Shush! I’m lifting my spoon.”

“Not yet, you’re not. Stand back from that Jell-O, lady.” Reaching into her apron pocket, Lexa quick-drew a can of Redi-Whip, piling it atop the dessert dish like berserk cumulus clouds.

“Classic,” proclaimed Mariah and dove her spoon in. “Ohh. Umm. Mmm *mmm*.”

“Easy, girl.” Lexa cocked an eyebrow at her. “The management takes no responsibility for runaway passion at the table.”

“You know me, I can abstain but I can’t be moderate.” Mariah paused between iceberg-sized spoonfuls. “You’re having some, of course.”

“Sure.”

“I was afraid of that.”

They wiped out the dessert in no time, then flopped down in the living room for recuperation. Lexa watched Mariah without trying to make a point of it. *There's still something, she...*

"I'm going to crash pretty quick," Mariah announced, giving a lusty yawn.

Her eyes met Lexa's a moment, then went reflective again.

"The bod starts to go," she mused. "I can't pull the all-nighters doing my prints like I used to, and the eight-day weeks kept catching up with me on my trip--the International Dateline [#]*means* it, did you know that?" She stretched her every inch, managing to look like a million damn dollars while doing it, her sister thought. "We're not bulletproof any more, Lexa."

Lexa sat bolt upright. "No kidding? Then thank God I'm the younger sister."

Another fetching yawn caught up with Mariah. "This feels like the cut-you-off-at-the-knees kind of jet lag coming. But it's not here yet. And until it is--" She rummaged in her camera bag until she found an airline mini-bottle of Lord Calvert. "I'm going to have a Lord ditch with my favorite and only sister, how about."

"Jell-O and alcohol both in one night? What's next, rolling naked on the lawn?"

Mariah didn't even have to stop to calculate before she said laughing, "Hey, kid, we've both done worse."

“All the world’s wayward except thee and me, and thee’s a little wayward,” Lexa dramatically burred one of their grandfather’s mock-preacher quotes.

Ice and tapwater and the regal glug of Lord Calvert departing the midget plastic bottle, pop of wine cork and purl of pouring, then the McCaskill sisters clinked glasses and in one voice toasted: “Here’s at you.”

“Mariah? Meet anybody?”

“Mate anybody, you of course mean? You coupled-up types just can’t get that off your mind, can you?”

“Yeah, well, that part too.”

Mariah took a sip of her drink and then owned up:

“There was a New Zealander, when I was shooting on the South Island there. But nothing lasting.”

“Some big something temporary, though? Mariah, I don’t mean to pry, but you seem kind of--”

“Romantically exhausted?”

“--splattered against the bug screen.”

Mariah stared over her motionless glass at Lexa. Finally she said: “Bingo, sweetie. It was not nice, calling it off with Colin, but I couldn’t see us long-term. Met him when I was doing the Mount Cook shoot.” An earring detached into her long slim hand, then the

other. She jiggled the bangles in her palm a moment, a little *chingchingching* sound, then dice-tossed them onto the coffee table in front of her. "He's a glacier guide, is he ever. More like a souped-up sherpa, really--carries people's gear up while keeping them from falling into humongous crevasses. Talks like Hillary on Everest--after every trip up and down the glacier he'll say, 'Knocked the bastard off again,' and that'll be it for about an hour. ^{But} And talk about a god bod--one look at ^{Colin} ~~him~~ and you want to start eating him with a sundae spoon."

Mariah paused in a major way.

"Lexa, he was twenty-four."

Lexa twirled her finger in a little water-down-the-bathtub motion. "I guess they don't count years counterclockwise or anything down there so you could kind of reverse toward Colin's age?"

Mariah tried with no luck at all to smother a convulsive laugh. "Girl, you are so full of sympathy."

"Serious a secundo, Mariah, are you sure you can't fudge the arithmetic there a little? I mean, guys seem to think they can flip back in the calendar and get themselves a Jennifer any frigging time they feel like--"

"Twenty-four and young for his age."

“Ow.”

“Colin doesn’t know diddly about anything except waltzing up and down glaciers.

Doesn’t care about getting anything done in life except that, either. I’d ^{to}try ₁ show him what I was up to with my photo work, or talk to him about all that was involved in the museum show or doing the book, and any of that left him cold. Sub⁷-zero on the ambition scale, that was Colin. But he was a beaut.”

Lexa studied the sister who had told her to always let the world see those wrist scars. ¹*They show you’ve been through some life.* Lately Mariah had been through some herself, had she not, leaving ~~Bambi-on-the-glacier.~~

“Book,” Lexa thought to prompt. “What’s the book? You’ve always been a shooter, not a scribbler.”

Mariah swirled her drink, peering down into it as if taking a look at her hole card.

“Got a contract, honeybunch. It grew out of the print show. I’m doing a photo book of the stuff I’ve been racing around and around the world shooting this past year, which is to say everything.”

“Oh, everything,” Lexa echoed after a considerable moment. She couldn’t help a bit of mischievous smile as she asked: “Gonna take up the shelf space, isn’t it?”

Mariah set her drink down as if it had turned too fragile. "Okay, earthly resemblances, how about. That's what I'm up to. *Think* I'm up to. Hope to bejesus I'm up to, and can get into my shooting."

Now one of her hands worried around in her mane of hair for a moment while she looked over at Lexa. "Wasn't happy in my work, before I landed the chance to go artsy-fartsying around the world. The usual mid-life shitstorm, I suppose," she shrugged just enough to punctuate that. "It's not all the *Montanian's* fault--there Missoula is, growing like crazy, and not a damn one of the new folks seems to want to subscribe to a newspaper. So the management's got problems, but they've also got thumbs for brains. Their idea of a roving photographer is 'Here, Rover, go fetch us another picture of some politician cutting a ribbon.' One reason I went after the Fuji prize so hard."

Lexa listened as though there was going to be a snap quiz later on this.

"So there I am, the world to choose from." Mariah pantomimed deadly dart-throwing. "But guess what, Lexa. The more places I went, the more I kept having this sense that I'd sort of seen it before. Not like I'd been there in the vasty past, I haven't gone Shirley. But I'd be taking a picture and think, hmm, this is familiar. Desert dunes and ocean waves. How come they're alike in the shapes they take, when they're opposites in what they're made of, sand and water. Or places. There I'd be in Petra--"

"¹⁵That rose-red city --"²¹ Lexa chimed in grade-school poem-memorizing rhythm.

"¹⁵--half as old as time,"²¹ Mariah joined her in the recitation, the two of them faking

little high-fives at each other when done. But Mariah sobered again promptly. "And I'd shoot this ^{really}old carved-marble building or that, and I'd think, God ^{damn}, I've had something pretty close to this in the camera before. ^oMesa Verde. Totally different place, different civilization, different everything--but a certain cliff with a building tucked under, say, it could be the same cliff half a world away. Or a *sister* cliff, how about. So I started shooting pairings. How one thing goes with another. It's christly hard to do, Lexa, but it's even harder to explain. Let me think a minute."

When she had, she started:

"You remember what Jick"--their father--"used to say about the Hebners? 'All the faces in that family rhyme.' There were a bunch of families like that when you think of it. The Zanes, that long horsefaced look on every one of them? Or the way you could tell that bowlegged walk of any of the Frew family a mile off? That's what I'm after, the resemblances, the natural family of forms. I--" Mariah stopped and grinned. "What're *you* grinning at, shrimp?"

"You wouldn't just happen to have any of these so-called pictures, ^oanywhere in your plunder?"

Mariah held out her arm, wrist bent. "Twist," she begged in a royally prim tone, then jumped to her feet and began digging out prints. "Stop me after a couple hundred, okay?"

Off Africa, waves trailing their spray like white shadows; in the Gobi, a settling sandstorm dusting oceanic dunes. The sky-cutting summit shard of the Matterhorn; within the cobalt-blue iceface of an Antarctic glacier the same sharp-tipped pattern like the ghost of a mountain. Paired likeness by paired likeness, Lexa marveled, Mariah's photographs lived up to the contours of her mind. Now she heard her clearing her throat discreetly before saying, "Colin country."

A rampart of ice and snow on Mount Cook, milk-moon lending whiteness.

"Then this."

A rampart of stone, as if carved from the first azure of dusk.

Lexa drew in her breath. "Jericho Reef. Woooooh."

"Hey, who's letting herself run over in public now?" Pleased, Mariah told her there were going to be a batch of such pictures of the Rocky Mountain Front before she was done with the book. Lexa barely heard.

The remembered mountains. The month of June the greenest on the calendar of memory. Trailing the sheep up. The trails were carpets into the anteroom of the sky, up from Noon Creek and English Creek, past the falling-down homesteads, up across the

foothills with their stands of spriggy timber, and then *up* that really meant it, the trails climbing the mountainsides, Jericho Reef and Roman Reef and the other stone shoulders of the Two Medicine country. ^{Lexa} She felt a catch at the back of her throat, time's reflex. They went horseback, she and her father, sometimes Mariah, tending the sheep camps in what they thought of as their family mountains...

Lexa reached again for the southern hemisphere moon-and-mountain picture, brought it up within inches of her eyes, compared it with the Jericho Reef shot, and made herself frown. "You're slipping, though. I knew you should have taken me along in your baggage."

"Slipping?" Mariah's voice rose. "You along, why? What for?"

Lexa turned the Mount Cook photo around and shook her head disparagingly. "No goats."

"You would bring those up."

The launch of Mariah's photography career had been from a point of rock on a mountain named Phantom Woman. She ~~at thirteen~~ and Lexa ~~at eleven~~ had lately graduated to separate horses--*Two is a lot of girls on one horse*, their father had admitted after their ~~previous summer~~ ^{three-day session} of arguing and elbowing while riding double ~~on~~ ^{the first} ~~camp~~ ^{camp}ending trips to Phantom Woman--and they were making the most of their new saddle freedom by

exploring off a little way along the mountainslope while their father dealt with the sheepherder. The birthday camera practically burned in Mariah's hands, she was so eager to start working it. But already she had enough of a shooting eye to know that the mountain goats grazing idly around below that rocky reach of Phantom Woman were prime picture material, if they would just show more of themselves than they ever did.

"What would be neat," Mariah mused, "is if they'd get up on that rock, the saps."

"Make them," Lexa surprised her with.

"Oh, sure, herd mountain goats? Ninny, you can't do with them like a band of sheep, they're wild anim--"

"You don't *know*?" Lexa was ecstatic with secret knowledge. "Nancy told me!"

What Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks, old and blind and murmuring out of her Blackfoot past, had passed along to Lexa worked like a charm. That summer the promontory rock turned into Grand Central Station for mountain goats, goats sniffingly curious, goats profoundly bemused, goats in winsome family groupings, goats in spectacular horned solo glory against the cliffline of the Rockies, roll after film roll of perfect posing goats. Mariah had pictures all summer long in the Gros Ventre *Gleaner*, the Hungry Horse *News*, the Choteau *Acantha*, and ultimately when the Associated Press picked one up, statewide.

The great goat success brought the girls attention from closer sources as well.

Their father came home one day from paying a visit to the English Creek ~~District~~ ranger station and promptly paid them one.

Jick McCaskill looked down from under his everyday Stetson at his ~~just-turned-~~ ^{goat-tamer} teenage daughter Mariah and her probable accomplice Lexa. He said as if thinking out loud:

“Ranger McCaskill--your otherwise doting granddad--has the notion you young ladies are baiting his mountain goats.” Jick studied from one picture-innocent daughter to the other. “Which upsets him all to hell. I am apt to get that way myself. Among other things, baiting goats is against about forty kinds of federal law.”

Lexa could just feel the tug-of-war going on in Mariah, whether or not to make some smart crack about little sisters at least being good for goat bait. Loyalty, backed up by Lexa’s warning stare, won. Mariah tossed her hair back over her shoulders to look up at their father and said:

“How would we? You mean, like with cheese?”

“That is what we don’t know, Ranger McCaskill and myself.” Jick inventoried them again. “Our best guess is rock salt. But how the two of you could lug a block of that up--”

Mariah and Lexa were shaking their heads in unison.

Oats? barley? cottonseed cake?--each commodity suggested by their father drew another synchronized headshake from the girls.

“Well, then, now,” he said, at last out of list and patience both. “Lexa, whatever it is you’ve been up to, cut it out, hear? As for you, Mariah, you can figure that you’ve now got all the pictures of goats you’re ever going to need in one lifetime, and it can remain a mystery why they like to prance right up and pose on that same one rock for you. Savvy?”

The girls did, although what their male forebears never did manage to savvy was that Lexa’s formula for making mountain goats line up and sniff with curiosity consisted of squatting here and there on that particular rock and simply peeing.

“Here’s the last thing I was working on,” Mariah was saying. She handed over a solo print.

The ocean looked like cloud, with a tall turreted shaft planted amid it like a lordly summoning horn being stood in the corner between uses.

“Alexander McCaskill’s lighthouse, my dear Alexandra. The Bell Rock.”

The graceful slender implantation of stone a hundred feet high looked no less impossible in the glossy photo than it must have on the vellum plans drawn in 1807. The Bell Rock lighthouse, off the east coast of Scotland, had to rise from the slightest spur of

reef, which vanished with each high tide; to build there was to steal firmament from the ocean. One of those stonemasons who had dared to lay granite on unwilling water at Bell Rock was their grandfather's *great-grandfather*.

“Our own family stuff in the album of everything? Pretty sneaky even for you, Mariah.”

“You know what I was going to pair it with? The Black Eagle stack.”

Lexa studied Mariah. “Maybe your body clock is farther out of whack than you think. ~~Didn't~~ they dynamite that--”

“--~~eight or ten~~ years ago. You bet your rose-red booty they did. It's even worse than that, Lexa--I was there taking pictures of that sucker when they blew it up. Umm, down.”

The gigantic smokestack of the Black Eagle smelter would start to show above the curve of the central Montana horizon as you drove within fifty miles of Great Falls and its Black Eagle hill, a smoking beacon against the sky. Lexa well remembered the silly but disorienting sensation of missing that manmade landmark, pole magnet to the eye for an hour at a time on any car trip, the first time she went back to the Two Medicine country after the divorce from Travis.

Mariah was thinking out loud:

“I was going to use it as--I don’t know, the runaway version of something like Bell Rock. Signatures on the horizons. The lighthouse sending its signals out to sea, all nice-nice...the Black Eagle stack taking over a piece of country about the size of Scotland and saying hey, we’re the biggest furnace in the world here, we’re smelting the copper guts right out of Montana. Anyway, so much for that pairing.”

Highly camera-ed up, their father had been known to say of Mariah’s approach to life. *Taking on the whole world with it now*, Lexa mused. *That’s Mariah for you*. With this flamehaired sister, when life wasn’t heart heart heart, it was job job job.

Mariah’s eyelids closed, then opened reluctantly as Lexa watched. “*Now I’m crashing*,” Mariah admitted. “Where’s that blessed bed you’re forcing on me?”

three

When the middle name of your hometown is Sulphur, there is not much you can do about the smell of your childhood.

Two generously pungent ponds burbling away at the temperature of warm soup convinced Mitch Rozier's forebears that the place would spawn an American version of Baden-Baden, but Twin Sulphur Springs turned out to be another teetery western town, stunted by distance, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of the Rockies and, to the sorrow of the first three generations of Roziers, devoid of earthly wealth except that pair of thermal swimming holes. By the time Mitch was blinking his way into his teens, his father Lyle was reduced to bossing a crew of rock pickers on the

glacial benchlands north of town where hard sod had been cut up into grainfields. Out there on the rock[#]pile it did not seem much of a debate^g whether Twin Sulphur Springs ought to be regarded as an unspawned spa with a healthy mineral aroma to it or one more West Nowhere with the added detriment of smelling like eggs gone bad.

So, Mitch took away with him a kind of bitter awe that his father never once wavered from that life, those stoneboats that you could heap high springtime after springtime and still have a world of rocks amid the alien grain, then the haying contract every summer at so much per ton but never as many-tons as anticipated, then the mad dashes of trucking in the harvest each fall if the white combine--hail--hadn't claimed the grain first. Winter, though, when his father was cooped up in town, was the season hardest to get through. Mitch dreaded supertime, coming home from scrub basketball practice and right away being dispatched by his mother to play fetch. Across town he would go, between the springs steaming side by side in Artesia Park, their aroma barely clearing from his nose by the time he reached the V.F.W. Club. Fluorescent dusk in there, the men along the bar drinking with their hats on as Mitch edged in. Lyle Rozier holding forth, you could count on it.

"Wouldn't you know. Here's my heir apparent, with orders from headquarters. Hey, Fritz"--or Mike or Monte or whoever else had once had the fate of being shipped overseas; New Guinea was Lyle's own chapter of foreign war--"how do you think this kid

of mine is gonna stack up? Needs another year or two and some pounds on him to really handle rock, but maybe he'll amount to a hay hand, what do you think?"

Supper ready at home, now to grow cold while his mother's temper heated up.

Mitch tried, "Mom said--"

"I can pretty much guess what she said." Just the right tinge in his father's words to draw a general laugh along the bar.

He would not forget standing there, raw as a stripped willow, watching as his father didn't budge on the bar stool except to dig in the shirt pocket where his smokes were kept. Then the bright crack of a match against his father's horn-colored thumbnail, new sulphur whiff filling the boy's nostrils as Lyle lit up another Lucky and ordered another beer. "We'll go before you know it, son," Lyle Rozier was saying, while Mitch was already more than halfway to his own verdict of stay or go.

—————
And the minute you come back, the Mitch of now was thinking to himself by way of his nose, you wonder how Proust could encounter the wafts of the past and get a butter cookie out of it.

As if by family mandate he had been driving the twisty old highway from Choteau somewhat too fast, but well ahead of time he braked hard for the bridge at the Soda Creek curve and its miserably unbanked turn where the half dozen white highway fatality crosses

had accumulated across the decades. This time of year the road was dry, and with the advent of anti-lock brakes the bad curve was not necessarily lethal any more. At the start of the winter of 1962, however, his mother's big tail-finned Chrysler apparently had skidded like crazy before wrapping itself and her around the concrete bridge abutment. Barely two miles out of town, Adele Rozier had already built up speed on another of her impromptu getaways to the Sweetgrass Hills, three hours away on the northern horizon, to simmer down for a few days or a week with the accommodating aunt and uncle who had raised her. By the county coroner's estimation she was dead in the time it took for the noise of the crash to carry to the nearest farmhouse. Cause of death: black ice. Mitch had been sixteen when his mother's car wreck came on top of everything else, there in that strange set of years that still were the longest in his life.

Past the Soda Creek curve the highway drew a dead aim on Twin Sulphur Springs, the yellow striped line a straight shot to the bumptious gazebo in Artesia Park at the far end of town. Beyond, as if keeping their wary distance, sat the Rocky Mountains. Now Mitch drove with excessive care--this section of road was unevenly patched from frost heaves--and used the time into town to let his eyes graze. The country here was ledger-line flat on both sides of the highway and yet not in sum; the bumpy edges of benchlands protruded everywhere like knees of reclining Gullivers. Grainfields whose more natural crop was cantaloupe-sized rocks had been farmed into all the benchtops but one, the hopelessly

pebbly elongated rise showing above the park at the west edge of town, and that was the Rozier Bench.

Mitch glanced at it one more time and pondered, *Dad, why? And don't tell me, "Because."* The lone thing the family property supported was the high school's big white rock letters TSS, repainted springtime after springtime by senior classes of varying artistic temperaments. Mitch's father had always got a kick out of acting civic, particularly if it didn't cost anything or better yet paid off somehow. Among Lyle Rozier's endeavors had been the contentious term he served as county commissioner, long enough to get a number of roads paved at the Twin Sulphur Springs end of the county and coincidentally one of them right out to the Rozier Bench. Currently his chosen connived post was as county brand inspector. Mitch shook his head. One Rozier trotting around to ever diminishing cattle ranches, another dedicated to the vanishing species called newspapers. *Stuff like that can't run in a family. Can it?*

As he pulled into town, it seemed to him even more shabby than the last time he had been here, no more than half a year ago. A fast-food delivery truck was backed up to its first port of call, the Town Pump, *Gas-Groceries-Videos-Electronic Poker*. The aquamarine post office, Uncle Sam's cinder-block contribution, squatted next to the old community hall that was now the senior center, with a wheelchair ramp put on like a hasty patch. In the squeeze tube line of enterprises that squibbed out toward visitors approaching

any American municipality anymore, the only new business Mitch could spot was a small medical equipment supply store, there to supply oxygen for emphysema sufferers. Any other change in a town like this was probably something vanishing. Until the statute of limitations on athletic fame ran out how ever many years ago, there had been a weathered sign at the town line proclaiming **State Class B Football Champions 1963**. Mitch's last game here, the Class B ^{playoff}. It came down to ~~The Springs~~ wind, ^g and Mitch. The Forsyth Dogies looked stunned when a typical gust stalled their point after touchdown, the kick in mid-air, the football fading like a shot duck. In the ungodly weather, next thing to winter, all game long Mitch made yardage against them in that deceptive drifting style of his, running faster than he looked to be, then pouring on a bit more speed yet. The Forsyth Dogies got back on their school ^{bus} with the wind fanning their whipped butts.

ly
smallcap

At least they beat me out of here. All too aware that the downtown face of ~~The~~ Springs on a bright afternoon of this sort was like being in a stucco desert, he took the back ^{street} to his father's place. Even so he had to skirt Artesia Park on the way. The fume of the twin springs and the gazebo needing paint and the bald patches of what had been intended to be lawn were everything he remembered. Well, what could you expect? ^{he} addressed the convention of ghosts in his mind. Come out here and create an unnecessary town from scratch and that's what it was going to look like, scratch.

He pulled up in front of the house. His father's pickup was not there, but rolling stock of several other kinds abounded around the place--vestigial tractors, and several generations of self-stacking hay bale haulers (none of which, Mitch recalled, ever worked worth a damn), and the power buckrake his father had driven before bale-stacking gizmos came into vogue, and the truck of all purposes called the Blue Goose, now mostly rust. Lyle Rozier's knickknack drawer was his yard.

The skeletal traffic jam aside, the Rozier place looked barely populated. The four wavery aspens out front that his father forever fed agricultural fertilizer were the thinnest of sentries. The house itself seemed gaunt, life only in its lower half; the upstairs, you could tell from the hazy unwashed windows, was a deck of unoccupied bedrooms. Downstairs, the ancient lacy curtains hung like doilies on a packing crate. Mitch climbed out of the Honda and walked down the gravel driveway toward the kitchen door. There was the large gray canker in the soil not many feet from the kitchen steps, where in the time before sewers and garbage collection reached this end of town his family tossed the wash water and stove ashes, and for that matter emptied the slop pail. The lye of the soap and ashes had killed the ground for good.

As if suspecting that kind of behavior, the Aronson house next door had a newly built bay window bulging like a vigilant eye. Whatever had got into the Aronsons, the

paint on their place also looked suspiciously fresh. With particular wariness Mitch sized up the new fence of shellacked jackstays between the houses.

“Are you the son?”

The accentless voice across the fence belonged to a carefully maintained man of about forty, wearing a brushed-denim shirt which cost about the same.

He ducked adroitly through the poles of the pristine fence, and whipped out an earnest handshake. “I’m Donald Brainerd. We’re next-door now.”

“Mitch Rozier,” Mitch reluctantly owned up to. He nodded toward Brainerd’s spruced-up house. “When did the Aronsons pull out?”

“Last December. We came up from Boise in time for winter. I thought we should test that out.” Brainerd seemed to be trying to do a fair assessment of Twin Sulphur Springs’ brand of winter. “It wasn’t as bad as all the predictions.”

“One will be,” Mitch forecast with no effort, “if you stick around.”

“Oh, we’re here to stay. I can run my consulting business mostly by E-mail and cell phone--FedEx when I have to. Nice to be able to do that and have all this, too.”

Brainerd indicated proprietorially toward the Rockies behind Mitch.

Mitch turned around to them, the distant but sharp-edged skyline up over the Rozier Bench. Mountain by mountain they took hold of his gaze. He knew them from boyhood and could still name each one, from southmost Cathedral Reef with its gray-blue

upthrust calling on the sky, to the mammoth pachyderm lobe of Ear Mountain, to the distinctive stone ramparts north in the Two Medicine country, Roman Reef and Jericho Reef, with the profile of Phantom Woman Mountain presiding between. Mountains of an older order than the Coast's volcanic apprentices; folded, palisaded, granitic. And up there along the divide of the continent extended the Bob Marshall Wilderness, named for that bat-eared Mozart of the national forests, roaming and rhapsodizing. Right now Mitch wished that more people had seen along with Bob Marshall that this neck of the earth was always going to be a country of great mountains and mediocre human chances.

Reluctantly leaving the sight of the mountains, Mitch turned around to deal with ~~next-door~~.

"Your father is something of a character."

Mitch glanced toward the hard-used Rozier house, then toward Brainerd's modernized ~~little-house-on-the-prairie~~. "Everybody is, in a certain light."

"I have to tell you, we're concerned," Brainerd let his voice drop as if sympathetic to Mitch's plight. "I'm glad you're here; [^]we thought we might have to call you."

"What about?--isn't he all right? I talked with him on the phone just--"

"I didn't mean healthwise. He tore out of here in that pickup as usual this morning." Brainerd frowned past Mitch. "It's the appearance of the place. Wouldn't a reasonable person say it's...overcrowded?"

Mitch turned and joined in Brainerd's appraisal.

"No," his rewrite instinct kicked in. "'Junk-laden' is more like it."

Brainerd cleared his throat. "Everything sits right there, out our window."

Mitch's eyebrows went up. "You're not telling me my father moved all his junk into view the instant you bought your place, are you? That'd have been the biggest sonofabitching deployment since Desert Storm."

"We were led to believe his collection comes and goes. It seems mostly to come."

Mitch put on an expression of sympathy. Ah, the troublesome life of the window westerner. Those gorgeous purple mountains and the Lyle Roziers of the world in the way.

Already tired of changing sides--he had been in his father's teeter^{er}totter of a town now for, what, fifteen minutes?--Mitch gave the neighbor a look with some shoulder to it. "Donald?" he said as if it was a guess. "I'm here to see about straightening some things up. Give me a little time with my father."

Brainerd ducked back through the jackstay fence looking unsatisfied but not surprised either, and Mitch went on into the house.

He knew that his father was no housekeeper, but the sludge of items had grown to geological proportions. Newspapers were stacked like hay bales. Amid the multiple months' worth of the *Great Falls Tribune* and the *Choteau Acantha*, Mitch was startled to spot past issues of *Cascopia*, then remembered that he long ago had sneaked his father's name onto the subscription list. Why on earth had he thought it was a good idea to give Lyle a weekly reminder of the gulf between their two lives?

Old machinery parts congregated comfortably on end tables and sideboards as if visiting from the back yard. Seasons of clothing were tossed onto hooks on the wall, Lyle's red-and-black plaid winter cap with earflaps mashed over his fishing hat.

Amid it all, a once-green easy chair showed a seat which sagged to the exact fit of Lyle Rozier's venerable rump. An almost as venerable bunny-ear television set, probably Ed Sullivan and Dagmar painted on the cave walls inside it, sat under a startling new VCR box no more than arm's length from the easy chair. Was his father's eyesight going, too?

Mitch unabashedly prowled. Christmas cards were still lined up in the bay of the window. The UNESCO one he and Lexa--all right, Lexa--had sent. A few with names Mitch recognized from around town. Then one with the shaky inscription, *Wishing you another year on top of the ground, old sarge. Your pal, Fritz.* Mitch made a mouth; Fritz Mannion, another single-handed winner of World War ~~Two~~^{II}, wherever he was now. *"One time out on patrol old Fritz tripped, saved our lives,"* Lyle's voice echoed from the past. *"I*

STET

of course went to help him up, and here's this movement in the jungle just ahead. Got my rifle around on it in a real hurry, but Ferragamo behind me beat me to it by about a trigger squeeze. He had that BAR going, the Jap never knew what hit him. I didn't even have to fire, Joe'd almost cut the guy in half already. Hadn't been for Fritz's big feet, though, that Jap would have ventilated us for sure."

Fritz's scratchy remembrance, and a stamped greeting from the electrical co-op, and the few others: Mitch wondered if Lyle cared that the handful of cards was a sad collection, or even noticed.

His father's desk in the far corner of the living room--^{the neutral corner}--was as laden but organized as ever. And unlike any other appurtenances in this household, the daybooks ranked on the long shelf above the back of the desk were kept free of dust. The ledgers of Lyle's crews, year by year.

1962 was inked on the spine of one in a hand different from the rest. For that matter, the teenage boy's hand that had so carefully written those numbers was different from the grown Mitch's now, was it not?

He felt the urge to pull out the daybook and flip through its pages, but why start that again. Names of crews, marching down the ledger lines, and their days of work tallied across the wide double pages of each month, that was all the thing held. Fritz and