“Tiptop,” she said wearily. “I have to get my camera gear together and a box from his pack. I’ll be ready by the time you get Mitch lifted.”

Lexa was kneeling by Mitch in his medical cocoon, the medic fussing over him on the other side. She did not want to babble, so she let her hand do the talking in its steady grip on his. With the sedative in him he was dead to the world, a phrase she could face now.

Beside the copter’s open bay of door the copilot was controlling the sling bringing Mariah up. “What’s she doing? Hey, lady! Pay attention up here, can’t you?”

Mariah did not look up. She clasped the camera to her eye, shooting and shooting as the sling reeled her up, below her the lookout tower on its base of rock standing forth, reeflike and beaconlike, out of the layer of cloud that looked like ocean.
Waking up each morning and reaching back to the knob on the bedpost that exactly
fit his hand, remembering to be careful of his lower half as he pulled himself up to half-
sitting, he had the weird impression of being a parade balloon of himself when he was
sixteen. Moored to his boyhood bed by the same leg.

The sun was already pouring in the window and he closed his eyes again for a
minute knowing it wouldn’t help much. He believed, along with Hemingway (his one
resemblance there), that some people’s eyelids were thinner than other people’s; light was
harder on fellows like them. When he once told that to Lexa, she looked at him and asked,

*How do you guys know that?*
Reluctantly he opened his eyes now, and nothing had changed overnight nor maybe since 1962. Out the window, the rust museum of dead equipment in the backyard was indistinguishable from earlier machine generations that his father had used up and left parked there for eternity. This too silent house, then as now the domain of disappointed schemes. Mitch edged out from under the covers, the leg with the cast on it first. At least medical fashion was different, the lightweight black fiberglass bootie rather than the plaster anchor of the first time around. He balanced there at the brink of the bed, putting his clothes on the way he’d had to do everything, factored around his leg, in the three weeks since the helicopter took him from Phantom Woman like a cracked Easter egg in a basket.

For two of those weeks now, Mariah had been roaring out of here daily to her gig at the museum in Great Falls and Lexa had been licking her wounds in Seattle.

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*I still can’t believe how three-way stupid we were. Better get used to believing it, though. They’re there, I’m here.*

The front half of her mind could bargain, no problem, for the pick of little tender spears of asparagus with one of the growers who had more than likely negotiated his way out of Vietnam on a refugee boat. She always shopped the low stalls at Pike Place Market where there were home-grown vegetables and faces like this man’s, while the high stalls
farther inside have California crops and the glossy bins that magazine photographers love so much. Today the bargaining was a hard go, the Vietnamese man insisting she had to take some of the big woody stalks that would sit like beaver food on the table at the party she was catering that night. As she haggled, her hands went through considerable gestures. It took her a little to realize the Vietnamese was following her wrists with his eyes, judging the scars there. "Barbwire," the word came right out of her as though the two of them had been comparing the fences in their lives, and he looked at her from his mask of crinkles. He nodded, one sharp up-and-down, to say she had a deal.

Lexa carried her string bags of vegetables down the hill of steps behind the Market, to catch the waterfront trolley to where she always parked at the north end of the piers. At least trying to hang on to a sense of humor, on her Walkman earphones she was listening to "I Cover the Waterfront," the rare Shelly Manne and Andre Previn pussyfoot rendition. She was resorting to the Walkman a lot.

"Mitch. I'm thinking I should clear out," she had said.

"Can't blame you there," he had said.

Even before he left the hospital she knew something was up between him and Mariah.
Mariah. Why, with all the DNA in the world, couldn’t she have been somebody else’s sister?

At first she had tried to write if off as that kind of endless-reunion air that survivors of a major accident have toward each other. No way could she share in that, she had been too busy racing down the trail trying to save his damn life. (All right, to be fair, she with her little midnight raid on the ashes had been the one who put him in the position where his life needed saving. Sort of.) But after he was home in The Springs and starting to get around, and the strain between him and her showed absolutely no sign of letting up and Mariah had that look on her like her heart was in quicksand, she packed for Seattle.

“I know when I’ve been cut out of the picture.”

“Lexa, none of the tower trip was my idea, was it.”

“You’re still going to have to get over what we wrestled about up there, you know.” She had tried one last shot on him. “Dispose of the disposing of.”

“How about giving me time to get used to being a cripple again first, okay?” he had fired back.

Then there had been the confrontation with Mariah, another pathetic breakup scene that she had not had any luck drowning out with the Walkman.
Up the street toward the Space Needle now she spotted another of the ubiquitous billboards for a new bottled water, every one of which reminded her of the non-bottled variety and taking the plunge together as Mariah and Mitch no doubt nightly were in the steaming dark of Artesia Park. Such scenes of the two of them kept adding up in the back of her mind like chalk all over a blackboard.

Mariah was trudging back to the museum after speaking to the Great Falls Rotary Club and showing some of her slides. She was in a powder-blue pants suit that she’d had to buy for such occasions during this museum gig, and she felt like a rodeo princess who had stepped in the droppings of the parade horses. The person running the projector had filled the carousel with every slide upside down. Nor had it been such a sharp idea to douse the lights and have the slide show right after everybody was stuffed with lunch; more than one Rotarian had caught a little sleep.

Taking the longest way back to work, she veered off into the neighborhood of big leafy trees and old houses north of downtown. The day was hot and sticky, and she tried to glide from one pool of shade to the next, wondering if she was timing this right to be ahead of the thunderstorm. Great Falls seemed to receive a lot of pent-up weather, clouds
that started off with white innocence in the mountains boiling themselves black by the time they reached here.

Weather was the least of grievances. The hike into the Bob, the quake-like rearrangement of Mitch and her and of Mitch and Lexa and of Lexa and her: *We all three walked into this one, did we ever.*

She came to the river, the museum at once in sight on a bluff of the Missouri. Between her and there, though, commotion in the air. The thunderheads were pushing agitation along the river ahead of them, and at the 10th Street Bridge fork-tailed swallows by the hundreds were swooping and drifting back and forth over the bridge and then under its archways to start looping their restless loops all over again. Mariah downed her camera bag and in the next motion came up with her Pentax. It allowed her one click and then was out of film. Swearing succinctly, she reloaded and cupped the camera to her eye again like a sentry habitually hoisting binoculars and found her picture of the storm of birds, within the wild weather. *Sunday taken care of, at least.*

The droopy-eyed houses with their shades half down in the summer swelter watched her make her way on along the river. Long ago, it seemed now, Great Falls had been literally the place in the distance that she aimed at in life. The smelter stack when it still stood across the river on the rise called Black Eagle she could recall like the mast of a
ship pulling in for her, drawing nearer and nearer when, at sixteen, she had won her first photo competition, and she and her folks, proud and a little mystified at having produced a photographer, were driving down here for the ceremony at the *Tribune*.

The long ago. She quickened her pace as if prodded. Growing up on the ranch, in all the weathers there were. By each January the gleam on the snow began to tarnish, and there were a hundred days yet until spring. Then came summer, and was gone as if the first nice breeze along Noon Creek shook those months off the calendar. Was that what turned her toward seasonless work, she wondered, the camera lens its same fresh day every time? But Lexa with the identical starting point had taken to horseback, to running the hills; somehow she was cut out for kid life on the ranch and the rhythm of chores taken in stride from then on.

*There seems to be a lot I’m not cut out for.* She still was cringing at what had been said between them before Lexa bailed out for Seattle.

"*Mariah, what is it with you--a sweet tooth for newspaper guys?*"

"*Damn it, damn it, damn it, Lexa. I didn’t intend any of this. Please don’t think I did.*"

"*I am so slow on this. Now that it’s over, I can see it happening.*"

"*Nothing is over, and not that much has happened.*"
"Hasn’t it? If you have anything to do with it, it will."

There had been occasions before when sibling, as practiced by the sisters McCaskill, became an active verb. Mariah had given Lexa a hard time about splitting up with Travis, and worse, been wrong about it. Lexa had given Mariah unshirted hell about getting back together with Riley, and worse, been right about it. But this made those look like warm-up bouts, and Mariah winced again at how sistering had turned tooth-and-nail.

Outside a neighborhood drugstore just ahead Lyle’s face looked at her, same as from every corner in the city today. The Montanian photo editor had chosen one of the shots from Artesia Park for the lead-in. Lyle in command of a weathered bench at a picnic table, his hat the only thing that still fit him in his gauntness. The first big raindrop blotch hit the plastic window of the newspaper box, trickling down his untouchable visage, as Mariah hastened by.

Rounds of the park were their next chore, him and his leg. This was another thing medical opinion had done a 180-degree turn on, how long Mitch Rozier was assigned to lie around when he went through life breaking that leg. That summerlong bedtime after the truck rolled over him wasn’t prescribed anymore. As per doctor’s orders this time around,
he had been up and hobbling on crutches the first week and since then just grimly hobbling.

So now he stumped around Artesia Park the given number of laps, watching other people's weather— in this case, a thunderstorm over there dumping on Great Falls—and speculating on today's temperature of the smelly springs, then drove back to the house. There was that about the soft cast, he could manage it into a car and then use his good leg for driving. Not that there was anywhere much to go.

He went in to resume what he had come to think of as non-housecleaning. Ever since the interruption by their hike into the Bob, the Rozier place had actually accrued a fresh top layer of clutter— Mariah's photographic gear, all over the house and bunkhouse both. He supposed this was like dwelling with Picasso, if Picasso had happened to use film.

Mariah. Plenty to be sorted out there yet, too.

At the moment, the only thing in the world he felt he could do justice to was a cup of coffee. He hobbled into the kitchen and put the pot on, then propped himself in the doorway to the living room to wait out the perking and figure out a next step in the minefield of his father's belongings. At least there was one less stack of paper on the desk across there. As though the distance across the room lent the perspective he had been
looking for, he contemplated the bare little bay of desktop where the Aggregate deal had rested. The non-deal, now. Making the call this forenoon to say that the Rozier Bench was not for sale at any price had not come easily, but it had come.

Passing a hand over his face, Mitch once more wondered what a crippled-up debt-saddled ex-newspaperman could do for a living: lean out of a car and change the pointers on those Forest Service "fire danger" signs, maybe? Yet there was a corner of peace in him, now that he had torn up the Aggregate paperwork, and he just wished it didn’t have to be such a lonely one. Mariah naturally was out of here, working her job or three, from can see to can’t see. Lexa, he knew, would have stood here applauding him to the skies for not letting loose of those megatons of gravel if Lexa had not gone out of his life because he would not let loose of a few pounds of ashes.

The pot gave a final blub, then added to the silence of the house. He poured a cupful of coffee and plucked up the newspaper for the dozenth time. When Mariah came in late last night from handling the photography class at her museum gig, she had left the early edition of the Montanian on the kitchen table. Those eyes drilling up through the newsprint were the first thing that met Mitch when he limped downstairs this morning.

Now he took the paper to the big chair in the living room and sat there staring at it. From a working lifetime as a word jockey fighting for space in the narrow confines of
news columns, he could take photojournalism or leave it, preferably leave. But this was
like a family album known by heart. In one of Lyle's moments caught by Mariah there was
cigarette smoke around him like the haze of his life. Another, he was talking and you could
tell that this man had a tongue in him like a clapper of a bell. Looking down at that face of
his father, Mitch could all but hear him sounding off to his rockfield platoons. Sharpless
and Loper and the skim-milk kid. His annual army of haymakers, Fritz and Ferragamo and
the three Swensons down through the years and one-armed Eddie and the mute Hutterite
and Truax and Larsen with an e, it was as if the ghost legion of them was mustered out of
the daybooks and crowded from wall to wall in this room where Lyle Rozier had handed
out their paychecks.

All that was a long way back, yet it was in no way gone. It sat there on the
daybooks' shelf in a somewhat beat-up beige box.

Mitch gazed over there a considerable while, mulling the ledgers of his father.
Then hauled himself out of the chair and over to the desk and the phone. He looked up the
number in the not very many pages of the Teton County phonebook. Across the driveway
he could see Donald Brainerd in his bay-window office whip a small cellular device to his
ear.
“Donald? It’s Mitch Rozier. Could I borrow Matthew over here for a while this evening?”
Versions of earth changed and changed along his route the next day, as though the car windows were thin-sawn prisms. Soon freed of the benchlands around Twin Sulphur Springs and the Soda Creek valley, the highway streaked straight across an elevated plain of tanned grass and then rollercoastered down to the fanned-open bottomlands of the Sun River. Onward south from there the land puckered into steep castellated buttes, crisp-edged inland islands of the sort he had liked ever since being around the Sweetgrass Hills.

Except for the excessive company of his cast, Mitch was solo in the Honda. It felt strange, after everything, not to have the vocal jury of Lexa and Mariah along. But witnessing himself at this was going to be hard enough.
Beyond the buttes the Missouri River took charge. Concentrated and curving, it cut its way through the bent hard-candy colors of Wolf Creek Canyon. On past the course of the river lay the long valley at Helena, knotted by the freeway interchange.

And here he made the turn onto the MacDonald Pass highway, the paved and banked route up to the Continental Divide.

The road crossed the Divide in a yawn of summit meadow and wound its way down into pockets of hayfields and small ranches, before becoming a tributary into the rush of Interstate 90. In minutes came the Deer Lodge exit sign on the freeway and the unforgiving walls out at the edge of the town limits. “Our graduate of Penn State,” his father always would say, just out of hearing of whatever occasional member of his haying crews happened to have served time here in the state pen.

He pulled in at Deer Lodge to the Hasty Tasty, which didn’t look either one. The place was churning out food to a standing-room crowd, though, apparently keyed to weekly visitors’ hours. Lots of ways in life to end up penned up, Mitch thought to himself. covertly assessing the bleak faces here to do their visiting-room duty. This town and the even smaller old ones south down this valley had been at the front of the line, back in the state’s earliest history, when institutions were being handed out. Besides the penitentiary here, the insane asylum had been awarded to Warm Springs at the far end of
the valley, and halfway between here and there, Hydropolis had the Montana National
Guard pensioners’ facility known as the Vets’ Home. He fortified himself with a
cheeseburger and two refills of watery coffee to try for the voltage of one decent cup. Then
drove the last dozen miles south down the valley of the institutionalized.

The Vets’ Home resembled a grade school of the 1950’s, low and flattish, built of
the elongated squashed-looking material known as ick brick. It sat a block back from the
brief main street of Hydropolis, an aging patch of storefronts and a bar aglow with a green
sign redundantly declaring itself the Oasis. At the Vets’ Home itself nothing much was
going on, so far as the reportorial eye of Mitch could see, except the kaleidoscopic turns of
colors on television screens through the windows of several of the rooms.

But the source for what he was after was not likely to be in there at this time of day
 glued to Jeopardy, was he. How to deal with the source. Always the trick on any story.

He drove around the block twice. Then headed for the lone motel in Hydropolis, to wait
for morning.

The sun was already delivering a little too much warmth when, a few minutes
before eight, here came two of them down the street from the Vets’ Home, not together but
not very far apart either in their race to the Oasis. The man in the lead, World War Two vintage, was toothless, his caved-in mouth making him look constantly concerned. The next one, shaggier and slouching, flapped along in an unbuttoned Nam field jacket. Each of them, Mitch could see as they passed where he was sitting in the parked car, was wearing loafers. Too shaky to tie shoelaces.

He kept watch in the rearview mirror. It took only another minute. Number three of the morning brigade, purposefully gaiting down the sidewalk now, had the remembered bulldog build.

*Serial number 20929162, Private, Montana National Guard activated to 41st Infantry Division. Service in forward area New Guinea. Occupation Duty in Japan....*

*DWI conviction, Yellowstone County, 1947...*

*Disturbance of the peace, three months suspended sentence, Gallatin County, 1948...*

*Re-enlistment during Korean Conflict, 1951, Disability Discharge...*

*DWI second conviction, 6-month license suspension, 1956...*

Those and other buffets of life that had brought this man here where the pensioned lived alone with their wars ancient and current, Mitch’s laptop now held, thanks to Matthew’s ransacking on the Web.
As rapidly as he could maneuver his cast, he climbed out of the car.

"Fritz, hi there. Mitch Rozier, remember?"

"Mitch, old kid!"

Fritz Mannion instantly sounded like the closest pal imaginable, honorary uncle in the bunkhouse. Midway through the handshake he already was peeking down in wrinkled concern at Mitch’s walking cast. "You look kind of bunged up."

"Missed a step," Mitch said minimally, waiting for the conversation to go the way he knew it would.

Fritz didn’t disappoint, shuffling into a stance as if appraising a historical tapestry. "Don’t I recall one other time you were hobbling around with something like that on?" He all too solemnly wagged his head. "You don’t want to let that get to be a habit."

The inevitable about the weather and how different this country around here was from Mitch’s neck of the woods. Then as if on cue Fritz gave a lopsided chummy smile.

"How’s that dad of yours, how’s Lyle?"

*Dead but still making trouble*, Mitch wanted to say but didn’t. "Passed away, about a month ago."

"No! Hate to hear that. What of?"
Mitch told him, watching the face that had aged so radically yet had the rubbery lineaments of those past summers. The old man listened as if he knew how to assess death; New Guinea had given him at least that.

"That's hell, when that happens," Fritz shook his head at leukemia. Then nodded over his shoulder toward the Vets' Home and said confidentially: "See people go to the marble farm every kind of way in that place."

Mitch said nothing, waiting him out.

Starting to fidget, Fritz nonetheless hesitated before asking:

"What do I owe this pleasure to?"

"Brought something to show you." Mitch reached in the back seat of the car and drew out the daybook from 1962, spreading it open on the hood of the Honda.

Fritz glanced toward the Oasis, where the door had opened and the earlier two thirst cases had charged in, then peered uncertainly down at the daybook pages. "Been goin' through your dad's stuff, is this? Get my cheaters on." He fumbled reading glasses out of his shirt pocket.

The penmanship caught his eye instantly. He glanced up at Mitch as if they were allies against forgery. "Too nice a writing for your dad. What, Mitch, did your mother keep the days some? Funny, I never knew her to handle any of the book side of things."
This was like pulling hen's teeth, but Mitch recited with patience: "That was my bookkeeper summer, because I was in bed with a cast on, wasn't I."

"Oh, yeah. Dimly remember." His forefinger as a slightly shaking guide, Fritz examined the names of the crew and the crosshatched record of their hayfield days as if it gave him every pleasure to do so. "Hadn't thought about some of these guys in years."

After a little, his finger found its way across the page to what the mens' labor ultimately added up to, the tonnage of the bale stacks.

"We were fiends on that haying when things'd go right," he vouched.

"Godamighty, look at this run of days--two hundred tons put up, that week. That's going some."

"The week of the Fourth of July," Mitch prompted. "Take a look at that."

With due deliberation Fritz turned the page and studied the three-day gap. "I see I got docked some days, in there. Must've been laid up some way."

"Actually you hung onto those days," Mitch came back with, "but it wasn't because I didn't try."

Every wrinkle on that face wrote out innocent amazement. "What, did we have some kind of little disagreement? Old stuff like this, it's hard to bring back."
Not for one of them, it wasn’t. As distinct as a recording Mitch could hear his younger self saying *You know you’re lying* and this man saying back *Just ask your dad.*

Mitch went through it all like a prompter feeding lines to a soured actor, how Fritz’s spree began on the Fourth and lapped over the next two days when the rest of the crew was back in the hayfield. “I marked you for showing up for work again on the seventh, and when everybody got paid off at the end of the summer you bitched like crazy on those two docked days. And my father backed you on it instead of his own kid. Sat there and lied right along with you. How come?”

Fritz moved his bowed shoulders an inch apiece. “If Lyle’d wanted you to know, he’d have told you.”

“The Fritz, I want to know. He had thirty-five years and never got around to it. I didn’t come here to jump on you about whatever you were up to, okay?” Mitch watched the face in front of him, but not even the eyelids moved. What did it take to make a mark on these old men? “But it played hell between my father and me when he let you screw over the daybook the way you did and then told me your word on it was better than mine. Everything went wrong between us after that. Help me out on this, Fritz. Just tell me what that was about, back there.”

“Wish I could help you out.”
From somewhere in memory another saying of his father's came to Mitch: *That Fritz, he'll fill you so full of it it your eyes'll be brown.*

Mitch kept watch on the old man, then closed the buckram cover on the daybook.

"Tell you what. Climb in the car with me, let's take the load off our feet. We can drive around a little while we catch up on those days."

"Another time maybe, Mitch. Been nice, but I got something needs doing downtown."

"Really? Not much open this time of day except the cafe and the Oasis. And I imagine they give you breakfast there in the Vets' Home, don't they?" He gazed down at Fritz's feet. They were in sandals.

Watching the flushed old man, desire for the first drink of the day hanging out all over him, Mitch hardened himself to say:

"Come on, let's get in the car, Fritz."

Fritz was chattering out the not many sights of greater Hydropolis when he noticed that Mitch had turned onto the access road that led back out to the freeway. He clammed up, but the looks he gave Mitch out of the corner of his eye said worlds.
Controlling his voice, Mitch said like the least time-conscious of tour guides: "I thought we’d just see some country. Mosey over to Billings and back, maybe." He punched the cruise control, the speed set at fifty. It didn’t take a minute before a bread truck passed them as if they were parked. Billings and back would be an all-day trip at this anemic speed.

"You’re meaner than Lyle ever thought of being."

Mitch clenched his teeth, on the hope that if it was true it was temporary.

"This car has got reverse in it," he said. Then forced the next sentence out: "Help me straighten out that daybook, and we’ll turn around."

Fritz’s eyes were watering.

Mitch did not know how far he could bear to push the man or his own revulsion for this. But he was determined to see. He had played by the rules of their generation, back then, and been run over by his headlong father and blindsided by this remorseless liar as his rewards. *Do things back somewhere count, or don’t they?* Time stalled on Interstate 90. Each in his own way, the old hay hand and the boy now middle-aged sat there in the slowly gliding car sweating it out. They rode five miles in silence, fence posts creeping past, before Fritz Mannion used his hands to lift one leg over the other, the way a cripple would. Hands, legs, knees still twisted together, he said with a wince:
“Ferragamo’s wife.”

Immediately Mitch punched the cruise control off and whipped the Honda around on a highway patrol crossover, aiming back toward Hydropolis. But he put the car on fifty again to remind his passenger not to get too relieved.

“Say more.”

Fritz rubbed the veiny back of a hand across his mouth.

“Those trips Lyle kept making into Great Falls--remember how much we was broke down all that summer? Radiator hose kept blowing out on his buckrake. This’d happen, that’d happen, time or two a week away he’d have to go to the Falls to get parts, wouldn’t he. What he was mainly getting was sacktime with Janine.”

Fritz glanced nervously across the car. “Mitch, I don’t know that your mother ever found out. If she did, not from me. I made sure she wasn’t even around when we got into it over my days.”

Mitch kept his eyes fixed to the road ahead, as though down its unrolling lane of time he could see them form again, the people at that picnic--the creamy Mrs. Ferragamo, and his father with that sergeant stare, and his mother whose life was all potluck, and the good Joe: picnickers and more. “I caught on now Fritz swallowed audibly, “I don’t even remember how. It started out as kidding, was all. Just me saying something to Lyle
about it sure being a hard summer on a certain kind of hose. He reddened right up, you
know that way he would? And next thing gave me one of his goddamn winks.” Fritz
paused. Wiped an eye, then his nose. “I just wanted him to know that I knew he was
going his dong polished regularly by Janine, those little trips down to the Falls for
‘parts.’”

Then climbing upstairs to his son who was keeping the days, to hand him the
expenses of cheating.

“Ferragamo,” Mitch put a voice together, “he was always the one in that story—”

“--spotted the Jap in the bushes, saved Lyle’s life, yeah, yeah. He did that. More
than likely saved mine, too.” Fritz stopped again to gather his next words. “Your dad
came out of that with the notion he wasn’t as much of a man as Joe, is what I think. And
when he couldn’t be, he...what would you say? Tried to whittle Ferragamo down. Those
summer jobs, bossing him around with the rest of us. Sneaking off and laying Janine.”

And last of all, getting it into his head to smudge away the man’s time on a
mountain, sift himself into that place. *In memory of Ferragamo, let’s just say:* back there
in the running-board conclave, Lyle Rozier saying it as though it were just the epitaph of a
Divide summer. Mitch gripped the Honda’s steering wheel as unrelentingly as if he had the
box of ashes in hand again.
“I always figured Lyle was getting set to fight it out with Joe over her, that next summer. Your mother gone, Janine’d have to choose, wouldn’t she?” Fritz’s voice had loosened, soft with gratitude at the sight of the Oasis now. “But right before haying, Ferragamo took her and moved to Oregon. Never said a word to Lyle, just up and did it. That’s what really got to your dad. Joe dropped him like he was just nothing.”
They were eating it up, the wedding-goers, whuffling right through the hors d'oeuvres and munching, munching, munching onward into the big food.

Nervously she circled off from the groom a little, wanting the reception to be perfect, the most mouthwatering page in nuptial history.

"We're out of the salmon pâté, Lexa," Jaci of her crew came up and whispered. Lexa pulled out the couple of emergency fifties she always kept in the pocket under her apron. "Run over to Gretchen's and beg some, quick."

She monitored the room trying to recognize the next incipient emergency. Now groom and bride were whooping it up with another champagne-brandishing phalanx of
friends. He owned a chain of sunglasses shops and she was concertmaster of a chamber orchestra; they had met in one of the hiking/biking/caring/sharing chat rooms on the Internet. Lexa nibbled her lip. Those champagne glasses were emptying fast, and she swung around to check on the level of traffic over by the bar and Mitch.

*Mitch?*

She was over there in a flash. Absence and the heart and all that notwithstanding, she was purely panicked by his materialization here.

"Where’d--What’re you--"

Giving the roomful a broken-field runner’s alert scan, he appraised the wedding reception: “Not bad as these things go, hmm?”

She couldn’t say the same for him. Unshaven for a couple of days, clothes that all too obviously had been slept in for at least that long, the giant black glob of his cast sticking out alongside the bar table, he looked like something a very large cat had dragged in off the road. To her outrage, he was perusing her companionably. There he loomed, a winning grin hung on him, damn him. As much as she wanted to whale into him with her fists for this derisive bye-bye or whatever he thought it was, she had to keep frantic watch over her shoulder for the mother of the bride, big mama of the universe at these events. All it would take was enough disturbance of the peace to bring the Matriarch of the Day over
with the pronouncement *You'll never fix food in this town again.* In a fierce whisper Lexa demanded to know: “What did you do with Brad?”

“He slipped out to his car to listen to his Kenny G instructional CD.”

“How’d you find--” She shut up and stood in front of as much of Mitch as she could while he dispensed champagne into the next covey of thrust glasses. When those guests moved off, he turned to her as if surprised she had to ask:

“Went to the house for some things and read the refrigerator door, how else?”

That was it, then. He had come for his stuff. Packing it all up, to add to the permanent houseload in The Springs. Roziers. A penchant for mess ran in the family.

For almost three weeks she had been fuming about having to live with his belongings and now she found herself equally ticked off that the house was going to look half empty. One pang after another going through her, she tried to keep her mind on the point that he had no business playing around with her business.

“The house is one thing, but where I’m trying to do my work is another. Why’d you bother to slip in here?”

“Thought it was time I did a little shopping.” He studied the reception room again.

“ Might need one of these someday.”
"You really are determined to be a sonofabitch about this, aren't you. Mitch, I
don't care how terminally peed off you are at me over the ashes and what happened at the
tower and whatever else you've managed to come up with to add to the list. I don't
deserve this. You and Mariah can go off into the wedding sunset if you goddamn want,
but--"

"Lexa--"

"I don't have to have that picture painted for me." She stood there seething at the
future. McCaskill family reunions were going to be a real case of the jollies, weren't they,
with him on hand as Mariah's hubby and Lexa's ex-you-name-it.

"Lexa, listen--"

"And I don't have to listen to any of your--"

"Lexa, Mariah and I are not in the marrying picture. We've never even tried the
sample of that."

She shot a suspicious gaze at him all the way up. True, his hair was not standing
up in sulphur spikes.

He caught her look and smiled. "Think about it. How could I go in the water with
this cast?"
By then it didn’t take thinking. It only took erasing the blackboard of her mind, and then their bodies were colliding in a desperate hug and more.

Coming into the empty house, Mariah deposited the sack with a Dairy Queen hamburger in one direction and her camera bag in another. How damnably quiet. *Price of peace,* she told herself, and went to the kitchen for one of Lyle’s beers to help prop up supper.

When Mitch had come back from Hydropolis yesterday with the goods on Lyle and told her he was going right on to Seattle, he’d asked if she didn’t think she should come along and start making her own mend with Lexa. “How convincing is that?” she had pointed out. “We come trotting into Seattle, joined at the hip, to tell her we’re not an item together? You go alone. Give her me to be mad at.”

Mitch had touched her on the shoulder. “We are an item together. Just not the household kind.”

“Second thoughts. Story of my datebook.”

Standing there, they drew new assessments of each other, a daily occupation since their time in the fire tower. He saw a woman who cut trails through life as brisk as a comet, and as unfollowable. Steady eyes on his, she was looking back at a route not
taken, not takable, running as it did between the sisters McCaskill. She and he traded those appraisals with self-conscious attempts at grins, and Mitch went out the door.

Someone at that door now. She opened it to a pair of men all in black, including hats and beards, who peered at her as if a beautiful redhead woman in a *Hard Rock Cafe--Beijing* ballcap and a bottle of beer in her hand had not been their expectation.

"Is t’ee mister here?" inquired the older Hutterite.

"We’re fresh out of misters. Can I do anything for you?"

"T’ose brands of Lyle’s, ve vant to buy vun." The older Hutterite locked eyes with her to avoid the temptation of straying into the rest of her scenery, then decided to confide, the other man nodding grave accompaniment: "Ve are hiving."

Mariah stepped back a little. "Is that a fact." It took her a few seconds to recall the Hutterite custom of hiving off into new colonies, entire families resettling on the next communal farm whenever an old one reached a certain population. A new dairy herd would need a new brand; maybe Lyle’s iron menagerie was worthwhile after all.

"Congratulations, I think. Come on out to the shed with me."

The branding irons appeared to have been busy learning from their clothes hanger cousins how to multiply in the equivalent of a closet. There were angular heaps of them,
wall-climbing squads of them, corner congregations of them. Mariah gestured at
everything with what she figured was businesslike aplomb:

"Help yourself, gentlemen."

The Hutterite pair looked at her. The elder one said:

"Ve vant a T Cross."

Mariah blinked. Half of the iron in the known world, wrought into fancy combinations of who knew how many kinds in this shed, and they wanted a specific one?

"Well, we can look, I guess. See if you can find it burned into the wall there while I scout around in the irons themselves."

The Hutterites read along the wall while she tried to figure out any system Lyle might have had to this. It wasn’t numerical, it wasn’t alphabetical, it wasn’t even brandabetical. Under no approach did it seem to want to divulge an iron stem with a T and a cross on the end of it. After much murmuring from the men and much clattering from her, Mariah announced:

"Whoa, here you go." The Hutterites looked at the swoop-necked branding iron she was brandishing. "The U Cross, next best thing," she maintained.

"Ve vant a T Cross," the two Hutterites said in chorus.

"If you don’t mind my asking, why the f--heck does it have to be a--
“Ve go the alphabet.”

“Could you sort of spell that out for me?”

“Ven ve hive a colony, t’e new colony gets t’e next letter for its brand,” the elder Hutterite explained. “T’e New Alberta colony, t’at vas our first, its brand is t’e A Cross.”

His beard lifted a little like a preacher coming to his favorite part of Deuteronomy. “T’e next vun, Kipp Creek Colony, t’e B Cross. Right up the alphabet, ve go. Now ve vant a T Cross.”

She gave up and rummaged some more. “Look, this is as close as it gets—an ET Cross. Must’ve been Spielberg’s his very self.”

The Hutterite men looked at her. “Nein, t’at is Ernie Toomey’s old brand.”

“Never mind. See, all you have to do is cut off the E.” She cast a wild glance at the tools here and there along the wall. “I’ll throw in that hacksaw and a blade, even.”

The Hutterites conferred with each other in German, and with a great show of reluctance snapped up the deal.

Wedding-goers gone, bride and groom on a floatplane whirring to the San Juan Islands, the Do-Re-Mi catering crew was cleaning up. The crew, which looked a little hurt
at having to get by with less than usual bossing, left a space around the bar, where a great amount of public kissing and earnest vowing was still going on.

“So he had love trouble in spite of himself,” Lexa digested his account about Lyle.

“It used to run in the family,” said Mitch, and reached for her again.

Back in the living room of the Rozier house, Mariah stood over the pages of the Montanian spread out on the desk, eating her thoroughly cold hamburger with one hand and running the other critically over the sheets of newsprint, trying a tighter cropping on one image, tracing and retracing the angle of perspective through another. Finally, more or less satisfied, she balled up her napkin from one hand to the other. All this time on a newspaper and I still don’t know why the ink has to come off on a person’s fingers.

The still unvanquished face of Lyle gazed up at her from the dozen incarnations on the pages. All at once she was reminded of his habit of e-mailing Ritz about each triumph in selling off a branding iron. Last favor, you old handful and in the general cyber-direction of Jakarta, One from beyond the grave, kid. Turning on the tired-looking old set and connecting to WebTV, she plopped into the big chair, keyboard cradled in her lap, then went to E-mail and typed out the message. When she came to the designation of the brand she tapped a capital T onto the screen and then the plus sign, pleased by its resemblance to
a cross so that Ritz would have a nice evocative for his e-mail equivalent of a

 scrapbook. She clicked on SEND, but that didn’t seem to want to be the end of it.

 Something still tickled at her, back up there in the vicinity of the plus-sign key. For

 curiosity’s sake she tried its nearest neighbor, the minus sign, then typed another capital T.

 Sure enough, there on the screen another recognizable brand, the Bar T.

 Doing away with the minus sign, she shopped further along the row of keys, to the

caret sign. Recognizably the Rafter T.

 She took off the caret and moved over a couple of keys to the asterisk. A

 pretty presentable T Spur.

 Faster now, she deleted the asterisk, held down the shift key and tapped the colon

 key, twice. The Dice T. Dumped that and put a pinky down in the lowest right of

 the keyboard. The Slash T.

 Mariah stared down at the keyboard. She wasn’t even into dingbat options, circles

 and boxes and triangles and hearts and spades and diamonds and the whole computer zoo

 of other graphics. Nor had she started to go the alphabet, pairing twenty-five more letters

 and combinations thereof with each of these keyable mutations.

 She lunged for the phone book, pawed out the number, waited impatiently for

 response at the other end.
“Donald, is it? Could you send Matthew over here to the Roziers’? I’ve got something on the screen I need to have him check out.” Then she called Seattle.

_BlazingBrands.com_, as quick as they got it on-line, billed a junior fortune in orders its first week. Brands went from being the return addresses of cows to the latest must-have as PICs—personal identification codes—in the cyber frontier beyond PINs, and the Web speak equivalent of monograms transposable to everything from tech team T-shirts to personalized steaks sizzling on barbecue grills at company get-togethers. From ZYX headquarters arrived a fine fat offer to buy all three of those letters, in all permutations.

Wouldn’t you know, Mariah set her sights on the world again. This time, with her cut of our cyber gold rush, she figured she could poke the planet in the ribs with her camera for as long as she wanted. Before she could take off, Mitch and I asked her to perform the photo honors the day Lyle’s ashes were dealt with.

She was circling around the site, restless as a jay, her camera bag bumping on her hip, when Mitch and Lexa pulled up.

The box clutched to him, Mitch ducked into the lee of the _BlazingBrands.com_ corporate Chevy Blazer, Lexa and Mariah already huddling there.

“This place is going to miss him,” Mariah mused.
“But it doesn’t need any more like him, either,” Mitch said with equal meditation.

“Watch your footing out there,” Lexa warned.

“Where was that advice the last time I needed it?” He sent her a flit of a grin, then looked soberly at Mariah. “Got your camera angle scoped out?”

“Always got that.”

“Then here goes.”

The two women watched him transport the ashes the last little way, carefully edging himself into position.

“Lexa?” ventured Mariah in a lip-biting tone. “No hard feelings?”

“Oh, yeah. But other kinds too. We’re still sisters.” She gave Mariah a reflecting smile. Then gently gave her a push, fond but a push, out into the wind.

Mitch stood at the edge of the Donstedder benchland where the coulee cut in. The pile of rocks below still seemed oddly concentrated here in this one place, like a sac of glacier stones. Lexa stood off to one side a little, upwind. Mariah went around to the brow of the coulee on the other side of them and cocked her camera.

“Maybe in error, but never in doubt—that was my father.” Mitch’s voice steadied against the wind. “He read himself wrong there at the end. He thought he could make himself add up to all that he wasn’t, with these—” Mitch raised the ashes a little “—and
Phantom Woman. If he figured he had to have a monument, there is nothing shameful about this one. This one he earned over and over.”

He opened the lid of the box, undid the plastic liner inside it. Hands high, he leaned out over the coulee and carefully turned the box upside down, shaking the ashes. They were the consistency of sand, and of the same color as the rocks they fell among.

In a mountain valley as old as the visit of glaciers, the hiker stopped to drink out of the swift stream.

He gazed around with care as he walked out onto the low smooth outcropping that led right to the creek. Upstream, a waterfall slid with a pleasant little roar, and then water that looked as if it had fish in it pooled against the parentheses of bank before riffling off down the valley. Pretty sonofagun of a place, occurred to him with a small smile. And it had the lookout tower beat for calm instead of commotion. All in all, he supposed he could tell himself he had come up in the world by coming down from Phantom Woman. But tired, Lord, he was tired and thirsty after the hot pace on the trail; it had been a long time since that fortifying can of tomatoes at lunch.

Taking off his hat and wiping away sweat, he looked for somewhere to set the hat and his things while he watered up, but there was nothing of the kind on the bare ledge of
the creek crossing. He backtracked off the dock of rock and put it all, his Stetson on top, against the nearest aspen. Then came back to the stream’s stone edge. He drank from his hands, wiped his sleeve across his mouth, and stayed squatting on his haunches a minute, simply looking around. No matter how old he lived to be he would never cease to be captivated by the green tingling leaves of aspens. Everywhere under them, flat rocks from a sedimentary ledge vastly larger than the creek’s namesake where he hunkered. The spill of rocks out of the mountainside was like a flow of stone joining the creek. A lot like flagstones. Tempting. It wouldn’t take much to pile them.

Running his eyes over the palette of rocks he mulled whether to put up a cairn, mark this place for the kick of it. Didn’t really have time. Another hour, maybe two, he could pound on down the trail before calling it a day. But the trail would be there in the morning, too. The monument this spot of solace seemed to want would not, unless he lent a hand to those rocks.

Leave it up to gravity, he decided. He stood up and dug into his britches pocket for the good-luck piece he carried, a Liberty Head silver dollar. If the toss came up heads, camp here and work with the rocks until they mounted up in monument form. Tails, then—he chortled at the play of words, starting to feel like himself for the first time this day—hightail on down the trail.
Bob Marshall poised the silver dollar on his broad thumbnail. Then flipped the coin

high, the lucky piece spinning its arc of tails and heads up, up, into the mountain air.
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