a possibility, of course, a major football program needed a battalion
of bodies, and nobody much minded Mitch being kept on the team as backup
to the backup fullback, especially Mitch.

Busy lighting up in every way he could think of, came the day when
Mitch went to football practice after his first experience with marijuana
half scared to death that it would somehow show on him, he'd be singled
out of the warmup drill by one of the assistant coaches screeching, "Hey
you, Dope Fiend, outta here!" When no such thing occurred, it quite
rapidly dawned on Mitch: these old white-socks guys were afraid to know!
Within days he confirmed this by showing up in the locker room wearing a
Levi jacket with a peace symbol painted on the back (he'd had to look all
over Seattle to find a 'nike jacket big enough to fit him) and the
coaches stared very hard but not one of them said a word to him.

There he sat, then, on into his junior year, All-Conference
scholastically and benchwarmer into eternity, until the pivotal Saturday
afternoon when the Huskies were playing at home against Southern California.
Much to the disappointment of the mud-oriented Washington coaching staff,
no drop of rain was falling on Seattle, the world capital of H₂O. On the
dry field Southern Cal tailbacks were taking turns romping around
the end of the elephantine Washington line. Bored, the Husky third-
stringers were sneaking peeks at the cheerleading squad, envying the
yell leader, a gymnastic imp named Mancini whose duty was to put his
hands under the purple pleated skirts of the female cheerleaders and
boost their pretty butts onto his shoulder.

Mitch in particular was engrossed in watching this activity when
Bingford, the freckled and notorious editor of the UW Daily, detached
himself from the sidelines press and said something at length into
Mancini's ear.

Lit up like a jack-o-lantern with inspiration, Mancini grabbed
his megaphone and yelped:

"All right! Listen up, everybody. Just had a request to do a
Go cheer for an institution that's dear to us all--North Dakota
Agricultural and Scientific! Got it? Go, N-A-D-S!"

Even before the student section woke up brightly to the opportunity
to roar "GONADS!" Mitch was laughing fit to rupture and lurched up off
the bench. He dashed over, picked up Mancini under the arms and held
him in mid-air like a squirming cat, and shouted:

"Now let's try S-P-E-L-I-G! SPELLING!"

He had barely set Mancini free when the backfield coach Jacobson
boiled up beside him. "Rozier, are you in this game?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Are you on something?"

"Twenty Questions does beat the crap out of this," Mitch jerked
his head toward the scoreboard showing UW 0 USC 27 in bright buttons

Mitch unsnapped his helmet, tenderly took it off with both hands, then reached back and slung it, sailing end over end, high into the ecstatic student section. It was the longest University of Washington pass of the day, and it concluded the football career of Mitch Rozier.

Not long after, Mitch was standing in a field carpeted with several thousand other zonked-out souls. When yet another of those funny-looking cigarettes made its way around to him, the hand that offered it was supremely freckled.

"You're the hippie fullback," said the possessor of the hand and the joint. "Or were."

Mitch took a drag, the better to contemplate Bingford.

"And you're the rich mountain climber's kid. No cure for that so far, though, huh?"

"Famous in our own time, guy," Bingford said with a world-weary sigh. He scanned the air. "Where's that mothering piano?"
Chords of Pink Floyd’s "Let It Rain" jangled out of the earnest but challenged band that had set up on the flatbed of a sod-hauling truck. The platform of piled-together logs where the piano was to hit loomed like a sacrificial altar. Everywhere around, the crowd splashdanced in the creek or cavorted in the farm fields, green pastures of pharmacopia.

Still studying the sky, Bingford asked: "They take away your jock scholarship yet?"

"Does a bear go in the woods?"

Bingford cocked his head. "What’re you doing for spare change?"

"Washing dishes at the House of Pancakes. And I work for a moving company, Saturdays."

Now the helicopter was approaching, whacking the air frantically. Beneath it the piano swung like a pendulum. The crowd scattered like chickens under a hawk, except for an unshirted young woman on an acid trip who loped along under the swaying Steinway, arms uplifted as if to hug it. She let out a cross between a moan and a wail when she was held back.

Mitch was finding he couldn’t decide whether the idea of a piano
drop was the greatest thing yet or plain goofy. That was the stimulating part: he wasn’t sure. Either way, here he stood, at this particular spot of time taken over by this spontaneous tribe, loose-limbed, barefoot, and not a few naked. Present and accounted for, at the dawn of a time when a piano would plunge from the sky. Margaret Mead—she was still alive, wasn’t she? Then where the hell was she, if not here watching this?

If she wanted to see a cargo cult, bigfella-in-sky-him-come-let-piano-drop, if she wanted to see Coming of Age in America Right Now, if she wanted real anthro, here it was. Okay, maybe some little bit of what he was feeling was the merrywanna starting to cook in him, but the bigger cause for exhilaration, he was convinced, was himself, and here, and this and now. Hadn’t he been able to hold an intelligent conversation with Bingford, while inside him there was all this lossy-goosy stuff going on? If this wasn’t something new in life, that you could stand (and holy smoke up your nose) out here with grass tickling your toes and feel giddy and perfectly sane at the same time, he didn’t know what was.

Mitch inhaled deeply, air this time, and felt his brain settle back into his head a little.
Side by side he and Bingford contemplated the laboring helicopter, close now. For no particular reason, Mitch heard himself pop out with:

"My old man always calls the thing a helicopeter."

Realizing how hicky that sounded, he added:

"On purpose."

"My old man owns a couple," Bingford confessed in return.

The old men. Fathers, the ghosts of dead wars. Mitch and Bing, nor all the sons and daughters in the skin-plaid fields of the young that day and in the hirsute ranks they would form against the war in Vietnam, did not even need to name their names, those spent shells. Antecedents always think they still own the combat zone. Iyle Rozier, who evidently had the time of his life in the jungle of World War Two. Jerry Bingford, fighter ace in Korea and cocky toward earthbound mortality ever since. Young in their time, but too many turns of the world ago. While the news that counted now hovered here.

The chopper noise flooded over the pasture, tingling in Mitch the way the thunder of a football crowd always did. Used to. He glanced sideways at Bingford, who seemed similarly swallowed in the blissful storm of
The roar of the helicopter drowned out something Bingford said.

Mitch cupped an ear at him.

"Come by the Daily office," Bingford repeated. He was looking off at the clattering chopper as it circled, the piano swinging like a watchcharm to amuse a baby. "The idiots let me have a budget. You can be our aviation reporter."

Having lifted its burden into bomb-run position a couple of hundred feet up, the helicopter now honed in on the log bull's-eye where the piano drop was to occur. Businesslike, the helicopter seemed to brake in the air. But the piano kept going. As, now, did the helicopter. Panicking at being towed by his cargo, the pilot let the piano loose.

Far overshooting the log platform, it plummeted to the earth with a dead thud. Not a chord, not a note, not so much as a plink.

"Encore," Bingford said softly.

Mitch could not have told why, but that decided him to show up at the Daily office.
After his sidelined but bylined final years of college and a few more on a well-intentioned but criminally underpaying community newspaper, Mitch latched on as a rim dog at Seattle's morning daily, the Post-Intelligencer. Not the most sensational of jobs, and he still wasn't sure he even liked newspapering. But he liked being around people who liked newspapering. Accordingly, there he sat each day, fashioning the three sentences for the front-page weather box and boiling down wire copy into bite-sized stories called "Quicklies"; Marnie had taken to giggling and calling him the king of the quickies.

He was hunched over his typewriter trying to think of some fresh way to say "rain later today" when the call came that someone wanted to see
him down in the lobby. He never liked eerie stuff, but somehow he had the prickling feeling it was going to be Bingford.

The last that Mitch knew, Bing was in a Rocky Mountain high period, off to climb the sixteens of Colorado and then goof around the Grand Tetons for a summer. That had been, what, considerably more than a year ago, Mitch realized—an evening spent parked below the runway approach to SeaTac airport while the two of them smoked some reminiscent dope and let the roars of jets take them over as plane after plane waddled down a hundred feet overhead. Between the soul-emptying flushes of noise and the good weed, they gradually slid off philosophical deep ends.

After what must have been an exceptionally potent puff, Bing revealed to Mitch his nearly paralyzed moments of fascination on rock cliffs sometimes at being suspended there by the nonslip piton his old man had invented and patented: he was hanging there by a combination of genetics and contrivance that just seemed awesome in those moments. Mitch in turn confessed his own latest source of awe, A Sand County Almanac—it had almost sent him back to do a master’s degree in English, hell, you could opus-pocus your
whole thesis on Aldo Leopold's rhythms, the old boy wrote like the coming up of the sun and the going down of the sun and the stopless turning of the seasons... but then along had come Marnie and marriage, and Mitch had chickened out on going back to school, but who knew, maybe eventually he would. It had been one of those funny warped nights, much too much said in sloppy circumstances, and Mitch and Bing had both ended up a bit embarrassed by the time the last jetliner swept its cone of thunder over them. You couldn't really base a gutspilling friendship on aeronautical decibels, could you? Now Mitch headed down to the lobby decidedly on guard.

"How's life in the Quickly lane?" Bingford said as hello.

"Salaried," Mitch answered, steering him out of the building.

One never quite knew with Bingford, whether he was simply stopping by to visit between conquests of tall peaks or whether he was here to unload on establishment journalism.

"Happy under the big crapping bird?" Bingford resumed when they were outside, indicating upward to the P-I's massive revolving globe with the Hearst eagle the size of a pterodactyl squatting atop it.

"Close enough. Why? You curious about getting on a paper again?"
They probably won't let you start right in as editor here, you know."

"I do know. So I figured I'd start my own."

"Your own paper? Bing, why don't you save time and just wad that money up and throw it out a window."

"This is one window people are going to throw money in. Tell you why, guy. Remember 'Hip spade wants to dig you'?"

Mitch laughed. All of them on the UW Daily staff had been bug-eyed when somebody brought in one of the underground weeklies with that first barrier-explooding classified ad. After that crack, the deluge. "The wanna ads, Bing? Hey, even we at the Pee Eye are running those these days. Kind of late to the orgy, aren't you?"

"Not if I gather ads from enough places out here and put them in enough corner boxes in all the good towns. People move around. The I-5 corridor--think about it, Mitch babe." It actually didn't take that much thinking. Bingford's scheme was based on the long skinny freeway archipelago from the Canadian border to the bottom end of the Willamette Valley, a day's drive to the south. That Interstate sluice of people alongside the Cascade range of mountains took in the campus
towns of Bellingham, Corvallis, and Eugene, it took in both state capitol, Olympia and Salem, with their burgeoning staffs of young guerrilla bureaucrats, it took in the groovy metropolises of Seattle and Portland: in short, the Pacific Northwest confederacy of beardedness and bralessness, ready to set out to explore the new back page alphabet of desire.

The cute little bastard, Mitch thought with a shake of his head, he's going to be able to buy his own mountain. But said only: "Could pay off."

"Trippe is coming in with me on the idea," Bingford said as if it was the wildest of coincidences. Mitch could not have been less surprised. She had been at the UW with them and in and out of mountain-climbing with Bing, Juanita had. Hers was a branch of the Pan Am fortune. This was one of the things about Seattle that Mitch could never get used to, there were these...seeps of polite wealth; neither Bingford nor Trippe would say family money if they had a mouthful of it.

"Rowdy-dow-dow for you and Tripper," Mitch softly patted the palm of one hand with the other.

"And--"
"And you only came by to give me the first subscription."

"--we have an opening," Bingford went on unperturbed. "You'd fit."

"Hey, here I get to write the weather every day. Wouldn't quite be the same in newspaper camp." Their old Daily phrase for various counterculture once-a-week-maybe excursions into print made Bingford wince. "This past week, we had weather again," Mitch tested out.

"Nope. Thanks anyway."

"Come on, guy. This isn't you." Bingford flapped a hand again at the P-I's taloned figurehead as if to shoo it off its roost. "We'll even scrape up the same salary for you."

"Bing, that doesn't cut it. I'm married and got a kid on the way, all right? Marnie already thinks my working for Hearst is next thing to picking up tin cans along the road. What's she going to say if I throw in with you just because we smoked some weed together at the U Dub?"

"Most of the time, you'll be out where you can't hear her," Bingford said helpfully.

"I what?"

In spite of what he knew ought to be a firewall of guilt
and shame, those words of Bingford’s sizzled up the back of Mitch’s mind. He had already started half-admitting to himself that Marnie was more of a flake than he’d bargained for, back in their dating days when she simply seemed turned-on in entertaining ways. Her latest phase, 100% wok cooking, had him sneaking cheesburgers from the drive-in catercorner to the P-I. Trying not to sound tempted, he asked: "Out where, would I be?"

"Wherever." Bingford impatiently threw his hands in the air to illustrate out. "We want you to be our nature freak."

So much for history, that caravan route of distant spices. Now was now, and out of the haze of cannabis smoke and freckles had emerged Jerome "Bing" Bingford III, editor/publisher of an urban weekly newspaper for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon.

From the shipwreck of a marriage and the raft he had sent his children away on and the shoals of a number of other major regrets had waded, big and drenched inside and out and environmentally the last of his kind, Mitchell F. Rozier, "Coastwatch" columnist and now quite late to work.

"I see we can call off the search party," he was met with by
Jennifer, the duplicitous receptionist and chief spy for Bingford.

"You're back in time for the staff meeting."

"Right," Mitch growled. "Wouldn't want to miss that just for the sake of getting my work done."

In her notifying tone, Jennifer called up the stairs after him:

"Bing wants everybody there."

"Bing shouldn't lust for us that way, Jen," Mitch tch-tched and tromped off to his cubicle.

A pair of eyes that were permanently parked in neutral and an
indiscernible murmur greeted him as he stepped in. His cubemate was the new video reviewer, Shyanne Winters--monosyllabic, thin almost to the point of transparency, and black-lipsticked. In his time, Mitch had shared cubicle space with drunks and brooders and at least one proven felon, but Shyanne spooked him. He was pretty sure Shyanne would have spooked even Jocelyn. At the first staff meeting after she was hired, Shyanne had gone on and on in an avid near-whisper about corporately responsible non-lactic vegan dietary rules until it dawned on the assembled Cascopians that no milk in the office meant no lattes in the office, and she was rudely hooted down. Shyanne seemed to expect that the world was going to put nasty stuff on her. As a reviewer, she had the habit of tapping an instantaneous lead sentence into her computer, then dissolving into a sea of sighs. Mitch's attempts at sympathetic conversation during these longeurs of hers only dragged him into her swamp of despond as well. Mystified but also royally fed up, he finally had gone to Bingford about her.

"How about getting me out of range of Lips of Death there?"

"Oh, come on, Mitch." Instantly Bingford's management style,
counterattack, kicked in. "Everybody shares here, you know that. Buckle down, bucko."

"I didn't say I don't want to share," Mitch protested, although now that he thought about it a cubicle all to himself sounded paradisiacal.

"All I ask is a cubemate who isn't a living X-ray."

"Can't you goddamnit be a little fatherl--" Bingford caught himself.

"Be some help to her, she's young, okay?"

Now Mitch matched Shyanne's more-or-less greeting with something slightly less equivocal and went directly to his computer. But no more than had logged in "Coastwatch/Berkeley gasbaggery" when heads prairiedogging out of sundry other cubicles announced the staff meeting. The extent of Mitch's muttered cussing caused Shyanne to look over her shoulder fleetingly at him as they left the cubicle.

In the conference room the Cascopia staff was strewn on the edges of tables and windowsills. It struck Mitch that compared to Jocelyn and her rollerblading cohorts—always with the Transylvanian exception of Shyanne, of course—these looked like an Amish choir.

They had unholy mouths on them, though. While Bingford and Jennifer
conferred in the doorway to be sure everyone was on hand, the usual rabid factions went at it over whether staff meetings ought to be held oftener, or never. By reflex Mitch pointed out that in the distant past when Bing panicked on every publication day and called a lunchhour meeting to try to straighten matters out, they always got something worthwhile done: eat.

"Woo oo, it's TM time," somebody droned. Institutional Memory was not a prized attribute among the younger Cascopians.

"Hey, now, not me," Mitch protested with a chesty laugh. "Not as long as Flatley waddles the earth." He cocked his head around to find the restaurant reviewer who could recite what kind of sandwiches and pickles Bingford ordered in for lunch in 1971. He realized everyone in the room was staring at him, a gallery of faces masked in mockery, embarrassment, and here and there shocking malice.

"While you were away," Bingford let him know. "Flats is no longer with us. He'd doing a CD-ROM for Microsoft on Pacific Rim cuisine."

Then Bingford came on in and sat at the table, carrying a single sheet of paper. "One announcement. A biggie." He rubbed his cheek
as if a freckle was bothering him. "The paper's going free."

Nobody said anything until Walmeier, who covered baseball, ballet, and brew pubs, asked: "How's that work?"

Our sinking captain didn't say it would work, Mitch mentally edited Walmeier, he merely said it would occur.

"Readership is dead in the water," Bingford was going on glumly.

"Mailbox roulette"--the personal ads--"isn't what it used to be. People can feel each other up on the Internet now." Next he resorted to his lethal sheet of paper, trotting out the data. Free weekly newspapers--Mitch in his mind edited that, too: giveaway newspapers--were the national trend, it would build circulation and thereby hoist the advertising rates.

"I've talked to them Downtown," Bingford was saying, which always meant the hated rival Seattle Weekly, also known as Seattle Chicly. "They're going to have to go this same route. So are the Oregon guys, Willamette Week and The Eugene Scene. And Bellingham, the Bellyburg News. They're all taking the price off the paper."

Bingford paused and went after that bothersome freckle again.

The room stirred, or rather, Mitch stirred it. He had sworn to himself, over and over during Bing's predestined announcement, that he
was going to keep his mouth shut.

What evil ventriloquist, then, was producing a voice exactly like his to suggest to Bing the next logical step: pay people to take the newspaper,
why not? Rig up the vending boxes like slot machines: if a person
grabs out one copy of Cascopia, the box pays him a quarter; if the
customer takes, say, three papers, make the payoff a dollar. "Circulation
will go through the roof, Bing, I can practically guarantee."

"Mouth, Mitch." Bingford primly patted his lips as if reminding
Mitch to employ a napkin there. "When I want my ass kicked in front
of an audience I'll go on Letterman, all right, old buddy?" Bingford
crumpled his sheet of paper, signalling that the meeting was over.

"This is where we are, people. Not easy times."

When he went back to his cubicle, Mitch settled himself into his
erg chair but did not turn his computer on.

He was half a century old, and working for a giveaway newspaper.

Put that in your Institutional Memory and smoke it, Rozier.

"Are you blocked?"

Mitch jumped as if goosed. Then spun his chair around to face
the wraith in the doorway.

just what this day needed: his cubemate the witch doctor.
can feel each other up on the Internet now." He stopped to resort to his
Shyanne's health mania was, it could only be said, incurable. Assorted natural purgatives and other herbs lay stuck away in every desk drawer at Cascopia, courtesy of her fevered diagnoses and apothecary arts. Wary of what she might foist on him, Mitch checked: "Are we on the topic of bowels here?"

"Writer's block," she specified eagerly. "I have it every time."

"Hey, huh uh." Mitch tried a smile, with the awful feeling that it was going to look sickly. "No, this is just a really hard piece to--"

"Strictly Ballroom was the worst," she broke in. "How can you write a review about something that's totally perfect?"

"Listen, ahm, Shyanne. I've got to start writing this piece or--"

"If you won't tell anyone? How I get past being blocked?" Shyanne came to roost on the edge of her chair, her sharp knees inches from Mitch's. She looked intense enough to cut diamonds with. "I always go: 'Reader, I married him.'"

Mitch's brow furrowed massively.

"Here, watch." She spun around to her computer and in the ritual keyboard flurry that Mitch recognized, he indeed heard her fingers
make the keys go Splocksplock, ock splocksplock ock and Charlotte
Bronte's once deliciously inked words were conjured there on her screen
in up-to-the-instant pixels.

Shyanne sat back, wan but wired. "See, there's my lead. I, like,
borrow it a while. Until I think of something better."

"Your 1--? Isn't that an ending?"

"Sure, but. It breaks through on the interpersonal level. There
I am, talking to the reader. And that just really helps me to--"

"But that reader exists in England in 18-um-something," Mitch
pointed out with a force that startled himself. "Charlotte Bronte's
reader, out there ankle-deep in the moors. Who has never laid eyes
on a video, let alone the forgettable Joan Fontaine as Jane Eyre."

Eyes vast, Shyanne suddenly was emulating the old Beatles song,
A Paler Shade of White.

"So, don't you think going interpersonal with that reader is kind
of"--Mitch knew that if there were a referee on the premises he would
be whistled for piling on, but he couldn't stop himself--"unnatural?"
"You jealous puke!" Shyanne was vigorous enough in springing out out of her chair. "Be blocked, see if I give a zit! I am out of here.

I will not work in the same space with a destructive aura. BING! I

NEED A NEW CUBE!"
"Way cool! You can hear it eating it!"

The third-graders in Loxa's group were in ecstasy at the unscheduled feeding time they were witnessing. Squirrels are cats with the brains left out, she reflected, judiciously watching the long-tailed gray tidbit being feasted upon by the zoo's eagle invalid, Spike. A minute ago the squirrel was bounding along, bippity bippity, at the grassy verge of the injured raptors' perch area, and the golden eagle, dragging wing and tether and all, nailed it with a huge noiseless pounce.

"SHHH. Listen."
Indeed, the sounds of Spike ripping apart the squirrel with his beak, tearing ligament from bone, could be heard quite well. Parents were in for twenty-seven graphic reports at dinner tables tonight.

Palmer wasn't even trying to hide his pride in Spike. Slipping the gauntlet onto his wrist, the raptor keeper said: "Little snack between meals there. But I don't want to see any of you attacking our squirrels with your bare teeth, hear?" The schoolkids moaned in adoration.

"While Spike chows down," Palmer continued, winking at Lexa where she stood behind the herd of kids, "let me introduce you to our other birds of prey."

The raptor casualty ward currently included a snowy owl, a kestrel, and a red-tailed hawk, besides the feasting eagle, and Lexa had heard Palmer's spirited spiel about each bird enough times that her attention drifted off to the zoo's Northern Trail again. She had taken this pack of schoolkids there—she took all the groups she led there—and naturally the bear enclosure wowed them. The Kodiaks, big and bigger, frolicked in the pond dammed by the transparent viewing wall. The Kodiak male, eight hundred pounds of bad attitude, in particular
seemed aware of the audience. The kids delighted in scaring themselves
by racing right up to the glassed-in bear, but Lexa, knowing it was silly,
nonetheless always stood all the way at the back to watch the big bear
from as much distance as possible.

The summer she had cooked for the bear tagging team, the team leader
Zweborg was forever saying Gee gosh, I hate to see that when the massive
pawprints would show up on the trail between them and the camp.

The six of them and a hundred or two grizzlies were prowling the
Kenai Peninsula. It was a great break for Travis, because on the research
rungs of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game this was way up there,
setting foot snares along streams choked with spawning salmon to catch
huge and hungry grizzlies. Then, when you caught a bear, firing a
tranquilizing dart into his shaggy hide and hastening (but not hurrying;
Zweborg, the priss, always piped out We must not hurry, people, for
we have no time to waste) through the procedures of fastening a radio
collar on the medically controlled griz, taking its measurements, tagging
its ear, and (even Travis did not much like this part) smearing blue tattoo
ink under its upper lip and plier-pressuring a permanent identification
number into there. The team looked like crazed surgeons air-dropped
into the middle of the wilderness, their implements spread on the back
of the bear. Souped up on adrenalin, but not hurrying, each of them
performed some chore on the bear—the two that always made Lexa catch
her breath, times when she was along with the taggers on some bear trail

near camp, were handling the needles of the bear-dope called
atrophine, deadly to humans, and Travis's count-your-fingers-first task
of tattooing the inside of the griz's lip.

Blued, tattooed, and construed, the grizzly then had to be given the
shot of antidote and watched a while to make sure it woke up satisfactorily
and went back to its bear ways okay. There was quite a lot of sentry duty in
tagging bears. Lexa noticed, though, that the pawprints across the
trail at the end of the day—the bear that wasn't there—spooked the
F&G team more than their tagging work did, and they would all erupt
into yodeling or nervous yelps to announce their presence. Everyone

was armed to the teeth and beyond, the men packing shotguns loaded with
slugs and the bear-drug dealer with a .375 Magnum revolver strategically

on her hip, and the times Lexa was out with them she was about as

concerned over all the large-calibre weaponry in the hands of fresh-
from-the-lab wildlife biologists as she was with the potential grizzly in the bush. Even Travis, who looked like Hunter Hank the minute you put him in the outdoors, was actually the genetically suburban son of a Phoenix airline pilot.

But the summer passed with nobody either eaten or shot, and Lexa looked back on it as a highly instructive season. Alaska was fresh to her then, but the trick of living beside the wild was known to her.

Other than Zweborg, whose mind seemed to consist of a compartment labeled *Everything about bears* and another labeled *Christian thoughts* for the day, she was the one among them who had any history with grizzlies.

When they were barely big enough to see over the dashboard of the Power Wagon, she and Mariah had watched as their father shot a sheep-eating bear, the grizzly trying its mightiest to tear off its own trapped toe and reach the man. There had been other family bear encounters as she grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front. So, in a sense, she had already been where Alaskans were stampeding toward. The human population of the Kenai was multiplying as fast as the U-Haul trailers could be unloaded, and the idea behind the tagging team was to study how the bears were faring as their home range was encroached on. Lexa would not have said she was against science, exactly, but she was going to be mighty
surprised if the data indicated anything but grizzly life eroding away.

Hers not to reason why, though. Travis seemed to thrive there in bear camp. He had charge of the floatplane, out at the trailhead, and the flying lessons he had cajoled out of his father, back when he was a teenager, looked pretty smart now. There was one other side of Travis she hadn't had a chance to see before, the elastic way he could fit himself around whoever was in charge. In no time at all, Zweborg was writing evaluations on Travis that were the bureaucratic equivalent of frankincense and myrrh.

Not overly surprising, then, when at the end of each week Zweborg would clear his throat and send Travis and her out together on the supply run. Everybody knew it made no sense to send the cook out of camp for the day, but the rest of the tagging team gamely said nothing and put up dried apricots with sandwiches and fruit in Lexa's absence. So, armed and pack-carrying, the two of them would head out on the trail, Travis's cute flat cowboy rear end close in front of her as they hiked fast and loudly announced themselves to possible bears. Travis's style was to caterwaul the Eagles' great song, You can't hide your lyin' eyes... In her turns, Lexa adapted top-of-her-voice commands that had worked well on the
McCaskill family sheepdogs. Jump in the truck, bear! Bear, go lay down!

Both of them would be thoroughly keyed up by the time they reached the lake and the floatplane moored there. Now at last came the conjugal part, the reason Zwee--bless his pointy old Jesus freak head--sent them out together. Nights in bear camp posed a marital problem, with four other people in sleeping bags a few feet away and half-awake anyway listening for grizzlies outside. But the sleeping bag she and Travis were promptly into here--the emergency-landing bag, stowed in the cargo area behind the plane seats--was gloriously their own, in solitude.

Those quick sessions in the back of the plane were only half-undressed and makeshift and breathless and hard on parts of the body but if you were young, newly wed, and turned loose in Alaska, what more could you want? It was the best summer she and Travis had together. The one good summer.

"So our buddy Spike has had his lunch, and now we'll show you a little aerial feeding of our other birds." Palmer was hitting his usual crescendo, the schoolkids silently agog at this climax to the raptor show.
Pulling the impressive leather gauntlet onto his left hand and forearm, Palmer shouted over to the raptor house for his assistant keeper Suzanne. An answering shout told him Suzanne would be a while, she'd had to make an emergency run for veterinarian supplies.

Lexa saw Palmer hesitate. Then he was calling over to her, behind the kids:

"Help me out with the food flight? You've seen how Suzanne tosses."

Lexa bit a little inside corner of her lip, but ducked through the white rail fence around the raptors' perching area and walked slowly out to Palmer.

"'Preciate this," he said, handing her Suzanne's gauntlet for her wrist. "We'll start with the kestrel, work our way up."

The pair of them went over to the perch where the kestrel sat, a
double handful of dignity and ferocity. Heart beating a little more than it should, Lexa focused on Palmer as he brought the hawk onto her wrist, letting it settle there, ruffling a bit, to accustom itself to her. His familiar unhurried way of moving, keeping the routine smooth, nothing to alarm the bird. Palmer, like Travis, was a natural at such handling.

To the audience beyond the fence Palmer pointed out the sideburns pattern of the kestrel, and the hawk's brilliant eye spoke for itself. The schoolchildren were rapt when Palmer took the taut little hawk onto his own gauntleted wrist.

The bird riding the human limb, the keeper stepped away from the perch area and paced off fifty feet, before turning around to face toward Lexa.

She reached into the plastic bag of meat chunks Palmer had provided her and took out one the size of a vole. She held the morsel in her ungloved hand, tucked the meat sack out of sight on the side of her away from the hawk, and looked the question to Palmer.

"Ready on the right, ready on the left, ready on the firing line,"