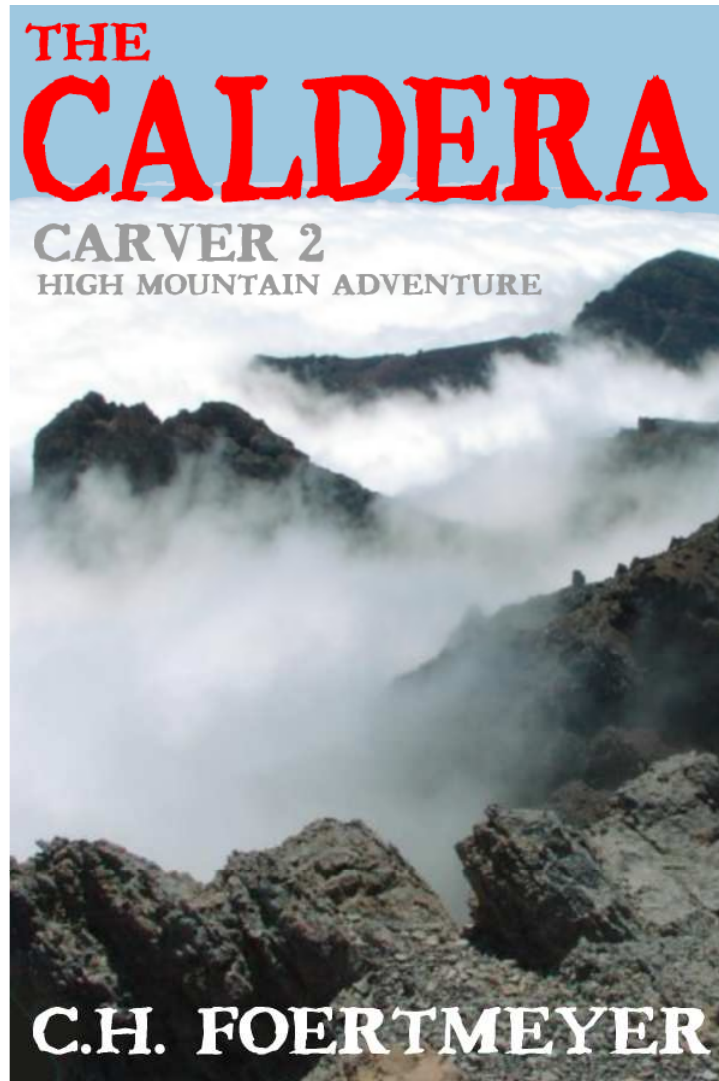


The Caldera



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THE CALDERA

CARVER 2: HIGH MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE

C.H. FOERTMEYER

The Caldera
Carver 2: High Mountain Adventure

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This book is dedicated to Sue Hartigan, my biggest fan and the most fervent promoter of my original work, Carver: High Mountain Tragedy.

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Foreword

The Caldera was written as a sequel to *Carver: High Mountain Tragedy* but not by any stretch of the imagination was it written in the same vein. Whereas *Carver* is a fiction novel with a message about a very serious social issue delivered in the form of an adventure, *The Caldera* is fantasy adventure born completely of the author's imagination.

Unfortunately, everything in *Carver* could have happened as written, save, some would argue, Sam Elliott's postmortem interference with Kevin Reynolds' activities. But who's to say what the spirit of a man long deceased can or can't do in the world of the living?

The Caldera does its best to defy the laws of physics, the order of time, and the accepted belief that Heaven and Earth are two separate environs. Are they really? Is Heaven really somewhere far overhead and is Hell truly somewhere down deep in the bowels of the Earth? Perhaps Heaven and Hell are not physical places at all. Perhaps both Heaven and Hell are merely what situation one finds oneself in after death. And, consider this. When a place on Earth becomes associated with a horrible and tragic crime against humanity, perhaps it somehow becomes a meeting point between the normal physical Earth we know and the Hell we hope we will never know. Perhaps then, Heaven's Gates are moved to level the playing field.

C.H.

Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

The Secret Trip

"Hey, Spence—Remember hearing about my cousin Kevin?" Mitch asked.

"Sure, I remember hearing about him, but I thought he was your uncle."

"I don't think so. He was my grandfather's brother's son. Does that make him my uncle?"

"Hell—I don't know. Who can figure that out?" Spence laughed. "I think maybe that's a cousin, like you said."

"Well, how much do you *know* about him? I mean about what he did and all?" Mitch continued.

"Not much, Mitch. I mean I've heard the stories and all, but that's about it," Spence replied. "Why?"

"Just wondering...but-what if I told you I know the *whole* story?"

"The *whole* story? Nobody knows the *whole* story, not even the sheriff. Kevin never talked and they never found his friend or that girl," Spence replied.

"Wiley and Mary," Mitch stated.

"What?"

"Wiley and Mary. Wiley was Kevin's friend and Mary is the missing girl," Mitch explained.

"Whatever—Hey, you've got a bite!" Spence said, excitedly.

Mitch looked at his bobber bobbing up and down on the water and gave his rod a quick jerk.

"Darn! Missed him!" Mitch complained.

"Pay attention, little buddy," Spence advised. "He probably got your bait. Better check your hook."

Mitch reeled in his line and looked at the empty hook.

"Yep, he did."

Mitch got another night crawler out of his tin can and baited his hook.

"So, what if I told you that *I do* know the *whole* story?" Mitch asked again, casting his line into the crystal clear waters of Lake Carver.

"How could you know the whole story? You weren't even born yet when all that happened. Besides, like I said before, your cousin took it all to his grave with him."

"Not exactly *all*," Mitch replied, a sly smile on his face.

"Okay, what gives? I'll bite. What do you mean, not *all*?" Spence asked, more annoyed at Mitch for interfering with his fishing than anything else.

Spence liked it quiet when he was fishing. He didn't like conversation when his line was in the water and not because he believed it bothered the fish, like some fishermen do. Spence was just the kind of guy who liked to let his mind wander when he was fishing. He might choose to go climbing a mountain or he might be exploring a virgin forest in the Alaskan wilderness. Fishing took him to many places he could not physically go and Mitch's constant chatter was a distraction to his travels. They were best buddies, but there were limits, and Mitch's constant talking was pushing those limits.

Spence looked at Mitch with an annoyed look on his face, waiting impatiently for him to explain what he was talking about.

"Kevin, the last year he was in prison, wrote letters home to his dad, Buck—my great uncle. He knew the end was near and it didn't look like he was going to get a reprieve, so he started telling his dad the whole story in the letters; from day one through to the end..."

Spence's countenance changed from annoyed to one of interest.

"Yeah, go on," Spence said.

"The letters were supposed to be a secret, for Buck's eyes only, and apparently my Uncle Buck kept them a secret because nobody ever found out what happened to Wiley and Mary," Mitch continued.

"And you know?" Spence asked, Mitch now having his full attention.

"Yep, I do. It's all in the letters."

"Wow! Can I read the letters?" Spence asked, excitedly.

"Sure, when we go back home," Mitch replied.

"Where did you get the letters anyway?"

"I found them in a trunk in my attic, all in a bundle tied up with a string. When I saw the return address with Kevin's name I got real curious and started reading them. If you start with the oldest one and read them in the order they're dated it reads like a book about what he and Wiley did up there in Blind Valley back in 1969. It's cool, but it's scary, too."

"Cool! Wiley was Wiley Coates, right? Kody's cousin?" Spence asked.

"Yeah, it was Coates, but Kody won't admit he was his cousin, if he was," Mitch replied.

"All the Coates families around here are related. Everybody knows that," Spence argued.

"Maybe so, but Kody won't own up to being Wiley's cousin. I think his parents drove that into his head years ago. 'You're no cousin of his!' I'll bet they told him."

"Yeah, probably. So, what *did* happen up there?" Spence asked.

"I'll let you read it for yourself in the letters."

"How many letters are there?" Spence wanted to know.

Mitch thought about that for a moment and then answered, "Ah-Twelve."

"Cool!"

"Hey, Spence. I think you've got a bite," Mitch said, pointing to Spence's bobber.

Spence gave his rod a gentle jerk and began reeling in his line.

"Feels like a big one," he said, smiling and working his rod and reel.

Spence brought his catch to the shore and dipped his net into the water lifting from the waters a three pound lake trout.

"That's a keeper!" he yelled.

Mitch laughed and helped Spence get his fish into the water bucket.

"You going to have your mom cook that trout for supper tonight, Spence?" Mitch asked.

Spence looked into the pail and replied, "Nah, guess not. I really don't like fish all that much."

Mitch wet his hand in the pail water and caught the fish, looking at Spence for his approval. Spence nodded his agreement and Mitch carefully placed the trout back into the water at the lake's edge. Mitch released his grip and the beautiful fish swam hurriedly away, disappearing into the sun's glitter on the wind stippled surface of the lake.

Both boys sat back down on the shore and looked out over the water in silence. It was a typical summer day in Carver, Montana. The altitude of the alpine town kept the temperature in the high seventies, and the dry air and breeze made it the most perfect of days for fishing, or any other outdoor activity one might choose on a day like this.

A good twenty minutes passed before Mitch finally spoke, breaking the silence of the lake shore.

"So, Spence-I was wondering..."

Mitch paused.

"Wondering what?" Spence asked, turning to look at Mitch.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go up to Blind Valley and have a look around?"

"Why? I mean, what's there to see up there after all these years?"

"I dunno. Kevin did say where their campsite had been. I thought maybe we could find where they camped and maybe-I dunno, maybe find some evidence. Maybe find the cave."

"Yeah, I remember hearing about that cave. They searched for that cave for weeks and came up with nothing. Some priest was supposed to have received a map from Kevin on his last day on death row, but he lost it, right?"

"Right. He said he misplaced it and tried to draw a new one from memory, but it was of no use to the sheriff. They never found it," Mitch explained, filling Spence in on some of the old details of the case.

"What was supposed to be in that cave?" Spence asked.

"Mary and Wiley were supposed to be in it, but since they could never find it the sheriff finally decided that the cave was just a hoax on them by Kevin leading them on a wild goose chase for his own twisted reasons. The priest never said what Kevin told him in confidence, but since Kevin did ask him to give the map to Dr. Clemmons, Mary's dad, the priest was okay with that much figuring Kevin intended for Mary and Wiley's whereabouts to be known. But then he lost the map somehow."

"So, no one knows what really happened up there to this day then, right?" Spence asked.

"I do," Mitch stated. "I read the letters. It's all in there. There is a cave and Mary and Wiley are in it. Wouldn't it be cool to find it ourselves?"

"Yeah, that would be kinda cool. Do the letters say where the cave is?" Spence asked, his interest in Mitch's little adventure growing.

"No, he never tells that. Only that it wasn't far from their campsite. If we can find their campsite maybe we can find the cave!" Mitch blurted out, excited over the thought.

"Okay, but our parents are never going to let us go to Blind Valley. That Oriel Peak country is wild and rugged. I know my mom won't agree to let me go."

"That's why I think we tell them we're going camping on Horse Tooth like we always do. Then, we drive out 77 to the Oriel Peak turnoff and hike up to Blind Valley. You know what Kevin and Wiley called it? They called it Short Pines. That was their code name for Blind Valley. It says so right in the letters."

"So, come on. Let's get over to your house. I want to read these letters before I agree to this trip. Are we going to ask Kody to go-if we go?" Spence wanted to know.

"Yeah, sure. He should come along, too."

"Even if he makes fun of your leg? That'll be a long hike and a difficult climb up into the valley. If you have trouble or fall behind he'll be sure to crack wise on your leg."

"That's okay. I can take it. He doesn't really mean any harm by it. Not like the other kids at school."

"Okay then. Let's have a look at those letters," Spence announced, as he stood up and gathered his fishing equipment. "When will we go-*if* we go?"

"How about we leave Sunday? I've got to help Dad on Saturday. He wants to clear some brush from behind the house and I'm supposed to help, but Sunday should be fine."

Spence nodded and began walking back toward his car. Mitch quickly gathered up his things and hurried to catch up to Spence. As he limped along, slowly gaining on Spence, he thought about his leg. He had never allowed it to stop him from trying to do whatever he wanted to do, but the hike to Blind Valley would be a long and hard one. He could only hope that he could hold up all the way to the top.

Spence drove back to Mitch's house and the two friends went straight up to Mitch's room where Mitch retrieved a bundle of twelve letters from under his mattress.

"Here you go, Spence. I think when you're done with these you'll be rarin' to go up there just like I am. I mean, wouldn't it be cool to find that cave and all?"

"Yeah, the cave would be cool, but if you're right about what's in these letters, there are two dead kids up in that cave, too. I don't know how neat that will be," Spence said, opening the first letter.

Mitch lowered his gaze to the floor and replied, "Yeah, that may *not* be so cool."

Spence spent the next hour carefully reading the letters. Mitch watched Spence's expression as he read through the letters, which changed from deep concern to outright horror as he proceeded through the pages.

When Spence finished he placed the letters in a stack on Mitch's desk and stared at Mitch with a deep, penetrating stare.

"God, Mitch-That's terrible what happened up there in that cave...and what happened to those students."

"Yeah, I know. Still wanna go?" Mitch asked.

"Not really, but I will if it's important to you. Kevin was *your* cousin, not mine. If you feel like you've got to go I'll stick by you."

"You think Kody will want to go?" Mitch asked.

"That lunkhead? Of course he'll want to go. He wouldn't miss something like this for all the beans in Boston."

"Beans in Boston?" Mitch laughed.

"My mom always says that, I dunno," Spence said, throwing a pillow at Mitch. "Just watch it, dweeb!"

Mitch threw the pillow back at Spence and they broke into a full-blown wrestling match that ended when Spence pinned Mitch to the bed and simultaneously Mrs. Reynolds' voice came rising up the stairs demanding the boys "Settle down up there!".

"Whoa, your mom's getting pissed," Spence said, laughing, but quietly.

"Come on. Let's go over to Kody's and tell him about the trip," Mitch suggested.

Spence let Mitch up off the bed and replied, "Okay, but are you sure you want him along?"

"Yeah, he ain't so bad, really. And besides, Wiley was his cousin, probably anyway, whether he'll admit it or not. He should come, too."

"Okay then. Let's go. There's no turning back now," Spence stated, in an ominous tone that Mitch didn't particularly like the sound of, but shrugged off just the same.

The drive from Mitch's house in Greenville to Kody's in Carver proper took the boys over the Upper Saline Bridge, which they knew from the published details of the tragedy was where the whole search for Mary Clemmons and Alicia Koppe had begun back in 1969.

What had taken place that year near Carver had not been forgotten. It was still talked about in the barber shops and any time the names Reynolds or Coates were brought up. It had been a tragedy that few cities ever see, let alone a small town the size of Carver.

Carver, except for the winter skiing season, was a small town of nearly eleven thousand people, nestled neatly into an alpine valley in the Montana Rocky Mountains. Except for during the skiing season it was pretty much isolated and insulated from the woes of the outside world. In 1969, when one of the town's founding family descendants, Wiley Coates, and his good friend Kevin Reynolds decided to take the law into their own hands, Carver changed forever. Gone was the innocence of this pristine alpine village and forevermore the town would carry the stigma of kidnapping and murder.

Spencer Doogan and Mitch Reynolds knew the story well, but until Mitch came across the letters, they only knew the

half of it. Now, as far as they knew, they were the only two living beings that knew the whole story. The letters had been written to Mitch's great Uncle Buck, Kevin's father, and Buck had passed away a year ago. The boys now felt like the keepers of a great secret and the more they thought about it the more intriguing the trip to Blind Valley was becoming.

Spence pulled his car into Kody's drive and he and Mitch hopped out and jogged up to Kody's front door. Spence rapped on the door and stepped back.

"Think he's home?" Mitch asked.

"Probably. He's more than likely messing with his computers, like always."

"Well, you've got to admit, he's good at building some serious systems," Mitch reminded Spence.

"Yes, he is that, but he needs to get out more and live a little. I've quit asking him to go fishing with us anymore. He always says he has things to do, and that means computers to build," Spence said, shaking his head.

"He makes good money at it, Spence. I heard he built one for the restaurant at Carver Inn with a touch screen or whatever you call them. You know what I mean where you just touch the item ordered on the screen and it gets cooked. Did that make sense?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Spence answered, laughing. "I don't know what you call them either."

Spence and Mitch waited all of three minutes for Kody to come to the door. They had all but decided that maybe he wasn't home after all when the door swung open revealing Kody standing there with a motherboard in his hand.

"See..." Spence said, with a snicker.

"See what?" Kody asked.

"Never mind, nerd. Can we come in?" Spence asked.

"Yeah, sure-Sorry," Kody apologized. "What's up?"

Kody didn't wait for an answer but turned instead and led Mitch and Spence to his workshop in the basement.

"I'm putting together a system for the high school biology lab," Kody stated, as he sat down at his workbench. "So what brings you guys by?" he asked again.

"We wanted to ask you if you want to go on a campout in the mountains. Interested?" Spence asked.

"Jeez, I don't know. I've got several orders to fill. I don't think I've got the time to go camping. Where are you guys headed, and when?" Kody asked.

"The when is this coming Sunday morning. The where is Blind Valley," Spence informed him.

"Blind Valley, as in up on Oriel Peak?" Kody asked, quite surprised.

"That's it," Spence replied.

"Why there? What's wrong with Horse Tooth-where we always go?" Kody asked, trying to understand the change in the usual routine.

"Because Mitch's cousin Kevin didn't kidnap Mary and Alicia and take them to Horse Tooth. They took them to Blind Valley," Spence answered.

"What?" Kody asked. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"We're going up to Blind Valley to find Kevin and Wiley's camp and search for the cave they used to hide out in up there and maybe even find the bodies," Spence explained.

"What bodies?" Kody asked, still completely in the dark.

"Wiley and Mary, duh," Spence said, turning to Mitch. "Mitch, show Kody the letters."

Mitch pulled the bundled letters from his hip pocket and handed them to Kody.

"Those are letters that Kevin Reynolds wrote home to his dad from death row. They spell out everything that happened back in 1969," Spence told Kody.

"Everything?" Kody asked, his surprise showing on his face.

"Well-almost," Mitch offered.

"Yeah, Kody, he tells everything except where the cave is, but maybe we can find that ourselves-with a little luck," Spence said, trying to interest Kody in their adventure.

Kody placed the motherboard down on his bench and swiveled his chair to face Spence directly. Spence could see the wheels turning in Kody's mind.

"You think we can?" Kody asked, after a few moments.

"Find the cave?" Spence asked.

"Yeah. You really think we can find it? I've always wanted to explore a cave. That does sound kinda cool," Kody admitted.

"So you're in?" Mitch asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll try to get this computer finished before it's time to leave on Sunday. My dad can deliver it to the school on Monday for me. That'll work out okay."

"Good, then it's settled," Spence said, smiling broadly. "But, we're going to Horse Tooth as far as your folks are concerned. Remember that. We've got to keep that

straight. Kody, you get your computer for the school finished and Mitch and I will take care of getting everything ready to go. All you need to do is bring your sleeping bag and tent. We'll bring the food for us all and any equipment we'll be needing. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," Kody replied.

"I'll pick you up at four Sunday morning-So be ready," Spence ordered.

Looking at Mitch, Spence continued, "Let's go dig out our equipment and put together a shopping list, Mitch. We'll want to make sure we don't forget anything 'cause we'll be a long way from home or a store up there."

Spence and Mitch left Kody to complete his computer system for the biology lab and headed for Mitch's house to begin their preparations for the trip to Blind Valley. Spence knew, from having listened to his late father's tales of hunting up there that it was rugged country and a long way from help and aid if anything went wrong. He knew that good preparation would be the key to a successful and uneventful exploration of Oriel Peak's Blind Valley caldera. What he also knew, that he did not share with his younger friends, was that up on that mountain serious accidents could happen despite the best of planning and preparation.

CHAPTER TWO

Camped in the Caldera

As Sunday mornings go, the boys had picked a great one for their hike up to Blind Valley. It was a clear and balmy seventy degrees at noon when Spence and Kody reached the bottom of the escarpment.

According to Kevin's first letter, they would have some free climbing to do before reaching the rope, if it was still there, that would aid them in climbing the worst the escarpment had to offer.

"Wow," Kody said to Spence, looking up the massive slope before them.

"Yeah-wow," Spence agreed.

"I'm willing to go part-way up there, but if we don't find that rope, Spence, I don't think I've got the marbles to go all the way," Kody informed his friend.

Spence was silent, shaking his head in agreement with Kody.

"So, are you willing to give it a go?" Kody asked.

"I guess so. Let's spread out here a little and then start up," Spence suggested. "This is about the least steep part of the escarpment so it figures Kevin and Wiley would have picked this area for their climb. If you spot the rope, give me a holler-and-be careful. I don't want to have to try to carry you back off this mountain."

"Nor me, you," Kody replied.

Kody and Spence moved a little away from one another, leaving about twenty feet between them, and started up. The footing was terrible and treacherous and they found themselves doing more crawling than climbing, but they were making progress. Little by little they inched their way up the escarpment, sliding back three feet for every six they gained. Finally, after about fifteen minutes of scrambling and searching, it was Spence who yelled out.

"Hey, Kody! Got it!"

Spence looked back down to where he had spotted the old, weathered rope and thought to himself, *Boy, that sure looks old and rotten*. He picked up the rope about a foot from its end and gave it a good tug. To his surprise, it held fast to whatever it was attached to and didn't give any sign of breaking.

Kody worked his way over to Spence and watched as Spence gave the rope a second try.

"Pull on it, Spence. Give it a good tug-'cause it looks rotten to me."

"I am pulling on it. It's holding just fine," Spence replied, growing agitated with Kody's prodding.

"No, yank it a good one. Here, I'll yank on it with you. I don't wanna get half-way up there and have it break on us."

Kody moved over behind Spence and grabbed onto the rope, being careful not to slip and begin a long tumble down the escarpment.

"Okay-Now pull hard-Now!" Kody commanded.

The two boys gave the rope their best efforts and pulled with all their might-and it held, again. It was becoming apparent to them that despite the rope's age it still had the strength to hold them and aid them in their ascent of the Oriel Peak escarpment.

"See, Kody-I told you it was still good," Spence said, smiling at his friend.

Kody returned the smile and brushed back his vibrantly red hair from his eyes.

"Guess you're right. Wanna start up, or...?" Kody asked, stopping in mid-sentence to look back down the mountain they had just spent the last six hours climbing.

"Yeah, let's wait for Mitch," Spence replied. "After all, it's his expedition."

"Expedition?" Kody snickered. "You don't really believe all that crap in those letters do you?"

"Well, his cousin was in prison for killing those girls. Everyone knows that," Spence answered, scowling and looking back down the trail. "I suppose most of it's true-or at least some. The rope part turned out to be true, right?"

"Yeah that much panned out but some of that stuff in those letters seems pretty far-fetched to me," Kody answered, laughing a small laugh and raising his hand to his brow to shield out the sun. "Pretty far-fetched, and-this might not even be the same rope. It's been here a while, I'll grant you that, but I'm not sure it's been here over thirty years."

"Well, far-fetched or not, we agreed to come along with Mitch so we wait until he catches up. He should be the first to see the valley, if it's there."

"Oh, it's there all right. That much is true for sure. It's on the topo map," Kody replied.

"What I mean is-if it's there like his cousin *described* it in the letters-You know, like a giant soup bowl full of pygmy trees and all."

"Yeah. Hey, look! Here he comes," Kody pointed out, as Mitch broke from the forest's edge onto the alpine tundra. "By golly, it looks like he's going to make it after all."

Spence looked down the lower portion of the escarpment and saw Mitch breaking from the forest. He smiled and took a seat on a conveniently flat-topped rock. Kody did likewise and watched as Mitch made his way slowly onto the open tundra.

Mitch had sent Spence and Kody on ahead in hope of finding the rope his cousin had described in his first letter home to his father. In the series of letters, Kevin Reynolds had told a harrowing story of murder and mystery, about which Buck Reynolds had been sworn to secrecy. Kevin had apparently played his amnesia card, even with his father, right up until the very end. The letters had all been postmarked in the year 2001, the year of his execution. He had held all his secrets in over the twenty-three years he had been incarcerated after coming out of his coma and the alleged catatonia that had followed. In the letters to his father he had laid out the whole plan and the events that had followed on Oriel Peak. The only missing detail was the exact location of the cave that held fast the bodies of Wiley Coates and Mary Clemmons. *That* detail had been omitted completely, either by oversight or by design. It had become Mitch's belief that *that* little detail had been left out intentionally; Kevin protecting Wiley's resting place even to his last day. He had apparently offered up the cave in the map Father Cardosi had lost as a last minute gesture of good will.

The name Wiley Coates had not escaped any of the boys' attention and Kody was quick to point out that Wiley was not directly related to him, but maybe a distant cousin of some sort. Kody could distance himself from Wiley with such an explanation; after all, there were far too many Coates families in Carver to blame them all. But Mitch could not distance himself in that way. Kevin Reynolds was, or had been his cousin, and there was no getting around that. The stigma of being Kevin Reynolds' cousin had attached to him at birth and he had lived with it these past sixteen years hence. Thirty-four years had not erased from the collective memory of the good townsfolk of Carver, Montana what had taken place on Oriel Peak at the hands of Kevin Reynolds. The fact that Wiley Coates, Kevin's co-conspirator, had probably died in the events on Oriel Peak had diminished his role in the crimes to some extent. That, and the abundance of redheaded Coates kids running around Carver made it impractical to hold them all accountable.

Kody and Spence watched in silence as Mitch made his way across the open tundra below the escarpment. Finally, Spence looked at Kody and said, "He's still thirty minutes away you know."

"Yeah, I know. I'm surprised he made it this far on that peg-leg of his."

"Don't call it that," Spence demanded. "It's a prosthesis. He gets enough kidding about it from the others. We shouldn't call it a peg-leg, too."

"Well I wouldn't to his face, Spence. You know that."

"You shouldn't call it that *anytime*. It's just not right," Spence admonished.

The boys sat silently watching Mitch make his way up to the base of the escarpment. The August sun was warm and the sky was clear blue as far as the eye could see. Their presence on Oriel Peak seemed to be noticed by only one small murder of crows squawking nervously nearby. It was peaceful and serene and there was not a hint of the events and the tragedy that had taken place here some thirty-four years ago.

The silence of the mountain was broken by Kody's curiosity about why it had taken so long for Kevin Reynolds to be executed for his part in the 1969 massacre. He turned to Spence and asked him if he knew the reason.

"From what I understand from what I've read, Kody, Kevin was found up here in the valley in 1969, nearly frozen to death and in a coma, a coma he didn't wake up from until 1980. Actually, the doctors said he went from comatose to catatonic in 1970."

"What's catatonic?" Kody asked.

"Like suspended animation. He was awake, but totally unresponsive to his surroundings. Anyway-He wasn't expected to wake up at all. When he did, in 1980, it surprised everyone and it took quite a while to prepare for his trial, which took place in 1982. Kevin's defense was total amnesia. He couldn't argue that he hadn't been up here in Blind Valley, but he argued that he had absolutely no recollection of it. The jury didn't buy his story and he was convicted of murder and kidnapping and sentenced to the gas chamber. That was in 1982. Then the appeals started and the stays of execution, so it wasn't until nineteen years later, in 2001, that he was executed. That's when they last searched Blind Valley for the cave and the remains of Wiley and Mary."

"Huh," Kody grunted, thinking about what Spence had explained to him. "That last search was because of some map, wasn't it?" he asked, after a moment.

"Yeah. Kevin allegedly drew a map to the cave and gave it to the priest who visited him in his cell on his last day. The priest lost it though and tried to redraw the map from memory, but it proved useless, and needless to say, they never found the cave."

Kody nodded his head and then went back to thinking thoughts of his own. As they continued to wait for Mitch, Spence began thinking about how they had come to be here. Mitch had found the bundled letters in a trunk in his attic. Had the letters been saved intentionally over the years, or had they been just a bundle of unread letters that had passed along from Buck Reynolds' older brother Wilbur to his son and then on to Mitch's father? According to Mitch, his father was born the year after all that had occurred on Oriel Peak had taken place. Mitch's grandfather, Wilbur, was still living so it seemed likely that he might have inherited the letters when Buck passed away. Did Wilbur even know he had them, or had they just been pitched into the trunk along with a lot of other junk Wilbur never took the time to look at? Whatever the case may have been, the letters had survived several moves and had now become a roadmap for Mitch, Kody and himself to follow to the site of Carver's most tragic of historical events. The three of them were on an expedition of their own creation and nobody knew what they were up to but themselves. That thought sent a shiver up Spence's spine. Perhaps it wasn't the wisest decision they had ever made, coming up here alone and without leaving word with their folks of where they were really going, but it was done. Could they turn back now? *No*, Spence thought, *but I'll ask the others anyway when Mitch gets up here.*

Mitch made good progress despite his handicap. He had grown very accustomed to his prosthesis since losing his left leg to cancer three years ago. He stumbled a few times and the loose alabaster under foot made his forward, uphill motion difficult, but he trudged on. Within the hour he came to the foot of the escarpment and halted, looking up at what lay ahead of him. He paused only momentarily before pushing on and up. Twenty minutes later he was seated on a rock alongside Spence and Kody.

"Made it!" Mitch said, exuberantly, smiling a broad smile for the others to see.

"Damned if you didn't!" Spence replied, smiling back at his friend. "How you feeling?"

"Good! Real good. Did you guys find the rope?" Mitch asked, anxiously.

"Yep. We sure did," Spence answered.

"Well, we found a rope," Kody chimed in. "But we don't know if it's *the* rope."

Spence shot Kody a stern glance and addressed Mitch's question.

"We found *the* rope. It's right here," Spence said, reaching down and picking up the end of the old, gray rope. "It's still sound, too."

"Cool!" Mitch exclaimed. "You tested it then?"

"Yep, we sure did, Mitch. It seems fine to me. Right, Kody?"

"I suppose so, but I don't think that rope is the one that your cousin put here. It's old, but not *that* old," Kody replied, glaring back at Spence, not willing to concede the point.

Spence ignored Kody's glare and turned back to Mitch.

"So, you did real good getting this far, Mitch. Are you sure your leg is okay? I mean..."

"The stump's a little tender, but it'll hold up fine. That last few hundred yards was rough on the breathing though. How high are we anyway?" Mitch asked, changing the subject from his personal handicap to one he knew they all shared.

"I have no idea, but I'd guess perhaps eleven thousand feet, give or take a few feet," Spence replied, smiling at his friend. "You gonna be okay with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with my lungs, Spence. I can handle it just fine," Mitch replied, reaching into his shirt pocket and retrieving a folded piece of paper.

"What's that?" Kody asked, noticing the paper.

"I summarized all the key points from the letters onto one sheet of paper we can use as a guide to find the locations my cousin went to in the valley. I figure if we trace his steps we might get lucky and find the cave he talked about. I mean, that's why *I'm* here. I want to find that cave and maybe even Mary and Wiley's remains; their skeletons."

"That is, *if* your cousin is telling the truth in those letters," Kody stated, a devilish sneer on his face.

"Why wouldn't he be telling the truth?" Mitch demanded. "He was on death row when he wrote them and he was writing them to his father. Why would he lie?"

"He wouldn't," Spence answered, before Kody could get in another barb. "I'm sure that if we find the cave it will be just like your cousin described it, Mitch."

"I'm not so sure," Kody said. "I could have sworn I heard somewhere that they had retrieved the bodies of Wiley and Mary."

"I don't know what you heard or where you heard it, Kody, but the fact is that they tried to find the cave using a map that the priest had drawn from memory after he misplaced the original one Kevin had given him. I told you about that before, on the escarpment. By the time the priest realized the original was gone, Kevin was too. Apparently it wasn't very accurate because they never found the cave or the remains," Spence explained. "Dr. Clemmons went ahead and buried an empty coffin in Oak Meadows Cemetery and put up a real nice stone for Mary, but the fact is that the coffin is empty. They never found her-or Wiley."

"He misplaced the map? You told me that before, but I still don't see how in the hell he could do that," Kody stated, with a look of complete disbelief on his face.

"He said that he had put it in his pocket and by the time the execution had taken place he had totally forgotten about it. He claimed that later, the next day when he remembered it, it was nowhere to be found. He tried to reproduce it for the sheriff, but he had glanced at it only briefly before the execution and didn't remember much of the detail."

"How do you know so much about all this?" Kody asked.

"I did some checking and asking around," Spence replied, smiling.

"Whatever," Kody replied, shaking his head. "Let's get going. We still have a long way to go to the top of this ridge and we need to be on the other side before nightfall. I'll go first," he finished, grabbing onto the end of the rope. "I think we better do this one at a time so we don't put too much stress on this old line."

"Okay, go ahead, Kody. You go ahead and test it for us while we watch from here," Spence replied, laughing.

Kody didn't answer Spence, but shot him another mean glare and began up the rope. Spence and Mitch remained at the end of the line watching Kody and holding their breath each time a foot would slip and Kody would cling to the rope for his life. But, against all odds, Kody made it to the top and stood staring over the edge into Blind Valley. He didn't even look back at his friends waiting below, so magnificent was the sight before him.

Mitch went next, followed by Spence, and when all three boys had made it safely to the top of the escarpment they sat and stared in awe of the beauty of this soup bowl valley, nestled with perfect symmetry into the side of Oriel Peak. Perhaps ten minutes passed before Kody finally spoke, breaking the silence.

"Hey Mitch—Where do we go from here? This is one cool valley."

"We go down and to the left. Over to that massive wall of granite to the west. That's where Kevin said they made their first camp," Mitch answered.

"Why not just go straight for the cave?" Kody wanted to know.

"Because, we don't know where it is. You should have read the letters more carefully when I gave them to you, Kody. Kevin said in one letter that the cave was not far from their camp and in another letter he mentioned they never had the chance to explore the east half of the valley. So I figure we should try to find their camp and then search to the northwest, deeper into the valley like I think they would have gone."

"So, that's what we're going to do then?" Kody asked.

"Not today, but tomorrow. For today we're just going to try to find Kevin and Wiley's campsite and bed down for the night," Mitch explained. "Tomorrow morning we'll get up early and begin following the wall to the north."

"Well then, let's get moving and get settled in. I don't know about you guys, but I'm famished," Kody stated, rubbing his stomach.

"I think we all are, Kody. Mitch, you take the lead. This is your expedition," Spence suggested, smiling at his best friend.

The boys stood and hiked their gear onto their backs and headed down the long embankment that led to the floor of Blind Valley. As they crossed the tree line into the forest they marveled at the stunted trees that formed the forest on this side of the escarpment.

"So this is what Kevin meant," Mitch commented, after a short while.

"What's that?" Spence asked.

"Remember what I told you before? Kevin and Wiley called this valley Short Pines," Mitch answered, looking up at the treetops.

"Well, that's appropriate," Spence replied. "There isn't a tree here over thirty feet tall."

"Wonder why?" Kody interjected, also amazed at the stunted forest around them.

"My guess would be that we are at the same altitude in here as we were just before we broke the tree line on the other side of the escarpment. The whole valley is at that altitude so the whole forest is stunted. Sound logical to you guys?" Mitch asked, pleased that he had come up with this theory.

"Yeah, sounds logical," Spence answered.

"S'pose so," Kody whispered. "Come on though-Let's keep moving."

The threesome marched on to the west toward the ever more imposing western wall of the valley. The closer they moved toward it the higher it loomed over the pygmy forest. After another thirty minutes or so they broke from the trees and the wall of solid granite loomed over them, overhanging the westernmost portion of the valley.

"Wow! It's just like Kevin said," Mitch spoke, in awe of the massive overhanging wall.

"You know, Mitch-You're gonna have to fill us in on the whole story after we get settled in camp. I know bits and pieces from the letters and from what you've told me so far, but I really don't know the whole of it all," Spence said, staring up at the monolithic rock above him. "Wow..." he muttered, quietly under his breath.

Mitch gave the instruction to start looking for any sign of Kevin and Wiley's old campsite. Kody argued that it made little difference if they actually found it or not, but Mitch was insistent. He wanted to camp exactly where his cousin had camped and that was the long and the short of it. To Mitch, it *did* make a difference.

It was the charred rocks that clued them all in to the location of the old camp. Oh, the rocks had been scattered about, but Mitch figured that they would have been scattered relatively evenly by his cousin and Wiley. Therefore, their camp must have been about central to the location of the collection of charred rocks. Mitch further decided that using the same rocks would be cool, so those were gathered to make their own fire pit.

Once the fire pit had been established the boys set about pitching their tents. Each boy, as a part of his gear, had brought his own one-man pup tent. They pitched the three tents with the openings facing the fire pit and evenly spaced out around it like three spokes on a wheel. This way they could lie on their bellies in their tents and all talk over the fire before going to sleep.

The camp now established the boys set about cooking their meals. Dinty Moore stew for Mitch, Canterbury stew for Spence, and Kody had a large can of corned beef hash, fried just right to a golden brown. It wasn't "five-star", but it was good and made even better by the smell of their pinewood fire.

Dark was now descending upon the valley and in the shadow of the overhang the boys were now in the darkest spot in the valley. As they sat by the fire in nearly total

darkness they could look east, out into the valley, and still see dusk. It was a surreal setting befitting what Mitch knew had taken place here some thirty-four years before. He began to feel as if he may not ever come back out of the dark into the dusk of the valley beyond-but then-it was just a feeling. He thought about that for a long while and wondered if he was wise to be up here revisiting his cousin Kevin's horrors. Perhaps it would be prudent not to go find the cave. Perhaps it would be wise to abandon this whole venture right now and head back home. Perhaps...

Mitch's thoughts were interrupted by Spence's voice.

"So, Mitch. When are you going to fill us in on all the details of your cousin's experience up here?"

Mitch shook off his thoughts and slowly turned to look at Spence.

"Well-Ah-Right now I guess."

Mitch paused a moment and then began again.

"It all started in 1968. My cousin had two good friends, Wiley Coates and Bryce Spencer. They were all kinda nerds as far as the other students at Carver High were concerned, but there were two girls who really gave the three a hard way to go; Mary Clemmons and her best friend, Alicia Koppe. Somehow, Mary and Alicia were responsible for the death of Bryce. Kevin never went into that in detail in the letters, but I know from rumors around town that it had to do with a skiing *accident*. Anyhow, Kevin and Wiley decided to get revenge for Bryce's death outside the law, and according to Kevin, the law was none the wiser-at first. So, they hatched a plan to kidnap Mary and Alicia from a school dance and bring them here to Blind Valley."

"What did they intend to do with them here?" Kody asked.

"According to Kevin, the plan was to take them to the cave and scare the bejebus out of them. They had already found the cave on a previous trip up here. They thought it would be the perfect place to get justice for Bryce. The idea was to make them fetch and do for them, never knowing how long they might be held captive; never knowing if they'd ever be let go."

"Did they intend to let them go?" Kody asked, interrupting Mitch again. "I mean, what about the consequences?"

"I think Kevin was, but I'm not so sure about Wiley. The final plan they arrived at was to simply leave the cave one day and not come back, leaving the girls to find their

way out in the black of the cave and then find their way through the valley and over the escarpment. Their fate would then be in their own hands. If they made it back, so be it. If not, there was nothing to tie Kevin and Wiley to their disappearance so they'd be in the clear, or so they thought."

"So, is that what they did then?" Kody asked.

"No, not exactly. The plan went haywire on them. First they were not alone in the valley like they expected to be. There was a school field trip up here when they arrived, a group of geology students. Kevin said that they ran into two of the students while traveling to the cave and one thing led to another and they killed both kids. That set Wiley off and they went and found the rest of the group and murdered them all."

"No shit! Damn!" Kody exclaimed. "What about *that*, Spence?"

"Yeah-Damn," Spence answered, softly. "I read that in the letters, but it sounds worse when you hear it out loud."

"Anyway," Mitch continued. "They went from there to the cave to carry out their plan, but again the unexpected happened. Mary got hold of a gun and killed Wiley, so Kevin shot Mary, right between the eyes..."

"Wait a minute," Kody interrupted again. "Where would Mary get hold of a gun?"

"Ah-I don't know-exactly, but that's what Kevin wrote in the letter," Mitch answered, nervously. "She just did, I guess."

"Uh huh. So, go on," Kody instructed, growing a little skeptical at this point. "Are you sure you're telling us the whole story?"

"Yeah! I'm telling what Kevin wrote and what I have heard my family say about it all. That's all I know," Mitch replied, indignantly.

"It's okay, Mitch. Go ahead. Finish the story," Spence said, nodding and smiling at Mitch.

"Okay-Well-Kevin now takes pity on Alicia and decides that he's just going to take her home and face the music. He's sick of the killing and I guess he has come to his senses or something, but a giant snowstorm comes up and when they leave the cave it's like twenty below zero outside. Alicia freezes to death along the way and Kevin carries her as far as he can before collapsing himself. The cops find them, Alicia frozen solid in Kevin's arms and Kevin nearly dead himself."

Mitch paused and looked up at the overhang above them.

"That it?"

"Yeah, Kody. That's pretty much it," Mitch replied.

"And Kevin never said how Mary got her hands on a gun?" Kody asked, squinting hard at Mitch.

"No-Ah-No, he didn't."

"Well it all seems pretty far-fetched to me. You're telling us, if I have it all right, that your cousin murdered a bunch of students up here in this valley and then Mary Clemmons, his prisoner so to speak, killed Wiley. And then to top it all off, Kevin killed Mary? Is that it? Do I have it right?" Kody asked, staring at Mitch in disbelief.

"Yeah, but Mary killed Wiley in the cave, not in the valley. That was later on, after..."

Mitch stopped in mid sentence.

"After what?" Kody prodded.

"Mitch," Spence said, joining the conversation. "It does seem pretty wild. I mean, I knew about the students getting murdered, that's in the official record of the incident and in the letters, but the letters never said a thing about what happened after that. There was no mention of Mary shooting Wiley or Kevin shooting Mary. The official record of the case also states that Mary and Wiley were never found and were assumed to have perished in the blizzard."

"That's what I mean," Kody chimed in. "That's how the story goes around town, too. I've heard it. Look, man. We came up here with you to find the cave and maybe find Mary and Wiley's bones. That's cool, but I'm getting the feeling you know more about this than the rest of the world."

Mitch's gaze drifted from Kody to Spence and then back again to Kody. Their faces said it all. They knew. They knew there was more to the story than he was telling and he knew they wanted some answers.

Mitch glanced at Spence and admitted, "There was a *thirteenth* letter, Spence."

"A *thirteenth* letter?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you mention that before, Mitch? Do you have it with you?" Spence asked.

"Yeah, do you?" Kody repeated.

"Yes," Mitch answered, sheepishly. "But I didn't mention it because it was kinda personal."

"Personal?" Kody blurted out. "How could it be personal?"

"Give him a chance, Kody," Spence ordered, sternly.

Mitch thought about what he would say next, how much he should reveal, and then spoke.

"In the thirteenth letter, the last letter, he asked that his father never reveal what he found in the cave. He didn't want to start a bunch of people going to the cave and looking for him..."

"Him?" Spence asked.

"Sam Elliott," Mitch replied, softly, almost inaudibly.

"Sam Elliott? Now who the hell is Sam Elliott?" Kody demanded.

"A mountain man," Mitch answered, still nearly beneath his breath.

"A mountain man-Now I've heard it all. They found a mountain man living in the cave?" Kody asked, laughing.

"Not *living*. He was dead. They found his skeleton, still dressed and in bed where he had died. He had his rifle resting in his arms across his body. That's the gun Mary used to shoot Wiley," Mitch informed them. "When Kevin saw what Mary had done to Wiley he shot Mary with his pistol, right between the eyes."

Spence and Kody were speechless.

"Then, after everything was said and done and Mary and Wiley lay dead in the cave, Kevin said that Sam stopped him from shooting Alicia and as punishment for what he had already done he sent the snowstorm to the valley."

"What?" Kody blared out. "What the hell are you talking about? You said Sam was dead!"

"He was. Kevin said it was his ghost or something like that. He figured that Sam sent the storm to test his metal, to see if he could survive it and bring Alicia out alive. At that point, Kevin figured Sam had put the full burden on him to make right what could still be made right."

"Mitch-If all of this is true, don't you think you should have given the thirteenth letter to the sheriff? After all, Dr. Clemmons is still alive you know. He'd probably like to know what happened to his daughter and finally get her back," Spence suggested.

"I thought about that, Spence, but then I got to thinking that we should make sure it's true before we go getting his hopes up and all. You know, find the cave if we can and then see what we find inside."

"I still don't see why you kept Sam a secret from us," Kody said.

"You'd have found out about him as soon as we found the cave, Kody. I'd have told you then. But, on the chance

that we might never find it I was going to keep Kevin's secret about Sam. That's why," Mitch explained.

"He told the priest how to find the cave. He gave him a map to it. He must have had a change of heart right before his execution," Kody suggested.

"Perhaps. But we don't know that for sure. We don't know what he told the priest and we don't know that the map he supposedly gave him was accurate. It could have been Kevin's last big joke or something."

"Then why protect his secret?" Kody asked.

"Because maybe he was sincere about helping Dr. Clemmons get Mary back. We just don't know," Mitch explained.

"I'll tell you what I think," Spence joined in. "I think we won't prove a thing arguing about it here and now. I think we need to find that cave tomorrow and see what's in it. That's the only way we'll sort this out. I suggest we all hit the hay and get a good night's rest so we can get an early start in the morning. Agreed?"

"S'pose you're right, Spence," Mitch agreed.

"Yeah, I guess so, too," Kody said, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. "I'm pooped out for sure anyway."

Each of the boys crawled back into his tent and settled in for the night. None of them knew what they might or might not find as the day unfolded tomorrow, but each went to bed with his own visions of what lay in the cave they hoped to find before returning home to Carver.

Each boy slipped slowly into slumber, except Kody. Kody, although the skeptic of the group was captivated by the thought of Sam Elliott, a real mountain man, lying silently, perpetually in the depths of the hidden cave. He didn't want to admit it to the others, especially to Mitch, but suddenly this trip was a lot more exciting than working on computer systems.

It had been a long and tiring day. But as tired as he was Kody couldn't let go of the vision of Sam lying on his bed, his rifle across his chest and cradled gently in his arms, and his buckskins worn and dirty from a lifetime of hunting and surviving in these mountains. Kody could see him plainly, as plainly as if he were standing at the foot of Sam's bed—and then he realized that he was standing at the foot of Sam's bed. He lunged up in his tent, scrambling from his sleeping bag and shaking off the vision he had just seen through closed eyes. *Was it a dream?* he wondered. *A nightmare?* Kody felt that it was neither. He had been awake, not asleep—and he *knew* it.

Kody clicked on his flashlight and crawled from his tent and stood looking east, out from under the overhang toward the rising moon and Jupiter chasing it into the sky. He shined his light toward the forest and followed its beam to the first pine tree he came to and sat down, resting his back on the trunk. He closed his eyes and was again standing at the foot of Sam Elliott's bed.

"*You'll be safe here,*" a deep and gruff voice said to him. Kody felt the ground shake and heard a terrible rumble coming from the pitch blackness of the cliff. He opened his eyes but could see nothing. He closed his eyes again and when he opened them next he had the impression that time had passed, but it was still the dead of night. He stood and headed back toward camp totally unaware of how he had ended up spending the night at the foot of a tree-or at the edge of the forest. What he did recall was someone telling him "*You'll be safe here,*" although he had no idea what they had meant or who that person had been.

As Kody walked back to camp, he chalked up the whole experience to a nightmare in which he had gone sleepwalking, something he hadn't done since he was a toddler. "*You'll be safe here,*" he thought again, and could almost hear the voice that had spoken to him. He shook the thought from his head and continued toward his camp. It was about ten minutes later that he realized that he had lost his bearings and he had absolutely no idea of where he was, and much worse, where his camp was located.

CHAPTER THREE

Who is Cardosi?

Casey Jeffries sat restlessly in his swivel chair. He found himself looking out the window of his new office toward Mount Crane and thinking about the events of thirty-four years ago that had all begun on the summit of that lofty peak towering in the distance.

Casey had heard about the events that had begun on that peak in 1968, but it wasn't until two weeks ago that he'd thought about it in years. But ever since Mitch Reynolds had stopped by asking about the incident he had thought about little else. He found himself very grateful that he wasn't the sheriff back when all that had taken place. That had been one big nightmare for Al Dramico who had been the sheriff at the time.

He knew that Stan had been deputy back then and Stan had helped him greatly in making his transition from deputy to Carver's sheriff. Stan and he had not talked much about the Reynolds case back before Stan had retired, so there had been little he could tell young Mitch about it. It was like he had told Mitch, Stan hadn't liked talking about it much.

Despite the fact that Mitch was Kevin Reynolds' cousin, the more Casey thought about it the stranger it seemed that Mitch would be so interested in a murder case that took place so long ago, years before his birth. Still, the kid *had* been very interested and had asked a million questions for which he had very few answers.

Casey swiveled his chair around and stood behind his desk, hands resting on the desktop. He was just about to go across the room to the Norcold for a cold Diet Coke when Stan walked through his office door.

"Hey, Stan. What brings you around?" Casey greeted his former boss.

"Just in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by for a visit," Stan replied, smiling broadly. "What's up around here?"

"Nothing much; just the usual. Want a Coke, Stan?" Casey asked, as he moved around his desk and headed for the small refrigerator sitting next to his tropical fish tank.

"Sure. Don't mind if I do," Stan answered.

"Diet okay?"

"Fine," Stan nodded.

Casey retrieved two Diet Cokes from the Norcold and handed one to Stan.

"Say, Stan. I'm glad you stopped by. I've been meaning to give you a call," Casey said, sitting back down in his chair.

"Yeah. What about, Case?" Stan asked, taking a seat across Casey's desk.

"You remember Kevin Reynolds I'm sure," Casey began.

"Of course I do. Why?" Stan asked, a frown crossing his face.

"Well—His cousin was here a couple of weeks ago."

"Mitch?" Stan asked.

"Then you know him?"

"Sure. Good kid. What'd he want?" Stan asked, his curiosity aroused.

"He wanted to know all about his cousin's case and I mean *all* the details."

"He say why he wanted to know?" Stan asked.

"When I asked he said he was just curious, that he'd heard tales and wanted the straight story so he could answer to his *friends* that brought it up from time to time."

"Uh huh. What else?" Stan questioned.

"That's about it. I told him what I knew, which wasn't much. That was a ways before my time, Stan. I told him to check with you if he needed to know more, but he never came back here looking for you."

"Huh. That's interesting. I wonder what dredged that up all of a sudden?"

"You don't believe he's just curious like he says?" Casey asked.

"No, Case, I don't. Something must have prodded him. I just can't imagine what right now. Oh well—I'll check with Mitch and see what it is he wants to know. I'd like to know what brought this up all of a sudden. By the way, how about you and Marsha joining me for dinner tomorrow night? Say, my house, around six?"

"Sure, Stan. Sounds good. I'll check with Marsha and if there's a conflict I'll let you know," Casey replied.

"Good. See you tomorrow night then. I better be moving along, Case," Stan said, standing. "No need to get up—I think I can find my way out of here."

"I hope," Casey laughed. "Take care, Stan and thanks for stopping by."

Stan made his way through the all too familiar station house and out the front door to his new Jeep; his retirement gift to himself. As he opened the car door the thought of Mitch Reynolds asking Casey about that whole mess back in 1969 raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

That's nothing that needs revisiting, he thought to himself, and he shuddered visibly.

It was about two miles down the road that Stan's curiosity got the best of him. He made a hard U-turn and headed for Elwin Reynolds' house. He knew Elwin from the bowling league he had joined last year and that was also how he had come to know Mitch. Mitch had come to the bowling alley twice to watch his father bowl, but he had never mentioned his cousin Kevin, nor had he ever expressed any interest in knowing about the events that took place on Oriel Peak back in 1969. *So why now?* he thought. Mitch had had several opportunities to ask him over the past few months, had it been on his mind at those times. *So-Why now?*

Stan turned onto Western Row and headed out toward the Upper Saline Bridge. Elwin Reynolds, Mitch's dad and first cousin to Kevin, was the son of Wilbur Reynolds, Buck Reynolds' older brother. He and his family lived in Greenville, the community across the Saline River from Carver proper. Stan didn't particularly like the drive out Western Row and over the Upper Saline Bridge because that was where the whole episode had begun back in 1969. It was at the Upper Saline Bridge where Mary Clemmons' car had been found, submerged in the freezing waters of the Saline River. It was when her car had been found *empty*, that the mystery turned tragedy had begun. Ever since that day the sight of the Upper Saline Bridge always brought back tragic memories for Stan.

Stan passed between the arches of the Upper Saline Bridge and entered Greenville, turning right on Sycamore and then left on Beech. He pulled up in front of Elwin's house, parked at the curb and sat there thinking about how to approach Elwin on what might be a sensitive subject for him as well. The Reynolds family had taken a lot of abuse over the years as a result of what Kevin had done, but they hadn't run. Stan had to give them that; they stuck in Carver and didn't run.

He decided that the best approach to take with Elwin would be to be honest about his concerns. *But, what are my concerns?* Stan thought to himself as he approached the front door. He wasn't really sure. Somehow though it just didn't seem natural to him that Mitch Reynolds would be taking an interest in his cousin's case without some sort of catalyst. *But what?* That's what he was here to find out, if possible. Why? Because Mary and Wiley had never been accounted for. Sure, he knew what Father Cardosi had said, what Kevin had told him in his last hours, but Cardosi hadn't ever been able to produce the map he claimed to have

been given by Kevin. Stan had spent weeks looking for the cave the good priest had claimed Kevin had directed him to, but he had never found it. The map Father Cardosi had tried to draw from memory had been totally useless. *How in the hell did he lose the original?* Stan thought back. That in itself had always seemed strange, or suspicious to Stan. Perhaps it wouldn't have had Cardosi not vanished himself. That had begun anew a whole new search of the Oriel Peak caldera known as Blind Valley. The speculation was that Cardosi had felt guilty over losing the map Kevin had given him and had decided to go look for the alleged cave himself. *Bad move if so*, Stan thought. *We never turned up even a hair from his head.* But Stan didn't believe that theory at all; not now and not then.

Stan thought back to the execution. Kevin had mentioned to him the map he had given Cardosi. He had told Stan, as they walked down the "last mile" together, that he should check with Cardosi about the map and that it would set a few things straight. After the execution he had asked the good priest about the map, but Cardosi had claimed to have left it in his room when he had gone home to freshen up. Cardosi had then offered to stop by Stan's office with the map the next day, but when Cardosi arrived the next afternoon he claimed he had lost the map and offered to draw another from memory. The *new* map had proved useless. Stan somehow got the notion that if Kevin hadn't mentioned the map to him Cardosi would never have mentioned it either. It was just a feeling that Stan had, but it was one of those strong feelings one sometimes gets that can't be argued away.

Stan rapped firmly on the Reynolds' front door. Moments later the door swung open.

"Stan Phillips. What brings you here?" Elwin asked.

"Nothing official, Elwin. You know I retired a few months back," Stan stated.

"Yeah, I heard tell of that somewhere. Good to see you again, Stan. We've missed you down at the bowling alley."

"Yeah, Elwin, I know—thanks. I didn't join back up last time because I knew I'd be retiring and I thought I might do a little traveling," Stan explained.

"Did you?" Elwin asked.

"Nope. No further than Bennett."

"So what's this *unofficial* business you're here on, Stan?" Elwin asked, as he led Stan into the living room.

Stan took a seat on the sofa and began explaining his reason for dropping by.

"Your boy, Mitch, came by the station house a couple of weeks back and asked Casey all about the Oriel Peak episode. Casey said he seemed real interested in all the details of the case, which of course, Casey didn't know to help the boy out any," Stan explained.

"Mitch? He came by asking about Kevin and all that?" Elwin asked, seeming totally surprised at Stan's revelation.

"Yep. Any idea what got him interested in all that all of a sudden?" Stan questioned.

"No, not a clue," Elwin answered.

"Would you mind if I asked Mitch about it, Elwin? Just to find out what brought this up again after so long."

"Nah, I wouldn't mind, if he were here, but he's not here and won't be for a few days, Stan. He and two of his buddies went camping up on Horse Tooth. They left yesterday morning and aren't due back until Friday."

"Horse Tooth?" Stan mumbled, and then stared at Elwin for the longest time until Elwin finally spoke again, breaking Stan's apparent fixation on some thought associated with Horse Tooth.

"Horse Tooth is a safe place to camp, Stan. What are you thinking?" Elwin asked, a little worried at Stan's reaction to what he had told him.

"Yeah, sure it's safe, Elwin. It's just that this is exactly what happened thirty-four years ago when the girls went missing. Buck told Al and me the same thing, that Kevin and Wiley had gone camping on Horse Tooth when in fact they were in the Oriel Peak caldera," Stan explained.

"Blind Valley? Mitch wouldn't even know how to find it. You don't think he's gone there do you? Why would he? We never discuss Kevin or anything about that whole mess around here," Elwin advised Stan.

"That's the way I had it figured, too, but something must have piqued his interest about it. Why else would he come to the station with all those questions about it? Can you think of *anything* that would have got him thinking about Blind Valley and all that?"

"No, not at all," Elwin replied. "I can't think of a thing, Stan. Mitch made no mention of it to me at all."

"Well, I s'pose if he was planning on going up there you probably wouldn't have permitted it. He probably knew that, so if he were planning on going up there he probably wouldn't have mentioned anything about it to you, Elwin. That makes sense-that part of it, anyway."

Stan stood up and took several steps toward the front door and then stopped to look back at Elwin.

"Hell, I don't know, Elwin. Maybe they are just camping up on Horse Tooth. Maybe I'm just paranoid when it comes to Oriel Peak and Blind Valley. No reason to go off half-cocked I guess."

"The boy's never lied to me before, Stan. I trust that he is exactly where he said he would be," Elwin replied.

Stan took another two steps toward the door when a familiar voice spoke from behind him.

"Stan Phillips? Is that you?" Wilbur Reynolds asked, as he came into the living room from the back stairway hall. "I'll be hanged if it isn't you."

Stan turned to the sound of Wilbur's voice.

"Wilbur. How are you?" Stan asked.

"Just fine, but what brings you out this way? Trouble, or just a visit?"

"Just a visit, Wilbur. I just got curious about something that I thought Elwin might be able to clear up for me," Stan smiled.

"What's got you muddled, Stan?" Wilbur asked, frowning slightly with concern.

"Mitch stopped by the station a little while back asking about Oriel Peak and the caldera and all that mess from 1969. I was just wondering what got him thinking about all that," Stan explained.

"Is he? Now that's strange. What *would* get him thinkin' about that I wonder?" Wilbur answered, his frown growing deeper.

"That's what I was hoping Elwin could tell me," Stan replied.

Wilbur looked down at the floor and raised his right hand to his chin, cupping his hand over it and rubbing it in a methodic, rhythmical series of strokes. Suddenly, he looked up at Stan and said, "Wait here a minute, Stan. I'll be right back."

Wilbur turned and went back into the back hallway. He was gone about five minutes before emerging again from the hall.

"Well-They're gone," he stated, with certainty. "Sorry to keep you waiting, but I had to be sure."

"What's gone?" Elwin asked, looking at his father with a totally blank expression.

"The letters. The letters are gone," Wilbur replied. "The letters Kevin wrote home to Buck. They were in a bundle in an old trunk in the attic, but they're gone now."

"Letters?" Stan asked, looking at Wilbur with total wonder. "What's in those letters? I mean, that would be of interest to Mitch?"

"Well, the last year Kevin was in prison, before...Well, he wrote home to Buck the whole thing of it all. He laid it all out for his dad in a handful of letters, from start to finish," Wilbur explained.

"To finish?" Stan asked. "What's that mean, Wilbur?"

"Everything, Stan. He laid it all out from how they took those girls to how the one girl shot that Wiley Coates fella to how Kevin, himself, shot that Mary girl. It was all in the letters he sent home, Stan."

"Pop-You never told me anything about any letters," Elwin stated.

"Better left alone, Son. I just figured it was better left alone," Wilbur replied. "Anyway, that's what's in those letters, Stan. The whole dirty mess of it all."

"And you never thought to turn those over to the authorities-to me?" Stan asked, sternly.

"No point, Stan. You had your man and right where he belonged, on death row. No need to share his letters. They were private between him and Buck and he asked in the first letter that Buck keep it to himself..."

"But, Wilbur," Stan interrupted.

"No buts about it, Stan. They were private. Besides, they wouldn't have helped you any. He took the location of that cave with him to the grave. He never gave that up in the letters. Just that it was there is all and that it needed to remain undisturbed for Sam's sake," Wilbur explained.

"Sam?" Stan asked. "Who the hell is Sam?"

"According to Kevin, Sam was the Blind Valley Hermit, but he was more than just a hermit. Kevin said that he was a mountain man from back in the 1800's. He said that he lived in that cave and eventually, that's where he died, restin' on his bed with his Sharps cradled in his arms. Sam Elliott was his full name. Kevin said he found it written in the cover of his Bible."

Wilbur stopped and thought about the letters. Stan and Elwin just stared at Wilbur in amazement, waiting for him to continue.

"It was the Sharps that Mary used to shoot Wiley. It was loaded and it still worked. Kevin said they knew it was there in Sam's arms, but hadn't given it a second thought when they put the girls down with Sam's body. Bad mistake for everybody, 'cause Mary shot Wiley with that Sharps, nearly cut him in half, and Kevin retaliated by shooting Mary right between the eyes with his pistol. Should I go on?"

Stan just nodded.

"This was after they had killed that professor and all his students. Then comes the part I never understood. Kevin said that after he killed Mary he was about to finish off the other girl...ah..."

"Alicia," Stan said.

"Yeah, Alicia. But he says that Sam stopped him. *Dead* Sam stopped him. That's the part I never understood, and I'd bet my last sawbuck that if Mitch read that last letter, then that's where he's gone-to find Sam. If he's got those letters you can bet he's not up on Horse Tooth."

"There was a *lot* that couldn't be understood about those days up there in Blind Valley, Wilbur. Like the snowstorm that hit out of the blue with no warning at all from the weather service. There was a whole lot that couldn't be understood," Stan repeated.

"You gonna go look for those boys, Stan?" Wilbur wanted to know.

"I'm retired, Wilbur. It's not my place to go pokin' around up there," Stan answered. "I'll pass it along to Casey and see what he wants to do. It's not like they're doing anything wrong being up there. Can't even say they're suppressing evidence really. The case is unofficially closed after all. If there is a cave, like Father Cardosi and Kevin have claimed, I never could find it. You say the letters don't divulge its location, so the boys will probably just have a nice campout up there in Blind Valley, if that's where they are, and come on home empty-handed."

"Who's Father Cardosi?" Elwin asked, after Stan had finished.

"He's the priest that was with Kevin at the end. Kevin gave him a map to the cave and the bodies of Mary and Wiley," Stan replied. "But-he could never produce it. He misplaced it somehow and then drew us a map from memory that was worthless when all was said and done."

"Huh," Elwin said, scratching his head. "*Misplaced* it?"

"So he said," Stan answered. "Wilbur. There may well be repercussions to your not turning over those letters. I don't know what Casey will do about that. Yes, we had our man in jail, but the case pertaining to Mary Clemmons is still open. She's listed as missing to this day and those letters constitute a confession by Kevin that he killed her, which would have allowed us to close the case had we known."

"But, the priest told you as much way back then. What about that?" Wilbur asked, growing nervous at the thought of being arrested for keeping the letters secret.

"We couldn't close her case based on that. We had nothing in writing and Father Cardosi couldn't even produce the original map. Couldn't close it based on that," Stan replied, firmly. "You should have produced those letters, Wilbur."

"Sorry, Stan. I just didn't think...well, sorry about that. I guess I should've when you look at it like that."

"Okay. No real harm done I guess. Dr. Clemmons believes Mary to be long deceased anyway and I'm sure of it myself. I'll let Casey know you're sorry about not disclosing the letters. I'm going to head out of here now and see what Casey wants to do, if anything, about the possibility of the boys being up there with those letters. I'll be in touch. No need to show me out."

Stan turned abruptly and went out the door and to his car. Once behind the wheel he sat and stared out the windshield. *Damn*, he thought. *Here we go again. Leave it alone, Stanley.* But he knew he wouldn't—he knew he *couldn't* just leave it alone.

Stan sat behind the steering wheel and thought about what his next move should be. Should he go straight to Casey with this new information or should he do what he didn't do during the original investigation? *Father Cardosi*, he thought to himself. *How in the hell did you misplace that map you supposedly had?* The missing map was always something that had gnawed at the back of his mind during their 2001 reinvestigation; and it still did. Why had he taken Cardosi at his word about the missing map? Why had he let him lead him all over the Blind Valley caldera looking for the cave with a map he had drawn from memory? Why had he not checked into Cardosi's background? Why? Because he was a *priest*? That shouldn't have been a good enough reason—and right now, Stan was just beginning to realize that.

Stan turned the key and fired up his Jeep, thinking, *the Internet's the place to start*, and he pulled away from Elwin's house and headed home. He pulled into his drive about twenty minutes later with a search plan already figured out using Google to locate the information he hoped to find. He parked his Jeep in the garage and not wanting to waste another minute's time, he jogged into the house.

Stan rushed through the kitchen and into his den, plopping down in front of his computer, which was already on, as usual. He opened up Internet Explorer and listened to the sound of his modem dialing and connecting. *One of these days I gotta look into broadband*, he thought, as he waited impatiently for the connection to the Internet to

complete. Finally he was connected and he typed in www.google.com and waited for the search engine to open. He then typed archdioceses of Montana and looked at his screen for the results. The top link on the results page looked promising to Stan, so he clicked on it and came up with a list of archdioceses in the State of Montana, complete with phone numbers and the names of the archbishops in charge of each.

"Great!" Stan shouted out, scaring his cat out of the room like a streak of lightning. "Just what I'm looking for." He looked through the doorway through which the cat had bolted and yelled, "Sorry, Fuzz."

Stan hit the print button on his browser and printed out the list of names and phone numbers and then settled in for a lot of phone calls he'd probably be making. Stan dialed the first number on his list, the Archdiocese of Billings, and his call was routed to a Bishop Shine. Stan's question, of course, for the good bishop was whether or not there was, or had ever been, a Father Cardosi there?

"No, not here," came Bishop Shine's reply, "But there is a Father Cardosi over in Bennett, although he's retired now."

Stan was speechless. This was not what he had expected to hear. He thought that he would make all the calls to all the archdiocese and be told by each that there was no Father Cardosi, nor had there ever been. He didn't know why he had expected a dead-end, but he had.

"Retired? In Bennett?" Stan asked the bishop. "Do you know where I can find him in Bennett?"

"The last I heard he still lived in the rectory at Saint James. He's retired from the pulpit, but *not* from the church. You'd have to know the man to understand what I mean," the bishop laughed.

"Dedicated?" Stan asked.

"To the *nth* degree."

"Let me ask you this, Bishop. Is this Father Cardosi we're talking about the only Father Cardosi you know of?"

"Yes, he's the only one *I* know of, but if you'll hold a moment I'll check my directory," the bishop offered.

"Yes, absolutely. I'll hold," Stan replied.

During the several minutes that the bishop was away from the phone, Stan began to question his suspicions about Father Cardosi. From what the bishop had told him, this Cardosi was a very dedicated, and well respected priest. Maybe he *did* simply misplace the map Kevin had given him. Maybe he had been trying his best to recreate the map and help out the investigation.

Stan's thoughts were interrupted by the return of the bishop.

"Well, Mr. Phillips, it appears that there is only one Cardosi in the priesthood in Montana. I also checked back into some very old directories I have here and the name Cardosi does not appear in any that would predate the Cardosi in Bennett. It would appear that he is the one and only."

Stan thanked Bishop Shine for his information and began thinking back to the time he had spent with Father Cardosi in the Blind Valley caldera. They had never discussed the priest's life or where he was from, or lived. All their discussions had been about the case and the whereabouts of the cave. Stan realized that he didn't even know Father Cardosi's given name. He had always called him "Father" as he had been taught to do growing up in Carver's Catholic community.

Stan went to his kitchen and fixed himself a ham sandwich for the road. It was time for a drive up to Bennett and a reunion with Father Cardosi. Why? He wasn't quite sure, but he wanted to rehash Cardosi's involvement in the case with him and maybe, just maybe, something might come to light that had been overlooked two years ago. Maybe if he sprung it on the priest all of a sudden he might remember some detail of the lost map he had not remembered back then. It was worth a shot anyway.

Leave it alone, Stan, his mind screamed at him, but he was back into it now and there would be no turning back. As far as Stan was concerned the case was open again. Unofficial as it might be, it was open. The only question in his mind now was how he would proceed from here. His decision was that he would decide *that* after visiting with Father Cardosi.

On the drive to Bennett Stan thought back to the search that Father Cardosi had led them on using *his* map. Stan thought about how Cardosi had concentrated on the floor of the valley, *not* the overhanging cliffs or talus slopes as he had expected. Apparently there was a *real* Father Cardosi, but what had been his agenda? *That* is what Stan needed to know.

Stan arrived in Bennett and went straight to Saint James, finding the rectory to be an old Victorian turn-of-the-century located in the parking lot behind the church. The church had apparently been built in the front yard of this once upon a time estate, halfway between the mansion itself and the pike. He parked his Jeep in front of the

rectory and walked up on the large front porch and pulled on the mechanical doorbell knob.

After a moment's wait, Stan was greeted warmly and invited in by a Father Jacobs. Stan stated his business with Father Cardosi and was asked to wait in the parlor until Father Jacobs could bring Father Cardosi down to him.

"It will be just a few minutes, Mr. Phillips. Please have a seat and make yourself at home," Father Jacobs said, as he left the parlor and disappeared into the hall.

Stan took a seat on the settee and looked around the old room, completely furnished with antique furniture and trappings from a bygone day. It was a warm and cozy room and Stan settled in and relaxed as he awaited Father Cardosi. His wait was short as five minutes later, Father Jacobs led into the parlor, a frail and diminutive man of about five and a half feet in stature. Stan's jaw dropped to his chest.

"Father Cardosi?" Stan asked, totally dismayed at the appearance of a priest a good foot shorter and forty years older than the Father Cardosi he had known.

"Yes, my son, have we met before?" the elderly priest asked.

"No-Apparently not," Stan replied. "I thought..."

"I know, my son. Others have been here before you."

"Others?" Stan asked, as Father Cardosi took a seat next to him.

"Oh yes. Reporters, journalists, authors, and the like, all believing me to be the Father Cardosi who was depicted in the newspapers two years ago. An honest enough mistake, being that I *am* the only Father Cardosi in this part of the country. There's not another Cardosi within a thousand miles of here, and that happens to be my younger brother-Again, the wrong Cardosi. I saw the newspaper articles and I saw the photographs of *your* Cardosi. I even met the man myself..."

"Met him? Where?" Stan asked, interrupting Cardosi.

"At the prison, right after meeting with Kevin on his last day. I ran into him in a hallway at the prison right after I left Kevin..."

"So it was *you* who met with Kevin? Not this other Cardosi?" Stan asked.

"Yes, it was me. Kevin gave me a map to the cave where he claimed the bodies of that boy and girl were interred. My first stop after leaving him was a payphone in the hallway from which I had planned to call your office and tell you about the map. *That's* when I ran into Father Gates, or so he called himself at the time. We got to

talking about Kevin and the map he had given me and *Father Gates* suggested that rather than me driving all the way to Carver he would deliver the map to you. He told me that he was the priest who would be present at the execution later that day. He assured me that he would deliver the map to you then."

"Why didn't you report this to the police when you saw his picture in the paper claiming to be you?" Stan asked.

"I did. I told the local police here in Bennett about the man, but they shrugged it off. It wasn't like he had been using my credit card or my actual identity. He never said he was me, you know, from Saint James Parish, or even that he was from Bennett. He never said where he was from that I could find. He was just some priest named Cardosi, and that's how the police here viewed it I suppose. I guess they figured it was none of their business. I don't have a copyright on the name Cardosi, you know. They *actually* told me that."

"And that's where you left it?"

"They said they'd look into it. That's where we both left it. I never heard back from the police and when I never heard any more about that Father Cardosi, I just forgot about it all together. You must remember that this was all quite a while after the fact. You see, visiting with Kevin was my last official act as an active priest. Several days after meeting with Kevin I retired and left on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the Vatican. I was gone for a year and it wasn't until after I returned that I saw the old newspaper articles as I was cleaning out a storage closet here in the rectory."

"I don't suppose you noted the location of the cave on the map Kevin gave you?" Stan asked.

"No, sir. The map was folded and I never opened it. It was not for my eyes, but rather, for the girl's father. In the end Kevin had wanted her father to be able to give her a Christian burial. Sorry, but I never unfolded it to look."

Stan thanked Father Cardosi and headed back to Carver. The long drive back gave Stan plenty of time to think about the Father Cardosi he had known back in 2001. The more he thought about it the more convinced he became that Cardosi had deliberately subverted the map and had then led them on a wild goose chase up in Blind Valley. More than that, he had diverted their attention from looking diligently along the cliffs and taluses of the caldera. He was a diversion. But why? Who had put him up to it-or, was it he himself who had wanted the cave not found?