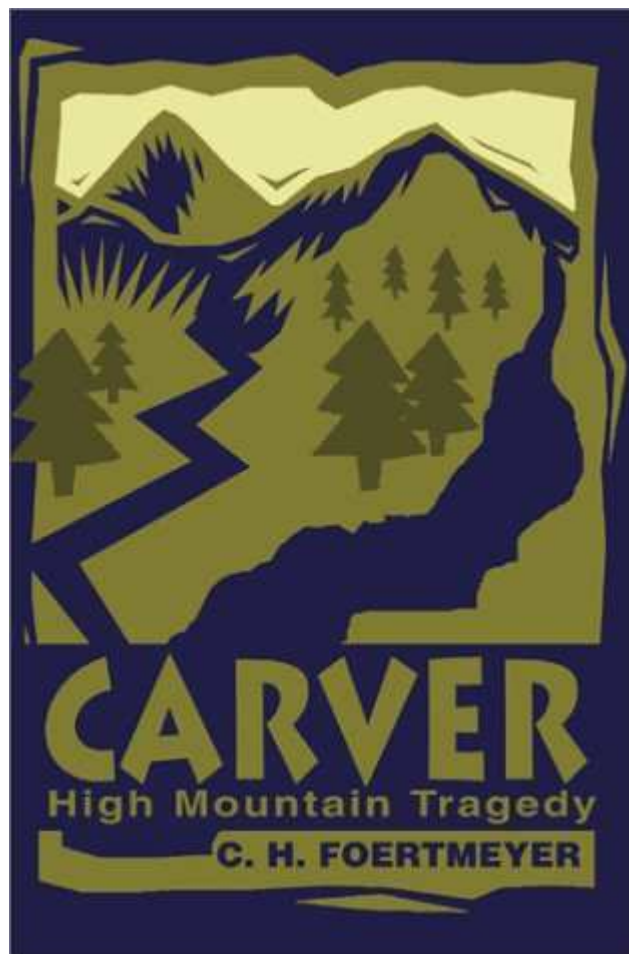


CARVER

High Mountain Tragedy

C. H. FOERTMEYER



Dedication

For Jennifer—For her inspiration—

Epigraph

Grade school and high school are merely stopping off places in our lives. No matter how cruel you may be treated, remember that there is a whole life awaiting you beyond your current experience.

Foreword

In regard to the location of this novel, it exists only in the mind of this author. Hopefully, the reader will find Carver, Oriel Peak, and Blind Valley as intriguing as I do.

To go in search of these wondrous places would be to search in vain, but perhaps, somewhere out in the Rocky Mountains there may be places similar in description and mystique. The valley described as Karl and Alicia's private valley, does indeed exist, in New Mexico. It is an oasis, of sorts, in the Doña Ana Mountains of Doña Ana County. It has been over twenty-eight years since I've been there, so I'm not sure I could ever find it again, but it is there, for you to search out, if you so desire.

As to the characters in *Carver*, they are also the creation of the author, but children like Wiley and Kevin live everywhere among us. Normal kids whose lives have been turned into a nightmare by the insensitivity and cruelty of their classmates. Be aware of them and try to help them understand that with the passing of time, they will be accepted, and even cherished by their peers.

C. H. Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

“Spider”—Kevin Reynolds had grown up with this name and had grown used to it, or had he?

Kevin was born, Kevin Wilson Reynolds on December 23, 1951 in the small mountain town of Carver, Montana. Kevin’s birth came at a time when parents of young and infant children had one major concern, polio, often referred to as infantile paralysis, and it had parents all over the country scared to death.

The disease had been declared an epidemic yet the odds of contracting it were only one in five thousand. This was enough however, to send families from coast to coast scurrying to the mountains or deserts or anywhere else they thought they might escape the scourge.

The Reynolds family was not overly concerned with this epidemic because they were already in the mountains away from the big cities and their blight. They lived in God’s Country and felt relatively isolated from the problems, which beset the flatlanders in the cities below. This all changed for them in December of 1954 when their precious Kevin was diagnosed with polio.

Kevin’s parents, Buck and Nancy, were terrified for Kevin, picturing him spending his life in a wheelchair or in braces. And then, of course, there was the guilt. How could this happen? They were isolated up here in Carver! But then Nan would remind Buck that he had taken Kevin to Liddelman with him on business several times. Buck would shrug and accept the blame saying, “I know, I probably shouldn’t have done that,” and Nancy would hug him in a consoling embrace and think to herself that her shopping trips to Bennett were just as likely to have been the cause. *Had she really needed to go to Bennett?*

But Kevin was a trooper and came through the disease well, with very little physical damage. It wasn’t until Kevin started school that the effects of the disease would become apparent to him.

The most noticeable effect of his childhood disease was his lack of normal locomotion. When he was forced to run, which he did with great reluctance, he had quite an unusual gate. His legs didn’t seem to follow the usual up and down motion of a more normal runner. They would flail out on the upstroke and in on the down and his body always seemed to be trying to catch up with his outstretched legs.

The other kids were quick to associate his movements with that of a spider scurrying across hot blacktop. In reality, this peculiar motion didn’t truly resemble a running spider, but that’s the way the other kids saw it and they had no compunction about saying so. By the time Kevin reached high school the name Spider had become universally and indelibly associated with him.

High school in the late 1960’s was no different than high school today and students then had no more compassion for the feelings of fellow students than they presently do. You could be merely a geek, a nerd, or a dip, or with the right deformity you could get your very own identity. Spider was just such a case.

Gym class was a particular Hell for Kevin, although the abuses he suffered there were by no means limited to that class.

Kevin could and did walk normally, but if he dared break into a run all hell would break loose—“S-P-I-D-E-R...SPIDER”! Spelling out the word in a rising crescendo and finishing off the chant at the top of their lungs with a final “SPIDER”! Then, of course, it needed to be repeated as many times as the closest teacher would allow. Verbal abuse *was* a major part of the daily life of Kevin “Spider” Reynolds, and summer and weekends were gifts from Heaven.

Even-keeled would pretty well describe Kevin. He got good grades, didn’t drink or smoke, and never caused anyone any trouble, not even his parents. He was obedient and pleasant to be around, friendly and helpful around the house. In short, he was a good kid.

Apart from his peculiar gate he was a rather normal looking kid, standing an even six feet tall with straight blonde hair, worn in Beatle fashion, as was common around his school. He was a lean one hundred and seventy-five pounds of mostly muscle, and he could flash you a most ingratiating smile when amused.

Kevin did have two friends and they were pretty good friends, too, but both were also considered members of the general geek population of Carver High. Bryce and Wiley, each of which was an only child, had only each other and Kevin to serve as friends and companions. Kevin had an older sister, Carrie, up until the fall of last year when she had been killed in an automobile accident.

Carrie had been extremely popular at Carver High, but that had been before Kevin had moved up from middle school. He never had the opportunity to ride her coattails to popularity and she had long since graduated, so to the current kids at Carver, Carrie had never existed.

Carver High was a small school serving the community of ten thousand full time residents and everybody at school knew everybody else. It was not unusual to see seniors associating with sophomores or freshmen hanging out with juniors. But Kevin didn’t associate with anyone he didn’t have to, suffering all the abuse he could handle at the hands of his fellow seniors. Why go looking for more trouble, he reasoned. But Kevin was used to it. Years of the same experiences, being constantly messed with or messed up, had hardened him to it. But nevertheless, it never stopped hurting.

Carver High was the only high school in the alpine city of Carver. The building was modern and new, a replacement for the older, more charming building which was to become the middle school. The city leaders had decided to build the new school in Greenville, on the east side of the Saline River, where they had anticipated growth and development, which had not yet occurred.

The city of Carver was the very picture of alpine beauty, nestled into a high mountain valley, surrounded by three prominent peaks and subdivided by the Saline River flowing south through the heart of town.

Mount Crane stood to the east, rising to eleven thousand feet and towering four thousand feet above Carver. Jessup Mountain, which had replaced Crane as the resort area several years prior, rose forty-five hundred feet over the city and was responsible for the majority of Carver’s revenue. The third peak, forming the trio, was Horse Tooth. This third peak had derived its name from the cubical appearance of its summit, which if one imagined hard enough, might resemble what the name implied. Horse Tooth was the shortest of the group stretching to reach its taller companions but falling short by several hundred feet.

The Saline River, a fast moving mountain stream, fed by perpetual snowfields and the spring melt, emanated above the resorts high up on Jessup Mountain. To the east of the Saline lay Greenville, so named for the rancher who first settled that side of the river, and to the west of the river was Carver proper.

Both sides of the Saline were actually Carver, but when Uriah Green's last living descendant passed on, Carver had annexed the area for itself. It had been known as Greenville ever since.

Two concrete rainbow bridges, the Upper and Lower Saline Bridges, connected Greenville to Carver, the Lower Bridge being the more heavily used, as it carried one directly into downtown Carver. The bridges were unique and an effort to have them listed in the state's historic register was underway. The two bridges were identical, with a concrete, rainbow shaped arch on either side of the bridges and pedestrian walkways outside each arch. Vehicular traffic passed between the arches in two lanes.

As you approached Carver from any of three routes in from the mountain passes you looked down on what appeared to be a pristine alpine village almost fairytale like in appearance. Coming down into town, and upon closer inspection, there were evident signs of the town's depressed state.

There were city streets in need of repair, buildings needing paint, and other telltale signs that the town was in need of a more substantial treasury. But the Jessup Mountain resorts had done a lot to improve things over the past three years and revenue was slowly starting to find its way into Carver.

So Carver, situated comfortably in this cradle of alpine beauty, with its hiking, skiing, and hunting opportunities, should have been a wonderful place for a boy to grow up. And it was so for Kevin, as long as school wasn't in session.

Bryce Spencer was one of Kevin's two friends and lived just two blocks from Kevin, on Cutter's Lane. They were closer friends to each other than they were to anybody else. They were best friends.

Bryce never achieved the status of Kevin at school. He had no fancy nickname and no distinguishing characteristics other than fiery red hair. He was just a geek who went by the most common and mundane of names, such as Dipstick and Pinhead. "Carrot Top" or "Fire Head" were not names used in the Carver area to describe someone with hair like Bryce's. It was far too common a trait in Carver, having come from the original Coates family stock. In Carver you were more likely to be teased over black hair, than you were red.

So Bryce had gone through his life so far, as a *typical* geek, neither special nor distinguished. What got him in trouble with the other kids at school was his straight-laced, almost Puritanical attitude.

Bryce lived by one set of rules, imparted to him by his father. "*This is how life is lived*—" according to Dirk Spencer. There was no circumventing the rules, no bending the rules, and certainly, no breaking these rules!

Bryce was fine with it all, neither questioning nor defying his father's wisdom. You did not cheat, steal, lie, or in any other way go against the word of God. It was a simple plan for happiness and tranquility within their home and as a guideline for their daily lives.

Another important lesson that had come to Bryce, by way of his father, was that you *never looked the other way*, when others transgressed. There was no room in this world for apathy toward, or tolerance for the willful breach of God's Word.

So Bryce adhered to these rules, to a fault, and was therefore neither liked nor trusted by his fellow students. Their dislike and mistrust of him was something he simply could not fathom because life was supposed to be simple and well defined, with *everyone* doing, as they should and following the rules.

Bryce was the kid the teacher would ask to watch the class if she had to leave the room. Bryce was one of the hall monitors. He was honest and beyond reproach. Put simply, the other kids didn't trust him. They knew if he overheard their plans to do something irresponsible or wrong, he would squeal. If he saw someone cheating, he would tell. That was Bryce and it helped earn him his rep as a Carver nerd. Did he care? Not at all. His allegiance was to his two best friends, Kevin and Wiley. They accepted him just as he was.

Then there was Wiley Coates, Kevin's other best friend. If Bryce was heads on a coin, Wiley was tails. He was not as close to Kevin as was Bryce, but they were good friends and buddies. Wiley *had* achieved a status of his own. He was "Taxi"—"Hey Taxi! Better shut your doors!" or "Dumbo" to others—"Hey Dumbo! Have a smooth landing!" Yes, Wiley's ears stuck straight out from his head, a feature not overlooked or ignored by his classmates.

Wiley was different though, and didn't take the abuse as calmly as did Kevin and Bryce. Wiley had a short fuse and could be a smart ass at times. He never started trouble or instigated pranks, but when teased in public, he would turn as red as his own hair, and spit out some pretty harsh rebuttals. This earned him more than his share of razzing because his reaction would be, predictably, what the other kids wanted.

Take the Tuesday Wiley had returned to school, after missing Monday with a bad cold. He had arrived ten minutes before homeroom was to begin, going directly to his locker as usual. He had dialed the combination on his padlock, 27 Right, 47 Left, 16 Right, and had jerked the lock open.

He suddenly got a funny feeling, like he was being watched, and looked over his shoulder. There were several kids gathering at the other side of the hall, watching him as he removed the lock from its hasp.

They were standing there, trying to look inconspicuous, but it didn't look to Wiley like they were simply having a conversation. The kids were whispering among themselves and their eyes kept darting to him and glancing quickly away.

Wiley looked back at his locker and lifted the latch, which should have allowed the door to swing open freely. Usually the door would pop out toward him, as if on springs. It did not. He gave it a tug. Nothing happened and the door remained closed, fixed in place. He gave it a second tug; this time harder, and again it failed to budge.

By now Wiley was hearing the familiar sounds of snickering behind him. Determined to ignore them and not be duped again, he gave the door one last pull. It did not yield, and he had pulled with such force that his fingers lost their grip on the handle. He reeled backward, dropping his books, stumbled, and gained his balance just in time to avoid falling on his butt. The laughter started, outright and full.

Wiley spun on the small crowd and began screaming, his face red and twisted.

“Get the crap away from me you stupid jerks!” he yelled. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

The onlookers scattered in five different directions, running and looking back at Wiley, laughing and jeering. Wiley stood there, in the middle of the hallway, alone and angry.

Bastards, he thought, and then stooped to pick up his books.

Later, the resolution to his dilemma came in the form of a janitor who replaced his locker. Even the janitor couldn't pry open the locker door and Wiley's belongings had to be removed from the back of the locker, after the locker was removed from the wall.

Needless to say, the janitor was no more pleased than was Wiley.

“Who'd have done a thing like this?” the janitor asked. “Gluing your locker with epoxy glue. Damn those kids, anyway. Just makes a lot more work for me!”

Wiley *was* quick tempered and lashed out frequently, but he had always been ‘all mouth’. The other kids simply saw him as humorous and harmless. But he also had a dark side, which neither Kevin, nor Bryce quite understood and the other kids never saw.

He would sulk for hours, wandering off alone, after one of his verbal retaliations to a prank or joke at his expense. His face would change, distorting into something Kevin considered strange and scary. He would turn within himself, withdrawn for hours, then shake it off and return to the Wiley that Kevin considered his friend.

After Wiley would return from wherever he had been and whatever thoughts he had been thinking, it was as if nothing had happened at all. This behavior of his was of concern to Kevin, but he knew how it felt to be ridiculed daily and he figured that this was Wiley's way of dealing with it.

The relationship between Bryce and Wiley was much the same as that between Kevin and Bryce. They too, were best friends. So it was Bryce who was loved by both Kevin and Wiley. He was the boy in the middle of the triad of friends. Bryce was the friend that cemented the three friends together, and it was also Bryce who would become the catalyst for life changing events to come.

Kevin may have grown up to lead a relatively normal life had it not been for Bryce, for it was Bryce, or rather what happened to Bryce, which was to change the course of Kevin “Spider” Reynolds' life. It would change his life and it would change Wiley's as well.

From that day on, Wiley and Kevin would become inseparable. Best friends. From that day on they would have a common goal. Beginning on that cold and miserable, second day of November, their lives would become as one, intertwined and with common purpose. But it would be Wiley, who would fan the flames of hatred, and keep the goal alive and in focus.

CHAPTER TWO

Kevin, Wiley and Bryce, the “Three Mountaineers”, as they had referred to themselves in their younger years, were inseparable. They had formed a coalition, which helped insulate them from the abuse they suffered at the hands of their fellow classmates. They resided in a world of their own creation, where they were safe and comfortable, apart from, yet parallel to, Carver. It was an after school and weekend world, where they could retreat from the cruelty and injustice of Carver High and its student population.

Their parallel world had geographical boundaries, like any other world might have. Some of these boundaries were physical and rigid, one other, flexible and ever expanding. The three main physical areas of their world were their bedrooms, where they would retreat for hours, talking, playing games, and making big plans for the future. One day it might be Kevin’s bedroom, on another, Bryce’s or Wiley’s. It really didn’t matter, as long as they were together.

The fourth fixed geographical location in their world was their shack, which was located in the forest behind Kevin’s house. It was constructed of scrap lumber provided by Cutter’s Mill and obtained by Kevin’s father, at the boys’ request. The “shack”, as the boys referred to it, was neatly constructed about two hundred yards behind the Reynolds home. It was not visible from the neighborhood and the homes on Birch were not visible from it. It was their place totally away from every place else, where they could wile away the hours after school or on Saturdays and Sundays, undisturbed and sheltered.

The shack itself was square in shape, measuring ten feet on each side, and seven feet high at the top of the single pitched roof. The roof was constructed of the same rough sawn planks as were the sidewalls, and a duck canvas tarp had been affixed over it to keep the rain and snow at bay. The floor, made of the same wooden planks, had been laid first and the windowless shack had been built around it.

The truly unique feature was the shack’s entrance with its three-foot tall door, which made entry possible on one’s hands and knees only, and was neatly tucked between two large rhyolite outcrops. A ten to twelve foot approach down a two-foot wide corridor between the rock monoliths was necessary to reach the door. Then one was required to drop to their knees, unlock the padlock, and push the door open to gain entry.

The boys had built their shack up against these two twelve foot high stones, positioning the entrance, squarely behind and between them. To approach the shack from the neighborhood side was to likely overlook it. Approach to it from the forest side was nearly impossible, as the mountain swept up sharply behind it.

Inside the retreat there was a table and chairs, hand-me-downs from each of the boy’s families, a throw rug beneath it all, and a lantern, suspended from the ceiling on a brass chain. It was cozy and secure, although there was no heat source for the colder days of winter. They had nailed tarpaper on the interior walls to keep out the bitter winter winds and the wind blown rains, but the cold during the winter months was a problem that limited their time there.

The fifth geographical location in their private world was the forests themselves. This was the flexible portion of their world, the portion they were constantly expanding. Every hunting or camping trip to a new location increased the territory they had laid

claim to. As they had grown older and obtained “wheels”, this boundary had expanded rapidly, providing even more insulating distance between them and their antagonists at Carver High.

As this new territory had become accessible to them, they had spent far less time at the shack, and it had begun to fall into disrepair. This bothered Wiley more than Kevin or Bryce, because for Wiley, the shack had always been more vital to his happiness and well being. The shack had always provided a haven from his father’s drinking and his mother’s crying. Home, for Wiley, was a lonely place and not always a very pleasant place to be. The shack, to him, was not about play, but survival.

The last week of October had ushered in some unseasonably mild weather, which had come as a relief to the previous five weeks of snow and cold. The base snow was in place for the start of the skiing season on Jessup Mountain, and that was all that mattered to the community. But the warm up had started Wiley thinking about the shack again.

As he, Kevin and Bryce, walked home from school, Thursday afternoon on the thirty-first, Wiley brought up the subject of the shack and its need for repairs.

“You know what I’ve been thinking about?” he began.

“What’s that,” Kevin asked, as Bryce also directed his attention to Wiley.

“I’ve been thinking about the shack. We haven’t been back there in months and the last time we were, it needed some help. We should head back there today and do a little fixing up. Hell, what better way to spend Halloween than doing that!”

“Yea,” said Kevin. “Can’t let it get too run down, I guess. That’s a good idea Wiley! What do you say, Bryce? Want to go back there today?”

“Sure, that’s fine with me. We’ll need to stop by your house, Kev, and get a hammer and some nails. The tarpaper was coming loose in several places the last time we were back there,” he pointed out.

“And a candle, too,” Wiley said.

“What do we need that for?” asked Bryce.

“There are a few small holes in the roof tarp that were leaking last spring. We can drip candle wax over them and seal them up,” Wiley explained to him.

“Anybody have their key with them?” Kevin asked.

“I do,” Wiley and Bryce answered, simultaneously.

“Good, because mine is back in my locker at school. I didn’t think I’d be needing it until spring,” he explained to the others.

“So it’s settled then?” asked Wiley.

“Yep,” Kevin replied.

“Sure, sounds like fun,” answered Bryce.

The boys continued toward Kevin’s house, their plans set for the restoration and improvement of the shack. It was understood by the boys’ parents that they would be together, someplace, until suppertime, so there was no need to check in or get permission as long as they were on foot and home in time for their evening meal. If they were driving somewhere, there was a different set of rules that applied.

Of the three boys, Kevin was the only one who owned his own car, a black, 1960 Chevrolet Biscayne. It was a six cylinder with a “three-on-the-tree” shifter. He had earned the money for its purchase over the past summer by working at the mill with his father. The purchase had been made from old “Chief” Hailstones at Sleet’s Fleet Auto Sales on the outskirts of Greenville.

“Chief” Hailstones was a native Blackfoot Indian, who had made a good living for himself selling used vehicles on the “Payday Plan”, years ahead of its time. He generally had about a dozen good used vehicles on his lot at any given time, and Kevin had been watching the lot weekly, looking for just the right car.

Then one day, while riding with his dad on a lumber delivery, *there it was!* He had decided, right then and there, that he had to have it. There was just something about those big, horizontal fins that had intrigued him. He had talked his dad into stopping and loaning him a down payment on the Biscayne, and had driven it away, a happy camper. Every payday, for the following eight weeks, he had stopped by Sleet’s and made a fifty-dollar payment. The car was now his.

He had so much looked forward to driving to school, but he rarely did so now. There were two reasons for this, each of which outweighed the luxury of driving, forcing the boys to trudge through the winter snow.

First, and foremost, leaving the car at home deprived his adversaries at school of the opportunity to trash it for him. He had learned this lesson the first week back to school.

He had come out to the parking lot on the third day back, to find his “new” Chevy, “keyed” from stem to stern. The scratch was deep and straight, as if someone had walked past the car while holding a key waist high and had dragged it along the finish. Needless to say, he had been livid and had wanted to strangle the bastard that had done it.

On the fourth day back, he left the building to find his Biscayne covered in dried egg. He had found it necessary to use his ice scraper to remove the dried goop from his windshield, in order to drive home. *That* had been the last day Kevin had allowed himself the luxury of driving to school. From that point on, he had chosen to walk the mile to school rather than subject his beautiful Biscayne to the abuse of his “loving” classmates.

The second reason for not driving to school was simply a matter of economics. He was no longer working at the mill, as they had laid off all part-time workers. When school began Kevin was forced out of a job, so his gas money being in short supply, he preferred to save it for hunting and camping trips to the wilderness.

Arriving at Kevin’s house the boys entered the side door to the kitchen, and procured a snack from Mrs. Reynolds. Finishing that, they gathered the tools and nails they would need for the repairs, and a candle and matches for Wiley. With all necessary supplies collected, they headed out the back patio door.

Kevin’s back yard was about seventy-five feet deep from the patio to the forest, and beyond that was the densely forested foot of Mount Crane. Kevin’s back yard lay right up against the unused west slope of the mountain. For a seventeen-year-old boy, who loved the forests and mountains, it was truly a picture perfect place to live. He had virtually grown up in the woods behind his house, learning to hunt with his pellet rifle, trap small game, and navigate the deer trails to wherever he wanted to go.

And so, the triad of friends began yet another trek into the familiar trees that concealed the fourth dimension of their world. They would refurbish the work of their youth, recounting old stories and revisiting old memories laid dormant until now.

They crossed Kevin’s back yard and disappeared into the world of the ancient Indians, mountain men, and explorers. It was a world they rarely ever wanted to leave, once they had settled in, and Kevin’s dinner bell was the only signal they ever acknowledged as reason to depart.

“How long has it been since we’ve been back here?” Bryce asked, stepping around the base of a giant balsam.

“Too long,” replied Wiley.

“Think anybody has messed with it since then?” Bryce asked, always the talkative one in the group.

“I doubt it,” Kevin answered. “Nobody knows it’s here but us and the critters.”

“I hope not,” Bryce said. “I still want it to be just our place.”

Upon arriving at the entrance between the outcrops, Wiley went in first.

“Seems narrower than it used to,” he commented.

Bryce, who had grown substantially over the summer, replied, “You’re not kidding! This seems a lot tighter than it did before!”

Wiley knelt down before the door to their private domain and inserted the key in the lock. He gave it a quick turn and the lock popped open. Removing the lock from its hasp, he pushed the door inward and crawled into the darkness of his liberation. Kevin and Bryce followed in silence, speaking not a single word, as that was the way Wiley had always liked it to be. It was a ritual he had created years ago to initiate their transformation from schoolboys, to mountain men, for *that* is what they became when they entered this place.

Once inside, they lit the lantern and a soft yellow glow filled the tarpapered room. Wiley said the magic words, which always began their stay in “the shack”:

“Oh great ghost of Jim Bridger and friends. We have arrived at rendezvous. We ask only for the warmth of your fire and the pleasure of your company. If you’ve a mind to share, your coffee smells inviting and your stew, delicious. Are we welcome at your fire?”

With the welcoming message spoken, Kevin and Bryce replied in unison.

“Welcome, mountain men. Join us at our fire and share in our bounty. Have you traveled far? What sights have you seen? Come, sit and tell us of your journeys.”

With that, they all broke into laughter. It had been so long since they had done this and it felt so good to be back. Why, they wondered, had they let their maturation into young men get in the way of visiting this most wonderful of places.

They made a pact, then and there, not to let it happen again. This *world* of theirs was too special and unique to ever let it slip away. They put to work immediately, nailing up the fallen tarpaper, sealing the leaky roof, and dusting from the table and chairs, the accumulation of lost time.

It had been a glorious and joyful afternoon, filled with wonderful memories of the past and plans for the future. They had talked of future hikes in the Los Lobos, past trips to Robinson Ridge, and they had talked about their futures after Carver High. It had been an afternoon, which had sealed their commitment to one another and had belonged to them alone.

Kevin’s dinner bell had rung—much too soon.

CHAPTER THREE

The three boys did not share all the same classes, so it was impossible to stick together throughout the whole school day, although they certainly wished they could. The lunch periods at Carver High were staggered, so except for Kevin and Bryce, the three boys were split up even then. Kevin and Bryce did have each other's companionship at lunch, Wiley being the unfortunate one who had to eat alone.

Today, as Bryce and Kevin selected their seats at the back of the cafeteria, Kevin noticed Mary and Alicia sitting not ten feet away at an adjacent table. They were laughing and talking with each other about *who knew what* and justifiably, Kevin's paranoia kicked in and he was sure they were discussing Bryce and him.

"Damn," he said to Bryce, nodding toward the girls. "Look who's here."

Bryce looked in the direction Kevin had indicated and shot a scowl back at Kevin.

"Can't even eat lunch in peace," he commented.

It was a scene that played out several times each month, on the days when they arrived late in the lunchroom and had little choice where they would sit. Today was just one of those unfortunate days.

Mary *had* noticed the boys sit down and Kevin had been right on the money in his paranoia; the girls had begun talking about them.

"Don't look now but dumb and dumber just sat down over there," Mary pointed out to Alicia.

"Yea, I saw them," Alicia answered.

"They really should have a separate room for those creeps to eat in," Mary spat. "It grosses me out to have to look at them while I eat. Especially that little drip, Bryce, the suck up snitch."

Alicia nodded in agreement with Mary's snide comments.

Mary made no attempt to keep her voice low; hoping Bryce would hear her, which he did.

"Did you hear that?" Bryce asked Kevin.

"Yep. Just ignore her Bryce, you did right. She's just pissed she got caught. Don't pay any attention to her," Kevin advised, through bites of his meal.

"Yea, I guess," Bryce said, shaking his head.

Strange as it may seem, of all the kids who gave the boys trouble, their chief antagonists were these two girls. Mary Clemmons and Alicia Koppe, who were as different as night and day, but seemed to share a common purpose in life; making the boys as miserable as could be humanly possible.

Mary was the debutante, born of wealthy parents. She and her family resided on the *right* side of the river, in the area of Carver referred to as "Pill Hill", the name derived from the fact that most of the local doctors lived there.

Mary could be aptly described as spoiled and took her position as a resident of Pill Hill far too seriously. Call it a superiority complex; if you will, but Mary believed, no she *knew* she was better than all of the other kids. Considering that she was a beautiful girl, with strong features, natural blonde hair, pristine blue eyes, as well as being tall and lean, and you had the makings of one conceited little girl.

Alicia, on the other hand, was from the Greenville side of the river, the daughter of a local shopkeeper. She was pretty, but petite. Her olive skin and dark brown hair went in perfect harmony with her cordovan brown eyes. Alicia was quiet, unassuming and shy. Whatever social strength she possessed, she drew from her friendship with Mary. If Mary wasn't around, neither was Alicia, even when she was there in the room. But as different as their backgrounds and personalities were, they were united in cause. They were the self-appointed demons of Spider, Taxi, and the dipstick.

But for right now, Bryce was Mary's principal target. She had always given him a hard way to go, but ever since *the incident*, she had really grown to despise and torment him.

Bryce had always taken the other kid's criticisms the hardest of the three boys, and lately he seemed to be singled out by Mary for her most vehement wrath. He knew why, but he truly couldn't understand it. In his world of truths and principles, near the top of the list was "*You do not cheat!*" Mary had, and he had caught her.

Kevin noticed that Bryce had fallen silent and had withdrawn into private thoughts, probably about the rough time Mary had been giving him since he turned her in for cheating. He decided to try to take his mind off the problem.

"Hey! Are you ready to go skiing tomorrow? It's supposed to turn cold again, so the shack is out for Saturday. Let's go skiing instead," Kevin suggested.

"Sure! Which slope do you want to go to? The lifts won't be running on Crane, you know. Cougar is probably the easiest to climb up to the top of."

The thought of going skiing was working. Bryce perked right up at the chance to get away to the slopes.

"Okay then. You picked it, so that's the one we'll go to. Cougar, here we come!" Kevin confirmed. "I'll pick you up so be on your curb at six so we can get up there before anyone else," Kevin instructed. "We can ask Wiley about going after school."

Kevin and Bryce finished their lunches, chatting about this and that, and left the cafeteria as quickly as they could. They were glad to escape the cold, hateful stares Mary was shooting their way from the next table over.

Mary had been silently eavesdropping on the boys' conversation throughout their meal, something she was not above doing upon occasion; any occasion.

"Did you hear what Kevin said Alicia?" Mary asked.

"About going skiing?" Alicia asked.

"Yes. About going skiing tomorrow morning. I think I've got a way to get back at that little Spencer punk, if you're game?"

"Depends. What do you have in mind?" asked Alicia, wanting to know what was up Mary's sleeve before committing.

"Tomorrow morning, we get up early and get up to the Cougar slope before they do. We lay a trap for Spencer, one that will mess him up good," Mary plotted.

"You're crazy! We'd have to leave at five a.m., which means I'd have to get up at four on a *Saturday morning!* That's nuts!"

"Damn it, Alicia! When will we ever get a better chance to get even with him? He's right in the palm of my hand now! I know where he'll be and when, and I'm going to be there to screw him over, somehow! Now are you in or not?" Mary asked, forcefully.

“Okay. I’ll do it, but four o’clock is awfully damn early to be getting up on a Saturday morning. What exactly do you have in mind for him? It had better be good with all the sleep I’ll be losing!”

“Oh—it will be good, you can bank on that,” Mary assured her.

Friday afternoon, the weather *had* changed, once again, to the winter cold everyone in Carver expected for early November. Yesterday’s relative warmth of the shack would be gone today, and probably for weeks to come. As the boys made their way home from school, crossing the Upper Saline Bridge, Kevin mentioned the skiing trip to Wiley.

“We can go to Cougar, bright and early, and have it all to ourselves,” he urged Wiley. “I’ll drive, and we can leave at six. We’ll be there by six forty five and get started.”

“The lifts won’t be running,” Wiley reminded him.

“So we’ll hike it to the top. We’ve done it before, besides, were doing Cougar, which isn’t that hard a hike. Bryce is all for it, aren’t you Bryce?”

Bryce nodded his affirmation.

“Cougar was his idea. Come on, Wiley,” Kevin pleaded.

“I don’t know,” Wiley said. “It’s getting pretty cold and a storm is due in tomorrow. That’s what I saw on the weather last night. Maybe we should wait until next Saturday and see what the weather does.”

“Come on, Wiley! What’s the matter with you? Since when does a little cold and snow stop a mountain man from going where he pleases?” Kevin encouraged him, calling upon Wiley’s sense of manhood to sway his decision.

“Okay, I’m game,” Wiley relented. “What time will you pick me up?”

“Six o’clock, sharp. Be waiting at the curb,” Kevin instructed. “I’ll pick you up first Wiley, and then I’ll swing by your place, Bryce, and get you.”

They continued their walk home, deciding to go to Kevin’s house and play Pong on Kevin’s Atari. It was getting too cold to venture back to the shack and hang out there for any length of time.

On Saturday morning Kevin showed up at each of the other boy’s homes, right on schedule. They liked to hit the ski slope early on Saturday mornings before any other kids showed up, not that many, if any, would. They had decided on the Cougar Run on Mount Crane because it *was* little used, and easily accessible when the lifts weren’t running. They knew the lifts wouldn’t be running Saturday morning because ever since the new slopes were constructed on Jessup Mountain, the Mount Crane slopes were all but abandoned. They were primarily just overflow slopes now, used by the locals when the holiday skiers would come to town on Thanksgiving and Christmas, swarming Jessup Mountain.

The boys had learned a lot about self-preservation throughout the course of their high school careers. Now that they were seniors, they pretty much had it all figured out. What it all boiled down to was *avoidance*. Avoiding the other kids allowed life for the three of them to proceed rather normally. So Mount Crane was the perfect place for them, close to home and little used, they usually had it pretty much to themselves. There was no reason to suspect, as they left home before daylight, that this day would be any different.

Mary had been looking for a way to get even with Bryce, the teacher’s pet, ever since he had turned her in to Mrs. Collins for cheating on a history exam.

Her parents had grounded her for a month, and not only had her scholarship to Evans been revoked, but now they were saying her acceptance to the college was under *further review*. Bryce had screwed up everything for her and now it was going to be his turn to hurt.

“I hope Bryce comes down first,” whispered Mary, her breath, hanging in the bitterly cold air.

“What if he doesn’t,” Alicia asked.

“Then we wait for Bryce,” Mary instructed. “He’s why we’re here. I want to screw him up bad! Give him something to think about the next time he considers screwing with me!”

“That’s fine with me, but maybe we’ll get lucky and they will all come down together,” replied Alicia.

“I hope not,” snickered Mary. “They’ll drag us halfway down the mountain!”

“Well whoever comes first better hurry before my ass freezes off!” Alicia complained, shifting her weight from her left cheek to her right.

Mary’s plan had been a last minute affair, devised only shortly after she had overheard Kevin and Bryce discussing their ski outing in the school cafeteria.

At first, all she knew was where and when she would get her opportunity to get even with Bryce. She hadn’t figured out right away how she was going to do it. Mary had considered rolling a log onto the slope in the hope that Bryce would hit it and go flying. But, upon further consideration, she had decided he might simply jump it, and besides that, she wasn’t sure she could manage to roll a heavy log any distance or whether or not one would even be available.

She had thought of stretching a rope out across the slope, tied to trees at either side of the run, but again, he might see it ahead of time and either slide under it or jump over it. He was a good skier after all, one of the best in the area.

The rope idea was better than the log and she even knew where she could get the rope, but the element of surprise was still missing.

The idea to do—what she was about to do—had come from an old war movie she had seen on TV. The movie had been about World War Two Nazi mountain troops fighting the Americans somewhere in the Alps.

The movie had come to mind as she had been going to sleep last night, thinking about the rope in the shed, and while in that twilight zone of thoughts that randomly pop into one’s head before falling into sleep. One particular scene from the movie, which she had thought was really cool, came swimming forward—*That was what she would do to Bryce!* It was perfect. A broken arm would be great; a leg would be even better!

She had rolled over and grabbed the phone to call Alicia right away.

“*I’ll pick you up at four.*” She had told her. “*I’ll explain later. Just be ready!*”

So—on this cold, November morning—the rope was carefully hidden just below the surface of the snow, tied to a tree on one side of the slope, firmly gripped by Alicia and Mary on the other. The trap was set.

Only moments passed before a shape appeared above them on the slope; one lone figure racing down the hill toward them.

“Who is it?” Mary asked, excitedly.

Alicia stared into the frozen mist and falling snow and replied, “It’s Bryce!”

“Okay! Wait until I say, and then pull with all you’ve got,” instructed Mary. “We’ll send him flying! As soon as he flips, run like hell! We have to get out of here before the others come down.”

Mary was responsible for the timing and she timed it just right. She gave the signal to Alicia and they jerked on the rope with all their strength. A plume of snow arose in front of Bryce, totally confusing him.

What the hell! Then out of instinct, or perhaps fear, he sat down on his skis. Then...he saw the rope...just before it caught him under the chin! He didn’t have time to think about that. His legs shot out in front of him, his neck made a terrible snapping sound, and he slid lifelessly down the hill and into the forest.

Alicia had let go just in time and had fallen back down a small ravine, but the force of the collision had yanked Mary out of hiding and onto the slope. Alicia was just standing up and brushing herself off as Wiley went by. She saw him, but it did not appear as though he had seen her. She hunkered down a little as Kevin flew by. He hadn’t seen her either, of that she was sure.

But...what about Mary? She thought.

She scrambled up the side of the ravine and ran to Mary, who was lying in the snow staring down the slope.

“Mary! Did they see you?” she asked.

“He’s not moving,” was her only reply.

“Did they *see* you?” she repeated, with more urgency.

“He’s still not moving,” repeated Mary.

“For God’s sake, Mary! Did they see you? Did they get a look at you? Answer me!” screamed Alicia.

Mary finally turned to face Alicia and said, “Yes, they saw me. But he’s still not moving, Alicia.”

They could see Bryce clearly, up against a fir tree some ten to fifteen feet into the woods. He was motionless and twisted against the trunk of the tree, and it did not look good. They watched for movement from Bryce, but there was none. Not a foot, not a hand, not a finger. Wiley and Kevin had gone right by him without stopping or even trying to stop. It was obvious they had not seen him fall, nor did they see him lying there in the woods. Finally, Mary got to her feet, all the while remaining transfixed on the crumpled body below.

“Did he move yet, Alicia?”

Mary was trembling with fear. It was not fear for Bryce’s well being that she displayed, but the fear that she had finally done something that was going to get her into some very serious trouble.

“God, Alicia, tell me he moved!”

Alicia put her hand on Mary’s shoulder.

“Mary, listen. We have to get out of here. We have to get out of here *now*. The other two are at the bottom by now and will be wondering where Bryce is. They’ll come back up here looking for him and we have to be gone by then. Bryce will be fine. He’s probably knocked out, that’s all. We *have* to get moving before they return.”

Alicia was trying to be calm but forceful.

“Let’s get going,” she finally commanded.

Mary finally responded to her coaxing, and the two girls disappeared into the forest from which they had come. Mary stopped one last time to look back, then moved along again, into the forest and the uncertainty of her future.