

BYRON TIMOTHY

Superspecies One Sample Chapter

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Disappearance

Falcon broke sleep between 5:00 and 5:30 to accept his place in the world. Pressure had been building on him since the night before as he rose and mumbled some god-awful pissiness to himself while spying a detestable likeness in the mirror: 'It is interesting...', he thought, '...to imagine a day when even I might be happy in the world.' Falcon was a slightly depressed individual of thirty-five who never wore a collar or slept with more than one woman at a time, believing it simply made life too complicated. By no means a heroic or romantic person (at least not in popular understanding of the term) he tended toward the simplest and least cluttered road in life while chuckling at the boyish, mischievous grin staring back at him. Slightly graying auburn temples belied the youthfulness of his mindset while an unusually thin frame belied his age. His prominent musculature carried an understated tone of strength and energy while his voice was deep and powerful in a sense. The sharp angles of a rather lunky chin alongside a large head positioned on top of a thin frame made him seem formidable. Grace wasn't totally lacking in his manner either with the

overall effect being a solid and able reliability of a man of action or “John Wayne of the forest industry” as he was sometimes referred to. He also possessed an active imagination, a fact alone that distinguished him from a lot of his peers.

Working for the U.S. Forest Service was a lot like being a species on the verge of extinction; only the animal has a lot better chance of survival depending on its ability to elude predators. The modern forest ranger has to worry about the constant rain of descending missiles conceived by federal administrative intrigue. Presently, for example, not a lot of funds were being set aside for observing the changes going on in the forests of the United States—or anywhere else for that matter—at a time when so many changes were strikingly apparent. He too often found himself wondering (working for a heavily funded organization like the National Park Service) why there was never enough money to adequately observe the changes occurring in the forests of his state. And with recent developments, like drastic shifts in animal populations going all over the place, logic would dictate that more money be allotted to investigate these developments.

Overlooking Falcon’s bed was a skylight that allowed the sun to slap him across the face when the shutter remained open all night, which he did about half the time in order to fall asleep more quickly to the soothing effect of the winking stars. It felt like nature itself was enveloping his sleep and seeping into his dreams which he didn’t mind at all at the end of a long day. He enjoyed being awakened by nature rather than the foul rattle of an alarm clock any day. “Nature replaces what civilization takes away,” he often said in the presence of others and, after fifteen years of repeating it, was renowned for this peculiar kernel of wisdom. Such was the case at least in the bustling

metropolis of Buford, Colorado, population 5,487 counting a few hundred horses, close to a thousand cattle and seven hundred and forty-five grazing sheep.

He began each day with a journey in his four-wheel-drive pickup (not jacked-up overmuch as far as pickup trucks went in the community) through the mountains of White River National Forest searching for any human or animal activity that appeared abnormal, destructive or otherwise disturbing of the peace and tranquility of local note. His daily assessment of the “grounds”—a diminutive term for a rather large area—took four to five hours at which point he would break for lunch and read notices, charts or send correspondence for the rest of the day. “Lotta coffee” is how he dubbed his daily drive, which meant he consumed one-and-a-half thermosfuls of strong black “joe” each day in the process. Never failing to consume less. Occasionally tossing in some spent coffee grounds to add additional “flavor” and what he described as the “nitro” effect for those hard-to-start morning rituals. Later in the day, depending on its course, this might transition into coffee + Wild Turkey to soothe a struggling batch of nerves.

On his way back from the ranger’s office one rainy evening he bottomed out severely, sending the undercarriage of the truck into a rapid “jerk-and-spring” motion, up and down, followed by a heady tailspin that sent the back of his skull flinging against the rear window with a sharp rap; his body achieving temporary weightlessness. The amateur astronaut suffered only slight bruising to the head as the rain fell hard and his eyes found it difficult to focus on the muddy slosh of road ahead. Outside there wasn’t even enough visibility to notice the newly formed ditch that had developed some time in the past twelve hours. The pickup stalled on its way up from the bottom of the ditch

and on recovery lurched up and over like a wounded animal throwing up the white flag. It lay completely on its side along the side of the road. Taking a quick peek under the hood, he realized mud was caked on top of the distributor and the engine compartment was splattered in black sludge from top to bottom. He tried starting it without hope and his fears were certainly realized—no way Jose!

He assembled his rain gear and, putting it on, accepted the reality that his only option at this point was to escape on foot. After surveying the exterior damage to the vehicle, he noticed the left front tire was flat as it lay there in the swirling mud, a pitiful mass of useless rubber. Driving along these long stretches of road in the unpredictable weather of the Rockies, one expected to be walking home through a downpour from time-to-time. Poorly equipped and unfortunate vehicles were always being hauled out of difficult entrapments along these state back roads.

He left the truck behind and began walking furiously while feeling compelled to move as quickly as possible in order to avoid getting the maximum soaking which he did almost instinctively without being certain of the wisdom of the strategy. But despite his pace having nothing to do with the amount of soaking he would ultimately get, he stuck to the plan as if it did, driven by dogged determination alone. Trudging heavily through the gumbo of muddy water and pebbles with head down and emerging from the rushing drops in the pale moonlight like a wayfaring pioneer on an old wagon trail driving the herd toward an unknown future. His stoic and impregnable face was like the rain gear on his back as he passed between steep slopes and dense forest that barely slowed the rain into a broadly expanding mountain valley where the

ground under his feet felt spongier than bedsprings. The rain beat down incessantly, drumming its tragic refrain on top of his head like a scolding parent wagging a stern finger against him raising it. About halfway between the truck's untimely demise and Falcon's home, he made it to the banks of a small rushing riverbed pregnant from the rain torrent that meandered around several hilly congregations leading up to his house. Vision still limited, he kept his arm raised above his head to protect his face from the lashing trees and forest foliage along the way. Swooping, drooping and sturdy twigs swatted him from all directions, punishing the hapless traveler that dared tread upon their domain.

"Ugh!" he yelled to dispel his own sufferings through vehemence alone, "Humping through the forest in a downpour is not my idea of a good time!" appealing to the cosmic accountant of personal injustice. Sloppily planting one foot in front of the other like a man in a straitjacket, he hoped to subdue his misery in an angry revolt against circumstance.

His eyes were nearly closed from the increasing pace of the downpour when he spotted some lights up ahead a hundred yards away—looked to be auto lights too. Two glowing, yellow orbs throwing a set of matching streaks into the night sky that disappeared somewhere in the towering pines like non-moving searchlights. Jack's eyes grew wide, ignoring the offending raindrops for a moment as his mind struggled with the possibilities of the strange light's origin. He acknowledged the shortcut he'd taken a mile back led straight into the belly of a canyon too treacherous for vehicle travel. Even four-wheeling adventurers, those in the know, avoided this region for the tough obstacles therein. Obstacles that made getting in and out one hell of an undertaking and a miracle escaping the

pitfalls. Only amateurs were ever pulled out of there for lack of discretion.

He pondered it for a moment and then drenched, sore and delirious realized...yes!...it was what it couldn't be—a wreck! Somebody must've skidded off the road in the storm. His mind raced with images of every gory scene he'd ever witnessed in all the years of disaster response and recovery: folks barely able to breathe, crying for help; battered, bloody and bruised; others unable to make a sound behind crushed doors, flesh and bones. Silence, he learned, can be morbidly deafening. Once he responded to an accident—a couple—the man's vocal chords exposed just above the Adam's apple and splayed out everywhere. A stringy, red mess of unholy spaghetti complete with lots of marinara. The man had been ejected through the broken windshield's serrated edges which sliced through his neck like an enormous cutting saw. His wife fared no better: she'd broken her face in seventy-seven places and the side of her head was crushed like an egg. She'd suffered so much trauma the left side of her brain turned black. Neither survived.

"People go crazy in this country..." he muttered bitterly to himself, "...they take stupid chances and this terrain makes them pay for their mistakes." He started out at a tempered sprint, tempered by the water-logged mud that kept sucking his feet down every time he took a step toward the goal—the blasted light!—hoping the passengers were still alive and not too injured to move. Alive is good! And how the hell was he going to get help down here if they were alive? The whirlwind of trees and branches reached out for him—laughing and slashing—as he sprang forward into a flurry of running (every second counted now!). Twice his feet caught something on the ground, the top of a fallen tree or a buried boulder, nearly sending him into the

mud as he sloshed around on the muddy canyon floor.

At the light's source he found a rather sad-looking Toyota Land Cruiser tilted up on its front wheels and slightly to the left. The headlights shot hopelessly into the night sky like a wartime searchlight. He hurried to the driver's side window which brought him to his knees in rippling, muddy water while peering through the glass into the dark void within. Pressing hard with his hand, he rubbed the foggy glass but discovered it was fogged on the inside. He tried the door handle, fuming and flailing, but couldn't get the damn thing to budge! He grabbed an eight-inch blade from the back of his pack and turned it around to avoid cutting his hand, exposing the iron butt as he lunged forward like a pitcher unwinding a fastball; cracking the window so it pushed forward in one awkward slab. Having performed this operation more times than he could remember he was, by now, an expert. He tapped along the edges to allow the glass to fall out in a single piece where it still clung to the edges. It crashed onto an empty front seat, fanning his disbelief in this situation. He found no one inside—not a wick or soul! He stood staring in awe for several minutes, blinking from soaked eyelashes that kept getting stuck in his stinging eyes, "I got muddy and soaked for this? Maybe I should have a look around. Shit! This is incredibly strange..." pressing the back of his neck with his fingers. "I wonder if they got out and they're injured and wandering around somewhere..."

He scanned the scene of the accident trying to figure out what had happened. From the looks of it, the car careened off the embankment toward a horrific descent better than a hundred yards down a cliff face. The "crash" course (as he liked to call it) left its evidence in deep waterlogged, meandering tracks that wound down the heavily forested hillside. More than a

few trees had been clipped on the way down judging from the exposed white tree trunks everywhere along the path and he walked around the truck to see if there were any footprints leading anywhere...

Visibility was deteriorating rapidly as he realized he didn't have a flashlight, he'd left it back in the truck. Idiot! Just a few feet from the window he saw what appeared to be footprints—but everything being pretty washed out as it was he couldn't be sure. Some of the "footprints" headed down to the riverbed, parallel to each other, but again he couldn't be certain as they looked remarkably similar to random ruts in the mud. Meanwhile, the rain kept up a furious pace. Flood water rushed down the sides of the canyon in a thin steady stream that made its own ruts along the way as it dislodged and carried away tons of mud.

He heard the howling sound of wolves getting louder and bolder in the night and decided to beat it home quickly and call out a search-and-rescue party. His house was only about a mile away so he hustled down the river along what he thought to be the most likely occurrence of footprints. Before leaving however, he turned off the lights and spotted the keys in the ignition; he grabbed them and did his best to jog out of the gully through the sucking mud. Luckily, he felt strong, not too exhausted and kept up a good pace. He glanced over the area one last time from a distance—still seeking any personal effects belonging to the victims or any indication whatsoever of what happened to them.

He threw open the door of the cabin in a panic; making his way to the phone while dripping water all over the phone and floor, "Hello, Rick, it's me..." followed by a short pause to catch his breath, "...yeah, I sound awful, I know...had an

accident bit ago and that's not all, don't worry, I'm alright. Look, I just observed a wrecked four-wheeler...Land Cruiser just below Fisher's Hill in the riverbed...looks like it skidded all the way down into the canyon. It's *very* bad—my truck's about two miles from the spot too...had a close encounter with a giant pothole and came up with a flat tire and a doused engine compartment. The whole thing needs to be flushed out now. Anyway, I caught sight of the Land Cruiser while tramping home through this insane muck. Call out a search party because we'll need every man we can get right away. There was no one in the vehicle when I got there and I'm afraid the owners may be out wandering around in the woods or got thrown from the wreckage. I searched around a bit and didn't see anything so we'll need to perform a wide search of the area. Bring both trucks and call in the helicopter. Yeah, I know the weather's ugly but situations won't allow us to wait out the storm...see you soon."

He went to the closet and found some dry clothes to put on; taking great care to remove the wet ones on the back porch to avoid spreading anymore water around the house. Laura was certainly going to kill him for this! He also put on high rubber boots and a thick wool sweater under heavy rain gear. He also donned a floppy, wide-brimmed, waterproof hat and tied the string underneath his chin to prevent it from flying off. He went out to the shed and poured gas into the ATV to ensure it wouldn't run out on the way—figuring one daily adventure was enough. He started it up and let it run for several minutes while he packed a flashlight, shovel, .45 and first aid kit into the stowaway bin behind the seat.

He arrived back at the scene of the accident half hour after leaving the cabin to find his fellow rangers and underlings, Mel

Jaspers and Rick Skaggs, sifting through the contents of the vehicle for clues. Skaggs was youngest of the three. Tall and thin with dark eyes and a general skepticism directing a hidden sword at the world; animating his features in a vigorous and appealing way. Jaspers was practically the opposite. He was the oldest of the three. Gray of beard and head—thick in both respects, patriarchal and Old Testament in aspect, stout like a mountain man with broad back and cold pale blue eyes.

Falcon parked the ATV in front of the Land Cruiser and left it running with the lights aimed at the truck. He noticed the rain had slowed down a bit while still keeping up a steady rhythm.

“Find anything?” he asked as he walked up beside the truck, leaning on his hands on top of the door frame and peering inside.

“Nothing, yet, Jack, it’s the damnedest thing...,” Skaggs replied in soaked frustration. A frustration that ran deeper than the water drenching his skin.

“When’s the helicopter coming? We’re gonna need it right away.”

“Bout an hour I’m told, no sooner. They need time to gear up and refuel the chopper. Apparently, they’ve been running non-stop since yesterday ‘cause it’s tourist season and they’ve been giving rides to families over the slopes to bring in extra income.”

“Shit! Well, ain’t that a kick in the nuts!” Jack growled; breathing fire. “Tourists? I need that now!” with passionate disgust. “Did you get a chance to check with emergency services to see if they’ve had any distress calls tonight?”

“Not me, Jack, but Mel did,” Skaggs answered dryly, undeterred from his present occupation of overturning the carpets in the back of the Land Cruiser to see if there was anything

underneath. Jaspers meanwhile was rifling through the glove box in search of registration papers or anything indicating the name of the owner.

“Mel, have there been any calls placed to emergency services tonight?”

“Nothing,” came the muffled reply from the small enclosure his head was presently stuffed into just below the glove box while looking underneath. “Of course, if there were any you think they would’ve contacted us by now.”

“I suppose you’re right...,” Falcon answered vaguely, “...but I’m going to check it all the same.” He walked to Rick’s truck and removed the radio receiver from the cradle. “Hello, c’min... c’min...this is ranger Falcon...,” impatiently awaiting a response. “Hi, this is Jack, supervisor of White River, I’m checking on any distress calls you might’ve gotten lately...”

A crackling but sharp female voice came on the line, it was Sandra Lee. “Well, hello stranger, it’s Sandra...nothing for you yet. You’d have gotten it already if we had, we ain’t holding nothing out on ya, Jack! You expecting something?”

Jack stared at the Land Cruiser in distress. The rear tires, dipping sharply into the ground, were almost completely submerged in a swirling pool of mud forming a murky tomb for the hapless SUV. It was roughed up pretty badly too—rear fender twisted upward sharply, front tires at odd, outward angles, and the rest of the back section pushed more or less in toward the center of the vehicle. If that weren’t enough, the rear window was smashed in and pushed through the back and a few inches of water had accumulated inside.

“Sandy, we’ve got a situation here: an SUV slid off one of the old state roads and crashed into a low-lying riverbed some one hundred feet below. It occurred right around the vicinity of

Fisher's Hill. The situation now is we can't locate the vehicle's occupants who've simply vanished. Haven't yet found any clues to their whereabouts..."

"My god! I didn't know," she gasped, still registering the information being given her, "Anything special you'd like me to do?"

"Don't worry Sandra—just keep me posted on anything that might come over the wire."

"Hey, Jack, here's something," said Mel Jaspers, the older, grizzled ranger who for all intents and purposes reminded him of an old patriarch. He'd been at White River for eight years and the forest service for thirty-two; consciously never rising above the position of ranger though promotions and commendations had been offered him in the past. To curious inquisitors, he explained it was fear of being taken out of the forest for paperwork, administrative duty and being chained to an office chair.

"Yeah, Mel. What is it?" turning to face the man mountain himself.

"Our office just called, there's a bit of a strange report that just came in..." he paused; peering intensely at Falcon and biting his lower lip, "...a couple just reported being forced off the road by a large grizzly they claimed came at them on the road. The bear forced them off the road and down a slope where they eventually crashed in the river. Miraculously—they survived." He examined Falcon's face closely to see if comprehension was taking hold, then shouted, "Right here!" observing his reaction and blinking several times in time conscious discomfort. He continued his explanation, "The grizzly was reared up on its front legs in the middle of the road! Scared them half to death and the driver veered off the road without realizing where he

was going in the storm.”

While still digesting all of it, Falcon asked with cocked brow, “Did it mention whether they were driving a Land Cruiser? When did this come in? Just now?”

Jaspers nodded to both questions but Falcon was insistent.

“Yes to both questions?”

“Yes, Jack, it’s the same people. Couldn’t be anyone else with that story and what we’re looking at here.” Falcon contemplated the many causes that might’ve led to such a rare occurrence. It was the first time he’d ever heard of a grizzly bear forcing a car off the road and seemed more like fantasy than any possible reality.

With uncertain tone he suggested, “Maybe mama bear had some of her cubs nearby and the driver simply got too close. She might’ve been getting ready to lead them across the road and the car just startled them.” Seeming satisfied with this explanation, he came out of the relative fog of his own thoughts and glanced at Jaspers again with clear eyes.

“No Jack...,” he protested, “...listen to this: the woman said the grizzly followed them down the hill after forcing them off the road and when they crashed at the bottom and escaped from the car, the grizzly picked up their little girl and made off with her into the woods. Disappearing, they said, so quickly they were unable to keep up with the bear as they tried chasing it into the forest...”

Mel stood observing Falcon’s reaction to decipher its meaning, wondering if the words were as strange to hear as they were to say. So far, though, there wasn’t much to be read on his blank face. Jaspers continued the story, hoping to gain a better response.

“I should mention that there were other grizzly bears involved

too. In fact, a large group of ‘em.”

“Grizzlies? You sure they were grizzlies? Here at White River? Impossible! Do you realize how unusual that is for this part of the Rockies? Grizzlies are almost non-existent here...” He hastily explained. Strange that out of the many unusual things involved in this case—grizzlies forcing cars off roads, people surviving long harrowing tumbles down treacherous embankments and young children being carried off to “god-knows-where” for “god knows what reason”, Falcon focused on the least unusual fact of all: a species, rare to the area, being observed out of its normal habitat range. Guess it was an attempt to “normalize” what seemed a perfectly “abnormal” situation.

“Grizzlies—yes, it was undeniable according to them. The father’s a hunter and says he’s sure they were grizzlies.”

Jaspers’ dark irises, swimming in pale blue, grew in excitement as he continued his explanation of the rather extraordinary event. “The woman said four or five grizzlies surrounded them when they got out of the SUV, growling and slashing at them as a kind of warning to stay put as if they’d been captured. They felt certain the bears were going to kill them and froze in their tracks, then one of the bears grabbed the little girl and slipped away while the mother watched in horror. She screamed and tried grabbing her daughter back but one of the bears took a swipe at her, giving her a deep scrape on the shoulder. Then the father stepped up to keep the bear from taking his daughter and was nearly killed in the process—thrown against the car so hard he sustained a broken wrist and collarbone. He may’ve even suffered a moderate concussion according to the medical report. Then, the mother said, the grizzly that picked up the little girl cradled her in one arm and

walked away with the other grizzlies in tow. Her husband said she was in such a state of shock she didn't even cry out—just stood there holding her breath. At which point, they pursued the group for a while before losing them in the bush. Pretty bizarre, eh?”

“That's not the half of it if all you say is true!” Falcon fledged in a state of shock; unsure whether he was the victim of some elaborate scheme and gazing at Jaspers with a fresh suspicion.

“All I can say is, it's a good thing they didn't catch up to those bears, otherwise we might have three deaths on our hands instead of one!” Falcon jumped immediately to what seemed the inevitable conclusion: the girl was dead.

“Please...,” Jaspers begged defiantly; finding that unpalatable, “They didn't say she was dead—yet. She may still be alive...”

Falcon took in Jaspers' hopeful, pleading expression and decided it was best to abandon that line of thinking for the time being. He'd simply assumed given the circumstances she was dead—well, maybe it was best not to assume anything yet, especially the worst at the start, and avoid tempting the will of fate.

“Mel, you're right, I am jumping to the worst possible conclusion without just cause, sorry...,” pausing for a moment because he was wondering about something; so compelling was this particular notion on his mind that he neglected to think about the impact before asking, “Did the couple seem sound in their recollections according to whoever spoke to them? By the way, who did interview them? Were they under the influence of any intoxicating substances?” He wasn't sure why he'd said it, it just came out like a natural and inevitable question—from conception to reality—since impossible was the only way to describe what he'd been hearing. He actually felt vicious for

uttering these words but the situation was so rare he had to be sure he was getting the absolute truth.

Jaspers responded plainly, ignoring the question concerning the couple's mental state. "I realize everything I've told you is hard to believe but it's true and accurate according to the report just come in over the radio. Didn't say anything about them being intoxicated."

Falcon withdrew in quick, critical thought. "Just sounds too unbelievable to me. My natural skepticism tells me something else may be going on here—a child abandonment or worse, a murder. Like that case a few years back: the couple that left their little boy in the forest hoping he would starve or be killed by animals. They reported him lost and when we finally located him he gave us a completely different account that implicated his parents."

Jaspers was grave, confessing darkly, "I didn't think of that. Gosh, I hope it's nothing like that..." voice shrinking to a whisper.

"Where's the couple, now?" Falcon inquired.

"At the office, they walked all the way there from here. Though I'm not exactly sure how they found it so quickly." Jaspers' confession was accentuated by thoughtful stroking of an impressive beard.

"I'm really dying to talk to those two," he informed the older ranger and turning to the other one kneeling beside the truck and peering underneath, "Rick, you come with me. We have to find out what's really going on behind this unbelievable fiasco." He actually had cause to use the word "fiasco" which amused him greatly as there weren't many occasions he found it useful. "Let's take your truck. There's nothing more we can do here anyway." Turning to Jaspers, who started walking up toward

the tire tracks, Falcon yelled out, "Mel, we're going back to the office to interview this couple. Give her the once-over and meet us up there as soon as you can. Oh, and tell 'em to get their asses down here with that chopper pronto!"

Jaspers replied with a short salute and began checking over the area one more time. Noticing now what appeared—after the report had come in—to be bear tracks on the passenger's side of the Land Cruiser. Visually, he tried to take the bear's measure from the size of the tracks but after glancing at it awhile, seemed unable to determine whether they were really bear tracks at all. Whatever they were, the water-logged indentations had undergone considerable distortion since forming. Absolute certainty under these severe weather conditions was perhaps too much to hope for.

Jaspers called out to them as the truck rushed past, "Put that couple under the lamps but be sure to go easy. I'm going to call in the tow truck to pull this thing outta here and make sure it's cleaned up good. See ya soon..."

Falcon yelled back, "Make sure it hasn't leaked any oil or gas anywhere, too. We need to know right away if it has and make out a report for the state. The environmentalists'll jump down our throats if they find out we didn't do anything about it. Oh, and put my ATV in back of your truck and haul it to the office."

Jaspers chuckled and tipped his hat as they disappeared up the hill beneath a predawn sky.

Delete Created with Sketch.

The couple looked defeated and at wits end when the rangers arrived back at the office; huddling together like refugees suffering the adverse effects of homelessness and exposure, physically and emotionally. Falcon instantly gathered it was frayed and cracked nerves rather than coldness and wetness

that affected them. Their faces bore the unmistakable stamp of pain, shock and helplessness when situations went extreme, seated in chairs like tiny animals on cliff edges. Their eyes rodent-like in ferocity against a world that cornered them and made them desperate.

The mother was a pale blond with a beautiful and somewhat oval-shaped face in her early 30s and normally, one would expect, possessed the light and graceful movements of a youngish woman. At this moment, however, she looked remarkably like a frail and feeble old woman suffering a tremendous burden her native delicacy left her unable to cope with; drifting as it were in a private universe and private hell. Her dark eyes weren't focusing on anything in the room, anything at all. She was absorbed and imprisoned by myriad thoughts and, strictly speaking, it would have been less uncomfortable for her companions if she were bawling out loud.

The father's mental state contrasted with the mother's by being nervous, irritable and defiantly terrified. The difference being his particular affliction prepared him for action. His eyes were clear, focused and cruel, searching for an object of blame or rage. In his late 30s, he was a smallish, intelligent man with black hair, doubtless white-collar, thick mustache, and from the large gold watch on his arm, well-to-do. He kept repeating over and over like a charm, "How are we going to get my little girl back?"—and like a wounded animal—"Why, oh why, did they kidnap my little girl?" With a hand like a claw he pulled his fingers through his hair practically yanking it from the roots, then wringing his hands together, repeated some variation of these sentiments over and over.

The scene was unnerving. After a bit, the man actually began shrieking, "He's going to kill my little girl, isn't he?...eat her like

a dog?” as if Falcon knew the answer to that question and a lot was riding on the answer. The woman’s eyes grew wider and more distant upon hearing this awful prediction and the man clenched his fists; forcing the veins violently to the surface of his arms.

“That god-awful beast is probably feeding on her as we speak, isn’t he?” he shrieked again, not noticing the effect on his poor catatonic wife. Oh! he howled, “What am I going to do?”

Falcon, in the role of supervisor now, did his best to answer all the father’s questions, however incoherent, without making it obvious he had no idea what a bear would want with his little girl. He didn’t have any idea, of course, but advertising that fact right now might not display the best form with two frantic parents on his hands. Why would a bear kidnap a human child? Who knows? Unless it was the obvious: to—to—best to think about it!

After doing some mental calculation, he turned tail on his previous thinking pattern rather than keeping up a front for them. How long could he pretend to know more than he did? Be better to simply come clean with them, they deserved that much after what they’d been through. He confessed with complete candor, “Unfortunately, (thinking fortunately) nothing like this has ever happened at White River before. We have nothing to compare this situation to and we’re not sure what to expect or what it means...”

The woman propped her head up and regarded him closely with a vague sense of loathing. Her eyes glowing, silently and morbidly, in nervous expectation as her gaze enveloped him. He realized nothing he said would soothe their agony, at the same time some sort of positive action was required under the circumstances. Would the grizzly kill her? Hide her? Eat

her? He wondered if she were still alive as they considered the protocols of rescuing her and something in the woman's eyes recognized the thought now fleeting through his head. In a feeble attempt to be hopeful and reassuring, Falcon explained directly to the girl's mother, "I do not believe the bear would hurt a human child...be highly unusual for them. The bear probably carried her around awhile for the sake of novelty then left her somewhere in the forest. What we need to do now is go out and find her before she is harmed." He observed her reaction. Nothing. He persisted, "It's very much a fluke, this event, and there's a good chance she'll be back with you—soon! First, however, we need to go through all the details of the incident together."

He wondered in her silent condition whether his words stirred her at all. Her look hadn't changed significantly, that was clear, and it was likely she hadn't heard him at all. His heart sank and he questioned the wisdom of uttering these thin words of hope.

The father seemed to be growing more agitated all the time and was beginning to show the initial signs of nervous breakdown. He scowled severely, shivered as if cold, and began mumbling inaudible curses to himself. Craggy veins popped out at his temples, pulsing as though his brain was about to explode from the pressure building up inside. Falcon stared in awe.

He turned to the woman hoping, at this moment, she might be more accessible than her rapidly disintegrating husband. "Mrs. Demora...?" She looked up for a split second, saying nothing; it wasn't much of an answer but he went on as if strongly encouraged, "...we're going to do everything possible, I assure you, to get your little girl back. I want you to understand

that...,” pausing to allow his words to sink in and determine if any registration were taking place.

“Now I realize you’ve suffered a terrible tragedy and we’re going to get to the bottom of it whatever it is, but we need your cooperation in helping us figure out what happened. Do you understand? For your little girl...,” his eyes grew wide in appeal to her motherly instincts and he imagined he saw a glint of purpose in her eyes. She didn’t move. He studied her for several moments trying to draw her out of herself and her face like a rubber mask. At last, he was sure of what he saw: a spark and glimmer of hope washed over her features, tightening and enlivening them. She was back!

Outside the rain poured down rhythmically, adding some measure of context to the course of events inside. It began again with renewed vigor as things got especially tense in a room where silence reigned over tiny droplets rolling down foggy window panes. Figuring Mrs. Demora was his best chance for getting a response (Falcon believed she had a relatively even temperament), Falcon queried gently, “Now please do tell me what happened Mrs. Demora...,” the clear, insistent sound of his voice appeared to draw her further out of herself.

“Oh, Mr. Ranger...we were just driving along the state road...we didn’t mean to get off there...I know it was wrong of us...” she stopped suddenly, sobbing without a sound and too wracked with guilt to continue. Blaming herself for her daughter’s disappearance and obsessed with a minor infraction of the law—using prohibited roads—as if it had contributed to or caused her little girl’s kidnapping or death. This simple act of miscalculation on her part was certainly indicative of the depth of her distress and how it rattled her to the core. What worried Falcon even more was the sense that she was clinging

to this illusion like an explanation, a place of blame and a link to reality; and the blame was clearly being thrust on herself.

He decided to let her proceed at her own pace and see what transpired. “Maybe driving...*sob*...a little too fast,” she picked up again without prompting; glancing guiltily at her husband who began staring at her in disbelief. “I’m so sorry, ranger... *sob*” to which Falcon replied, “It’s OK. It isn’t your fault. Don’t worry about the state road. That isn’t important now, please just continue with what happened after that...”

She looked at him shyly, wiping her puffy, red eyes, “Anyway, we were driving too fast for the weather. We realize that now...,” she glanced insistently at her husband who looked at her blankly; bewildered by the unexpected testimony, “...and then we saw a huge shadow in the road up ahead. I was in the passenger seat, my husband was driving and in the headlights in the center of the road...neither one of us could make out what it was until we got up close...*too close!*” Her face transformed quickly into a death mask as she relived it all again. She burst out in a voice thick with terror, “We should’ve been more careful! Should’ve backed up immediately!” It sounded like a wail—the cry of a wounded animal. “A very large grizzly was standing on its hind legs coming straight at us and it looked like there were others just over the ridge. I couldn’t believe my eyes!” those eyes presently exploding like volcanic suns. “I screamed for Daniel to stop! “Stop!” I yelled at him, “Turn back! Turn back!” I said over and over! I don’t even know if he heard me...” She glanced at her husband briefly at that, “...but he couldn’t see the road well and the rain was coming down hard and everything was so wet and muddy and wild! Daniel quickly put the car in reverse to back up so we could get away—*away!*...” she shivered, “...but we got stuck in the sloppy

mess trying to back out. Daniel panicked and before we knew it we started rolling and rolling down a very steep hill, backwards, crashing at the bottom. None of us were hurt, thank god! A terrible situation we were in too, we knew it, but thought at least we'd escaped those awful creatures. We came down such a long, *long* way! But...but..." she trailed off; breaking down in a series of dry, crackling sobs.

Suddenly, the husband awoke from his mental stupor. The sound of her voice had evidently stirred his protective instincts enough to make him clasp her shoulders in support. After a long silence, Falcon urged her to proceed, "I know it's difficult for you, Mrs. Demora, but please go on. We need to know everything." Her failing voice and bewildered expression indicating she was slipping back into a semi-conscious daze; trembling now and on the verge of breakdown.

"What happened next? with patient persuasion that didn't elicit a response right away; so, as she slipped further away, his voice became more insistent, "And then?" Placing his face up next to hers. She broke down instantly, "ah-ah-ah-ah-aaaaaaa!" wailing in drowning tones. Then suddenly, without warning, she resumed speaking again:

"When we got out of the car, we were surrounded by huge bears—monsters!" she explained with a wide, vacant expression. Her face growing tight, "I don't know how many—four, five..."

Mr. Demora interrupted to keep the record straight, "Four." Returning to a committed and scowling silence immediately thereafter. She didn't seem to hear him as she relayed the rest of her account; a narrative filled with frequent sobbing, "My... little...Amy..." *sob* "...was picked up...by..." *sob* "...excuse me, I'm sorry, I can't go on..." *sob*, passing quickly into an episode of ever violent wailing. It was agony to behold. She

buried her face in her hands and her body trembled with such unrestrained force they were certain she'd shatter into a million pieces. An eternity for Falcon and at least as long for the others present. Without thinking, he placed a firm hand of consolation on her arm.

"It's alright, miss, please take a deep breath and try to relax. What direction did the bear take her when he grabbed your daughter? Did you see? Into the mountains, maybe...?"

The skin on her face trembled like loose rubber as her eyes pooled up with cloudy tears she attempted to stifle in noiseless sobs. Falcon felt for her. The weariness, the quick lines on her face showed clearly just how much she had suffered from the experience—indeed how much she was suffering now. Falcon suspected much of her agony stemmed from personal guilt, blaming herself for not having "done more" to rescue her child. Feelings of helplessness are always the hardest to accept in any situation.

"I'm sorry to press you so much, Mrs. Demora..." Falcon said by way of explanation, "...but we need to collect all the information we can get in order to find your little girl. I hope you understand."

She stared at him deeply, eyes sunken, shiny, pleading and now coldly rational, "Ranger, my little girl is out there somewhere in this god-forsaken place with wild animals holding her hostage, perhaps turning her into grizzly meat as we speak and I don't know what to do!" and in even clearer voice, "Whatever you decide, wherever you're going, I want to be there to help..."

Falcon countered, "We have quite a number of folks in the field already, Mrs. Demora. In less than an hour, there's going to be a twenty, thirty man search team accompanied by tracking dogs and helicopters leading the ground crews." He glanced in

Skaggs direction, "Isn't that right Rick?" Skaggs nodded. "You see, Mrs. Demora, we have everything covered as far as that goes. Wherever they are, wherever they're going, they'll be trackable as long as they're still in the general area and haven't strayed too far or taken deep cover somewhere. Grizzlies are pretty rare in this area and should be easy to spot."

"Particularly if they're still in a group," Skaggs explained helpfully.

"The best way you can help us now is to show us where you last saw Amy before she disappeared into the forest with the bears." He paused a moment to gauge her reaction. "We'll take you back to the scene of the crash and you can show us if that's alright with you. That's where we'll take up the search." He scanned her face for any encouraging signs but she stayed silent and walled-off, giving nothing away.

"It would mean a great deal," he insisted, kneeling in front of her, hands over bended knee. "Show us where and what direction they went, that's all I ask." He glanced over at her husband who had stopped staring at his wife and was now staring at him.

"I'll tell you..." Mr. Demora said in a rush, "...we chased 'em as far as we could. Don't know what got into us!" head shaking vigorously. "We both could've been killed! But my little girl!" His face took on the shape of primal fear. A fear that reverberated through his muscles and pulsed in his veins like a black paralyzing ooze morphed into rage turned inward. Falcon, however, was pleased at this development. He was at least moving out of shock phase and into the grief-stricken one.

"They took her up in the mountains, east of where we crashed, about half a mile from the site." He tried moving his wrist to no avail. Falcon studied the cuts and bruises on his wrist and head.

“How do you feel, Mr. Demora?” Falcon asked mildly.

“Call me Dan. I know what you’re thinking, ranger, but I’m okay to travel. I’ll go anywhere in fact. My head’s a bit sore and I look beat up for sure but I’m OK to travel and we need to find my daughter!” He let out a deep, wistful sigh, which at the moment Falcon found mystifying. More mystifying still, from his perspective, was the fact that both of them were holding up so well under the circumstances which were simply awful.

“I’ve been in worse shape than this and able to do much more,” he added to support his case and prove his worth. I’m a veteran.”

Falcon smiled in deference to his sense of social responsibility and real world experience; regarding him with protective scrutiny, “As long as you’re up for it and I believe you when you say you are.” Demora nodded with impressive dignity, ready again for the great campaign.

“They carried her to the high ground, didn’t they Daniel?” a struggling voice intervened as the two men both stared at each other in silence. Ostensibly over who had the floor which had suddenly shifted in Mrs. Demora’s favor. Their three faces met in a monument of personal tragedy, anger and despair crossing swords between them.

He snapped, “Of course they did! You were there...,” breaking away from her mirrored gaze abruptly and facing the ranger with the remnants of a scowl still on his face.

“Alright, the bear took her up into the mountains...,” Falcon repeated with a quick glance at Skaggs that amounted to eye-rolling without the act itself. Skaggs smiled briefly then returned immediately to blankness, “...that much is established.” Then giving them both a cursory nod that the meeting was over, Falcon rose from the chair slowly.

“Then that’s where we’ll concentrate our efforts...,” he ex-

plained to them, "...you'll show us where you lost them and we'll get the dogs to pick up the scent from there."

"Mr. Demora, you OK to make the journey?" Skaggs said after noticing the laborious undertaking it was rising from his chair. The instant wave of anger that washed over the husband's face made Skaggs realize he'd made a serious mistake—too late; it touched a nerve. A nerve that emerged, most likely, from a combination of feeling impotent to save his daughter in the first place and his current dependency on others to get her back.

He grumbled bitterly, "I'm going to get a gun and kill those monsters myself!" spit shooting out of the sides of his mouth and face muscles jiggling like rubber. "If you don't find my little girl, I'll find her if I gotta hunt down every goddamned bear in these mountains! Find my little girl!" he screamed desperately at Falcon, "I don't care about anything else!" letting out a few violent, uncontrollable sobs to underscore the point.

Falcon waved Skaggs back as he attempted to handle the gesticulating dad who was clearly having no trouble with mobility now. He relayed calmly, "In your shoes I would undoubtedly feel the same way, but I suggest for everyone's sake—including yours and your little girl—we work together. We'll get your daughter back much faster that way."

"Just get my daughter back, I don't care how you do it...!" speaking in imperious tones; beyond aggravation now and staring pugnaciously at the two bewildered rangers. Then, unexpectedly, Mr. Demora's grimace softened from exhaustion more than anything else.

"The most important thing right now is to stick together..." Falcon repeated, "...put in a concerted effort, use our resources wisely and with none of us running off on our own because that can only make things worse."

“My idea is...” he continued after hearing no protests, “...we should join up with the search team which ought to be up to full strength soon, if not already. Mr. and Mrs. Demora you can ride along with me and my partner Rick Skaggs. Together we have a pretty good idea where the bears have taken her. The feeding grounds aren’t too far from the crash site but we’ll wait and see where the dogs lead us.”

Falcon left for a minute and disappeared into the back office to pack gear for the trip. In a medium-sized shoulder bag, he placed a GPS unit, maps, compasses, a flashlight, knives, food and a first-aid kit (just in case there were any mishaps in the field). He removed a 9 mm. gun from his hip, locked it up in the safe and replaced it with .45 magnum and holster. The new weapon being much more suitable for close-range encounters with bears.

The Demoras were in the midst of a protective huddle against the world when he returned, their arms encircling each other as if they’d never—or couldn’t—let go. Joined like caterpillars in a shriveled cocoon and protective barrier of life, loss and love. Everything was closing in on them from all corners of the world as their grief matured by degrees into morbid resignation and the need for positive action or fatal surrender. Skaggs waited, observing them closely, and after an acceptable term asked if they were ready to go; obsequious before their self-fortification and signaling them to follow at their own pace.

To get the couple conversing again and ease the tension, Skaggs instructed the Demoras to tell him of any additional details about the kidnapping along the way. Anything they recalled now might greatly increase their chances of success, he explained. What the bears looked like, any distinguishing features, marks, scars, unusual behaviors or if they split up

making their escape. Thinking about it now he wondered, and asked, if the bears had separated in different directions when they disappeared as that seemed critically important now. Mr. Demora explained he wasn't able to see very well at the time, with the rain and all, but the bears were still together when they lost sight of them.

The sun was up and the rain was over as a ghostly mist still lingered in the gray air reflecting sunlight to the ground in glistening aureoles. The air remained passive as whispers from the towering treetops seemed to broadcast their journey in forewarning; passing along dewy, silent roads.

"Mr. and Mrs. Demora..." Falcon addressed them, "...you'll be sticking with Mr. Skaggs and myself during the entire rescue operation. Hope you understand. I suggest remaining as close to us as possible for your own safety but also so you can stay abreast of any developments as they happen."

Hitched to the back of Skaggs' truck were a couple of ATVs intended for covering a lot of ground in a hurry—chasing a bear through semi-rugged terrain for example. The only drawback being that, effective as ATVs were for tracking game through the forest and reaching difficult places, they were major hindrances for making critical shots because driving and aiming rifles are nearly impossible to do at the same time. Stopping suddenly and grabbing rifles at close-range wasn't a particularly desirable option either since it left the driver open to attack in the meantime.

"I'll radio the search party and tell 'em we'll meet up with 'em at the accident scene. When we get there, the manpower will be split into groups and they'll take separate routes up the mountain so every possible escape is covered."

He said this for the benefit of the couple in the backseat who

would likely be more amiable and cooperative companions if kept informed and involved throughout the process. At this moment however they just stared at him with wide eyes and a grim pondering silence of the strange things they might encounter under the care of this odd forest renegade. Falcon returned their gaze with severe intent, seeking a certain level of understanding among them for everyone's sake.

"Is that clear?" imploring them to at least nod in acknowledgment. "Well, that's it, then..." turning toward the front window, "...we'll be there shortly."

The first three hours of the search turned up nothing and some people were already showing premature signs of demoralization—especially the Demoras. The search party was comprised of twenty-four state policemen along with a variety of rangers from other nearby parks and ten bear tracking dogs all hot on the heels of four or so bears. During this time and the hours following, the bear dogs had picked up the scent and lost it, picked it up and lost it again, appeared to find it yet again but found only a family of unhappy raccoons. All the while leading their human counterparts on a wild two-hour-long chase through dense forest terrain—then turned tail and retraced their steps back to the beginning where they were now.

Multiple rivers, streams and mounds of thick, impassable forest lay in front of them preventing the dogs from maintaining an unbroken trail of scent. Skaggs mentioned in passing that it was possibly a deliberate tactic by the bears who sensed instinctually they'd be followed. Bears, he explained, are particularly adept at throwing enemies off their scent with an impressive array of offensive and defensive tactics.

The helicopter reported back the bird's eye view every twenty

minutes but so far all the reports were negative. The constant overhead passing was beginning to grate on Falcon's nerves like a whispered reprimand as he spied the Demoras' crushed appearances out of the corner of his eye; their faces coming apart at the seams. Morale was lagging and aggravation was quickly replacing all hope and optimism among the searchers. They carried on doggedly nevertheless but with each passing hour the actions of the group were no longer driven by the high expectations at the beginning. Falcon meanwhile did his best to shield the couple from the contagious discouragement of the others by engaging them in every aspect of the search and keeping them distracted. He explained the purpose of each step along the way and what it meant to the overall effort while, at the same time, realizing he was just postponing the inevitable. The tactic wouldn't work long unless something tangible—a break—was forthcoming.

A light sprinkle began as Falcon sloshed through the mud with loud sucking sounds directly underfoot from pools of stagnant, brownish water filling holes made by his boots...leaving mini lakes behind. In the near distance, he heard the dogs barking with a haunting sound that chilled him better than the strong gusts of morning wind. Perhaps even they were bemoaning their lack of success so far. All around were shadowy outlines of Ponderosa pines framed against white chalky slopes with shifting human shapes capturing the hazy sunlight. Footsteps and falling raindrops helped make a buzzing background.

Falcon stood beside Skaggs scratching his head in frustration under a thick splay of pines, "Where the hell did they go?" as if expecting an honest answer. In the distance, the lonely howl of a wolf rose above the trees filling the air with hopeless longing. The two rangers pored over plastic-coated topographic maps

trying to determine where distribution of landforms and forest density gave large animals an opportunity to conceal themselves. They also took the chance to mark off areas already searched in order to determine what was left undone.

The Demoras waited by themselves—separated from the others in an ATV—straight-backed, speechless and still. They were no longer offering each other comfort which, at this stage, would have been reassuring. Their daughter might be dead and they were gradually adjusting to the idea on the most personal level. They hardly looked at each other as they sipped coffee and shivered from the chill, whispering in conspiring tones and casting accusing glances at the others.

Rick Skaggs went to the truck's CB to try to scare up some help from other law enforcement agencies; nothing to lose was the thought. He tried to reach Bill Gaines, Colorado State Police Commissioner, who had offered them assistance in disappearance cases before.

"Hello, this is Rick Skaggs at White River...I'm trying to reach Bill Gaines, is he there?" pausing for an answer. No one answered immediately but trusting somebody had heard him, he elaborated, "I'm calling to find out if there's anything yet on the missing girl case? Over." He waited; and after about twenty seconds a grainy voice came on the line.

"This is Bill...Rick, you old salt! How the hell are you?" a broad and amiable voice greeted him. "We ain't found nothing yet, sorry to say. It's a shame—a real shame! Baffling too! A bear kidnapping a child? Can't get my head around it...not at all...but you'll be the first we contact if anything turns up. Over." Skaggs felt his heart sinking in his chest. He said thinly, "Thanks, Bill, talk soon. Over..."

His face was despondent. "We may have to keep searching

through the night. There's no way we can call off the search or postpone it because of bad weather with a little girl's life at stake. How would that look?" Falcon stood before Skaggs, arms crossed, desperate for any positive development. "Nothing," he replied in answer to Falcon's hanging expression about the call. "May be time to call in another helicopter and more men."

"Yes and yes..." was Falcon's simple answer, "...as much and as many as we can get. We'll surely need both. Too much time has already been wasted and nothing's been accomplished. I'm starting to fear the worst: we'll never find her. Call the state police and have them send twenty or more men and another chopper immediately. The one with the infrared scanners and motion sensors this time—from the army—never mind the cost. If they're using it for something else, tell them this is much more important. We'll be able to cover about a thirty- to forty-mile radius every hour in that machine."

Falcon glanced at the parents who were still seated in the back of the ATV staring blankly into space. After Skaggs completed the call for additional help, Falcon said to them, "Alright, let's go and join the rest of the search team on the southern side of the mountain. That's where everyone's headed since this side's finished. Lot more territory to be covered there..." he said as optimistically as possible.

The search team agreed to reconvene at a place called Nelson's Mill, an old homestead dating back to the region's glorious—and short-lived—"boom-and-bust" days. Tattered remnants of a ramshackle mill sat over a creek missing more than a few wallboards along with a rickety waterwheel that, at one time, powered one of the largest saws in the state.

Nelson's Mill was situated three-quarters of the way up the mountain on the southern edge of a steep slope. It

was a well-known gathering place for bears because of its dense overhanging pines, multiple paths of escape and steep-walled canyons on either side of a stream that offered enviable defensive and camouflage possibilities. Groups of black bears had been observed holding mass feedings at the location from time to time as it was especially suited for that purpose.

There were no roads leading up to the mill other than an old gravel one riddled with sharp angular rocks, occasional flooding, fallen trees and mudslides along with thick forest overgrowth and some large tree roots. The road was almost wholly impassable except by wayfaring animals in search of food and human beings with a penchant for personal peril. Every year a few such personality types had to be rescued along the road entangled somewhere or another along the deep recesses. The road itself—a left over from the old mining days—looked like it hadn't been used since the nineteenth century. The faint outline curved through a number of steeply rolling hills with trees and high forest grasses in the middle, in many cases with long thorns, and it was often hard to tell where the road ended and the forest began.

Nelson's path, the informal designation given to this interesting little piece of local history, was slow going and sloppy on this particular day following the off-and-on rains of the past few days. The rain itself had stopped by early evening but its effects were still being felt in myriad ways—not the least of which was an agreeable musky smell in the air. Falcon, Skaggs and the Demoras made the painfully slow uphill journey with an early moon perched overhead partly obscured by red clouds and fading light.

The clouds cleared away revealing a full moon and an ocean of stars that improved visibility both on the ground and in the air.

Falcon was armed with a familiarity of the road's every contour, twist and turn; designating his way the "only way" to the top. However, they weren't going to the top this time. The search team was meeting up at the final "run-out"—the last turn before the most perilous section of the road. A good thing too, because the final section was particularly treacherous; involving a steep pile of mine waste that had to be surmounted in order to reach a plateau at the top. Scores of motocross bikers flipped over there and daredevil drivers frequently ended up with head and neck injuries.

Getting to the "run-out" required a thorough knowledge of the road's unique obstacles and challenges. The approach had to be varied and adaptive in order to be effective and split-second timing was required in some places; particularly where large boulders occupied the middle of the road and driving was limited to tiny spaces between outcrops, dense trees and cascading bluffs. There were also hairpin turns everywhere along the road with high drop-offs. Falcon's knowledge was obtained through years of trial and error—mostly rescuing others—and near death experiences. In several places, the road was so impassable that it was safer not to stick to the main road but to actually go onto the sides until it was safe to take the road again.

The Demoras didn't look happy when Falcon glanced at their faces in the rear view mirror. To their credit though they bore it all without complaint, perhaps just shutting down under the weight of it all. Falcon guessed it was because their own lives weren't uppermost in their minds at the moment. It was touching—the girl's parents becoming so unconcerned for their own safety at a time of their daughter's misfortune. Touching sometimes how tragedy makes the hardest hearts sacrificial.

His own life even seemed unimportant by comparison. If they had to suffer a little bit to save a little girl's life, such—as the saying goes—is life.

Falcon shuffled through the glove box for a second flashlight and compass he immediately placed in the front pocket of his fisherman's vest. Conscious that a compass is the most important item in a tracker's arsenal, he believed he needed an extra one just in case. A compass was more important than a gun if a person ever got lost in the woods. The lack of one, or the knowledge of how to use one, can cause a hunter, hiker or fishermen to wander aimlessly for days.

By the time they arrived at the spot below Nelson's Mill the sun had already set. Funnels of mist were rising above the trees and everything had a slow, shifting quality to it. A few of the nocturnal hunters could be heard stirring in the bushes beginning their nightly search for food as little dancing flashlights fanned out in all directions forming an unbroken line in the void. The helicopter's floodlights passed overhead from time to time making shadows creep like vines up the sides of rocks and trees while a vague sense of foreboding filled the air.

Falcon parked the ATV in a clearing, got out and opened the door for the Demoras who stepped out wide-eyed and cautious, looking all around them with amazement—exhausted but acutely aware of their surroundings. Falcon whispered to Skaggs, "The search team is out in force tonight and it looks like they've started without us. All set for another lengthy search of the area?" Skaggs only response was a slow, somber nod; exhaustion was beginning to set in as dark circles under his partner's eyes. Falcon lowered his voice and, casting a precautionary glance at the Demoras, added confidentially,

“Time is passing quickly my old friend...if we find her tonight it’ll be a miracle...”

Skaggs searched his face for a moment then something forced him to look away, “I know what you must be going through... how you must feel about all this if it’s any consolation.”

“Well...,” was the sighing reply, “...let’s just find her, wherever she is...whatever condition she’s in. The worst thing now would be to leave the parents forever guessing what happened to her.”

“The sooner the better,” Skaggs concurred.

Falcon walked to Skaggs’ ATV and grabbed a set of infrared night-vision goggles from the side compartment. He had only one pair so they’d have to trade them back and forth in the field. They were awkward, bulky things that kept falling off their heads, limiting mobility to slow and non-jarring motions. Skaggs explained it was due to a stretched band on the head strap that badly needed replacing and had for a while, making him a bit ashamed to admit not having fixed it.

“Tie it into a knot to make it tighter,” he suggested.

Falcon adjusted the rifle strap over his shoulder and Skaggs did the same. The rain resumed a steady pace again so they buttoned their coats, slid on their rain gear and prepared for the worst. Skaggs said, “We will go up the mountain face because most of the state police are already headed into the canyon below.” And in a cautionary tone, “Looks pretty steep so please watch your step.” He was concerned about the Demoras doing any difficult climbing, they didn’t appear cut out for it in their condition and what if something happened to them? Then Skaggs noticed something out of the corner of his eye, “Look! There’s a light flickering up the hill there...”

“Good! Maybe they’re back country campers that have seen or heard something,” Falcon replied hopefully. “It’s awfully

dangerous for them to be in this area though the way it attracts bears and that light gives away their exact location.” So they began the treacherous journey up the muddy slopes toward the strange light in the trees. A white halo guided them like a piercing beam and circular glow between the dense undergrowth and trees—a lighthouse beacon stamped upon the hill obscured by rising mist—casting a dull haze on a thicket of trees that shielded it from direct sight.

Falcon was a bit surprised no one noticed the light or went up to check it out but them. It seemed a pretty important feature under the circumstances but maybe the source of the light had something to do with the state police search team. Checking it out was the only way to be sure.

Skaggs let the Demoras walk in front of him in order to keep an eye on them and to catch any slips and falls along the way. Contrary to what they originally believed the couple was surprisingly light on their feet and didn’t need anyone’s help after all. This had a profound effect on Falcon’s morale: the couple’s amazing hardiness under extraordinary conditions. He got the sudden inkling they might actually succeed beyond his own expectations and abilities.

Falcon walked at the head of this wretched little party while the rain dealt them all another good drubbing after having slowed down a bit. Together they looked like a group of thick-headed oxen bearing their uphill burdens with stubborn tenacity. Half way up, Falcon wondered why the strange glow hadn’t been extinguished in light of the horrible drenching they were enduring. His first impression—that the light had been a campfire—seemed rather improbable in the hard-driving rain. He asked himself if it might be a floodlight of some sort but that, in itself, seemed unlikely given the fact that it was hard to

imagine how any group of campers could carry a floodlight up such a steep slope with no other access. Certainly no vehicle could get up there.

Next Falcon considered the possibility that they might be poachers; but poachers would never advertise their presence in this way unless they were incredibly stupid...and he'd never known any that dumb. Although it was just possible they were overly confident of not running across any rangers because of the bad weather. Still, even this seemed ridiculous because they would've heard all the activity going on in the park and shut down for the night.

The prospect of poachers disturbed Falcon and was cause for considerable alarm. On the outside chance it were true, the situation was potentially dangerous for all of them. Poachers often try to shoot their way out to avoid being captured or attempt daring escapes rather than be taken alive since the penalties for poaching are severe. He motioned for Skaggs to come closer and relayed these concerns in his ear; afterwards warning the couple to proceed as quietly as possible and stay behind them now. He didn't, of course, tell them the reason for this sudden precaution and thankfully they didn't ask. He merely said they were coming up on some campers and had to remain quiet in order to prevent startling them.

Falcon and Skaggs began hugging their rifles at chest level about halfway up to shooting position. Falcon yanked his from his shoulder and let the strap fall at a swinging arc below the barrel but Skaggs was having trouble removing his from his shoulder. The strap got twisted and caught the back of his arm as he tried lifting the strap up and off. Falcon came over and helped him free it but just as he finished unraveling the strap and was handing the rifle over, a giant hairy paw slashed out

from a patch of saplings on the left.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Skaggs screamed, leaping out of the way only inches from the thrust of the blow. He dropped his rifle on the ground in the flurry of confusion and fell backward. At the same time, Falcon raised his into position and took aim at the terrifying beast. Skaggs’ frantic lunge sent him crashing onto the ground where he cracked the back of his head on a rock, falling instantly into unconsciousness. He groaned miserably a couple of times before going silent. Falcon yelled at him in desperation, “Rick! Rick!” allowing the rifle to slip through his fingers onto the ground. No reply.

The grizzly dropped down on all fours a moment to take its adversary’s measure then immediately reared up on its hind legs, slashing out in all directions and growling fiendishly. It prepared for another charge, leaning in Falcon’s direction with heavy paws waving around Falcon’s head who fell instantly into semi-paralysis. His mind seemed to be beyond his own control. “OK...”, he said to himself as fast-moving images crossed violently through his mind, “...OK...”. It was all that came to him as he attempted to maintain his bearings between deadly swipes threatening to remove his head.

Suddenly, his thoughts rushed forward in a brief moment of clarity, “I’m dead if I don’t fend this bear off now, he’s gonna kill me and the Demoras!” Arriving at this conclusion in a rush of tingling adrenaline pumped through his veins as battle-ready images trumpeted in his ear. “It means to kill me...”, he further alerted himself; the words echoing in his head as though yelled in a canyon, forcing him awake. His pal might be dead and he could be next! Swiftly, with unruly shaking hands, he knelt down, seized the handle of a concealed boot knife and ripped it out from the sheath—managing to tear one

of the leather fastening straps on the way out. Fortunately, this clumsy maneuver prevented him from being brained by a vicious swipe of the paw that just missed him by inches. The grizzly stepped closer without charging, perhaps trying to scare Falcon away from the injured victim on the ground to be able to do whatever it wanted with the lifeless body.

He couldn't afford to take any chances, though he wasn't exactly sure what the grizzly's intentions were—whether to kill, or possibly eat, his partner—but circumstances wouldn't allow him to rely on good luck. He must defend his partner and the Demoras' lives at his own risk. He lunged backward, raising his arms, prepared to do hand-to-hand combat with the giant bear while trying his best not to be psyched-out by its incredible size. A terrifying prospect under any circumstances, especially armed with only a marine knife, but it was all he had at the moment (what with the rifle some ten yards away or so). He stiffened his resolve and struggled to make every movement efficient, precise and count!

If he moved too swiftly the grizzly might feel threatened and charge him in self-defense. Even with a gun at this range, he'd only be able to get off a shot or two and they'd all have to be perfect; meaning they'd have to take the bear out completely—stop it in its tracks. Grizzlies are never more dangerous than when they're wounded, particularly the bad-tempered grizzly which often becomes so enraged and seething with adrenaline it won't feel the first shot or even the second and will maintain a steady charge regardless of the onslaught. Shots must be precise in order to ensure the survival and well-being of the hunter which means the grizzly must be rendered physically incapable of advancing.

He felt around his hip—the gun! He'd brought the .45 and

could defend himself with that! How'd he forget about it til now? But it wasn't there...so where? A sharp pain in his stomach was prompted by the feeling life was persecuting him in some way in addition to throwing him into mortal danger. Nothing was going right. Then he remembered: he'd left in the ATV! It had poked him in the side on the way up the mountain and he took it off thinking he'd remember when he got out. He didn't. He wondered now if that wouldn't be his final mistake...

Too many thoughts mingled in his head like a swarm of circling bees. Falcon poised himself and dug in the best he could; leveling the eight-inch blade at the beast's chest while looking as menacing as possible. He had the silly and whimsical notion that it might retreat into the forest if he looked mean and ornery enough. Instead the bear let out a growl so loud it felt about to shake the trees from their foundations in addition to sending an avalanche his way. His ears buzzed with the noise for several aching seconds and he could taste death on his palette; he didn't blink. His knees trembled violently as every muscle struggled under the strain of self-control.

He pointed the knife up toward the grizzly's face so the animal could see its shiny surface. Intended as a warning, he prepared to make a desperate swipe at a paw or arm before the grizzly took him utterly to task and "handled" him nicely. He reasoned that if he could sting the bear quickly and decisively, he might frighten it enough to send it packing back to the forest. Unarmed hunters had done as much in past rare cases. Of course if it didn't work, he might just further inflame the bear's nasty temper, increasing his chances of a gruesome mauling.

Plan B was to get close enough to grab one of the rifles off the ground with a quick snatch and level it at the grizzly's chest just in time to blast away at anything that moved. Maybe even get

off two or three shots before being attacked or killed. These idle thoughts, however, struck him as completely impractical since they relied so heavily on getting close to the gun. He locked the blade firmly in his palm and prepared to hitch his destiny to plunging all eight inches into anything that presented the first opportunity and—for all intents and purposes—gave himself up for dead.

His awareness bristling with a thousand aching sensations, Falcon suddenly heard voices getting closer—and footsteps! Could it be the other members of the search party? Could it be by any blessed chance? The Demoras must've run for help after they disappeared. He'd nearly forgotten all about them in the excitement but would they arrive in time? The voices were barely audible down the hill but he couldn't wait for their arrival so dug in...

The grizzly approached slowly, taking his time about it, wielding its long nose like a rapier sword at Falcon who felt like a bug about to be squashed. The grizzly alternated between carrying itself on its hind legs (which made the creature look eight feet tall) and walking on all fours; uncertain perhaps which way to proceed with the charge. Falcon was equally uncertain which manner of death would strike him first as the bear got steadily closer—eventually solving the mystery by standing up on its hind legs in order to put fear into his adversary—an effective strategy to say the least. The bear's outstretched arms must've been three to four feet across but how he was able to determine that little fact under the circumstances was hard to trace.

"I'm not getting a second chance at this!" as the grizzly dropped down on all fours and made the inevitable charge at full speed. All Falcon could see in the blinding rush was a

large snout and gleaming teeth as everything else turned blurry. Objects no longer had shape and time itself ground to a halt. He thrust the blade out in a circular fashion, covering the widest possible attack radius and managed to catch the bear at the base of one of its massive forearms. Hitting the fleshiest portion of the limb and splattering blood all over his own face. The grizzly wailed as blood spilled out on its arm, chest and legs. Falcon didn't feel the claws tearing the side of his throat in a trio of swipes that punctured the flesh deeply and lethally. Blood trickled out, mixing with the grizzly's, as the smell of death assailed his senses.

In a flurry of flailing arms, giant paws and shining steel, Falcon fell backward on top of Rick's right leg and thought he heard a slight groan underneath. He felt around on the ground for a way to push his body back up before—wait...the rifle! He felt it! He cupped the shaft in his palm, lifted it up and raised it to his chest in one surprisingly agile maneuver under the circumstances—shooting without care or concentration—straight ahead and in all directions. Suddenly, he thought of the rescuers on their way up the hill and ceased firing. Everything went silent as the smell of gunpowder lingered in the air like a misty morning. Falcon glanced around wide-eyed and discovered he was alone...

"Oh...my...God!" he gasped, "I must have stabbed him pretty good or...or..." his thoughts drifted away from his own certain death and back to his immediate surroundings, "...the shots scared him off," still trembling and reporting the news to no one in particular. "Rick!" rushing over to check his partner's condition while kneeling down, looking him over and checking his pulse. His breathing was good and he hadn't lost too much blood. He laughed wildly in relief.

“He’s banged his head a bit but he appears to be alright,” he assured himself; smiling strangely at the thought. Lifting him up behind the neck and under the knees and laying him down on a soft grassy area. “It’s okay, you’ll be fine here,” looking sadly at his partner’s blank face.

Five state policemen appeared almost immediately on the scene with rifles up and ready as Falcon yelled out, “Don’t shoot, everything’s alright. The danger’s over and done with! For God sakes, don’t shoot me NOW!”

The new arrivals gazed at the battle scene in wide wonder: the unconscious man on the ground with matted and bloodstained hair, the sweaty, raving lunatic in torn ranger’s jacket wrapping a white tourniquet around his neck; the ripped up plants, rocks and dirt piles mingled with random splatters of blood on clothing, grass, hair and flesh. Expressions grew wider as they took it all in.

The Demoras appeared over a ridge a few moments after the officers, afraid to come closer and standing off to the side with terrified gazes. In response to the officers’ confusion Falcon simply stated, “I’m Jack Falcon, the supervisor here. We were just attacked by a grizzly. He’s gone now but it might not be a bad idea to have a look around just in case.” He wondered for the first time if the officers’ arrival was what really scared the bear off, giving their presence at the scene greater significance if true. The troopers dropped their guns at their sides while one of them went over to look at the wounded man and the others searched the perimeter.

“Is he going to be OK?” asked a tall trooper of about forty with sergeant stripes on his arm. Falcon guessed accurately he was in charge of the small group.

“He’s alive but shaken. I checked him over and he’s in

pretty good shape other than possibly needing a head X-ray or something. He suffered a pretty good whack on the noggin during the scuffle. Would one of you kind gents mind running him down to the hospital while I keep searching for the girl?” focusing on the sergeant before shifting his gaze to the two distraught faces lurking in the background with droopy eyes—looking out of sorts and miserable. He had a strong desire to go over and thank the Demoras for notifying the police, and possibly saving his life, but that seemed inappropriate at this stage.

“Not a problem...” the sergeant replied without hesitation, “...it’d be my pleasure.” Grinning affirmatively at Falcon while turning to the other officers, “Ronnie, get some of the others and run this man down to the hospital on the double, will you? Thanks partner...” the sergeant turned and faced Falcon again with the same grin.

“Thanks, er, what’s your name?” asked Falcon.

“Thomlison—Sergeant Paul Thomlison—pleased to meet you,” extending his hand to the ranger and taking in his bedraggled appearance at the same time, “How are you doing by the way? You sure *you* don’t need a hospital?”

Falcon shook his head emphatically, “Hell no! Too much to do!” removing the bloody tourniquet around his neck and probing the wound with his fingers. The puncture at the base of his throat had closed up for the most part and was beginning to crust over. “I’ll be fine,” he added with greater self-assurance than he felt.

Officer Ron picked up Skaggs’ body with the help of two other officers and carried him down the mountain which proved to be a slow, arduous task. Fortunately for them, Skaggs’ injuries were not life-threatening so he could be moved without the

help of an air ambulance which would've eaten up valuable time. The injured ranger struggled with visions as he was being carried away; groaning insensibly, forcing Falcon to turn away in disgust. When he turned back again his partner's body was rolling side-to-side along with the steps of the attendants, muttering, "Jack...Jack! Where are you? You OK?" before succumbing to unconsciousness again.

"I'm here, Rick. I'm alright. Don't worry about me now, just take care of yourself and I'll see you again soon." Knowing full well his partner couldn't hear as he passed out of sight.

Falcon glanced up at the halo of light still beckoning on the horizon, sensing that it was significant as the Demoras stood awaiting the final word on how to proceed. All of them seeming to share a single thought: find out what was up there, the thing in the distance....

