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HIGH COUNTRY



AN ANNA PIGEON NOVEL

High Country
By: NEVADA BARR

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CHAPTER 1

"Would you like baked potato or pommes frites with that?" Anna asked politely.

"Can't I get French fries?"

"You bet." Anna wrote: "NY strip w/PF-well done," on the pad.

As the mom and dad at table twenty-nine coaxed suitable orders from a five- and a nine-year-old with hearts set on pizza, Anna let her eyes drift up to the two-story windows enclosing the end of the dining room. Beyond their comforting reflections of safety and warmth stood granite boulders the size of houses. They in turn were dwarfed by ponderosa pines with trunks eight, ten, twelve feet in diameter and these made toy like by the sheer and towering cliff that served as a backdrop. The bones of Sierra Nevada, glistening with half-melted ice, held Yosemite Valley in the rockbound embrace of a ruined Shangri-la, a place where only the youth of the mountains was immortal and people grew old at an alarming rate. On a misty December afternoon the evergreens showed black against the streaked gray of rock: forbidding, dangerous, and, to Anna, utterly seductive. It was as if, should she leave the warm gold and russet of the grand Ahwahnee Hotel and cross the parking lot into the rocks and trees, she, too, would be leached of color, would walk in the world as a ghost, a mountain breeze, the whistle of a hawk's wing.

"Do you have hot dogs?" The reality of Mom's voice cut through Anna's ghost dance with the sharp laser light of a red microfleece-clad arm.

"No hot dogs."

"You oughta have a children's menu with hot dogs," the mother complained.

"I'll suggest it to the chef," Anna lied easily. The chef, a veteran of many four-star establishments, was fanatical in his hatred of hot dogs and only slightly more sanguine on the subject of children.

A turkey quesadilla was settled on, and Anna left the table to walk down the long gallery from the alcove. She'd always wanted to work in Yosemite National Park, but even in her dreams it never crossed her mind she would be there as a waitress.

A waitress coming up on fifty might be an oddity in another establishment, but at the historic Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley, built of the very granite and pine it sheltered beneath, carved beams and great stone fireplaces warming the bones of park visitors for over seventy-five years, much of the waitstaff was wrinkled and sere. It was a plum job. Tips were fabulous, openings were rare. As with some of the more venerable clubs, one practically had to be grandfathered in.

Anna had washed in on a tsunami of lies and half-truths: her cover story. The phrase amused her; it was so deliciously cloak-and-dagger. A spy, Anna was a spy. According to Lorraine Knight, Yosemite's chief ranger, it was a necessary bit of drama.

Parks, even the big ones like Yosemite, Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon, were, at least socially, very small towns. Yosemite concessions workers in both the hotel and her less picturesque and pricey sister, Yosemite Lodge, along with the people minding the stores, delis and shops, numbered around twelve hundred. Nearly six hundred NPS people over-wintered. In a society of less than two thousand souls, everybody knew everybody at least by sight, if not by name. On the rare occasions when an undercover law enforcement person was called for, a ranger from another park, an unknown face and name, had to be brought in.

Anna was unsure whether it was her law enforcement status or the fact that she'd worked her way through college waiting tables at Pepe Delgado's in San Luis Obispo that inspired her own chief ranger, John Brown, to offer her the assignment when the call went out.

She was pleasantly surprised at how fast her skills came back. She had been wearing a dead-maybe dead, probably dead-woman's clothes both literally and figuratively for less than a week, and already her short-term memory had risen to the challenge. Crawling into trousers of the deceased hadn't been Anna's heart's desire, but a new uniform order would have taken a week or more to arrive. So far the hardest part of the job had been turning her tips over to the Mountain Safety Fund. As long as she was pulling in her pay as a GS-11 District Ranger, she wasn't allowed to keep them. A shame: they dwarfed her salary.

A quick check of the order and she put it up for the chef. Waitstaff desiring to keep the peace double-checked orders. James Wither, a man so lean his large hazel eyes bulged from nearly fleshless sockets and whose jet black hair hung over a forehead lined by at least fifty years of slaving over hot stoves, saw waiters and waitresses as either flawed delivery systems or malicious art vandals bent on destroying his creative visions. Anna had never seen him actually throw knives at busboys or fling trays at salad chefs, but she'd heard the stories and chose to tread lightly.

Several of the longtime servers could talk intelligently about food. These educated few Wither could see and hear. Anna, who shied away from meat but otherwise ate what was easy, cheap or put in front of her, was beneath his notice. This was good. Despite what they said in the movies, a spy needed to be unremarkable. Anna was finding this

and the rest of the spying business harder than she'd anticipated. Chatting, drawing people out-being downright likable-was work for her at the best of times. Doing so with ulterior motives was an absolute grind.

When tempted to give it up as a nonstarter-the unapologetic opinion of Leo Johnson, the deputy superintendent-and go home to her dog, her cat and her fiancé, Anna viewed in her mind's eye the photographs Lorraine Knight had shown her.

Before donning her apron and sensible shoes, Anna had met with the chief ranger and the deputy superintendent. Lorraine had shown her pictures of Dixon Crofter, Patrick Waters, Trish Spencer and Caitlin Bates. These four were typical of the marvelously atypical young people who worked in parks.

Dixon Crofter, what parkies referred to as a "climber dude," lived in Camp 4, a mecca for rock climbers from all over the world. He'd been in Yosemite three seasons. He climbed for fun. If he could get on a funded expedition to Greenland or Austria or Patagonia, he climbed for fun and money. When the park Search and Rescue team needed a climber, they hired Dixon or several other of the "SAR-sitters" living in the camp. Then Dixon climbed for fun, money and the good of his fellow man. Dixon was twenty-four years old, six foot three, one hundred thirty-five pounds. From the picture Anna guessed his body was a powerful construction of cable and bone. He had long curling black hair, a smile that could melt ice and a nose a Bedouin chief would be proud of.

Pat Waters worked trail crew. He was two years younger than Dixon. Where the climber was narrow Pat was broad: shoulders, jaw, chest. He looked strong-not with gym-honed, bench-press muscles, but the kind that can move rocks and stumps all day and still have the energy to tell jokes over dinner. He sported a bleached-blond Mohawk and a grin that, despite the dusty rigors of his chosen occupation, spoke of expensive orthodonture. On his right biceps was a tattoo of Bill the Cat in one of his more schizophrenic poses.

Trish Spencer and Caitlin Bates were photographed together, their arms around each other's waists, their heads close, long hair twining together. Trish's was sleek and brown, Caitlin's bleached and permed with black roots. Trish had buck teeth a shade whiter than nature intended and dark eyes that nearly disappeared with the onslaught of her smile. Caitlin wore a bandanna pirate- or-to Anna's memory-hippie-style around her head and looked all of twelve years old. Neither girl would ever make a living modeling or win a swimsuit contest, but they were beautiful nonetheless. Even in the flat, dead medium of a photograph they exuded youth and high spirits and, in Caitlin at least, an innocent wickedness that Anna found irresistible.

Trish was in her third season as a waitress at the Ahwahnee. Caitlin was one of the NPS's own. She was a summer intern finishing her first season working in Little Yosemite Valley campground, a heavy-use area a four-mile hike, most of it straight up, behind Half Dome.

Thirteen days before Anna arrived, a vicious thunderstorm dropped eight inches of snow on the park amid high winds, followed by a cold snap that had yet to let up. Ten days later the high country was blanketed in another foot of snow. In between these two meteorological events these four kids had gone missing.

They'd hadn't been seen leaving the park together. None of them filed backcountry permits. They told no one of their plans. It was only assumed they were together because they'd all disappeared on the same day.

Patrick Waters left trail camp on the Illilouette Trail to come to the valley for his weekend. Dixon Crofter was spotted by a maintenance worker about five A.M. that same day, hitchhiking west out of the valley with a backpack and climbing ropes. Caitlin Bates had left Little Yosemite Valley camp the afternoon before, also on her weekend, headed for the apartment she shared with three other park interns near the old graveyard in the valley. Her supervisor said she'd carried nothing but an empty pack and water. He had assumed she'd hiked out the Mist Trail past Nevada and Vernal Falls. It was steep-the upper half little more than a shattered granite staircase-but only a little over four miles long. Fit and agile with knees not yet forced to bend too often to the vicissitudes of life, the young intern could reach the valley floor in an hour. Trish, pleading headache, had stayed home while her two roommates left for work that morning. When they'd returned she was gone, as were her pack and boots. Later it was discovered that the fire ax had been taken from its niche in the hall.

For Anna's edification Lorraine Knight had drawn the containment area of the search, the area in which, based on time, distance, physical ability, terrain and weather, the missing persons had a ninety-five percent chance of being found. Outside this perimeter, Anna was amused to discover, was referred to as the ROW, the Rest of the World. To indicate even the zillionth percentile of possibility beyond that, Lorraine sketched a tiny flying saucer.

After eight days the search had been suspended-not abandoned, since in spirit, at least, the NPS never gave up looking. Wet snow, ice, three weeks: if the four were lost or injured in the backcountry, they were most likely dead. Unless-and this was the deputy superintendent's pet theory-the four of them had hitched out of the park to find warmer adventures in Mexico or South America.

Anna had not been brought in as an addendum to the search-and-rescue effort. Yosemite had one of the finest SAR operations in the country, if not the world. The park was harsh enough to provide endless challenges, and the visitors were foolish enough to provide the rangers with endless practice.

Lorraine Knight had brought Anna in because she was convinced the incident was far from over. She had stated her view succinctly: "I suspect foul play," she'd said, and smiled at the drama of the words.

With that smile, Lorraine won Anna over. They were of an age, more or less, and seemed to have like interests. Knight was a big woman, five-ten or -eleven, and powerful-looking without being masculine in the least. Anna put her age at around fifty, though it was hard to tell. Sun and wind had done more to her skin than the mere passage of years. Her hair was undimmed by either time or the elements. A braid as thick as Anna's wrist and of a rich red-gold hung down past her waist. The tail of it rested on the butt of her gun like a squirrel on a branch. Out of doors, when Lorraine was armed, the braid went up with a flick of practiced fingers to be secured in place by pins that appeared to come from nowhere.

This instantaneous affection put Anna on her guard. There were those who swore by first impressions. Anna was not one of them. First impressions could be manipulated. Anybody could suck it up and play hale-fellow-well-met long enough to impress. Few could sustain a convincing facade over time. Sooner or later cracks began to show. Anna was a big proponent of last impressions.

"Something besides the disappearances is upping the collective blood pressure of the park," Lorraine finished. Anna had felt it. A poison dripped into the small, isolated community, an unspecified drift of unease that seemed to animate or enervate, warp that indefinable buzz of the human hive till it whined and grated in the mind.

Leo Johnson, the deputy superintendent, grunted at these feminine intuitions of disease. Johnson was in his thirties and as steely-eyed and lantern-jawed as a comic book character. The heroic effect was spoiled by receding brown hair with a tendency to curl over the ears, and a small mouth that, on a young and comely lass, might be compared to a rosebud. On Leo's broad face the comparison was more apt to be to one of the body's other natural apertures.

Before this interruption he'd had little to do today, so little Anna suspected he'd been pressured from above into going along with Lorraine's undercover investigation.

"It's a holdover from the Sunsoy killings," the deputy superintendent said dismissively.

Like the rest of the country, Anna had followed those grim events on the news.

People managed all sorts of ways to damage or extinguish themselves in Yosemite. They fell off the magnificent cliffs, got lost, suffered from exposure, broken ankles and bee stings. The brave or crazy died in base jumps from El Capitan. They crashed hang gliders and fell out of trees, committed suicide off Half Dome, overdosed, brawled. Search, rescue and even the occasional death were daily fare in a park as wild and yet as heavily visited as Yosemite. Even the odd happenstance of four park people going AWOL would not have shaken the social foundations as recently as two years ago.

That was before a psychopath working in the nearby town of El Portal had sexually

assaulted and murdered four women, one of whom lived in an inholding surrounded by NPS lands.

Though the man had been caught, his evil had not stopped. The sense of safety many had enjoyed in the glorious stone heart of the Sierras died along with the women. The monster had graphically illustrated the fact that there is no place beyond evil's reach. Because of this, the disappearance of the park people raised fear levels in the valley till there were times when the small hairs on the back of Anna's neck fairly prickled with it.

Talk would have it that the Sunsoy murders were happening again, that a copycat had taken up residence in Yosemite Valley.

Chief Ranger Knight had brought Anna to Yosemite because she, too, feared the killings had just begun.

CHAPTER 2

In five days the only toxins Anna had sniffed came from the head waitress, Tiny Bigalo, a dried-up wisp of a woman with the energy of a hundred monkeys, all of which, if put in a barrel, would be no fun. According to her staff, Tiny, autocratic by habit and inclination, had "a bee up her ass," "a burr under her saddle" or "been on a tear for weeks." As a consequence everyone associated with the dining room scurried about in tight-lipped resentment expressing their frustrations by clashing dishes and slopping coffee.

Trish Spencer had been an intimate of Tiny's, which was one of the reasons Anna had been placed in the dining room. So far her efforts at sucking up to the fierce little woman had failed to bear fruit.

As much as being gregarious and ingratiating went against her grain, Anna managed to become friends with two others on the Ahwahnee staff. Anna Pigeon the waitress, the spy, was pleased with these human acquisitions. Anna Pigeon the ranger looked upon both relationships with a jaundiced eye.

The first contact caused Anna's conscience the fewest qualms: Scott Wooldrich, the assistant chef. At thirty-seven he was old enough and at six-foot-four and two hundred twenty pounds he was big enough to take care of himself. Whether or not he would prove a font of information as she wormed her way into his affections, Anna couldn't say. Even without that professional perk, he was a worthwhile ally. Bluff, good-natured, fun-loving-all those Iowa farm boy cliché, Scott ran interference between offending waitpersons and the wrath of Jim Wither. The febrile and brilliant chef could hear Scott's baritone when his ears were closed to other voices of reason. Such were Wooldrich's charms, Anna'd even seen him tease a smile out of Tiny a time or two.

What roused Anna's radar regarding the ease with which she'd become friends with Scott had little to do with the assistant chef and much to do with human nature-hers. Whenever she became bosom buddies with a blond, blue-eyed hunk that made her little heart go pitty-pat, she questioned her motives.

The second connection was more likely to prove useful, but despite her attempts to justify it as necessary, it caused Anna the occasional stab of guilt.

Mary Bates, an exquisite, naturally blond, seventeen-year-old hotel maid, was a concessions brat. Her parents had worked at the Ahwahnee and she'd grown up in the valley. This year Mom and Dad had moved on to better jobs at the lodge in Yellowstone. Out of love for Yosemite, Mary opted to stay behind and work for a year before going to college. It was the first time she'd been separated from family. She was a sitting duck for Anna's "hip mother" or, God forbid, "hip grandmother" routine.

Anna had intentionally adopted her to use as bait. Being a woman of a certain age there were natural barriers when it came to cuddling up to the men on trail crew who'd worked with Patrick or the eclectic and unpredictable community of climbers inhabiting Camp 4. A nubile blond opened more doors than a gold badge.

Revulsion at this subtle form of pimping might have outweighed expedience had Mary been made of lesser stuff. Having grown up in the park, despite her youth and fairy-princess good looks, she was accustomed to the dangers of bears, hypothermia, falling rocks and climber dudes.

"Hey, Anna, over here," was hissed as Anna passed the hostess's station with an armful of heavily-laden plates.

The very child she contemplated using for her own ends stuck her towhead from behind the fronds of a plant tired with winter and dropping leaves onto the stained and polished cement floor. Employees were discouraged from hanging about where they did not belong; one of the many niceties that marked the Ahwahnee as a grand hotel.

"Yeah?" Anna whispered back, stealth being contagious.

"When does your shift end?"

"Three-thirty."

"Want to go for a walk? I've been making beds all day and feel like an old wadded-up piece of tinfoil."

"A walk would be good."

The blond slipped into the underbrush.

At three thirty-five Anna clocked out and left the hotel by way of a utility entrance that let out through the Dumpsters at the back. There was something Disneylike about the Ahwahnee, about Yosemite Valley. Natural features were too big, too perfect: domes of granite sliced neatly into aesthetically appealing halves, rocks and trees juxtaposed to delight the eye. The Merced River, clear and emerald by turns, chuckled through in glittering communion with wind in the pines.

And, like Disneyland, Yosemite required machinery to run smoothly, law to regulate too many people, too many cars and buses, walls to hide the ugliness of Dumpsters, boneyards, toilets. Like H. G. Wells's future, parklands must have the Morlocks to keep Eden beautiful for the Eloi. Periodically, when this stage-set unreality struck, Anna was nearly overpowered with a need to flee into the high country, the ninety-five percent of the park that was wilderness. She'd yet to make it more than a mile from the main road. As with all true evil, whatever had set off Lorraine Knight's alarms centered round the human element.

Besides, Anna consoled herself as she scuttled through the garbage and mud-spattered vehicles, it's cold. Camping, hiking and communing with the gods seemed less appealing when temperatures dropped below fifty degrees.

In deference to her age and status as a year-round waitress, Anna had been offered one of the hotel's employee houses—a single-room tent-frame to which walls and a bathroom had been added. The dorms were reserved for seasonal workers and those significantly lower on the food chain than the main dining room waitstaff. Tempted as she was to snatch at this scrap of solitude, she had requested dormitory housing in the room where Trish Spencer had lived.

In communal housing it was more likely she would hear the kinds of rumors that never make it to the ears of law enforcement and, by being placed in a living situation "below her station in life" she had a built-in reason to be one of the valley's disaffected, should she choose. All the better to be part of the whining and plotting of others on the fringes.

The room she shared with the two busgirls, both securely under thirty, was dark and dank due to the weather without and the decor within. Her roommates had yet to reach the age where visual order was necessary to the psyche. The place resembled the inside of a laundry hamper. Dirty clothes and female accoutrements were heaped on unmade beds and vomited out of open dresser drawers. Anna's first task on arriving in her new persona had been to pack up Trish's things while Nicky and Cricket—the roommates she'd inherited along with the missing woman's apron, shirt and pants—looked on with the thrilled misery of those half playing at tragedy.

During the search the NPS had gone through Spencer's belongings, hoping for a clue that could tell them where she'd gone. In the normal course of events it would have been Yosemite rangers who packed up the missing woman's goods for shipping or

storage. Lorraine Knight left the task to Anna, hoping it would serve as a bridge to the missing woman and a way of breaking the ice with the roommates. It had been successful on both counts.

Anna waded through to her wee tidy space to peel off her uniform. White shirt, black polyester pants and black many-pocketed apron: these Anna had borrowed from the late-very late-Trish Spencer, and everything was a couple of sizes too big. Not only was Anna an imposter, but a poorly-dressed imposter at that. Walking a mile in someone else's shoes was a tad creepy when done literally.

Mary was dressed and waiting. She wore Levis, running shoes and a red hooded pullover that made her look like every wolf's dream of Little Red Riding Hood.

Perfect, Anna thought and suffered a pang of remorse for being bloodlessly pragmatic. "Ready?"

"Want to go to the village?" Mary asked as she fell into step beside Anna. "I've got to get some things."

"Sure." En route Anna would come up with a plausible excuse to get her living lure to Camp 4; see if they could coax anything interesting from the climbers. Though active and seemingly anxious to help with the rigors of the search, they'd been characteristically close-mouthed with law enforcement.

While Mary made her purchases in the grocery department, Anna poked around the souvenirs section. Depending on one's point of view, Yosemite Village with its deli, pizzeria and full-service grocery store was either a tremendous convenience or proof the park was going to hell.

Making conversation, Lorraine Knight had told her how the local public school, some forty-five miles away, had held a children's symposium on the nation's parks, asking the children what they would do with Yosemite Valley. The park's rangers sat back complacently waiting for their enlightened offspring to lead the way. The consensus of the kids from Yosemite was that a Costco and an orthodontist should be added to the village's repertoire. The three-hour round-trip drive to these necessities was a very real burden to them.

During her college days Anna and others had contemplated monkeywrenching the village infrastructure in hopes of driving out the urban blight. Thirty years later and now, at least temporarily, a resident, she was sympathetic with the children; she was glad she didn't have to drive eighty miles every time she ran out of shampoo.

Civilization was comfortable.

Anna dearly hoped she'd never reach the point where the love of comfort outweighed her love of the natural world, but she wasn't about to make any rash promises even in

the privacy of her own skull.

As they left the store, passing the statuesque twin pines which graced the entrance, Anna decided to nudge.

"Let's go down toward Yosemite Lodge. I'll buy you a drink." Mary would have hot chocolate, but the alcoholic phrasing flattered the girl's youth and fit with Anna's assumed role. Since Anna had picked Mary up she'd kept herself open, warm, fun and funny, winning the girl's trust. This was the first time she would use it.

Set the hook before you reel her in, Anna thought sourly as Mary bobbed charmingly along at her elbow. Too good a catch to throw back, she told herself philosophically and began:

"That Dixon guy, the one that got himself lost with those others, didn't he live in a camp somewhere down here?"

"Yup. Camp 4. It's really famous. Climbers come from all over. They're a wild bunch. Sort of a force unto themselves. Wanna go see it? It's just past the lodge."

Candy from a baby. "Sure. Did you know him? Dixon? That would be pretty creepy."

"Not know him," Mary admitted reluctantly. Like most people, she wanted to be in the center of the excitement even if only by association. She was a longtime park-dweller, and Anna ostensibly in Yosemite for the first time. It would be tempting to anyone to embroider the truth to such a willing believer. Anna admired her for resisting.

"I've seen him around to talk to," she went on quickly lest Anna be disappointed. "You pretty much see everybody around if you live here."

"Dixon was cool. The other guys call him Spiderman. Once he climbed Half Dome in the morning—an unassisted climb, you know, just fingers and toes and a belay—then he ran down and over to El Cap and climbed it in the afternoon. Nobody'd ever done that before. He always looked kind of wild with all that hair and that smile. Kind of like Lawrence of Arabia but not so pale and faggoty. More like that other guy, the black-robed guy."

"Omar Sharif?"

"I guess. But taller. Oh, I'm screwing it up but Dix was a rock: real and hard and unfathomable."

Dixon Crofter had been a resident on and off for three years. He would have come on the scene when Mary was fourteen. A good time for a man to steal a girl's heart without even being aware of it. At fourteen it was still acceptable to love pure and chaste from afar. Anna suspected Mary had yet to let go of this girlish habit where the

lean and romantic climber dude was concerned.

"Dix was always scruffy but backpacker scruffy. You know-fine."

Anna knew. Even at her age there remained an attraction to scruffy young men, though in recent years, she'd been content to merely admire them from a distance, the way she did mountain lions and grizzly bear cubs.

"This is it," Mary announced.

They had passed the lodge and arrived at the notorious Camp 4. It was set in a field of boulders that dwarfed the tents and trees. Despite the inclement weather, men were out climbing. A new breed of climber had sprung up since Anna first visited Yosemite Valley back in college: sport climbers, people who eschewed the long dangerous climbs, preferring short speedy pitches up boulder faces which they pocked with anchors in what seemed to be an attempt to re-create indoor climbing walls on living rock. Sport climbers dotted the rain-streaked granite with brightly colored ropes and more brightly colored spandex and fleece.

"They're not real," Mary said with unself-conscious snobbery. "They're more like climbing groupies. They like to talk the talk and swagger around the campfires with the big boys."

"Dixon was one of the big boys?"

"Oh yeah. He owns a tent cabin. They're hard to come by. These guys guard their cabin rights like you wouldn't believe. Somebody's practically got to die before they change hands." Her words caught in her throat. Mary'd lived too long in a wilderness park not to know that was probably what had happened to Dixon. Her climber was most likely dead.

Maybe not, Anna reminded herself. People lost in the mountains, fallen down gullies to break femurs, off cliffs to shatter hips, had been known to live weeks under conditions and weather as severe as any the Sierra had dished up so far. Humans were tenacious and unbelievably tough for animals without claws, who were unable to run fast or jump high, blind in the dark, without any real sense of smell to speak of and no pelt to ward off the cold. That was why SAR units hated to quit looking. When time came, they stopped spending NPS resources and talking about it but over a few scotches the stories came out. An unsolved disappearance from ten, twelve or thirty years before would still be on their minds.

Mary shook her pale yellow hair to banish the vision of the fine and scruffy Mr. Crofter dead in a ditch. "Dix-Dixon Crofter-bought the cabin a few years back off a French climber who lost his feet to frostbite."

"Had to quit climbing?"

"Oh no. He got wooden prosthetic feet. He had 'em made smaller than his old feet so he could wedge them better, and of real hard wood because it worked better for him than plastic. I guess he's still climbing, but we haven't seen him around here for a couple years."

Anna made a mental note to ask the chief ranger how one went about "buying" a tent cabin on NPS land and whether the owning of one was worth killing for.

Camp 4 was well populated for so late in the year. The unusually cold but dry weather had lengthened the climbing season significantly. Red, orange, green and blue tents sprouted between the boulders like poisonous mushrooms. Climbers-the real and the unreal-hunkered around picnic tables dark with moisture saying little and nursing their beverages of choice from battered melmac cups and thermos caps.

The paved path Anna and Mary followed wended through the campsites. For all the notice Anna got she might have been invisible, but in Mary's wake there stirred a hormonal breeze that brought heads up and enlivened faces.

On a small rise at the east end of the campground, forming a skeletal village, perched the tent cabins of climber royalty. Dirty gray-brown canvas houses, a door at one end and a stovepipe sticking out the other, were splattered down at odd angles as if they'd fallen from a low-flying plane. Unprepossessing in and of themselves, they looked a picture of cozy comfort next to their nylon neighbors on this gloomy, cold November afternoon.

Taking in the scene of Dixon Crofter's last known address, Anna enjoyed the scent of pine mixed with wood smoke, a perfume that captured the essence of mountains and adventure. It tickled a place in her brain that was untouched but by train whistles and engendered a need to sing sad songs and wander the globe. Maybe the smell had a like effect on Crofter, Spencer, Bates and Waters. Maybe one day they'd simply turned left toward the Rest of the World instead of right toward the containment of civilization.

"Which one belonged to Dixon?" she asked.

"The one with the porch." Mary pointed to a short narrow deck crowded with a hibachi and bicycle. Two forlorn beach towels, their gay colors muted from wear and precipitation, hung across the railing, relics from better weather. Smoke poured out of the stovepipe. Given the information Mary had shared regarding real-estate transactions in Camp 4, Anna had expected Crofter's cabin to stand empty. If it took death or something very like it for these tents to change hands, the next tenants had not stood on ceremony.

"Looks like squatters moved in. Probably sport climbers not wanting to get their spiffy new gear wet." Mary's voice, usually softened by the blurring of natural shyness, had an edge to it. Her face was set in hard lines-no easy feat with flesh firm and unmarred

by time and trauma. "That just plain sucks," she said. "Dix might be coming back. We don't know anything for sure."

For a heartbeat or more Anna watched Mary from the corner of her eye. The girl was park born and bred. Her sense of pride and the proprietary pleasure park people take in gifted eccentrics attracted to "their" park had been outraged.

"Dix owns that cabin. They can't just move in. Makes me want to go in there and chew somebody's head off."

Anna wanted to get a look in the cabin as well, but for less exalted reasons. "Why don't you?" she tempted the girl. "The bastards have it coming."

"I just should." Now that opportunity had knocked in the form of adult approbation, Mary's courage wavered. So did Anna's. Without gun, pepper spray, baton or color of law to hide behind, she questioned the wisdom of goading the girl into a confrontation with whomever had taken Crofter's space. Still and all there were plenty of tents nearby and, out of uniform, Anna had no compunction about screaming for help at the top of her lungs should things go awry.

"They are probably even using his gear," Anna said, picking the most heinous crime she could think of.

"Will you go with me?" Pleading and fierce, righteousness ignited Mary's usually pacific blue eyes.

"You bet." Though she felt unpleasantly powerless without the weight that went with a badge-regardless of the size of the individual it was pinned to-Anna's blood ran faster and warmer at the thought of real work. Standing straighter to take full advantage of all sixty-four inches of her imposing frame, she pushed the graying hair back from where her hood had fringed it around her face and reminded herself she was yet possessed of a formidable weapon. Odds were good these squatters were in their twenties. With luck, those who did not respect their mothers feared them. If they had any buttons, Anna intended to push them the way only a woman of a certain age can.

It wasn't her style, but Anna let Mary go first. They weren't serving a warrant on known felons; they were visiting a tent in the peaceful splendor of a national park. Besides, Mary's face was more likely to get them invited in than Anna's was. The poor girl, blissfully unaware of it and never to be enlightened by Anna, was adorable when she was mad.

Anna trailed Mary up the short, well-worn path from pavement to cabin. Vehicles were not allowed in camp, but there were tire tracks frozen in the soil. Big tires, and new. The tread was crisp, cutting deep. Probably a truck or an SUV. Anna could see gouges where the vehicle had been backed up to the railing as if to load or unload something. Given the length of time and the weather since Dixon Crofter quit his quarters, the

tracks had been made after he'd disappeared.

Unless Dixon kept a secret treasure in his little cloth house, there shouldn't have been much worth stealing. Climbing gear was expensive but didn't have much resale value, and it looked as if the new guys not only had their own stuff but enough to be cavalier with it. Four brand-new but filthy backpacks leaned against the railing on the narrow porch. No attempt had been made to protect them from the elements.

Mary rapped smartly on the screen door. Anna hurried up the steps to be near when whatever was going to happen happened. As she squeezed past the hibachi and the packs she was hit with a familiar smell. It was so out of place it took her a moment to place it. Diesel fuel; something nearby was soaked with either diesel or gasoline and oil.

The door opened and they were greeted by a gust of cigarette smoke and a boyish voice saying: "Well, did you get your . . ." It broke off when its owner saw them instead of whomever he was expecting. "Yeah. Hey. Um, can I do something for you?"

Anna looked over Mary's shoulder. The door's screen added its veil to the smoke nearly obscuring their intended host. Dark-haired, short in stature, confused and mildly alarmed were the only impressions she could glean.

"May we come in?" she asked before Mary could begin her tirade. From a sudden slump of the girl's shoulders, Anna suspected she'd chickened out anyway. All the better. Mary was there to get them inside. A scene on the doorstep that got them banned would be of little use.

For a second Anna's request was met with silence, then: "Hey, man . . . I don't know . . ." and the shadowy face turned as he looked inside for guidance. Anna poked Mary gently in the ribs.

"Please, sir," she said like a child accustomed to being nudged into good manners by her elders.

The plea put Anna in mind of little Oliver Twist with his empty porridge bowl, and she smiled.

"Yeah. Sure. I guess," the doorkeep managed, and the screen was opened. Anna pushed Mary into the stifling darkness. Inside it was eighty degrees or better, the woodstove crackling and smoking with too much wet wood.

"Uh, sit down if you can find a spot," their host said uncertainly.

The place looked as if frat boys had been having a three-day orgy in an REI warehouse. Equipment, new by the look of it, and backcountry apparel were scattered and heaped so thickly not even a footpath remained across the plank floor. Dixon's

storage boxes and cook area had been looted. Opened cans of food, dirty dishes and socks were mixed haphazardly. Whoever these people were, they clearly knew nothing about housekeeping in bear country. No grizzlies were left in Yosemite, but the black bear population was thriving and had long ago learned the delights of people food. With this largesse, Anna was surprised bears hadn't already torn out the side of the tent.

As her eyes adjusted she realized part of the piled debris was in human form. Amid the flotsam on the cot to the left of the stove were two men. One leaned against the wooden frame of the cabin, legs splayed, one foot on the floor, one on the cot. Between a beer and a cigarette both hands were spoken for. Hunkered at the cot's foot was another man with a bottle of bourbon held by the neck. No glass. He, too, had a cigarette, but his lay forgotten on a saucer at his feet, a long white ash highlighting a burn mark on the plate.

Masked by beard stubble, smoke and the paucity of light, Anna couldn't guess their ages. They felt older than most climbers. Thirties. Maybe forties. The habitual ease with which they embraced their various dissipations spoke of long practice. Neither of them looked like athletes. "Beer" was significantly overweight and "Whiskey's" bare and dirty feet had been inexpertly bandaged in the wake of serious blistering. Despite the haze of their chosen painkillers, both looked miserable.

"Is this okay?" Anna heard Mary ask as she gingerly lifted a box of gym socks, still in their wrappers, from the cabin's only chair.

"Yeah. Sure," said the man who'd admitted them, the only one yet to speak.

Mary sat. Anna studied the doorman. At five-ten or so and maybe one-sixty, he was younger and fitter than his tent-mates. His weight was muscle. In the heat he'd stripped down to slacks and a tank-top-slacks, not jeans or sweats but much-abused pleated-front pants in charcoal gray. From the waist up he was ripped and carved with washboard stomach muscles hinted at through the thin undershirt. A poster boy for Gold's Gym. Though his legs were encased in gabardine, Anna guessed the glamour stopped at his belt. Men who buffed for show rather than practical application tended to give short shrift to areas not readily apparent in the bathroom mirror.

His face was surprisingly pleasant, so Anna forgave him the action-figure body. He was younger than his companions, not much more than twenty-one or so. A nice smile lit up a baby face roughened by a blue-black beard shadow. The kid probably had to shave twice a day.

To cover the awkwardness he took a swig from a beer camouflaged among its fallen comrades on the countertop. Even with a drink in his hand he didn't look as dissolute as the men on the cot. Several years in their company would fix that. At a loss for what to do, he fell back on early training. Gesturing at the fat man slumped in the corner he began: "This is Kurt Cl-"

"This isn't a fucking garden party," the fat one, the one Anna'd been thinking of as "Beer," snarled before his last name could be completed. Either these slimeballs were hiding or secrecy had become a way of life. Probably the former. The signs were there and writ large.

Parks, like tropical islands, were out of the way, distanced from the "mainland." Like islands, they attracted men and women who wanted to be anonymous, needed to remove themselves from the real world with its demands that one's metaphorical and literal papers be in order.

Had they not been encamped in the missing Dixon Crofter's cabin posing as climbers or hikers or whatever the hell they were trying to be, Anna wouldn't have thought to connect them with wilderness. They reeked of the city, right down to the fuel smell that permeated the place.

"You want to diddle this mother and daughter act you take it elsewhere," Beer-Kurt Cl finished.

Anna was deciding whether anger or tears would best suit the situation insofar as finding out what these bozos were doing in Dixon's place when Mary took the decision away from her.

"We came here to find out what you guys think you're doing in Dix's tent," she said hotly. "You've just about trashed it as far as I can see. You've got no business-"

Cloaked in nothing but youthful innocence and righteous wrath, Mary had leapt in over her head. The doorman was taking the tongue-lashing and managing to look sheepish, but his two brothers in squalor were shifting in a way Anna didn't like. Faces hardened under the boozy blur, that instant sobriety hard drinkers can affect after enough years at it. Limbs stiffened and moved to positions of greater mobility.

The door banged open and a man of middling height and delicate bone structure pushed in.

"If that bitch's cunt were as hot as the shower I might be tempted to like this shithole." The words were barely out when he noticed they had company. Already Anna detested him. He'd used her least favorite word in the English language. The next few minutes did nothing to change her mind.

Vulgar jocularly vanished. He took in first Anna, then Mary, exposed in the gray wash of light from the fading day. His eyes were dark and sharp. They were also long-lashed and almond-shaped, and Anna might have found them pretty had his vocabulary not already established him as a truly ugly individual.

Mary's Goldilocks good looks didn't soften his demeanor. With no immediate use for

her, she was just another object. "Get them out of here," he said. He didn't snap out the words or raise his voice, yet it was a command. There was no question that he was the leader of the strange little wolf pack.

Not wolves, Anna thought as she took hold of Mary's hand. Hyenas. There was more of the vicious scavenger about them than the clean-kill predator.

"Let's go," Anna said.

Looking close to tears, Mary rose and followed Anna toward the door.

As Anna passed the dark-eyed man, he grabbed her arm. Her whole body flinched with the effort of not driving her elbow into his larynx.

"What're you two doing here?" he asked in his even boardroom voice.

The lies that sprang to mind-Dix's aunt, mother's friend used to live here-couldn't be voiced. Mary would know she was lying and, being a bright girl, would begin to wonder why.

This close to freedom, Mary's courage returned. "We wanted to see who was squatting in Dix's house," she said. The black karma of the place had robbed her voice of righteousness and the words came out sounding like an apology.

His hand on her arm, Anna could smell the man's aftershave and the scent of the hapless girl, probably a maid at Yosemite Lodge, whom he used for showering and other bodily needs, and though the short winter dusk was nearly spent, she could see his face clearly. Eyes and skin and an abundance of beautifully barbered hair lifted an unremarkable face to where it might be called handsome. In the instant Anna studied it, it underwent a startling transformation. Ice, crudeness and steel vanished as if they'd never been. In their place his eyes sparkled with warmth and his mouth curved in a smile so nice his lips seemed to grow fuller.

"You're friends of Dixon's? Why didn't you say so? Did any of you jerks offer the ladies a drink?" Still holding on to Anna but not so tightly now, he turned his attention to the young doorman. "Bro, get out a couple more beers."

But for the salon hair, all at once he looked and sounded genuine, welcoming. Anna was not impressed. The "C" word was lodged firmly in her craw. He would have to rescue a gaggle of little girls from burning buildings for her to soften toward him. And then there was the "Bro." Intuition told her it was not short for brother but a way of covering the fact that he didn't want names bandied about.

"Where do you know old Dix from?" he was asking as he cordially turned Anna to bring the party back indoors. "Fellas, shake a leg!"

The others looked baffled but shuffled around in oafish domesticity, clearing places to sit, moving piles of gear and clothes from one place to another, getting in one another's way and generally accomplishing nothing.

In the span of a few sentences the new man had turned a viper's nest into something resembling *The Country Bears* meet *I Love Lucy*.

Anna felt plucking at her jacket sleeve. "We should go, Anna. It's getting late." Being nobody's fool, Mary wasn't ready to forget a whole lot of nasty because a teaspoon of honey had just been forced down her throat.

Anna needed to stay, see if anything rose to the surface from the muddy depths of these guys, but she didn't want to risk losing Mary's respect or friendship. She might need it again. Turning to the man still holding her right biceps captive, she sought his help.

"It really is kind of late," she said in that oddly porous voice women adopt when they want to be talked into an indiscretion yet maintain plausible deniability.

He laughed. It was a charming laugh, not at all the laugh of a man who had recently used, then verbally abused a hotel maid. "It's not even six o'clock. One beer." This he directed at Mary, pretending he believed her to be a woman of drinking age. "Any friend of Dix's got to be a friend of ours."

Mary was immune to the double flattery of being assumed older and friends with a man she admired.

"You want to stay, Anna?"

"Okay. One beer," Anna capitulated gracefully. The doorman and the slimeballs were introduced respectively as Bobby, Billy and Ben. Billy, to clear up old issues, amended it to Billy Kurt to cover the earlier lapse. Like the well-brought-up girl that she was, Mary was careful to remember their names and use them often in conversation.

Anna didn't bother. If she mentally squinted she could almost see the a.k.a. followed by "Turk," "Mojo" and "Junior." The leader gave his name as Mark. He seemed comfortable with it; if it wasn't his real name it was one he'd used before.

An hour passed amiably enough. Mary charmed by her mere existence, Mark by his art. Mark let them know he was a dear old friend of Dix's. Unwittingly Mary fed Mark his answers by embedding them in her questions.

Did you meet Dix climbing?

He'd met Dix climbing.

Was it on that expedition to Patagonia?

Yes, it was on that expedition to Patagonia.

From there, Mark managed without help, building on general human experiences. Dix had offered the use of his cabin should Mark ever come to Yosemite. He'd arrived to find the tent cabin empty and was hanging out, climbing, waiting for Dix to return. Without coming out and saying so, he managed to get across that Billy Kurt, Bobby and Ben were recent acquaintances who'd horned in on his quarters when the weather turned cold.

Anna listened and watched. By the end of the beer she might have believed Mark's version of events. He was that good. But she noticed Mark gave out very little information, yet deftly managed to get everything Mary knew about Dixon Crofter, his disappearance and the subsequent search.

And she remembered the man he'd been when he'd first opened the door, before he knew they were there.

CHAPTER 3

Anna and Mary skipped cocoa at Yosemite Lodge. The atmosphere of Dix's invaded tent had left its stench, both physical and metaphysical. Anna needed to be alone, Mary needed to call her mom. Both wanted to get to a hot shower and shampoo the reek of cigarette smoke out of their hair.

These were luxuries Anna was to be denied. When she entered her room her dorm mates were in a flutter. The two of them were young, just out of high school, and had fled California's central valley agricultural towns seeking adventure and romance in the high Sierra. Except for housekeeping habits that rivaled those of the Billy/Ben/Bobbsey triplets in Crofter's cabin, they were pleasant enough. Anna considered them dandelion fluff: lovely lighthearted, light-headed girls whose lives and thoughts were dispersed by any wind that blew their way.

During the first few days, she'd surreptitiously questioned them about Trish Spencer and learned only that she was "cool" and "fun." Anna suspected Trish, older by nearly ten years, was one of the winds that affected the two, blowing them into parties and introducing them to cute boys.

"Boy, it's a good thing you showed up," the plump one, Nicky, said as she pulled on her black uniform trousers. "Tiny's doing her Gestapo-waitress bit." The effort of standing on one leg while threading the other through a polyester tube proved too great and Nicky fell over sideways onto her bed. Further communication was lost to wild gales of laughter from Nicky and her partner in inanity, Cricket. It went on. And on.