

Chapter One

Harold Knouse set his knapsack on the ground and knelt to tie his bootlace. Tightening and retying the one that had worked its way loose on his right foot, he untied the left, and then did the same with it as well. For the most part it had been a pleasurable experience: waking up at daybreak to a robust breakfast of eggs, toast, and fried ham. A piping hot cup of Maggie's fresh-ground coffee sent them out the door and onto the highway for a much-anticipated day of rest and relaxation, and a rekindling of the relationship he knew his wife had been hoping for.

Harold's eyes opened long before the alarm clock sounded, so giddy he was at the prospect of leading his wife up to Rickert's Peak, a hard sell to be sure, but one he had finally managed despite Maggie's constant complaints and nay saying. She didn't understand why, fresh out of the blue, Harold, who had never once mentioned camping or hiking or any other outdoor activity in their three-year-marriage, would be so bound and determined to stand at the summit of some mountain to look out across the horizon—even if it was a breathtaking view of the Carolina skyline. And that was exactly what she told him as he stood up and uncapped the forest-green polyester canteen dangling from his shoulder:

“I still don't see why we have to *walk* up this mountain.”

“C'mon, Mags, we've been over this a hundred times already.” Harold took a deep breath, placed the flat palm of his hand on his chest and let it out. “Take a lungful of

air, baby. Breathe in deep and let it out. Absolutely magnificent... and wait'll you see the view from up there."

"Like we couldn't drive to the top of any old mountain and get the same view."

"Yes, Maggie, we could drive to the top of any old mountain, but that's not the point. It's the getting there that matters. That's why we left the car and took off up this lovely little trail, to be out in the fresh air and sunshine in the middle of God's country. Great, isn't it?"

"Yeah, great," Maggie said. "Gimme a sip of that water."

Harold handed her the jug and Maggie took a long drink. Rivulets of sweat trickled down her face and onto her neck. Strands of short black hair lay damp against her neck; dark splotches bloomed on her powder-blue blouse, partially hidden beneath the tan jacket she wore. She screwed the cap back in place and handed him the canteen.

"How much farther?" she said.

Harold looked up at the face of a rock formation peeking out through the treetops, then back at his frowning wife. "Not much," he said, then, "Hey, c'mon now. Cheer up."

Maggie ran a hand across the back of her neck. Sunlight gleamed off her sweat-slicked palm as she held it in front of her. "Cheer *up*? Look at this. I'm sweating like a race horse here. We couldn't go through the park and drive up to that *other* mountaintop. Nooo. We had to bypass that action so we could trudge around in the midday heat."

Harold smiled, because she was right. He'd purposely driven past the park with its families and picnic tables and long sloping hills, taken a rutted, hard-pack dirt trail until the trail tapered off and the deep furrows finally forced them out of the car and on foot, following a series of narrow paths as they crisscrossed their way toward the mountaintop.

“Midday heat? It’s cool as it could be up—”

“It’s *hot*, Harold. Look at me!”

And he did. He looked at the kind and gentle woman he had fallen in love with three and a half years ago, and saw the tight-lipped shrew she had become. Nothing was good enough for her, from his job to his car, all the way down to the clothes he wore—nothing. She woke up complaining, and that was what he came home to after a hard day’s work: bitching and moaning about every goddamn thing under the sun. His friends were Neanderthals, his language low class. One minute she loved him, the next she wanted his sorry ass out of her house. *Her* house. Never mind that his paycheck went straight into supporting the grand structure. It was hers before they met and would be hers when he was gone—she never missed an opportunity to lay that little pearl on him, and that was what had led them up the trail to where they now stood, three-quarters of the way up a mountain, sweating beneath the clear blue sky as a cooling breeze blew through the Carolinas.

He had made a big deal of planning this trip, telling all their friends and the guys and gals at work how happy they were to be taking off to hike the trails of Rickert’s Peak, convincing Maggie that all they needed was some time alone together, away from the family and friends and obligations that were pulling them apart. Thank God she had finally seen things his way, because that was the only way for him to get out from under the whole mess with his dignity intact. Harold was going to escort his lovely bride to the top of the mountain. Then he was going to throw her ass off it and live happily ever after, courtesy of a three-hundred and fifty thousand dollar life insurance policy that would double in value as soon as the cops ruled her untimely demise an unfortunate accident.

Harold strapped the canteen around his shoulder, removed his black-framed glasses, wiped them clean on his shirt and returned them to his face. “C’mon,” he said, and then started up the path, dry leaves crunching underfoot as he and Maggie made their way past a couple of tall pine trees.

Wispy shreds of clouds drifted across the sun as they wound their way up the trail. Every once in a while, Maggie would stumble and cry out, or whine an objection as to why they should even keep going. Once, she fell to her knees and tossed a venomous harangue his way—all of which strengthened Harold’s already steady resolve to send his wife plummeting to her death.

Harold hurried to her side and helped her up. She got to her feet, muttering and brushing a hand across her bare knee. The tan fabric of her pants leg was torn, the skin scratched but not bleeding. “This,” Maggie said, “is not how I planned to spend our day together. I wanted us to get away, to be alone, but wearing myself out on the side of a mountain sure wasn’t what I had in mind.”

“I’m so sorry,” Harold said. He shifted the canteen out of the way, put his arms around Maggie and drew her close. He pressed his lips gently against hers. Her soft lips parted, and then slammed shut when his tongue tried darting into her mouth. “I’m too *hot!*” she said, and then pulled back, a sad-looking smile on her face as she patted his chest. “Too hot.”

When they parted, he sighed and kissed her forehead, checked the stainless steel Rolex watch decorating his wrist, and then told her to look up. The rocky face of Rickert’s Peak loomed ahead, high above the treetops dotting the mountainside. Fifty or

so yards up the trail, a winding path forked off at the base of the cliff, sending two weed-strewn byways snaking up either side of the craggy formation.

“It’s huge,” Maggie said.

Harold noticed the look of relief settling over her face as she realized the long and arduous climb was coming to an end. He smiled, because not only was their hike coming to an end, all of his problems were as well.

“C’mon Mags,” he said. He took her by the hand and led her up the steep incline, through the pines and firs and overgrown scrub brush dotting the landscape. The path leveled off into a clearing at the base of the cliff. A couple of logs sat next to a group of flat stones laid out in a circle around a few charred pieces of wood, an obvious remnant of bygone fires. Several empty liquor bottles lay scattered on the ground. Harold could just imagine a couple of hunters sitting around the campsite, swapping tall tales. Maybe one of them had brought his son along, the same way Harold’s dad and uncle had initiated him into the deep woods, so many years ago.

They stepped into the clearing, past the broad trunk of a tree.

Maggie gasped and Harold turned, a half smile decorating his face—until he saw what had caught his terrified wife’s attention: a child-sized animal nailed to the tree like Jesus on the cross; arms to the side, rusty nails pounded through its forearms, its headless body split wide open, revealing a dried pelt that hung from it like the loose flaps of a tent.

“Harold.”

“What the... ”

“I wanta get out of—”

“Where are its *guts*?”

“—here.”

“It’s okay,” Harold said. Not because it *was* okay, but because he didn’t want Maggie backing out, not after they’d come this far.

“*Okay?* Look at that thing! I wanta go home!”

“Look, Mags, whoever did this is long…” Harold turned to see the bloody tip of an arrow exit his wife’s neck, bursting through until the wooden shaft was halfway out. She grabbed her throat, blood pumping through and over her clutching fingers as she croaked out her husband’s name.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Har...old.”

“Jesus fucking—”

Another arrow whistling through the air pounded Maggie with an audible *thwack!* She pitched forward, still croaking. Hands clawing her throat, she dropped to her knees.

A man stood beyond the clearing, halfway up the cliff-side trail. He wore dirty jeans and a buckskin jacket, scuffed leather boots on his feet. His long brown hair blew wildly in the wind as he stepped forward clutching a wooden bow, smiling and drawing an arrow from a sheath strapped around his shoulder.

Harold looked down at his wife, at the arrow through her throat and the one buried in her back, its feathered tail riding above her shoulder like something straight out of an old John Wayne movie.

“Fuck *this*,” he said, and then ran away from the clearing to where the trail dropped to a steep incline, barely missed by the arrow whistling past his ear as he flung himself head-first over the precipice.

“*Goddamnit!*” echoed from behind as he rolled sideways down the hill, adrenaline racing through his body as he thought about his situation. He should have been horrified, but he wasn’t. Frightened, yes, and a bit unnerved. But as frightened as he was, the adrenaline rush of having his problems suddenly resolved brought a fresh wave of optimism washing over him.

His wife was dead. Soon he would be free and clear, running down the trail to the car and racing off to find the local cops. Free, with enough money to do whatever the hell he pleased. And he didn’t even have to come up with a bullshit story. Hell, he would’ve stuck around long enough to thank the crazy fucker, if he wasn’t trying to *kill* him.

Harold slid to a stop beside one of the tall pines he and Maggie had passed on their way up the mountain, and looked over his shoulder at the bow peeking over the edge of the hill. The lunatic holding it was yelling like crazy, but Harold couldn’t make out what he was saying. He turned to run and an arrow slammed into his backpack. He raised his arm as he ran down the mountainside, middle finger extended, grinning because he knew he really would get away. All he had to do was haul ass through the trees and zigzag his way back to where they’d left the car. That crazy son of a bitch couldn’t nail his ass now, not unless he had Daniel Boone’s DNA floating around inside him.

He ran past a tree and his shin exploded, sending an excruciating wave of pain howling up his leg as he fell screaming to the dirt. He tried to get up but his leg wouldn’t work. He craned his neck, gasping at his shattered leg, which lay in an impossible angle below him—lower leg and foot cocked sideways in an inverted L, the blood throbbing between his ears drowning out everything: chirping birds, the wind rustling through the

trees; his own screams and the raving madman rushing down the mountainside. He barely heard the footsteps crunching the dry leaves behind him.

But he heard them, all right.

A rustling that drew his attention to an ogre of a man who stood behind him, the rusty blade of an ax held high above his head.

He gasped.

“Please,” he said.

The ax came down and he screamed.