

Chapter 1

They crossed the asphalt road into the trailhead, slipping seamlessly into the alien world of the wilderness. To Courtney Temple, the abruptness of the change was daunting, and she worried that its suddenness might trigger a panic attack and abort her participation in this eccentric attempt by her father to effect a family reconciliation.

Only the snorting of the mules and horses and the occasional sound of their metal shoes clapping on stone broke the initial eerie silence. Soon the atmosphere of audibility transformed, as her mind grew attentive to the birdsongs, insect buzz, and the rustling cacophony of breeze-brushed leaves. The July sun poked brightly through the tree branches like a roving beam, forcing an occasional painful squint through the lenses of her sunglasses.

Courtney was on the third horse in the string, behind three heavily laden mules and Harry McGrath, their outfitter leading the pack, and Tomas, the Mexican wrangler riding behind him. Harry had placed each of the horses on a domination scale known only to himself. Courtney's horse was named Bubba, and he was steady as a rock as he lumbered slowly forward with what seemed like a sense of bored equestrian indifference. Behind her was her brother Scott, his long legs perched awkwardly in their stirrups, and behind him, their father, who had required a helpful boost from Harry to get his leg over the cantle bag and his butt on the saddle.

Courtney felt an odd sensation of elation as she observed this sign of her father's aging after their four-year hiatus, as if it were a prologue to his decline and demise, the latter a wished-for outcome, the timing of which had often intruded on her thoughts. But aside from this show of diminished strength, his features seemed more youthful than she remembered. Puzzled at first, she realized on closer observation that he had had the bags removed from under his eyes, and his teeth were obvious implants, white and too perfect for a man of his years.

His complexion, too, seemed clearer, another obvious repair, probably by chemical means. His hair, once prematurely gray, had now miraculously turned to rusty brown. There was only one conclusion. The man had had a deliberate makeover. Why? The reason seemed obvious. It was an outcome that had already filled her with dread. There was a woman in the picture. He was well over his widower's mourning. In Courtney's mind the imaginary woman was certain to be a dangerous predator, a transforming competitor in the coming inheritance stakes. Whoever she was, she had become an instant enemy.

Not that Courtney was certain that he had changed his will to shortchange what was once their promised inheritance. Once, he and their now-deceased mother had proudly revealed that his two children would share equally in their largesse when they both had passed on. Had he cut them out or reduced their take after their rift and estrangement over the past few years?

She suspected as much but couldn't be certain. Was this trek a test for her and her brother? Was it worth the discomfort to find out? Was there a new wrinkle, a new demanding woman in the picture?

They had checked into the motel in West Yellowstone the evening before but had not had dinner together, since they had all arrived at different times. In the morning, they had breakfasted with Harry before leaving for the trailhead but had little chance for anything but the banal and polite chatter of a traditional family reunion.

Their father had greeted her with an affectionate hug that seemed oddly incongruous with the bitterness of their last argument and the long aftermath of the four-year silence that followed. He was equally affectionate in greeting her brother Scott, and both she and Scott had returned the gesture with propriety as if nothing had happened to split the once-unbreakable bond.

Throughout breakfast Harry did all the talking, outlining what they were to expect during their seven-day, fifty-odd-mile trek on horseback. They listened in silent concentration as he showed them the map of the journey and reeled off instructions reminiscent of their earlier trip. Their father had arranged an abridged replica of the original family trek, which had lasted ten days.

Harry seemed to offer a more detailed introduction than she remembered twenty-odd years earlier. A dirty-nailed finger traced their future journey on a wrinkled, much-used map of the Yellowstone area. He sounded more like someone eager to continue selling, as if he was still uncertain that he had made the deal. His voice seemed to have become rougher over the years, and his weathered complexion had the look of ancient parchment, out of which peered pale blue eyes surrounded by tiny rivulets of red.

She figured him for about sixty, a man well sculpted by the harsh outdoors and bad habits. His facial skin was florid, with bands of rough red mantling his nose and cheeks. There was a permanent indentation midway on his forehead, undoubtedly made by the band of his stained and misshapen cowboy hat, an apt symbol of his authentic Western bona fides. It struck her that he was trying hard, too hard, to reach for good humor and to portray himself as still young and vigorous. About him was a stale odor of dried sweat and boozy breath, larded with the obvious scent of the chewing tobacco that had yellowed his teeth.

In his explanation, he made a historical point that she did not recall, informing them that the Thorofare Trail, which they would partially follow, was the route taken by the Washburn party who first tracked the Yellowstone. The report of that journey had convinced politicians that two million two hundred thousand acres had to be preserved, and as a consequence, Yellowstone became the first national park in the world. He noted, too, that they were heading for an area just outside the official borders of the park, known generally as the Teton Wilderness, more than a half-million acres of unspoiled land.

It sounded as if he was trying to validate his knowledge like some chamber-of-commerce booster, and they all listened politely and nodded as he spoke.

"Here's where we're going," he said, following the trail with his finger as he informed them that they would be heading through the southeastern edge of the park, an area of high meadows in the Absaroka Mountain Range. He paused and looked up.

"Lot of this was burned out in '88 but it's mostly come back, though you can still see the residues of the burn."

Harry explained further that they would be traveling on trails along Yellowstone Lake, "the biggest mountain lake in North America," then returning over backcountry trails with spectacular views.

"No Eagle Pass," Courtney interjected, suddenly remembering its hazardous trail.

He rubbed his jaw and laughed.

"As your Dad and I agreed, no Eagle Pass."

"Now that was something," their father said. "Remember Mom's attitude? She was petrified."

"God, yes," Courtney said, remembering the narrow switchbacks and deep canyons.

"Scared the living shit out of me," Scott said.

"Hate to be dependent on a four-legged creature with a small brain," Courtney said good-naturedly. She was determined to be pleasant and ingratiating. She was, after all, a professional actress. "And I'm slightly uncomfortable living with my heart in my throat."

Their father chuckled.

"Tell you the truth," Temple said. "I'm a little too old for that kind of fear."

He was about to go on but aborted his remarks, obviously remembering his violation of the outfitter's age limit.

"Actually it was the shortest route of return during that last trek. That was a lot longer than what we plan this time. Of course, it's your nickel and your choice. Anyway, this I can promise, we'll see lots of critters, big and little, elk, moose,

cougars, mountain lions, bison, deer, big-horn sheep, brown bears, and, I don't want to scare you... grizzlies, biggest carnivore in North America, and what you didn't see last time you were here, wolves." He pulled a face, sighed, and shook his head. "Damned wolves. Totally screwed up my hunting business. Maybe we're at the tail end of an era. Stupid government and those goddamned tree huggers."

Courtney exchanged glances with her father. There was an ominous tone to his remark, a flicker of both anger and anxiety. Although she had no passionate political leanings, she was exposed to the usual Hollywood mindset that leaned heavily liberal, assuming that most people felt this way. Not that she really cared one way or another. Actually, she was nonpolitical, except when it mattered careerwise.

"I thought bringing the wolves back was a good thing," her father said.

"For the wolves maybe, but not for us outfitters. We make most of our living hunting during season. The wolves are taking all the elk and moose calves. Anything they can find, especially the babies. The young ones kill for sport. Fucking ecology freaks." He coughed, looked at Courtney. "Sorry, but they just don't get it. Won't be elk or moose left to hunt in a couple of years. Maybe some brown bears. The wolves are everywhere now and..." he lowered his voice and turned toward her father as if he were confiding some vital information. "Not only the wolves, Temple. Fact is the grizzlies are invading. Endangered my ass. Tough bastards, big feeding machines, need lots of range space. I used to do my business out here in the wilderness without being armed, which is illegal. No more." He lowered his head and shook it sadly. "You'll see 'em. I guarantee that. We take

precautions. They come smelling around for food, we hang it high. Remember the meat pole? Can't be too careful. They'll as soon as eat you as any piece of raw meat. Don't worry, though. We'll be watching. One gets ornery around me or my clients, I'll blow his fucking brains out, government or no government order, prison or not." He stopped abruptly, as if he had gone too far.

It seemed obvious to Courtney that he was disturbed, angry, and deeply depressed about the situation in general, adding to her suspicion that things were not going well for Harry. He was a long way from the Harry of twenty years ago. This man was obviously suffering, perhaps facing the end of his career and way of life. He was definitely not the strong, confident, rugged figure she remembered.

"Not to worry," he said, perking up, transparently trying to restore confidence and allay fear. "I'll bring you back safe and sound and give you the best damned adventure of your lifetime." He turned to Courtney's father. "Just like last time. Right, Temple?"

"That's what I'm hoping," her father said, nodding and offering a tight smile. It could not mask his concern.

"What do we do if one...you know...say a wolf or a grizzly pays us a visit?" Courtney asked. She felt genuinely frightened, remembering the famous story by Jack London about fending off wolves.

"Wolf doesn't go after humans."

"And grizzlies?"

"Hell, you remember your grizzly lesson," Harry chuckled. "Just don't get in his space. If you do, don't run. Assume the fetal position and play dead, and don't look the big bastard in

the eye or threaten him in any way. And above all, don't go near the cubs if it's a female. And remember, he's a foodie and needs lots of protein to feed his bulk."

"Just lay there?" she asked. "And if that doesn't work?"

"Just pee in your pants," Scott said.

"Is this trip necessary?" Courtney asked with humorous sarcasm.

"Haven't lost anyone yet," Harry laughed, continuing. "Hell, we're here for adventure. Maybe I advertised the dangers too hard."

"Adventure, yes," Scott said. "But I wasn't planning an early demise." He winked at Courtney. "Not just yet."

"Not on my agenda either," their father said with a chuckle.

"Looks like I made it sound worse than it is. Just remember, you're in my care. And if any of those big bastards start something funny, I'm fully armed and loaded and can take down one of 'em in a couple of well-placed shots. You're under my care and protection. I've got more than thirty-five years of outfitting under my belt. My job is to bring you back safe, healthy, and happy and give you an experience to make conversation for years. Right, Temple? Did I deliver before?" He was getting repetitive.

"Sure did, Harry. And here we are back at the old cigar stand. It's been on my memory reel for two decades," Temple said. "I'm looking for at least another couple of decades to tell the story. Fodder for my dotage." He was cautious about talking about age now.

"I could do without the grizzlies," Courtney said, forcing herself to maintain the light tone. "And I'll take your word for it about the wolves."

"Actually I'd like to see at least one of both," Scott said.

"If I have to, I'll hire 'em," Harry replied, obviously hoping this banter would bond them closer. "Actually I can guarantee you won't be disappointed."

"Thanks a lot," Courtney murmured.

"You're as safe with me as a baby in a cradle," Harry said. Observing him, a faded version of his old self, did not give her much confidence. An image of old homeless drunks that infested Santa Monica popped into her mind.

She wondered how many times he had gone over the same ground with others, whetting their expectations with projections of danger. All part of the show. He was simply manipulating one's expectation in pure Hollywood fashion. As for her and her brother, adventure was hardly the reason for their participation. In stark terms, for them it was all about money.

"We're going over trails that are the furthest point from a road in the continental United States. And that includes logging roads," Harry added, embellishing the expectation further.

Occasionally Courtney's mind drifted as she stole clandestine glances at her father and brother. She had almost given up hope that sentiment and nostalgia would one day force her father into a reconciliation mode.

From his friendly and affectionate attitude, she was encouraged to believe that he might again be willing to reverse course and restore his earlier generosity in financing his darling daughter's great dream of celebrity and stardom. As for the inheritance, she would find subtle ways to press him toward revelation. Was it still in effect as once revealed? A two-way split?

Her brother was another matter. She hoped that his weakness and his often-wobbly conscience would not gum up the works.

On the drive to the trailhead, following the two big horse trailers in one of their rented cars, with Scott driving, her father beside him, and Courtney in the rear seat, they maintained a protocol of polite chitchat as if they had made a pact with each other to hold back intimacy until they grew more comfortable with their new proximity. Once on the journey, thrown together for hours at a time in the vastness of the wilderness, there would be no way to avoid conversation and, hopefully, intimate exchanges, a prospect she viewed with both anxiety and optimism. Opportunity knocks, she assured herself, and despite all hardships, she was determined to take full advantage of it.

She noted that her father carried a digital camera on a leather strap that hung on his shoulder, which surprised her. Apparently in the four years since she had seen him, he had become familiar with computers. Noting the camera, it brought back memories of the many slides he had taken of their last trek, which he often showed to visiting friends on their old carousel projector. It was always a highly detailed showing, a soup-to-nuts portrayal of what became the family's quintessential great once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

Both at home and in his jewelry salon in Manhattan's diamond center on Forty-seventh Street, he had blown up pictures of the trip, one of all four of them side by side on their horses, with the jagged peaks of the Absaroka Mountains in the background. The pictures graced one of the walls of the jewelry salon and served as a conversation piece for customers, especially those very rich ones who kept and rode horses. In their spacious Riverside Drive apartment, she recalled