

The Explorer's tires found the ice hidden beneath the fresh dusting of snow and lost traction, sending the SUV into a skid; nose right, ass left. The driver, accustomed to wintry driving conditions, corrected. The SUV came around, then kept on going; nose left, ass right. The driver corrected again, but it was no use, physics had taken over: momentum and ice conspired to send the vehicle hurtling off the mountain. Gravity pitched in and did its part, accelerating the descent of the doomed Explorer. For the driver, that would have been the end of the story—if not for a lone pine.

The impact shattered the tree's trunk, but the pine remained standing; though bent and certain to perish, its sacrifice halted the Explorer's descent. A moment later, the engine cut out. The driver, blood streaming down his forehead, moaned one last time. Then, once again, tranquillity blanketed the snow-covered mountain pass.

Inside the SUV, dangling from the mirror, a doll, a plump miniature monk, rocked back and forth, as though praying.

Two hours later, a team from Rocky Mountain Rescue, outfitted in orange and yellow parkas, their walkie-talkies crackling commands, rappelled down the slope. Wielding power saws and crow bars, they pried the driver's limp body from the wreckage.

"Get him out of here. Let's move it," the rescue leader exhorted his climbers. They scrambled up the rocky incline and hoisted the driver's body into a waiting Bell Jet Ranger for the flight

to intensive care where he would join the barely alive, or, as a pessimist might say, the nearly dead.

At the nurse's station in the Intensive Care Unit, a cop, his cheeks red and his hands chapped from the cold, hefted a plastic evidence bag onto the counter. It held the driver's personal belongings recovered from the crash scene.

"Looks like someone could use a hot cup of coffee," quipped a nurse.

"Or a warm bed," the cop mumbled, blowing on his ice-numbed fingers, flashing a wink, flirting.

She shook her head and shot him a wry smile. "No vacancies. You'll have to settle for the java tonight."

"How's the driver?" the cop asked. "You don't suppose he could answer a few questions?"

"Not unless you're a medium," she joked. "Hot coffee, one floor down. Make yourself at home. If you're waiting for him to talk, you'll be here a while."

*And that's a damn shame*, she told herself, experiencing a jolt of unexpected sympathy for the patient hooked up to life support in ICU 7, "lights out" in a coma. He must have been a handsome fellow before the wreck left him bruised and swollen. When she had measured his height—or was it his length given he was flat on his back?—she discovered he had stopped growing half an inch short of six feet. She wondered if the near miss bothered him. He weighed one-seventy, his muscle tone was excellent; she knew his fit condition tipped the scales toward a possible recovery, but, she told herself, tongue-in-cheek, there were certain things one was not supposed to do to a body—like driving it off a cliff and slamming it into a tree.

The cop circled behind the counter and stowed his clipboard with the accident report attached, then ambled to the elevator blowing on his hands, trying to shake off the bitter cold.

A tech-savvy candy striper, identified by her name tag as Teri, snooped through the evidence bag, discovered the driver's

Palm Pilot and booted the device; she accessed the stored phone numbers, and started making calls. Two phone calls later she had the crash victim's girlfriend, Chase Callahan, on the line; her next call went out to his mother.

An hour later, Chase sat at the side of her comatose lover and held his hand in hers; for the first time in her life, she wrestled with a hopelessness that negated all options. In the past, when he was troubled, more than likely she was the one that gave birth to a problem-solving insight; now, flashes of intuition no longer mattered—you couldn't share a bright idea with a man in a coma. There was something else she couldn't share: the startling news she had confirmed for the third day in a row—the test strip had turned blue, positive. She was pregnant.

Randi Carte boarded a plane in Los Angeles and, hours later, arrived in the ICU. Before leaving the coast, she had tried to locate her ex-husband, to let him know their son had been in an accident. They hadn't talked for years, and, if truth be known, even now, she didn't want to speak to him, but she felt duty bound to try. He might as well have fallen off the planet; all leads were cold.

The head nurse welcomed Randi with a hug; instantly, without a word, they were on the same page, bonding with the empathy reserved for mothers, linked by an intuitive awareness of a mother's pain. Randi checked the nurse's name tag: Lani, it read. Lani introduced Randi to Chase; they shook hands, their fingers lingering, searching for something familiar. An awkward moment.

Though her son had briefed her—*he was seeing a new girl, she was fantastic*—that had been two years ago and now that they were face to face, Randi, matching her mental picture against the in-the-flesh girlfriend, realized she hadn't pictured Chase accurately. She was taller than expected at five-foot-six. She wore her hair in a simple cut, unpretentious and flattering; her eyes, brown flecked with green, gazed back steadily, unwavering and confident. She was not an extrovert, but neither was she a cowering introvert. Though Randi knew Chase was now “the” woman in her son's life, at this instant, she was little more than a stranger.

Chase, too, had not expected to find herself ill at ease. She presumed she had formed an accurate concept of his Mom based upon his stories; now, she doubted herself. Randi's southern California tan, radiant even in the middle of winter, gave plausibility to the lie that her wrinkles were the result of too much sun rather than aging; Chase imagined Randi running on a SoCal beach, her kick strong and high, an act of defiance shoved in the face of advancing age. Most of all, she did not look like a grandmother.

Chase wondered, and worried, about how Randi would take the news that she was being promoted from mother to grandmother. But this was not the time for discovery—their first encounter, at the bedside of her dying son, was no time to spring startling news on the unwary—so Chase held the secret close, tucking it away in the back of her mind, like a present stuffed under the tree to be opened later.

Most likely, Randi would not have heard Chase's surprising revelation anyway, as her full attention had shifted to her injured son. Finding him entombed in a coma, his bruised and bandaged body sprouting tubes—arterial lines, catheters, endotracheal tubes, and IVs—shocked Randi into raw disbelief.

Lani, the nurse, fearing Randi's stark overwhelm would develop into a full-blown faint, rallied into action with an improvised lecture on the varied purposes of the wave forms dancing on the ICU monitor: graphic displays of blood pressure, intra cranial pressure, and brain waves. Her attempt to use raw data to distract Randi from her fears might as well have been directed at the comatose patient; in the dark recesses of her mind, Randi's intuition unveiled a new fear: she would be called on to make the decision to "pull the plug." Ironic, she mused: she had ushered him into the world without so much as a forethought, his conception and subsequent entrance onto the world's stage the result of an "accident." Now, when it came to his final bow and exit from the stage, she would be called upon to make a conscious decision. It wasn't fair. But there was always hope, wasn't there?

"Perhaps not." Dr. Sloane, the neurosurgeon in charge of

her son's care, was not given to inflating false hopes.

Randi hadn't been aware of his entrance. "What did you just say?" Had he read her mind? No, the doctor had seen her before, hundreds of times, mothers filled with unreasonable hope; he did not require a crystal ball to divine her thoughts.

"Your son suffered—severe injuries. We have hemorrhagic contusions in the interior frontal and temporal lobes. We see these often in vehicle accidents."

He pinched his patient above the collarbone; there was no reaction. Randi, however, flinched.

"Our main concern," Sloane continued, "is the swelling. A patient can recover from the original injury, but secondary injury due to swelling can be fatal. The ICP..."

Blank confusion washed over her features.

He started over, "We inserted a tube, into his brain, to monitor pressure, to drain fluid. The intra cranial pressure, ICP, is in the mid-twenties. Not ideal. We'll do everything we can, but I don't want to seem overly optimistic. It's one day at a time."

Randi nodded and inhaled. This ordeal taxed her strength, drained the well of her composure. Before she could exhale, Sloane was gone, a master of the magician's entrance and exit.

Lani followed him out, tossing a frowning apology over her shoulder.

Chase stepped out of the shadows and draped her arm around Randi's shoulder, but, before she could say anything, the cop entered, juggling a generic "grande" in one hand, his clipboard in the other. In contrast to the medical staff, he was upbeat, almost cheerful; he'd seen mayhem in his day...

"And I have a lot of respect for the human spirit," he informed Chase and Randi. "You can't tell by looking. Stuff happens we don't see. If you know what I mean."

Neither Randi nor Chase had the slightest clue what the cop meant, but they nodded anyway, appreciating the kind sentiments. Soon they were answering his questions as he filled out his report. There was something reassuring about the process, it was as

though they were solving a mystery; it was only a game and the minute they uncovered “whodunit,” the role-playing victim would no doubt spring back to life—but, in the end, on this day, they failed to solve the mystery.

“Why? What caused the accident?” Chase asked, her plaintive questions directed more to God than to the officer fussing over his report.

The cop sipped his coffee, mumbled something about Mother Nature turning nasty, something about ice and how they wouldn’t really know until the young man in the bed was able to talk. He promised that when that moment of recovery arrived, he would return. Then, balancing his coffee on his clipboard, he exited, thawed sufficiently to once again brave the cold and patrol the icy streets in anticipation of impending vehicular mishaps.

Chase wondered again, silently this time, what had happened up on the mountain—this wasn’t like him; he wasn’t accident prone. The cliché “dead men tell no tales” staged an unwanted invasion of her mental space. She corralled her wayward thoughts, and tried to pull herself together with a series of deep breaths.

Later that evening, three young men, tanned and weathered, uniformed in hiking boots, jeans, and Patagonia pullovers, slipped quietly into the room. They nodded a silent greeting to Chase, then fixed their collective gaze on the bruised, immobile figure laid out on the bed.

Chase recognized the men, but couldn’t remember names. They were rock climbers—adrenaline freaks who risked their lives crawling up granite walls like spiders armed with pitons. Her boyfriend had joined their climbing team on dozens of ascents.

The climbers eschewed chitchat; stony silence framed their contemplation. The sight of a climbing buddy plugged into life-support packed the wallop of a heavyweight’s uppercut; the Mountain had beaten one of their own, even if the battle had not taken place on a climb. With their mortality center stage and suffering stage fright, they shuffled out, having paid their

respects.

Minutes later, Chase's sister, Eva, delivered hot coffee and deli sandwiches with her precocious ten-year-old daughter, Bren, in tow. Lani, the head nurse, pretending to be pre-occupied, looked the other way as the contraband and the minor were smuggled past. Rules were broken, not an uncommon occurrence when doctors and administrators were absent from the floor.

Chase briefed her sister on the unsettling medical prognosis, and then introduced Randi. Bren seized the opportunity, slipped free of her mother's iron grip, leaned over the battered patient and, with a kid's frank honesty, offered her appraisal: "He's gone, isn't he?"

Stark reality put in an appearance; Bren's candid comment fixed their focus on the truth. After an uncomfortable moment, Chase, Eva, and Randi, amidst a quick flurry of kisses, good-byes, and well-wishes, recovered their emotional balance and reality once again went soft and fuzzy. Eva, peppering her exit with profuse apologies, departed with the outspoken Bren firmly in custody.

"But, Mom, I can see," Bren protested as she disappeared into the elevator shaking her head at the foibles of adults. After the doors closed, she said, "Aunt CC was crying, wasn't she?" Eva nodded, biting her lip.

At eleven o'clock, the grave yard staff signed on; the halls went quiet except for the constant beeping of electronic monitors. Guard dogs stationed at the portal of death.

Chase, emotionally exhausted, nodded off, her head falling forward then jerking back.

Randi searched a closet, found a pillow, and propped it up behind Chase's head. The touch of mothering bridged the gap; Chase smiled and snuggled her face into the soft linen and dozed off.

Randi wrapped her fingers around her son's cold hand and whispered, "Ray? Can you hear me? Ray?"

# 2

The path twisted up the slope, crested over a rise, then carved its way through a meadow dappled with vibrant, psychedelic yellow and purple wildflowers.

The hiker's cranium pounded *thump thump* with his pulse, driven by a heart gone mad in its attempt to deliver oxygen to his brain in the thin mountain air. He slowed his pace.

That was when he saw her—sitting cross-legged under a tree, at the far end of the meadow. The sculpted folds of her diaphanous blue dress pooled on the ground. Her hair was pulled back, framing her pale face set off by strikingly intense blue eyes.

For a moment, the hiker imagined he had stumbled upon Alice—Alice in Wonderland.

If she was aware of his presence, she gave no indication. She appeared as unperturbed as the flowers. Her eyes seemed to take in everything and nothing at the same time.

He crossed the meadow, keeping to the trail, which wound past the tree under which the unusual young woman was seated.

An unwritten law dictates a hiker encountering another on the trail shall respect the sanctity of solitude; one nodded a greeting, tossed a knowing glance, and passed on. In spite of the curiosity aroused by his chance encounter with this striking young lady, the hiker adhered to proper mountain etiquette: as he came upon her position, he nodded a greeting and quickened his pace.

"You're not on the path," she said, cordially.

He glanced down, then shot her a challenging look. "I've

not been trampling the flowers, if that's what you mean."

"Not that path, silly," she said, flashing a patronizing smile.

"Ah, *that* path." It was his turn to patronize. *A commune chick?* he wondered.

In the late sixties, communes, populated with hippies, spiritual seekers, and social utopians, flourished in these foothills. Not far from here, a self-styled guru had penned the book "*Be Here Now*," which seemed to the hiker to be good, though obvious, advice. The commune scene died out years ago, but sporadic attempts to resurrect the era were not uncommon. No doubt the young lady under the tree was part of the latest such effort.

"How do you know I'm not on the path?"

"Not ready. I can see *that*. Sorry, I interrupted your hike. Have a good day."

Her evaluation was insulting and awakened a desire in him to wilt her arrogance with blistering sarcasm, but he held back and responded politely, "I don't mind the interruption. I want to know what you see. *Why* am I not ready? You can be honest."

"Didn't mean to hurt your feelings," she replied. "I just made an observation, that's all."

"You're part of some cult. Meditating and trying to get out of your head, is that it?"

Though the hiker was not one to engage in the ubiquitous flame wars between "believers" and "skeptics" which erupted soon after the Internet shrunk the planet into a global sandbox, Alice's "observation" hit the same raw nerve that sent skeptics spinning into mad rants. *It was the attitude*, he realized. Believers conveyed their observations as though only holy water touched their lips, while you, the heathen non-believer, were a puppy to be rubbed behind the ears when good and swatted on the bum when discovered peeing in forbidden places.

"Now you're angry, and upset. I've ruined your hike. And all you wanted was to get away, away from all those obnoxious people pushing and shoving their way through shallow lives."

The sarcasm stung. He wasn't sure why.

“You didn’t ruin anything. And I’m not escaping from anyone. At that moment, in fact, I was amusing myself, imagining you were Alice—“

”Alice?”

“Alice in Wonderland.”

“Oh, *that* Alice.”

Her smile, was it sarcasm or genuine amusement? He could not tell.

“But when you fired off that wisecrack about the path, you reminded me of the Evil Queen.”

“Well, you’re *not* ready, are you?”

*Ouch.* She was direct; she aimed to kill, not wound. He wondered why he found it so hard to disengage from her banter and get on with his hike—and came up empty-handed.

“I’ve given a fair amount of thought to spiritual matters,” he said. “I’m not the Neanderthal you think I am. I know life is more than beer and pretzels. I understand that. I understand compassion: it pays to be nice.”

He winked, a poor attempt at conveying warmth, then gave up any pretense of politeness and continued, “But I don’t buy the mumbo jumbo. Not into Ouija boards. I don’t run up bills phoning the Psychic Hotline. And I don’t have a guru to tell me when to breathe and when to fart.”

“Then we’ll get along. We’re both realists. Though reality may not be what you think it is.”

”Oh? You know this? You walked the path? And I’m not ready?”

“Yes. I suppose. Good observation.” She rose to her feet, preparing to leave. “You’ve thought about spiritual matters?”

“Right,” he replied.

“Then you know you’re a spirit, not a body, right?”

“Like I said, I’m not into mumbo jumbo, but I live a spiritual life—“

”I don’t get it,” she said, as though talking to herself. She gave free rein to an exaggerated look of puzzlement. “How can one

live a spiritual life if one is not a spirit?"

"They've shown spirit doesn't exist."

"Who's shown *that*?" She gaped with disbelief, prodding and antagonizing.

"Scientists. You know..."

"No, I don't know. I'm disappointed. I thought you were a realist."

Again, she rubbed that nerve, setting him off. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't let it go. "Science is real, sweetheart. It's what *is* real. Not—"

"Spirit? If so, then you cannot be spiritual. That's only logical." She winked, signaling she was playing with him.

He couldn't find the spirit of play within himself; he was much too serious and he knew it. Was his real concern the young lady who had appeared magically on the trail? Or was the actual problem the persistent and nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something, something important? He vaguely recalled he had an important message to deliver, but he couldn't grasp what that message might have been. It would come to him eventually; it always did.

"If you're not a spirit, you must be a robot. A nice robot, a polite robot, but a robot nonetheless."

"Forget it." *This wasn't going anywhere*, he thought. Alice had taken too many drugs, crawled down too many rabbit holes, and chased too many mad hatters, or whatever they were called. Besides, he was going on thirty-two, she was at least a dozen years younger. He was debating with a child.

She walked away, disappearing behind the trunks of the birch trees, reappearing, then disappearing again.

A voice emerged out of the memory that was failing him: "*Get him out of here. Let's move it.*"

Disappointment lashed his emotions. A nebulous fear of impending loss swelled in his chest. He didn't want her to leave, he didn't want to be alone—but he was frozen, unable to act, unable to make a decision. A moment ago, only his memory was failing

him; now it seemed the crisis had spread to all his faculties.

She called back over her shoulder, "So the next time we meet we will talk about spirit?"

"Next time?"

"I have to go now."

"What shall I call you?" he shouted.

"Alice is fine."

"I'm Ray. Ray Carte. Wait—"