

Buford, Colorado

By Dave Carlberg

Chapter One

“Drought”

It was a dry heat that leaked through the clouds in Buford City, Colorado. It planted itself in the ground, and in the trees and buildings, where it grew until the whole of the place was warmed even without the visible sun. Every now and again a breeze would fall from the mountains that bordered Buford to the east, roll through town and pass into the prairie to the west. This would not so much break the heat, but mask it for a while. The constant bickering between the dead silence of heat and the moderate shrill of the breeze was halted as an old pickup truck sped north through town. The clang of its engine broke all manner of silence as it slowed at the northern end of Buford.

The Buford Snack N’ Gas sat idle as the maroon truck pulled in. The driver hopped out and pulled the cowboy hat from the top of his head before reaching for the nozzle.

“It’s pay first.” The attendant’s voice rose up from his body, which sat lifeless upon an old wooden bench in front of the store. The brim of his ball cap hid the features of his face, save for his lower lip, which swelled around a clump of tobacco. A stream of brown liquid trailed out his mouth and down into the silver scraggle of his chin.

The cowboy left his truck and crossed the ruddy expanse of dirt to the doorway. As he entered, he met with a flood of cool air, which smelled of chemicals and came from a large humming box installed in the ceiling.

“Pump two?” the attendant behind the counter asked. His face was young and shaven and the lengths of his hair were pulled behind his head in a ponytail. The nametag on his shirt read ‘Lewis.’ “How much?”

As the cowboy shuffled through his pockets, he glanced over to his right where he discovered a sparsely filled rack of t-shirts. They were large, depicting eagles and bears and wolves in front of purple bolts of lightning. He glanced to his left and found a revolving glass case, and inside, a collection of pewter dragons and glass horses and Buford snow globes.

“Twenty,” the cowboy said. He tossed a crumpled bill on the counter, next to a small display of ‘Colorful Colorado’ key chains. He nodded at the attendant and left. Lewis closed the register and flicked on the pump, then followed the cowboy outside the store. His truck kicked up a cloud of red dust when it left.

“Another day, huh Will?”

The man on the bench shifted slightly but remained silent. Louis pulled a cigarette from the breast pocket of his overalls and lit it with a bullet-shell lighter he swiped from the counter.

“What do you think of those clouds, Will?” Louis motioned to the west with his cigarette.

“Hasn’t rained in weeks.” William lifted his brow slightly to see. “Don’t reckon it will. Them clouds will blow over.” Will pushed himself further back in the bench and crossed his arms. A thread of brown liquid shot out from the purse of his lips and stained the ground in front of him. “Don’t reckon it ever will.”

Chapter Two

“Transients”

Jeremy stared blankly out the driver’s side window of his Jeep, batting at the ‘Colorful Colorado’ keychain hanging from the ignition. The garden to his left drew his eyes in with its color. Flowers grew tall from the ground and seemed to infest the place. The lawn was scattered with rusting wheelbarrows and iron scrap and an old plow. Myra’s mother had long since turned them into planters, though he could hardly make out any intent through the purple mess of things. The path up to Myra’s house was nearly consumed by them, the flowers, columbines and aster, so much that the only way to trace the exact direction of the path was to follow someone as they left the house.

She emerged from behind a tattered screen door, where Jeremy saw her wave back to someone inside. Except for the dark tress of her hair, which fell neatly to her shoulders and rested there, she was barely discernable from the tangle of the garden. Her eyes met his for only a moment, and then returned to the ground where they remained as she ambled towards the passenger door. Jeremy leaned across the interior to open her door and she stepped in.

“Hi Myra.”

Her lips pressed in upon themselves to form a thin smile. Her hand crawled over to the side of his leg, where it rested firmly against the denim of his jeans as he started the Jeep and drove off. Out of his rear-view, Jeremy caught a glimpse of Myra’s living room window, where Mrs. Rios’ image floated briefly before it disappeared behind a flicker of curtain.

A mile down the road they pulled off to the side. Before the vehicle was fully stopped, Jeremy's hand had found its way to the back of her head, and had buried its fingers within the black sheen of her hair. When things were stopped, he pulled her head in and pressed his lips up against her own. Myra's hand met with his cheek. Their torsos argued with the deep buckets of their seats, but the lock of their faces didn't fail for another minute.

They cruised down the highway in comfortable silence. Their eyes met often. To the north it was another six miles to Buford City, and to the south was nothing but farmland all the way to the New Mexico border. On either side the highway was sloped and generously framed by barbed cattle fences. Tall flax wound itself in and around the fence poles, which reduced into a yellow blur with the speed of the highway. He pointed to the west, to a gathering of clouds that made camp along the horizon.

"Might rain." He dropped a fistful of sunflower seeds into his mouth.

"Would be a nice break from this heat" she replied, not turning her head. She gazed out the right side, to the east, where blue skies provided a casing for the green ascending peaks. From their tower, the peaks strained outwards and fell down to the west, forming the final reaching tongues of the Rocky Mountains. Their concluding lick was Buford City, where the tips buried themselves into the prairie and became flat. One by one those tongues passed them by, in no great hurry.

Through the southern half of Buford the speed limit was slowed. The highway widened and became Buford's main street, lined sparingly with cottages, gift shops, kayak rentals and a few bed and breakfasts. A handful of tourists rambled along the shoddy wooden sidewalks on either side of the street, carrying fly rods or rafting helmets.

Several small children towed a party of plush toys in a red wagon, and a pair of older women sold baked goods on the lawn in front of the library. Busy for Buford, he thought.

As they made their way through town, things got quieter. The shops began to thin and the road narrowed, and on either side there remained only a few dilapidated houses and scraggly plots of open land. They came finally to the north fork of town, where one road delved off and to the left in search of the Interstate, and one road continued on towards the northern branch of the mountain range. The final patchy remnant of Buford consisted of the Miner's Museum and the old Snack N' Gas on the opposite side of the road.

"Do we need anything else?" she said as she met his eyes, with one thumb stretched out towards the gas station. He grinned mildly.

"I have everything." He volunteered his hand palm up atop the center console. She met it with hers, and their hands clasped into a stationary whorl of listless white and russet brown. They interlocked their fingers. She closed her eyes.

"Besides," he offered, "we're not going far."

They followed the highway north out of town alongside the river. Yellow rafts drifted along with the water back towards town. From the height of the highway she could only see the tops of their helmeted heads as the rafters floated lazily atop the water. Fishermen marched both north and south along the river with brown tackle boxes or burlap packs. Every now and again she extended her hand out the window and waved; the fishermen would grin and tip their heads up.

Several miles north of town, the highway split from the river and continued north. The river formed an elbow and stretched east into the mountain pass, up into the woods

and to its lakes of origin. They continued alongside the river on a dirt four-wheel-drive trail, and followed it until either side of the road was dotted with pines. The dots became patches and then thick groves, until the entire trail was framed and enclosed by them. As the road climbed the pines became instilled with aspen and ash. The trees diffused the sunlight in brilliant multicolor patterns and painted them across the ground, as if the canopy of the forest was itself a stained glass window and the mountain above, an altar.

Chapter Three “Above Buford”

The hanging scent of pine had perfumed the air as Henry ascended through the brush, but there was nothing bothersome about it. The sun looked down through the canopy of trees and cooked the pinecones, melted the sap from their limbs, and gave strength to the wildflowers. The light fell gently through the trees, and landed in fantastic colored mosaics upon the forest floor.

“Come on, Trigger,” he shouted.

The Labrador emerged from under an awning of rotting tree, where the black sheen of his fur had kept him hidden in the shade. Large drops of water beaded off the graying fur of his lower jaw. He overtook Henry on the trail, and went first up the crisscrossing flight of switchbacks.

“It’s not much further now.” Henry, to his dog, shouted. “Just atop this ridge, I believe.”

Each step led Henry further up the bowl of the mountain. The path ascended gently, climbing back and fourth amongst the scattered growth of the old forest, sprinkled with lodgepole-pine and bristlecone. Their bark was familiar; it was clear and

unpretentious under the graze of his palm. He gripped the trunks as he could, climbing along with them as if they were outstretched hands.

The trail wound upwards. On its left-hand side the ridge had been cleft by a stream of snowmelt, which trickled lightly down the hill and sometimes along the path. Trigger had an easy enough time following the stream directly up the hill, lapping at the waters at his own leisure. His paws sank into the bed of the stream with each step, becoming increasingly caked in black dirt. Henry held true to the path, which was becoming particularly muddy in places, but eventually dried out as it drifted further from the snowmelt.

At the top of the ridge Henry veered slightly off the trail, to the south through an overgrowth of cowbane. Trigger trotted back and followed, sneezing at the thick leaves as they grazed past his snout.

“Slow down, boy.” Henry rounded a few more trees before he came to their end. From there, the mountain sloped down again on the opposite side of the trail. The opening in the trees provided Henry with a view off the mountain and down into the valley.

“See, friend? There’s old Buford.”

From halfway up the mountain, the city was small. He could see the highway carrying in from the south, and along it Buford’s buildings grew in disheveled clusters. There was a thick center to the town, which Henry recognized as the school. Behind it was the old sports field, upon which he could barely distinguish the painted lines of the soccer pitch. Around it and on any side grew lines of single-story houses, whose roofs blended together to form thick bars which ran up and down with the city.

From Henry's perch, Buford looked like a stain upon the land. Disjointed, alone, and incongruous. It was as if ancient men had left wood and brick on the grass in heaping piles and forgot to pick it up off the landscape before they left. It gave the city a lonely look. From the height of the trail, Buford was more like a truck stop than a city, more like a detail than an actual place. The longer he stared out into the valley, the more the city became marginalized against it, until it stood as a footnote in the expansive timeline of the Rocky Mountains. As his mind wandered, he began to wonder how long it would take for the city to be overgrown by moss, or if there was a gust of wind strong enough to wipe it out in a single pass.

Henry set his pack down and leaned heavily against the trunk of a lodgepole. He reached down and combed his fingers through Triggers fur, who took his breaths silently at his side. Together they gazed out into the valley, following the lines of it up into the western range. The peaks rose like spires above the city of Buford, and the whole of it all rested silently under the shadows of the arriving clouds. Those peaks, he thought, stood long before Buford. He saw Buford as it was, an old mining city cradled in the uneasy jaws of the Rocky Mountains, and all that mouth had to do was flinch and the whole of the city would be chewed and swallowed up, and the only memory of the place would be the decaying roads that once ran through it.

Chapter Four

"Poacher"

The Buford Snack N' Gas sat despondent under the shade of a passing cloud. The heat in the air beat down upon the roof, and began to peel the brown paint from the siding of the building.

“It’s just redundant, Will.” Lewis emerged from the underbelly of an old station wagon.

“What, the transfer case?” William removed the cap from his head, and wiped the sweat from his bald scalp with his sleeve. “The transfer case is redundant?”

“No, Buford. Buford.” Lewis stood and grabbed the extra beer from the cooler at William’s feet. “Buford is redundant. The transfer case is fixed.” Lewis placed the beer atop the roof of the car and leaned against the driver door. As he wiped the oil from his hands, he scanned the expanse of the horizon, noting the progression of the clouds.

“Well,” William began, with his hands on his belt. “Pump three is broke again. If that’s what you mean by redundant, then, I reckon I agree with you son.”

Lewis grabbed the beer from the roof and brought it to its lips, keeping his eyes fixed on something far in the distance.

“Same thing, Will. Day in, and day out.”

William turned to look, bringing his back to lean against the wagon. They stared far down the highway, following the fading yellow lines of it as it disappeared and reappeared between the moderate hills north of town.

William started. “You know, son, you can stare down that highway until the cows come home, but I don’t reckon you’ll be seeing much coming down it anytime soon.”

“One day,” Lewis replied, “one day, maybe we’ll finally see some excitement. Maybe a rock star tour bus, or a movie actor, or something like that. I bet they’ll be coming from the north, too. They’ll just have to stop here.”

“You know, my pa used to think the same thing. He brought me out here when I was young. I guess he figured a gas station would be a pretty smart investment, what with

the ski tourists and all. Then, out of the clear blue the Interstate gets built. Folks start using it, instead, and it killed his business.” William paused, and brought the beer back up to his lips. A drop of it ran down his chin.

“Nowadays,” he continued, “Buford isn’t the kind of place people just chance upon. There is no real reason to pass through here. We’re in between no one and on the way to nowhere. You’ve got to want to get here, I reckon, which is a problem, seeing as how no one knows where here is.”

“You’ll see, Will. Just wait.” Lewis brought the can back to his lips and took a long sip.

“I’ll wait all right. I figure I’ll be long dead when that day arrives, but I’ll wait just the same. ” William chuckled and threw the last swig of beer down his throat. “What else is there?” He popped the hood of the VW and busied himself beneath it.

Lewis was silent for a long while, but kept his eyes staring blankly at the highway. The hills stretched out before him, and ran quietly up to the base of the mountains. Their color was glossed by the heat of the ground and blurred by the thermals. It was twenty minutes later when his eye caught the glint of a moving car two or three miles to the north. The truck pulled into the station and stopped abruptly. It was large, with fog lights on its roof and massive studded tires, and its bed was wrapped in a blue tarp. The white gloss of its paint was hardly visible beneath a layer of mud.

“Here we go, Will.” Lewis started towards the pump. William came out from under the hood and followed him, wiping his hands on the pants of his jumpsuit.

“Well, son,” William began, “he sure as hell isn’t local. This might be your lucky day.”

The driver emerged from his truck, one hand resting in the pocket of his camouflage cargo pants.

“How goes it?” William started. The driver nodded and pulled a twenty from his pocket.

“Not bad, boys. I’ll take twenty dollars worth.”

“That ought to get you to Denver, or wherever you’re off to?” William nodded to Lewis, who went inside to switch on the pump. William set up the nozzle.

“Yeah, Denver” the man said. “Been out hunting. You hunt?”

William nodded. “Sometimes.”

The man stepped to the bed of his truck and untied a corner of the tarp.

“Then maybe you’ll like this.” He lifted the tarp. William looked up from the pump to see a pair of massive horns, which spiraled downwards and connected themselves to the lifeless head of a bighorn sheep.

“He’s a beauty, isn’t he?”

William followed the sheep’s head down to its body. A large incision pierced the stomach of the carcass and ran from its chest to its stomach. Its legs were bound in pairs of two, and folded up into its chest. Blood had soaked into the sheep’s fur and matted it, and pooled in the bed of the truck. William then noticed it dripping onto the dirt from the back of the truck bed.

“Yeah, that’s about 275 pounds, I’d say. I took it from 300 yards, in only three shots. We were up there in the mountains, up towards White Cross. I spotted the thing and we followed it until I got a clean shot. We were actually out for elk, but this fellow was too beautiful to pass up.”

William heard a click, and pulled the nozzle from the gas tank.

“And that’s my son in the truck. He helped me clean the thing.” He stuck a thumb out towards the passenger seat, at a child who couldn’t have been older than twelve. The boy had his head leaned against the passenger window, twirling a sheathed hunting knife in his hands. Lewis returned from inside just in time to catch glimpse of the dead animal, before the man fastened down the tarp.

“And it’s a good thing, too. We bagged it before this thunderstorm came in.” He nodded towards the darkening clouds to the west. “Oh,” The man said. “Can I get some ice here? I was hoping to save some of this meat.”

“Sorry” William said bluntly, breaking eye contact with the man. “Ice machine is on the fritz. You’ll have to go to the other side of town. There’s a shop over there.”

The man nodded politely and got back in his truck. The door closed and the truck pulled off the lot and onto the road.

“Was that a bighorn sheep, Will? I didn’t know it was legal to hunt those.” Lewis pulled another cigarette from his breast pocket.

“It’s legal, but damn close to impossible to get the permit for it. Ten to one says he poached it.”

“Should we call the D.O.W.?” Lewis lit the tip of his cigarette and took a drag.

“Probably. But I reckon that any man with the gall to kill a creature like that is going to get what’s coming to him anyway.”

The truck disappeared into the distance, and William and Lewis were left to stare at the small puddle of crimson blood that had begun to sink into the dirt in front of them.

Chapter Five

“Symbiosis”

Jeremy and Myra parked the Jeep off to the side of the road and continued, on foot, along a debatable trail that led off through the wood. It brought them to the opening of a meadow.

The clearing that stretched before them was carpeted with thick tufts of golden green switchgrass. A path was cut vaguely through the middle and lined with swaying foxtails, which led to the opposite side of the clearing. From there the grass sloped downwards, and what was further below could not be seen, but there rose up a massive assembly of rotting planks and iron poles. Just beyond it, a ridge rose sharply out of the ground and up into the sky. As they proceeded across the field and down the slope, several more buildings came into view. The structures were both large and small, all of them consisting of old timber which had long since turned a pale gray. Many of the walls had rotted out, and several of the buildings had collapsed into themselves. One stood stronger than all the rest, the larger one at the base of the ridge. A massive awning grew out from its roof and extended across a thick layer of grass and wildflowers, and supported itself with two colossal beams that rose out of the ground like tree trunks. A dense border of larkspur painted a blue and white mote, which followed the edge of the building.

“What is this, Jeremy?” she said.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” He stepped under the awning and knelt down, then buried his hands beneath the grass. “Look.”

She knelt beside him, and followed the movements of his hands as they cleared the grass, and uncovered a thick iron rail, and beneath it, beams of white rotted wood and scattered gravel.

“A train?” She stood, excited, and placed her hands in a clasp atop her head.

“A mining town was built here.” He closed his eyes and drew a long breath, leaving his hands hidden under the green tangle of the meadow. “I suppose this track had rounded the mountain, then met up with one of the larger towns up north.”

They stood and followed slowly the line of the track as it exited the meadow, he on one rail and she on the other. Their hands clasped, gapping the space between the rails, supporting one another as they placed their feet one in by one. The track fell gently along with the slope of the meadow, and off into the trees where its veil of grass filtered out and allowed the track to reappear. They stopped at the border of trees. She brought their knotted hands up to her face, slid the back of his hand across her cheek and clasped them harder. She did not look up to him, but closed her eyes and drew breath. Their feet remained planted on separate rails until he pulled his hand back and her with it, meeting in the center. Their hands, all four, joined together between their chests, and he, looking down, kissed the line between her hair and brow and then rested his forehead upon it. For several minutes they stood, letting the wind run circles around them, and the trees rustle back and forth with excitement, while frames of the old buildings fatigued under their own age and sprouts of columbine matured and kissed the rotting walls. Through it they stood, holding close, not tight but infallible. Undeniable. Impenetrable.

Above their heads the clouds had begun to conspire, and by then the ceiling of them extended along the entire forest and well into the valley, above Buford and even further. They grew dark, and swelled up and up into the sky like behemoths.

“They look angry,” she noted. A drop of water fell and landed on her cheek as her head was tilted up. Following it was one more, and another, until they landed consistently in their hair and on their skin and spotted their shirts. He led her quickly back along the tracks to the train building and the shelter of its awning. The rain leaked through it in many places, but left one patch dry, where they stretched themselves out and laid down upon the grass and the moss and scattered patches of forget-me-nots.

The rain fell, or was thrown down upon the earth. Through the thick sheets of it, the opposite side of the valley became obscured and blurry, but the mountains that rose behind it stood clear.

They sat and listened to the rain. At first they stared in tandem down the slope of the valley towards the river, but her eyes drifted towards him and caught him, and whispered to him until he looked back.

He placed her on her back and let the tips of his fingernails glide across her exposed stomach. The lids of her eyes trembled as she held her breath, arching her back, stretching her arms out to feel the grass on either side of her. The weight of her body caused the grass to furrow inwards. It encased her in tiny lucid throngs of blue and green and yellow, grazing the surface of her skin and joining with her hair. His lips kissed slowly down the line of her neck, then along the collarbone and down to the line of her shirt. His hand rolled and his palm laid flat, firm against the curves of her stomach. The tide of her breath joined in with the chorus of the mountain, rising and falling under the

flat palm of his hand and the weight of his body. He pulled his head back and looked deep into the contours of her face until her eyes opened. She tucked her bottom lip under the crown of her front teeth, and reached for the back of his head.

“I love you, Jeremy,” was all that she said, and he replied without voice, but alongside the rain with his lips and his hands, and the strength of his back and the muscles in his legs. As they embraced, they became hardly discernable from the mattress of grass that held them and surrounded them. The columbines beside them swayed kindly in the breeze, just as enthralled by the sound of the two lovers as the sound of the falling rain. His eyes, closed, felt the softness of her finger as it traveled across his lids, up his forehead and to his hair, where the curled locks of his head wound their way about her fingers.

As they together took their breath, as the clouds consumed the entire sky and blanketed the forest and valley with rain, they existed, not immune from the world around them but within it and enfolded by it, created by it and defined by it and utterly dependent on it, but aware of nothing more than the whorl of their bare skins as they lay melted, one into the other.

Chapter Six

“Flood”

Trigger released an uneasy breath through his snout, and shifted impatiently between his front paws. Henry stood for a moment longer, following the curve of the

earth as far as he could, tracing with his eyes the imaginary Utah border to the west, and New Mexico to the south. From both directions the clouds marched slowly towards Buford.

“Come on, Trig.” Henry turned to follow his forged trail back to the main path, but when he turned the sky became darker, and the reviving patches of blue sky had begun to shrink. There, to the north, rising above the tops of the trees was a thick blanket of grey cloud, humbling and massive. Henry hesitated, and appreciated the stark contrast between the blue and the darkening grey. He dropped his arm to his leg and patted around his pocket, ensuring he hadn’t forgotten his poncho. Trigger stopped at the border of the main path and looked back to Henry.

“It’s all right. We’ve a few hours left before we have to start worrying about the rain.” Trigger’s tail swayed in agreement as he darted off to his left, up the trail and up the mountain. From there the trail followed the line of the ridge, but the view was masked on either side by pines. Trigger led the way, staying far enough ahead that he could pause in patches of kinnickinnick, or the hollow of a rotting log or a tuft of foxtail grass.

Henry’s mind wandered up into the sky, into the trees, above the mountain and well beyond it. With each step Henry considered the link between his own breath and the breath of the weeds and trees, wondering if he could slow his own perception to the steady in and the steady out of photosynthesis. He interpreted the very air as it rolled into his lungs, and thought very hard about where it came from. Oxygen, from trees to his lungs, from his lungs to carbon dioxide and back to the trees, formed a circle that no man could take credit for. He tried to feel, at times, the earth move under his feet, or the waves

of the water as they were dictated by the moon and the stars. Trigger barked at a squirrel that escaped up the trunk of a tree, and Henry's mind snapped back into place.

They hiked on and up, and the peak came into view. The trail had long since turned to loose stone, and the trees had passed away. The trail would soon turn to wide flat boulders as they ascended, providing a natural staircase up to the top. The shadows of the rocks grew softer as the clouds above gathered thicker over the sun. They had flown in from all directions.

“Well, Trig, I think that drought may finally see its end.”

Tiny dots appeared, one by one on the grey surface of the mountain. The land darkened under the blanket of rain. Henry stood still, waiting to see exactly how wide those clouds would open their bellies.

The rain came down, hard. Streams of water were already coming from the high side of the mountain, cutting across the path and down to either side. Looking up towards the sky he could see the clouds bleeding out, dumping rain upon the land, and the rain grabbing hold of the cloud and dragging long white strands down towards the earth. Henry draped himself in his neon poncho. He looked down to meet a pair of large brown questioning eyes looking up at him.

“Sorry, Trig.”

The dog shook the rain that had already soaked into his fur and looked back up to Henry for ideas. Henry tightened the hood around his chin and glanced around. The silver lining of the mountains stood in harsh contrast against the darkening sky. They rose up, and grew higher above the clouds like cathedrals, overlooking the ridge, overlooking the valley, and overlooking Buford. They blurred behind a veil of rain.

“We should probably turn back, then.” Henry started down the path at a slightly faster rate. Trigger affixed himself to Henry’s side, matching pace. Henry’s eyes locked onto the tree line ahead, then back and forth between the sky and the ground. The dog let out a soft whine, which was enough to get Henry’s attention.

Looking down at the dog, he could see strands of his black fur lifting gently towards the sky. He reached out to pat them down, but when he was close enough a tiny blue light jumped from the fur to his finger giving him a slight shock. Henry tilted his head towards the sky and heard an angry rumble from above.

“We should go, Trig.”

Henry kept low, but increased his speed as he bounded down the trail. Trigger had caught the sense of danger, through scent or experience or some other force, and kept up without whimpering. Henry set his goal at timberline, but doubted within his own mind whether they would actually make it. He cursed himself silently for ignoring the clouds all day. It was then that he noticed out of his periphery a wooden structure, off on a landing carved into the side of the ridge. Through the rain he couldn’t tell if it was a radio tower or an old mining hut, but he could make out the slight rock trail leading up to it. It was a great deal closer than the tree line, but too unpredictable. A crack of thunder sounded from the next peak over. He turned quickly off onto the rock trail, hardly wide enough for both his feet, and made his way across the side of the ridge.

“Keep up, Trig.”

He whimpered softly as they turned off the track, but never broke the lock of his trot, staying close behind and matching pace. Henry wanted to slow his speed. He wanted to move safely, thinking faster speeds would make him more susceptible to lightning. He

wanted to, but his legs carried him, didn't listen to his brain and paid no attention to his thoughts, and surely didn't heed his own blindness as the beads of rain slammed into his eyes.

He was only a few feet from the safety of the structure when a deafening burst of thunder filled the air. Henry was not hit, but through the thunder he could not hear the snapping under his feet. His legs had carried him on top of an assembly of wooden planks, which extended over a dark shaft. Even as he ran, they buckled and gave under his weight. Henry fell. The world rose quickly.

The pouring of the rain and a subsequent crack of lightning masked his scream, as his spine slammed down on a boulder and the shank of a rusty pipe shot up into his calf and jetted out the front side of his shin.

Trigger had stopped short of the fall. He let out a single, strangled bark that floated off into the wind, then trotted over to the far side of the hole. A more gradual incline let him work his way down and in, and right up to Henry. Henry's body was limp, lying half-submerged in the rain that had already accumulated. Trigger licked the side of his face and crouched down beside him whimpering.

Henry was in too much pain to talk or scream. He mustered only enough strength to reach out to his dog and bury his hand in the fur of its neck. A wave of warmth passed over him. He felt the blood leaking from his leg and into his bath of rainwater. He felt the shattered pair of vertebrae rub against one another in his back. He felt Trigger's tongue on his face and the vibrations as he barked into his ear, but could do nothing except stare up into the sky.

His eyes were wide and were slammed with beads of water, but did not close. He saw straight up into the sky, could see thousands of drops of water long before they came to hit him. They fell around him, down from the skies, dragging those long, thin strands of cloud with them, and Henry wondered silently if those white strands were coming down for him, if they shared a breath, in and out, like him. His perceptions slowed. He came into a sense of himself, as he who had been standing for so long on the tooth of the Rocky Mountains, and eventually, like Buford, he had to be swallowed up, and the only memory that would remain would be the decaying bones that once ran through his body.

Chapter Seven

“Gold Rush”

William secured the panel back onto the side of pump three and gave it a tap with his wrench, as the rain above him began to fall. To the north, long strands of cloud fell from the sky towards the earth.

“That should do it, at least for another week.” William grabbed his toolbox and headed for the porch of the store, where Lewis sat with a grin.

William grinned, “All right, son, I guess I was wrong.”

“Pessimists are usually disappointed.”

William set down the toolbox and took a seat on the bench next to Lewis. They sat together and stared out west into the prairie, watching the rain as it came first in drops, then in streams and finally in sheets.

“Well, old Ian down at Raft Tours will be pleased, I figure.” William reached deep into his pocket, grabbing a chunk of moist chew and placing it under his lip. “Rivers haven’t been riding at capacity all summer.”

From their seat at the Snack N' Gas, the entirety of the western horizon looked open. The clouds that flew above it all bled out into the surrounding sky, until the difference in color between them and the sky was indiscernible. The rains poured in the west, and poured in Buford City.

“Well, Will. I don't think there's an end in sight.”

“For the best, I reckon.”

Will and Lewis sat in comfortable silence for close to an hour, watching as the streets began to flood and the dirt in the lot became riddled with small puddles. The only vehicle that passed was a van towing a stack of rafts, the driver of which waved towards the shop but passed by without slowing.

Lewis broke the silence. “Hey Will,”

William's eyes had long since closed, but he had not fallen asleep. He replied with a grunt.

“Why didn't you ever leave Buford?”

“You're the younger one, son. I'd ask the same of you.” William spit out into the rain. He slowly lifted the lids of his eyes. “You remember my pa? The man who built this station?”

Lewis nodded and took a deep breath in, and smiled at how moist it was. He shifted in his seat, but didn't break his eyes from the miles of nothing in front of him.

After a moment, William continued.

“Well my pa, he was one of them gold rush folks. Those folk who are always trying to get something better, even though there's nothing really wrong with where they were in the first place.

“People like that, they’re everywhere. The ones who get all worked up over the notion that there’s something better out there. They get to thinking that they deserve it, that it’s all for them, meant for them. They see their own gold rushes within their own head, see, and it drives them mad. The truth of it, son, is that most of the gold has been dug. The mines are shut down and the open range is all fenced up. There isn’t nothing left of those dreams. There isn’t nothing out there for people not willing to accept the way of things.” He spit out into the rain again.

“As for this old Snack N’ Gas,” he continued, “well, some things are easier gotten than gotten rid of.”

From the north came a string of fisherman, walking side by side along the street in neon ponchos and wide-brimmed hats. William raised his arm and grinned as they passed. The fisherman raised their strings of trout towards the Snack N’ Gas and smiled. The rain was loud, but didn’t completely drown the sound of their laughter as they disappeared down the street towards town.

“Town will be full of tourists, soon.” Lewis kicked the dirt in front of him.

“Yep.”

“More hikers, more hunters.” Lewis sighed.

“More SUV’s to fill up their gas tanks.” William curved his mouth into a smirk.

“I don’t know, Will. I just, well I’m not sure if they belong in a place like this.”

William closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Upon opening them, he extended his hand out in front of him into the rain.

“Yeah, maybe they don’t belong. Maybe we don’t belong here, either. But I don’t reckon many people actually belong here, Lewis. The only reason we’re allowed to stay

is because of who we are. Some of us are dreamers, keeping our noses up to the wind, or poets looking for something good to write about. The rest of us just want a small bit of peace and a good measure of quiet, and figure we can do it out here on our own. If these folk aren't any of those, well, son, I don't think they belong in the Rockies either."

Lewis listened as a car came up through the rain from the south. With his eyes he followed it as it passed the station and left north. He followed it through the hills and to the elbow in the highway, cutting through the sheets of rain, turning slightly west, making for the interstate and on towards Utah. He followed it as far as he could until it was miniscule against the horizon, but could see no more from his seat, on the porch of a gas station in Buford, Colorado.