

There are a few places left on earth that swallow the human psyche and cast it into something not understood by the greater society of man. Where mystery thrives and time itself is measured in geological epochs. The Colorado Plateau is one of those places.

Chapter One

Into the Mystic

The wheels hummed with a canorous moan as they rolled down the derelict highway. Hypnotic in timbre, the monotonous Om-buzz lulled the driver into a dream-like state void of enlightenment. The ancient two-track bore no rumble strips to alert the weary traveler to the perilous consequences of nodding off at the wheel in canyon country. When the tires smacked the rails of a cattle guard at sixty miles an hour, the soothing lullaby ended. The abrupt *paradiddle* sound of rubber on tempered steel throttled any further slip down the somnambulist highway.

Izzy snapped his head up and regained a semblance of composure. *Damn Bro. One slip off this road and its all over but the funeral.* He leaned over and pushed the 'Play' button on the archaic cassette player. The machine responded with a painful screech, similar in tone to a rat caught in the belt assembly of a vintage Maytag. A album's worth of U2 songs lay in a tangled mass on the console. There would be no tapping the steering wheel to the sound of *New Year's Day* on this winter escapade. He wrenched the tape free and placed the frayed tunes on the dashboard. A visual reminder to upgrade.

The solitary navigator leaned forward on the steering wheel. Keen eyes scanned the landscape and sky for a potential photograph. The sage dotted playa didn't score high on the composition scale but a gathering cloud parade garnered serious appraisal.

Mesas froze to the bedrock and canyons shivered during midwinter in the high desert. Nothing with a pulse escaped the glacial grip of the Ice Queen. The chill factor issued a malevolent warning to all life forms; *find shelter or perish*. The majority of warm-blooded creatures migrated to lower elevations where temperatures were less severe at this season. Izzy knew the perils of backcountry travel during the month of the *long night moon*. One mistake could lead to a most unpleasant evening ... or worse.

Disappointment Valley issued a punitive wake-up call for the unprepared. Most folks that traversed the valley with any frequency learned to respect this formidable crust of earth. The desolate dryland offered a legion of challenges as well as treasures hidden in places human feet rarely tread. It shared no secret with the uninitiated or those who embark on casual sorties. This peculiar corner of the planet appealed to a very narrow slice of humanity.

Native cultures familiar with the region harbored a parallel sentiment toward the defiant landscape. The desiccated valley demanded the utmost attention for anyone tempting its unyielding sovereignty. One hundred and forty-eight miles between gas pumps deterred the masses. As well as potholes that swallowed anything smaller than a county dump truck. A handful of oil rigs hid in the backcountry but workers seldom left the job site during the chaining-up season. For Izzy, this was a cherished sanctuary detached from human chaos.

Colorado state road 141 was a high-lonesome ribbon of battered asphalt that sliced through Disappointment Valley and Unaweep Canyon. There were stretches so desolate even the fence posts leaned towards resignation. The isolated motorway served as a conduit from Grand Junction to points south and vice versa. It sat fifty miles and sixty years away from the bustling interstate. Prime territory for a fringe dweller or a free-range escapee from a federal detention facility.

The high desert commuter scanned the daunting landscape while his mind shifted to a stream of curious thoughts on those who came before. Long before. *What did this region look like a thousand years ago; nine thousand years ago? How different the plants and animals from the contemporary species? What did the ancient inhabitants of this hostile land look like? How did they endure the punishing cold and heat? What stories were shared about*

the stars, weather phenomena, animal behavior, and the enigmatic spirit world? What would be the mindset of someone connected to the earth in a way no modern human could relate to? And why does it matter? Random thoughts entertained by a restless mind with no acoustic stimulus other than the constant hum of a six-cylinder engine. A journey ripe for pondering divergent queries that bore no simple answers. Most encouraged other questions which prompted an interminable quest for a spark of illumination. The vast and intriguing terrain offered little respite for a fervid imagination. Especially when left to its own sense of navigation without numbers or conference. A territory not meant to be tread upon by the weak-minded or those in need of solid game plan.

Isolated byways offered time and space to ponder life's mysteries but the two thousand foot climb out of the valley demanded maximum attention. Wrestling snow chains on frozen asphalt at this late hour was to be avoided. So were gullies, cliff edges, and road-hugging bovines. The entire stretch of highway was notorious for the dreaded black-ice syndrome. Several canyons displayed the twisted frames and crushed cabs of vehicles that never made it home.

Izzy navigated the remote byway in a vintage Toyota truck on the final leg of a three hundred mile excursion to 'Junction' to procure various articles not available at the local mercantile. Distance didn't discourage the seeker of secluded passages. All-day town trips were a fact of life. The miles long and plentiful in a landscape with sparse human enterprise. Cloud parades and sporadic wildlife sightings encouraged a measure of visual relief from the monotone highway.

To say Hwy 141 was in disrepair would be a quantum understatement. The state road crew focused its maintenance efforts on busier thoroughfares. As a result of this unwavering neglect, the condition of ragged byway bordered on catastrophic. Potholes ruled. Dodging these abysmal lesions required sharp vision and quick reflexes. Vehicular contact at a reasonable velocity would dislodge critical bearings and tweak the front struts beyond drivability. Disappointment Valley was no place to address mechanical problems at any season.

There were numerous bare niches where the vintage macadam was obliterated and the stubble of

desiccated weed stems rose defiantly from the hard-pan. They resembled scorched palm-trees plastered askew on some post-apocalyptic atoll. During the monsoon season snakeweed and cheat grass gained purchase in the numerous scabs and cracks in the pavement. The deterioration of the chip-n-seal granted a virgin opportunity for nature's most hardy flora. The weed family.

The terrain changed dramatically on the lofty mesas that surrounded the valley. The abrupt elevation increase offered a climate more favorable for human habitation. Surrounded by a vast dry-land farm country, Izzy's cabin sat on a hillside a dozen miles west of Dove Creek, near the southern terminus of Hwy 141. Immense grain elevators indicated the source of commerce and incessant labor for the town's residents. Pinto beans, wheat, and invasive weeds dominated a landscape once covered with vast forests of juniper and pinon trees. After WWII, an army of dust-bowl refugees mounted colossal bulldozers that dragged battleship anchor chains and wrested every living plant in an area the size of Rhode Island. The steel behemoths left nothing standing in their path. Ancient trees, countless medicinal plants, and native grasses were ripped out of the ground and burned to make room for cultigens for the masses. The modern farmer's version of the ancient Mayan 'slash and burn' technique on a grand scale.

Surrounded by mountains and deep canyons, the vast plateau once hosted a legion of prehistoric hunting camps and small pueblos of diverse antiquity. All but a few were annihilated by polished steel and diesel. Hundreds of prehistoric sites were pulverized to clear a path for massive plows and combines. Nothing stands in the way of a bean farmer visualizing silos chockfull of profit.

The manicured agri-scape covered hundreds of square miles of the southwestern edge of the Colorado Plateau. It stretched into parts of Utah where Latter-Day farmers shared the same occupation. The dryland crops depended upon a healthy snow accumulation and monsoon rains to produce a bountiful harvest. On Sunday, farmers prayed for moisture. On Monday, cursed the lack of it.

The residents of Dove Creek were far too industrious to meddle in the affairs of other people. Izzy and his wife, Johnny Fey, admired that quality. The splendid isolation, absence of radon drenched soil, leaf blower fanatics and pot-luck devotees were a bonus but nonetheless, cabin life delivered hardships

and challenges on a systematic basis. Some were epic. Off-grid living on the fringe was not suited for those seeking conveniences or camaraderie through social gatherings.

Forty miles north of Dove Creek, lay a swath of desiccated terrain with zero human inhabitants. During the deep freeze of winter, Disappointment Valley appeared like a deserted empire tossed about and forsaken by reckless gods. A raw and demanding territory shrouded with lost dreams and abandoned hope. An untamed desert where men of consequence knew the bitter taste of hardship and defeat. The desolate valley catered to an unforgiving reality and total disregard for human enterprise. It stood defiant and glorious, an untamed no-man's land on the western frontier sprinkled with parched bones and rusted relics of desperate enterprises. A thing exquisite in its resistance to time itself.

Izzy Langlois did not tempt the hand of such a severe and judgmental land. He bore mnemonic scars of several near-death experiences too fresh to dismiss. The spicy fringe dweller harbored no desire to augment that list.

A handful of hardcore hikers explored the maze of canyons in fall and spring but the alkali flats baked in the summer and froze solid in the winter. But on this day, Mother Nature blessed the isolated valley with a gift of snow. The scant moisture was paramount for the survival of all desert lifeforms. But that benevolent gesture could quickly transform into a traveler's nightmare with a mechanical malfunction or slightest error in judgment. Only a paltry veil of scree separated a vehicle from a terminable plunge down the steep cliffside. The convoluted terrain devoured brake shoes and melted axle bearings. Runaway trucks seldom made it to the gravel flats.

Izzy regarded the entire Old Testament landscape and its erratic weather with bounteous respect. He endured ample vehicle excavations in conditions harsh enough to question the rationality of inhabiting such an onerous environment. But this rugged wilderness also offered a mixed bag of delicacies for the curious mind. The self-taught naturalist kept a keen eye focused on changes in the atmosphere ... the movement of animals; birds in particular. The slightest change in their behavior did not go unnoticed.

On this day the snow clouds held low, detached from one another, not blizzard material. But weather conditions could change rapidly in the high desert. A moody eminence the vigilant shutterbug held in tall regard. The high desert sky offered superb cloudscapes as well as birthing copious volumes of snow and mud that swallowed vehicles and left foolhardy drivers with a most venomous reality check.

Izzy enlisted no obligations other than breathing and grappling the routine chores required of off-grid living. Once he arrived at the cabin snow accumulation registered little concern unless a blizzard forced him to plot escape options. At this time of year, the ever-present chill factor necessitated tightly-wrapped layers of clothes impenetrable to the scathing wind. The barren fields offered zero resistance to this merciless force of nature, a fact of life the inhabitants accepted. The alternative was to join the motorized snow-birds who migrated to the warmer climate of the lower Sonoran desert. The Cajun ex-pat favored isolation on the tundra to the sardine-packed campgrounds of southern Arizona. Miles of uninhabited space suited the reclusive artist just fine.

On the downhill side of a narrow pass, an odd shape caught his eye. Off in the distance, a derelict hovel tucked under a copper-bearing cliff. The towering monolith stood alone like the prow of a ghost ship stranded in the bleak desert. Created from a tug-of-war of shifting tectonic plates, the draconian backdrop draped with earth hugging clouds, offered a fine photo opportunity. The archaic miner's shack rendered a sense of scale, and its deserted condition added a somber human element. Izzy packed a camera at all times backed with a finely tuned vision from decades of peering through a viewfinder. An inherent sense of composition flowed naturally as breathing. Alert eyes forever scanned the earth and sky for potential subjects. Very little eluded the veteran image-makers radar.

Izzy slowed the truck down and stopped in the middle of the highway. Nothing stirred but the hum of the engine. Not a soul appeared in any direction. He steadied himself on the open door frame and perused the shanty and surrounding terrain with binoculars. *Too far and too cold to hike in at this hour.*

Several caves dotted the cliff face with ashen hued tailings spilling down the talus slope. Guts of a mountain painfully disgorged by pick and shovel. Izzy knew volcanic extrusions often hid veins of copper,

gold or uranium beneath their crusty skin. The lure of mineral riches pushed men beyond the limits of physical and mental capabilities. It crushed spirits, ravaged the body and left the hopeful diggers crazy in the head as they gambled their lives on the far-flung possibility of a strike. The temptation of wealth is a harsh gesture bestowed upon man by a trickster god. One of his own making.

Location noted for future exploration. No G.P.S. needed. Izzy cruised down the highway, slow and mindful. There would always be another day to inspect the crumbling dregs of a miner's lost dream. He grabbed the steering wheel tight with both hands. Kept an eye on the deserted claim and the faded yellow lines on the two-track highway. The life of that hapless miner intrigued him. What he ate, things he witnessed and the lonely nights deprived of simple comforts and companionship. More than likely the secluded excavator prayed for a cigarette, a warm stove and a glimmer of pay dirt exhumed from the working end of a pickaxe and shovel. The hopeful sourdough toiled in solitude beneath the crusty scab of the earth miles from anything civilized. *Did he question his sanity after months of heinous labor in the dark worm-hole he created? Entertain meaningful conversations with himself? Or maybe he held counsel with the spirits of those lingering on the memory of a life sacrificed to an empty dream.* The miner's God was harsh, seldom forgave and rarely answered a prayer. Compared to a miner's life, the seven trials of Hercules appeared like a Greek holiday.

As the truck leaned into a gentle curve, the constant thinker noticed a charred circular shape a few feet from the pavement on the passenger's side. The scorched area swept clean of snow. A scattering of metallic sparkles glowed in the charcoal ring. Izzy pondered the blackened oddity with its odd scintillations. *Perhaps a catalytic converter on an oil field truck singed the ground.* He pressed the gas pedal and shifted focus back to the highway.

A quarter-mile past the mysterious circle he spotted a pair of crows perched in a lightning charred pinon tree. Dark eyes focused on the slow-moving truck. Izzy glanced at the feathered duo and honked the doleful horn twice. The unperturbed sentinels rustled not a feather. Every creature that survived in this part of the world knew the profit of energy conservation and disregarded the irrational acts of humans unless food or gun powder were involved.

As he topped a small hill a lone figure of some undiscernible species stood motionless on the edge of the road. The frail light and distance discouraged species identification.

Izzy eased off the gas pedal and coasted along in neutral. His sharp eyes zeroed in on the enigma stationed in the distance. At first glance, he presumed a pathetic cow scavenging the roadside for a morsel of dried snakeweed. A few hard-core stragglers always managed to evade fall round-up. Most renegade bovines froze to death by mid-winter or met their demise on the front end of an oil truck. The bumper crop nourished a ravenous assortment of carrion eaters including the crow sisters perched in the pinon tree.

Maybe it's Ed Abbey's moon-eyed horse come back to haunt me.

Within seconds, he discerned a motionless human figure. From the individual's height, he surmised a male. A few curious Daniel Boone synapses whispered, *Why a hitchhiker out here in the middle of nowhere this time of year? No one with good sense trekked this empty quarter during winter months unless they were on the run from the law.*

A warm, tingling sensation flowed through his palm as it gripped the shift lever. The hair on the back of his neck perked up like cat whiskers in the dark. *Something wasn't right.* His intuitive network lit up like a pinball machine dishing out bonus points. *Who could this bipedal anomaly be that disturbed his present reality in such a daring and puzzling manner?*