



CATALYST

Copyright ©2002 by Ross Richdale

Cover art by Barbara Quanbeck
<http://www.wordwrangler.com>

Electronically published in arrangement with the author

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Except for brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews, the reproduction of this work in whole or in part in any form by electronic or mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including printing, faxing, E-mail, or copying electronically, is forbidden without the permission of the author.

<http://www.ebookfiction.biz>

E-mail novels@ebookfiction.biz

Published by Atlantic Bridge Publishing

<http://www.atlanticbridge.net/publishing/catalyst.htm>

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues in this book are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

Renee Bonnett was scared, really scared. Her heart raced as another cloud of fine dust clouded her safety glasses, but she did not dare move her sweaty hands from the wall to wipe them clean.

Take slow deep breaths and relax, she advised herself. Yes, that was easy to say in the security of the small reception room of the national park service building. Why did she insist on avoiding the commercialized cave of Wyoming Bighorn Caverns for the unexplored Misty Depths Catacombs nearer the Montana border? Was she trying to prove something to herself again or had the name attracted her?

She swallowed, shook a strand of auburn hair aside, and turned her head. The light from the helmet's flashlight moved with her to cast an eerie beam along the wall. Half a dozen paces ahead, Sam, their Native American guide, turned and grinned. .

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Fine," she lied and attempted deep breathing.

"The roof gets lower, but this is as narrow as it goes," Sam continued.

That was all she needed.

The cave was barely six feet wide at this point, but one redeeming factor was the ceiling that towered into darkness above them and gave some feeling of space to relieve the claustrophobia. After an hour of narrow, twisting passages, Renee was ready to return to the main cavern, but the other three plodded relentlessly on.

"It gets to you a bit." A second male voice sounded from behind.

Renee turned, her flashlight picked up the speaker, and she smiled. This quiet guy, Lem she remembered his name was, had spoken little during their expedition, but when he did, his voice reassured. It was as if he knew she was anxious. He was third in line with a teenage girl whose name she'd forgotten, coming up in the rear.

"Yes," she replied. "I love the huge caverns with the stalactites and stalagmites, but these narrow passages..." Her voice trailed off.

"You're lucky," Lem said. "I'm so wide I reckon I'll be wedged like a cork in a bottle if it gets any narrower, while you'll stroll along as if it was High Street."

"Doubt it," she replied and had to chuckle. His bulky jacket, one with zip pockets everywhere, did make him look rotund.

His chatter helped her gain confidence as she concentrated on the next section. The cave twisted so much her companions were often out of sight with only their flashlight beams dancing along the walls beside her. Their heavy breathing and the crunch of footfalls provided the security she needed as she bowed her head to avoid hitting the limestone above.

"A short section on all fours is coming up." Sam's voice floated back, and Renee had to smile at Lem's audible sigh.

All fours.

Hell, it was slithering forward on one's stomach and worse, far worse, than anything yet encountered. She used elbows and knees to propel her body forward and shut her eyes and tried to imagine she was under the blue sky.

"This is the bit where it's so much easier for you," Lem's reassuring voice panted from behind. "I reckon I'd better take my jacket off."

His flashlight dropped back. Renee swallowed and wriggled on until the walls parted, the ceiling disappeared into darkness, and they could stand again. She accepted a fruit bar distributed by Sam and wiped her safety glasses.

"How are you, now?" Lem asked

"Not too bad, thanks," she replied with forced lightness. "That last bit was claustrophobic, though."

"I'm hot," Sam confessed and removed the backpack he was carrying. "The main cavern makes it all worthwhile. We can take a different route back. It's longer, but isn't such a squeeze."

"Now he tells us," Lem said with a chuckle.

The cavern may have been worth seeing, but Renee never reached it.

She was in the next narrow section when a distant rumble became a roar. The walls gyrated. Before her mind could comprehend what was happening the ceiling split open and a deluge of gray earth dropped in front of her eyes.

It was sheer terror. Flashlight beams twisted around and disappeared. In complete darkness, Renee felt gritty sludge grip her body. It was as if some giant was rubbing sandpaper down her body. The air filled with choking dust, stung her eyes, and she couldn't breathe.

Seconds later, another sensation pierced her petrified mind.

She was falling.

A hollow rasping scream that ricocheted from a dozen places was her own. She realized this was not a narrow passage but a massive open space.

There was no time for contemplation. The darkness spun, her head hit something hard, and her helmet banged pinched ears. The sensation of vertigo filled her mind, her stomach lurched, and dizziness disoriented everything. God, her limbs stung from gravel burns. A loud crack filled the air and excruciating pain shot through her body. Something was wrong.

After an eternity it seemed, she landed on something soft, heard a gasp, and realized there was a person beneath her.

More sensations.

The falling motion stopped, but she still slid on a pile of debris. Her flashlight and helmet had gone. Choking chalk dust filled her mouth. A guttural cough cleared this, but the particles continued to tickle her throat. Lem's silhouette slipped by in a pile of rubble with his flashlight lighting up a million dust particles. Beyond him, another flashlight jerked haphazardly.

At least she wasn't alone. Her leg hit something and she shrieked in anguish. But it was too painful; her mind could not cope and she slumped unconscious onto a cavern floor.

"Hi Renee," said the soft voice. "Can you hear me?"

Renee felt an arm around her shoulders and a cold moist object pressed to her lips. God, her mouth was like chalk. She sipped. Water shot into her mouth to send her into a spasm of coughing as she opened her eyes.

"Take it slowly, now," Lem said and held the plastic mug to her mouth again.

"What happened?" Renee gasped and attempted to sit up. A spasm of pain shot up her right side.

"Your leg is broken, I'm afraid," Lem said. "Otherwise, I think you're fine. It's good to have someone to talk to."

Renee pushed her hands back, and with Lem's help, managed to slide into a sitting position. She glanced around and saw millions of tiny blue pinpoints of light far above. Could they be

outside in the darkness? It was warm and still with Lem's helmet flashlight the only source of illumination.

"Where are we?" She gasped.

"A cavern. Those are glowworms above us."

"But how?"

"I'm not sure. When we were walking along the passage I heard a rumble and glanced up to see the ceiling coming down. I fell and just kept going. The floor wasn't there any longer."

"That's right. I remember seeing the ceiling collapse."

"Yeah." The man grinned and held out the mug of water. "We dropped twenty feet and slid a couple hundred more. Your leg slid between some rocks, I'd say. I heard a crack before you began sliding in a pile of debris. When we reached the bottom I saw it was broken. Both of you were out cold."

"Both of us? Who else is here?"

"Courtney, the youngster who was behind me. She was knocked out in the fall."

Renee muttered, "What about the guide?"

"Sam is nowhere around, so chances are he wasn't caught in the landslide. Our backpacks came with us and I found a coil of rope. Sam probably tossed it down for us to use and has gone back to get help. It'll be three hours at least before anybody can get back to us. We're a fair way down." Lem shrugged. "My biggest casualty is my jacket. I can't find it anywhere. Remember, I'd just taken it off. It's a pity. I had bits and pieces in my pockets."

Renee studied her companion for the first time when he stood and walked a few paces to examine the girl. Lem would be a few years older than her. He was clean-shaven with a five o'clock shadow across his tanned face. His dark hair receded, but like his weight, did not detract from his muscular appearance.

Lem glanced up. "It's the bump I'm worried about," he said in a soft voice as he unfastened the girl's helmet and placed it on the ground. "She got a real wallop on the head. The helmet absorbed most of the blow, but a bruise is appearing."

He held the long blonde hair up to show an egg-shaped bruise behind the left ear.

"Are you a doctor?" Renee asked.

"No such luck," Lem replied and chuckled. "I've done a couple first aid courses. That's about

the limit of my medical knowledge."

He placed his backpack under Courtney's head, rubbed her hands, and gave her a gentle shake. Apart from a slight moan, there was no reaction, so he covered her with a jacket and turned back to Renee.

"At least it's warm in here," she said.

"These deep caves usually are," Lem commented. "It could be a hundred degrees outside or freezing below, but in here it stays about seventy all year round."

Their eyes linked and they both smiled.

Renee coughed, grimaced in pain, and looked past her companions. Three stalagmites stood like Roman columns a few feet away. Beyond was darkness with no sign whatsoever of the hole they'd fallen through. In the opposite direction, the glowworms seemed a hundred miles away. She pushed her good leg through loose white dust and wriggled her bottom into a more comfortable position.

"Well, I'd rather be here than in that narrow tunnel," Lem said. He frowned at Renee's dysfunctional leg. "I'll get us something to eat. I'm sure it's about time we got stuck into those prepackaged lunches we were given."

"No thanks," Renee answered. "I doubt if my stomach could handle anything at the moment, but I wouldn't mind more to drink."

"Sure," Lem replied. "Hot or cold? There's a thermos bottle of coffee."

"Coffee please, but what about yourself? Did you get hurt during your fall?"

"Abrasions and bruises. Nothing worse. I guess I was lucky." He stood up. "I'll get the coffee."

Two hours turned into three and then into four, but Lem's constant prattle kept Renee optimistic. Their younger companion woke to a semidelirious state and was violently ill. Though open, the girl's eyes rolled into her head and she did not respond to Renee's or Lem's voices. After jerking in a spasm she lapsed back into unconsciousness.

"Concussion," Lem muttered as he felt the girl's pulse. "I think she's over the worst, though."

Renee nodded. "Poor kid. I hope Sam arrives back soon."

Though she didn't want to burden Lem by complaining she didn't feel good. Her body ached

and her head thumped in a terrible headache.

Lem glanced at her and frowned. "I'll get you more painkillers," he whispered.

"More?"

Lem reddened in the glare of the flashlight. "I added a dose to that water I gave you," he admitted. "Some object to pills, but you weren't in a better state than Courtney is now so I..." He gave a shrug.

"I don't have any hang-ups," Renee said. "Well, no health ones. If it helps to relieve the pain, I'm all for it."

She appreciated this considerate man and was curious about him. In the hours they were together he'd said nothing about his personal life. They'd talked about caves, tourism, a bit on current events, but nothing personal.

"Do you mind if I turn the light out?" Lem's voice interrupted her thoughts. "It might pay to conserve power."

"Sure, go ahead."

Nothing else was said, but Lem's voice gave her the impression he was concerned about the time that had gone by. Blackness soon became gray with the closer cave walls visible. Overhead, the number of tiny pins of blue glowworm light multiplied by the minute like a gigantic cathedral beneath the heavens. Accompanying the view was complete silence, seldom noticed on the surface with the usual wind, insects, birds and noises of human habitation.

"It's beautiful," she murmured. "I never realized there were so many glowworms."

"It is," came the reply. "They respond to noise, you know. Make a loud sound and they switch off. They're one of the few sources of cold light in our world."

When Renee forced her eyes open her headache had gone and her damaged leg felt numb rather than painful. The sound of sighing reached her ears. She listened and heard gentle snores and silence before the noise began again. Lem was a lump in the darkness a few feet away, while elsewhere only the familiar glowworms and the faint outline of the cave wall could be seen.

"Oh, shoot," muttered a female voice.

Renee forced herself into a sitting position and strained her eyes. "Courtney?"

The teenager leapt around in fright and two blue eyes focused on her. She was of average build

with a loose-fitting sweater and jeans that would have hidden her femininity if it weren't for the shoulder-length blonde hair. Light make-up and well-manicured fingernails gave the impression of a young person who cared for her appearance.

"I need to get to the toilet, but with Lem here?"

"There's a trowel with our gear. Go and dig a hole. A toilet roll is in my backpack."

"Thanks," the teenager replied with a tone that sounded anything but thankful. She stood, found the necessary commodities, and disappeared into the darkness.

Renee grinned, but her expression changed to a frown after she glanced at her watch. It was almost midnight. The accident had happened nine hours before. Why hadn't a rescue team arrived? She forced herself into a standing position to relieve cramps and was about to look for something to munch when the girl returned with a sheepish expression.

"I'm sorry I growled, Renee," she said. "You were asleep earlier when Lem explained what had happen. God, I was sick as a dog, but he just chatted away." She looked at Renee's misshapen leg. "Look, relax. I'll help. What do you want?"

"No, it's okay," Renee replied. "I need to restore my circulation, that's all."

Courtney opened the backpacks and found two apples, a fruit bar and a couple boxes of raisins. She smiled, handed half the food to Renee, sat down and bit into the apple. "Damn mess we're in, isn't it?"

"The rescuers will be here soon."

"You hope. I reckon if they were going to come they'd be here now."

"They'll come. Even if Sam didn't get to the surface, our names are registered at the park headquarters."

"Pity," the girl whispered.

Renee stared at the newcomer with concern. "What do you mean?"

"Oh nothing. It came out wrong. For Lem and your sakes, I hope they find us." She turned to glance at the sleeping man. "For someone his age, he's a great guy, isn't he?"

Courtney's cynical remarks did not go unnoticed, but Renee decided not to press for an explanation. "Yes, Lem couldn't have been more helpful," she replied. "I like him too, but tell me, how are you?"

"Better now, thanks. That's if I don't count the woozy stomach, sore throat and thumping

head." The teenager studied Renee. "Are you a teacher? You sound like one."

"No." Renee said with a laugh. "A lawyer, actually."

"Young for that caper, aren't you? The only young lawyers I know are on TV programs. In real life they're all old farts."

"Well, I just graduated two years ago, and I'm a junior assistant with a law firm in a town north of Seattle."

"Never been out there," Courtney continued. "This is as far west as I've ever been."

"So where's your hometown?"

"Nowhere," the girl retorted. "I was in Florida before I decided to try it here. I was told smaller places are better for jobs."

"I see," Renee replied. "And have you got one?"

"Yeah, at a local motel." She shrugged. "The pay's lousy, but at least I'm treated like a person here and get a cabin to live in. When I'm not working I like to get out into the wilderness." She gave a slight grin. "This is my first time in a cave."

Renee frowned. Courtney was an enigma, no more than eighteen, and in spite of her efforts to cover it, had an educated quality to her voice. Why wasn't she graduating from high school and moving on to college instead of doing low paid manual labor?

"You disapprove?" Courtney said with a glare.

"No. Curious, that's all. I'm sorry to sound presumptuous, but I wonder why you seem alone doing a manual job. All your mannerisms point to a well-educated young lady."

"That obvious, is it?"

Renee nodded

"And what do you damn know about life?" The girl's voice rose an octave.

Renee sighed. "As I said, I'm sorry Courtney. What you're doing is none of my business."

"Yeah," Courtney turned away. "That's the trouble in this country."

"What's that?"

"Nobody cares about anything. If I'd been killed today, I'd rank half an inch on page thirty-

two of the local paper. However, if I shot a couple tourists in the process, I'd be a headline across the world. Only the nuts are noticed today."

"Possibly, but does it matter what others think? It's what you are that's important."

"To whom?"

"Yourself, your friends, and family."

"They don't care," the girl whispered.

"So you had trouble at home?" Renee replied tenderly.

"Yeah, you could say that." She turned and walked off into the gloom.

Renee stared into the darkness and cursed the broken leg.

'Don't worry.' Lem's voice interrupted her thoughts. "She sounds like a typical strung out teenager."

Renee swung around. "Hi Lem. I thought you were asleep. Did you hear our conversation?"

"Bits. I'll go after her. Be back in a moment."

Lem stood, brushed himself off and followed the teenager. His flashlight caught a glimpse of her disappearing silhouette, and he had to increase his pace to catch up.

"Hold it, Courtney," he said softly. "You can easily get lost in here. Everything looks the same." He laid a hand on her shoulder.

The girl's reaction was unexpected. "Don't you touch me," she screamed and slung her shoulder sideways away from his hand. "Don't you ever touch me." She stopped and turned to show a tear-strained face with wide apprehensive eyes. Tight lips and a quivering chin portrayed fear rather than anger.

"I'm sorry," Lem muttered. "I had no intention..."

"No, of course not." The girl's voice reeked sarcasm. "Damn males are all the same."

Lem flushed. "That was not my intention. Renee was concerned and I offered to come after you, that's all." He hesitated. "It seems you've had a bad time with men, but I assure you we aren't all like that."

Courtney's eyes held his for a second before glancing away. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "You were so kind earlier. It's nothing to do with you. It's just..." She stopped again and gave a glimpse of a smile. "Oh hell, I've just had a hard time, that's all."

"Well, come back. We need to stick together. Stalking off and getting lost won't help."

"I know," Courtney said. "Come on. It's poor Renee with her broken leg that needs our company. At least we can walk out, if necessary."

She headed back to where Renee's flashlight could be seen in the distance. Lem watched for a moment, shrugged and followed.

CHAPTER TWO

Renee jerked awake and tried to orientate herself. Pain, like a white-hot poker, burst through her body. She moved to relieve it, but only succeeded in bumping her leg. More excruciating pain made her gasp and squint tears of agony. Her eyes opened, saw one flashlight beam glowing, and she remembered what had happened.

"Here, have a sip. I put an aspirin in it," the young, female voice said. She felt cold plastic pressed to her lips. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more I can do." What was her name? Courtney, that was it.

Renee struggled into a sitting position, felt a guiding arm behind her back, and grimaced. "Thank's Courtney. What time is it?"

"Twenty past eight in the morning. We slept for quite a while. Lem's gone off to inspect the hole we fell through. He never said anything, but I think he's worried." The girl pouted in the dull light. "I am, too."

Renee realized her stomach rumbled and she could smell food.

"We have a small gas cooker and I've boiled that high energy stuff we had in our supplies. It looks worse than boarding school porridge, but it's hot and should fill a hole," Courtney said as if she'd read Renee's mind.

The older woman grinned. "You're an angel." She maneuvered herself up further so she could see the surroundings. Everything beyond the flashlight beam was darkness punctuated by light gray stalagmites and the million glowworms overhead. The air was warm with a slight dusty smell.

Courtney laughed. "I've been called a few things in the last few months but never an angel. Get this into you."

Renee took the food and the pair sat in silence while they ate before she broke the silence. "So you know all about boarding school meals?"

"Yeah. I was at Miss Shelton's Academy. Heard of it?"

Renee shook her head.

"It's a private girls' school in New Hampshire, grand and filled with girls whose parents have money but don't want kids hindering their social lives. I boarded there three long years." She shrugged and slurped her broth. "Well, almost, I left in the last term of my senior year."

"And were your parents like that?"

"Like what?" Courtney retorted with a defensive ring in her voice.

"Lots of money but don't want children hindering their social lives."

"Yeah, I guess," she whispered. "I didn't think they were until that last day of the winter term when it all came out."

"If you want to talk about it, I'd like to listen."

"Why not? We aren't going anywhere. It's no great story, but something that always happens to somebody else. When it hits you it becomes quite a shock."

"I know the feeling, but go on, Courtney."

The youngster glanced up from her bowl, gave a shrug and began her story.

The afternoon of the last day of the winter term was an anticlimax. Easter and two weeks of glorious vacation lay ahead, but Courtney was bored. Almost everyone had left after classes were over at noon, and it was almost two-thirty with only a handful of students around.

"Why didn't you take the bus to Manchester, Courtney?" Sada Manoharan asked.

"Mom and Daddy always arrive and pick me up," Courtney replied. "They're usually early. Last year Daddy wandered into our final assembly just after ten as if he owned the place. I could have shrivelled up."

"Perhaps their car broke down." Sada suggested.

"Could be. Anyhow, what are you doing over the next two weeks?" She continued talking as the pair walked towards the junior students' common room.

A modern automobile drove in the long curving drive. Courtney glanced back. No, it wasn't her parents' metallic green BMW. She followed Sada when a horn tooted and a familiar voice called out. "Courtney, honey. Sorry we're late, but we're here, now."

It was her mother, but why the different car? The girl frowned. Daddy always drove BMWs. She said a brief goodbye to Sada and stepped towards the vehicle that stopped a few yards away.

Something else was different. Mom was the same, but it wasn't Daddy driving the car.

Lizzie Howlett stepped out and rushed to her daughter. "Selwyn knew a shortcut," she said, "but we became lost on one of those little back roads. Silly man." Her face clouded. "You know about Selwyn, honey. I wrote you about him. Remember?"

"Where's Daddy?" Courtney retorted. It was true. Her mother had written about problems with Daddy. They were always fighting, but why was she with this other man? She remembered she had refused to finish reading the letter.

"You never answered my letter," Lizzie said. "I explained everything."

"But never damn rang, Mom," Courtney whispered. "You could have rung or called to see me. Hell, the school isn't far from home."

"I was in England until a week back, honey, and this last week..." Lizzie sighed and stared into Courtney's eyes. "Your father left us, Courtney. I told you. He's still in England and not coming back."

Courtney glared at the immaculately dressed woman, still not forty, with slim figure and short-cropped brown hair, the businesswoman who had balanced a career and family life, her mom. "Daddy always comes back," she said.

"No, not this time, honey. We're finished, but come and meet Selwyn Benson. I know you'll like him."

"Yeah, sure," Courtney muttered and swung away. Daddy was gone without contacting her and her mother had a fancy man.

"Hello Courtney," interrupted a husky voice. "I've heard so much about you. Your mother hardly stops speaking of all the fine things you've been doing."

Selwyn looked a typical businessman, slightly overweight, clean-shaven with gray receding hair. If anything, he'd be older than Daddy and certainly wasn't as fit.

"She doesn't know," Courtney retorted. "She hasn't been near me since Christmas. She never came to parent interviews, and I bet she never read my report. Too damn busy in England, no doubt." Her eyes touched the man's for the first time. "Perhaps it was the south of France in the sunshine."

"Courtney," her mother said in the voice she used when suppressed anger was about to bounce out. "You can at least be civil to Selwyn. He didn't have to come but offered to drive me here. He wanted to meet you."

"Where's the BMW, Mom?" Courtney turned away from the man.

"Your father sold it," Lizzie sighed.

"And what else did he do, Mom?"

"Very little. Everything is the same at home."

"I see and where's home?"

"I haven't moved, Courtney. Selwyn joined me, that's all."

More emotions flooded Courtney's mind. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry, to scream nobody could replace Daddy, to run into the common room and refuse to budge, or to tell the man he had no right to take Daddy's place. In the end she glanced back at Selwyn and saw an unexpected expression. The man averted his gaze and looked hurt, his lips a thin line and eyes downcast.

"Thank you for coming to pick me up, Selwyn," Courtney whispered. "I hate traveling in the bus. I've a load of stuff to pile in, so I'm glad you have a big car. Drive to the dormitory block. I'll meet you there."

"So this Selwyn was the trouble?" Renee said.

"Not really. In some ways, I felt sorry for the guy. I think Mom was leading him on. It's his kids that drove me crazy. He had three, two stuck up girls, fourteen and twelve, and their little brother. He was okay."

"So what was wrong?"

"Mom. She changed. It was as if Selwyn's kids were perfect and I was the visitor. The fourteen-year-old was a little bitch. We fought all the time, but Mom never saw my view. Laura, that was her name, stole my make-up and lied through the teeth about everything, but it was me Mom blamed. Anyhow, I survived the vacation, and for the first time looked forward to returning to school." Courtney stared into the darkness. "I lasted only a month though."

"I see."

"Yeah, I stuffed that one up, too"

"Come on, Courtney," Kathleen Anderson said. "You're the one who always said we should stick together."

"I know," Courtney replied. "It sounds fun, but what if we're caught?"

"Well, if you're going to take that attitude," Brigitte Somerville retorted, "you'll end up doing nothing in your life. We might as well be in a convent."

Sada, the fourth girl present in the dorm, sighed and watched while Kathleen tried to persuade their reluctant friend to accompany them.

"That's the trouble," Kathleen said. "It's as bad as any convent. If they were a bit more liberal around this place we wouldn't have to sneak out." She gazed at her friend. "Come on, it's Saturday night. Half the staff are off duty and we'll be back before lights out at midnight."

"Okay, girls." Courtney relented.

"Right," laughed Kathleen. She ran to her wardrobe and took out her jeans and white sweater. "I've got some make-up, too." She giggled. "Want to use some?"

"Why not?" said Brigitte.

Fifteen minutes later the four girls sneaked down the back stairs to Kathleen's Honda Civic coupe. Kathleen reversed onto the street, screeched around, and accelerated towards Manchester. Forty-five minutes later they were in a seedy looking club near the town center. Courtney shivered. She didn't like the look of the place one bit but had to be confident in front of her friends.

"Hi, you girls," said a formidable looking character at the door. "Are you all eighteen?"

Courtney gave a mental sigh of relief. If they weren't allowed in she could suggest they go to a movie.

"Yeah, sure," Kathleen replied and grinned at her friends. None of them were and Sada, in particular, looked even younger.

Courtney's relief was only momentary when the doorman shrugged. "No drugs allowed," he said and opened the glass door.

Afterwards, Courtney had little recollection, only the stink of sweaty bodies and cigarette smoke, flashing colored lights, and the rock band. The group pounded out at full decibels and the girls were bumped and shoved as too many people tried to enjoy themselves in too small an area.

Kathleen handed Courtney a small pink drink and giggled. "It's only pink punch. There's nothing in it."

However, something was wrong. The drink made Courtney lightheaded, not in a bad way, but enough to make her throw her previous doubts aside and enjoy herself. She pulsed to the beat when a young guy ambled up to her.

"Howdy," he muttered in a slurred voice. "Me name's Gary. Want'ta dance?"

"Sure." In her intoxicated state he seemed quite a hunk.

Pulsing colored lights, loud music, and a crush of sweaty bodies mixed. The dancing became energetic. Time was a blur. Courtney's eyes caught her watch. My God, it was almost midnight. She was in the ladies' room and had vomited in the toilet. In a mild panic, she tore out of the room right into Sada.

"Are you all right, Courtney?" the girl asked. "We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Better now," Courtney replied.

"Have you seen Kathleen?" Sada continued. "We have to go."

Courtney bit her lip and looked around the crowded room. Darkness intercepted by flashing blue and red lights made the dancing bodies mere silhouettes against a haze of smoke and gloom. It was difficult to recognize anything.

"We lost you both," Sada explained. "It's so late we decided to get the Honda. Brigitte has it out front. I said I'd come in and find you. Hurry! You've been missing for ages." Courtney followed her friend around the room.

It took elbowing and squeezing, but they found their friend giggling and gyrating in the middle

of the floor. She seemed oblivious to everything.

"We're going," Sada ordered as she grabbed her friend's arm and propelled her towards the door.

"Hi guys," Kathleen yelled. "One more dance?"

"No," Sada hissed. "We're going. Brigitte has the Honda out front."

"Spoil sports," Kathleen muttered. She allowed herself to be guided out the exit.

Brigitte saw them approach, jumped out of the driver's seat and folded it down, so Sada and Courtney could crawl through into the back.

"I'll drive," Kathleen ordered. As soon as Brigitte was seated in the front passenger seat, she accelerated down the city streets towards I-93.

"Don't worry," she said cheerfully. "I'll get us back to school."

"It's after curfew," Courtney wailed.

Kathleen turned her head. "I know," she retorted, "but what else could we do? It's not my fault you got yourself lost. We couldn't just leave you."

"Me?" Courtney said. "I wasn't lost. You were."

"Well, whatever."

"It'll be okay," Sada said. Her calm voice soothed the others. "We can go up the back stairs."

"We'll be home before lock out," Kathleen said as she turned onto the interstate. She grinned and accelerated above the speed limit. Within seconds blue and red lights flashed in the rear view mirror, and a siren sounded. Kathleen's eyes turned wide in panic and she sped up.

"Stop!" screamed Courtney. She grabbed the girl's shoulders. "For God's sake Kathleen, stop."

The police car kept pace in an adjacent lane. "Will the driver of the Honda please pull to the curb," a loudspeaker crackled through the night air.

"We'll lose him here," screamed Kathleen as they flashed under the large sign indicating an exit.

Whether it was the speed, the alcohol, or Kathleen's inexperience, nobody ever found out, but the Honda did not complete the turn. Courtney's mind blurred with vague memories of a

screech of brakes and flashing lights before she blacked out.

A flashlight shone in her eyes and screaming reached her ears. It sounded like Kathleen. Courtney struggled to move, but throbbing pain cut through her mind and she found it difficult to breathe.

"Hello, there young lady," said a kind voice. "Just lie still. We'll get you out soon. The seat belt saved you." The highway patrol officer turned. "We need help here. There's a lot of blood."

Courtney lost consciousness again.

When she woke she found herself on a stretcher with a paramedic holding a satchel of clear liquid above her head. The Honda looked wrecked with the far side squashed in against a concrete wall. Skid marks gouged deep ruts across a grass strip and steam rose from the engine.

One other stretcher was beside her. It was Kathleen. Their eyes met and the other girl burst into sobs and reached out. Courtney found a cold limp hand to squeeze and wondered where the other two were.

"Sada and Brigitte were killed that day," Courtney whispered. "A concrete support beam crushed their side of the car and they never had a chance. Kathleen was hardly hurt and I was cut up a bit."

"I'm sorry." Renee's eyes were filled with compassion. "Have you kept in touch with Kathleen?"

"Yeah," Courtney replied and gave a little grimace. "I wish I hadn't."

"So what happened next?"

"I was suspended for a week. Mom had a blazing row with the principal, withdrew me from the school, and I went to the state school at home. It didn't work out though. Laura was a freshman at the same school and caused trouble. Mom and I couldn't get on, so one day I walked out." Courtney stared through the darkness at her companion. "I thought that would solve my problems, but I was wrong. My God, was I wrong."

CHAPTER THREE

Lem stopped, wiped a hand across his perspiring brow, and searched. The flashlight beam showed an almost vertical section of loose rock above him. He grunted. It would be impossible to go higher. Far below, one tiny flashlight showed where the other two were, while overhead the blue glowworms sparkled across the ceiling. A faint movement of cooler air tumbled from the tunnel above and stirred particles of dust in the limestone. Lem coughed and made one last inspection across the face before returning to the others.

The slip on the far side was steeper and unstable. He turned and was about to retrace his steps when the flashlight beam caught something orange. It appeared to be clothing. Lem frowned and made his way forward. When the area lit up his casual interest focused.

Lying with one arm and his head out of the rubble was their guide. His head tilted back at a grotesque angle and open eyes bulged from a ghostly face.

"Sam." Lem gasped and scrambled through the loose soil.

He reached the body in seconds. Sam was dead, and by the look of the pallid, gray skin, had been since they'd slipped. Lem sighed, pulled the jacket from the debris and laid it across Sam's face.

"Sorry, Sam," he whispered. "You did not deserve this."

He squeezed the stiff arm and made his way back.

"It's bad news, I'm afraid," Lem said to the others. "Our guide never made it."

Courtney sucked on a bottom lip before turning and reaching in the backpack. She took out three fruit bars and handed them around. "So what're our chances, now?"

"Probably no different. Sam's death explains the longer wait, that's all. We'll be found, I guarantee it."

"And did you find a way out?"

"I'm afraid not. There's a sheer cliff and loose stuff everywhere. If we try to reach the upper cave we could bring the lot down on top of us."

"So what will that rescue team do when they arrive?" Courtney's voice sharpened.

"They'll have equipment," Renee cut in. "There may be a different way in. I'm sure there'll be experts who know what they're doing."

"Like Sam."

Lem glanced at Renee and raised an eyebrow.

"Courtney was telling me a little about herself," Renee said. "I'm keen to hear what happened, if you don't mind listening."

"Not at all," Lem replied. It was obvious she wanted to get the girl's mind off their situation. "And what about yourself?"

"Yeah," the teenager said. "You've told us nothing. Why're you here, right now?"

"I slipped down this whopping great hole," Renee said.

"I know that," Courtney retorted. "You know what I mean."

"Sure. I'll just bore you both, I'm afraid."

"Try us," Lem replied.

"Well, I'm a junior lawyer, glorified secretary, chief bottle washer and pen pusher, really." She gave a little laugh, but there was a touch of bitterness in the sound. "Well, key pusher in front of a computer monitor, it is."

"And I'm sure very talented," Lem said.

"Maybe, if I'm ever given a chance to try."

"So the old bastards rule the roost where you work, too," Courtney added.

"Not really. The old bastard, as you call it, is a woman in her thirties who succeeds in making everyone around her feel inferior, but damned if I'm going to grovel."

"Good for you, Renee," Lem said. "Somehow, I can't imagine anyone getting the better of you."

"No." She sighed. "But it isn't easy, you know."

It was ten to five when Annette Usborne placed the twenty-page document on Renee's desk and fixed her steely eyes on the younger woman. "The layout of this will for Mrs. Stein is incorrect. You know we indent paragraphs."

Renee swore under her breath and glowered at the junior partner. "It is the legal standard layout of wills," she explained. "Modern procedures do not indent paragraphs but double-space them instead."

"That may very well be," Annette continued, "but in our firm..."

"Then get Lois or one of the secretaries to do it," retorted Renee. "I'm busy at the moment." This was a small matter, but the constant pinpricking over the last six months was getting to her.

"She's gone home," hissed the other woman. "I agreed to take the will for Mrs. Stein to sign this evening. She is one of our most valued clients, you know."

Normally, Renee would have grimaced, taken the document and redone it. This time she stopped and turned to the immaculately dressed woman standing by her desk. "Then do it yourself, Annette."

"Why of all the..." Usborne began.

"I am not a secretary or typist," Renee replied in a controlled voice. "I am a qualified lawyer. If you are so concerned about changing modern layout, I feel sorry for you."

Annette Usborne's face turned white with anger and her jutting chin shook when William Usborne Senior walked into the open office. Annette's father was in his mid-sixties, prim and of the old school. He was, though, scrupulously fair, and in Renee's eyes, far more genuine than either his daughter or son, William Junior. Unfortunately, the rumors were that the elder William would retire at the end of the year.

"Trouble?" he asked and raised his bushy gray eyebrows.

"Look at this, Dad," Annette retorted and handed the will to her father.

William Senior took the document and turned to Renee. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

The elderly man sat in the seat for Renee's clients and took reading glasses from his top suit pocket. He read every word of the document, while his daughter glowered and Renee sat tight-lipped in anticipation.

"You did well," he said when he reached the end. "Old Clara was adamant her eldest daughter

would receive nothing in her estate. How did you talk her around, Renee?"

"I told her if she cut Gloria out the will could be contested in family court, and there was a high chance the action would be successful. I had to show her the findings of several court actions to convince her."

"But, Daddy..."

"Oh hush up, Annette."

"But the layout."

The old man glanced back at the sheets. "It's different than our usual format, I must admit," he said. "But I like it. I'm sure old Clara will be able to follow it with ease." He looked at Renee. "I like the terminology you use, Renee. Much superior to the flowery language usually put up with, isn't it?" He chuckled, stood and turned to Annette. "Now what was the disagreement?"

"Nothing."

"Problems from your side?" he continued as he turned to Renee.

"Not really," she said in a low voice. "Annette didn't agree with the layout, that's all."

"Didn't she?" William Senior replied. He frowned at his daughter and walked out.

The junior partner stood, red-faced and grim, and waited for Renee to speak. Instead the younger woman looked up. "If you're really that concerned, I'll redo it before I go home, Annette. It's all on memory so will take only a few moments to alter."

Silence reigned while the pair watched each other and waited for a first reaction.

"No, it doesn't matter," Annette replied in a whisper. "As Dad said, I'm sure Mrs. Stein won't notice the difference. Have a good evening, Renee."

She turned and strutted out.

As Renee drove north on I-5 from Mount Vernon, the small city where she worked, her mind relived the situation.

"Damn woman," she muttered as she headed inland up the Shagit Valley. This latest episode was a pyrrhic victory with Annette now openly hostile. William Senior was an enigma. He had never helped her before and rarely said more than the casual greeting on most days. A couple weeks earlier he'd forgotten her name and referred to her as Jennifer, a girl in the typing

pool.

It was after six when she arrived home at the farmhouse she shared with her father. She parked in the barn, spent a couple moments talking to Zona, the dog, and walked inside. The modern open-space kitchen smelt of a cooking roast and a late middle-aged man glanced back from stove to smile.

"Hello, Renee," he said. "Was today any better?"

"Different, Dad," she replied and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Old William stood up for me. Mind you, Annette isn't going to improve." She sighed. "It's as if she purposely finds fault in everything I do."

"She's envious, perhaps even jealous, sweetheart," Jack Bonnett said in a low voice. He shut the oven door and limped to Renee. She glanced up with empathy in her eyes. Dad tried hard to lead a normal life, but since the stroke last year that paralyzed his left side, he found it difficult.

"Jealous of me, Dad? But why?"

"You're young with higher qualifications than her. She's an old maid with little to look forward to except the silly firm and rows with her lazy brother."

Renee frowned and leaned forward. "How do you know, Dad? I never told you anything about William Junior."

"You didn't have to," Jack replied. "Not after that staff party a few months back. I know the guy made a pass at you."

Renee flushed. "But how?"

Jack Bonnett smiled that half smile caused by partly immobile lips. "I also know you turned him down flat and came home early. I wondered what brought on the tears that evening."

"The sod has a young wife and two kids," Renee retorted. She stopped and frowned. "Have you been spying on me, Dad?"

"Not at all." Jack changed the topic. "Will you take the roast out of the oven, sweetheart? I'd hate to drop it."

Renee glanced at the beautifully cooked meal, grabbed the oven gloves, took the steaming food, and set it on the stovetop. "You've done enough, Dad. Sit down and I'll serve it."

Jack sat in the chair his daughter vacated. "But I enjoy doing it."

He switched his attention to the news on a small television in the corner, while Renee served two generous portions.

Jack's eating was mainly one-handed, but through sheer willpower, he managed movement on his paralyzed side and insisted on holding a knife between the curled fingers.

"Can I cut your meat, Dad?"

Jack glanced up and whispered, "Thanks, sweetheart." He used to argue and attempt the impossible himself, but since accepting his disability, he had made better progress. A few weeks earlier he would have been unable to open the oven door, let alone roast a meal.

As they ate he began to talk. "I've never really liked those business clubs, too snobbish for me, but lately I've found I enjoy the company of old guys like myself at The Puget Sound Club in Mount Vernon. You know, we have a few beers, play cards..."

"I'm pleased. I'm glad you've gotten into the habit of going every Wednesday. That's what you need, rather than becoming a hermit out here on the farm." She stopped and noticed her father's coy expression. "Okay, what have you done, Dad?"

"I was looking through the club's register a few weeks ago and noticed William Usborne Senior was a member. I introduced myself and let the old guy beat me at cribbage. Since then we've become quite good friends. He plays lousy cards, though."

"Dad," Renee sputtered. "What did you say?"

"Not a lot. I merely mentioned I was thinking of transferring all my legal affairs to his firm because my daughter worked there. Later I added I'd changed my mind, since she was going to leave because she was under utilized. It was a pity their firm would lose someone of your high qualifications and..."

"Dad."

"Come now, Renee." Jack turned serious. "There's little I can do for you now. Let your old Dad help you this way."

"Oh Dad, you are the limit."

The young lawyer reached over and hugged her father. He held her with his one good arm. "Your mom would have been proud of you, sweetheart," he whispered. "I am too, so don't you let those young upstarts grind you down. It will come right, I assure you."

Renee gulped. Her father still talked of her mother even though she'd died a decade earlier. "Thanks, Dad."

"So that's really it," Renee said to her two companions.

"And you're still with the firm?" Lem asked.

"Yes." Renee sighed. "Mind you, Old William decided not to retire and makes the place bearable. Also, I'm doing some court work now, mainly civil cases."

"And the brother who made that pass at you?" Courtney cut in.

"He's still there but leaves me alone. The last I heard he was having a fling with one of the secretaries. I feel sorry for his wife. She's quiet and unassuming."

"And your dad?" Lem asked.

"He's at home," Renee said. "Poor Dad. He was such an active person. I think he's lonely." She glanced up. "He's the reason I'm here. During my annual leave, I decided to potter around the farm, but Dad insisted I have a real holiday, as he called it. So here I am, lying in a cave hundreds of feet under a mountain with a busted leg. I must say, I enjoy the company. It's strange, but I feel as if I've known you both for years, not just a few hours."

"Emergencies can do that," Lem said. "I feel the same."

"Time is funny," Courtney whispered. She stood and brushed her dusty clothes off. "My God, I'm getting all sentimental now. The cave must be getting to me."

"Probably," said Renee. She caught Lem's eyes and smiled.

Their meal was sparse, but nobody complained. Even worse was the dwindling supply of water. They would run out within a day, so decisions had to be made. Courtney was all for trying to find a way out, but her spontaneity diminished when Lem asked what direction they should take. They were in the center of a huge area with little or no distinguishing features. The slip that appeared as a blot of blackness without glowworms was their only link with the outside world.

"What do we do?" Courtney asked pessimistically. "Nobody is coming now. If they were, they'd be here. It's up to us."

"You two go," Renee said. "There might be a way out. If you find it, you can send someone back for me."

"No," Lem replied. "If we go, we all go."

Courtney stared at Lem, then Renee. "Funny, I thought you might say that."

"Don't you agree?" Lem replied.

The teenager rubbed a hand along her face and sighed. "In the last few months I found I could trust nobody. Nobody cared about me. I was one of a hundred. If I walked away, someone would jump into the space I left, but here..." She gave a tiny smile. "Let's say, I wouldn't want to be the person all alone down here, and I don't think Renee should be left either."

"Thanks Courtney," Renee said. "If it wasn't for my leg, I'd be the first one walking out."

"So we wait a little longer." Lem said.

"How about morning?" Courtney suggested. "If nobody is here by nine, we hitch Renee on our backs and walk out. Okay?"

Lem glanced at Renee. She nodded.

"Okay," he said and glanced at his watch. It was after seven in the evening.

Thank you for downloading this novel .We hope you enjoyed the first three chapters.

Catalyst can be purchased for \$US5:00 from the publisher Atlantic Bridge Publishing.

<http://www.atlanticbridge.net/publishing/catalyst.htm>

Visit Ross Richdale's site for info on his eighteen novels

<http://www.ebookfiction.biz>