

FROM

## *Descent*

BY TIM JOHNSTON



**T**he phone in his hand was ringing. For how long? He read the screen with illogical dread.

“It’s Sean,” he said, and his wife said nothing.

THEY’D LEFT THE ASPENS and stepped into a high, intense sunlight, their shadows thrown back on the blacktop. The morning had burned away. The air was sere and smelled of weeping sap and of the brown, desiccated needles. They’d unfolded the map and tried to get their bearings. In a moment, and for the first time that day, they heard an engine, and then a gaining thump-beat of music, and above them at the curve there banked into view a truck, or a jeep, or something in between, some mountain breed they didn’t know, and it was coming and Caitlin said, “Get over here,” and Sean crabwalked himself and the bike into the scrub growth and wildflowers while the strange vehicle, all sunlight and bass, veered wide of them. In the window was a face, a man’s jaw, yellow lenses fixing on them for a long moment before the jeep-thing passed on and, reaching the crest of the road, dropped away, body and engine and music and all.

They’d set off again then, and when they came around the bend there was another road, unpaved, intersecting the blacktop at an oblique angle like an *X*, and without hesitating and without consulting him, Caitlin simply took it. And although the road was unmarked, and although it appeared as though it would take them higher up rather than down, he said nothing. Later, he would think about that. He would remember the shrine of the woods. The graves. He would see the Virgin’s face and her mutilated blessing and he would remember thinking they should pray before her just the

same, like the right reverend said, just in case. Forty days was forty days. But Caitlin had already been on the path, moving toward the road. She was wearing a white sleeveless top, white shorts with the word **BADGERS** bannered in cherry red across her bottom, pink and white Adidas, and for a moment, in that place, she had looked not like herself but like some blanched and passing spirit. A cold wanderer around whom the air chilled and the birds shuddered and the leaves of the aspens yellowed and fell.

HE RAISED THE PHONE and said, "Hello, Sean," and a man's voice said, "Is this Mr. Courtland?" and Grant's head jerked as if struck.

"Yes. Who is this?"

At these words, the change in his body, Angela came around to see his face. He met her eyes and looked away, out the window. The man on the phone identified himself in some detail, but all Grant heard was the word *sheriff*.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Where's Sean?" There was a pain in his forearm and he looked to see the white claw fastened there. He pried at it gently.

"He's here at the medical center in Granby, Mr. Courtland," said the sheriff. "He's a tad banged up, but the doctor says he'll be fine. I found his wallet and this phone in his—"

"What do you mean a tad—" He glanced at Angela and stopped himself. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean it looks like he got himself in some kind of accident up there on the mountain, Mr. Courtland. I ain't had a chance to talk to him yet, they doped him up pretty good for the . . . Well, you can talk to the doctor in a second here. But first—"

"But he's all right," Grant said.

"Oh, his leg's banged up pretty good. But he was wearing that helmet. He'll be all right. He had some good luck up there."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he could of laid there a lot longer, but it happened some folks come by on their bikes."

Grant's heart was hammering in his skull. He couldn't think—his son lying there, up there, on the mountain, hurt—

“Mr. Courtland,” said the sheriff. “Where are you all at?”

There was something in the man’s tone. Grant shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Well, sir. We found your boy way up there on the mountain, on a rental bike. So I’m just wondering, sir, where *you’re* at.”

“Caitlin,” Angela said suddenly, and Grant’s heart leapt and he said, “Yes. Let me speak to my daughter. Let me speak to Caitlin.”

“Your daughter . . . ?” said the other man, then was silent. In the silence was the sound of his breathing. The sound of him making an adjustment to his sheriff’s belt. The sound of a woman’s voice paging unintelligibly down the empty hospital corridor.

When he spoke again he sounded like some other man altogether.

“Mr. Courtland,” he said, and Grant stepped toward the window as though he would walk through it. He’d taken the representations of the mountains on the resort maps, with their colorful tracery of runs and trails and lifts, as the mountains themselves—less mountains than playgrounds fashioned into the shapes of mountains by men and money. Now he saw the things themselves, so green and massive, humped one upon the other like a heaving sea. Angela stopped him physically, her thumbs in his biceps. She raised on her toes that she might hear every word. “Mr. Courtland,” said the sheriff. “Your son came in alone.”

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