

The Mountaineer's Painting

A ghost story.

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Disclaimer: All persons in this story are fictitious. Images of figures are models only. Any resemblance of the characters in this book to persons living or dead is coincidental. Ungacongagru is a fictitious

mountain. There are climbing areas on Rattler Gulch Road in Drummond, Montana, but the monolith mentioned is fictitious. Daisy chains are real, however, the brand used here, a Subzero Daisy Chain, is fictitious.

I have included images of basic equipment in the chapters. There is a key to their identity at the end of the book, along with a guide to finding videos demonstrating climbing techniques and equipment online.

This book is dedicated to my Patty Ann—Patricia Ann Curran my wife, my lifelong editor and best friend.

Day 1: Sunday



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My name is Kevin Frost. I like to know what people look like in the stories I read, so I'll describe myself. I stand just a smidge over six feet tall, have wide shoulders, green eyes, and shortish red hair. I'm going to call this a ghost story, but I've never heard a ghost story like this.

The yard sale was out past the Forest Service office on Spurgin Road in the bowl of the Missoula Valley. It was hidden in the labyrinth of roads between the surrounding mountain peaks on which the snow still

glistened in the sun. I would never have found the single-story ranch house but for the homemade cardboard signs with bright yellow arrows pointing the way. It was a warm Sunday morning in mid-May in the valley, and I didn't expect there to be a big crowd. The hand-made signs and the ad in the paper indicated it was the third day of a sale that had started on Friday. But when I pulled up under a large oak, there were no other cars parked along the road.

I wondered if there would be anything good left as I exited my car.

The offerings were the usual assortment of junk and collectibles plus more furniture than I would have expected. It seemed more of an estate sale than an ordinary yard sale. I didn't see anything at all that I liked until I entered an old, sagging mini-barn that had seen better days.

Propped up against the side of the barn, in a corner near the door, was a handsome wooden picture frame. Spider webs surrounded it. The thing had to be at least four and a half feet tall by three feet wide. The glass in the frame, for some reason, had been painted black and had a metal nameplate at the bottom. The thin frame was of an unfamiliar light-colored wood. The finish seemed to gleam like no wood I'd ever seen. There was no price. I leaned it forward so that I could look at the back. The back had been sealed in the way that professional framers do, with material stretched over the entire back. But in all the frames I've seen, paper was the backing material with the paper glued in place. Instead of paper, this one had a weaved cloth that appeared to have been stapled in place.

"I can let you have that for a very good price," a nasal voice said behind me.

It startled me so; I nearly let the thing fall back against the wall. The man who had spoken was reed-thin with a shaggy beard and unruly hair, a lighter shade of red than my own.

He stood about an inch taller than my six feet. His eyes were as green as mine but behind thick glasses that made his eyes appear to bulge.

My garage sale instincts rose to the occasion. "Well," I said, holding the frame away from me as if it had a bad odor, "It's very nice, I'll admit, but why would anyone paint over the glass?"

"I don't know," the man said, coming over and looking down at it. "I got it at a garage sale myself some time ago. I think the fellow said it was of a relative he wanted to forget."

"I don't know," I said, giving the frame a little shake. There was something about his manner that made me think he was lying about how he came by the thing.

"There is no paint on the frame at all. Whoever painted over the glass and nameplate was meticulous. You could throw whatever it is covering up away and have a very nice frame," he added.

I liked it. I imagined the frame might be quite valuable and wondered if this guy knew that. Then it occurred to me that it might have been stolen, and it was covered least it be recognized.

I leaned the frame back where it had been.

He was watching me. As I turned to the door, he said, "You can have it for \$50."

"\$50?" I said. It was a very low price for such a large, elaborate frame made of fine wood. "It's nice, but I only have \$30 with me."

"It's yours for \$30," he said. "May I wrap it for you?"

I looked at him. He had a strange expression on his face as if my buying the painting was a relief. I thought about trying to get him to go lower, but something held me back. The weird thought came to me that 30 pieces of silver was the perfect price for this purchase.

"No need to wrap it," I said. "I'll take it as is."

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At home, I put the frame face down on the kitchen table. I used a pair of needle-nosed pliers to remove the staples holding the canvas-like backing onto the frame.

As I tugged with the pliers on the third staple, the staple flew out more quickly than I expected and nicked the finger of my left hand. A drop of my blood fell on the back of the frame and rolled beneath the backing. Afraid it would stain the wood, I wiped it off quickly with a wet cloth. I wasn't fast enough as my blood left a definite stain. At least it was on the back of the frame.

By the time I'd gotten all the staples out, I was ready for a break, but my curiosity got the better of me. I carefully turned the frame over with my hand on its back and laid it picture side up on the table. I then lifted the edge of the frame holding the glass down. The glass did not want to come free at first. I put my hand on the glass and applied a little pressure, and with a slight crack that made me think I'd chipped it, the picture and glass finally slipped out of the frame.

I moved the frame out of the way and lifted the glass. Instead of the visage of some frowning patriarch, I revealed a rather intricate double-matted painting. I believe it was a watercolor though I'm no expert. The outer mat was gray, with just the edge of the inner off-white mat showing. It was a complex scene. High above on the right, a sharp mountain peak stood sentinel beside turbulent mists that blended into a hazy sky. Beneath the peak, lower cliffs, green with tree-tops, skirted the mammoth peak like the dark hems of a dress.

At the base of the painting, a forest rose. Here the artist had given definition to the trees as if in the shadows of the trees, some depths could be made out, and paths could be taken. At the very bottom of the painting, so small I had to look closely to see, the painting was signed with three initials: T. I. F.

I rather liked it instantly and could not imagine why anyone would cover it up. Though I had intended to use the frame for something else, which I had yet to determine, I decided there and then to hang it up in my bedroom in a spot where I could see it from my bed.

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Just before I turned out my reading light that evening, I glanced across the room at my new painting. It was easy to imagine being in that place, looking out at that lofty pinnacle from a distance.

Day 2: Monday



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I awoke the next morning from a dream in which I had been hiking toward the very mountain in my painting. In my dream, the morning air was chill, and as I made my way through the primeval forest with a heavy pack on my back, I zipped my jacket up around me. I was in a hurry because a group of people were expecting me.