

Chapter One

Once upon a time, in 1993, in the heart of the Rocky Mountain ski areas of Colorado, an unusual phenomenon occurred.

During the winter, the mountains and valleys of this area were covered with snow, creating breath-taking vistas of pristine white peaks against deep blue skies. In the summer, however, only streaks and patches of snow remained on the dull, brown peaks, leaving the mountainous terrain without the depth and drama it displayed six months earlier. The green of the pine forests seemed not as intense in the summer, set against the muted colors of slate and granite, although the mountain ski resorts continued to draw vacationers to hike, backpack, camp, mountain bike, ride horses, and play golf. With ample sprinkling systems, the golf courses thrived to a brilliant, unnatural color akin to chartreuse, and the areas surrounding the condominium buildings burst with the dramatic hues of dense arrangements of hybridized wildflowers. The golf courses were very popular with lowland golfers, not only for their beauty but for the great distances golf balls soared in the thin air.

Molybdenum Mountain Ski Resort, located in a valley between Denver and Vail, was fondly known as Molly Mountain or just Molly. It was in the Vehicle Maintenance Department garage of Molly Mountain that our story's heroine faced a dilemma.

In the garage, an assortment of vehicles owned and operated by Molly were maintained and repaired. The garage was very large with twelve tall bays that could accommodate huge earth-moving equipment, school-bus-type buses called Red Robins, and large, diesel tractor-trailer units, nicknamed Sharks, which, during the winter months, pulled large coaches to transport skiers back and forth between the parking lots and the ski lifts.

The Transportation Department office, adjacent to the Vehicle Maintenance Department, employed men and women to drive the Sharks and the Red Robins. The men were pretty average and not very interesting. The women, however, were a different story. The female supervisor of the department, Blaise, knew all about the mechanical goings on of all the vehicles. She trained drivers and made sure that maintenance on the Sharks and Red Robins was performed on schedule. She'd been a policewoman before taking this job. Earlene was a pretty, young blond Texan who used to break horses and drive a semi trailer truck before becoming a driver for the Department. Monica, a middle-aged woman with heavy features, small eyes, unkempt, nondescript hair, and extremely thick, brown-tinted glasses, seemed to have a fascination with the breasts of the other women drivers. She claimed to be in love with Red Robin number 250 and carried a photo of it in her purse. Roxanne was a professional bicycle racer, red-haired, well-muscled, and a bit on the tough side. The last female driver was Sheila. Sheila had a masters degree in psychology, another in business, was a moderately-successful fiction writer, was in her mid-forties, divorced, the mother of one son who was away at college, and she liked men. She took this job because she needed to earn some money after moving to this resort community on a whim, preferred a job outside rather than in an office, and didn't want to wear pantyhose.

Everyone liked Sheila. She was bright, accommodating, perceptive, and listened to people's problems with genuine compassion. She was of medium height, had bouncy black hair cut in a sporty bob, vivid blue eyes, a slim figure with a full and sexy bottom,

or so men told her, and a warm smile. The Transportation Department was grateful to have her, although most of the drivers and the mechanics were puzzled as to why she chose to work there.

One day in late summer, Sheila was about to wash some Red Robins by hand because the mechanical washing device was broken. She'd parked one of the buses in front of the garage and was in the midst of pulling the hose out when she saw from her peripheral vision a pulsing orange and blue light. It was just inside the nearest garage door in front of some metal crates and was about the size of a dinner plate. She wanted to look directly at it, but some little voice warned her not to. She somehow understood that if she did, her vision could be damaged by the light's intensity.

She stared down at the gravel beneath her feet and watched the water trickle out the copper nozzle of the hose and disappear between the small stones. She watched the water and waited, her heart pounding through her head. She turned toward the light just enough to see that it really was there, but she did not look directly at it. It sent her the message that she must view it with only her peripheral vision. Fear gripped her and told her to get away from this thing as quickly as possible. She dropped the hose and bolted toward the closest garage door. But then she stopped, because the fear vanished. The light pulsed gently to reassure her, so she went back to the bus, picked up the hose and, once again, watched the water trickle into the gravel. Calmly now, she tried to make sense of this. She could still see the pulsing light out the corner of her eye.

Kurt Miller, one of the mechanics, walked past. "You okay, Sheila?" he called.

Sheila straightened up, allowing the trickle of water to arc out in front of her. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. How are you today?" she asked while she tightened the nozzle to stop the water flow. She was very attracted to Kurt. He was tall, maybe six-two, had a burly build, thick, sandy hair cut short and combed back, and, Sheila thought, the most beautiful brown eyes—large, deep, and sensitive. Her heart fluttered at the sight of him, then began to pound because she didn't want him to see the orange and blue light in the garage. It felt like it belonged to her, and she believed that it was there for a reason.

She walked towards him. "How's that story about the cowgirl coming?" she asked. Often, over the last couple years, they'd shared each other's writing, Kurt also being an aspiring author. They'd slept together only twice. Kurt had been warm and attentive but not, it seemed, interested in establishing a steady relationship.

"Funny you should ask," he said. "I was just thinking I'd like you to read it again. I've changed some things, re-written several pages. Maybe we could do dinner after work—spend some time talking about it?" He looked down at her and smiled.

Those eyes, she thought, looking into their dark richness. Her whole body flushed as she glanced at his hair, imagined running her fingers through it while she kissed him, then ran her eyes over his shoulders and down his chest, remembering the luscious hairiness and the feel of his strong back beneath her hands.

"Tonight?" she said, looking off to her left, away from the visiting light. "Hmm. Let's see. What's going on tonight? My German class is tomorrow night, taekwondo class was last night." She paused. "I think I'm free."

His smile emanated sexuality, his eyes deep meaning. Sheila felt the flush run through her body again.

He nodded. "Good. I think I've made some progress with it." His expression was hopeful.

“Yes, that’s what you said a few weeks ago. I look forward to reading it. Oh, and would you mind looking at the tail pipe on my truck? It’s sagging again.”

“I told you the weld wouldn’t last forever. You should just get a new band.” He raised one eyebrow and cocked his head.

“Well, you’re probably right. But just look at it, okay?” Sheila playfully gave him a light punch on the shoulder.

“Hey, watch it,” Kurt said and grabbed for Sheila’s ribs to tickle her.

She squealed and jumped back from him. Then she aimed her hose at him and put her fingers on the nozzle, threatening to open it.

Kurt threw both hands in the air like someone at gunpoint. “Okay, you got me.” He stumbled sideways, pretending to be shot, and fell on the ground. Sheila laughed. He stood up, looked at his watch, and said, “Oops, I’ve gotta get going. I’m meeting with Blaise and Scotty. Blaise wants all the Sharks equipped with new radios for ski season. Scotty wants to know how much it’ll cost. And how many labor hours it’ll take.”

“Okay. See you tonight. Six-thirty okay? You can come to my house.”

“Yep. Sounds good. See you then.” And Kurt walked away.

Sheila watched him, watched the movement of his blue jeans, and wondered how things would go that night. As she felt her pulse slow, she brought her attention back to the Red Robin waiting to be bathed. As if to draw her attention back, the pulsing light in the garage burned brighter. She almost looked directly at it, then caught herself and looked away.

“You may have one wish,” it said, though not in audible words. “I will grant you one wish.”

Sheila, hose in hand, stopped. How could this pulsing light, this thing, whatever it was, grant her a wish? she wondered.

A wish, she thought. This is like a childhood fairy tale. One wish. What would I wish for? To have Kurt fall in love with me and we would live happily ever after? To have my first novel published and made into an award-winning film? To have an unlimited supply of money so I could just write and not have to drive buses? To be twenty-five again and never age?

With not even a poof or a sensation of any kind, Sheila turned into a gorilla—a male mountain gorilla. Without thinking, she looked directly at the orange and blue light. It was gone. She looked down at her belly, her legs, her arms, and her hands. They were black and hairy, her arms were extra long, her fingers were black and as large as bananas, and her feet had thumbs.

She felt no different inside. She was still Sheila the woman. On the outside, however, she was now a male gorilla, which was easy to determine because she now had a penis. Her head did not swim, and she did not feel sick or frightened or anything. A rapid-fire succession of thoughts, however, flooded her mind.

What happened to my one wish? The light said I could have a wish, but I hadn’t made one yet. I never asked or even thought about becoming a gorilla. I didn’t make this wish! Geez! What will the mechanics think when they see me like this? I better get started washing this Red Robin. Uh-oh, here comes Mark. He’s going to help me with the hose. It’s tangled way at the other end. I’ll run and untangle it. God, I hope he doesn’t notice. There, I’m smiling at him, and he’s smiling back. He doesn’t seem to notice. How can that be? He’s still smiling at me. I best not talk to him. What if I sound like a gorilla? Oh,

thanks, Mark, I've got it. Thanks. Thanks, so much. There, it's all straight now. I'm flashing him a big smile, and he's walking away. How can he not notice?

What will they do with me? They'll put me in a zoo. I can see it now. I'll be inside a large cage with metal bars. And people will come past to look at me and take pictures. And they'll want me to mate with female gorillas! Geez! How will that be?

Sheila looked down at her private area and held a small, limp penis. She let it slide through her hand. She dropped it immediately and thought, *I have one. I really have one. Oh, my God! How can this be?*

Then her head numbed and began to spin. *A delayed reaction, for sure*, she thought. *Where will I hide? What should I do?* She saw Kurt come out of the garage, so she walked past him to see what his reaction would be. He glanced at her, seeming only to notice that she was someone he didn't know. He acted as though gorillas were a normal part of the scenery, that they were a type of common worker. She ran back to the hose, picked it up, opened the nozzle wide, and began to spray the Red Robin, and he never looked aghast at her or anything. She looked around to see if there were other gorillas working. She saw none, and yet, as other mechanics came out and walked this way and that, no one took notice of her. No one spoke to her, but no one acted as though she were invisible, either.

Her mind raced. She turned the nozzle off and let the hose drop to the ground. Then she looked over her body again. The black, hairy arms, belly, legs, feet, and penis were still there. She was definitely a gorilla. The only other thing that seemed clear was that no one in the maintenance area seemed to care that she was a gorilla. But then she thought, *No one knows I'm me. They just think I'm some ordinary gorilla. But why? This makes no sense. Maybe I'm crazy. Delusional. I need to tell Kurt.*

She tip-toed into the garage, walked past the red metal chests of drawers that held the mechanics' tools, past a snow-grooming machine that was half disassembled, and headed down the narrow hallway toward the office in the back, but by the time she reached the office door, she remembered that Kurt had just come out of the garage. *Yes, yes, I'm befuddled here. Who wouldn't be?* A couple more mechanics pushed past her on their way into the office. She smiled pleasantly at each one, and they all, with nonchalance, smiled back.

She decided to go back out and wash the Red Robin. She turned around and nearly ran into Kurt in the narrow aisle. He carried a large, heavy box that he held up over his head in order to get past her. He looked right at her eyes but showed no recognition. When he was close to her, she said softly, "Kurt, it's me. We have to talk." She was relieved that it was her own voice that came out, not a gorilla grunt of some kind.

His eyes got huge, his mouth dropped open, and he lost his grip on the box. It fell fast and heavy, so she caught it and held it out to him. He looked terrified. "I don't know what's happened," she continued. "Please come talk to me. I'll be outside." Aware that her whole body quivered, she hustled away and didn't look back. She headed toward the Red Robin and the hose.

She forced herself to walk slowly and calmly toward her task although she felt she might launch into a full-blown panic attack at any moment. She hung on to her wits by a mere iota, breathed deeply and slowly, focused on the rhythm, and tried to calm herself. Just as she was about to bend down and pick up the hose, the panic took over. It grabbed at her heart and coursed through her veins, so she ran.

She bolted behind the garage, up the hill past the little white trailer that housed Blaise's office, across the gravel service road, and onto the golf course. She wanted to flee this body that surrounded her. Her head and chest beat with a fierceness she'd never known. It felt like a dream, yet she was sure it was not. Her head spun and the green golf course grass swam in front of her as she looked across it toward the steep incline of the pine-forested ski mountain. She felt the forest would save her somehow, if she could only reach its cool shelter. She felt her brain would explode into tiny fragments as a loud humming filled her ears. She felt impending doom and knew she was about to shatter. Her legs became weak, and she could no longer breathe. Her bronchial tubes constricted in a spasm, and she fell to the ground in a shroud of darkness.

Later—she had no idea how long—she felt the sun's warmth caress her. She felt the short, coarse grass prick her fingertips and her lips. She squinted her eyes open and saw blurs of green and gold. She shut them again as her mind began to clear. *What am I doing lying in the grass?* She knew she would be happier if she just went back to sleep, so she allowed slumber to consume her once again when she felt a dull object poke her in the back. It was a nudging, something hesitant, something that felt curious but timid. She ignored it. She didn't care about the grass or the sun. She just wanted to escape something, although she couldn't remember what.

"I think it's alive," said a scratchy whisper.

"Poke it again," said a similar voice, clearly female.

Sheila felt the poking in her back again. Then she felt life move back into her legs, arms, and fingers as she moved them a little.

"Stand back!" said one of the voices. "It could be dangerous."

"They said they're not dangerous," insisted another fuzzy feminine voice.

Sheila felt the poking again. Now it was getting annoying, and she opened her eyes wide. She lifted herself up on one elbow. The voices gasped behind her. She gazed across the golf course at the townhomes on the other side and the huge mountains across the highway. She saw semi trucks and cars whizzing by on the four-lane interstate. Sensing a complex shadow behind her, she sat up, folded her knees to her chest, and looked around to see what had been poking her.

The voices gasped again as she turned, and one said, "Get ready to run, girls."

Sheila struggled to focus on three older women with curly grey hair, each dressed the same—white slacks, red visors, and navy blue polo shirts with a large pocket logo in white and green that read "Over The Hill Gang." Each lady held a golf club. All three peered at Sheila through stylish sunglasses.

"Hi!" said the middle one as she held her hand straight up, palm facing Sheila, and gave a short wave. Then she cupped her hands, fingers together, and rolled them forward. She said to the other two, "I'm signing 'Hello. How are you?' to it."

What? thought Sheila. *What's going on here?* Then it hit her. The recent nightmare entered her consciousness. She thought it had been a dream. Then she looked down at herself. There she was, dark, hairy, and very large. She leaped up and ran for the forest.

She heard two of the ladies scream, and the one who had tried to communicate in sign language shouted, "Hey! Wait! Come back!"

The other two shouted at her, "No! Let it go. Don't call it!"
And Sheila ran for the forest.