

# THE ROCKS

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**H**al Craven stared at the wet rocks that lined the steep river bank, oblivious to the beads of water that collected on his cap and trickled down the back of his neck. Occasionally he would sneak a glance in Mac's direction. When he did, a jumble of emotions flooded his consciousness. Guilt was not among them, though. The betrayal had been too great, too personal, to allow for guilt.

Mac stood under the open hatchback of the Ford Explorer, out of the weather, fussing with his equipment. He examined some caddis flies, checked his double-taper line, organized a tan canvas vest with flapped and zippered pockets that held the small tools of a fly fisherman's trade.

Drizzle continued to ooze from a sky that was the color of old pewter. It hung so low an artful backcast would tickle its soft underbelly. Hal inhaled the aroma of the dripping jack pines that surrounded the small clearing where they were parked, and found it difficult to tear his eyes from the slick, glistening rocks. The Ice Age's gift to him.

"Maybe we should wait for a while," Mac called. "See if this crap blows through."

Hal heard the words, but they sounded far away, like some unpleasant noise he was subconsciously determined to filter out. He didn't want to wait. Not when everything was going according to plan. Better even. They were alone at the place where they always accessed the river on their fishing trips, and he'd gotten lucky with the wet conditions. It was almost too perfect.

"Well, what do you think?" Mac asked.

Hal hated the thought of delay. Finally he looked away from the rocks and toward Mac. "You're probably right," he said.

"How many opening days does this make for us?" Mac asked after they'd settled into the front seat of the Explorer. "Fifteen?"

Hal wasn't in the mood for small talk, but tried to act normal, casual even. "I was thinking about it earlier," he forced himself to say. "I believe it's 17."

"Seventeen years." Mac gazed through the windshield at the soggy landscape and shook his head. "We've had some times, haven't we?"

"Yeah, a lot of memories," Hal said, looking out the window on his side so Mac wouldn't see the expression on his face. The phony sentimentality made him want to puke.

Mac wiped some dust from the dash and fiddled with the radio dial, stopping at an oldies station. After a few minutes he said, "You know, sometimes I regret leaving the firm."

Hal rolled his eyes and grunted. "It's the first time I've heard you say that. Why the second thoughts now, three years later?"

"I don't know," Mac said. "It was our baby and all, and the people are still like family to me." He paused for a minute and

then continued. "Remember back in our fraternity days when we decided to go to law school and then set up our own shop after getting some training at one of the big firms?"

Yeah, Hal remembered all right. Cameron MacNeill with his privileged background and family contacts had gotten into a national law school while Hal wound up working his way through a no-name place that was firmly buried in a lower tier. Guess who had the pizzazz at cocktail parties? Now the hypocrite was talking about partnership and family. What would come next? Another lecture about Hal's drinking? More hollow promises of legal business from his company? The damn jerk had no conscience, which was going to make this a lot easier for him. Maybe they'd shared some good days in the past, but things had changed, and the changing had been Mac's doing, not his.

Hal squeezed out a snicker. "Hey, you took the money and ran," he said.

"That's not fair," Mac shot back, looking hurt.

Hal shrugged. "You're not going to tell me you haven't done well at L-Tech, are you?"

"No," Mac said, "I'm not saying that at all. I've done very well, but that's not the reason I left. I just needed a change."

Hal's mind flashed back to when Mac had announced he was leaving the law firm, just as things had begun to slide downhill. "Whatever," Hal said. "It's history now."

After a couple of minutes of silence, Mac asked, "Is the firm going to make it?"

Hal's head snapped toward Mac. "What are you getting at?" he asked. "You want me to say things would be different if Cameron MacNeill were still at the firm? That Cameron MacNeill had been the main guy all along. That what you

want me to say? Well maybe what our firm has been going through lately has nothing to do with your leaving. Losing a growing client to a big law firm happens these days. And as I recall, you're the one who hired that dogcrap young associate who got us sued."

"Jesus, Hal, you're taking my question the wrong way. I'm just concerned, that's all. Is something wrong? You seem edgy."

"No," Hal said, trying to rein in his churning resentments. "It's just this damned weather."

Mac removed his slouch hat and pulled a leather-covered journal from the center console. He shifted his position so he was leaning against the driver-side door and began to write. Hal glanced over, but the pages were shielded from his view. A Johnny Cash classic drifted from the radio. The one about going to Jackson to mess around.

Mac looked up. "You know, when the Man in Black passed on, that was really the day the music died."

Hal nodded. "Yeah, he was the best." What he really wanted to do, though, was give the radio a hard kick. Those lyrics were the last thing he wanted to hear. But maybe it was good to be reminded about the messing around. Helped him maintain his edge.

Hal snuck another glance at Mac. He didn't see him regularly these days, but the guy seemed to be aging awfully fast. His hair was thin and his skin didn't have the same healthy glow. He was rich as hell, though. Women liked that. If a man had money, the other stuff didn't seem to matter much.

Mac finished writing and slipped the journal back into the console. "How much longer should we give it?" he asked.

Hal turned to him, his brow furled. "You're not thinking about bailing out, are you?"

“No, it’s just that...”

“You got a hot date tonight?” Hal asked. “You divorced guys, always on the hunt.” He fought to keep the edge out of his voice as he thought about Mac and his wife, Karen. “You’ve found someone, right?”

“Hey, if I had, you’d be the first to know.”

“Would I?” Hal asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hal forced a grin. “Who’s being touchy now? All I meant was that sometimes things change, people change.”

“We’ve known each other too long to change. Shared too much.”

Hal’s fingernails dug into his palms. That was the problem, the sharing. It had become so obvious lately. The lingering hugs whenever Mac and Karen saw each other, the tender glances. Then there was the long lunch they’d had at Rizzo’s the day he’d had Karen followed two months ago. He had pictures of them sitting at a back table, for crissakes, looking at each other like a couple of moonstruck teenagers, her hand on his. How many other lunches had there been? How many hotel rooms?

Mac lowered the window on his side and stuck out a hand. “You know, I think it’s stopping.”

Hal stepped out of the Explorer. Mac was right. His pulse quickened again at the sight of the rocks. Things were back on track.

“We’ll kill ourselves if we try to get down to the river from here today,” Mac said, staring at the river bank. “Maybe we should go upstream where it’s not as steep.”

Hal knew he couldn't let this opportunity slip away. "And fish elbow-to-elbow with all those other guys?" he said. "C'mon. We've always gone down this way."

"But not in these conditions."

Hal played his hole card. "Look, if you want to be a wuss about it, go ahead. I'm fishing here." He looked at Mac and snickered. "Just don't forget to pick me up later, Millie."

Mac gave him a long look. "Okay. You're nuts, but I'll stay and bail you out as usual."

"Yeah, right."

Hal hefted his new Orvis split bamboo fly rod and admired the feel. The rod he couldn't afford, but had bought with the new credit card he'd managed to get a few weeks ago. He was tired of sacrifice. Besides, when he turned his law practice around, a grand for a fly rod would be chickenscratch. He slipped the rod back into its case and slung it over his shoulder. Might as well protect it, he thought; he wouldn't be using it today anyway.

"Okay, Rambo, lead off," Mac said.

Hal looked at him. "That's a change. What happened to Mac the troop leader? The take charge guy?"

Mac just shrugged and waved his hand for Hal to proceed. Hal had counted on Mac taking the lead as usual, but now he'd have to adjust. He forced a chuckle and started down the bank, moving gingerly, and immediately lost his footing. "Whoa!" he cried, trying to sound as though he were having the time of his life.

Slowly they picked their way down the treacherous slope, slipping on a rock here, stopping to regain their balance there. Hal led the way, keeping an eye peeled for the right place. He knew he had to make it happen now. It would be dry later,

and his advantage would be gone. The slick rocks were his friends.

Hal selected a route that would take them over a large crowned boulder that looked as smooth as glass. And slippery from the rain. When he reached the boulder, he stepped up and faked a slip as he started across.

“Damn!” he muttered as one knee cracked against the rock.

Mac came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You okay?”

Hal squatted and rubbed his knee for a moment. “Yeah, just a little bump.”

“Well, be careful,” Mac said.

Do it now, Hal told himself. As he rose, he deliberately let his feet slide off the rock and lurched wildly backward, arms flailing. When his hand touched Mac’s leg, he grabbed and yanked hard as though reflexively trying to break his fall. Everything turned to slow motion. Hal’s back hit the rock, causing pain to shoot through his body, and he saw one of Mac’s legs fly into the air. Then he heard a heavy thud as flesh and bone slammed against the rocks. A thud that would be sickening to most, but rang in Hal’s ears like the lyrics from a favorite song.

Hal looked back at the twisted body lying among the rocks. “Mac, you okay?” he asked. “Mac?”

Cameron MacNeill’s glassy eyes stared at the sky and Hal saw a thin trickle of blood oozing from his head. The jagged point of a nearby rock loomed like the weapon of an avenging angel. He’d done it! Don’t panic now, he told himself, everything had to look natural. Was the head injury fatal? Hal didn’t dare hit him again; the medical examiner surely would notice that. He had to trust that the rocks had done

their job. Think. Should he call for help? Yes, that's what he needed to do. He punched at the numbers on his cell phone, misdialing on the first attempt.

Now show concern, Hal told himself. Get something to cover the body. He scrambled up the steep bank, slipping and banging his knees on the rocks. His heart pounded and sweat soaked his clothes. He found an old blanket in the back of the Explorer, and begun to pick his way down the rocky incline again when he remembered the journal. Could Mac have become suspicious and written something about him? Hal raced back to the vehicle and wrenched open the front door. He snatched the journal from the console and fumbled through the pages, hands trembling. Karen's name appeared in one entry, and a recent one, too. The sonofabitch! Sweat stung Hal's eyes as he began to read:

Saturday will be my last opening day. The doctors leveled with me. The cancer is too far advanced. I told Karen two months ago after she'd noticed my hair. She's been wonderfully supportive. Maybe I should have asked Hal to join us at Rizzo's that day when we met to talk about my condition, but we decided not to tell him until after Saturday. It wouldn't help. So much has gone wrong for him lately, and there was just no use spoiling his opening day. Karen's so devoted to him. They're so lucky to have each other and....