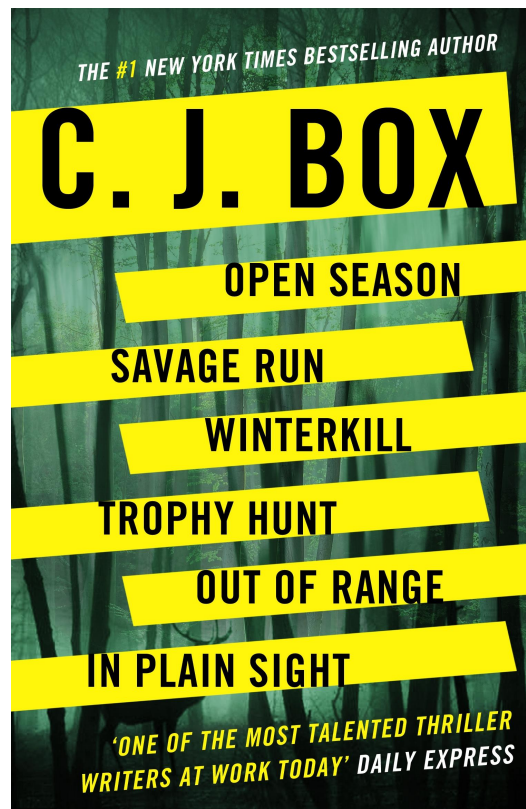


Joe Pickett Series Bundle (Book 1-6)

C. J. Box



4 July 2019

Contents

[Author Bio]	10
[Copyright]	10
Open Season	11
[Dedication]	12
CONTENTS	13
PART ONE	15
1	15
2	19
3	21
4	25
PART TWO	28
5	28
6	33
7	40
8	43
9	46
10	51
PART THREE	57
11	57
12	59
13	65
14	69
15	70
16	73
17	80
PART FOUR	85
18	85

19	90
20	95
21	102
22	104
23	108
PART FIVE	113
24	113
25	116
26	118
27	120
28	123
29	126
30	129
31	131
32	133
33	134
PART SIX	138
34	138
35	140
36	144
37	147
PART SEVEN	153
EPILOGUE	154
 Savage Run	 160
Table of Contents	161
[Dedication]	162
Acknowledgments	163
PART ONE	164
1	164
2	169
3	176
4	178
5	187
6	190

7	195
8	201
9	203
10	206
11	209
12	212
13	215
14	220
15	224
16	228
17	232
PART TWO	237
18	237
19	241
20	243
21	249
22	251
23	253
24	255
25	260
26	263
27	268
PART THREE	272
28	272
29	276
30	281
31	286
32	290
33	293
34	295
35	300
36	304
37	310
38	313
39	315

<i>Winterkill</i>	318
Table of Contents	319
[Dedication]	320
Acknowledgments	320
[Epigraph]	321
PART ONE: Severe Winter Storm Warning	322
1. Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming	322
2	332
3	336
4	345
5	350
6	359
7	361
8	365
PART TWO	371
9	371
10	374
11	379
12	389
13	395
14	400
15	405
16	409
17	413
18	418
19	422
20	426
21	428
22	438
23	446
24	456
PART THREE	460
25	460
26	467
27	470
28	474
29	477
30	485

31	489
32	497
33	507
PART FOUR	511
34	511
35	518
36	522
37	525
 Trophy Hunt	 528
Table of Contents	529
[Dedication]	530
Acknowledgments	531
PART ONE	532
1	532
2	540
3	544
4	550
5	556
6	560
7	563
8	570
9	574
10	578
 PART TWO	 586
11	586
12	594
13	596
14	599
15	606
16	617
17	625
18	628
19	632

PART THREE	637
20	637
21	643
22	645
23	647
24	653
25	657
26	663
27	670
28	675
29	680
30	687
31	689
32	690
33	695
34	699
35	703
36	706
37	710
38	718
39	723
 Out Of Range	 729
[Dedication]	730
 Table of Contents	 731
 Acknowledgments	 733
 PART ONE	 734
1	734
2	736
3	741
4	746
5	750
6	753
7	762
 PART TWO	 771
8	771
9	777

10	. . . . .	781
11	. . . . .	785
12	. . . . .	790
13	. . . . .	798
14	. . . . .	803
15	. . . . .	805
PART THREE		810
16	. . . . .	810
17	. . . . .	814
18	. . . . .	818
19	. . . . .	824
20	. . . . .	828
21	. . . . .	829
22	. . . . .	831
23	. . . . .	836
24	. . . . .	840
25	. . . . .	846
PART FOUR		849
26	. . . . .	849
27	. . . . .	854
28	. . . . .	858
29	. . . . .	864
30	. . . . .	867
31	. . . . .	870
32	. . . . .	875
PART FIVE		879
33	. . . . .	879
34	. . . . .	881
35	. . . . .	887
36	. . . . .	892
37	. . . . .	897
38	. . . . .	901
39	. . . . .	903
In Plain Sight		907
[Dedication]	. . . . .	908
Table of Contents		909

Acknowledgments 911

APRIL 912

1. Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming 912
2 923
3 934
4 939
5 947
6 949
7 953

MAY 954

8 954
9 956
10 960
11 964
12 967
13 978
14 984
15 992
16 995
17 1000

JUNE 1004

18 1004
19 1007
20 1010
21 1017
22 1024
23 1028
24 1035
25 1039
26 1045
27 1047
28 1050
29 1054
30 1057

[Author Bio]

C. J. Box is the winner of an Anthony Award, the Prix Calibre .38, the Macavity Award, the Gumshoe Award, the Barry Award and the 2009 Edgar Award for Best Novel. His novels are US bestsellers and have been translated into 21 languages. Box lives with his family outside of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

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Open Season

[Dedication]

To Molly, Becky, Roxanne, and especially for Laurie – my partner, my anchor, my first reader, my love

And thanks to Andy Whelchel and Martha Bushko, who brought this to life

CONTENTS

- PART ONE

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4

- PART TWO

- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10

- PART THREE

- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17

- PART FOUR

- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21

- Chapter 22
 - Chapter 23
- PART FIVE
 - Chapter 24
 - Chapter 25
 - Chapter 26
 - Chapter 27
 - Chapter 28
 - Chapter 29
 - Chapter 30
 - Chapter 31
 - Chapter 32
 - Chapter 33
- PART SIX
 - Chapter 34
 - Chapter 35
 - Chapter 36
 - Chapter 37
- PART SEVEN
- EPILOGUE

PART ONE

Findings, Purposes, and Policy

(b) Purposes. - The purposes of this Act are to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered species and threatened species depend may be conserved, to provide a program for the conservation of such endangered species and threatened species, and to take such steps as may be appropriate to achieve the purposes of the treaties and conventions set forth in subsection(s) of this section.

—The Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1982
Printed for the use of the Senate Committee on
Environment and Public Works
US Government Printing Office
Washington: 1983

1

JOE LIVED, BUT it wasn't something he was particularly proud of. It was now fall and Sunday morning dawned slate gray and cold. He was making pancakes for his girls when he first heard of the bloody beast who had come down from the mountains and tried to enter the house during the night.

Seven-year-old Sheridan Pickett related her dream aloud to the stuffed bear that served as her confidant. Lucy, three and horrified, listened in. The television set was on even though the reception from the vintage satellite dish was snowy and poor, as usual.

The monster, Sheridan said, had come down from the mountains through the dark, steep canyon behind the house very late last night. She watched it through a slit in the curtain on her window, just a few inches from the top bunk of her bed. The canyon was where Sheridan had always *suspected* a monster would come from, and she felt proud, if a bit fearful, that she had been right. The only light had been the moon through the dried leaves of the cottonwood tree. The monster had rattled the back gate before figuring out the latch and had then lurched clumsily (sort of like mummies in old movies) across the yard to the backdoor. Its eyes and teeth glinted yellow, and for a second, Sheridan felt an electric bolt jolt through her as the monster's head swiveled around and seemed to look directly at her before it fled. The monster was hairy and shiny, as if covered with liquid. Twigs and leaves were stuck to it. There was something white, a large sack or box, swinging from the monster's hand.

“Sheridan, stop talking about monsters,” Joe called out. The dream disturbed him because the details were so precise. Sheridan’s dreams were usually more fantastic, inhabited by talking pets or magical things that flew. “You’re going to scare your little sister.”

“I’m already scared,” Lucy declared, pulling her blanket to her mouth.

“Then the man walked slowly away across the yard through the gate toward the woodpile where he fell down into a big shadow. And he’s *still out there*,” Sheridan finished, widening her eyes toward her sister to deliver the complete effect.

“Hold it, Sheridan,” Joe said abruptly, entering the room with a spatula in his hand. Joe was wearing his threadbare terry-cloth bathrobe he had purchased on a lark in Jackson Hole on his and Marybeth’s honeymoon ten years before. He shuffled in fleece slippers that were a size too large. “You said ‘man.’ You didn’t say ‘monster.’ You said ‘man.’ ”

Sheridan looked up quizzically, her big eyes wide. “Maybe it was a man. Maybe it wasn’t a dream after all.”

JOE HEARD A vehicle outside, racing up the gravel Bighorn Road much too fast, but by the time he crossed the living room and parted the faded drapes of the front picture window, the car or truck was gone. Dust rolled lazily down the road where it had been.

Beyond the window was the front yard, still green from summer and littered with plastic toys. Then there was the white fence, recently painted, paralleled by the gravel road. Farther, beyond the road, the landscape dipped into a willow-choked saddle where the Twelve Sleep River branched out into six fingers clogged with beaver ponds and brackish mosquito-heaven eddies and paused for a breath before its muscular rush through and past the town of Saddlestring. Beyond were the folds of the valley as it arched and suddenly climbed to form a precipitous mountain-face known as Wolf Mountain, a peak in the Twelve Sleep Range.

With Wolf Mountain in front of them and the foothills and canyon in back, the Pickett family, eight miles from town in their house, lived a life of deep and casting shadows.

The front door opened and Maxine burst in, followed by Marybeth. Marybeth’s cheeks were flushed—either from the brisk cold air or her long walk with the dog, Joe wasn’t sure which—and she looked annoyed. She wore her winter walking uniform of lightweight hiking boots, chinos, anorak, and wool hat. The anorak was stretched tight across her pregnant belly.

“It’s cold out there,” Marybeth said, peeling the hat off so her blond hair tumbled onto her shoulders. “Did you see that truck tear by here? That was *Sheriff Barnum’s* truck going too fast on that road up to the mountains.”

“Barnum?” Joe said, genuinely puzzled.

“And your dog was going nuts when we got back to the house. She nearly took my arm off just a minute ago.” Marybeth unclipped Maxine’s leash from her collar, and Maxine padded to her water dish and drank sloppily.

Joe had a blank expression on his face while he was thinking. The expression sometimes annoyed Marybeth, who was afraid people would think him simple. It was the same expression, in a photograph, that had been transmitted throughout the region via the Associated Press when Joe, while still a trainee, had arrested a tall man—who turned out to be the new governor of Wyoming—for fishing without a license.

“Where did Maxine want to go?” he asked.

“She wanted to go out back,” she said. “Toward the woodpile.”

Joe turned around. Sheridan and Lucy had paused at breakfast and were looking to him. Lucy looked away and resumed eating. Sheridan held his gaze, and she nodded triumphantly.

“Better take your gun,” Sheridan said.

Joe managed a grin. “Eat your breakfast,” he said.

“What’s this all about?” Marybeth asked.

“Bloody monsters,” Sheridan said, her eyes wide. “There’s a bloody monster in the woodpile.”

Suddenly, there was the roar of motors coming up Bighorn Road from Saddlestring. Joe was thinking exactly what Marybeth said next: “Something’s going on. I wonder why nobody called here?”

Joe lifted the telephone receiver to make sure it was working, the dial tone echoed clearly into his ear.

“Maybe it’s because you’re the new guy. People here still can’t get used to the fact that Vern Dunnegan isn’t around anymore,” Marybeth said, and Joe knew instantly she wished she could take it back.

“Dad, about that monster?” Sheridan said from the table, almost apologetic.

JOE BUCKLED HIS holster over his bathrobe, clamped on his black Stetson, and stepped outside onto the back porch. He was surprised how cool and crisp it was this early in the fall. When he saw the large spatters of dried blood between his oversized fleece slippers, the chill suddenly became more pronounced. Joe pulled his revolver and broke the cylinder to make sure it was loaded. Then he glanced over his shoulder.

Framed in the dining room window were Sheridan and Lucy. Marybeth stood behind them and off to the side. His three girls in the window were various stages of the same painfully beautiful blond and willowy female. Their green eyes were on him, and their faces were wide open. He knew how silly he must look. He couldn’t tell if they could see what he could: splashes of blood on the ancient concrete walkway that halved the yard and crushed frozen grass where it appeared that someone—or something—had rolled. It looked almost like the night nesting place of a large deer or elk the way the grass and crisp autumn leaves had been flattened.

Grasping the pistol in front of him with both hands, Joe skirted a young pine and stepped through the open gate of the weathered fence to the place where the woodpile was.

Joe sucked in his breath and involuntarily stepped back, his ears filled with the *whumping* sound of his own heart beating.

A big, bearded man was sprawled across the woodpile, both of his large hands folded across his belly, palms down, and one leg cocked over a stump. The man's head rested on a log, his mouth parted just enough to show two rows of yellow teeth that looked like corn on the cob. His eyelids weren't completely shut, and where there should have been a moist reflection from his eyes there was instead a dull, dry membrane that looked like crinkled cellophane. His long hair and full beard was matted by blood into crude dreadlocks. The man wore a thick beige chamois shirt and jeans, and broad stripes of dark blood had coursed down both. It was Ote Keeley, and Ote looked dead.

Joe reached out and touched Ote's meaty, pale white hand. The skin was cold and did not give to the touch. Except for the dried blood in his hair and on his clothes and his waxy skin, Ote looked to be very comfortable. He could have been reclining in his La-Z-Boy, having a beer and watching the Bronco game on television.

Clutched in one of Ote Keeley's hands was the handle of a small plastic cooler minus the lid. Joe kneeled down and looked into the cooler, which was empty except for a scatter of small teardrop-shaped animal excrement. The inside walls of the cooler were scratched and scarred, as if clawed. Whatever had been in there had been manic about getting out, and it had succeeded.

Joe stood and saw the extra buckskin horse standing near the corral. The horse was saddled, and the reins hung down from the bridle. The horse had been ridden hard and had lost enough weight that the cinch slipped and the saddle hung loose and upside down.

Joe stared at Ote's blank face, recalling that day in June when Ote had pointed Joe's own pistol at his face and cocked the hammer. Even though Ote had thought better of it and had sighed theatrically and spun the weapon around butt-first with his finger in the trigger guard like the Lone Ranger, Joe had never quite been the same. He had been expecting to die at that moment, and for all practical purposes he *deserved* to die, having given up his weapon so stupidly. But it hadn't happened. Joe had holstered his revolver with his hands shaking so badly that the barrel of the revolver rattled around the mouth of the holster. His knees had been so weak that he backed up against his pickup to brace himself so he wouldn't collapse. Ote had simply watched him with a bemused expression on his face. Without a word, Joe had written out the citation for poaching in a shaking scrawl and handed the ticket to Ote Keeley, who took it and stuffed it in his pocket without even looking at it.

"I won't say nothin' if you don't about what just happened," Ote had said.

Joe hadn't acknowledged the offer, but he hadn't arrested Ote either. The deal had been struck: Ote's silence in exchange for Joe's life and career. It was a deal Joe agonized over later, usually late at night. Ote Keeley had taken something from him that he could never get back. In a way, Ote Keeley *had* killed Joe, just a little bit. Joe hated him for that, although he never said a word to anyone except Marybeth. What made it worse was when word of the incident filtered out anyway.

During the summer Ote had gotten drunk and told everyone at the bar what had happened. The story about the new game warden losing his weapon to a local outfitter

had joyously made the rounds, and it even appeared in the wicked anonymous column “Ranch Gossip” that ran in the weekly *Saddlestring Roundup*. It was the kind of story the locals loved. In the latest version, Joe had lost control of his sphincter and had begged Ote for the gun back. Joe’s supervisor in Cheyenne heard the rumors and had called Joe. Joe confirmed what had actually happened. In spite of Joe’s explanation, the supervisor sent Joe a reprimand that would stay in his personnel file forever. An investigation was still possible.

Keeley’s poaching trial date had been set to take place in two weeks, but obviously Ote wouldn’t be appearing.

Ote Keeley was the first dead person Joe had ever seen except in a coffin at a funeral. There was nothing alive or real about Ote’s expression. He did not look happy, puzzled, sad, or in pain. The look on his face—frozen by death and for several hours—told Joe nothing about what Ote was thinking or feeling when he died. Joe fought an urge to reach up and close Ote’s eyes and mouth, to make him look more like he was sleeping. Joe had seen a lot of dead big game animals, but only the stillness and the salt-ripe odor was the same. When he saw dead animals, he had many different emotions, depending on the circumstances—from indifference to pity and sometimes to quiet rage aimed at careless hunters. This was different, Joe thought, because the dead body was human and could be *him*. Joe made himself stop staring.

Joe stood up. There *had* been a monster.

He heard something and turned around.

The backdoor slammed shut, and Sheridan was coming out in her nightgown, skipping down the walk with her hands in the air to see what he had found.

“Get BACK into that house!” Joe commanded with such unexpected force that Sheridan spun on her bare feet and flew right back inside.

On his way through the house and to the phone, Joe told Marybeth who the dead man was.

2

OF COURSE, COUNTY Sheriff O. R. “Bud” Barnum wasn’t in when Joe called the dispatch center in Saddlestring. According to the dispatcher—a chain-smoking conspiracy buff named Wendy—neither was Deputy McLanahan. Both, she said, had responded to an emergency that morning in a Forest Service campground in the mountains.

“Some campers reported seeing a wounded man on horseback ride straight through their camp last night,” Wendy told Joe. “They said the suspect allegedly rode his horse right through their camp while displaying a weapon and threatening the campers with said weapon.”

Joe could tell that Wendy loved this situation, loved being in the center of the action, loved telling Joe about it, loved saying things like “allegedly” and “said weapon.” She did not get a chance to use those words often in Twelve Sleep County.

“I called out the entire sheriff’s office and both emergency medical vehicles at seven-twelve A.M. this morning to respond.”

“Did you get a description of the man on horseback?” Joe asked.

Wendy paused on the telephone, then read from the report: “Late thirties, wearing a beard, bloody shirt. A big man. Crazy eyes, they said. The suspect was allegedly swinging some kind of plastic box or cooler around.”

Joe leaned his chair back so he could see out of the small room near the front door that served as his office. Both girls were still lined up at the back window, looking out. Marybeth hovered behind them, trying to draw their attention away by rattling a box of pretzels the same way she would shake dog biscuits at Maxine to get her to come into the house.

“Why wasn’t I called?” Joe inquired calmly. “I live on the Bighorn Road.”

There was no response. Finally: “I never even thought about it.”

Joe recalled what Marybeth had said about Vern Dunnegan but said nothing.

“Sheriff Barnum didn’t mention it neither,” Wendy said defensively.

“The injured man was displaying and threatening a weapon with one hand and swinging a plastic box with the other?” Joe asked. “How did he steer his horse?”

“That’s what the report says.” Wendy sniffed. “That’s what the campers reported. They was out-of-staters. From Massachusetts or Boston or some place like that.” She said the last part as if it explained away the inconsistency.

“Which campground?” Joe persisted.

“It says here they was at Crazy Woman Creek.”

Crazy Woman was the last developed U.S. Forest Service campground on Bighorn Road, a place generally used as a jumping-off site for hikers and horse-packers entering the mountains.

“Are you in radio contact with Sheriff Barnum?” Joe asked.

“I believe so.”

“Why don’t you give him a call and let him know that the man on horseback was Ote Keeley and that Ote is lying dead on the woodpile behind my house.”

Joe could hear Wendy gasp, then try to regain her composure.

“Say again?” she replied.

JOE HUNG UP the telephone and started for the backdoor.

“You’re not going back out there?” Sheridan whispered.

“Just for a minute,” Joe said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone.

He shut the door behind him and slowly walked toward the body of Ote Keeley, his eyes sweeping across the yard, taking in the bloodstained walk, the woodpile, the canyon mouth behind the house. He wanted a clear picture of everything as it was right now, before the sheriff and deputies arrived. He didn’t want to screw up again.

Squatting near the plastic cooler, Joe drew two empty envelopes and a pencil from the pocket on his robe. Using the tip of the eraser, Joe flicked several small pieces of scat from the cooler into an envelope. He would send that to headquarters for analysis. He gathered several more pieces of scat and put them in another envelope. He sealed both and put them back in his pocket. He left the rest for the sheriff.

Back in the house, Joe dressed in his day-to-day uniform: blue jeans and his red, button-up chamois shirt with the pronghorn antelope patch on the sleeve. Over the breast pocket was his name plate, which read GAME WARDEN and under that J. PICKETT.

When he came downstairs, the girls were sprawled in front of the snowy television, and Marybeth was sitting at the table flanked by dirty dishes. She held a big mug of coffee in her hands and stared at something in the air between them.

Her eyes raised until they met Joe's.

"It'll be okay," Joe said, forcing a smile. He asked Marybeth to gather up the children and some clothes and go into Saddlestring. They could check into a motel until this was over and the backyard was cleaned up. He didn't want the kids seeing the dead man. Sheridan's dreams were already vivid enough.

"Joe, who will pay for the room? Will the state pay for it?" Marybeth asked softly so the children couldn't hear.

"You mean we can't?" Joe replied, incredulous. She shook her head no. Marybeth kept the meager family budget under a tight rein. It was the end of the month. She would know if they were broke, and apparently that was the case. Joe felt his face flush. Maybe they could stay with somebody? Joe dismissed that. While they had made a few friends in town, they were still new, and he didn't know who they could call to ask this kind of favor.

"Can we use the credit card?" he asked.

"Nearly maxed out." She said. "It might work for a night or two, though."

He felt another wave of heat wash up his neck.

"I'm sorry, honey," he mumbled. He fitted his dusty black hat on his head and went outside to wait.

3

AFTER MEASURING, MARKING, and photographing, the deputies sealed off the woodpile with yellow CRIME SCENE tape and unfurled a body bag.

Joe stationed himself outside with his back to the window so no one who looked out could see the deputies bend Ote Keeley into the bag, folding his stiff arms and legs inside so they could zip it up and carry it away. Ote was heavy, and the middle part of the bag hummed along the top of the grass as the deputies took the body out of the yard and around the side of the house to the ambulance.

Sheriff O. R. “Bud” Barnum had arrived first and had briskly ordered Joe to show him where Ote Keeley’s body was. Despite his age, Barnum still moved with speed and stiff grace. His pale blue eyes were set in a pallid leather face and rimmed with paper-thin flaps of skin. Joe watched as the blue eyes swept the scene.

Joe had expected questions and was prepared for them. He informed Barnum that he had gathered the scat evidence to send to headquarters, but Barnum had waved him off.

“Yup, that’s Ote all right,” Barnum had said, before returning to his Blazer. “You’ll write up a report on it?” Joe nodded yes. That was *all* there was. No questions, no notes. Joe was surprised and felt useless.

From the side of the house, Joe observed the sheriff as he held the mike of his police scanner to his mouth with one hand and gestured in the air with the other. By his movements, Joe could tell that Barnum was becoming frustrated with somebody or something. So was Joe, but he tried not to show it.

Joe went inside the house. Marybeth watched him nervously from her place on the couch.

“Is it gone?” she asked, referring to the body. She didn’t want to say Ote’s name.

Joe assured her that it was.

She was pale, Joe noticed. Her face was drawn tight. Marybeth rubbed her hand across her extended belly. She didn’t realize she was doing it. He remembered the gesture from before, when she was pregnant with Sheridan and then Lucy. It was something she did when she felt that things were on the verge of chaos. She held her arms across her unborn baby as if to shield it from whatever unpleasantness was happening outside. Marybeth was a good mother, Joe thought, and she reared the children with care. She resented it when outside events intruded on her family without her prior consent, permission, or planning.

“He’s the guy who took your gun a while back,” Marybeth said with dawning realization. “I’ve met his wife. In the obstetrician’s office. She’s at least five months along also.” She grimaced. “They have a little one about Sheridan’s age and I think one younger. Those poor kids ...”

Joe nodded and poured some coffee in a mug to deliver to Sheriff Barnum out in his Blazer.

“I just wish it wouldn’t have happened here,” Marybeth said. “I know these things happen but why did he have to come here, to our house? Right to our *house*?”

It’s not our house, Joe said to himself. *It belongs to the State of Wyoming. We just live here.* But Joe didn’t say that and instead went out the front door after a quick “I’ll be right back.”

Barnum was signing off from a conversation, and he angrily hung up the microphone in its cradle on the dashboard. Joe handed him the cup of coffee, and Barnum took it without a word.

“What we know so far is that Keeley went into the mountains with two other guides to scout for elk and set up their camp last Thursday,” Barnum said, not looking directly

at Joe. "They have an outfitters camp up there somewhere. They weren't expected back until tomorrow so nobody had missed them yet."

"Who were the other guides?" Joe asked.

"Kyle Lensegrav and Calvin Mendes," Barnum replied, finally looking at him. "You know 'em?"

Joe nodded. "I've run into them a few times. Their names have come up along with Ote Keeley's in connection with a poaching ring. But nobody's caught them doing anything as far as I know." Joe had once had a beer in the Stockman Bar with both of them. They were both in their mid-thirties, and both mountain-man throwback types. Lensegrav was tall and thin, and he wore thick glasses mounted on a hooked nose. He had a scrabble of blond beard. Mendes was short and stout, with dark eyes and a charming, flashbulb smile. Pickett had heard that Mendes and Ote Keeley had been in the army together and that they had both served in Desert Storm.

"Well, nobody's seen Lensegrav or Mendes," Barnum continued. "My guess is that they're trying like hell to get out of state because they shot their good old pal Ote Keeley right in the chest a couple of times, for whatever reason."

"Or they're still up in the mountains," Joe said.

"Yup." Barnum paused, pursing his lips. "Or that. The word is out to the Highway Patrol statewide to watch out for 'em. Problem is I don't know yet what they're driving. Keeley's truck and horse trailer are up at Crazy Woman Creek where they left it. We're trying to find out if one of them took a vehicle up there as well."

Joe nodded at Barnum and said "Hmmm." There was an uncomfortable minute of silence.

Sheriff Barnum was an institution in Twelve Sleep County, and he had been in office for 24 years. He rarely had opposition when he ran for election, and in the few times he had, he'd taken 70 percent of the vote. He was a hands-on sheriff, involved in everything from civic organizations to officiating at high school football and basketball games. He knew everybody in the county, and they in turn knew and respected him. Very little got by Sheriff Barnum. Over the years, he had become a storied and colorful character. Specific incidents had become legend. He had put a .357 Magnum bullet into the eyebrow of a ranch foreman who had just used an irrigation shovel to bludgeon to death his own mother, brother, and a Mexican hired hand. He had taken Polaroid snapshots of cows who had apparently been mutilated by alien beings who had arrived on earth in cigar-shaped flying objects. He had arrested a Basque sheepherder in his sheep wagon and confiscated a ewe named Maria that had been dyed pink. He had once turned back two dozen Hell's Angels en route to Sturgis, South Dakota, by firing up a 24-inch chainsaw while straddling the yellow line on the highway.

"Your office should have called me this morning," Joe said abruptly. "I was closer to the scene than anyone else."

Barnum sipped the coffee and squinted at Joe as if sizing Joe up for the first time.

"You're right," Barnum answered. Then: "Wasn't it Ote Keeley who took your gun away from you while you were giving him a citation?"

"Yes, it was," Joe replied, feeling his ears flush hot.

"Strange he came here," Barnum said.

Joe nodded.

"Maybe he wanted to take your gun away from you again." Barnum smiled crookedly to show he was joking. Barnum was wily, no doubt about it. Joe hardly knew the sheriff, but Barnum had already tweaked one of his weak spots. There was a moment of hesitation before Joe asked if Barnum planned to investigate the elk hunting camp.

"I would, but right now I'm screwed," Barnum said, banging the dashboard with his fist. "That camp is in a roadless area so we can't get to it. Our chopper's on loan to the Forest Service so they can fight that fire down in the Medicine Bow Forest. Tomorrow night's the earliest we could get it back.

"And my horse posse guys are all in the mountains already because they're all gettin' ready to go hunting." Barnum looked over at Joe, exasperated. "We can't get to that camp unless we hoof it, and I'm not walking."

Joe thought it over for a moment. "I know a guy who knows where that elk camp is located, and I've got a couple of horses."

Barnum began to object, then caught himself.

"Well, I don't see why not, since you're volunteering. How soon could you get going?"

Joe rubbed his jaw. "This afternoon. I've got to fetch my horse trailer and get outfitted, but I'm pretty sure I could get on the trail by about two or three."

"Take my guy McLanahan," Barnum said. "I'll get on the radio and tell him to grab his saddle and some heavy artillery and get his lazy butt out here. You guys might run into some bad business up there, and I want to make sure you've got 'em outgunned."

Barnum grabbed his microphone but halted before he spoke into it.

"Who is it who knows where that hunting camp is?" Barnum asked.

"Wacey Hedeman," Joe replied.

"*Wacey Hedeman?*" Barnum hissed. "He's declared that he's going to run against me in the next election, that blow-dried son of a bitch."

Joe shrugged. Wacey was the game warden in the next district but had patrolled in the Twelve Sleep area temporarily after Vern left and before Joe was assigned the position. Wacey had once mapped out all of the licensed outfitters' elk camps along the Crazy Woman drainage.

"Goddamnit," Barnum spat vehemently. "I hate it when things turn cowboy."

Barnum cursed again, then turned away to radio his dispatcher.

WACEY DIDN'T ANSWER the telephone in his home office and didn't respond to the radio call, but Joe had a good idea where to find him. Before he left in the truck to find Wacey, he kissed Marybeth and his girls goodbye. Lucy gave him a bored kiss. She didn't approve of him leaving the house at any time for any reason, and this was how she showed it. Because she was so much younger and was wise beyond her years—she had absorbed, as if by osmosis, many of the lessons her older sister had learned the hard way—Joe often treated Lucy as a fellow adult conspirator, fighting the many emerging pre-adolescent forces of her animated older sister.

Sheridan and Lucy were confused by why they had to leave their house. Marybeth was telling them how exciting it would be to stay in a motel, but they weren't yet convinced.

Joe stopped at the door and turned back. Sheridan was watching him closely.

"You okay, honey?" Joe asked her.

"I'm okay, Dad."

"Next time you say you see a monster, I'm going to believe you."

"Okay, Dad."

"You remember who's coming tomorrow night, don't you?" Marybeth asked.

He had not thought about it at all with everything that had happened that morning.

"Your mother."

"My mother," Marybeth echoed. "So we'll be back in the house by then. Hopefully, you will, too."

Joe grimaced.

4

WHILE HER MOTHER packed a suitcase in the bedroom, Sheridan did exactly what she had been told not to do and went to the dining room window to watch. However, before she did, she made sure that Lucy was still wrapped in her blanket on the floor watching television. Lucy would gladly tell on her older sister.

The man her dad called Sheriff Barnum stood in the yard near the woodpile, and another man wearing the same kind of policemen's uniform—he was younger than Sheriff Barnum but still old, like her dad—stood near him. The sheriff stood with his back to the woodpile, pointing toward the mountains and talking. His arm swept along the top of the mountains and up the road, and the younger man's eyes followed the gesture. Sheridan couldn't hear what the sheriff was saying. At one point, the sheriff walked from the woodpile to the house. He stopped squarely in front of Sheridan at the window, and Sheridan was too scared to move. Over his shoulder, to the other man, the sheriff called out the number of paces he had measured. Before turning back, he had looked down and grinned at her. It had been a kind of "get out of my way, kid" smile. Sheridan wasn't sure she liked Sheriff Barnum. She didn't like his pale eyes. She didn't like cigarettes, either, and even through the screen in the window she could smell them on his uniform.

As Sheriff Barnum returned to the woodpile, Sheridan thought about how surprised she was that this thing had happened. How could it be that what she had thought the night before was a monster from her "overactive imagination" (as her mom called it) had turned out to be real? It was as if her dream world and the real world had merged for this event. Suddenly, adults were involved. She had had a strange notion: what if her imagination was so powerful that she could dream things into existence?

But she decided this wasn't the case. If it was, she would have brought forth something much nicer than this. Like a pet—a *real* pet of her own.

Sheriff Barnum took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, shook them, and flipped one up into his mouth. It was a neat trick, she thought. She had never seen it before. The man with Sheriff Barnum reached over and lighted the sheriff's cigarette for him. A great roll of white smoke grew around the sheriff's head.

Sheridan wore her glasses. She wished now she would have had her glasses on the night before, so she could have seen the man's face in detail when he looked at her. If she would have seen him clearly, she would have trusted her own mind over her imagination and run to her parents' room instead of convincing herself that she had a nightmare about monsters coming down from the mountains.

She loved that she could see clearly now but hated the fact that she was the only student in her class who had to wear glasses. Her first day of school at Twelve Sleep Elementary was also her first day wearing glasses. She would never forget how tall she seemed to be when she looked down or how awkward she felt when she walked. The chalkboard and the words on it were in such sharp focus that they hurt her eyes. It was bad enough that she was one of the new girls in school, and the rude girls had already grouped her into a category called "Weird Country" that was made up of students who lived out of town. Or that she could already read books and say poetry she had memorized while they struggled with sentences. But on top of all of that, she also had to show up wearing glasses.

And she was the new game warden's daughter in a place where the local game warden was a big deal because nearly everyone's dad hunted. It was understood that Sheridan's dad could put others in jail. So far, in the two weeks since school had begun, she had absolutely no friends in the second-grade class.

Sheridan's only friends were her animals, *had* been her animals, and they had all disappeared. The loss of her cat, Jasmine, had devastated her. She had cried and prayed for Jasmine to come back, but she didn't. She begged her parents for another pet to love, but they said she would have to wait until she got a little older. They told her she would have to get a fish or a bird in a cage, something that didn't go outside or into the hills behind the house. She had overheard her dad telling her mom about coyotes (although she wasn't supposed to know), and she had figured out that her cat Jasmine had been eaten. Just like her puppy before that. But while those pets were nice, they weren't what she needed. She wanted a pet to *cuddle* with. She wished she had a secret pet, one that neither her parents, the rude girls at school, or the coyotes knew about. A secret pet that was just hers. A pet she could love and who would love her for who she was: a lonely girl who had moved from place to place before she could make friends and who had a little sister who was too adorable for words and a baby on the way who would command most of her parents' love and attention for ... *maybe forever*.

Then she saw something outside that quickly brought her back to earth. Something had moved in the woodpile; something tan and lightning fast had streaked across the

bottom row of logs and darted into a dark opening near the base between two lengths of wood.

The sheriff and the younger man were still talking, and they had their backs to the fence and the woodpile. What she had seen was just behind them, only a few feet away, but it didn't look like they had noticed anything. They hadn't even turned around. She could see nothing now. A ground squirrel? Too big. A marmot? Too sleek and fast. She had never seen this kind of animal before, and she knew every inch of that yard and every creature in it. She even knew where the nest of tiny field mice was and had studied the wriggling pink naked mouse babies before their eyes opened. But this animal was long and thin, and it moved like a bolt of lightning.

Sheridan gasped and jumped when her Mom spoke her name sharply behind her. Sheridan turned around quickly but her mom was looking sternly at her and not at the woodpile through the window. Sheridan didn't say a word when her mom guided her away from the window, through the house, and to the car.

As her mom backed out of the driveway and Lucy sang a nonsense song, Sheridan watched over her shoulder through the back car window as the house got smaller. As they crested the first hill toward town, the little house was the size of a matchbox.

Behind the matchbox house, Sheridan thought, was a woodpile. And in that woodpile was the gift her imagination had brought her.

PART TWO

Determination of Endangered Species and Threatened Species

Sec. 4. (a) General. - (1) The Secretary shall by regulation promulgated in accordance with subsection (b) determine whether any species is an endangered species or a threatened species because of any of the following factors:

[(1)] (A) the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;

[(2)] (B) overutilization for commercial, [sporting,] recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;

[(3)] (C) disease or predation;

[(4)] (D) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms;

or

[(5)] (E) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

—The Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1982

5

THERE WERE 55 game wardens in the State of Wyoming, an elite group, and Joe Pickett and Wacey were two of them. Wacey had received his B.A. in wildlife management while bull-riding at summer rodeos before Joe had graduated with a degree in natural resource management. Three years apart, both had been certified at the state law enforcement academy in Douglas and both had passed the written and oral interviews, as well as the personality profile, to become permanent trainees in Jeffrey City and Gillette districts respectively, before becoming wardens. Each now made barely \$26,000 a year.

As Joe drove down the two-lane highway toward the Eagle Mountain Club, he thought of how the morning had violently changed course. Ote Keeley had ridden down from the mountains in the middle of the Pickett family Sunday routine. It was a routine that had moved with them as they relocated throughout the state. It continued to Baggs in Southern Wyoming, then to Saddlestring as he worked under the high-profile Game Warden Vern Dunnegan, then to Buffalo when Joe took on his first full-fledged post as game warden. There had been six different state-owned houses in nine years, five different towns. All of the homes—and especially this one—had been plebeian and small. They were careful at headquarters not to give the taxpayers the idea that

their hunting license fees were going toward elaborate homes for state employees. The Pickett house was built into the mouth of a small canyon on a lot that included a barn, a corral, and a detached garage. They had brought their family routine back to Saddlestring district after Vern suddenly retired from the state and Joe finally got the job he wanted most, in the place he and Marybeth liked the best.

It was a job Joe almost didn't get. Vern had recommended Joe and had used his influence at headquarters to get Joe an interview with the director. In what Joe and Marybeth later called "one his larger bonehead moves," Joe had written the wrong date for the appointment with the director in his calendar and simply missed it. When Joe screwed up, he tended to do it massively and publicly. The director had been furious for being stood up and it was only through Vern's intervention that Joe was able to later meet with the director and secure the post.

Both Marybeth and Joe had commented how much bigger the house had seemed to be when Vern and his wife occupied it, back when Joe worked under Vern and he and Marybeth would visit. They both remembered sitting in the shaded backyard, sipping cocktails while Vern barbecued steaks and Vern's attractive wife, Georgia (they had no children), mixed drinks and tossed salad inside. The house at that time seemed almost elegant in a way, and both Joe and Marybeth were envious. The future seemed so bright then. But that was two children and a Labrador ago, and the same three-bedroom home was filled. After only four months in the house it seemed to be shrinking. The baby would make the house even smaller. And everything about it was falling apart. The shelf life for a state-owned and -constructed home was short.

Today was, he knew, likely to be the last Sunday for at least three months that he would be able to cook breakfast for his girls and read the newspapers—and now he hadn't even been able to do that. Big game hunting season in Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming, would begin on Thursday with antelope season. Deer would follow, then elk and moose. Joe would be out in the mountains and foothills, patrolling. School would even be let out for "Elk Day" because the children of hunters were expected to go with their families into the mountains.

Hunters began before dawn, and Joe would begin before dawn. Hunters could legally take game up to a half an hour after dark, and Joe would be out among them until well after that, checking permits and licenses, making sure that the game was tagged properly, that laws weren't broken, and that private land wasn't trespassed on. In Wyoming, the people owned the game animals, and they took their ownership to heart. Joe took his job just as seriously.

He thought about Sheridan saying "Better take your gun," and it bothered him. Sheridan had certainly noticed his Sam Browne belt and the pistol in it when he came home every night. His .270 Winchester rifle rested permanently in the window gun rack of the department green Ford pickup he drove. They knew that his job entailed carrying a gun with him. But never had either child ever suggested he go out and shoot something. Maybe they didn't realize what he really did all day. He had heard Sheridan

say in passing that her Dad “saved animals” for his job. He liked that definition, even though it was only partially true.

Joe slowed on the highway to let a herd of pronghorn antelope cross. He watched as they ducked under a barbed-wire fence and continued their journey toward the foothills, toward Wacey Hedeman’s district.

Wacey and Joe had both been trained in the field by Vern Dunnegan at different times. Vern told anyone who would listen that they were his “best boys.” Because their districts adjoined each other—the warden in the Saddlestring district and the warden in the Basin district—Wacey and Joe often teamed up on projects and investigations. They built hay fences together, shared horses and snow machines when needed for patrol, called on each other for support if necessary, and traded notes. As a result of spending many predawn hours together in one or the other’s trucks, Joe had come to know Wacey well. They had even become friends, of a sort. Wacey fascinated Joe at the same time he repelled him. Wacey knew the county and was intimate with ranchers and poachers alike. Wacey was an ex-rodeo cowboy who had an easy, oily charm that worked on just about everyone, Joe included. Even Marybeth seemed to enjoy Wacey, although she startled Joe once by saying that she didn’t trust him.

Some of the things Joe knew about Wacey would have confirmed her opinion, but he kept them to himself.

JOE TURNED HIS pickup off of the highway into the entrance of the Eagle Mountain Club. A uniformed guard in a white clapboard guardhouse waved at him to go through, and the motorized wrought-iron gate swung wide. But as Joe drove forward, the guard suddenly swung out of the door of the house and approached his window.

The guard was in his late fifties, and his uniform strained across his belly.

“I thought you were somebody else when I waved at you,” the guard said, bending his head to the side so he could see into the truck.

“You thought I was Wacey Hedeman,” Joe said. “He has a truck just like this. I’m here to see Wacey.”

The guard stared hard at Joe. “Have you been here before?”

“Once, with Wacey.” Joe let his voice drop. “Now please let me through now. There was a homicide near Saddlestring, and I need Wacey’s help on it now.”

The guard stepped back but took a moment to wave Pickett through. In his rearview mirror, Joe watched the guard step into the road and write down Joe’s license plate number on a pad he took from his pocket.

The Eagle Mountain Club was an exclusive private resort on a hilltop overlooking the Bighorn Mountains. From what Wacey had told him, initial dues to the club were \$250,000 and members joined by invitation only. The Eagle Mountain Club had only 250 members, and new members joined only when old members died, dropped out, or were denied privileges by a majority of the members. This had happened only twice to Joe’s knowledge, once to the famous televangelist who “baptized” a housekeeper by inserting the neck of a vodka bottle into her and then dunking her in the club-stocked trout pond and the other time when a member, a former astronaut, was found guilty of

beating his wife to death with a bronze replica of the Lunar Landing Module. The club had a 36-hole golf course that fingered through the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains, as well as a private fish hatchery, shooting range, airstrip, and about 60 multimillion-dollar homes that had been constructed when a million dollars was an obscene amount of money. The one thing the exclusive membership had in common was a passion for privacy. Few people in the state even knew about the Eagle Mountain Club, and access to it was purposely difficult. It was more than 200 miles from the nearest city of any size—Billings, Montana—and more than 500 miles from Denver.

The Eagle Mountain Club was nearly vacant in the fall, and Joe encountered no vehicles or golf carts on the road. Few residents stayed during the winter, and most were already gone. As he drove along the wide empty roads bordered by manicured lawns with the Bighorns looming all around him, Joe got the sense of being on top of the country that spread out around him. It was a false oasis hidden away on a mountaintop in Wyoming, a high and dry place where the grass grew only because of nonstop, unrepentant irrigation and where all of the food in the four-star restaurant was flown in from other places. Joe felt that this place didn't belong, and he knew it was there for precisely that reason. The Eagle Mountain Club predated the recent flight to the Rocky Mountains by rich celebrities by about 30 years.

Homes were set back off of the road, and most were hidden by trees. There were no street signs, and driveways to homes were marked by brass plaques imbedded in the pavement with the owners' last names. When he saw the name Kensinger, he turned.

Wacey's muddy green Ford pickup was parked at a rakish angle on the side of the massive two-level log home. Joe parked behind it and got out. His footsteps on the pavement were the only sound he could hear. Joe knocked on the door.

The wide oak front door swung open, and Wacey stood in it and squinted at Joe with a sour expression on his face. Wacey was still thin and compact—a bull-rider's body—and his mouth was hidden under a thick auburn gunfighter's mustache. The only thing he was wearing was his red chamois Game and Fish shirt.

"Take your pants off and come on in, Joe," Wacey said in a whisper. "That's what I did." A slow full-face grin started near his corners of his blue eyes.

Someone inside the dark house, a woman, asked Wacey what he was doing.

"My colleague Joe Pickett from the Saddlestring District is here," Wacey said over his shoulder. "I'll just be a minute."

Behind Wacey, in the gloom, Joe saw the form of a very white and naked woman pass. He heard her bare feet slap across the marble floor.

To Joe, Wacey mouthed the name "Aimee Kensinger." Then: "She really does like us wardens."

Despite himself, Joe smiled. Wacey was something else. Wacey had once told Joe that Aimee Kensinger, the trophy wife of Donald Kensinger of Kensinger Communications, had a thing for cowboy-types in uniform. Joe knew Wacey had been spending a lot of time of late at the Eagle Mountain Club. He also knew that Wacey's visits coincided with Donald Kensinger's business trips.

Wacey stepped out on the porch and eased the door closed behind him.

"What's going on?" Wacey asked. "I was right in the middle of something."

Joe knew what. There was a wet stain on the front tail of Hedeman's shirt where his erection stretched out at the fabric like a tent pole. Hedeman followed Joe's eyes.

"That's kinda embarrassing," Wacey said. "Guess I'm leakin' a bit. She'll make a guy do things like that when they aren't used to it."

Joe Pickett told Wacey what had happened that morning. He confirmed that Wacey did know where Ote Keeley's elk camp was located on the Twelve Sleep Drainage. He told Wacey about the cooler, and Wacey seemed interested.

"Ote Keeley. He was that guy ..."

"Yup," Joe answered sharply.

"When do we need to get going?" Wacey asked.

"Right now," Joe said. "Right now."

"I gotta call Arlene," Wacey replied, referring to his wife.

"Maybe you ought to do it from the truck."

Wacey again started his slow, infectious smile. He winked at Joe and nodded his head toward the door.

"She's gonna finance my campaign for sheriff," Wacey said in a conspiratorial voice. "And when it comes to sex, she'll try just about anything. She even shaved herself this morning. You ever mess around with a woman who is shaved clean as a whistle? It's weird. Sort of like a little girl, but not a little girl at all, you know? You just don't realize how big and ripe those lips are down there unless you can really see 'em."

Joe nodded uncomfortably.

Aimee Kensinger came out of the house wearing a thick white robe.

Joe said hello. He had met her once at a museum fundraiser dinner Marybeth had taken him to, but he knew she didn't remember him. He hadn't been in his uniform.

"Hello, officer," Aimee Kensinger said. It was a purr, a self-conscious, very obvious purr. Joe was both alarmed and aroused.

Aimee Kensinger had a wide-open healthy face framed by a bell of dark hair. Her feet were bare and her calves were trim. She wore no makeup, but her face was still flushed from whatever Wacey and she had been doing inside.

"Forget it, babe," Wacey said gently to her, giving her a brotherly punch on the arm. "He's married."

"So are you, honey," she said.

"It's different with Joe, though," Wacey answered, shrugging as if he couldn't understand it himself.

"Good for you," she said. Joe couldn't tell if she meant it or not.

6

THE COMMAND POST that had been established at the Crazy Woman Creek Campground had quickly become chaos. The murder of Ote Keeley and the possibility of an armed camp of suspects had ignited the imagination of the entire valley. A crowd had formed in the campground including off-duty Saddlestring police officers, volunteer fire department members, the mayor, the editor of the weekly *Saddlestring Roundup*, even elderly officers of the local VFW armed with Korean War-era M-1 carbines. Two local survivalists had shown up in battle fatigues with specially modified SKS Chinese assault rifles and concussion grenades hung from web belts. Sheriff Barnum didn't mind the crowd; he reveled in it. His makeshift office was established in a stout-walled Cabela's outfitter tent. His desk was a card table. Someone (Joe guessed one of the Korean War vets) told him that when he sat at the table and smoked, he reminded them of General Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh. Barnum enjoyed the comparison and mentioned it to anyone who would listen.

Joe Pickett and Wacey Hedeman saddled their horses and shook the hands of well-wishers while they waited for Deputy McLanahan to arrive. Joe had brought up his six-year-old buckskin mare named Lizzie. Joe felt like he and Wacey were star athletes of the local football team. Men clapped them on their shoulders and whacked them on the butt as they walked by. Many said they wished they were going along.

McLanahan arrived armed for a small war, and the gear he had brought would have been fine if the three of them were setting off on a land offensive with four-wheel drives and transport trucks. Unfortunately for McLanahan, this was a designated roadless area of the national forest and the only access was by foot or horseback. In his Blazer and horse trailer, McLanahan had brought hundreds of pounds of bulky outfitter tents, sleeping bags, a propane stove, blankets, cast-iron skillets, Dutch ovens and frying pans, radio equipment and a chuck box filled with plates and utensils that weighed more than 150 pounds by itself. The back of the Blazer was stacked with guns—Joe imagined McLanahan cleaned out the gun cabinet in the sheriff's office. He saw several high-powered sniper's rifles with night-vision scopes, semi-automatic carbines loaded with armor-piercing shells, a couple of MAC-10 machine pistols, M-16 automatic rifles, and semi-automatic riot shotguns. "Typical Barnum overkill," Wacey had scoffed loud enough to be heard by the crowd in the camp. A few people laughed. "Supporters," Wacey whispered to Joe.

Barnum had ordered the three horsemen to "take as much as they could," and McLanahan had loaded down the canvas panniers while Joe and Wacey stared at each other in puzzlement. Barnum made it clear that he was assuming command of the operation and that the two Game and Fish officers were subordinate to the county sheriff, which was officially true in this circumstance. He "strongly advised" that both equip themselves with more firepower. Both had sidearms—Joe had his never-fired-in-anger-and-once-swiped-by-Ote-Keeley Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum revolver, and Wacey had his 9mm Beretta semi-automatic. Finally, Wacey was persuaded to strap to

his saddle one of the carbines in a scabbard. Both had pitched in to help McLanahan, who was a boyish-looking former college ROTC officer, to load the panniers on the two packhorses so they could finally leave.

Barnum scoffed when he saw that, instead of digging into the county arsenal, Joe was taking his personal remington Wingmaster .12-gauge shotgun, which was primarily a bird-hunting weapon. If he had to take a shotgun, Barnum said, at least it should be one of the short-barreled riot guns from the truck. Joe explained that he had had the shotgun since his teens and he was comfortable with it. Joe was known as an excellent wing shot when it came to game birds or, occasionally, clay targets. Strangely, he could rarely hit a target if it was stationary, only if it was moving or flushing from the underbrush. He had the ability to hit a fast-moving target by instinct and reaction, and he never really aimed. If he aimed, he missed. Joe had failed his initial pistol test and had barely passed on his second (and last) attempt. While he was fully capable of bagging his limit of three pheasants with three well-placed aerial shots, he was unable to punch holes in the outline of an intruder on the firing range. Barnum finally persuaded Joe to at least load his shotgun with magnum double-ought buckshot shells so if he had to he could “knock down a house.” But Joe thought how odd it was to be loading the shotgun he had used since boyhood for ducks and pine grouse with shells designed solely to kill a man. But he did it, and he filled one pocket of a saddle bag with a dozen extra rounds.

Barnum briefly took Joe and Wacey aside while they waited for Deputy McLanahan to secure his panniers.

“Guess who is on the way to observe this rodeo, boys?” Barnum asked them. Joe and Wacey exchanged glances but neither knew.

“Vern Dunnegan!” Barnum clapped Joe and Wacey on their shoulders. “Your mentor. He called and left a message with the dispatch.”

“Why is Vern here?” Joe asked. Wacey shrugged.

“He was in the area and heard about it on the radio, I suppose,” Barnum said. “So don’t screw up, boys. Not only will the entire valley be watching, but Vern will be watching, too.” There was sarcasm in Barnum’s voice.

Most of the gear, including the chuck box, they left with Barnum and the bustle of people and equipment. As they finally mounted and had turned their horses to the trail-head, they could hear Sheriff Barnum, flanked by the two retired Korean War vets from the VFW post, on his radio trying to track down his missing helicopter.

“HOW CLOSE ARE we?” Joe asked Wacey as he nosed his horse through the silent pocket of aspen. In timber this thick, it was best to let Lizzie pick her own way through. He just pointed her in the general direction, which was behind and to the left of Wacey. Wacey was a few yards ahead, and he reined in his mount and leaned to the side of his saddle.

“Couple hours,” Wacey said, also in a murmur.

“That’s what I was worried about.”

Hedeman nodded. They would not make it to the outfitters' elk camp in daylight, even though getting there before dark had been the purpose of the trip.

Joe walked his horse abreast Wacey's palomino. Two aspens as thin and round as baseball bats stood between them. The grove was heavily timbered, and black roots curled up through a carpet of lemon-colored leaves.

"And here comes the reason why," Wacey grumbled.

It was hushed in the middle of the trees, the light was dappled and muted, but they could hear the clinking of Deputy McLanahan and his packhorse skirting the grove on the outside. McLanahan had fitted the packhorse with hunting panniers, and the bulging canvas bags were so wide that he couldn't follow Joe and Wacey into the grove. Joe and Hedeman caught a glimpse of the deputy down a narrow chute in the trees; it was clear that McLanahan was much less of a horseman than Joe on his worst day.

"When I'm elected I'm going to fire his butt before I even order business cards," Hedeman whispered, looking down the chute where McLanahan had passed. Joe didn't respond. There was no need to.

THEY WAITED FOR Deputy McLanahan in the clear of a saddle slope that was bordered on each side by juniper pine. Commas of snow from that morning lay in long pools of shadow cast by boulders and trees. Groves of aspen were bright yellow with fingers of crimson coursing through them. The evening sun made the colors intense, almost throbbing.

Joe thought of the contrast of the last few hours. At Crazy Woman Creek, he had seemed crowded by admirers and he felt like a member of a powerful force. Here, in the cool darkening stillness of the Bighorns, he felt tiny and insignificant.

"I'm gonna be real sore tomorrow," bellowed McLanahan as he approached.

Joe noticed Wacey shift his weight sharply in his saddle, a familiar sign of irritation.

"When you're sneaking up on somebody, you might consider keeping your voice low," Wacey hissed as McLanahan approached. "It's an old, sly Indian trick. We're assuming that the people we are sneaking up on have ears mounted on each side of their head."

Deputy McLanahan, clearly angry, started to say something but caught himself. Wacey was not fun to argue with.

"You're slow and we're late," Wacey continued in the low hiss. "We aren't going to get there with any light. We're going to have to cold camp up here and go into the outfitters' camp at dawn to see if we can catch anyone."

McLanahan's jaw was tight, and his eyes glistened. Joe felt sorry for the deputy. Much of the delay had been the deputy's fault but Hedeman was pressing the point.

"Starting late ain't my fault. Barnum read me a list of supplies to bring that was as long as your arm," McLanahan finally said, and his voice caught.

"The hell it ain't," Wacey answered, turning away and nudging his horse forward.

"Don't worry about it," Joe assured McLanahan. "Let it go."

"He don't need to say that," McLanahan answered, his bottom lip trembling. "Not that way."

Don't cry, for God's sake, thought Joe. He clicked his tongue, and the buckskin walked. He left McLanahan alone to compose himself, and he wondered what was with Wacey. Wacey seemed uncommonly irritable. He hoped it didn't have to do with the fact that the success or failure of this venture would likely become an issue in the future sheriff's race against Barnum.

THEY PICKETED THEIR horses by the blue light of fluorescent battery lamps and spread out sleeping bags tight against a granite bluff. They were close enough to the elk camp, Wacey said, that a fire was out of the question.

Marybeth had made a half-dozen ham sandwiches, and they ate them in the dark. McLanahan passed around a pint of Jim Beam bourbon, which seemed to improve Hedeman's mood, at least a little.

"I missed my son's football practice tonight," McLanahan said unexpectedly. "I'm the defensive line coach."

"You have a son?" Joe asked. McLanahan was just too young for that, he thought.

"Well, he's not actually my son." McLanahan sounded a bit sheepish. "He's the son of my fiancée. We're livin' together. She's been married a couple of times before. She's quite a bit older."

"Oh."

Wacey snorted. "What in the hell does that have to do with the price of milk?"

"First practice I missed," McLanahan said. "Twelve Sleep plays Buffalo on Friday. Home opener."

"The mighty Buffalo Bison, our nemesis," Hedeman said sarcastically. Then: "Why don't you go find your radio and tell Barnum where we're at and what we're doin'. All those folks down there will want a report so they can spend the rest of the evening second-guessing us. Let him know we'll move on the elk camp before dawn tomorrow."

McLanahan nodded and wandered away to dig through his panniers.

"Jesus," Wacey complained after McLanahan was gone. "Havin' him on the payroll is like havin' two good men gone."

"Take it easy on him," Joe said.

Wacey grunted and chewed his sandwich. "I'll be interested to find out what was in that cooler Ote had with him."

"Yup."

"I suppose it coulda been anything," Wacey continued. "Of course it might not mean a goddamn thing in the end, I guess."

Joe nodded. Then he reeled off the number of ranch houses between Crazy Woman Creek and the Pickett home that Ote Keeley could have gone to for help.

"There was a reason he came to our house," Joe said. "I just don't know what it could be."

"You're gonna send that cooler and those shit pellets to Cheyenne to get it checked out?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll know," Wacey said.

"Then we'll know," Joe echoed.

"Could be nothin'," Wacey said. "Could be one of those things we just never know, and the only guy who knows is stupid, dead Ote."

"Maybe Ote was bringing you a couple of beers," Deputy McLanahan said from the dark as he approached. "Maybe that's what was in that cooler. Maybe he thought you guys would pop a couple and forgive each other."

"Excuse me, McLanahan," Wacey said. "Did you get Barnum?"

McLanahan told Joe and Wacey that he had talked with Sheriff Barnum and told him of their status. He said Barnum had located the helicopter and the earliest it could get back up to Saddlestring was tomorrow afternoon. There had been no sightings as yet of the other two outfitters, Kyle Lensegrav or Calvin Mendes.

"Guess who else was down there at command central?" McLanahan asked, the light reflecting off his teeth.

Neither spoke.

"Vern Dunnegan!" McLanahan's voice was a mix of excitement and awe.

Joe noted that Wacey had looked sharply at him to check his reaction. Joe didn't flinch.

"Vern says, 'Be careful, boys. Make me proud.' "

"What's Barnum say?" Joe asked.

"Barnum says, 'Don't fuck up and make me look bad.' " McLanahan laughed.

Vern, like Barnum, was a kind of legend—the most popular and influential game warden ever in the area, as well as a force in the community. The kind of guy who had coffee with the city councilmen at 10 each morning in the Alpine Cafe and who was not only tougher than hell on poachers and game violators but was also known to fix a few tickets and let a few locals off the hook. Even though he was primarily a state employee, Vern always liked to think of himself as an entrepreneur. He boasted that he had 31 years of business experience. Vern was always involved with something in town, whether it was the local shopper newspaper, a video store, satellite dishes, or a local radio station. Vern always owned a share and had a partner or two. For whatever reasons, the partners always left town and Vern ended up with the enterprise. Then he sold it and moved on to the next venture. Some said he was a good businessman. Most said he was nakedly greedy, and he systematically looted each company until the partners left out of disgust and fear. Vern Dunnegan had cast a big shadow. So big, Marybeth had said, that Joe had yet to see much sunlight in the Twelve Sleep Valley as far as the community went. Vern had supervised both Wacey and Joe, and he had tutored them both in the ways of the field. No one knew more about the ways and means of poachers and game law violators—or about the vile side of humans out-of-doors—than Vern Dunnegan.

It was Vern's shadow that had probably prevented Joe from being notified that morning about the incident in the campground at Crazy Woman Creek. Vern had resigned six months earlier to go to work for a large energy company as a field executive

in “local relations,” whatever that was. The rumor at the time was that Vern had more than tripled his salary.

THEY DISCUSSED THE plan and the possibilities. They would move in on the elk camp in the predawn from three directions and close in. Wacey said he would communicate with Joe and Deputy McLanahan with hand signals. If anyone was in the camp, they would surround and disarm them as quickly as possible.

“We don’t know if these two had anything to do with Ote getting shot,” Wacey said. “Ote may have wandered out of camp on his own, run into some kind of trouble, and made the midnight run to Pickett’s house. These two might not even know where he is or what’s going on.”

“On the other hand ...” interrupted McLanahan, barely able to contain his excitement of the possibility of being part of some real action.

“On the other hand, they may have gotten drunk with old Ote and got in a fight and shot him a couple of times,” Hedeman finished. “So we’ve got to be prepared for just about anything.”

“If they’re involved they might not even be there,” Joe said. “They might have cleared out last night and they’re in Montana by now.”

JOE LAY IN his sleeping bag but couldn’t sleep. He doubted the other two could either. The stars were out, and it was colder than he had expected it to be. He could see his breath in the starlight.

His revolver was within reach on the side of his sleeping bag, and he reached down in the dark and felt the checkered grip.

Joe thought of his girls. It was only 9:30, although it seemed much later. Both girls would be in bed, but probably not asleep. More than likely, they would be pretty wound up in that motel room. Sheridan would be reading or gabbing to her bear. She used to do that at night with her kitten, and before that, her puppy. Marybeth would be reading Lucy a story or cuddling her until she drifted off. Sheridan would no doubt be checking the motel window for the approach of more monsters.

He wondered how this incident would affect his girls, especially Sheridan. It was one thing to look for monsters and another thing to actually see them. Ote’s sudden appearance had somehow thrown a new curve on things, and Joe knew Marybeth would be thinking about that. The sanctity of their little family had been violated. Ote’s blood would remain on the walk for months—and in their memories forever. Joe wondered what kind of cleaning substance he could buy that would remove bloodstains from concrete. How would Lucy remember this day? Would it make her more cautious, more suspicious? Would Sheridan wonder if her parents—especially her dad—could actually protect her from harm after all? The relationship between a father and his daughters, Joe had discovered, was a remarkably powerful thing. They looked to him to accomplish greatness; they expected it as a matter of course because he was their dad and therefore a great man. Someday, he knew, he would do something less than great and they would see it. It was inevitable. He wondered at what age his luster

would dim in Sheridan's eyes and then in Lucy's. He wondered how painful it would be for them all when they recognized it.

Joe Pickett had two passions. One was his family and the other was his job. He had tried as best he could to keep them separate, but that morning Ote Keeley had forced them together. Joe now looked at both differently and what he saw pained him. Marybeth had never actually complained about the way her life had gone since marrying Joe Pickett. Her frustration appeared in random sighs and sometimes hopeless facial expressions that she probably didn't even recognize as such—but Joe did. Marybeth had been on a career path—she was a bright and attractive woman. But by marrying Joe in college, having children, and moving around the state with him from one beat-up house to another, her life had turned out differently than she, or her hard-driving mother, imagined. Marybeth deserved a certain standard, or at least a permanent home of their own; Joe had not been able to provide either. It was eating at him, taking a million tiny bites. When she talked on the telephone to her old college friends who were traveling and managing businesses and enrolling their children in private schools, she would be blue for weeks afterward, although she wouldn't admit it. While he loved his job—he was, after all, nature boy—the guilt he felt this morning when he learned that they couldn't even afford a motel room in town still shrouded him. The exhilaration of the mountains right now brought a hard-edged sense of regret and confusion. His belief that what he did was *good*—and that he was good at it—would not put his daughters through college or allow his wife to ever take a real vacation.

Joe shifted to try to get more comfortable. He tried to think of other things but he couldn't. Joe tried to imagine what Marybeth would think if she could see him now, on a manhunt with his hand on his revolver and two (heavily armed) men sleeping next to him. It was a boyhood dream coming true; good guys pursuing bad guys. He couldn't deny the excitement that was keeping him wide awake. It would be hard to describe to Marybeth how he felt right now. He wasn't sure she would understand.

He wondered what Marybeth, the protector of his career who had never understood what Joe saw in Vern (or Wacey, for that matter), would think of Vern being back in Saddlestring. Joe tried to stave off the resentment he felt toward Vern. Vern had been good to him and had recommended him for the Saddlestring district. It wasn't Vern's fault that everybody seemed to think Vern hung the moon when it came to setting the standard for a local warden.

Too much to think about, and no conclusions to be reached.

He raised up on an elbow and in the faint light of the stars, could see Deputy McLanahan walking away from the camp to relieve himself. McLanahan couldn't sleep either.

As he stared up at the hard white stars—there were so many of them that the night sky looked gauzy—Joe realized that if things were to change for him and his family, *he* probably would have to change. Marybeth and his girls deserved better than what they had; to give them more, he would have to give up the other thing he deeply loved.

But first there was the matter of a dead man in his backyard and an elk camp a few miles away.

Wacey sighed deeply. He was snoring. He seemed to be exhausted. Joe wished he could sleep like that.

7

AT SIX A.M., they had rolled up their sleeping bags in silence, saddled up, and followed Wacey up and over the summit into the creek bottom where the elk camp was. No one had brought breakfast.

Joe was alert but not completely awake. Although he knew he must have slept, he could not recall actually waking. He had slipped in and out of a kind of cruel half-consciousness that was vivid with dreams and episodes that didn't connect.

Joe followed Wacey down a horse trail toward the camp. It was still dark enough that Wacey's worn denim jacket was out of focus. Deputy McLanahan followed Joe. No words had yet been exchanged that morning.

They tied up their horses in a stand of lodgepole pines. Wacey poured dusty piles of oats into the grass for the horses to eat and to distract them and keep them quiet while the three men walked the rest of the way up the trail to the camp. It was an hour before dawn and the mountain air was crisp. The cold that had settled in for the night was just beginning to retreat through the trees and up the slopes.

They were upon the camp in less than 30 minutes. Canvas outfitters' tents came suddenly into view, blue-gray smudges against the dark grass and trees, and when they did, Wacey dropped into a hunter's squat and Joe and McLanahan followed suit. They kept hidden from the tents by a hedgerow of three-foot young pines.

Wacey leaned into Joe and McLanahan and whispered that McLanahan should flank left and Joe right. Wacey would continue down the horse trail and hide behind a granite spur just inside the periphery of the camp. When they all found good cover where they could see into the camp, they would wait until it was light. Wacey said he would ask the outfitters to come out with their hands behind their heads. If only he spoke, he said, the outfitters wouldn't know how many men were out there. Joe was impressed by Wacey's take-charge attitude and command of tactics. Wacey seemed to be a natural and comfortable leader, and he had led them straight to the elk camp without a map. He had taken command and was not shy about it. Joe had not seen this side of Wacey before.

"Did you see the horses?" Wacey asked, in a low whisper. "There's two of 'em in a corral." Joe shook his head no. He had dropped too quickly to see anything more than the tents.

"There's probably somebody in camp after all," Wacey said, looking to both Joe and McLanahan. "Those horses are likely to notice us before the outfitters do, so keep quiet and close to the ground and out of sight."

McLanahan let out a long breath that rattled at the end of it and mindlessly caressed the stock of his shotgun with his thumb. He was anxious and probably scared. McLanahan's face no longer had the kind of whiz-bang enthusiasm for action in it that Joe had seen the night before. Joe understood.

JOE KEPT LOW and picked his way through the trees to the right side of the camp. He kept his shotgun parallel to the ground, glad he had it with him. He slid along the trunk of a thick, downed pine tree until he reached the root pan. It was there, for the first time, that he really raised up and looked at the camp.

There were three tents constructed in a semicircle, with the opening of each aimed at a fire ring. They were permanent tents with stoves inside and probably wooden floors. Black stovepipes poked from the top of each tent. A thick wooden picnic table with benches was near the fire ring, as well as stumps for the elk hunters to sit on while they drank and watched the fire at night.

The ground around the tents was hard packed by years of boots and horses' hooves during hunting season. A blackened coffee pot hung from an iron T near the cold camp fire. It was impossible to tell when the campsite had been used last.

Behind the tents, directly opposite the horse trail they had entered the camp on, was the area used for hanging elk and deer. The crossbeams for suspending the carcasses as they were skinned and cooled were wired high in the trees, as well as rusty block-and-tackle for winching up 500-pound animals. Joe could now see the makeshift lodge-pole corral through the trees.

The camp was still. Only the gentle tinkling of a foot-wide creek—the headwaters of the north fork of the Crazy Woman—made a sound. They had somehow surrounded the camp without raising warning chatters by squirrels, and the horses apparently hadn't seen them either because there was no nickering. Joe looked at his watch and waited. The fused warm light of dawn was now creeping down the summit. It was a clear morning, and the camp would soon be bathed in sunlight.

He shifted to get more comfortable and tried to imagine who might be inside the tents and what they might be doing. As he did so, he noticed a quick movement.

Suddenly, there was a shiver of the canvas on the side wall of the nearest tent. Joe eased the barrel of the shotgun through the roots of the tree so it pointed in the direction of the camp. He looked down the length of it toward the tent and the side wall.

There was another shiver, then a sharp tug from the inside. Joe watched both the side of the tent and the door for any sudden movement. Joe held his breath. A low muffled grunt came from within the tent. He raised himself up hoping to catch the eye of either Wacey or Deputy McLanahan to indicate to them there was movement in the tent but could see neither. Joe settled back down and located the safety on the shotgun and clicked it off. The beating of his own heart now rivaled the sounds of the creek.

A distinct round bulge appeared in the canvas, about a foot from the floor of the tent. The bulge slid slowly down the wall, straining at the material and pulling the

canvas tight until the bulge rested near the ground. Joe kept the front bead of the shotgun on the middle of the bulge. He thought about his historic inability to hit anything that was stationary, and it worried him.

He had never been in a situation like this before. How would he react?

Then the bulge pushed its way outside and what emerged was the black-and-white bicycle-seat head of an enormous badger. The badger's head darted from side to side, and it sniffed the air.

Joe lowered the shotgun and briefly closed his eyes. He let his breath out in relief. Then he studied the badger as it grunted and struggled its way out from under the wall of the tent. The badger was massive, the largest he had ever seen. As it scuttled away from the tent, rolls of fat shimmered under its coat, and its belly nearly dragged along the ground. Before it crossed the creek and entered the brush, it froze and noticed Joe for the first time. The badger swung its head at him and bared its teeth, and Joe noticed the pink tint of its head and mouth, the bright red of the piece of meat in its jaws. The badger had been feeding on something inside the tent. There was a brief, chilling moment when Joe and the badger stared into each other's eyes.

Then things happened too quickly. Nearly out of his field of vision, Joe saw the door of the middle tent flap open and a man step out wearing old-fashioned long-handled underwear. Someone yelled—McLanahan or Wacey—and the man reacted by turning toward the sound. A rifle barrel raised from the side of the man, and suddenly there was a rapid series of deafening explosions that split the stillness of the morning wide open like an ax to a melon.

Something struck Joe hard in the face and he found himself sitting down, his gloved hand covering a vicious red-hot sting under his right eye. He pulled the glove away and saw his own blood smeared across the leather. There were several more explosions and then a ringing in his ears. Joe scrambled back to the roots of the tree. The middle tent was now collapsing under the sprawled weight of the man who had raised the rifle. Flowers of dark red bloomed on his thermal shirt. The man was still and his arms outstretched, and his rifle was on the ground near his feet. Wacey was screaming for McLanahan to stop firing.

Then Wacey turned toward the camp: "Anybody in that tent throw your weapons out first and come out with your hands behind your heads!" Wacey shouted. "There are twelve armed U.S. marshals out here and one of your party is already down!"

Joe brought the shotgun to his cheek and pointed it toward the nearest tent. The butt of the shotgun was instantly slick with his blood. His face was now numb; he would assess his wounds when this was over.

In the camp, nothing happened.

Wacey barked out another warning. Both Joe and Wacey shot nervous looks at the body on the middle tent, and neither saw any movement. The tent was now down, and the man was partially covered by thick folds of dirty canvas that collapsed over him.

Wacey stepped from behind the rocks and slowly walked into the camp, his carbine held loosely and ready in front of him. Wacey had fired at least one shot from the

carbine, because he jackéed an empty brass shell into the grass with the lever action. McLanahan stood up from where he had hidden directly across the camp. He was reloading stubby shells into his shotgun.

You shot me, *Joe thought*. One of your pellets ricocheted and hit me right in the face, McLanahan.

Wacey had quickly determined that no one was in the tent nearest to him and had now crossed over the fire ring and approached the tent the man had come out of. Wacey squatted for a moment over the body of the man who had just been shot, apparently confirming that he would be no further trouble. Joe crossed the creek and neared the closest tent, the tent the badger had come out of, from the side.

“Anybody home?” Wacey called toward the last tent.

Joe smelled it before he saw it; when Wacey threw open the tent flap, Joe gagged and turned away.

Kyle Lensegrav and Calvin Mendes were still in the sleeping bags where they had been shot and killed two nights before, their pale naked arms and parts of their faces chewed to the clean white bone by the badger.

8

SHERIDAN SAT IN the shade of the big cottonwood tree in her backyard and ate a bowl of dry cereal with her fingers. She still wore her blue school dress but had kicked off her shoes and socks. She ate and watched the woodpile, waiting and hoping for something to happen.

Someone from town had called her mom to tell her that her dad was okay and would be on his way home soon, and now Mom was calling Sheridan’s grandmother to give her the good news. When Mom talked to Grandmother Missy, she talked for a long time. Unlike other grandmothers, Sheridan’s insisted that her grandchildren call her by her proper name. Likewise, Missy never referred to her grandchildren as grandchildren. Sheridan felt that Missy was embarrassed that she even had grandchildren. Sheridan always felt a little silly calling a lady of her grandmother’s age “Missy.” It seemed like such a lightweight name.

Mom said that the bad guys had been caught and that Dad had been hurt a little but that he would be all right. Dad would have to spend the night in the hospital in Saddlestring and answer a lot of questions and then he’d be home. So that would be good.

The hotel had been okay for a night but Sheridan was glad to be back home. It had been fun. For dinner, she and Lucy had eaten popcorn shrimp that was delicious, and there were more than 30 television channels in their room. There was an elevator to all five floors, and she and Lucy had spent hours going up and down on it. There was a game room where she begged her mom to play pinball with her, and her mom had agreed. Her mom could actually be kind of fun when she wanted to be, and it

surprised Sheridan that Mom had played pinball before. She even knew how to bump the console with her hip to manipulate the steel ball. It was nice not to have to make the bed in the morning, and Mom said it was okay to leave the towels on the floor of the bathroom, which was a treat. But by then Sheridan was ready to leave and go to school. Lucy wanted to stay. Mom said Lucy liked luxury, just like Grandmother Missy.

In school, the rude girls had gathered around her and asked her questions about the dead outfitter and her Dad and what had happened in the mountains. Sheridan was for once the center of attention, and she liked that. The girls who had called her Weird Country now wanted to be around her because she had seen a real live dead man. They asked her what the dead man looked like, how his eyes were. The monster, in a strange way, had brought Sheridan not only a secret but a lot of luck. She liked the new good luck her secret had brought her. One girl, named Melanie, who was popular and had never spoken to Sheridan before, asked Sheridan if she wanted to be her best friend.

She had almost told her mom about what she had seen in the woodpile while they were in the hotel but had decided not to do it. Sheridan reveled in her secret, and wanted to see the animals again. She knew somehow that what she had seen in the woodpile was important. If seeing a dead man caused all of this attention, what would happen if people knew about the secret pets?

When Sheridan got home from school, it looked like Mom had tried to scrub the blood off of the sidewalk and had thrown away the lengths of wood from the top of the woodpile that had blood on them. Sheridan could still see some of the stain on the walk but she had to look hard to do so.

A small sound pulled her attention away from the walk. Sharp black eyes looked out at her from the woodpile and she held her breath, afraid even the slightest movement would scare the little creature away. She didn't know how long it had been watching her, and she had not seen it poke its head out from between the ends of two thick logs. The creature was perfectly still and hard to see at first.

The little animal had a round knobby head and large, black shiny eyes. Its ears poked up straight and round from its head like a cartoon Mickey Mouse. It had a tiny pink nose at the end of a slim snout, and it looked chinless. The animal was light brown with a dark stripe that came over the top of its head and down between its large eyes. She could see a long, thin neck behind its head but couldn't see the creature's body in the shadows of the logs. All that was visible was one small foot with slender fingers and nails poised around the bark of the log it stood on. The creature's hands were delicate and well-formed, and they looked capable of grasping and picking up small objects.

Sheridan was delighted that the creature had not retreated into the logs yet, but stayed and let itself be looked at. She liked the creature's big, dark eyes, and thought that the animal not only looked cute but smart as well. Its eyes were intelligent and sparkling.

Without breaking her gaze with the animal, she reached down into the fold of her dress and grasped a handful of Cheerios. Trying not to make her movements too quick, she threw the cereal toward the woodpile. Cheerios rained on the logs and the creature popped quickly back inside.

She was starting to regret what she had done—she thought she had scared the animal back into hiding—when the little round head reappeared. This time, Sheridan sat still, trying to quiet both her heart and her breath. She was so excited that she wanted to shout, but she didn't dare.

"Hello again, little guy," Sheridan whispered.

The creature was now leaning farther out of the logs than it had been before. She could see its tiny shoulders and clawlike front feet. Its long, narrow body was now several inches out of the hole in the wood. The dark strip ran down its back as far as she could see. The creature focused on a Cheerio directly below it in the joint of a branch. It looked from the Cheerio to Sheridan and back to the Cheerio. Suddenly, in a lightning movement, it shot completely out of the hole, stuffed the Cheerio in its cheek, turned like a little, brown tornado, and vanished back into the woodpile.

Sheridan let out a long whistle. "Wow," she said. "Wow."

She scooped the rest of the cereal from her dress and the grass and tossed it in handfuls toward the woodpile. She hoped the creature would now know the sound for what it was—food.

And then there were three. Their heads popped out of the side of the woodpile. *Pop, pop, pop*. She instantly recognized the first creature she had seen as the biggest and darkest. There was also a lighter brown animal with a smaller head. And the smallest one was almost light yellow in color and with a sleeker look about it. She felt happily overwhelmed by the six shiny eyes on her, and she giggled and covered her mouth.

One by one, with the large, dark animal leading the way, the creatures shot out of the woodpile, gathered cereal, crammed their cheeks, and zipped back into holes in the logs. By the third trip, they all seemed more comfortable, and not as manic in their movements. The big, dark one ventured the farthest from the woodpile. It stood straight up on its hind legs. Then it used its front paws to stuff a Cheerio into its now-fat cheeks. It looked alert—and comical. Now it stood just a few feet away from Sheridan.

"What are you doing, Sherry?"

Lucy's voice scared Sheridan as much as it did the animals. All three creatures disappeared quickly back into the woodpile.

"What were those things?" Lucy asked. Lucy sat down in the grass next to Sheridan. Lucy could be so annoying.

Sheridan explained in a finger-pointing, big-sister way that the animals were her secret pets. She told Lucy not to say anything to Mom about them. Lucy didn't really understand. She kept asking if she could play with them now.

"If you tell Mom and Dad about those pets, they'll die, and we'll be in A LOT OF trouble," Sheridan hissed. "All of my pets die when people know about them!"

“Can they be my pets, too?” Lucy asked.

Sheridan fought the impulse to say no and made a decision to bargain instead. “They can be our pets,” she said. “But they’re a secret.”

“Can we name them?” Lucy asked. She always wanted to name everything. Sheridan agreed.

Then she sent Lucy back inside with the empty bowl to ask for more dry cereal.

9

THE HELICOPTER FINALLY arrived at the outfitters’ camp late in the afternoon to airlift bodies both alive and dead to the Twelve Sleep County Memorial Hospital. Sheriff Barnum as well as officers from the State of Wyoming’s Department of Criminal Investigation (DCI) were waiting at the hospital to talk to Joe. He was interviewed at least five different times by different men, including Sheriff Barnum. Although Joe could not say he actually saw the man point his rifle at Wacey or Deputy John McLanahan, he could say that he saw the man raise the weapon. Was it possible the shooting victim was raising his hands above his head to surrender at the time? Joe said he didn’t think so. The state investigators didn’t press that line of questioning.

By the time they were done, Joe hoped he had told the same story to each investigator, that there were no inconsistencies. It was apparent though, by the tone and questions of the last interviews, that the shooting was considered justified.

Remarkably, the man who had been shot at the elk camp was still alive and had been airlifted to Billings for massive surgery. The last Joe had heard, the man was reported to be in critical condition and not expected to live through night. The victim had been shot seven times, including five partial and somewhat reckless shotgun blasts (McLanahan) and two .30-caliber rifle bullets (Wacey).

The man who had been shot was Clyde Lidgard, a local from outside of Saddlestring who lived in a wreck of a house trailer on the road to the landfill. Lidgard was a mentally unbalanced modern-woodsman type who lived on a disability pension from the lumber mill as well as fees he collected for looking after summer cabins in the mountains. Lidgard was not an outfitter, and as far as anyone knew, he had never associated with any of the three murdered men. Joe had once been to Lidgard’s trailer after someone had called the office and reported a wounded mule deer limping around near the dump. Joe couldn’t find the deer, and he went to Lidgard’s trailer to see if Lidgard had seen the animal. Clyde Lidgard was not inside the trailer at the time but was instead hiding in the outhouse. Joe heard him in there and waited for him to come out. Joe had heard from someone that Lidgard didn’t like visitors and that his outhouse was his hideout of choice. After nearly fifteen minutes, Lidgard had stuck a gray, craggy face outside the door.

“Ain’t no sick deer here,” Lidgard had bellowed.

“How do you know I was looking for a deer?” Joe had asked back.

“Go away,” Lidgard had croaked. “You is on private property!” He had pronounced it “propity.”

Lidgard had been right, and since Joe hadn’t seen any sign of a deer, dead or alive, he had left. As Joe had driven his pickup along the rutted trail toward the road, he had watched in his rearview mirrors as Clyde Lidgard had scuttled from the outhouse into his trailer. The next time he would see Clyde Lidgard would be as he came out of the tent in the elk camp and walked into a firestorm of shotgun blasts. But in the confusion at the elk camp, Joe had no idea who the man was.

Lidgard was considered crazy but not dangerous, despite the fact that he was rarely seen in the mountains without his ancient .30-.30 lever action rifle. No one had ever seen the 9mm semiautomatic handgun they had found stuffed in Lidgard’s coat pocket, but few people knew Lidgard well at all. It would be a couple of days before the pistol could be confirmed to be the murder weapon of all three outfitters. Why Lidgard had stayed in the camp after shooting the men—two while they slept in their tent—was unknown and the subject of much speculation. Maybe he wanted the camp for himself, one of the state investigators said. Maybe he just didn’t know what to do, McLanahan guessed. Or maybe he was waiting for someone, Barnum said.

Joe thought about the fact that men like Clyde Lidgard were not the aberration in places like Saddlestring that many might think. Mountain towns and out-of-the-way rural communities all had men like Clyde Lidgard in and around them. Stops at the end of the road collected Clyde Lidgards like dams collected silt.

WACEY CAME INTO Joe’s hospital room that night after Marybeth had left. Wacey looked even more exhausted than Joe felt. Wacey said the investigation was continuing, but it would probably be wrapped up soon. All of the evidence indicated that the shooter was Clyde Lidgard. All they were waiting on was the report from DCI that the gun found on Lidgard was in fact the gun that had been used on the outfitters. Wacey said he had talked to reporters not only from the local papers but to radio and television reporters as far away as Denver. He told Joe, not without a hint of a sly grin, that he, Joe, and unfortunately Deputy McLanahan were being thought of as heroes. Wacey said the whole story was being treated as quite a big deal and had made all of the wire services. A stringer from Cnn had interviewed him on camera, and the piece was supposed to be broadcast that night. Barnum, though, was being questioned as to why he sent the small party into the mountains without backup and why it took so long to airlift them all out with a wounded suspect.

“I’m looking good and Barnum’s looking bad,” Wacey said. “I can live with that.”

“I bet you can,” Joe said. “Now answer one question for me.”

“Fire away.”

“Was Clyde Lidgard raising his rifle to shoot at you?”

Wacey shook his head no. “Not at me. He was aiming it at McLanahan. That’s why McLanahan started blasting.”

“Then why did you shoot him twice? McLanahan was shooting buckshot, but you nailed the guy twice in the lungs with your rifle.”

Wacey shrugged. "Wouldn't you want me there and ready if Clyde Lidgard had raised his rifle at you?"

NOT LONG AFTER Wacey left the hospital room, Joe felt another presence near his bed. When he opened his eyes, someone was looming over him in the dark. He hadn't realized that the lights in his room had been turned off. And he didn't understand how anyone other than a doctor could be in his room. For a moment, he forgot to breathe. But then he recognized the silhouette as belonging to Vern Dunnegan, his old supervisor, the man who cast the big shadow. Vern clicked on the bedside lamp.

"Hello, son," he said gently.

Joe could see Vern clearly now. Vern had gained some weight, but he'd been portly to begin with. Vern had a trimmed, dark beard flecked with gray that bordered a round, jovial face. He had a round nose and probing, dark eyes. His movements, despite his bulk, had always been swift, and he gave the impression of a man who carried himself well. Vern had a quick, jolly chuckle that would burble out at any time, in any situation. The chuckle often disguised what Vern was really thinking and what he might say or do. It was one of the things Marybeth had never liked about him. She found Vern patronizing, especially toward Joe. She said he was calculating and manipulative, and she didn't like her husband to be manipulated. As warden, Vern had an extremely high opinion of himself and his influence in the county and the state. Generally, he was right. People knew him and respected him. Many feared him. But he had always considered himself to be a mentor to Joe. Vern's dealings with Joe had always been fair, and to Joe's advantage. It was Vern who had fought for Joe's moving back to the Saddlestring district, and he had made it happen. The fact that Joe was one of Vern's favorites didn't do him any harm within the agency either.

Vern sat down on the bed near Joe's knees. Joe felt the mattress sag. "I just talked to Wacey," Vern said. "My boys did all right up there. How's your cheek where old Deputy McLanahan shot you?"

Joe nodded and said he was okay, just tired. Absently, he touched the bandage on his face.

"Need a drink? I've got my flask in my pocket. I'm drinking Maker's Mark these days instead of that old Jim Beam I was used to. I've moved up the bourbon hierarchy."

Joe shook his head no. He remembered how angry Marybeth used to get when he returned home late after drinking with Vern, pretending he'd "just had a couple of beers."

Vern seemed to read his mind.

"How many kids do you and Marybeth have now?"

"Two. Sheridan and Lucy. And Marybeth's pregnant."

Vern chuckled and shook his head. "A loving wife, two wonderful kids. A house with a picket fence. Literally a picket fence. D'you still have your Lab?"

"Maxine. Yes."

Vern continued to shake his head and chuckle.

"Tell me about Ote Keeley," Vern said.

Joe told him all of the details that Sheriff Barnum had never asked him about. Dunnegan waved his hand when Joe began to recount the actions of the EMTs.

"Interesting," Vern said. "You sent the shit pellets in?"

Joe nodded.

"Heard anything?"

"Not yet. I plan to call tomorrow."

"Let me know, will you? I'm still interested in this kind of stuff."

"Yup."

"How's Georgia?" Joe asked.

"She's fine, she's fine. She's living pretty well on the alimony I pay her," Vern said.

"I hadn't heard," Joe said, taken aback.

"You know, Joe, I came to a realization. That realization is that I'm a promiscuous man. I wasn't doing her any favors staying with her and chasing women on the side, as you know. One morning about eight months ago, I just woke up and rolled over and looked at her puffy face and decided I didn't want to ever do it again. Simple as that. I wanted to wake up next to other bodies—younger bodies, older bodies, bodies with big lips and big breasts. I wanted to hear other women's voices. So I packed my stuff and I didn't see her again until court."

Dunnegan smiled and shrugged, showing Joe palms-up and his 10 stubby fingers. "It could happen to anyone," Vern continued. "Men are promiscuous. That's what we are. We try to pretend otherwise, but deep down we know it's true. We wake up with hard-ons and don't really care who's next to us as long as we can poke her."

Vern let out his trademark happy chuckle but his eyes were on Joe's face. In fact those eyes never left Joe's face as Vern talked, as he changed subjects from this to that, as he prodded and tested for what made Joe react. It was this probing, mildly sarcastic, offbeat quality that had made Vern such a good interrogator when he was a game warden.

"I mean it could happen to anyone except Joe Pickett, who is clean and pure and good," Vern said.

"I'm not sure exactly what you mean by that," Joe said.

Vern leaned forward and rolled the bed tray to him so he could put his elbows on it. "Marybeth is a fine woman, I'm sure," Vern said. "But wouldn't it be fun to get a piece of somebody else? Did you ever meet Aimee Kensinger? Don't you think about that? She likes guys like us. Guys in uniforms, who carry guns and work outside."

Joe looked away. He didn't like where this was going.

"Look at you, Joe. Tall, rangy. Gold-flecked brown eyes. Babes love solid guys like you."

"You didn't come here to talk to me about that," Joe said.

Vern chuckled and slid a paper napkin out from beneath a water container on the tray. Joe watched as Vern unfolded the napkin, then refolded it until it was in the shape of a rectangle. Vern drew a pen from his shirt pocket.

"This is the state of Wyoming," Vern said, sketching the border of Yellowstone Park in the northwest corner and the ranges of the Rocky Mountains from top to bottom on the napkin. Vern found the motorized bed control and raised up the head of it so Joe could see clearly.

"Joe, what we've got here are two pipelines currently under construction." Vern drew two heavy black lines from north to south on the east side of the mountains. "The idea is to start at the natural gas fields in Alberta, cross Montana and Wyoming, and be the first to hook up to the energy system in Southern California. InterWest Resources, my new outfit, are the good guys. CanCal, our competitors, are the bad guys. Each pipeline costs about a million dollars a mile to build. Whoever gets there first is going to spend a fortune in order to make a gazillion dollars. Whoever gets there second just spends a fortune."

On the napkin, Vern drew the CanCal pipeline as it ran through the Powder River Basin to Central Wyoming near Lander then took a sharp left through the Wind River Mountains.

"CanCal is working on environmental and regulatory approvals to take their pipeline over South Pass and on to L.A." For Los Angeles, Vern drew a set of dollar signs. "The hoops these companies have to go through to build the line are fucking insane. There's environmental impact statements, federal and state easements, private property easements. It's unbelievable. InterWest has as many lawyers on the payroll as it does pipe fitters. The capital outlay is unbelievable to accomplish something of this magnitude."

Joe simply nodded. The race to California by the two companies had been a fixture of state news for more than a year. He watched as Vern lowered his pen to the end of the InterWest line on the napkin.

"I met the InterWest boys when they first came to Saddlestring about two years ago. They contacted me because I knew everybody and everything." Vern chuckled and his eyes moved to Joe's face. "The InterWest boys had been looking at the topo maps, and they saw that if they could take their pipeline through the Bighorns then they might gain six months on CanCal and be the first to California. They asked me if it was possible to do this. I told them it could be done if they had the right front guy working the landowners, the Feds, and the state land guys. 'Give the right guy a checkbook,' is what I told them."

Joe reached out and spun the napkin around. The pipeline ran straight through the mountains and through the Twelve Sleep Valley.

"The right guy was me, of course," Vern said. "I negotiated with them for a real salary for the first time in my life and one percent of the stock in the company. I promised them I would deliver a route for their pipeline and by God if I didn't get it done."

Joe looked up from the napkin. "You have?"

Vern sat back triumphantly. His eyes seemed to glow. "Private easements are done, state lands are cleared legally, and all we're waiting on is the final approval from the Forest Service on the environmental impact statement and approval at a few town

meetings, and we'll be bringing the pipeline over the top," Vern said. "Saddlestring is dying, Joe. This pipeline will bring in a bonanza for the whole county. It'll be like the oil-boom days of the early eighties once again. People around here will have good paying jobs again."

Joe shook his head. What a gamble Vern had taken with the community and environment.

"InterWest needed someone who knew these people so they came to me. They needed someone who was trusted—and clean as a whistle-pig. You're that same kind of guy, Joe."

"Are you offering me a job?"

Vern leaned forward and spoke softly. "I'm testing the water."

"What's the job pay?"

"Three times what you're making, Joe. For the life of the project. Five to ten years, maybe more. Who knows after that." Vern slipped the flask from his hip pocket and poured some in a water glass. He offered it to Joe, who shook his head no, then sucked on it himself. "Maybe some stock options, too."

Joe sat back in the bed. He felt hot. It was as if Vern had somehow read his thoughts while he had been in the mountains the night before.

"You've got a wife and kids, Joe. You're a nice, wholesome guy. You're a goddamned hero right now. No one could ever doubt your sincerity when you talk to them. You deserve a lot better. You're working for nothing. You have a family, and a picket fence, and a dog. You," Vern said, letting the chuckle start low in his belly, "are an endangered species. There ain't many like you, Joe."

Vern slipped his pen back in his pocket and pulled out a business card. Joe read it:

Vernon S. Dunnegan

Land Manager

InterWest Resources

"Call me," Vern said, standing up. "Do it soon."

10

AT JOE'S INSISTENCE, the doctors grudgingly released him not long after Vern Dunnegan's visit. They had strongly suggested Joe stay in the hospital and rest but Joe had no intention of following their advice. I'm fine, he said. As much as he wanted to call Marybeth and have her come pick him up, he didn't. It was late and the girls would be in bed—he didn't want to wake them. He signed off on the insurance paperwork and located his pickup in the parking garage. As he swung the truck out onto the street, one thought kept repeating over and over in his mind: *eight miles on the right-hand side and we're home*. As he swung off of the Bighorn Highway onto the narrow gravel strip near his house he thought: *my wife and my girls, my anchors, will be inside*. The discussion with Vern had left a bad taste in his mouth.

The simple acts of turning off the headlights, pulling the keys from the ignition, and crawling out of the pickup were difficult in themselves. He was worn out and almost drunk from fatigue. He rubbed his eyes as he let himself in the front gate. The only thing that had kept him going for the last few hours was the prospect of getting home. Now that he was home, it was as if he were imploding. They had kept him overnight in the hospital for observation, and Marybeth had come alone to confirm that he was all right. The double-ought buckshot had chipped his cheekbone and stopped there, and it was easily removed. He would have a scar there for the rest of his life.

The first person he saw when he stepped inside his home was his mother-in-law, Missy Vankeuren, curled up on the couch with dozens of glossy magazines splayed like a massive poker hand on the floor beneath her. She was wearing a cream cashmere sweater and black stirrup pants. Her dark hair was cut close to her face and, as usual, she didn't look her age. She was and always had been an attractive woman. When she looked up, there was no doubt she read him like a book, because he was too tired to feign a hardy welcome. In fact, in all that had happened over the last three days, he had forgotten she was coming.

"I never get a chance to read at home," was what she said by means of a greeting. "So I brought my magazines with me, and it's wonderful to have the time."

"That's great," Joe said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. Missy lived in Phoenix now, Marybeth had told him, dating a wildly rich and influential cable television magnate who was part of the Arizona political glitterati (Missy dutifully sent Marybeth society page clippings from the *Arizona Republic* and *Phoenix Gazette* that mentioned her name). She no doubt had little time between functions to read all the back issues of *Glamour*, *Gourmet*, *Southern Living*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Condé Nast Traveler* that were arranged on the floor.

Marybeth arrived from the hallway and had on her perfect hostess face with the big grin.

"The girls wanted to stay up, but I finally put them to bed. They're awake right now and want a goodnight kiss."

"That I'd be glad to do," Joe said.

He squeezed Marybeth's hand as he walked past her and opened the door to the girls' bedroom. The light was on and they were reading. He kissed Sheridan in the top bunk and Lucy in the bottom bunk.

"What happened to your face?" Sheridan asked.

"Just an accident," Joe said, involuntarily reaching up and fingering the large bandage beneath his eye.

"That's not what I heard," Sheridan said, propping herself up on her pillow. "At school they said you got shot."

"It was an accidental shooting," Joe said.

"Will you tell us about it tomorrow?" Sheridan asked.

Joe paused. "You girls get to sleep," he said. Lucy rolled her eyes and covered herself with the sheet.

"I've been looking out this window," Sheridan told him. "I haven't seen anything. No more monsters."

"You won't," Joe assured her. "That's all over now."

Lucy was faking sleep. It was something she did to punish her father for being away. He kissed her and told her good night, but she held firm and wouldn't acknowledge it, except for a hint of a smile.

JOE POURED HIMSELF a bourbon and water in the kitchen. He had not taken any of the painkillers the doctor had prescribed for him, saving them for tomorrow.

"It says here that fat grams aren't everything," Missy Vankeuren said from the other room. Joe assumed she was talking to Marybeth. "You still need to watch calories. Just because something is low in fat doesn't give you license to eat like a pig."

He drank a quarter of the drink, then topped off the glass with more Jim Beam. Joe was not much of a drinker anymore, although he'd done more than his share in college and when he worked with Vern. But his intake of alcohol always increased proportionately when his mother-in-law was around.

He came into the living room and sat down. Marybeth had just come from tucking in Lucy. She frowned at Joe, and then smiled at her mother. She offered to get her mother something to drink, and Joe realized he was being scolded for not asking her himself.

"Do you have any red wine? That would be nice."

"Joe, would you open a bottle?" Marybeth asked.

"Where is it?"

"In the pantry," Marybeth said. "And I'd like a glass also."

Joe found the wine on a shelf in the pantry. There were a half dozen bottles to choose from. All must have been purchased within the last couple of days, anticipating her mother's visit, because normally the only thing on that shelf were boxes of breakfast cereal.

Marybeth, Joe grumbled to himself as he located the corkscrew, was a wonderful strong woman with strong opinions ... except when her mother was present. When Missy flew in to visit, Marybeth shifted from being Joe's wife and partner to Missy's daughter, the one with unrealized potential, according to Missy. Her favorite child, according to Missy. Marybeth's older brother, Rob, was a loner who failed to keep in touch, and her younger sister, Ellen, had devoted her life to following the alternative rock band Phish on their never-ending concert tour. Marybeth was the one, Missy had once said while she was drunk and sobbing, who married too early and too low (she may have forgotten about those comments by now, but Joe hadn't). Rather than being the well-dressed, wealthy corporate lawyer she should have been, Marybeth was the wife of a game warden in the middle of Wyoming who made less than \$30,000 a year. But, Missy no doubt felt, *it still may not be too late*. At least that's what Joe read into many of the things Missy said and did.

They had discussed all this before, and Marybeth thought Joe was too hard on her mother. Marybeth said that yes, she did sometimes assume the role of daughter when

Missy was around, but after all she *was* Missy's daughter. Her mother just wanted the best for her, which was what mothers did. And Missy was proud of Joe in a way, Marybeth had said. Joe appeared to be faithful and a good father. Marybeth could have done much worse, Missy felt.

Joe's mood was sour when Marybeth came into the kitchen. He poured two glasses and handed them to her.

"Cheer up," Marybeth said. "She's trying to be pleasant."

Joe grunted. "I thought I was being the model of propriety."

"You're not being very accommodating," Marybeth said, her eyes flashing. Joe stepped up close to Marybeth, so that what he had to say couldn't be heard in the next room. He had just been through three of the strangest days of his life, he told her, from finding Ote's body, to the shoot-out at the outfitters' camp, the finding of the mutilated bodies, to the barrage of questions afterward, to the hospital. His mind was reeling, and he was beyond tired. The last thing he needed upon finally getting home was Missy Vankeuren. The Missy Vankeuren who at one time resented the hell out of her daughter for having the gall to make her a *grandmother*, of all things.

Real anger flashed in Marybeth's face.

"It's not her fault all of this happened," Marybeth said. "She's just here to visit her granddaughters. She had nothing to do with a man dying in our backyard. She has a *right* to visit me and her granddaughters, who think she's wonderful."

"But why does it have to be now?" Joe asked lamely.

"Thomas Joseph Pickett," Marybeth said sharply, "go to bed. You're tired and disagreeable, and we can discuss this tomorrow."

Joe started to say something, then caught himself. Her tone was similar to what he heard when she was mad at the children and used their formal names. It was fortunate she was right because Joe didn't have the energy for an argument.

Joe entered the living room, and Missy looked up from her magazine. Her eyebrows were arched in an expectant way. Joe found this annoying. She obviously knew there had been words in the kitchen.

"I'm going to bed," Joe declared. He knew he sounded simple.

"You should do that," Missy said, purring. "You are probably just dead with all you've gone through."

"Yup."

"Good night, Joe. Sweet dreams." Missy dropped her eyes back to her magazine and, with that gesture, dismissed him.

WHEN MARYBETH CAME into the bedroom later, Joe woke up with a start. He had been dreaming he was back in the mountains, back at the elk camp, reliving what had happened. In the aftershock of the shooting, time had become fluid, and Joe had drifted with it, like a raft on a river. The bodies of the outfitters were still in their tent where they had been found. Clyde Lidgard was still wrapped in the folds of the tent. He was moaning. They covered him with blankets. Pink bubbles formed and popped from a hole in his chest as he breathed. Deputy McLanahan was getting violently sick

in the bushes from the tension and the release. The stench from the tent drifted to Joe and Wacey when the wind shifted.

In his dream, they were still waiting on the helicopter to arrive. They were all hungry.

“What time is it?” Joe asked.

Marybeth was scrubbing her makeup off in the bathroom adjacent to the bedroom. She was scrubbing hard. She was still mad.

“Midnight,” she said. “Mom and I were visiting. I didn’t realize how late it was getting.”

“Honey, I’m sorry,” Joe said. “I just need sleep.”

“So sleep.”

“I will, if you’ll get me that bottle of pills from the counter.”

Marybeth brought him a glass of water and the bottle of painkillers and returned to the sink. She had stripped to her bra and panties to scrub her face. Joe thought she looked good standing there. She stood on her toes to get her face closer to the mirror, and he admired her legs. Marybeth was not extremely thin, but she was firm and still looked athletic. The only place she looked pregnant was her belly. Marybeth carried her babies high and straight out as if she were already proud of them. She looked perfect as far as Joe was concerned. She could be fun in bed, and Joe suddenly wanted her there.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, looking at him from the mirror.

“I’m thinking you look pretty good.”

“And ...” Marybeth said, “aren’t you too tired?”

“And I want you.”

Marybeth stopped scrubbing and turned toward him. “Honey ...” she said, almost pleading and gesturing toward the closed bedroom door.

“She can’t hear us,” Joe replied dryly. “I’ll make a point not to shout.”

Marybeth glared at him. “It’s not that. You know I don’t like to do anything when my mother is in the house.”

Joe knew. They had had this discussion before, many times. But he continued, “Do you think she thinks the kids were conceived by divine intervention?”

“No,” Marybeth said, “but I’m just not comfortable when I know she’s in the house, under the same roof. If I’m not comfortable, how fun can it be?”

Joe conceded the point, as he had conceded the point before.

“Okay,” he said, covering up. “No hard feelings.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad you understand. I know it’s irrational, but it’s the case here.”

When she came to bed, he was still awake.

“Do you want to know who came in and saw me last night in the hospital?” Joe asked as she snuggled into him.

“Wacey.”

“Well, him, too,” Joe said. “But after Wacey, Vern Dunnegan came to call.”

He felt her stiffen.

"I really hate hospitals," Joe said.

"I know you do. What did Vern have to say?"

"He just wished us well and said he thought I had done a good job up there in that camp with Wacey. He said he was proud of his two boys."

"You're my boy, not Vern's," Marybeth said. Then she cautioned him. "Be careful with that man. I don't trust him. I never have."

Joe chuckled at that. The pills were beginning to work. He felt numbing waves slowly wash over him. "He just stayed for a minute, but he said he wanted to meet with me later this week. He said he wanted to talk about my future."

"What did he mean?" Marybeth asked haltingly.

"He kind of offered me a job with InterWest Resources," Joe said. "For a lot more money."

"You're kidding," Marybeth said, sitting up and turning to him.

"I'm not," Joe said, patting her.

"Well, my goodness, Joe," she said. "*My goodness.*"

PART THREE

Lists

(c) (1) The Secretary of the Interior shall publish in the Federal Register [, and from time to time he may by regulation revise,] a list of all species determined by him or the Secretary of Commerce to be threatened species and a list of all species determined by him or the Secretary of Commerce to be an endangered species. Each list shall refer to the species contained therein by scientific and common name or names, if any, specify in respect to such species over what portion of its range it is endangered or threatened, and specify any critical habitat within such range. The Secretary shall from time to time revise each list published under the authority of this subsection to reflect recent determinations, designations, and revisions made in accordance with subsections (a) and (b).

—The Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1982

11

THE TRIPLE FUNERAL for the three dead outfitters was unlike anything Joe Pickett had experienced before. Ote Keeley's wish that he be buried in his 1989 Ford F-250 XLT Lariat turbo diesel had caused complications with the staff of the Twelve Sleep County Cemetery in that they were required to dig the biggest hole in the ground they had ever dug. The rental of an earthmover was necessary, and the size of the hole created a fifteen-foot mound of fresh soil at the head of the grave. The ceremony had been organized by the widows of Ote Keeley and Kyle Lensegrav (Calvin Mendes was unmarried) and the "unconventional" Reverend B. J. Cobb of the First Alpine Church of Saddlestring.

Joe Pickett stood soberly in his suit, hat, and bandage on a hillside listening to Reverend Cobb give the eulogy as he stood perched on the hood of the pickup. The Keeley and Lensegrav widows and children flanked the crowd and the truck. Behind the families, a blue plastic tarp hid a large pile of something.

It was a beautiful day at the cemetery. A very light breeze rattled the leaves of the cottonwoods, and the sun shone down brilliantly. Dew twinkled in the late fall grass, and the last of the departing morning river mist paused at the treetops.

Although Reverend Cobb's eulogy covered the short history of the outfitters—boyhood friends who hunted in Mississippi, joined the army together, served the country well in Operation Desert Storm, and relocated to the game-rich mountains and

plains of Wyoming—Joe couldn't stop looking at the massive hole in the ground in front of the pickup and wondering what was under the blue tarp behind the families.

The mourners consisted of a few fellow Alpine Church members and several of the outfitters' drinking buddies. Joe noticed that there were no other outfitters present, and when he thought about it, he wasn't that surprised. Keeley, Lensegrav, and Mendes had been drummed out of the Wyoming Outfitters Association for their radical views and tendency to commit obvious game violations.

"They were salt-of-the-earth types," intoned the Reverend Cobb, a pudgy bachelor with a crew cut, who was known for his survivalist tendencies and small but fervent congregation. "They loved their trucks. They were throwbacks to a time when men lived off of the land and provided for their families by their outdoor skills and cunning. They were prototypes of the first white Americans. They were frontiersmen. They were outdoorsmen. They were sportsmen of the highest caliber. And these boys knew their calibers, all right. They ate elk, not lamb. They ate venison, not pork. They ate wild duck, not chicken ..."

The three mahogany-stained pine caskets were in the bed of the pickup, two side-by-side on the bottom and the third laid across them on top. Joe couldn't tell which casket contained whom. The weight of the caskets made the four-wheel-drive pickup list to the rear. The Reverend Cobb finally finished up his comments about what the outfitters ate.

Ote Keeley's wife wasn't hard to pick out as she was the only pregnant woman there. She was thin and small and severe. Joe guessed that normally she wouldn't weigh more than 100 pounds. She had short-cropped blond hair and a pinched, hard face. Her mouth was set around an unlit cigarette. She tightly held the hand of a small girl who wanted to go look at the big hole instead of stand there respectfully with her mother. The girl—Joe would later learn that her name was April—was a five-year-old version of her mother but with a sweet, haunting face.

Joe had introduced himself to her before the services began and had said he was sorry about what happened and that he had children, too, with another on the way.

She had glared at him, her eyes narrowing into slits. "Aren't you the motherfucking *prick* who wanted to take my Otie's outfitting license away?" Her Southern accent made the last word sound like "uh-why."

The little girl didn't flinch at her language, but Joe did. Joe said he was sorry, that this was probably a bad time, and scuttled back to the loose knot of mourners on the side of the pickup.

The Reverend Cobb ended his eulogy by saying that there were certain sacred items that the families of the deceased wanted their loved ones to have with them in the afterlife. At his cue, Mrs. Keeley and Mrs. Lensegrav peeled back the blue tarp to reveal a large pile of objects.

"Kyle Lensegrav would be lost in heaven ..." the Reverend paused until Mrs. Lensegrav turned from the pile with her arms full, "... without his Denver Broncos jacket."

Mrs. Lensegrav approached the pickup and draped the jacket over one of the coffins on the bed of the truck.

“Where Kyle will be, the Denver Broncos will always be predominantly orange and blue, as they were in the seventies, eighties, and mid-nineties before they changed into their new hideous uniforms,” thundered the Reverend.

Joe watched in fascination as Mrs. Lensegrav placed Kyle’s favorite hunting cap, spotting scope, Leatherman tool bag, meat saw, Gore-Tex boots, and saddle scabbard on the coffin.

Mrs. Keeley was next.

“Not every man has the skill, determination, and acumen to bag a moose that will forever be listed as one of the top five Boone and Crockett-sanctioned trophies of north America!” the Reverend said. “But Ote Keeley can make that claim and these massive beauties ...”

Mrs. Keeley struggled under the weight of the huge moose antlers—rumor had it that Ote had actually shot the animal illegally within Yellowstone Park and sneaked it out—and Joe felt an urge to step forward to help her. He caught himself because he wasn’t sure that she wouldn’t attempt to skewer him. Somehow, she summoned the strength to place the antlers over the top coffin.

“... will forever be mounted above Ote’s celestial easy chair.”

There were more items for Ote, including a television, VCR, tanned hides, his happiness is a warm gut pile T-shirt. Calvin Mendes was probably shortchanged in the ceremony overall because the only items the women put on his casket were his bound volumes of *Hustler* magazine and a case of Schmidt’s beer.

Then the Reverend Cobb started up the pickup, eased it into drive, and leaped from the cab. Joe watched, as did the rest of the small crowd and the families, as the Ford inched forward and descended into the massive hole. It settled to the bottom with a solid thump, and no one wanted to look down to see if the caskets had jarred loose and broken open.

Joe wondered, as he walked down the hill through the cemetery, how long the engine of the pickup would keep running and whether or not the cemetery staff would choose to shut it off before they filled up the grave with the earthmover.

12

AFTER THE FUNERAL, Joe went on patrol. It felt good to get out of town and away from the cemetery. He had packed his lunch that morning in the kitchen and filled a Thermos of coffee. Maxine had been waiting for him in the back of the pickup, her heavy tail thumping the toolbox like a metronome as he approached.

He patrolled a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) tract to the west of Saddlestring, a huge, nearly treeless expanse that stretched from the river to the foothills of the Bighorns. It was deceptive, complicated country, and he had always liked it. From a

distance, it appeared to be simply a massive slow rise in elevation from the valley floor to the mountains. In actuality, it was an undulating, cut-and-jive high-country break land of hills and draws and sage-brush. The landscape had folds in it like draped satin, places where shadows grew and pronghorn antelope and large buck mule deer thrived. A spider's web of old unnamed ranch roads coursed through it. Herds of deer and antelope had long learned how to take advantage of the land and the landscape, to live within its folds and draws and literally vanish when pursued. The antelope especially used the starkness of the break land for defense, and they often frustrated hunters by silhouetting themselves on the tops of hills and rises so that they were so much in the open there was no way to sneak up on them. The only trees in the area were the silent markers of hundred-year-old failed homesteads and cabins.

It was opening day of antelope season, the only day there would be real hunting pressure, and it was Joe's job to check the licenses and wildlife stamps of hunters. Most of the hunters he had checked that morning were local and out for meat, although he did visit the trailer camp of an outfitter with four hungover Michigan auto executive clients who were wearing state-of-the-art outdoor gear and were struggling through a Dutch-oven breakfast. Everyone was legal, with the correct licenses and stamps. They planned to go hunting later in the day when they sobered up.

Joe idly wondered how Missy Vankeuren would react when Marybeth told her about Joe's job offer with InterWest Resources. Joe harbored a feeling of sweet vengeance and secretly wanted to be there when Marybeth gave her the news. It had been a special time in bed after he told Marybeth, and they had both been a little giddy. Marybeth had even broken her rule about not having sex while her mother was under the same roof. Neither before or after had Marybeth said she wanted Joe to take the job, and Joe didn't say he wanted to take it. But the possibilities electrified them both. He wondered now if Missy would warm up to him, now that she knew that his salary could soon triple. In his experience, the women in his life were brutally, honestly practical. Maybe she would think that her daughter had done all right after all.

As he left the camp, he heard the booming of rifles in the distance, and he drove toward the direction of the shots. There was the closed-in *pow-WHOP* sound rather than an open-ended explosion, and he knew that whoever had been shooting had hit something. They had; three local hunters had killed four antelope, which was one too many. The hunters explained to Joe that a bullet had passed through a buck and hit a doe unintentionally. Although Joe believed them, he gave them a speech about shooting into the herd instead of selecting specific targets, and he ticketed the hunter who had killed two. Joe asked the hunters to field dress all four animals and to deliver the extra animal to the Round Home, a halfway house in Saddlestring that fed and housed transients and local alcohol and drug addicts. More than half of the Round Home population consisted of Indians from the reservation, and they preferred wild game meat.

THROUGHOUT WHAT REMAINED of the morning, Joe moved from camp to camp, stopping periodically to survey the landscape through his spotting scope. He

liked working outside, in the break lands and in the mountains. He liked working outside and coming home and taking a shower before dinner. When he went to sleep most nights, he was physically tired. He knew there were not many jobs left like his anywhere in the world.

Joe vividly remembered, as a 10-year-old, when it first came to him that being a game warden was the thing he wanted to do. He and his younger brother, Victor, had been sleeping outside in the backyard like they did most nights in the summer—in sleeping bags spread out on the trampoline. The stars were bright, and there was a light night breeze. Inside the house, his parents were yelling, fighting, and drinking, which was not unusual for a Friday night. Outside in his sleeping bag, young Joe Pickett read the latest issue of *Fur, Fish, and Game* magazine under a flashlight. He couldn't wait until the magazine was delivered every month, and he read it from cover to cover, even the advertisements in the back that sold animal traps and urine lures and do-it-yourself boats. Victor slept next to him in his sleeping bag, or at least Joe hoped he did. It was worse than usual with his parents that night. Inside, there had been a loud crash of glass, and he had heard his father scream "Goddamnit, woman!" and then his mother was crying and his father was consoling her. It went back and forth like this a lot, only usually it wasn't this loud. While he read and hoped his little brother slept, he heard the clattering rattle of ice in a shaker. His father was the last of the great martini drinkers, and this was the eighth time he had heard the shaker that night. The hollering and crashing was punctuated by periods of silence marked by ice rattling in a shaker, as if both parties had agreed upon time-out while they refueled. Joe knew the neighbors had probably heard the commotion as well.

His flashlight was dimming but he hadn't finished reading yet, so he climbed down from the trampoline and tried to sneak through the house to his bedroom where he kept fresh batteries. He didn't want to be seen and he didn't want to see his parents, but he stepped on broken glass in his bare feet in the kitchen and trailed bloody footprints down the hall carpet, all the way to his room. On the way back outside, with two D batteries in his pajama pockets, he met his mother in the hallway. She was drunk and sentimental, the way she sometimes got, and she rained sloppy kisses on him (which he preferred, considering that if she were sober, he'd have gotten a violent rage and open-handed slaps because of what he had done to the carpet) and guided him into the bathroom. While she tried to pull slivers of glass from his feet (she said she was sorry for breaking the glasses on the floor earlier), he watched her and winced. Her makeup was smeared with tears, and a cigarette danced in her mouth as she talked. It reminded him that she thought of herself as an early sixties hipster. Because she was in such bad shape, she tended to drive the slivers deeper into his foot with the tweezers before regaining her balance enough to pull them out. He told her he was okay even though he wasn't, and he bandaged his own feet while she went out to rejoin his father and the pitcher of martinis.

With new batteries, the flashlight glowed white and strong and he lay on his stomach in his sleeping bag and wished he lived somewhere in the mountains, anywhere other

than where he was. It was then that he read the advertisement in the back of the *Fur, Fish, and Game* magazine:

HOW TO BECOME A GAME WARDEN

Don't be chained to a desk, machine, or store counter. This easy home-study plan prepares you for an exciting career in conservation and ecology. Forestry and wildlife men hunt mountain lions, parachute from planes to help marooned animals, or save injured campers. Live the outdoor life you love. Sleep under pines. Catch your breakfast from icy streams. Live and look like a million!

Under the text was a photo of a rugged and smiling proto-game warden in a six-point hat holding up what appeared to be a bobcat. The game warden had indeed looked like a million.

"I want to be a game warden," Joe had said aloud.

"Me, too," Victor mumbled from deep in his sleeping bag, surprising Joe. "I want to go where you go."

Joe reached in Victor's sleeping bag and found Victor's hand. They shook on it. The next day, Joe sent in his five-dollar fee. It had set him on this course.

Victor never followed. Ten years after that night, while Joe was in his second year of college and Victor Pickett was a senior in high school, Victor broke up with his girlfriend, got drunk, and drove his car into the massive stone arch to Yellowstone national Park's north entrance. It was three in the morning, and he was going 110 miles per hour.

No one ever knew why Victor had traveled for two hours to get to Yellowstone to do what he did. Joe could only speculate that it had something to do with a vicious emotional brew of alcohol and violence and the dream escape from both that a place like Yellowstone seemed to offer.

JOE PARKED HIS truck on a hilltop that allowed him to see most of the break land, and he ate his lunch and drank coffee. He mounted his spotting scope on his window and left the radio on. The sun had burned off the early morning damp and the day was warm, dry, and cloudless.

From this vantage point, Joe watched as a scenario developed far below him. A large herd of nearly 80 pronghorn antelope were spread out along the top of a plateau, warily eating grass and moving east to west. To the west, snaking along a four-wheel-drive road, was a single white vehicle. The occupants of the vehicle were below the rim of the plateau where they could not be seen by the herd. From the movements of the antelope, Joe could tell they had not yet noticed the white vehicle.

Chewing on a chicken salad sandwich, Joe focused on the white truck through his spotting scope. He recognized the vintage International Scout and the two older hunters who were driving it. Joe watched as the hunters stopped their vehicle and slowly walked up the side of the plateau. It took nearly a half an hour for the hunters

to get to the top. Once there, they hunkered down behind a reef of tall sagebrush to take aim.

Joe leaned away from the scope and watched the herd in its entirety. The herd, as a single unit, suddenly jerked to life and rocketed east along the plateau, each animal trailing a thin plume of dust. Then the delayed sound of two heavy shots, one a definite hit, washed up to him over the distance. He lowered his eye to the scope again and could see at least one downed antelope in the distance. One of the hunters was now walking toward it, and the other was going back to get the Scout.

Joe washed down the last of his sandwich with coffee, then started the pickup and began to move over the hill. The herd was now a long way away, still running fast. He could no longer make out individual animals, just a rapidly retreating white cloud of dust. Pronghorn antelope were the second fastest mammals on earth—only an African cheetah could outrun them.

By the time Joe drove his pickup over the rim of the plateau, the hunters had completely field-dressed the pronghorn and were in the process of attaching the back legs of the animal to a hook tree. He recognized the men as Hans and Jack, a retired ranch hand and retired school teacher from Saddlestring. Hans now ran a janitorial business part-time, cleaning downtown commercial buildings such as the drugstore and the video rental store. Hans and Jack had hunted together for more than 30 years, and they had developed antelope hunting into an annual craft. Their Scout was a customized traveling meat-processing plant. The older they got, the more refinements they made to compensate for their age and the more their appreciation for taking care of and eating game meat grew. First it was the old freezer they packed with ice that filled most of the bed of the small pickup. They had learned to cool down the meat as soon as possible to prevent any spoilage from the warm days of September. Then they had added the winch and the crane to elevate the carcass from the ground in order to skin it and further cool it out.

They showed Joe their newest invention, a five-gallon gravity-based water tank with a hose that they could use to wash and scrub the carcass down once it was skinned. Joe watched as the hunters quartered the animal into sections and rotated each section on the winch to the icebox. Hans's movements were getting shakier with each year, Joe noticed, and Jack kept his distance when both of them were skinning with their knives.

Then Hans asked Joe a strange thing.

"You ever heard anything about endangered species being found up in the mountains, Mr. Pickett?"

"What?" Joe asked, suddenly paying more attention to what the two old men were saying.

"*Hans*," Jack said, eyeing his partner.

"Just wondering." Hans said with a bemused, holier-than-thou expression on his face. Hans and Jack exchanged glances, and went back to their work. Joe waited for more that finally came.

"It'd probably be best for everyone if nothing was ever found," Hans said, looking up at Joe. "My guess is that we wouldn't be able to hunt out here anymore if someone thought there were endangered animals out here."

"Damned right," Jack said.

"Why'd you bring this up?" Joe asked. "Do you know something?"

"No reason," Jack said.

"Just bullshitting you," added Hans.

"If you know something, you need to report it," Joe said looking from one to the other. He couldn't tell whether he was being fooled with or not.

"And that's what we would do," Jack assured Joe. "Indeed we would."

"Indeed," Hans echoed.

It had been a strange interlude, Joe thought.

When they were done and the Scout was hosed down and cleaned, Jack and Hans offered Joe a cold beer from the cooler. He thanked them but declined, and he wished them luck for the rest of the day. He knew that if Hans and Jack didn't get their second antelope today, they eventually would, so he would see the Scout out in the break land every day until that happened. Hans and Jack had the patience of the retired, and they were both known as good hunters and good cooks.

Joe had no problem with hunters hunting for meat. He felt, compared with buying it at the supermarket in cellophane-wrapped parcels, that hunting was basically more honest. He had never understood the arguments of people who opposed hunting on principal while eating a cheeseburger. He thought it was important for people to know that animals died in order for them to eat meat. The process of stalking, killing, dressing, and eating an animal was much simpler and easier to understand to Joe than having a cow killed by a sledgehammer-swinging meat-processing plant employee and having the eventual results appear as a small packet in a shopping cart. He appreciated people like Hans and Jack.

For Hans and Jack, hunting for meat was still a way of life and not really a sport. The greeting of "Got your elk yet?" was as common as hello in the small mountain towns, and the health and size of game herds was a matter of much public concern and debate.

Joe figured this was why the murders in the elk camp were the talk of the town. The killing of three outfitters realized every hunter's nightmare: that out in the field someone may be hunting for *them*. No one had ever heard of such a thing happening before. Sure, there were accidental shootings and incidents of fistfights and threats—the kind of things that would inevitably happen when men (there were very few women in the elk camps) left their jobs for a week or two and got together in the mountains to hunt. But considering the number of guns and the gallons of alcohol available, deliberate killings during hunting season were incomprehensible to the people of Saddlestring.

And the more Joe thought about it, the more he realized that the killings were incomprehensible to *him*.

FEELING GOOD ABOUT the day and the job he had done, Joe worked his way through the break land toward the road that would take him back into town. Vern Dunnegan had called him early that morning, before the funeral, and asked Joe to meet him at five in the Stockman's Bar. If it was like the old days, Vern would be in the last booth on the right, past the pool table. That was Vern's booth.

13

THE STOCKMAN'S BAR was a dark place where they served shots and beer under the dusty heads of local game animals and where the walls were covered with black-and-white photos of local rodeo contestants from the forties and fifties. No matter what day or hour it was, there seemed to always be the same number of patrons. Joe walked past a dozen men on stools, toward the pool table in the back. A hanging Coors-beer lamp illuminated the green felt of the pool table and highlighted the side of Vern's face. Vern was in his booth, and he had company.

"You're early." Vern said as a greeting, extending his hand toward Joe. "Joe Pickett, this is Aimee Kensinger." She was in shadow. Joe's eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark bar.

Joe took off his hat. "We've met."

"See, I told you that," Aimee said to Vern.

Vern chuckled and gestured for Joe to sit across from him in the booth.

"Will you drink a beer with me?" Vern stated more than asked. "Aimee's got to get going."

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten about that," Aimee said sarcastically. Joe liked her voice. As his eyes adjusted, he could see she was wearing some kind of fuzzy, black sweater and a thin gold necklace. She was smiling at him. "I'll see you around, Joe Pickett."

Vern stood and let her out of the booth. She tousled Joe's hair as she left, which embarrassed him. She was a beautiful woman, no doubt about that. Vern followed her as far as the bar and returned with four shots of bourbon and four mugs of beer on a tray.

"Happy hour," Vern said. "Two for one." He downed a shot and chased it with beer. "You're looking good, Joe. How's the pellet wound?"

Joe told him it was fine and took a long drink from a mug. The cold beer tasted good. The after-image of Aimee Kensinger hovered next to Vern.

"She still likes me," Vern said, smiling. "Even though I don't wear the uniform anymore."

Vern threw another shot down his throat. "She likes you, too." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Joe didn't respond. He didn't want to go there.

Joe tried to gauge how much Vern had been drinking. This certainly didn't seem to be his first shot of the afternoon, judging by how flushed his face was. Vern had always been a hard drinker, and there had rarely been a night after work when Vern

didn't suggest they stop for one or two. But since Vern had returned, Joe had yet to see him without bourbon within his grasp.

"Have you given what we talked about any thought?" Vern asked.

Joe nodded.

"Well?"

"I need to discuss it with Marybeth," Joe said. "We really haven't had a chance to talk it over yet."

Vern's eyes never left Joe's. "She's a smart woman," Vern said. "She'll steer you in the right direction. D'you want me to talk to her?"

"That won't be necessary." Joe felt a twinge of resentment toward his former boss. Vern obviously thought he could talk Marybeth into making Joe take the job. Vern thought he could talk anybody into anything. Usually, he could. Vern was a highly intelligent man and very persuasive. But for a reason Joe couldn't quite articulate, he found himself resisting the job offer.

"I know one thing," Joe said, drinking at the beer. "I know I won't be ready to make any big moves until these outfitter murders are finally solved."

Vern sat perfectly still. He looked at Joe with disbelief.

"What in the hell is there to solve, Joe?" Vern asked, his voice low and tight. "Clyde Lidgard shot three local white trash outfitters, and you guys shot him. Case closed."

"There are too many unanswered questions," Joe said quickly. "Why did he do it? Why was he up there? Why did he stay there if he did it? Why did Ote Keeley come to my house? What was in that cooler? In my mind, there are a lot of things that have to be answered."

Vern sat perfectly still with a look of outright contempt on his face, his eyes boring a hole in Joe. Although he felt his resolve weakening, Joe looked back and did not flinch. He steeled himself against Vern, determined to not let him talk him out of continuing the investigation.

"Joe," Vern said, his voice barely over a whisper. "Let's you and me take a couple of minutes and talk about the *real fucking world*." Vern bit off the last three words with a vehemence that caught Joe completely off guard and unnerved him.

"I don't know the answers to those questions, and I frankly don't give a shit," Vern hissed. "Murders are messy. When the killer is shot before he can talk, there are all kinds of loose ends. This is not an exact science—you should know that by now. These things aren't always wrapped up neatly. Sometimes when it's too neat, an innocent man goes to prison, but usually the guy is scum and should be in there anyway. Don't beat yourself up trying to put every piece together. Forget about it and move on with your life, Joe."

Joe thought about what Vern said. And he thought about Vern. There was an urgency there Joe couldn't understand and hadn't expected.

"What about the cooler Ote brought to my house?" Joe asked. "What was in it?"

Vern brought his hand down on the table with a wet slap.

“Again, who the fuck cares?” Vern asked, reaching over and taking one of Joe’s shots. “Let it go.”

“I talked to a couple of hunters today who asked me if I knew anything about an endangered species being found in the mountains,” Joe said. “They wouldn’t elaborate, and I don’t know if they were kidding or not.”

“Who were they?” Vern asked. He knew everybody.

“Hans and Jack.”

“Fuck ’em,” Vern said, dismissing them. “Coupla gossipy old hens.”

“I don’t know about that,” Joe said. “I always thought they were all right.”

“Joe...” Vern sighed.

“I’ve got an obligation to find out and report on it,” Joe said. “You know that.”

Vern sneered back. “An obligation to whom?” he asked. “The Wyoming Game and Fish Department? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service? The Sierra Fucking Club? The president of the United States?”

“Vern,” Joe reasoned. “You know what we’re supposed to do if we find something like this. Or even suspect it. And what if it’s tied to the outfitter murders in some way?”

Vern rolled his eyes. He used to do the same thing when he thought Joe had said something incredibly naive.

“You know, Joe, what I’m about to say will shock you,” Vern said. “But I know good men who have found an endangered species on their land and shot it and buried it without a second thought rather than announce it to the world. I know a rancher over by Cody who cornered some kind of wolverine-type creature that he *knew* was supposed to be extinct. He blew that little sucker away and fed the pieces to his dogs. That rancher knew that if he had reported it, he would have been kicked off of his own land so that a bunch of bark-beetle elitists could claim they were saving the world.”

One of the men from the stools at the bar weaved near their booth as he made his way toward the bathroom. Vern leaned across the table to Joe and kept his voice down.

“Do you realize what would happen to this valley if it got out that there might be something in the mountains? Even if it was nothing more than a silly rumor started by a couple of gossipy old hens? Even if there was no more to it than a couple of future Alzheimer’s candidates blabbering into the wind? Or even if you, as the game warden, announced that you thought there was something up there?”

“Think of the people who work in the lumber mill,” Vern said. “Think of the logging truck drivers, the cowboys, the outfitters, the fishing guides. They’d be unemployed while the Feds roped off the entire valley for the future. Environmentalists from all over the country would move in with their little round glasses and sandals and start giving press conferences on how they’re here to protect the innocent little creatures from the ignorant *locals*. Whether or not anything was ever found up there, the environmentalists would keep things tied up in the courts for decades just so that they can tell their members they’re actually doing something with their dues.

“Third-generation ranchers would lose their ranches. Support people—teachers, retailers, restaurant owners—would lose their jobs or move on eventually. All because Joe Pickett, master game warden extraordinaire, suspects that there might be some rare *thing* in the mountains.

“Half the people in this town would hate your guts,” Vern said. “Some would lose their jobs. Your cute little girlyies would catch all kinds of horrible crap in school. They would bear the brunt of it, Joe, and it would all be your fault.”

Joe found himself breaking his gaze with Vern and looking down at the table, but thinking, *InterWest Resources and their pipeline wouldn't do too well either.*

Vern continued, “It might be different if the endangered species laws either made any sense biologically or if they weren't just political mind games. But neither is true. Listen.”

Vern went on to recount how there were more than 950 plants and animals listed as either “endangered” or “threatened” and an additional 4,000 species that were candidates for future listings. And how 20 years and billions of dollars later, fewer than 30 species have come off the “endangered” list. He said the laws were hypocritical, that species considered “cute,” like wolves and grizzly bears, fared better than species that were ugly to human eyes, and no rational scientific basis was used. He said he had looked at the numbers and figured out that more than \$190 million had been spent on bald eagles, northern spotted owls, red-cockaded woodpeckers, grizzly bears, West Indian manatees, Florida scrub jays, and whooping cranes. Then he spoke in broad, global terms and stated that at least 99 percent of all species that had ever lived on earth had become extinct naturally, without man's “interference.” Mass extinctions had happened since the dawn of time. Snail darters, Colorado squawfish, spotted owls, and Mount Graham red squirrels wouldn't be missed by anyone or anything.

“Animals die, Joe,” Vern said. “Species go belly up. It happened before the first fish crawled on land and figured out lungs, and it will continue to happen. What gives us the right to be so arrogant that we think we can control what lives and what dies? We aren't as almighty as we like to think when it comes to affecting the real world, the natural world. All of the nuclear bombs on earth have about one ten-thousandth the power of the asteroid that slammed into the planet and killed all of the dinosaurs. What humans can do to change the planet is puny. We're deluding ourselves if we think we're so fucking smart that we can either save or create a species. How do we know that by saving some little dickey bird that we aren't preventing a new and improved dickey bird from evolving? Who do we think we are?” Vern asked. “Who the hell are we *to take on God?*”

Joe sat back. He felt as though he had been pummeled.

Vern noted the reaction and, obviously thinking he had persuaded Joe, drank the last shot of bourbon and smiled.

“Speaking of God,” Vern said. “Have you ever heard of the God Squad?”

Joe shook his head no.

“It’s a real thing. I didn’t make this up. It’s composed of the secretary of interior, the secretary of the army, the secretary of agriculture, and a couple of other guys. It is their job, when it comes down to the nut cutting, to decide which species live or die in the national interest. Can you believe the incredible arrogance of that?”

Joe and Vern finished their beers in silence. As Joe got up to leave, Vern reached out and held his arm. Their eyes locked.

“There is an offer on the table, Joe. The window of opportunity for that job offer is starting to close. If you choose not to take advantage of it, you will be making a mistake.”

Joe was unsure whether he was being advised or threatened.

“I’ll let you know, Vern,” Joe said. “Seems like there are a lot of things I need to decide.”

“You’ll do the right thing,” Vern said, patting Joe on the hand. “You’re a good man, Joe, and you’ll do the right thing.”

14

SHERIDAN AND LUCY named the largest creature—the first one they had seen—Lucky, the smaller, brown creature Hippity-Hop, and the long, thin creature Elway. They decided the animals were a family, and a happy one. Lucky was the dad, Hippity-Hop was the mom, and Elway was the son. The names, they thought, matched their personalities. And boy, could they eat.

They ate everything. Not only would they emerge from the woodpile for Cheerios, but they would stuff bits of hot dog, luncheon meat, and vegetables into their cheeks. The only thing they didn’t seem to like were jelly beans, and that upset Lucy because she had a whole plastic purse full of them.

During dinner, Sheridan had learned to hide bits of food in her napkin to take out to the backyard later. Lucy ate all of her dinner, but she would gladly sacrifice her snack because she wasn’t much on sweets. Together, while Mom was clearing dishes or talking on the telephone or visiting with Grandmother Missy, Sheridan and Lucy would ask to play in the backyard (the wish was always granted) and then go feed the secret pets.

Lucky, Hippity-Hop, and Elway weren’t silent after all. They could chirp and chatter and make a trilling sound like a muted baby’s rattle when they were annoyed or playful. Sheridan sometimes thought the animals were so loud that there was no way Mom or Grandmother Missy wouldn’t hear them, but they never seemed to.

Lucy would eventually give the secret away, Sheridan thought. She was just too little to keep her mouth shut. Just that evening after dinner Lucy said she wanted to go outside and “feed Lucky.” Sheridan explained that Lucky, along with Elway and Hippity-Hop, were their imaginary pets. Mom complimented Sheridan for playing so nicely with her little sister. Grandmother Missy beamed at them both.

When the creatures were done eating or didn't emerge from the logs, Lucy wanted to "play animals" with Sheridan. Sheridan went along, which meant Lucy pretended she was one of the creatures and Sheridan was feeding her. Sheridan would throw imaginary food on the grass and Lucy, a good mimic, would replicate the creatures as they picked up the food in their claws and stuffed it into their cheeks.

Sheridan knew it wouldn't last. Something would eventually happen. It always did.

But while the creatures were alive and playful, and while they just belonged to Sheridan (and Lucy), she would enjoy it. Having the secret and seeing those little faces pop out of the woodpile was a wonderful treat—and something she looked forward to every afternoon on the bus ride home.

While it lasted, it was magic.

15

JOE WENT BACK to the break lands before sunrise. He drove there in a heavy, wet mist and had to use the four-wheel drive to get to the top of his lookout hill. The day broke wet and dark, and the rain increased. The clouds were low and filled the sky, and the water pooled on the slick bentonite clay of the plateaus or created chocolate brown ponds or streams that foamed through draws. The valley was socked in, and from what he could see through his spotting scope, the antelope hunters had stayed in their camps. The roads had already deteriorated and were either marble-slick or mushy, depending on the terrain. He decided to get out of the area while the option was still available. On the way back he winched out a crew of hunters stuck in a ditch and followed them down to the main road.

Once he reached home, Joe left his boots and yellow slicker in the mudroom, put his hat crown-down on his desk, and called Game and Fish Headquarters in Cheyenne and asked for the Wildlife Biology Section. He told a technician about the package he had sent them and asked whether the contents had been examined yet. He was asked to hold.

From his chair, he could smell coffee from the kitchen, and he could hear the murmuring of Marybeth and her mother at the table.

At last a man identifying himself as the chief biologist came on the line. Joe had heard of him but had never met him. Joe listened to him and felt his scalp twitch.

"What do you mean you don't have it?" Joe asked.

"Exactly that," the biologist said, the righteous annoyance of a higher rank apparent. "No one here has seen it or recalls receiving it. How did you send it to us?"

Joe described the small box wrapped in brown paper and tape.

"You sent it regular mail? not UPS? not Federal Express? not registered mail?" the biologist fired at Joe. "So there's no receipt. You sent it so there was no way to trace it?"

Joe felt his temper rise. He kept his voice low and even. "I called ahead and was instructed to send it by mail," Joe said. "I was told that in these days of limited state budgets, we were to avoid extravagances like Federal Express."

"Who told you that?" the biologist asked flatly.

"I think it was you," Joe said. The voice sounded the same. "I called you the day I found it."

There was a long, frustrated sigh over the telephone. "Well, we don't have it."

"Can you look again? It's important," Joe said. "Nothing I've had examined has ever been lost before, either from there to here or from here to there."

There was a long silence. "Sure, we can look. But no one here recalls getting it."

He asked Joe to confirm the address he sent it to and the section. He asked Joe if he had put enough postage on the parcel.

Joe started to answer when the biologist asked him to hold again because he said someone might have found it. Joe sat back in his swivel chair with the receiver up to his ear. He recalled how the boys in Cheyenne often felt about the wardens in the field and vice versa. Vern had warned him about it years ago—how the agency directors sometimes felt that field wardens would go native and forget they were state employees, that the wardens would start to think of themselves as advocates for local ranchers or hunters or boosters. Some of the Cheyenne brass thought of the field wardens as prima donnas out there with their fancy trucks, guns, and badges. Like they were local celebrities rather than subordinates. But the resentment could be mutual. Joe had never placed a call to headquarters before 8 A.M. or after 5 P.M. knowing that anyone he needed to talk to would only be in during those hours. He might start the day by patrolling the Bighorn break lands at 5 A.M., but things were different in Cheyenne. Biologists got paid the same whether they found a package or didn't find it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sheridan and Lucy playing in the living room. Lucy was being a dog or something and was raising up on her hind legs for an invisible treat that Sheridan was giving her. *It was cute*. Marybeth had said the night before that the girls seemed to be doing extremely well and that the Ote Keeley incident had not seemed to upset them. Marybeth said both girls had spent the last two days playing near the woodpile in the backyard and never even mentioned what had happened there. She said Sheridan, Miss Emotional, had even been consistently sunny. Marybeth said she was beginning to feel that maybe there would be nothing to worry about after all.

"Nope, sorry," the biologist said as he came back to the telephone. "We found a package and opened it, and it was a piece of a dead eagle a warden sent us from ranchester to see if it had been shot."

Joe cursed under his breath. The biologist agreed to call him if the package ever showed up.

JOE WALKED INTO the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Marybeth and Missy were sitting at the table and stopped talking when he walked in, confirming that they had been talking about him. He filled his cup and turned and leaned against the counter.

Marybeth looked radiant, and she smiled at him. Missy was smiling, too, and she looked at him with a kind of detached respect he had not seen from her before. Neither was about to ask him about the job offer or what he thought about it. Yet. They were both trying to gauge his mood.

Lucy crawled into the kitchen on all fours and propped up on her haunches near the table with her mouth open. Missy fed her a piece of a waffle from a plate. Joe guessed this routine had been going on most of the morning.

"There's your treat, little doggie," Missy said.

"I'm not a doggie," Lucy said over her shoulder as she scooted back into the living room to be with her sister.

"I don't know what's going on, but the girls are being angels," Marybeth told Joe. "Maybe their grandmother brings out the best in them."

Joe laughed, and Missy gave Marybeth a look.

The telephone rang in the office, and Joe excused himself to answer it. There was silence on the other end after Joe identified himself. The barely perceptible hiss in the line indicated it was long distance.

"You don't know me." It was a woman's voice. "I work at headquarters in Cheyenne." Her voice was steady, but nervous. She was barely audible.

Joe reached behind him without looking and closed the office door. It was now quiet in the room. He sat down at his desk.

"You called about a package today," the woman said. "I saw it come in Tuesday and it went to Game Biology. Then it disappeared."

"What do you mean it disappeared?" Joe asked.

"It disappeared."

Joe thought about it, saying nothing. The woman again said that it had disappeared. She clipped her words, and he could sense the caution in her voice, as if someone might walk in on her any minute.

"Who are you?" Joe asked.

"Never mind," she said. "I've got two kids and a husband who's out of work. I'm a state employee with benefits. I need this job."

"I've got a couple of kids, too," Joe said. "And another one on the way."

"Then you had best just forget about that package," the woman said sharply, not wanting to establish any kind of common interest. "Just forget about it and go on with your life."

Joe frowned. It was the second time he had received that advice. While she talked, he slid open his desk drawer. The other envelope, the one with the last few pieces of scat, was still there.

She paused briefly, then continued. "Let me put it this way: anything you send us will get lost."

"Why are you doing this?" Joe asked.

There was a hint of exasperation on the other end of the phone. "I don't know," she said. "I just felt that I had to. I have to go now."

"Thank you," Joe said but she had already hung up.

Joe thought about what to do. Still holding the receiver, he sifted through his desk until he found his old address book and then dialed his friend Dave Avery. Joe and Dave had gone to college together and Dave now worked as a game biologist for the Montana Fish and Game Department in Helena. After they had caught up (Dave had divorced but was engaged again), Joe asked him if he could send him a sample for an independent analysis.

"Where was it found?"

"My backyard."

"And my Wyoming colleagues can't decide what squeezed it out?"

"There's some dispute," Joe hedged. He didn't want to go into the story of the lost sample. There wasn't any need to.

"Sound's like you're challenging me," Dave said. "Name That Shit."

"I am," Joe said, forcing a laugh. Dave agreed to take a look at it, whatever it was, and to keep both the sample and the results in confidence.

Joe sat back in his swivel chair. He thought about what the woman at the lab had told him. He wondered how he could go about finding out who she was and if he even should. He believed she had told him the truth about the missing sample. He wished she hadn't, because things had suddenly become a lot more complicated.

16

THE TIRES OF Joe Pickett's pickup made a sizzling sound as he drove through the wet streets of Saddlestring to the county sheriff's office. It was still raining, and there were very few people out on the streets. Those who were out were scurrying from one door to another holding their hands on top of their heads. Joe thought how strange it was that the rain had continued throughout the day. Rain was a rarity this time of year; in fact, it was a rarity, period. Wyomingites, Joe had observed, didn't know what to do when it rained except get out of it, watch it through the window, and wait for it to go away. The same people who chained up all four tires and drove through horizontal snowstorms and bucked snowdrifts just to go have lunch in town during the winter had no clue what to do when it rained. A few ranchers stretched plastic covers, sometimes referred to as "cowboy condoms," over their John B. Stetsons but few people owned umbrellas. Fewer yet would let themselves be seen with an umbrella open because it would appear urban and pretentious, and the only rain slickers he ever saw were rolled up neatly and tied to the backs of saddles, where they generally remained. But Joe liked rain and wished there were more of it.

Vern had been right. Saddlestring was dying. A decade ago the coal mines in the county were operational and the Twelve Sleep Oil Field was pumping, but now both were silent. Only a reclamation crew still worked at the mine, and the oil wells had since been capped, waiting in vain for the price of a barrel of oil to rise. Even the

agricultural jobs had shrunk as out-of-state wealth bought local ranches for tax write-offs and in some cases took them out of production. Cattle prices were the lowest in a decade. A quarter of the storefronts on the main street were boarded up. In the past five years, the population of the town had decreased by 30 percent. Houses were available in all parts of town, and the prices were cheap. Saddlestring's one radio station had announced it was going off the air as of the first of next month. Unemployment was high and getting higher. Vern's pipeline would pump not only natural gas but new blood and dollars back into the community.

Saddlestring was a classic western town borne of promise due to its location on the railroad, but that promise never really played out. In the 1880s, a magnificent hotel was built by a mining magnate, but it had faded into disrepair. The main street, called Main Street, snaked north and south and had a total of four stoplights that had never been synchronized. The two-block "downtown" still retained the snooty air of Victorian storefronts designed to be the keystones of a fine city, but beyond those buildings, the rest of Main Street looked like any other American strip mall, punctuated by gun shops, sporting goods stores, fishing stores, bars, and restaurants that served steak.

Joe entered the sheriff's office and hung his jacket and hat on a rack.

"Still raining?" asked Deputy McLanahan from his desk behind the counter. Joe said it was and asked if Sheriff Barnum was available. Wendy, the receptionist/dispatcher, eyed Joe coldly, long enough to remind him that she still didn't like him after their telephone conversation on Sunday. But then she relented and buzzed Barnum on the intercom, saying "Game Warden Joe" was here to see him.

Sheriff Bud Barnum sat behind a desk stacked with mountains of paper and mail. He was sipping from a large white foam cup that he appeared never to put down. Although Barnum's office was good sized, there were stacks of magazines and documents everywhere, and the untidiness of it gave Joe a claustrophobic feeling. There was a single, brown naugahyde chair across from Barnum's desk, and Joe moved a few pieces of unopened mail from it and sat down.

Barnum sipped loudly from his cup. Joe could smell the strong coffee.

"You ever been to that new coffee place down the block?" Barnum asked. Joe nodded that he had. Marybeth liked to meet him there for coffee and oversized muffins when he took a morning break.

"It's a pretty good place," Barnum said quietly. "The people who own it are a little goofy, though. It's kind of a hippie establishment. They moved here from California, and she doesn't wear makeup or shave her legs, which I don't understand the significance of. He was some kind of computer engineer before he sold his stock and moved out here. All their food is vegetarian."

To Joe, Barnum looked very tired. His pallor was grayish, and there were bags under his eyes.

"They've got all these different kinds of coffee these days," Barnum said, looking at the big foam cup. "This is Ethiopian Jaba-Java. All my life I thought there was only one kind of coffee and that it came out of a big red can with a little Mexican or

Colombian farmer on it. Then all of the sudden there are a hundred kinds of coffee. They feature a new kind of special coffee every day in that place. I've been trying a different one every day to try and make up for all of those years I was sheltered. I don't know why it is that alcohol and tobacco are now bad, but jolts of caffeine are suddenly good. It is beyond me, and it makes me feel old."

He handed Joe the cup for Joe to try it. To be polite, Joe had a sip. Barnum had a disarming and likable way about him.

Joe nodded.

"Pretty good, eh?" Barnum said. "Who'd a thought there could be coffee from Africa? Plain old American coffee just isn't good enough for us anymore, I guess."

Joe felt awkward. Then he came right out with it: "Can I ask you a question about the outfitter murders?"

"Pertaining to what?" Barnum asked, sitting a little straighter in his chair, his heavy-lidded eyes fixed on Joe.

Joe started to answer, but Barnum spoke again.

"First I need to know whose camp you're in," Barnum said.

"Whose camp?"

"Wacey Hedeman's or mine," Barnum said. "The guy who is running against me. Your pal."

"I'm neutral," Joe said truthfully. "I don't have a position on that."

Barnum's expression never changed. Joe had no idea what Barnum was thinking. It was unnerving.

"Stay that way," Barnum warned.

"I intend to," Joe replied.

"I'm going to lose the election," Barnum said flatly. "I've been around long enough to know this is the last one, even if no one else realizes it."

Joe had no idea how to answer that. He couldn't imagine Bud Barnum not being the sheriff of Twelve Sleep County. Clearly, Barnum couldn't either.

"I don't know what the hell I'm going to do after that," Barnum said. "Maybe the governor will give me a job, but then I'd have to move to Cheyenne. Probably I'll just stay here and drink a lot of coffee."

Joe lamely suggested that there was still a month and a half until the election and that anything could happen in that time. Barnum nodded wearily.

"You had a question."

"I'm wondering what the status of the investigation is."

"The *status of the investigation*," Barnum mimicked, his expression theatrically perplexed, "is obvious. The state crime-lab ballistics has proven that all three Mississippi yahoos were shot with the same 9mm semi-automatic pistol at close range, and that pistol was found on Mr. Clyde Lidgard by Deputy McLanahan and yourself and Mr. Hedeman. Lidgard is in critical condition in the Billings hospital, having never regained consciousness, and the doctors up there say every day that he won't live through the

night but he has so far. Unless Mr. Lidgard regains consciousness and tells us a story that is different from what we already know, the case is all but closed.”

Joe waited for more. No more was coming.

“So when Clyde Lidgard dies, the investigation ends,” Joe said.

“Unless there is some kind of new evidence to open it back up,” Barnum said. “Simple as that.”

Joe nodded. “His trailer was searched?”

Barnum’s tone was mildly sarcastic. “It was searched both by the sheriff’s office and by the state boys. Nothing could be found that either implicated or exonerated Lidgard. The report is in the file if you want to read it over. Lidgard was a strange bird, and his trailer was a strange place. He liked to take a lot of pictures with his Kodak Instamatic. There are thousands of photos out there. He also liked to collect pictures of Marilyn Monroe, including that first-ever *Playboy* magazine with her in it. That magazine’s probably the only thing Clyde owned that was worth anything. If that magazine is still out there, it will amaze me because more than likely it ended up in the briefcase of one of the state investigators. But aside from the magazine, everything that was in the trailer is still in the trailer, and the unit has been sealed and locked.”

Joe took it all in and waited for Barnum to finish.

“Do you mind if I take a look on my own?” Joe asked.

Barnum again resumed the perplexed look. Then he smiled slightly as if Joe amused him. “You going to do some investigating?”

“Just curious.”

“Can I ask why?” Barnum said, his eyebrows arching.

Joe shrugged. “I guess I’m taking this whole thing a little personal because Ote Keeley died in my yard. This whole thing has affected my family.”

“What’s there to solve?” Barnum asked. “In my twentyodd years of experience dealing with things like this, I’ve come to the painful and sometimes unpopular conclusion that many times things are exactly what they seem to be.”

“Maybe so,” Joe said. “But I need to convince myself.”

The sheriff studied Joe for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. “Go do what you need to do,” Barnum finally said. “Lidgard’s trailer keys are in the file. Just don’t take or disturb any of the evidence, because we might find a next of kin who wants some of that crap out there.”

Joe thanked him and stood up.

“Joe,” Barnum said, as Joe reached for the doorknob, “shouldn’t you be out there in the woods catching poachers or counting gut piles or whatever it is you boys do?”

That stopped Joe and turned him around.

“Yes, *I should be*,” Joe said quietly. *He did not say what he was thinking, which was, Shouldn’t you be out there following up every last possibility instead of sitting here on your butt, drinking coffee and worrying about the election?*

JOE GOT A copy of the crime report and the trailer keys from Deputy McLanahan.

“Depressing, ain’t he?” McLanahan asked Joe. “This is a really fun place to work these days. When I try and make a joke or even smile about something, he tells me to quit trying to act like Jerry Lewis.”

Joe nodded and got his jacket and hat.

“*Jerry Lewis*,” McLanahan echoed as Joe stepped outside. It was still raining.

WRITTEN WITH A felt-tipped marker, the cardboard sign on Clyde Lidgard’s trailer read: Anyone caught vandalizing or attempting to enter these premises will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law by order of the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff’s Department.

The rain had caused the letters on the sign to blot and run, and there were several long rivulets of black running the length of the door.

It was dark inside the trailer, the heavy rain only allowing a meager amount of light to filter in through the grimy louvered windows. Joe searched for the light switch but discovered that the electricity had been cut off. It smelled musty, and there was the sharp stench of rotting food from the refrigerator and garbage. He decided to check them last, on his way out, because he guessed that the smell would be overpowering once he opened the doors. Joe drew his flashlight from his belt and turned it on. He felt wary and voyeuristic standing in the middle of the dead man’s home. The investigations Joe conducted were usually done outside, more often than not over the carcass of a game animal shot and abandoned. In the trailer, Joe felt closed-in. He believed that he didn’t know Clyde Lidgard well enough to be in his home. Plus he had no idea what he was looking for in the trailer.

The trailer was small and filthy, years of grit coating the floors and counters. He stood near the kitchen table in the middle of the trailer, trying to decide where to look first. He shone his flashlight around the room, exposing a hallway that branched off of the room he was standing in. All the doors were wide open, the result, Joe guessed, of the sheriff’s search. At the end of the hall, Joe could just make out the foot of a bed in a large bedroom. There were two rooms off of the hallway. One led to a tiny bathroom and the other to a small room that appeared to have been used for storage.

Joe started down the narrow hallway, and his holster caught on an exposed nail. He stepped back and unbuckled his cumbersome belt and put the holster on the table. He kept his flashlight.

Joe stepped inside the bathroom. Old Marilyn Monroe pictures, puckered from steam, covered the walls and ceiling. The staples that secured the pictures were rusty. Shelves against the corner were filled with dozens of brown, prescription drug bottles. Most of the bottles were dusty and hadn’t been used in some time. Joe read the labels and saw most had been prescribed by doctors at the local VA hospital. The most recent had been filled by Barrett’s Pharmacy in Saddlestring. Joe recognized the names Thorazine and Prozac but knew little about either drug.

The small bedroom was filled with boxes, clothes, and junk. So much had been haphazardly piled into the room for so long that the room couldn’t really be entered without taking boxes out. Joe shone the flashlight into several of the closest boxes and

found them filled with envelopes of photographs. As Sheriff Barnum had said, there appeared to be thousands.

Joe then entered Lidgard's bedroom and found that the twin bed nearly filled all of the floor space. Joe had to turn sidewise and shuffle around the bed to look around. There were a couple of yellowed posters of Marilyn Monroe stapled to the wall along with an army photo of a younger Clyde Lidgard and a calendar from Lane's Feed and Grain in Saddlestring. The sheets on the bed were not beige as he had first thought, but were white sheets so dirty they appeared beige. There was a stale smell in the room.

Joe slid back the closet doors. Lidgard had a surprising quantity of clothing—they completely filled the closet rack—but none of them looked to have been worn for years. Dust covered the shoulders of the shirts and jackets. On the shelf above the clothes, Joe saw a dozen boxes for .30-.30 rifle cartridges. The price tags on the boxes ranged from \$8.50 to \$18.00, indicating they had been purchased over at least 20 years. Joe reached up to find that the older boxes were empty but for whatever reason Lidgard had chosen to keep them. Judging by the photographs, junk, pill bottles, and cartridge boxes, Lidgard had been an obsessive collector of things. Joe stood on the end of the bed to make sure he had seen everything on the shelf. The heavy coat of dust was tracked with recent finger smudges, and Joe assumed they had been left by the other investigators. But Joe didn't see what he looking for.

Joe closed the closet and drew a small notepad from his shirt pocket.

"Lidgard's trailer," Joe wrote. "No nine millimeter cartridges."

It took Joe several trips to bring out all of the boxes of photographs from the junk room to the kitchen table where the light was better. It appeared that the thick envelopes full of photos were not really arranged in any manner. But in general, the top envelopes contained more recent photos than those at the bottom of the boxes.

Joe took out the newer sets of photographs, looked at them, and was careful to return them into the proper envelopes. The most recent photos had been developed at Barrett's Pharmacy, the same place Lidgard filled his prescriptions.

If Joe had hoped that the photos would reveal anything other than the fact that Lidgard was a poor if prolific photographer, he was quickly disappointed. The photos were generally of bad quality, and of mundane and inane things. Lidgard apparently carried his camera with him everywhere and from his car window took a lot of photos of things that only Lidgard could explain. Most were crooked, with a left-hand tilt to them. There were trees, lots of photos of trees and bushes. Joe squinted to see if there was anything in those trees and bushes, but he could not find anything of note. There were landscapes: sagebrush, foothills, mountains, the river valley. Sometimes there would be a photo of a part of Clyde Lidgard. There were several pictures of Lidgard's shoes taken as he apparently just stood there and shot down. There were a couple of photos of Lidgard's unfocused face as he held the camera away from him at arm's length and triggered the shutter. Joe studied Clyde Lidgard's face for any kind of clue, but what he saw was a dark, pinched, almost tortured scowl obscenely

lit and shadowed by the flash. There was an eerie photo of Lidgard taken into the bathroom mirror with the flash obscuring most of the frame. There were pictures of the cabins Lidgard looked after in the mountains and photos of buildings in downtown Saddlestring. There were two entire rolls taken of snowdrifts. In one of the winter pictures, Joe could discern a herd of elk traipsing across the plains in the far distance, the animals no larger than fliespecks. And occasionally there were unfocused photos of Lidgard's shrunken penis.

Joe reached down into the box for a handful of envelopes from past years. Many of the pictures were taken inside a VA hospital. There were nurses, doctors, light fixtures, other patients, tile floors, and again, Clyde Lidgard's penis.

Joe went through photos until the light got so poor he could hardly see. The most recent photos were from the summer before, and they had been taken in and around Saddle-string. That left a gap of at least two months from Clyde's last photos until he was shot in the outfitters' camp. Joe noted the time lapse in his notepad. He wondered what had made Lidgard stop taking pointless photographs.

When he finally took the boxes back to the junk room, he realized he had given himself a headache. The drumming of the rain on the roof had toned down to sporadic pings. He had been trying to see things that weren't there in the photos, trying to find something in them that would give a clue to who Clyde Lidgard was and how he ended up in the camp. He had found nothing, and the photos had only depressed him. There was something intimate in looking at the photos, as useless as they turned out to be. Lidgard, for whatever reason, had chosen to take the photos, have them developed, and stored them away. Lidgard might see things in the pictures that no one else could see, Joe guessed. Or he might see things out there that he felt compelled to photograph, only to get the photos back and to discover they weren't really there after all. Joe concluded that he knew no more about Clyde Lidgard than when he entered the trailer, but because of the penis photos he now knew more about Clyde Lidgard than he cared to.

Joe took a deep breath and opened the refrigerator. A thick roll of stench washed over him and stung his eyes. He squinted as he moved the flashlight around—putrid hamburger, spoiled milk, oozing cheese. He reached up and flipped down the door to the freezer compartment and the stink was even worse although the compartment was nearly empty.

Joe blew out a breath and kicked the trailer door open to get some air. Then he turned back to the freezer. The freezer pan was full of congealed blood and fluids. Tufts of brown hair were stuck in the blood and to the sides of the compartments. Until recently, Clyde Lidgard had stuffed his freezer with animal parts. And now they were gone.

JOE STOOD OUTSIDE the trailer with his hands on his knees, breathing deeply, fighting back nausea. His head pounded and his eyes still stung. Eventually, he was breathing crisp clean air. There was the strong, sweet smell of wet sage, and Joe inhaled gratefully. Dusk brought a red-smeared sunset over the foothills.

Joe straightened up and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Then from behind him came a powerful *whump* sound. He turned in time to greet a ball of flame as it rolled out of the trailer, scorching his face.

It was remarkable how fast the trailer burned. Already the walls were gone, exposing the black skeleton frame.

He watched helplessly. Whatever evidence there might have been inside was being destroyed. How could this have happened? He hadn't smelled gas.

He remembered that he had left his holster inside and he cursed out loud. Then something made him turn around.

On the road leading toward Saddlestring, a pair of brake lights flashed. If a small herd of antelope hadn't crossed the road and forced the vehicle to slow down, Joe probably wouldn't have seen what looked like the back of a dark Chevrolet Suburban.

Vern Dunnegan drove a Suburban, but so did lots of people. Vern had also once taught Joe the trick of waiting until dusk to sneak up on hunters and use no lights because that was the hardest time to be seen in a moving vehicle.

Joe wondered if that had been Vern, and, if so, what Vern would be doing out at the Lidgard place.

17

WHEN JOE GOT home, Wacey's mud-splashed pickup was parked in the driveway. Joe pulled in alongside it and, as he walked toward the house, sniffed his shirtsleeves. There remained a strong odor of smoke from Clyde Lidgard's trailer. Maxine met him at the door and trailed him into the house, a gold shadow not three inches from his leg. Lucy and Sheridan were playing in the living room. Lucy was again playing the role of an animal and Sheridan was feeding her invisible treats as Missy looked on, amused. Wacey was leaning against the door frame of Joe's office and Marybeth was inside, looking through Joe's desk calendar.

"Want one of your beers before I drink them all?" Wacey asked.

"Sure."

Wacey returned with a cold bottle. "You don't smell good, Joe," Wacey whispered out of the corner of his mouth as he brushed by Joe and handed him the beer. "I heard about Clyde Lidgard's trailer burning down. How in the *hell* did that happen?"

Joe was in a dark mood. He had radioed the Saddlestring Volunteer Fire Department (they had arrived ten minutes after the framework of the trailer sighed and collapsed in on itself into a sizzling pile) as well as Sheriff Barnum (who rolled his eyes skyward and moaned ruefully) about the ball of flame. The fire department recovered what was left of his gun and holster; the black fused-together mass still smoldered in the back of his pickup where he had thrown it. Rarely had Joe Pickett felt as stupid as he did right now.

"Did you ask him yet, Marybeth?"

"Ask me what?"

Marybeth had a curious smile on her face. Joe looked from Marybeth to Wacey, puzzled.

"Wacey has a proposition for us," Marybeth said.

Wacey stepped forward and shut the office door behind him. It was a small room. Wacey grinned. Marybeth grinned.

"Aimee Kensinger has to go to Venice, Italy, for three and a half weeks with her husband," Wacey said. "She asked me if I knew anyone who would be trustworthy enough to stay in her house and keep it up and walk her dog every day. You know, that little rodent Jack Russell terrier of hers."

Joe nodded slowly, waiting for more.

"He suggested us," Marybeth added in a way that indicated to Joe that she liked the idea. "Our whole family. Even *Mom*."

Wacey jabbed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Missy in the living room. "That way she could live more *in the style to which she is accustomed*," he said, affecting enough of a pompous lilt to make Joe smile in spite of himself. "It's going to be like a family vacation without really going anywhere."

Joe turned to Marybeth. "So you want to do it?"

Marybeth spoke practically. "We're out of room, Mom's sleeping on the couch, everything seems to be falling apart, and it would be a good time to get some repairmen in here when they're not bothering everybody. It seems like we're *always* here. It *would* be kind of like having a vacation."

"Which, as far as I know, you two have never had," Wacey chimed in. "Hell of an opportunity. *Hell* of an opportunity."

"We move in Thursday," Marybeth said.

"Then I guess the matter is decided," Joe said flatly, then drained his beer.

Marybeth asked Wacey if he wanted to stay for dinner. But Wacey said he had to get home. On the way toward the door, Wacey stopped suddenly and watched Lucy and Sheridan play.

"That's a cute little dog," Wacey said.

"I'M NOT A DOGGIE!" Lucy yelled back, arching up on her feet with her chubby arms curled under her chin while Sheridan fed her an invisible treat.

"What are you, then?"

"I'm not a doggie," Lucy said, folding back down to her haunches.

JOE WALKED WITH Wacey out to his pickup. Wacey stopped and stood in the dark before he got in. Wacey had brought an unopened beer with him and Joe heard the top being unscrewed.

"Joe, do you know how it's going to look when word gets out that you burned down Clyde Lidgard's trailer?"

"Another bonehead move," Joe admitted, reaching into the bed of the pickup to see if his weapon was cool enough to touch. It was still warm. He tersely described what

happened and said he couldn't understand how the fire had started. He left out the part about maybe seeing a Suburban.

"What a stroke of bad luck," Wacey said, looking at the now-useless gun. "I bet Barnum's having a good laugh about it. By tomorrow half the town will know."

Joe sighed. He couldn't believe he had lost his gun again.

Wacey took a swig of beer. "Are you sure this is something you ought to be pursuing?"

"Ote Keeley died in my woodpile. That makes it kind of personal. And to me the pieces just don't quite fit."

"What in particular?"

Joe rubbed his eyes. They stung from the fire. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I can't convince myself that Clyde Lidgard just up and shot three men for no clear reason and then stayed in their camp until we found him. And I don't know why Ote Keeley came all of the way to my backyard to die."

"Joe ..." Wacey's voice sounded high-pitched and pained, as if he were losing patience. "Clyde Lidgard was a fucking nut. You can't explain a nut. That's why he's a nut. Just let it go."

"You sound like Barnum and everybody else."

"Maybe he's right for once," Wacey said. Joe could see the pale blue reflection of the moon on the bottom of Wacey's beer bottle as Wacey lifted it to his mouth. "Trust me, Joe. It's been investigated. Everyone's satisfied. We're just Game and Fish guys. Guts and Feathers, as our critics like to say. We aren't detectives. People think we're nothing more than glorified animal control officers. Don't be a lone ranger here. You'll just embarrass the department and get yourself in more trouble, if *that's* possible."

Joe absently kicked the dirt with his toe and looked down.

"And you never know," Wacey said, "you might find a bad guy and then reach down only to remember that you lost your damn pistol again." Joe could tell Wacey was smiling at him in the dark.

"You've made your point," Joe answered sourly.

"Just go on up with your cute little family and have a nice vacation at the Eagle Mountain Club," Wacey suggested. "Besides, hunting season's just about to get hot and heavy, and you're going to be busy as hell. We both are."

"Maybe so," Joe said.

"That's what you say when you really don't agree but you don't want to discuss it anymore," Wacey commented. "I know you pretty good, Joe. You can be a stubborn son of a bitch."

"Maybe so," Joe said. Wacey grunted, and the two men stood in silence. Billowing dark clouds were low and moving fast through the sky, painting black brush strokes over stars.

"Why don't you and Arlene stay at Kensinger's?"

Wacey snorted. "Arlene's idea of high class is eighty television channels. She wouldn't exactly appreciate that place the way Marybeth would. Besides, Arlene might find a sock of mine under the bed."

Joe nodded, though he wasn't sure he could be seen in the dark.

"I'm going to work one more week before I declare my candidacy," Wacey said after a long silence. "I'm trying for a leave of absence with the state, but if I don't get it, I'll have to quit."

"What if you don't win?" Joe asked.

"I'm going to win," Wacey said, confident as always.

"But what if you don't?"

Wacey laughed and drained his bottle, then flipped it into the back of Joe's pickup where it would rattle around tomorrow. "Hell, I don't know. I haven't given it any thought at all. Maybe I'll go back to riding bulls for a living."

Wacey opened his truck door, and they looked at each other in the glow from the dome light.

"I'm not kidding you, Joe," Wacey said, climbing in. "Leave this outfitter business be. Just go back to work and have a fun vacation with your family. You've got one hell of a family, and one hell of a wife."

Wacey slammed the door, and they were in darkness again. Wacey started his pickup and the headlights bathed the peeling paint of the garage door.

Joe listened to gravel crunch and watched Wacey's tail-lights recede down Bighorn Road.

Marybeth was suddenly beside him, and it startled him. He hadn't heard her come outside.

"We seem to be on a lucky streak," she said, looping her arm through his. "First the job offer and now the Eagle Mountain Club."

"I might have broken that streak this afternoon," Joe said.

"What's bothering you?" Marybeth asked. "You didn't exactly get excited when Wacey told you about it."

"I am excited," Joe said flatly. "You and the kids will probably love it. And your mom, of course."

She tugged on his arm playfully. "So what's the problem?"

He started to say "Nothing," but she anticipated it and tugged on his arm again. He didn't want to mention burning down the trailer and losing his gun. Still, that wasn't the problem.

"I guess I just feel bad that we live in such a dump that house-sitting seems like a vacation."

"Oh, Joe," Marybeth said, giving him a hug. "We both know this won't last forever."

JOE OPENED HIS mail while Marybeth got ready for bed. The mail was mostly junk, but there were several envelopes from headquarters in Cheyenne. There were two departmental memos, one about avoiding overtime and the other about making sure

that original receipts were sent along with expense reports because credit card receipts could no longer be accepted.

When he opened the third envelope and read the letter it contained, he froze. It was written in terse bureaucratic prose and he read it three times before it sunk in. He blew a short, hard breath out through his nose in exasperation as he resisted the urge to tear the letter into tiny pieces.

“What is it?” Marybeth asked from behind a washcloth.

“Headquarters,” Joe said dryly. “I’ve got to appear in Cheyenne on Friday for a hearing.”

Marybeth stopped washing and listened.

“They’re investigating the incident when Ote Keeley took my gun from me. They call it ‘alleged negligence with a department-issued sidearm.’ It says here that I could get suspended from the field.”

Joe read the letter a fourth time to himself.

“Why now?” Marybeth asked. “That happened months ago.”

“The state works in geological time,” Joe said. “You know that.”

“Those bastards,” she hissed. She rarely said anything like that, and Joe looked up. “Just when things were going so well.”

PART FOUR

E) (1) Establishment of Committee

There is established a committee to be known as the Endangered Species Committee (hereinafter in this section referred to as the “Committee”).

(2) The Committee shall review any application submitted to it pursuant to this section and determine in accordance with subsection (h) or this section whether or not to grant an exemption from the requirements of subsection (a) (2) of this action for the action set forth in such application.

(3) The Committee shall be composed of seven members as follows:

(A) The Secretary of Agriculture.

(B) The Secretary of the Army.

(C) The Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors.

(D) The Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

(E) The Secretary of the Interior.

(F) The Administrator of the national Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

(G) The Governor of each affected State.

—The Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1982

18

SHERIDAN WENT OUTSIDE to tell her animals that she’d be away for a little while, but they were nowhere to be found. Not only that, but she felt as though someone were watching her.

Sheridan’s pockets were bulging with as much food as she could cram into them and still get out the door without her mom noticing. She had sunflower seeds, croutons, dry dog food, and cereal in the pockets of her skirt. It was more food than she had ever taken out to the animals, but she didn’t know when she would be back to feed them again. She was very upset about having to leave the house again, this time to go and stay in the home of people she had never even met before: a stranger’s home at Eagle Mountain. Mom couldn’t even tell her when they would be back. Sheridan didn’t care to see what Eagle Mountain was (“wealthy people share their homes all of the time!” her Grandmother Missy kept telling her. “And they have a pool!”), because she already hated it. Grandmother Missy had said that the girls at school would be envious of her, but Sheridan didn’t really care about that. Grandmother Missy liked it when

other people were envious, but Sheridan wasn't sure it was all that great. Sheridan thought that taking the entire family to Eagle Mountain would be a big mistake, just as she had when she, Mom, and Lucy had stayed at the motel in town. So many things her parents did for her benefit didn't seem to help her at all. She told her mom and Grandmother Missy that. She didn't want to leave her home again, and she especially didn't want to leave Lucky, Hippity-Hop, and Elway.

But the animals didn't seem to be there.

It wasn't as if the creatures always came bounding out of the woodpile at the sight of her. Sometimes it took a while before one of them would realize she was out there. But as Sheridan walked across the yard, there was something about the woodpile that seemed vacant. The secret life was gone from it. It was just a woodpile.

She rained some seeds on the top of it and waited, looking closely for any movement. She sighed and sat under the cottonwood, her chin in her hands. Hot tears welled in her eyes. Where could the animals have gone? Could they be hurt, or worse? Did she feed them something that made them sick? Did they leave during the night and go back into the mountains? Could it be that they just didn't like her anymore? Or that they knew she was leaving and were so sad or angry that they didn't even want to see her?

"This," she said out loud to herself, "is a really bad day."

And she could not get over the feeling that she was being watched.

She shinnied around the trunk of the tree and looked at the house, fully expecting to see her mom or grandmother at the window. Or at least Lucy. But no one was there. Maybe that was it, she thought. Maybe her secret pets sensed someone's eyes on them as well.

Squinting, she looked all around her. She took in the rest of the yard, the Sandrock draw pulsing red in the evening sun, and even the roof of the house. She tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear. But she could see no one. It was giving her the creeps, and her imagination started to wander. For the first time in weeks, she thought of the monster again. It came from somewhere deep in her mind, as if it had been there waiting for the right moment all along. Maybe, she speculated, the monster, or the monster's friend, had come back for Lucky, Hippity-Hop, and Elway.

When she stood her stomach ached. The feelings welling up inside of her were overwhelming: anger, fear, and guilt. Maybe she should have told her mom and dad about the creatures. If she had told them, possibly they would somehow still be around. Her dad could have caught them and built nice houses for them, like he did when he built the rabbit hutch. Maybe by not saying anything, she had caused the creatures to die.

She decided she would give the creatures a little more time. If they didn't come out, she would rush in the house and find her mom. She would tell her everything. When Dad came home they could take the woodpile apart, stick by stick, until they found the poor little animals. Eagle Mountain could wait.

She threw more food on the woodpile, this time harder. There was no way the animals, if they were okay, would not know she was out there.

Then she heard the familiar trill. She was suddenly joyous.

But the sound did not come from the woodpile. She stood as silently as possible, listening and smiling.

When she heard the sound again, her head swiveled toward it. Past the woodpile, past the fence, past the bushes. She found herself staring through bushy leaves at the peeling paint on the back of the garage.

She found them. They had moved, for whatever reason. The sound came from the other side of thick lilac bushes, and she crawled toward it on her hands and knees. She knew the area around their house so well that she was certain where she would find her pets: under the foundation of the garage. There were some large cracks in the concrete where the structure met the ground, and the cracks led to a large dark space under the floor of the garage. She had once probed the space with a long stick and had not been able to find the sides. That, she was sure, was where she would find them.

When she emerged from the bushes, the first thing she saw was Lucky sticking his head out of the crack and then vanishing under the garage.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," she said, emptying her pockets into the hole. "That ought to keep you guys full for a while." The relief she felt made her giddy. "I'll be back as soon as I can be, you can count on that." She felt as wildly good as she had horribly bad a moment before.

"You guys are pretty smart." She smiled, pulling her pockets inside out to get every last sunflower seed. "This is a much safer place for you."

Rather than crawl through the bushes again back into the yard, Sheridan skipped down the length of the lilacs toward the end of the fence and the corner of corral. She planned to turn and enter the yard through the same gate the monster had used.

As she turned toward the corral, she saw the face of a man in the window of the pole barn, and it stopped her cold.

The man's face withdrew from the window into the shadows of the barn and then re-emerged in the doorway, so that she could now see all of him. He stood in the light but didn't step outside into the corral. He was motioning to her to come to him. He was smiling. She had been *right* about being watched.

Sheridan couldn't move. She was terrified. She didn't know whether to scream for her mom, run for the gate, or run back toward the garage. If she ran back to the garage, the man might follow her and maybe see the animals.

"Sheridan, right?" The man asked softly. He spoke just loud enough for her to hear him. "I need to talk to you for a second. Don't be afraid," the man said. "I know your dad."

He did look familiar, Sheridan thought. She had seen him before with her dad. She didn't know his name, and if she had been told what it was, she had forgotten. There were a lot of people who came to their house because it was Dad's office also. There had been a lot of men at their house when the dead man was found. She knew she

shouldn't talk to strangers. But if he knew her dad and her name, was he really a stranger? She weighed going to the man against screaming or running to the house. If the man saw her feed the animals, he might tell her mom. If she ran screaming, she might embarrass her dad.

The man kept smiling and motioning for her to come.

She walked toward him on stiff, heavy legs. Her eyes were huge. She walked past the gate and ducked through the poles of the corral. Still, the man stayed in the pole barn. Sheridan suddenly realized that he was standing there so he couldn't be seen by anyone in the house, and she knew she had made the wrong decision. She turned to run, but he was on her in an instant, and he jerked her back roughly into a dark stall with him.

He swung her around and pressed her against the hay bales, and her scream was smothered by his hand. His face was so close to hers that his hat brim jammed against her forehead and his breath fogged her glasses.

"I'm sorry I had to do this, darling," he whispered when she had stopped struggling. "I really am. I wished you hadn't come around the yard that way. I didn't expect you and you saw me."

He kept his hand, massive and rough, crushed against her mouth. Her breath came in quick little puffs from her nose, and he didn't intend to let her answer.

"Before I take my hand down, there is something you have to understand, Sheridan. Are you listening?"

She tried to nod her head yes. She was trembling, and she couldn't make herself stop. She was suddenly afraid she would wet her panties.

"Are you listening?" he asked again. This time his voice was very gentle. "Are you listening?"

She said with her eyes that she was.

"You've got some secrets, don't you little girl? You've got some little friends in the woodpile, don't you? I've been watching you. I saw you feeding them."

The big hand did not move from her mouth.

"Do your mom and dad know about them?"

She tried to shake her head no. Even though he pressed her to the hay, he could tell what she was trying to say because he smiled a little.

"You're not lying to me, are you, Sheridan?"

As forcefully as she could, she tried to say no. He pressed his face even closer to her. His eyes were all she could see of his face.

"Okay, then. That's good. We both have a secret, don't we? And we're going to keep it our secret, just between us. Just between us friends. You just keep this to yourself and don't you ever say a word about this to anyone. Look at me."

Sheridan had averted her eyes toward the door, hoping her dad would be there.

"*Look at me,*" he hissed.

She did.

"If you say one thing about this to anyone, I'll rip those pretty green eyes of yours right out of their sockets. And I won't stop there."

With his free hand, Sheridan felt him reach back. She heard a snap and a huge black gun filled her vision.

"I'll use this on your dad. I'll shoot him right in the face. I'll do the same thing to your pretty mom and your itty-bitty sister. I'll even kill that stupid dog. I'll blow her head right off. *Keep looking at me,*" he said.

She had stopped shaking; she was beyond it. She was absolutely calm, and absolutely terrified.

"I'm going to take my hand down now and let you go as soon as you can smile," he said. "Then you take that smile right into the house and never, ever tell anyone what happened here. Your little animals in the woodpile are going to heaven, do you understand? Your family won't have to go to heaven or anywhere else if you keep your little mouth shut."

He eased his hand down. Her face felt cold as the air hit it. Her lips had been crushed against her teeth, and she tasted a drop of salty blood from inside her mouth.

"Are you listening, Sheridan?"

"Yes." Her voice was thin, and it nearly cracked.

"Then smile."

She tried. She didn't feel like smiling.

"That's not a smile," he chided, his voice gentle again. "You can do better than that, darling."

She tried.

"Closer," he persisted. "Keep working on it."

Her mouth smiled.

"We can live with that," he said, stepping back. His crushing weight was now off of her. She stood up. She winced as he reached over her shoulder, but he was just brushing the hay off of her dress.

"Don't be scared of me," he admonished. He sounded like a normal person now. She was as confused as she was frightened. "Nothing bad will ever happen because we've got a deal. I won't break it if you don't. Shoot," he said, "we might even turn out to be friends someday. That'd be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," she said. But she was lying.

"You might even get a little older, and I'll take you to a movie. Buy you a Coke and some popcorn." He smoothed her dress across her bottom, pressing his hand more firmly than he needed to. "You might even like it."

They both looked up when they heard her mom call her name.

"You had better go now, darling," he said.

THE HOUSE HE was looking for was located down a mud-rutted dirt road in a thick stand of shadowy, old river cottonwoods. Joe had never been down the road before, but he had often passed by the crooked wood-burned sign on a post near the county road that read:

OTE KEELEY OUTFITTING SERVICES
GUIDED HUNTS
ELK • DEER • ANTELOPE • MOOSE
SINCE 1996

The Keeley house was a pine log home that looked tired. There was a slight sag in the roof, its once dark green wood shingles now gray and furry-looking with age and moisture. In the alcove where the house slumped, there was a rusty 1940s Willys Jeep, a horse trailer, an equipment shed, and a yellow Subaru station wagon. Antlers hung above the doors of the house and the shed. Joe shut off his pickup, sat with the window opened, and listened. The heavy, damp quiet of the river bottom lay over the house and to Joe the scene seemed to be more Deep South than Rocky Mountain. Cross beams in the trees indicated that Ote had hung game animals in his yard.

Joe had checked in some fishermen early that morning, working his way upriver toward the Keeley house. He had ticketed a local ranch hand for using worms in a stretch of the river that was regulated for artificial lures only and had cited two itinerant Hispanics who were fishing without any licenses at all. Before he had left the house that morning, he had called Game and Fish Headquarters in Cheyenne to talk to the officer who had sent him the letter he received earlier in the week, Assistant Director Les Etbauer. Etbauer wasn't in yet, so Joe left a message that he would see him that afternoon for his hearing.

Joe walked by the yellow Subaru on his way toward the front door of the house and glanced inside the car. There was a child's car seat, and scattered on the bench seats and floorboards were fast-food wrappers, plastic toys, and children's books.

The unmistakable sound of a shell being jacked into a pump shotgun froze Joe in place where he walked. He was mindful of where his hand was in relation to his holster—*Damn! He was unarmed*—and he slowly raised both his arms away from his body so there could be no mistaking that he wasn't reaching for a gun.

Jeannie Keeley, Ote's widow, stood in the open front door of the house with a .12-gauge riot gun aimed at his chest. She was wearing some kind of uniform smock and a pair of faded jeans.

Using a soft voice, Joe said who he was and said he would show her his identification if she wanted to see it.

"I know who you are," she said. "I remember from the funeral."

"In that case, I would suggest you put that shotgun away somewhere safe," Joe said. "I don't even have my weapon with me." He spoke softly but there was an edge to

his voice. Jeannie Keeley shrugged and stepped back inside the house and placed the shotgun in a rack near the door.

"Sorry," she said, not really apologizing. "I'm not usually home during the day so I didn't expect anybody showing up. I got a sick kid here and I've been a little jumpy since Ote died."

"I understand." Joe stood up straight, took a few deep breaths, and unclenched his muscles. He decided against telling her that he could arrest her for aiming a gun at him because he figured it would be pointless. Jeannie, like Ote before her, seemed capable of getting the drop on Joe Pickett very easily. He told her he would like to ask her some questions about Ote.

She stood in the doorway, trying to look tough, Joe thought. Her unlit cigarette bobbed up and down as she seemed to think about it, and him. She was wary of him. He read the name embroidered on her smock. She was a waitress at the Burg-O-Pardner restaurant in Saddlestring. That was the place that specialized in deep-fried Rocky Mountain oysters and one-pound hamburgers for lunch.

"I'd rather not invite you in the house," she said. "I got a sick kid in there, and it's kind of small. The house I mean."

"I don't mind staying out here," Joe said.

Inside the house, from the dark, a young girl called for her mom. Jeannie glanced over her shoulder and back at Joe.

"Oh hell," she said. "Come on in."

Joe sat down at a rough-hewn wood table in the kitchen while Jeannie tended to a girl Sheridan's age. There were four rooms in the dark house. The kitchen and dining room were crowded by the number of animal heads on the walls. Off of the dining room were a bathroom, a bedroom, and another bedroom that looked as if it were crammed full with bunk beds. Joe thought *his* house was small, and he wondered how the Keeley family managed without tripping over one another.

April, the girl with the haunted face that Joe had seen at the funeral, was in the bottom bunk of one of the beds, and Joe could see a tangle of sheets and wet, dark hair. Jeannie gave the girl a glass of something and asked her to rest and be quiet until the man went away. The girl nodded her reply. Joe could also see another child—he couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl—playing on the floor in the room. The child wore only a disposable diaper and a T-shirt that was torn and dirty.

Jeannie came back into the kitchen and asked if Joe wanted coffee. He said no and she sat down with a cup for herself. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and put it in an ashtray.

"I can't smoke on account of I'm expecting, as you can tell," Jeannie said. "But sometimes I just have to stick one in my mouth for a while. It helps."

Jeannie went on to tell Joe a lot of things he would rather not have known, like how Ote had no insurance when he died. How Ote spent every dime they made on horses, guns, outfitting equipment, and that damned truck he was buried in. How the Ford dealership in Casper where Ote bought the truck was on her case because, come to

find out, Ote had missed the last three payments and they wanted the truck back and wouldn't *that* be a hoot? How Ote married her when he was home on leave from the army and she was a junior in high school and got her pregnant for the first time on their wedding night. That was three and a half kids ago. How Ote spent everything he saved in the service to buy this cabin and land in Wyoming so he could live his dream of killing things and getting away from people. He wanted to be a mountain man. He liked to say he was born 180 years too late. Ote hated people, but mainly he hated the government. Ote believed in the right to keep and bear arms. Ote told her all the time how he would die when the Feds came to get him for one thing or another. That's why he kept himself armed. That's why he showed her how to use and shoot the shotgun they kept in a rack near the door. That's why he wore a Derringer holster in his boot. Ote always thought his outfitting business would take off someday. He guaranteed a trophy to any of his clients on the promise that they wouldn't tell anyone when, where, or how they got it. He wanted to buy a float plane and expand into Alaska someday. He wanted to homeschool his kids, but she wouldn't let him because the kids drove her nuts when they were home all day, and besides, someday they would have to get jobs and go out on their own and Ote didn't know enough himself to teach anybody anything except how to butcher an elk. How Ote liked being with Kyle Lensegrav and Calvin Mendes more than he liked being around anyone else. Ote was a mean-spirited *prick* of a man. Ote thought he knew everything, but he was basically Mississippi white trash in the middle of northern Wyoming. He left her nothing, not even the damned truck. She would have to go on welfare, money from the government he hated. Wouldn't *that* make Ote spin in his grave? She thought there might be insurance and benefits through the Veterans Administration, since Ote was a veteran. She needed to pursue that. Again, money from the government he hated. Ote would keep spinning down there. Like a top. She would have to sell the house and the cars and move. Maybe she would take the kids; maybe she wouldn't. She wasn't sure. Her mama in Mississippi could take them for a while until she got her shit together. Go to Colorado, maybe. New Mexico. Arizona. Somewhere it was warmer. A good waitress could get a job anywhere.

Joe listened and watched her. He was as unprepared for this torrent as he had been unprepared for her at the door with the shotgun. She would not stop talking. She was bitter about Ote's death, but possibly just as bitter at the life he had given her and left her with. Joe could see that she could have been pretty when Ote had married her. But her features were now sharp, and her outlook was flinty. He was surprised how quiet the children were in the other room. He wondered if they were simply terrified of her. And she was going to have another.

"When he died, it was in *your* yard," she said, her eyes flashing. "He didn't even have the decency to die in his own yard. The *prick*. I had to sell his horses to pay for that funeral. I didn't know how much a front-end loader cost to rent. Why did I pay for his perfect funeral? Why? I'm so goddamned idiotic. He wouldn't have done that

for me if I'd got shot. I bet he would have gotten drunk with his pals Kyle and Calvin and burned my body on a pyre like some kind of Indian woman."

Joe rubbed his neck. He stole a glance at his watch. She had been going non-stop for 45 minutes. He would need to leave soon if he wanted to get to Cheyenne on time.

"Aren't you the guy Ote took the gun from?" she asked suddenly, grinning.

Joe said he was.

"Damn, he was proud of that," she said. "He couldn't stop talking about it for a while. Then he realized he could lose his outfitter's license. Then he got scared and depressed. You've got to understand that if Ote had lost his license, he might as well have been dead. It would have killed him. It drove me up the wall, him talking about it."

Joe looked at her as she talked, but his attention was diverted by the absolute quiet in the other room where the children were. He wanted to know what was wrong with the little girl in bed.

"Ote liked you," Jeannie said. "He bragged for a while about that gun thing, then he got scared. He said he thought you were a good man. He said you were fair and square, not like Vern Dunnegan."

Joe asked what she meant.

She shrugged. "Ote didn't tell me a lot about his business. All I know is that Ote was really mad once because Vern caught him doing something—poaching, probably—and Vern made Ote make it right with him."

"You mean a bribe?" Joe asked.

"Something," Jeannie said. "Vern made Ote do something, but I don't know what. All I know is that Ote was pretty mad about it. This wasn't a fun place to be when Ote was mad."

But she didn't know what specifically had happened.

"That's the way things work," she concluded, as if she had forgotten Joe was a warden.

"Not necessarily," Joe said.

Joe couldn't listen to her much longer. He stood and asked her if he could get a glass of water. She waved toward the sink. On the way there, he paused at the children's bedroom door. April was in the bed. She looked feverish, her hair plastered to her skull, but her eyes were calm and piercing. On the floor, a baby boy with big dark eyes turned to him. There was a look on the boy's face that suggested he expected Joe to step in and smack him. But Joe could see no bruises or injuries on either child.

He turned on the spigot and filled his glass with brackish water that came from their well. Jeannie Keeley was staring at him. He absolutely could not figure her out. She could be cool and abrupt one minute, and absolutely gushing words the next. He wouldn't have been surprised if she had stood and walked back over to the rack and pulled down the shotgun again and aimed it at him. This house and the people in it were crazy.

"Did Ote give you whatever he was going to give you to make things right?" she asked.

Joe paused with the glass nearly to his lips.

"Ote said he had something that once you saw it you would drop all the charges against him and he'd have his license back. Did he give it to you?"

"No. Did Ote tell you what it was?" Joe asked.

"Something he and the rest of the guys found. Some kind of animal."

"What kind of animal?"

She paused and screwed up her face. From the bedroom the little girl cried, "Mama."

"SHUT UP AND BE STILL," Jeannie Keeley roared without looking toward the bedroom, and there was silence.

"What kind of animal?"

"I can't remember for sure. We laughed about it, though. I had a gym teacher by that name in high school, I remember that."

"What was the gym teacher's name?"

"Mr. Merle Miller. We called him 'Killer Miller.' "

"Was it," Joe paused, searching his memory for the answer, "a Miller's weasel?" He vaguely recalled the name from a course he once took in biology. All he could remember was that the species was indigenous to the Rocky Mountain west and had been extinct for at least a century, maybe longer.

"Could've been," she said. "That sounds familiar, I think."

"Did he tell you any more about it?" Joe asked.

She reached into her smock for a book of matches. She lit the cigarette she had put in the ashtray and inhaled deeply. "Can't do it," she muttered. "I been since breakfast without a cigarette. I got to learn to quit. Ote would be pissed if he was here." Which meant she had been smoking all along.

"Did he tell you any more about the Miller's weasel?" Joe asked again, this time letting his voice rise.

"Ote never told me nothing," she said flatly.

WHEN JOE DROVE out of the cottonwood trees into the sagebrush and the bright white sunlight, he could not get three things out of his mind. The first was what Jeannie had said about the animal Ote was going to give him. The second was the manic, almost deranged look she had had on her face when she told him about Ote. The last was the look on April's face when Joe first saw her in the bedroom. He had seen the expression before, but only on domestic animals. It was Maxine's expression, the Labrador look. It said: *please hit me if it will make you feel better*.

The static sound of gravel crunching stopped abruptly as his tires climbed onto the smooth pavement of the state highway. He pressed the accelerator and the engine roared. Twin spoors of dirt trailed him on the blacktop. He could not get away from the place fast enough.

He turned in the direction of the interstate highway, away from Saddlestring. The drive to Cheyenne would take six hours.

To hunt and fish in the State of Wyoming, Joe thought, people were required to buy licenses and, in some cases, pass tests that proved they knew how to use firearms and knew Game and Fish regulations. There were no such requirements for having children.

20

FROM THE MOMENT he walked into Game and Fish Headquarters in Cheyenne and said he was Joe Pickett and he was there to see Les Etbauer for a meeting, the atmosphere changed within the room. The receptionist looked at him warily and pushed herself away from her desk as if he were contagious. Joe noticed that two young female license agents shot looks at him the instant they heard his name, then quickly turned back to their computer monitors as if suddenly reading the most fascinating e-mails they had ever seen. The receptionist directed him down a long hallway and told him to take a seat on the molded plastic seat outside of a door. Painted on the frosted glass were the words LESLEY ETBAUER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR.

Joe took off his hat and sat down. There wasn't much to look at. The sprawling cinder-block building had been built in the early 1960s, and the walls were painted institutional yellow and lit with industrial neon tubes. The hallway was narrow and the black-and-white checkerboard linoleum floor was scarred. It was the kind of hallway that echoed and amplified the rat-a-tat sounds of clicking heels as people walked down it. Not that there were many employees about; most of the doors in the hall were shut and there were no lights on behind the glass. He recognized many of the names on the doors as his agency superiors, but apparently they were already gone for the day. As he sat waiting for Les Etbauer, Joe realized that he felt as though he was back in grade school and he'd been sent to the principal's office. Like most of the field wardens, Joe had spent as little time as possible inside this building. This was where the agency bureaucracy was, where policy was set and regulations formed. It was here that the director met with the governor and individual legislators while they were in town for the legislative session and where laws and new regulations were hammered out and concessions were made. This was the place where hunters, fishermen, landowners, and environmentalists stormed (although they rarely made it past the front counter) when things didn't go their particular way. It was the place where all of those departmental memos came from. It was a place where they knew him, but he really didn't know them.

During the long drive to Cheyenne, Joe had had a lot of time to think. He had mulled over not only where the investigation of the outfitter murders seemed to be leading him, but also about the things Vern had said in the bar. It was the first time since this had all started that Joe had had the free time to try and put the things that he'd learned together. The conclusions he had reached unsettled him.

A man with an open collar and a short-sleeved dress shirt that stretched across his large belly approached from an office far down the hallway, and Joe looked up at him as he passed. The man stopped warily and turned around.

"You're Joe Pickett?" The man asked.

Joe nodded.

The man looked down the hall in both directions to make sure no one was coming.

"I just want you to know that there are a lot of people here who think you're getting screwed."

"Really?" Joe had not realized he had been the subject of discussion at headquarters, although the behavior of two license clerks behind the counter had hinted at that.

The man took a tentative step toward Joe and bent forward. "We hope you fight it and take it all the way to the governor," he said. "This kind of good old boy shit has gone far enough."

Joe was confused. "You seem to know a lot more about what's going to happen here than I do."

The man snorted and a smug look passed over his face. "Why do you think they'd want you here at four o'clock on Friday afternoon if the whole thing wasn't cut and dried? Think about it. If you get mad and want to protest, there's nobody to hear you until Monday morning."

"What ...?" Joe started to ask but the man turned quickly on his heel and continued down the hall. The receptionist had reappeared.

HE WAS GOING to be suspended. It was simply a matter of time until Etbauer pronounced those words. He had said a lot of words, Joe thought, but not those. Joe sat and listened. His mouth was dry, and his hands were wet. He couldn't quite believe this was happening even as he sat there. In his career, he had never received either a verbal or a written warning regarding his conduct, except for when he arrested the new governor for fishing without a license. His performance reviews had always been good if not brilliant. He had done his job well, he thought, to the best of his ability and according to regulations. He had tried very hard to be honest and fair. He had not cut corners, and he had worked hard. The time he spent working was far beyond what was required of him and he never asked for overtime or compensatory time. He never cheated on expense reports. He had reported what had happened with Ote Keeley because it was the right thing to do. He had never even suspected that it would result in anything but, at the worst, a mild reprimand. After all, he had recovered the weapon and arrested Ote with an ironclad case of poaching.

But he was going to be suspended. Joe felt as though the wind had been kicked out of him.

Etbauer went on and on in a thin, nasal voice. He sat behind his desk and read aloud the report Joe had written about Ote Keeley taking his gun. When he was through reading Joe's report, Etbauer found the passages in the agency handbook that pertained to department-issued firearms and read those aloud. Joe hoped like hell

that Etbauer wouldn't notice that he wasn't wearing his gun now and ask him about it.

Etbauer had a wide, flushed alcoholic face and thick, photo-gray glasses. Joe also noticed that he was balding. He didn't speak with Joe as much as speak to him. There was a quiver in his voice, and he mispronounced some of the words. It was as if Etbauer was reading aloud from a script.

Joe didn't know much about Etbauer, but he had heard things. According to Wacey, Etbauer had gone straight from the U.S. Army to the Game and Fish Department without a real job in between. Wacey had called Etbauer "the ultimate government employee," a man who had never collected a paycheck in his life that wasn't from either the state or the Federal government. He had attained his rank due to a particularly bureaucratic method known as ADV or "advanced due to vacancy." That meant that Etbauer simply put in his time and moved up as others moved out or retired. As state employees either left to take other jobs or start businesses of their own, bureaucrats like Etbauer (who no private sector employer would ever want on the payroll) simply grew in power and seniority like a tumor within the agency, amassing security and building a fine pension.

Joe had always considered individual words as finite units of currency, and he believed in savings. He never wanted to waste or unnecessarily expend words. To Joe, words meant things. They should be spent wisely. Joe sometimes paused for a long time until he could come up with the right words to express exactly what he wanted to say. Sometimes it confused people (Marybeth fretted that perhaps people thought Joe was slow) but Joe could live with that. That's why Joe despised meetings where he felt the participants acted as if they were paid by the number of words spoken and, as a result, the words began to cheapen by the minute until they meant nothing at all. In Joe's experience, the person who talked the most very often had the least to say. He sometimes wished that every human was allotted a certain number of words to use for their lifetime. When the allotment ran out, that person would be forced into silence. If this were the case, Joe would still have more than enough in his account while people like Les Etbauer would be very quiet. Joe had attended meetings where little got accomplished except what he considered the random drive-by spewing of words, like unaimed machine-gun bullets. What a waste of words, he often thought. What a waste of currency. What a waste of bullets.

Joe realized that there had finally been a pause and snapped back to the present. Etbauer was staring at him.

"I said," Etbauer asked, miffed that Joe had ignored him, "how could something like this happen?"

"Easier than you might think," retorted Joe.

Etbauer narrowed his eyes with scorn. This was not the answer he had been waiting to hear.

"I was writing out a citation," Joe said. "It's in the report. I was holding the clipboard with one hand and a pen with the other. I admit that I wasn't prepared for what happened, and I regret that it happened, and it's my fault that I let it happen."

"But he took your weapon," Etbauer said, as if bolstering his case. "He took it from you while you just stood there." Etbauer said it with disbelief, as if he couldn't imagine anyone being as stupid as Joe Pickett.

Joe stood up suddenly from his chair, reached across the desk, plucked Etbauer's name badge from his shirt pocket and sat back down. Etbauer looked at him with wide eyes, and a hint of panic.

"See what I mean?" Joe asked, holding up the name badge. "Even if you realize what's going on, sometimes you just can't react quickly enough because you're kind of boggled that it's happening in the first place."

Etbauer swallowed, trying to recover his authority. But his voice was weak: "Give me back my badge."

Joe slid it across the desk. "You thought I was going to pop you in the mouth, didn't you?" Joe asked. "And you still weren't able to do anything about it. Well, that's what happened with Ote. I screwed up, but I didn't expect it at the time. Just like you."

Etbauer's face was now bright red. He wouldn't look Joe in the eye. When he said that he had carefully reviewed the report and the evidence and that his determination was that Joe was to be officially suspended without pay as of next Tuesday, September 30, he was declaring all of it to a place on the wall behind and far to the right of where Joe sat.

In addition, Etbauer said, there had been some other very disturbing reports. Serious allegations.

"We plan to investigate whether or not there has been a serious dereliction of duty while you investigate murders that have already been solved. And there is some question of whether or not you destroyed evidence that could link the accused to the crime."

When Joe asked who had made the reports, Etbauer cautioned that "he was not at liberty to say." Joe felt a chill snake down his spine.

Etbauer continued. "Let me inform you right now that because of your recent actions and behavior, we are going to investigate whether or not you should be a suspect in the crimes themselves. Do you understand the gravity of this?"

Joe nodded. He certainly did, but he had trouble speaking.

"Me, a suspect?" he finally croaked.

"You, a suspect," Etbauer confirmed, his smile cruel. "We hope you can be cleared quickly because, frankly, if you aren't, it would cast the entire department under a black cloud, and we wouldn't want that."

Joe sighed. Etbauer was clearly a vicious, petty bureaucrat who lived for opportunities like this.

"Department policy states that you can challenge the suspension at the next Game and Fish Commission meeting, which takes place at the end of next month, by submitting a written appeal to the director. You've got three days to journal your area.

Your duties will be turned over to an interim warden in an adjacent district who will be assigned on Monday.”

Joe discovered that his mouth was too dry to swallow.

“You’re dismissed,” Etbauer said. “There’s not much more I can say right now.”

Joe stood. He knew it would all hit him later, but at the moment he felt both angry and oddly calm.

“At least give the Saddlestring district to Wacey Hedeman,” Joe said. “He knows it pretty well, and he’s a good hand.”

“We’ll consider it.” Etbauer said, fingering the name badge Joe had snatched. “You’re dismissed.”

Before Joe opened the door, he turned to Etbauer.

“Have you ever done this before?” Joe asked. “Suspended an active field warden for this kind of first-time violation?”

Etbauer flushed again and looked away. Joe followed Etbauer’s sight line. He was looking at a digital clock on a credenza behind him. It was 4:58 P.M.

“Anybody tell you to do this now?” Joe asked.

“Of course not,” Etbauer replied, still looking at the clock.

“Nobody called you and said, ‘Les, I need you to move this Pickett gun thing to the top of the pile’?”

Etbauer wheeled around in his chair. “Of course not.” He was defensive. “This conversation is over.”

Joe opened the door. The receptionist who had been standing outside, listening, quickly gathered herself together and escaped down the hallway, her shoes clicking like an old royal typewriter.

“It was never a conversation,” Joe said to Etbauer. “A lynching maybe, but not a conversation.”

He slammed the door so hard behind him that he stopped in the hall to make sure he hadn’t cracked the glass.

HE FOUND AN unoccupied, unlocked office and called Marybeth at the Kensinger house. Joe still felt strangely calm, but the need to talk to his wife was urgent. He wanted her thoughts after he told her what had happened. When she answered the telephone, he asked her how she liked the new place.

“Oh, it’s nice,” she said, but he could tell from her voice that she was completely enraptured. “Five bedrooms, four bathrooms. A beautiful deck that overlooks the Twelve Sleep River, a jacuzzi, a kitchen the size of our house and a dining room the size of a stadium. All of the closets are walk-in and so is the refrigerator. A breakfast bar and three fireplaces, one in the master bedroom. Mom and Lucy just love it. Right now, they’re out walking Maxine and the Kensinger dog around the golf course.”

Joe felt better just hearing her voice. After what he’d just been through, he needed to hear it.

“You didn’t mention Sheridan,” Joe said. “What does she think?”

Marybeth paused before she spoke. "I don't know for sure. She doesn't seem real excited for some reason. She didn't eat any lunch, and she didn't want to go out with Mom. She's just sitting in the living room staring out the window."

"Is it just the change of scenery?" Joe asked, thinking about how much they had moved Sheridan around from place to place in the last few years. The consistency and routine of the Saddlestring house was something Sheridan obviously enjoyed. Maybe she thought they were moving again.

"I hope that's all it is," Marybeth said. "I hope she isn't coming down with something."

Joe agreed. Then he said it: "Marybeth, the department has suspended me without pay as of Tuesday because Ote Keeley took my gun. They also suspect me of somehow being involved in the outfitter murders."

She gasped. "Oh my God, Joe."

He said nothing and neither did Marybeth. Finally, he asked if she was still there.

"Joe, what does this mean?"

"Two things, I think," Joe said, with as much confidence as he could muster. "The first is that there are some pretty powerful people who want me out of the field. The second is that it looks like you're talking to the newest employee of InterWest Resources."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Joe, is this something you really want to do?" Her concern was genuine, and he loved her for it.

"I don't see a lot of options," he said. "I've got a family to support."

"What about the house?" Marybeth asked.

"We can stay in it through an appeal, if we decide to appeal."

"Joe ..."

"I've got three days before I'm officially relieved," Joe interrupted. "I want to spend those three days following up on a few things I was thinking about on the ride down here. Then I'll let Vern know what the decision is. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course."

"I'll be home tonight," Joe said. "But don't wait up for me."

"I love you, Joe Pickett," Marybeth said.

"I love you, too."

JOE WENT DOWNSTAIRS into an area marked WILDLIFE BIOLOGY SECTION. He walked past a desk already vacated by a secretary, then into a maze of small cubicles and tables littered with lab equipment. It smelled of wet fur and feathers and strong disinfectant, and without any windows, it was dark down there. His boot steps seemed amplified in the empty room as he walked through the middle corridor looking for anyone who might still be working.

When he saw the woman emerge from her cubicle with a jacket folded over her arm and a handbag, he knew immediately who she was. She had that harried look about her that said she had children at day care and she was on her way to pick them up.

"Working late on Friday?" Joe asked, smiling.

"Later than I wanted to be," she said, looking him over and clearly wondering why he was down there. "Can I help you find something? I'm kind of in a hurry."

He recognized her voice.

"I'm Joe Pickett," he said. "I believe we spoke on the telephone last week."

The look on her face confirmed it. Her expression was pained.

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're in a hurry and all, so I'll get right to it," Joe said. "I appreciate what you did. It took guts and I know you could get in trouble for it. As far as I'm concerned, we're not even talking right now. I don't know your name, and I'm not going to ask."

She continued to watch him suspiciously. He could tell that she was trying to decide whether or not to simply walk away.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"Would you please show me where I can look up some information on an endangered species? Actually, it's an animal that is thought to be extinct."

Her face was a mask. "Is the species indigenous to Wyoming and the Rocky Mountains?"

"Yup."

She made up her mind and shrugged. "Oh, come on," she said. "It'll only take a minute, and then you're on your own."

She walked quickly down the length of the room into a library cluttered with reference books and journals. Joe followed. There was a computer and fax machine on one stand and a microfiche reader on another. She put her coat and handbag on a shelf while she booted up the computer, double-clicked through a series of menu screens, and pulled up a document database.

"Do you know how to operate this?" she asked.

"I do," Joe said. He thought he did, anyway.

"Key in what you're looking for. If the search turns up something, you'll get an index number and a title for the publication. The reference books are on the shelves behind you and next door in the resource room." She stood up and quickly gathered her belongings. "I'm out of here."

He called after her. "One more thing ..."

She wheeled, obviously out of patience.

"Did anyone locate the package I sent here?"

She sighed. "Try the incinerator."

"Thank you again."

"Forget it." She sang over her shoulder as she walked away. "I really mean that. Make sure you shut off the computer and the lights when you leave, and if anyone comes down here, just leave and don't say anything."

"It's a deal," Joe said, chuckling. He liked her.

He sat and turned to the computer monitor. After taking a few moments to figure out how to move around within the document, he pulled up the find command and typed in the words "Miller's weasel."

WHEN JOE WAS through reading, he drove into downtown Cheyenne and bought a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum revolver at a pawn shop for \$275. Farther down on the same block, he bought a box of cartridges for it.

21

“HEY, LITTLE SCHOOL girl,” the man called out as his vehicle slowed to a stop and his power window whirled down. “Do you need a ride?”

Sheridan squinted against the roll of dust that followed from the road. It was the same man who had been hiding in the horse stall. He had been traveling on the other side of the road but had crossed over the middle of the county road and stopped in front of her. Because the passenger seat was empty and the vehicle was high, Sheridan could only see his face and his hand that rested on the steering wheel. He wore sunglasses, and she couldn’t see his eyes. He was smiling.

“I’m not supposed to get in a stranger’s car,” Sheridan said.

The man chuckled. He could seem so friendly. “I’m not a stranger, though, darlin’. I know your dad, remember? And you, too!”

Sheridan nodded yes. She was wearing a blue jumper and lace-up shoes. Her homework and reading were in her backpack. Because she was staying at the Eagle Mountain Club, she had to take a different bus from a different place than she was used to and the bus was always late. She was the only child who got on in Saddlestring for the long ride.

“Mom is waiting for me to get off the bus,” Sheridan said.

“Okay, okay. But at least come closer,” the man said, still smiling. “So I don’t have to yell.”

Sheridan stepped up to the road but kept well back of the window. She was cautious, and her legs felt ready to run. Because the man would have to leap across the passenger seat and through the window, she thought she could easily get away if she needed to. Now that she was up on the road with him, she could see him a little better, and she could see clearly into his car. Her insides were knotted. Sheridan felt as if she might get sick and throw up. She had not been able to stop thinking about this man ever since he had pulled her into the stall, and now he was here again, right in front of her. He seemed so nice, but he had said such horrible things. And he looked at her like she was something special to him, as if by sharing the secret, they were somehow close to each other. She had never thought about any grown man in these terms before. It frightened her and made her feel guilty.

Without being obvious, she tried to steal a look down the road in both directions.

“There’s nobody coming,” the man said, an edge creeping into his voice. “What’s the matter, don’t you trust me to stay put? You think I’m going to grab you or something?”

She didn’t reply. In her imagination, her dad’s pickup had appeared on the top of the hill and was getting closer.

"If you were a couple years older, I probably couldn't stay put," the man laughed. "But you're safe for now." His voice dropped. "Unless of course you don't want to be so safe."

Sheridan turned her head, so he wouldn't see how scared she was.

"Let's make this quick so we can get on our way," the man said, his voice serious now. "How did you get those little weasels to come out of the wood pile?"

Sheridan said she tossed handfuls of food on the top of the pile. Like rain.

"What kind of food?"

Dry cereal, she said. Raisins, nuts, bread, sometimes bits of hamburger.

"And you just sort of sprinkled it on top, huh?" He asked. "Did they come out every time?"

No, they didn't, she said. Not every time.

The man seemed to be thinking about something. She couldn't see his eyes, but she could tell they were glaring at her behind the glasses.

"Sheridan, are there any secrets you're keeping from me?"

Sheridan went cold. "No," she lied. She hoped to God he wouldn't ask her if she knew where the weasels were now, because she wasn't sure she could answer him without showing she was lying. But he didn't ask, and like most grownups, he thought he knew everything.

"We've still got a deal, don't we, darlin'?"

Sheridan nodded, relieved they were off the subject. "A deal is a deal."

"You bet it is," he said slowly as he reached and pushed the silver button that held the glove box closed. The cover dropped open. There was something in the glove box. "Look," he commanded, in a voice that made her obey.

She couldn't see it very well. The glove box was dark, but there was something round and white in the corner of it. It was something about the size of his fist, but wrapped in red-stained white paper that looked wet.

He snapped the cover shut before she could see any better.

His voice was almost a whisper: "Have you ever seen a kitty's head after it's been twisted off, Sheridan? When you twist it, the neck breaks and it sounds like when you crack your knuckles."

Sheridan stepped back, nearly falling. She covered her mouth with her hands, horrified.

"That," he pointed toward the glove box, "could happen to someone you know real well unless you keep our secret just between us."

Sheridan found herself backing away from the truck, wanting to be as far away from what lay in the glove box as possible.

"If I can't get those weasels out, you might have to help me," the man said. "Maybe you can talk weasel language to them or something. I don't know."

He started up the motor. His voice rose as the engine raced. "Take it easy, darlin'. Wish me luck with those weasels!"

THE MAN PULLED away and drove down the road. He watched in his rearview mirror as the yellow school bus cleared the hill behind them and began to slow down for the girl. She was moving toward it. The bus door swung open, and the little girl in the blue dress disappeared from his sight. She was a cutie, that Sheridan.

He leaned over and opened the glove box and reached inside. The package was still warm, and the paper greasy. He peeled away the wrapper with his teeth. He took a big bite out of it, and dollops of ketchup spattered in his lap.

It was a triple chili cheeseburger from the Burg-O-Pardner on Main. *Damn*, it was good. That place could sure cook a burger.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at himself good and hard in the mirror. Despite everything, he liked what he saw.

22

THE FIRST WRITTEN description of a Miller's weasel was made by Captain Meriwether Lewis in the Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, published in 1805. The passage was not extensive. Lewis wrote, with his particular brand of spelling, that the party had encountered small colonies of the "plesant creatures" shortly after they had reached the Three Forks of the Missouri River and had followed the Jefferson River toward the Rocky Mountains. The animals, like prairie dogs, burrowed into the earth along what proved to be traditional buffalo migration routes. Their name came from rodney "Mandan" Miller, a surveyor's assistant in the expedition, who injured his ankle by stumbling into one of the burrows. Lewis wrote that the creatures sometimes stood in tight groups on their hind legs and chattered a warning as the party approached. The Miller's weasels were, he noted, "happey little companions of the trail" and that their primary food supply was buffalo carrion. The day after a buffalo bull or cow was shot by the party for food, the weasels would gather and wait patiently until the large predators—the wolves, coyotes, eagles, vultures—were through with the carcass themselves and then would move in to finish what was left. He wrote that the weasels ate the meat, fur, and viscera of dead buffalo. As was his custom, Lewis first made a sketch, then shot several of the weasels, skinned the hides, and salted the bodies for later study by scientists back home.

It was dusk and Joe drove north, bathed in the brilliant copper light of the mid-September sun. He kept the window open so he could breathe in the sweet, dry smell of the sagebrush—covered flats that stretched like an endless rumpled quilt in every direction as he approached Waltman north of Casper. There were few other vehicles on the two-lane highway. It was just before dusk, the time of day when silent herds of deer were moving out from the secret draws and the tall sagebrush—a brief, magical time when the light was of perfect force and angle so it lit up the brown-and-white coloring of hundreds of pronghorn antelope, revealing them like beacons in the gray brush. In a few minutes, the light would change and the pronghorns, their particular

illumination extinguished, would meld back into the mottled texture of the country as if they had never really been there at all.

Joe rolled down the window and turned the radio off. There weren't many places left in north America where humans could still be virtually alone and inaccessible but this was one of them. He had driven out of range of the only available radio signal several minutes before, and the "search" feature had been unsuccessfully spinning through all of the frequencies like a slot machine that wouldn't stop. He had now entered what Wacey referred to as "radio Free Wyoming," and he would remain in it for at least the next half hour. He planned to drive straight through without stopping except for gasoline. He wanted to get home to Marybeth by midnight.

A strange, almost giddy feeling overcame Joe. He had seen thousands of Wyoming sunsets before, but for some reason, this one touched him. His emotions flitted like the radio search command from guilt to relief to outright anger. Guilt that he was letting Marybeth and his family down, relief that this chapter of his life—the long hours, the low pay, the frustration of trying to do a good job in a numbingly indifferent government bureaucracy—was over, and anger, nasty pulses of white-hot rage to which he was entirely unaccustomed, because he was a pawn in someone's game.

He tried to not dwell on the fact that this might be one of the last times he drove this pickup or wore his uniform. He wouldn't just be losing his job—he'd be losing his own self-image as well. Without a badge he was just like everyone else. He started to understand, for the very first time, why a police officer might want to turn his weapon on himself instead of turning it in. He fought against the self-pity that threatened to engulf him.

Instead, he turned his thoughts to what he had learned in the resource room.

What was known of Miller's weasels came from four primary sources: Captain Lewis' writings, the field notes of early biologists, references in pioneer journals, and a series of articles about the last known group of the creatures, which had been displayed at the Philadelphia Zoo in 1887 (according to the articles, they were a popular exhibit years before anyone had ever heard of the phrase "endangered species"). No more than twelve inches long and startlingly quick, Miller's weasels were more closely related to mongooses than any other north American species. They were civets, and seemed to resemble the Suricate or Stokstert meerkat of West Africa. They were omnivorous and aggressive, and they would eat eggs, snakes, mice, birds, lizards, fruit, insects, bulbs, and seeds. They would even give chase to foxes and dogs. It was estimated that at one time in the early nineteenth century, there were as many as a million Miller's weasels located within the Rocky Mountain West and Great Plains. They lived in family units as small as five or as large as 30, and they moved their colonies several times a year, following the buffalo wherever they went. They relied on the buffalo not only for carrion, but also for breaking up and churning the earth with their hooves as they grazed, thereby exposing plants, tubers, and small animals for the Miller's weasels to feed on.

American Indians considered the Miller's weasels to be good luck animals, and there were likenesses of them painted on tipi skins and beaded on clothing. The reason was simple: if there were Miller's weasels, then the Indians knew that buffalo would be nearby.

References to Miller's weasels were found in many of the journals kept by those who traveled the Oregon Trail, but no extensive or comprehensive passages. Most of the references had to do with killing the weasels wherever they could be found. It seemed that a legend had developed along the trail that Miller's weasels, despite their cuddly appearance, liked the taste of human flesh. The biologists who had analyzed the journal entries speculated that the pioneers had seen the weasels feeding on bison carcasses or perhaps digging into the numerous human graves that lined the route. There were rumors—none confirmed—that the animals were known to steal into Conestoga wagons at night and feed on human babies while they slept. Because of this legend, Miller's weasels were exterminated in every possible way. The pioneers poisoned the weasels by leaving tainted meat or oats near the colonies. They also would set bonfires on top of the animals' holes or flood these areas, then club the animals to death as they tried to escape. They were also shot, of course, on sight. Sometimes a single shotgun blast would cut down a dozen as they stood on their hind legs and yipped.

But what really led Miller's weasels down the path to extinction was the virtual elimination of the great herds of buffalo on the Great Plains. Because the Miller's weasels were dependent on the buffalo, they died out when the buffalo vanished. It wasn't until many years later that it became apparent that Miller's weasels no longer existed in America.

Was it possible that a few of the species still existed?

It *was* possible, Joe thought. Maybe the weasels had learned to eat something else. If the remaining weasels managed to change their staple diet, there were plenty of elk, moose, and deer in the mountains to feed on.

And Vern was right. If a colony of Miller's weasels was discovered, the news would hit the scientific and environmental community within hours via the Internet. It would sock the already fading town of Saddlestring, Wyoming, with a punch Joe wasn't sure it would recover from. Federal employees from various agencies, journalists, biologists, and environmentalists from all over the world would come, all dragging their own distinct and separate political agendas along with them. The ranchers, loggers, outfitters, guides, and residents of Saddlestring would be no match.

Joe had no hard evidence of the species to present to anyone yet. But when everything that had happened was viewed in a certain light, a light not unlike the sunshine that had found and exposed the antelope in the sagebrush, it all seemed to point to the fact that a species thought extinct for 100 years was alive and well in the Bighorns—and that three men who found out about them had been murdered. The murderer, according to Sheriff Barnum and the state investigators, was Clyde Lidgard. But if Clyde didn't do it—and Joe couldn't decide if he believed that—who did? And why

did the people who should be the most concerned about the possibility of this discovery, Joe's colleagues, seem uninterested or at least want to steer him away?

Joe smiled bitterly in the dark.

He had only three days to try and find the answers to those questions, and he was completely on his own.

IN WALTMAN, at a small pink general store 30 miles from anywhere else, Joe bought a half-pint of bourbon and a six-pack of beer from an old man behind the counter who had not only lost an eye but also his left arm from the elbow down. The store owner didn't bother to pin up the empty sleeve of his dirty, gold cowboy shirt, but let it flap beside him like a broken wing as he rang up the purchases. Yup, the store owner answered Joe, that payphone outside still worked.

Outside, Joe dialed the telephone, opened a beer, and leaned against the pink building in the dark. A humming neon Coors beer sign from the window of the store painted his face a light blue.

Dave Avery, Joe's friend from the Montana Fish and Game Department, answered at his home in Helena. Joe could hear the sounds of a football game on television in the background. Joe asked Dave if he had been able to analyze the samples he sent him yet.

"Are you screwing with me, Joe?" Dave asked, his voice wary. "Is this some kind of a trick you're pulling on me?"

That meant Dave had received and tested the scat samples Joe had sent him.

"Why do you say that?" Joe asked.

Dave snorted. He was animated. No doubt he had already had a few beers that evening. "You know why, Joe. That scat had a little of everything in it. Pine nuts, vegetation, traces of cartilage, even some elk hair. It could be a fox or something, but it's way too small for that. You win this game. I can't guess that shit. I thought I could name that shit in three notes, maybe less. But I'm baffled. Boggled. Blown away."

For Joe, this confirmed he was on the right track.

"Ever hear of a Miller's weasel?" Joe asked.

"A what?" Dave asked. Then he laughed, unconvinced. There was a long silence. Dave Avery was well versed in both the current and former species of the region. "You're not kidding, are you?" Dave asked. "Did you actually see any?"

Joe told him what had happened, where he found the samples, and what he suspected. Dave kept saying "Jesus Christ" as Joe talked.

"Do you know what you might have here?" Dave said when Joe was through. "If the Feds find out, it'll get wild."

"That's the least of my worries right now." Joe said. "Now will you do me a favor for the time being?"

Dave said he would.

"Do a couple of more tests to make sure neither of us is wrong. Then lock up those samples and the analysis. Don't tell anyone what you've got or what we discussed. Just keep it under wraps for a while until I can sort things out down here."

Dave asked how long it would be before Joe got back to him.

"Three days."

* * *

THIRTY MILES north of Waltman and 20 miles south of Kaycee, Joe turned off of the highway onto a little-used ranch access. His tires bounced over ruts until he cleared a rise where he knew he couldn't be seen from the highway.

Joe killed the engine and swung out of the truck. There was just enough light that the sagebrush looked cottony. A jackrabbit bounded away from the road with tremendous leaps, looking twice its actual size in the headlights. Behind him, the hot engine ticked.

He stroked the checkered grip of the new revolver and raised it. He thumbed the hammer, and the action worked smoothly, rolling the cylinder. He aimed down the long barrel at the now-distant rabbit and squeezed the trigger. The .357 roared and bucked violently in his hands and a two-foot explosion from the muzzle left an afterimage in his vision. A plume of dust exploded in front of the jackrabbit, and the animal reversed direction and now bounded right to left.

Joe fired, then fired again. He kept squeezing the trigger until he realized it had clicked three times on empty cylinders. A half a mile away, the jackrabbit had hit overdrive and was streaking toward the mountains.

With his ears ringing and half-blind from the concussive reports of the big pistol, Joe stumbled back to his pickup to reload.

23

VERN DUNNEGAN WAS not in his room or in the lounge at the Holiday Inn, but Joe saw his black Suburban on Main Street in front of the Stockman's Bar. Joe parked beside it. As the front door closed behind him, Joe squinted down the length of the dark narrow room through cigarette smoke and saw Vern sitting in the back booth just as he had a few days before. Vern was alone, hunched over and staring down at a tall glass of bourbon and water that he held between his hands.

As Joe approached, Vern looked up and in that instant something passed quickly over Vern's face—perhaps a mixture of both surprise and anger. Joe barely had a chance to register the look before it was replaced by a huge, overdone grin. Joe sat down heavily in the booth and ordered a beer when the barmaid approached.

"You're up awfully late," Vern said, studying Joe carefully from behind his smile.

"I just got back from Cheyenne," Joe said. "That's one hell of a long drive."

"It's a two-and-a-half six-pack drive." Vern chuckled. "A drive I made many, many times. It looks like you might have had a few yourself to make the hours more bearable. Gotta be careful on the highway," Vern said, smiling paternalistically. "Some of those patrolmen would like nothing better than to give a ticket to a fellow state employee and get you in all sorts of trouble."

Caught, Joe nodded. A drunk like Vern who had tried to hide it for years could be very perceptive when it came to identifying someone else who'd been drinking, Joe thought.

"You just missed Wacey," Vern continued. Vern was now in command. Whatever had passed across his face when he looked up and saw Joe was now well hidden. "We were having a little celebration."

Joe looked puzzled.

"Barnum announced today that he's dropping out of the sheriff's race," Vern said. "He's going to retire."

"You're kidding," Joe replied. He wondered what had made Barnum come to that decision. With Barnum out, Wacey was assured of winning the republican primary in a couple of weeks. And in Twelve Sleep County, winning the republican primary was the same as winning the general election. There were only a handful of Democrats, and few of them even bothered to vote anymore.

"So ole Wacey was pretty excited and we had a few drinks to celebrate," Vern said.

"I bet he was," Joe agreed. "Strange that Barnum dropped out."

Vern shrugged. "These things happen. Maybe he thought he was going to get whipped."

Joe recalled the conversation he'd had with Barnum earlier that week. Barnum had certainly acted as if he had already been defeated. But Joe hadn't understood it then, and he didn't understand it now. He had noticed no ground-swell of support for Wacey Hedeman in the community—and very little dissatisfaction with Barnum. It seemed to Joe that voting against Sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum was like voting against the Bighorn Mountains.

"Politics," Vern said, as if the word alone summed up the conversation. "Stranger than fiction."

Joe sipped his beer. He wished he hadn't been drinking on the ride home. He wished his head was more clear.

"So what brings you down to the Stockman's Bar when it's obviously past your bedtime?" Vern asked.

Joe looked up. "I guess I want to accept that job you offered me with InterWest," Joe said. "I got suspended today."

Vern frowned melodramatically. "Suspended? *You?* That doesn't even seem possible."

Joe had a feeling that it wasn't as much of a surprise to Vern as Vern made it out to be. They were now playing some kind of game with each other. But in this kind of game, Joe was an amateur and Vern was All-Pro.

Joe told Vern what had happened. Vern shook his head and rolled his eyes at the right places. Joe thought for a moment that maybe Vern hadn't known. No, Joe amended, *Vern knew*. There were still plenty of people in Cheyenne that owed Vern a favor and could have tipped him off.

"So I want to work with you," Joe finished.

“Why don’t you fight it?” Vern asked. “It sounds like a ridiculous overreaction by the department. You should be able to win it at your hearing.”

“I don’t have the time or money to go against them and I need to support my family,” Joe said truthfully. “I’m not sure I have the determination I need. I guess I’m not really sure I want my job back at all if this is what they’re capable of.”

Vern drained his drink and ordered another for both of them. “What does Marybeth say?” The tone of the question was not kind.

“I haven’t talked to her about it yet,” Joe said, flushing just a bit from the implication. “I came straight here.”

“Joe,” Vern said after the drinks had been delivered. “We seem to have some kind of misunderstanding here.”

“What do you mean?”

Vern chuckled in his most kindly way, as if he were sharing the embarrassment for both of them. “Joe, I don’t think that I ever actually offered you a job. If I remember correctly, I just asked if you might be interested in something with InterWest. I believe I said I was ‘testing the waters.’ Don’t you remember that phrase?”

“I do remember it,” Joe said, trying to understand what was going on and where Vern was headed. He still wanted to trust Vern, but Vern’s statement that there *wasn’t* a job waiting for him at InterWest had left him shaken and wary. “But I know what I heard from you. I know what you meant.”

“Look,” Vern said, glancing around the bar and lowering his voice. “It’s not going to happen.”

Joe sat back in his seat.

“Besides,” Vern said, rolling the sweaty drink slowly between his palms, “I talked to my bosses at InterWest and they now think things are just fine as they are. For a while there, they tossed it around and they asked me if you were willing to make the commitment and I had to honestly tell them at the time that I didn’t think you were. They reconsidered after that and now they don’t see the need for additional employees at this level and at this phase in the project. Maybe if you had come back to me sooner—or with some enthusiasm. Before this thing in Cheyenne happened. It would be pretty hard right now to convince them that you suddenly changed your mind and it wasn’t connected to the fact that you got thrown out of the department.”

Joe started to speak, but he caught himself.

“One of the reasons I wanted you aboard with me was because of your clean record and your sterling reputation,” Vern said, sounding almost apologetic. “But lately you’ve been neglecting your real job and running around the county with a wild hair up your butt trying to reopen that outfitter case. Don’t think nobody has noticed it. You’ve been the talk of the morning business coffee at the café. There’s talk that you burned down Clyde Lidgard’s trailer house for some reason that only you know. Now you’ve been suspended from the department. I really don’t think there’s a job for you with us, Joe. I’m sorry.”

Joe was stunned for the second time that day. He couldn't believe this was happening. He didn't know what to say to Vern. This was exactly the opposite of what he thought he would be able to tell Marybeth when he got home. And his girls. And his mother-in-law. The worst thing about it was that he had not really wanted to come to Vern and ask in the first place. He had talked himself into it as he drove and drank on the highway. He had done it, he thought, because it was the most responsible thing to do. As Joe stood up, he considered raising his fist and smashing Vern in his grinning mouth as hard as he could. But he didn't. He felt too defeated for that.

"All is not lost, Joe," Vern said as Joe clamped on his hat. "Wacey might need a new deputy, you know. He's going to get rid of that McLanahan guy just as soon as he takes office. All is not lost."

Joe turned and leaned forward into the booth, with both of his hands on the tabletop, and put his face directly in front of Vern's.

"You're wrong, Vern," Joe said, nearly whispering. "All is just about lost."

"Now, Joe ..."

"Vern." Joe cut him off. "Shut up and listen for a change."

Vern's eyes quickly confirmed that no one in the bar was paying them any attention. He looked suspiciously back to Joe.

"Vern, I lost my job and my house today. My faith in the belief that if you do your job and you work hard and you're honest then good things will happen is real shaky right now. My family is one paycheck away from being on the street. One paycheck. Now I've lost my only prospect for another job. And to top it off, you tell me I've lost my reputation. Then you tell me that *all is not lost*."

Vern reached up and put a hand on Joe's shoulder, but Joe angrily shook it off.

"Hey, Joe," Vern said, "it's time to start thinking a lot more about Joe Pickett and a lot less about what your family and everybody else thinks. That's what I've learned, Joe."

Vern's eyes turned hard and his lip curled back in a sneer. "Welcome to my world. The *real* world. It's a place where nice things don't necessarily happen to nice people. I," Vern said in his most grandiloquent way, "am an entrepreneur. I create wealth. I empowered this InterWest deal into being. An offer was made to you, and you passed on it when you had the chance."

Their eyes locked.

"Vern, have you ever heard of a species called the Miller's weasel?"

The corners of Vern's mouth twitched slightly, then out came the false smile. "Miller's weasels are extinct," Vern said. "They don't exist, even though every decade or so a rumor pops up that somebody saw one. Kind of like sightings of Bigfoot or something."

"Vern," Joe hissed. "If I find out you're involved in all of this, things are going to get real western."

The look Joe had seen on Vern's face when he walked into the bar passed over it again. But this time there was some fear mixed in. It was good to see.

THE NIGHT HAD turned sharply colder and the stars were shrouded by clouds. Joe's hands were shaking as he dug in his pocket for his keys. He started his truck and began to drive to his house. He hit the brakes and cursed loudly when he realized that he was headed in the wrong direction. His family was at Eagle Mountain now, so he turned in the middle of Main Street and roared away in the other direction.

PART FIVE

Land Acquisition

Sec. 5(a) Program. - The Secretary, and the Secretary of Agriculture with respect to the national Forest System, shall establish and implement a program to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants, including those which are listed as endangered species or threatened species pursuant to section 4 of this Act. To carry out such a program, the appropriate Secretary -

(1) shall utilize the land acquisition and other authority under the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended, and the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, as appropriate; and

(2) is authorized to acquire by purchase, donation, or otherwise, lands, waters, or interest therein, and such authority shall be in addition to any other land acquisition authority vested in him.

(b) Acquisitions. - Funds made available pursuant to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, as amended, may be used for the purpose of acquiring lands, waters, or interests therein under sub-section (a) of this section.

—The Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1982

24

IN THE DINING room, there was a long, dark hardwood table that could seat fourteen people comfortably. In the middle of the night, Joe sat in his robe at the foot of it under a dimmed chandelier and felt sorry for himself. Hours before, he had switched to drinking water, and he filled up a stubby cut-glass tumbler from a pitcher that was older than he was.

The Kensinger house was magnificent, but he had surveyed it with amused dispassion. The bar area alone was half of the square footage of his house on Bighorn Road. The walls were hung with original Bama and Schenck contemporary western paintings and eighteenth-century English sporting prints. Two-thousand-dollar navajo rugs hung from ceiling beams. There was a pure stainless steel kitchen with a walk-in refrigerator/freezer, giving Joe the impression that food preparation in this place was a serious, almost clinical affair. In the book-lined den (the books were mainly leather-bound editions of sporting and history categories with stiff, uncracked spines), a powerful telescope was mounted on a tripod to study the Twelve Sleep River and the wildlife

that came down from the foothills to drink from it. To Joe, the house was not built or arranged to be lived in as much as it was a stage for entertaining. Small children would kill this house, and this house would kill small children. It was a kind of rancho deluxe contemporary western living museum.

Joe sipped his glass of water and looked around the dining room in the dark. The unreality of this place, given his situation, was overwhelming.

“Can I get you anything?” It was Marybeth. She stood in the shadow of the double doors. He gestured at the half-empty pitcher of water to indicate he was okay. He looked at her as if he were seeing her for the very first time. To sleep in, she was wearing an extra-large T-shirt that extended to midthigh. The cotton cloth strained across her pregnant belly and substantial breasts, her nipples poking out like buttons. Beneath the T-shirt, her legs were firm and thin, and her toes were curled into the nap of the thick carpet. Her hair was down around her shoulders and sleep-mussed. She was lovely.

When he had first come in, he had told her everything. The kids had been in bed, and Missy Vankeuren was who knows where within the house. He had held nothing back as they sat across from each other at the dining room table: what had happened at Game and Fish Headquarters, what Dave Avery had confirmed, what Vern had said about the job and his reputation.

“One way or other, that man has made sure he still has power over you,” Marybeth had said. “Vern Dunnegan may be the only person I have ever truly learned to hate.”

He had told her about his plan to go back up into the Crazy Woman Creek canyon tomorrow where the outfitters had been murdered—while he still had the authority to do so. Maybe he could find something that would substantiate what he was beginning to suspect about the outfitters’ murders. He had laid it out in flat, declarative sentences. When he was through, she had looked at him and had said, “That’s a lot to think about,” and then she had gone to bed. They had left things on a difficult, unresolved note. Now she was back.

She came from the doorway, pulled out a straight-backed chair next to him, and sat down. She reached over and slipped her warm hand between the folds of his robe and put it on his leg. She looked into his eyes.

“Joe, I’ve been thinking about everything you said.”

He waited for what would come next.

“Joe, all is not lost. You have me. You have your family. You have character. That’s a lot, and not many people can say that. We love you and appreciate who you are and what you’ve done.”

He looked at her quizzically.

“Joe, you are a good man. You’re the last of your kind. Don’t forget that. There aren’t many like you left. You have a good heart and your moral compass is a model of its kind. You need to do what you need to do. Things will work out, and we can talk about it all later. We’re being tested, God knows why.”

Joe was taken aback. For some reason—and he felt more than slightly guilty about it now—he thought she was going to tell him that she had had it and maybe the best idea was for her to take the children and go and live with her mother in Arizona for a while. He felt he had failed her. But she was showing that she was stronger and more committed to him, and them, than he had given her credit for. He started to speak and ask her why, but she didn't let him.

"Don't ask me, Joe. There isn't anything logical about it. There's nothing I can really explain to you other than I trust you and I'm with you until the bitter end."

"That's a lot to live up to," Joe said.

"You bet it is," Marybeth answered. "But you haven't let me down yet."

Joe thought she had never seemed as beautiful as she did at that moment.

"I'm not sure what I should say next," Joe said, flushing.

She withdrew from his robe and guided his hand under the T-shirt to her belly. He rested his hand on her and then spread his fingers. Beneath the taut flesh he could feel the baby shifting inside of her.

"We make wonderful babies," she said softly. "We're bringing good little people into the world who have a mom and a dad who care about them and love them. They know right from wrong because their parents teach them which is which, and because their parents live by example. Somewhere, there is a reward for us, Joe. We need to believe that. We won't just be abandoned."

Joe stared at Marybeth, still unsure what to say. "But right now, I just want you in my bed," she continued. "I need you there."

He followed her to a bedroom he had never even seen before and to a bed he had never slept in. In it, they made love in a warm, clumsy way that at least for a few wonderful moments made him forget where he was.

HE DIDN'T KNOW how long he had been sleeping, but when he opened his eyes it was still dark outside. He eased out of the bed, not wanting to wake Marybeth, and padded along the cold stone tiles in the hallway. Then he realized, standing in the strange house, that he wasn't sure where the closest bathroom was. He stopped at a curtained window and brushed it aside to look outside. There was still no sign of dawn. Stars shown brilliantly in the black sky. His intention was to be in the saddle by seven and to the elk camp by noon. Beyond that he wasn't sure where he was going or how far he would go.

By the faint blue light from the moon, he saw the shadow of a lamp on a table in the hall; he bent down, turned it on, and looked at his wristwatch.

"Dad?"

The voice made him jump and spin around. He hadn't known which room the children were sleeping in. When he entered the bedroom, he saw Sheridan sitting upright on the bed, her fingers wrapped tightly around the covers.

"Honey," Joe said as he sat down on the bed, "it's three-thirty in the morning. Why aren't you sleeping?"

He couldn't see her well in the dark. She looked like a tangle of blond hair and thin limbs. He stroked her hair and eased her back to her pillow.

"I can't sleep," Sheridan said, her voice hoarse.

"Is it the new house?" he asked. "Sleeping in a new bed?"

She didn't answer, but he had the feeling that she wanted to say something. Tell him something. He petted her hair and shoulder to calm her. Something was wrong. He heard her sniff and realized that she had been sobbing. He felt her cheeks, which were moist with tears.

"You can tell me," he said, his voice gentle.

Suddenly, she sat up and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face into his chest. He assumed she must have heard some of the earlier conversation with Marybeth. Maybe she was worried about their situation ... like he was. He told her that everything was going to be okay. He told her that she needed to get some sleep. He waited for her to tell him what the problem was. She had never been shy before when it came to talking about her feelings. Far from it, Joe thought.

Finally: "I don't like this place," she told him, crying.

He didn't tell her that he wasn't real sure he liked it either. Instead, he once again eased her back into her bed.

"Is that all?" he asked.

She paused for an inordinate amount of time. She covered her face with her hands.

"That's all," she said, meekly.

"We won't be here forever," he said, aware of the irony of that statement.

He rubbed her shoulder until he thought she had drifted back to sleep. He rose eventually and quietly walked across the room toward the hall.

"I love you and Mom," she said. "I love our whole family."

He turned at the door.

"Your whole family loves you, too, Sheridan. Now get some sleep."

25

JOE RODE HARD, pushing Lizzie as fast as he dared, and made it to the elk camp by midday. It was cold. Gray, scudding clouds filled a sky that seemed especially close. He dismounted in the camp, stretched, and unsaddled his horse. They had both worked up a sweat. Steam rose like contrails from Lizzie's back, and he rubbed her down with his gloved hands while she drank from the trickle of cold water that was Crazy Woman Creek in early fall. He set out some grain for Lizzie and then draped the smoky, wet saddle blanket over a branch. He would wait for Lizzie to dry and rest before he continued on.

Except for a few early rising hunters waiting for their coffee to brew in the campground before sunrise, Joe had not seen another living person since seven that morning. On his hard ride up the mountain, he had spooked a small herd of cow and calf elk

and had nearly ridden on top of a coyote who was loping lazily down the same trail he was riding up.

As Lizzie rested, he carried his saddle and walked through the elk camp. He sat on a rock, pulled his Thermos from a saddlebag, and poured a cup of coffee. In addition to the new Smith & Wesson revolver he wore on his hip, he had brought his remington shotgun loaded with double-ought buckshot. He arranged the saddle scabbard on top of the pommel so he could pull the shotgun out quickly.

Even though it was the same place he, Wacey, and McLanahan had moved in on that morning just two weeks before, it seemed very different now. The tents were gone, as were the stoves and wooden floors. The earth within the camp had been trampled flat and hard by investigators. The fireplace had been kicked apart, and the cross beams in the trees that were used for hanging elk had been dismantled. In a year or two, with plenty of snow and new grass and erosion, the elk camp would be unrecognizable, nothing more than a wide, flat place along the stream.

He spread a topographical map across his knees and studied it until he found the location of the elk camp where he now was and the creek that ran alongside it. Along the creek a few inches up from the camp, the contour lines narrowed and became dark and thick, indicating a steep and narrow canyon. The creek became a hairline. The trail, marked by dots and dashes, ended at the mouth of the canyon.

On the map, the canyon looked incredibly long and narrow. He traced it with his finger as it snaked through the heart of the mountain. But what Joe was most interested in was where the creek began, and where the walls appeared to widen. It looked like a huge bowl or depression, two miles long by three miles, all four sides rimmed by sharp cliffs. The area was in a roadless section, and the map showed virtually no access from above. The only way in, it seemed, was upstream along the creek.

Joe had never been to the bowl before. He had asked Vern about it, back when he had just started in the district, because it was such a unique topographical feature. Vern had said he had been there once but hadn't been back as it was so hard to get to. Hunters avoided it, Vern said, because, although it was remote and probably rich with game, it was one of those places where "the only way to get an elk out was with a knife and fork."

But Ote Keeley, Kyle Lensegrav, and Calvin Mendes had spent a lot of time up here scouting and hunting elk. Joe wouldn't be a bit surprised if they had felt the urge to find out what was upstream, beyond the narrow canyon. They had probably used the same topo map Joe had and could see, as he could, that the bowl could very likely be the home of magnificent elk that were rarely, if ever, hunted.

Joe looked up and searched upstream for the spot where the canyon walls began to narrow. That was where he planned to go.

"WHY DO YOU want to go back to the house so badly, Sheridan?" her mom asked as she gathered up the breakfast dishes from the table. Lucy had already left to go watch television. Lucy had fallen in love with all of the channels available on the satellite dish.

Sheridan had thought long and hard about a story that would work. She had forgotten her library books, she said. The books were due on Monday, she said. It was a lie, Sheridan knew. But it was sort of a good lie.

"Can't we go tomorrow?" her mom asked. "Tomorrow is Sunday."

"I've got to read the books," Sheridan said, looking to her grandmother for sympathy. "I've got to do a book report on one of them."

Missy Vankeuren laughed. She had been in a good mood ever since they had come to the house at the Eagle Mountain Club. "She sounds like me in my school days."

"Yes," her mom said, looking with disapproval at her own mother. "But it doesn't sound like Sheridan."

Mom turned back to her.

"Sheridan, you know better than to wait until the last minute to do your homework," her mom admonished as she took the dishes to the kitchen.

"Well, it's been pretty busy lately," Sheridan said, indicating the move. That would instill a little guilt, Sheridan thought. Her mom knew Sheridan didn't really like the new "vacation home," as Missy called it.

"Just use your charm to get yourself out of it," Missy said, winking at Sheridan. "Bat your eyes and make up some good story. That's what I would do." Then she smiled.

Sheridan's mom came back into the dining room.

"Well?" Sheridan asked her. "Can we go get my books?" Persistence usually paid off.

"We'll see." Her mom looked at her sternly.

"Does that mean yes?" Sheridan asked.

"It means, we'll see," her mom answered. "Now, scoot. You look like you could use a little nap."

"I'm okay."

"Are you feeling all right, honey? You're looking a little pale."

"I'm okay," Sheridan repeated, hopping down from the chair.

"She's fine," Missy told her mom with a knowing smile.

Boy, Sheridan thought, is she ever wrong.

WHICH MEANT YES, Sheridan thought, as she huddled with Lucy under a blanket on the sofa to watch Saturday morning cartoons. A second "we'll see" always meant yes.

Despite what she had told her mom, Sheridan wasn't feeling good. She stared blankly at the television set. She had not eaten much breakfast and her stomach hurt. Last night had been the worst night yet. In the unfamiliar bed it was almost as if that man was in it with her, he seemed so close. She could almost smell his breath.

It was as if he were there watching her, waiting for her to say or do something she wasn't supposed to. Then that smile of his would turn into something else, something wicked, and in her imagination she could see him turn on his heel to hurt her family. And there was nothing she could do to stop him.

She had awful dreams. The dreams awakened her, and she had trouble getting back to sleep. In one dream, the worst, the man was in her room sitting on a chair near the foot of her bed. He was talking to her, telling her that he was her friend, but in his lap there was something round and large and wrapped in paper. Only this time, when she looked at the object, it was not the head of a kitten. It looked like Lucy's head. In the dream he began to unwrap it.

Another dream had her back in the barn, pinned again to the stall by the man as he breathed in her face and talked to her. He would do things to her mother, he had said. That he'd do things to the baby that was coming, too. *You don't really want another brother or sister around here anyway, do you?* he asked. *I can tell*, he said. *You would like it if it were only you, wouldn't you?* It made her feel bad that in the dream she had nodded her head yes. She hoped she didn't really feel that way. To prove it, she hugged Lucy, but Lucy wriggled free.

Sheridan had stayed awake after her dad had left her room, and had listened as he made coffee and shuffled around the house, gathering things to take with him. She had come close to telling him about the man and her secret pets when he was in her room. She had come so close. But remnants from her dreams had stopped her at the last second. After her dad had left the house, she stared at the unfamiliar ceiling and made a couple of decisions. When she made them, they felt right to her. So she wouldn't forget them in the morning, she got out of bed and wrote them down on a piece of paper with a crayon. The crumpled paper was in her pajama pocket now.

First, she would figure out a way to get back to the house so she could make sure the creatures were still there. She would feed them if she could. She prayed they would be all right.

Second, she would tell her dad everything. Something about the way he had put his hand on her face the night before made her feel that if anyone could protect her and the family, it was her dad.

Knowing what she planned to do made her feel a little better. Lucy leaned back against her, and they snuggled under the blanket. Lucy laughed at something that happened in the cartoon. Sheridan let her eyes close. Her eyes were burning. This was too much for her. All of it.

She would have to wait for her dad to come home. Then she would talk. It was time.

THE FIRST HALF mile of the canyon was easy going, even as the dark gray walls became sheer and the sky became no more than a ribbon of blue light straight overhead. There were Indian petroglyphs on the rocks, scenes of elk bristling with arrows, painted and feathered men on horseback, figures of warriors holding aloft the scalps and entire heads of other warriors. Near the petroglyphs, Joe found newer and much more stupid graphics written with a felt-tipped marker. "Ote Keeley Sucks the Big One," someone had scratched. "Kyle Eats Shit," said another. "Calvin Is a needle Dick." Yup, Joe thought, the outfitters had come up here all right.

The rock walls eventually became so narrow that Joe dismounted and hung the stirrups over the saddle horn so they wouldn't catch on the sides. Lizzie was fidgety, her ears were pinned back, and her eyes were wide with apprehension. He led her, coaxing her to continue and keeping up a singsong, inane monologue to calm her as the walls closed in around them. He stepped from stone to stone in the stream, trying to keep his boots dry. The mare's metal shoes clattered and sometimes slipped on the creek rocks, and the back of Joe's pants were soon soaked as a result.

He wished he hadn't brought the horse into the canyon and instead had tied her up and continued by himself. The canyon was much narrower than he had anticipated, and the roots, foliage, and thick spiderwebs that covered it made it claustrophobic. The problem he had now was that they had gone too far to turn around. He would have to back her out nearly a quarter of a mile along slippery rocks. The likelihood that she would fall and injure herself—as well as block the canyon—was too great. He had to continue on and hope she would trust him.

At one point when the walls became so narrow that they were literally touching both sides of her and the brush in the canyon was so thick above them as to block out the light, Lizzie finally balked and jerked back on the halter rope, pulling Joe into the creek. Her eyes were white and wild with panic, and they partially rolled back into her head. Joe tried to stop her as she backed up, and the rope sang through his hands, scorching his gloves. She finally stopped when her shoes skated over the tops of the rocks, and she sat down with an enormous thud and splash. Her breath pistoned out of her flared nostrils. She sat quivering and let Joe approach her. He spoke softly to her saying much the same things he had told Sheridan the night before. After a long ten minutes, she awkwardly scrambled upright. Her breathing had settled to a rhythm. He wedged in beside her and could find no injuries on her except for on her flank, where a small flap of torn hide stuck out like a pink tongue. He was now wet everywhere, and getting cold. The buckskin was wet also, and the canyon smelled strongly of horse.

"We are over halfway there, Lizzie," he told her, over and over again in a kind of mantra. "We can either keep going or back our way out. Let's keep going. It's not that far now. It'll get better, I promise. It's okay. Things are just real okay. Everything is not as bad as it seems."

As the walls eventually receded, the creek became shallow and soon Joe was able to mount again and ride up-stream along a sandy bank. The sky didn't seem as gray as it had earlier in the morning, and the little bit of sun that filtered through the clouds warmed and dried them.

When the canyon walls finally opened, the bowl in the mountains was even more lush and untrammled than Joe had imagined it could be. It was a beautiful, remarkable place. Around the rim of the bowl in all directions were sheer, red rock cliffs, which provided both protection and a windbreak. Thin rivulets of water that looked like old lace streamed down the rock walls from above. Joe imagined that in the spring the waterfalls would have real volume and would fill the bowl with their roar. The old-growth trees were mossy and tall, the foliage thick. Tall grass carpeted the edge of the creek while spring-fed pools full of clean, cold water dotted the creek bottom.

Something cracked in the trees and Joe pulled his shotgun out of the scabbard in a single movement. But even before he had racked the pump, he could see that the sound had come from a huge bull elk who had seen him and was now fleeing through the trees, a shadow moving through the thick timberlike fan blades whirling in front of a light until it was gone. He lay the shotgun across the pommel of the saddle and nudged the buckskin on.

Joe knew what a unique place this was. It was like going back in time, like being one of the first to ride into a natural wonder like Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon and not really being able to believe your eyes. Few people in the modern world would ever have the chance to see what he was seeing or experience what he was experiencing.

Or so he thought.

HE WAS NEARLY PAST the grassy rise before he realized exactly where he was. Later, when he thought about it, he couldn't really say why he had stopped or how he had found it. It was a feeling he felt on the back of his neck like the lick of a ghost. But when he reined the buckskin and turned in the saddle, he had absolutely no doubt about what was there in front of him.

He was looking at a killing field.

It was a treeless slope that started at the edge of a dark timber stand and continued down until it reached the valley floor. What was peculiar about the field, now thick with dried, tall grass, was its lack of life. There were no birds, and nothing scuttled in the grass. It was dead, and Joe wanted to know why.

The mounds were there. He counted 26 of them. But the holes on the top of the mounds were blocked with new spider-webs or bits of brush and grass that had blown into them. As Joe walked through the field, from mound to mound, he found the things he had suspected he would. There were spent casings from .22 shells buried in the dirt, as well as shotgun shells. He bent over a dried quarter of elk that was old enough to be skeletal but not old enough that he couldn't see and smell the poison it had been laced with. It was Compound 1080, a deadly substance preferred by those who took the killing of predators very seriously.

He found several M-44 cartridges wired into the carcass of a rabbit. The devices, long illegal, were designed to automatically fire a stream of cyanide into the mouths of whatever tugged on them. The cyanide, which reacted with saliva, would kill within seconds. The cartridges had been fired.

In a kind of stunned fog, Joe gathered what evidence he could. He pulled his camera from a saddlebag and took several rolls of film. Many of the shots, he knew, would be of Clyde Lidgard quality. But he found a scattering of tiny bones pressed into the soft earth of one of the mounds, and he filled a plastic bag with them. He gathered a handful of spent .22 brass for another sack, as well as the M-44 cartridges. Then he sat on a downed tree and simply stared at the field. He tried to imagine what it had looked like when it was teeming with the last colony of Miller's weasels on earth.

IT WAS NEARLY dusk when Joe cleared the elk camp in a trot and continued down the mountain. The long passage through the canyon had been made almost in a dream, and the buckskin mare seemed to sense that Joe was distracted, so she cooperated. She knew they were going home. Joe's mind was racing, and he was shaky from what he had discovered and from lack of sleep. Several times, he reached back into his saddlebags to confirm that he had in fact gathered the evidence he thought he had gathered. Already, the bowl seemed very far away.

He thought of the implications, which were huge. Terrible acts had taken place up there. They had happened right under his nose, in his jurisdiction, and on his watch. Of course there was now a conspiracy. He doubted that it had started out that way. He guessed that what had happened was a series of incidents and mistakes that had mushroomed into something both big and awful. He didn't know how everything was connected yet, and he wasn't really sure he would be able to find out. But he knew he was now in the thick of it, no matter what. He wondered who out there would surface, once the word got out.

He thought again of the killing field, which both disgusted and depressed him. He was astonished at the thoroughness of the people responsible. First they had started with Miller's weasels and then moved on to killing the outfitters. That progression indicated that perhaps they weren't yet through.

Joe loaded Lizzie into the horse trailer and put the saddle and tack in the back of the pickup. He shared the last of his water with his horse then climbed stiffly into the cab of the truck and started the engine.

When he cleared the timber, the Twelve Sleep Valley opened up below him. In the distance, he could see the early evening lights of Saddlestring like a jewelry box dumped on the prairie. Directly below him was the campground, and the winking yellow lights of hunters' lanterns and propane lamps. Between the two, miles in the distance and hidden in the folds of the foothills, was his house on Bighorn Road.

God, he was angry. He was furious at his own situation and at the people who had put him there. He was enraged when he thought of the killing field and the purposeful, deliberate way a species had been completely wiped off of the face of the earth. In all of his studies and all of the gossip he had heard over the years, this was the first

instance he knew of in which there had been a purposeful and determined effort to wholly terminate a species.

It was nearly dark, and it was getting colder. An icy wind raced up the mountain from the valley floor. The sky had cleared to the horizons, but it seemed to be regrouping for later. Long, thin faraway clouds paralleled the western horizon looking like multiple red knife wounds slashed across purpling flesh.

28

“WE HAVE SOME beautiful sunsets, don’t we, honey?” Sheridan’s mom said.

“Yeah,” Sheridan answered blankly. She had other things on her mind.

In the car, on the way to their house on Bighorn Road, Sheridan’s mom had asked her to tell her what was wrong. It was just the two of them, she said, and she was getting a little worried about her big girl. She could tell that something was really bothering her, and she wanted Sheridan to tell her what it was. She said Sheridan’s eyes looked very tired.

“I’m okay, Mom,” Sheridan said. Her backpack was on the floor of the car. She had brought it, she said, to put her books in. But now it held a full bread sack of table scraps.

“Did you hear some of the things your dad and I discussed last night when he got home?”

Sheridan shook her head no. Her mom seemed relieved. Sheridan was glad it was nearly dark outside, because she knew her mom could read her face. It was as if her mom could tell what she was thinking sometimes. Sheridan felt guilty about not telling her mom about the creatures and the man. Mom was wonderful, and very smart, even though she could be stern. Sometimes she couldn’t believe how wonderful her mother was, especially as Sheridan spent more time with Grandmother Missy. Sometimes it seemed like her mom was the adult and Grandmother Missy, Sheridan, and Lucy were the children. But her mom sure could worry, and Sheridan knew how much she would worry if she knew what Sheridan knew. Worrying wasn’t a good thing for a woman who was so pregnant. This Sheridan was pretty sure of.

“I want you to feel you can tell me what’s wrong, Sheridan,” her mom said. She wasn’t letting this go.

Sheridan had part of her problem solved. When they got to the house, Sheridan would go into her bedroom and fill her backpack with some of her own books from her bookshelves. She doubted her mom would want to look at the books to see if they were from the school library. The hard part, though, would be figuring out a way to get outside alone. She had a little flashlight in her backpack for shining under the garage. She hoped she would see them under there, and she hoped they would be all right.

“I think I don’t like that house we’re staying in,” Sheridan said. “It seems too fancy. It seems like we’re living in somebody else’s house.”

"I know you feel that way," mom said. "We *are* living in someone's house. Wealthy people like your grandmother do it all the time, but I realize it's new to you. But isn't it nice to have your own big room for a while? And that TV with all of those channels? What about that wonderful fireplace and all of those books on the shelves?"

"They're all right," Sheridan confessed. "But I still like our old house better."

"Sometimes change is good," her mom said.

"Most of the time it's bad," Sheridan echoed darkly.

Her mom laughed. "You can be so dramatic, sweetie."

The car slowed and her mom turned the steering wheel.

"Well, it's still here," her mom said.

Sheridan looked through the windshield. The house was very dark. It looked like her father's truck was parked where it usually was on the side of the house. But it wasn't her father's truck.

"Wacey must have gone with Dad and left his truck here when they took the horses," Mom said. "I didn't realize he was going, too." She turned off the motor.

"Anyway, let's not take all night," Mom continued. "Grandmother Missy is making lasagna, and we don't want to miss that."

Grandmother Missy had come to the conclusion that everyone in the family loved her lasagna. The fact that no one finished their dinner hadn't changed her mind. The truth was that the only person who liked Grandmother Missy's lasagna was Grandmother Missy herself.

Sheridan was behind her mother while her mom found the keys, opened the front door, and went in. Mom reached to click on the lights, but she stopped before she did so, and Sheridan bumped right into her.

Her mom didn't move.

"What? ..."

Suddenly, her mother was bent over and her face was close to Sheridan's.

"Don't turn on the lights, honey. Just be still." Her mom's voice was urgent—and serious. Sheridan had rarely heard that tone, and it scared her.

"What's wrong?" Sheridan's eyes were wide.

"I don't know for sure," her mom said. "But I can see some kind of light in the backyard."

Sheridan couldn't speak. She looked around her mother and could see it, too. Yellow light came in through the kitchen window and swept across the ceiling. Then it flashed the other way.

Sheridan's mom guided Sheridan to the couch and sat her down.

"Just stay here for a second. I'm going to go see what it is."

Sheridan sat, clutching her backpack. She watched her mom walk through the front room and into the kitchen. Her mother's silhouette was framed by the window.

"Mom ..."

Her mother turned. "There is a man out there by the woodpile with a flashlight. He's kicking it apart." Her voice was a tense whisper. "I think he intends to steal our firewood."

Sheridan was jolted the instant she heard that someone, a man, was in the woodpile. It came to her in a brilliant flash of panic: the truck parked outside, the fact that Mom didn't know about it, the friend of her dad's.

What was his name?

"Mom!" Sheridan screamed, hurtling off of the couch toward the kitchen, even as her mother reached over and clicked on the floodlights that illuminated the backyard.

"Get away from that wood!" her mother yelled, smacking the window with the palm of her hand as if the man were a stray dog rooting through the garbage.

Then the window shattered and there was a sharp crack outside. Her mother was thrown backwards to the floor, her head bouncing hard on the linoleum. Outside, a man was shouting.

Sheridan tossed the backpack aside and fell to her knees, sliding into her mother on the floor. Sheridan put her hands on both sides of her mother's face.

"Oh, Mom ..."

"I'm hurt, Sheridan darling," her mother said in a clear voice. "He shot me, and I don't think I'm okay. I don't know who it was who shot me."

Sheridan wailed and buried her head into her mother's breasts. She could feel her mother's strong heartbeat. But Sheridan's hand, which was wrapped around her mother's waist, was warm and wet.

"Oh God," her mom said, with a choke in her throat. "I can't feel anything. Everything is numb."

It had all happened so quickly that Sheridan couldn't yet grasp the situation.

Suddenly, her mother was bathed in light, and Sheridan could see her mother's face and the tears in her eyes and the blood, lots of it, spreading across the floor. Her mother looked from Sheridan to the source of the light, and Sheridan followed. "Stay where you are, you two," the man said, almost calmly. Then he withdrew the flashlight. They heard him trying to get in the locked back door.

"Somebody let me in," the man said with authority.

Sheridan's mom reached up and squeezed Sheridan's arm.

"Get away, Sheridan."

"I can't," Sheridan said. The words tumbled out as she cried. "It's all my fault this happened. He said if I told anyone he would hurt our family. He said he would hurt you and Lucy and Dad. He said he would hurt the baby." Her tears dropped on her mother's face.

"Unlock the goddamned *door*!" A loud crash accompanied the man's yell as he began to hurl himself against the back door. There was a big crack down the center of the door. Splinters flew across the floor.

"Get away *now*," her mother said. "Run out the front door and keep running. Hide and wait for your dad and Wacey to come back." Her voice was not as strong as it had been a minute ago. "Don't you stop, Sheridan."

Her mother's words rooted Sheridan to the spot. The truck outside that looked like her father's but wasn't, the man's familiar voice, and her mother's words all sprang out in sharp clarity and a surge of recognition hit her.

"But Mom, that's *Wacey* outside the door," Sheridan cried. "It was Wacey who said he would hurt us!"

But her mom's eyes were closed, and her hand had dropped to the floor. Sheridan could still feel her heartbeat though, and she looked like she was sleeping.

Sheridan said, "I love you, Mom," and then she was up and running, deftly juking around the coffee table in the living room and out the front door just as the backdoor gave way and Wacey Hedeman stumbled into the house.

29

RUNNING LIKE SHE had never run before, not even feeling the soles of her tennis shoes on the grass or the broken concrete of the walkway, the screen door slamming behind her, Sheridan ran through the front gate onto Bighorn Road, changed her mind, and turned back toward the driveway. Sheridan stopped and caught herself as she reached for the handle on the door of the car. She was not thinking clearly, and she realized she had no plan at all once she was inside the car. She could lock the doors, but Wacey could simply smash through the glass and get her. She couldn't drive away because her mom always took the keys with her and they were probably in her purse, on the floor, in the house.

So she dropped to her belly and scrambled under the car like a crab. Gravel from the driveway ground into her bare hands and jammed into the top of her trousers. A piece of hot metal that was sticking out under the car tore through her shirt and into the skin of her back.

Then she was out the other side and up again. She paused and tried to think. Either she could run out onto Bighorn Road again and maybe be seen and picked up by somebody or she could go around the garage and into the backyard. But in the road, he could see her better, and shoot or run her down. She knew the backyard very well and the grounds around it. He might not look there first, which would give her time. These thoughts shot through her brain, and then she ran toward the garage. For a terrifying few seconds she was in the open where she could easily be seen if he was looking. Before she dropped to her hands and knees to crawl through the lilac bushes, she glanced over her shoulder.

The lights in the house were on now, and Wacey was coming out the front door. He had one hand on the screen door knob and was holding the pistol in the other. He was

looking out toward the road, squinting, and she was sure he hadn't seen her vanish into the dark bushes that formed a hedge between the house and the garage.

As she weaved through the bushes toward the back—she couldn't see well but had done it so many times before—she heard him call her name. Then he called her name again.

Not really seeing but knowing, she cleared the bushes and ran across the backyard. She avoided both the light of the floodlights and the trunk of the cottonwood tree, then raced through the woodpile where the neat rows of logs had been kicked to pieces and then through the corral fence. The stall was empty and dark, and her dad's horse was gone. She pulled down a heavy horse blanket from a cross beam in the tack room and threw it over her shoulder and ran out of the stall toward the Sandrock draw and up into the foothills. She would go to the place where she once thought monsters had come from.

She heard Wacey yell her name again.

He was now out on the road.

SHERIDAN CLIMBED UP the draw away from the house. Cactus pierced her feet, and wild rose bushes tugged at her clothes, hair, and skin as if trying to prevent her from climbing still farther, as if trying to throw her back to where she belonged. It was hard to see where she was going so she navigated blindly, using senses she didn't know she had to tell her when to turn, when to duck, and when to step over a rock. Several times, she covered her head and arms in the horse blanket to push her way through thickets that would tear her skin or trip her.

Finally, she stopped. She could go no farther. Her chest hurt from panting, and her legs and arms were too heavy to lift anymore.

She sank to the ground, her back to a boulder on the side of the draw. She pulled the horse blanket around her and covered her mouth with it to muffle her racking sobs. Her mind was filled with the image of her mother on the floor. She put the fingers of the hand she had held her mom with in her mouth, and she tasted blood. And she listened, hoping she wouldn't hear Wacey coming after her.

Instead, she heard her name being called very clearly.

"Sheridan, I know you can hear me," he yelled. She figured he must now be in the backyard. His voice carried through the draw and certain words bounced back in echoes.

"I know you can hear me, Sheridan. You need to listen to me."

Her head emerged from the folds of the blanket.

"Sheridan, I'm really sorry about what happened. I apologize to you and to your mom. She scared the hell out of me, and I shot before I even knew who it was. Really, believe me. Please."

He sounded as if he were telling the truth, Sheridan thought.

"I called for the ambulance, and it's on the way. Your mom is going to be okay. I just talked to her, and she's going to be just fine. It looks a lot worse than it really is.

She's just worried about her little girl. She needs you to come back. She really misses you. She's real worried."

But he was a good liar. He had shot her pregnant mother, and he had come after her. The last thing her mom had told her was to get away. Sheridan believed what her mom told her. A lot more than she believed Wacey Hedeman.

"Sheridan, answer me so I can tell you're okay! Your mama needs to know."

He went on like that for a while. She listened but didn't speak or move. Her breath was finally calming, and her chest didn't hurt as much. The blanket was thick and warm, and it smelled like Lizzie and the leather of her dad's saddle. It comforted her.

His voice got harsher. He was now demanding that she answer him. There was no mention of her mother now. That meant he had been lying all along, as she had supposed. He wanted to know if she had told him everything she knew about "her little friends." He had been trying to find those Miller's weasels for two straight days, and all he could find, he said, was a bunch of goddamned turds in the woodpile.

"Get your little ass down here, Sheridan. If you don't, you're going to be in bigger trouble than you ever imagined!" He sounded crazy now.

When he said that, she resolved not to move an inch. Adults could be incredibly stupid. He had *almost* convinced her to answer before he lost his temper.

"Okay, then," he continued. "If you aren't coming down RIGHT NOW you had better stay *exactly* where you are tonight."

This was new. She listened. He was shouting. His voice was getting hoarse.

"Sheridan, there are going to be a lot of people here in a little while. Lots of lights and lots of policemen. You better not even think of coming down until after they're gone. If you do, if I see you, a lot more people are going to die. You're going to be the first one, and then I'm going to finish off your mother. JUST LIKE I'M GOING TO FRY ALL OF THESE FUCKING LITTLE WEASELS!"

It was the first thing he said that she truly believed.

She looked up, and the rock wall in front of her was glowing. Orange curls of light flickered across it, and for a moment she was sure she was witnessing a miracle.

Then she climbed on the boulder that she had been sitting under and looked down. She was amazed at the distance she had covered, and how clearly she could see what was going on below her.

The woodpile was burning, the red flames rolling into the cold night air. Wacey was in the backyard, bathed in the light of the fire. He kept looking up into the foothills and it appeared he was looking directly at her. But he couldn't see her up there, so far away on top of that rock.

He turned and went inside the house. It was too far away to see into the house, to see her mother.

IN HIS PICKUP, Joe crested the hill on the Bighorn Road and what he saw ahead in the distance was his worst nightmare come true—something that perhaps in the past he had dreamed about, or thought about just like every father inevitably does, but something he had suppressed into a place deep in his mind. But sometimes those unthinkable possibilities, no matter how far beaten back, are unleashed at terrible moments. Like now.

His house and the road in front of it was an explosion of strobing and flashing lights. Garish blue and red emergency lights spun on the tops of Saddlestring Police Department cars and county vehicles. Orange flames rose into the clear sky behind the house, the fire so large and bright it lit up the hillside beyond.

Then, from the center of it all, a Life Flight helicopter bristling with landing lights lifted off, looking clumsy as it cleared the roof of the house, then gaining altitude once it emerged from the spoor of wood smoke that was black on black in the night sky.

For a heart-stopping moment, Joe had forgotten that his family was at Eagle Mountain. But, after assuring himself that they seemed to be nowhere nearby, he wondered what he could be seeing.

He pressed the accelerator to the floor and sped up. The horse trailer pulled sluggishly behind him. In the few minutes it took to get to his house, a half-dozen different scenarios occurred to him: the wiring in the house had always been bad, so a short caused a fire and the Life Flight helicopter contained an injured firefighter; or a drunk hunter, mad about something, had come to his vacant house and set the woodpile aflame and gotten burned in the process; or the people who had wiped out the Miller's weasels had come after him and something had gone wrong. All of the scenarios were possible but none made any sense.

The intensity of the multiple flashing emergency lights made it nearly impossible to see where he was driving. There were vehicles blocking the driveway and lining the road in front of the house. He pulled ahead and off to the side of the road and jumped out of his pickup. He left the motor running and the door open.

Sheriff's deputies in short dark jackets and Stetson's compared notes on the front lawn. No one seemed to notice him as he approached the house. Through the front picture window, Joe could see that there were men inside, standing in the living room and the kitchen, and every light in the house was on. Joe felt he was walking through some kind of movie scene where he was invisible to everyone else in it. He saw Sheriff Barnum's hangdog face through the window talking on the telephone.

As he opened the door to go in, Wacey suddenly blocked it. He could tell by the drained, panicked look on Wacey's face that something was horribly wrong. Joe tried to step around him, but Wacey made it clear he didn't want Joe to come any farther into the house.

"Move, damn it," Joe barked.

"Joe, Marybeth's been shot."

Joe stopped. The words hit him like a hammer.

Wacey reached out and put his hands on Joe's shoulders both to steady him and to keep him in front of him.

"Joe, I was driving up the road about a half hour ago and I saw there was big fire behind your house. I saw Marybeth's car out front and the door was unlocked so I went in. I found her on the kitchen floor and there's a bullet hole in the kitchen window and the backdoor was kicked in."

Joe felt as if his insides had been sucked out. "Who ..."

"We don't know." Wacey had a desperate look on his face that disturbed Joe even more.

"Is Marybeth all right? Why was she even here?"

"She's alive, but we don't know how bad it is yet. The Life Flight chopper is on its way to Billings right now. She should be in surgery within a half an hour."

Joe was staring beyond Wacey and into the house. The kitchen floor was covered with dark red blood. It looked like gallons of it. A county photographer was taking shots of the floor and the window.

"Joe?"

Joe looked back to Wacey.

"Joe, do you have any idea at all who might have done something like this? Was anybody gunning for you? Any problems in the field with hunters or anything?"

Joe shook his head no. He didn't want to spend the time it would take to tell Wacey what he had learned in the elk camp, not knowing if it could possibly have any significance with what had happened to Marybeth.

"Was she alone?" Joe asked. "Did she have any of the kids with her?"

"She was alone, thank goodness," Wacey said. "God, I'm so sorry this happened to you. I really am."

"Jesus Christ," Joe sighed.

"Absolutely by herself," Wacey added for emphasis. "But don't worry, Joe, we'll find out who did it. We'll probably have 'em by midnight. My guess is drunk hunters."

Joe nodded, not really listening.

"Wacey, will you help me out here?"

"You bet, Joe."

"I need to unhitch a horse trailer and get to Billings. Will you help me unhitch it and then call my mother-in-law at Eagle Mountain and tell her what's happened? I'll call her and the kids from the hospital as soon as I get there and find out what's what."

Wacey agreed, and the two of them went out to the road where Joe's pickup was. Wacey asked Joe if he was sure he was okay to drive, and Joe mumbled that he was. He was still shaken from the sight of all of that blood on the kitchen floor. Marybeth's blood.

They unhitched the horse trailer from the truck and lowered the tongue to the ground. Joe asked Wacey to corral Lizzie and feed and water her.

"Do you want me to take that saddle, too?" Wacey asked, shining his flashlight in the back of the pickup on the saddle with its bulging saddlebags and the butt of the Wingmaster shotgun still in the scabbard.

"No," Joe said. "That stays with me."

Joe ignored Wacey when he said he would be "more than glad" to take the saddle to the corrals.

As he pulled out into the road, in his rearview mirror, Joe could see Wacey leading his horse across the road and watching Joe's pickup drive away.

There had been something in Wacey's eyes, Joe thought, some glint that made him look just a bit unhinged and had made Joe want to keep the saddle and the things in it. Joe wondered why Wacey seemed so personally affected by what happened to Marybeth. Either Wacey was deeper than Joe gave him credit for—or something was going on.

Joe tried to erase the feeling he had, but it wouldn't go away. Maybe he was getting paranoid. Maybe finding that killing field and thinking about the circumstances that led up to it was making him suspicious. Maybe he just wanted to get mad at someone because he felt guilty about not being able to prevent what had happened to his wife.

He drove through Saddlestring, through four straight red lights, and out the other side. Billings, Montana, was an hour and a half away, an hour if he drove 100 miles an hour. He tried to imagine what Marybeth was thinking, and he tried to send his thoughts to her up there somewhere in the air probably right over the Wyoming/Montana border. He told her he loved her. He told her to be stronger than hell and hang in there. He told her he would be with her very soon. He told her that she couldn't die, because if she did, he didn't think he had the strength and ability to hold their perfect little family together by himself, without his anchor to the planet.

His hands strangled the steering wheel. His legs trembled strangely. He drove even faster.

31

SURGERY WAS ON the third floor. He headed up there, ignoring the shouts of the receptionist to leave his holster at the desk and sign in. The elevator was busy, so he took the stairs two at a time and burst out into the third-floor hallway breathing hard. He approached the doorway of the operating room just as a heavysset woman in a green scrub suit emerged from it, held up a rubber-gloved palm, and said, "Stop!"

"I'm the husband," he said. "My name is Joe Pickett."

The woman said she would get the surgeon but only if Joe would stay exactly where he was.

"I'll stay here for about a minute," Joe said. "If he isn't out here by then, I'm coming in."

The nurse looked him over, sizing him up. "I'll get the doctor," she said.

Joe paced. Through the thick windows covered by blinds, he tried to see what was going on in the Or. He could see movement and light; a half-dozen people in green suits like the nurse wore were standing side-by-side with their backs to him. Marybeth must be on the table in front of them. What were they doing to her? The thought of his wife in that room with all of those unfamiliar people around her disturbed him. Was she bleeding? Broken? Crying?

Joe had never liked hospitals. They brought out something mean in him. He had made an effort all of his life to avoid going in them. Even when Marybeth had been in one to have Sheridan and Lucy, he struggled with himself to be in the room with her when she delivered. It wasn't the blood or illness or weakness that turned his stomach. It was his memories of being in a hospital when he was very young, visiting his mother after she fell down the stairs. He must have been around six years old at the time. Looking out at him from her hospital bed, her face had been mottled and blue, her bottom lip was split and stitched back together, and her arms were in casts. He remembered how the nurses would smile at him like they were sorry for him instead of his mother, and how they would look at each other when he told them she had fallen down the stairs while he was sleeping. It was much later before he learned that she had never had the accident, that it was the result of a drunken fight with his father outside of the Elks Club. Nevertheless, he hated the forced quiet, the antiseptic smell, the artifice of the nurses who patted his head and looked at each other, and the doctors who thought of themselves as Olympian gods. He shivered when he heard the sounds of nurse's shoes squeaking down the hall as they walked.

A short, wiry doctor came out of the operating room and walked directly to him. The man's scrub suit was flecked with dark blood and his latex gloves were tinted pink from being immersed in it. The doctor slipped his mask down to his neck. Joe introduced himself.

"You may want to sit down," the doctor said by way of introduction.

"I'm okay," Joe said calmly. He tried to brace himself for the absolute worst.

"She's stable but still in danger," the doctor said bluntly. "The baby is lost. It might have been possible to save him, but it wouldn't have been the wisest thing to do considering his condition. We had to make a choice between saving your wife and saving a very damaged fetus."

Joe stepped slowly backwards until he could rest against the wall. Otherwise, he was afraid he might slump over. The moment passed.

"Are you all right?" the doctor asked.

Joe couldn't think of anything to say, so he nodded that he understood.

"The bullet entered below her sternum, glanced off of her rib cage, and exited her lower back. It may have injured her spine. We don't know how extensive that injury will be."

Joe appreciated the fact that the doctor was being absolutely straight with him. But he struggled with the magnitude of what he was being told. His baby—*his first son*—was lost, and his wife might not be able to walk again.

“When can I see her?” Joe asked, his voice a whisper.

The doctor sighed. He started to say something soothing and procedural but the look in Joe’s eyes made him reconsider. Then: “They’re finishing up in there now. She’s sleeping. They should be done and have her back in bed in intensive care within the hour. You can see her then, but don’t expect her to be awake.”

Joe nodded. His mouth was dry, and it hurt to swallow.

The doctor approached him and put his hand on Joe’s shoulder.

“There’s no easy way to tell you these things,” the doctor said. “Be strong, and love her back to health when she’s out of here. That’s the best advice I can give you.”

Joe thanked him, but he really wanted to tell him to go away. He didn’t want to be seen by anyone right now. He didn’t want nurses clucking over him like they had when his mother was in the hospital. The doctor seemed to sense what Joe was thinking and went back into the operating room.

Joe turned and stumbled down the hallway until he found the men’s bathroom. He went in it, turned out the lights, and wailed for the first time in his life.

32

WACEY KNEW JUST enough about the telephone lines in rural Twelve Sleep County to be dangerous. What little he knew he had learned from a couple of U.S. West telephone company engineers who had once needed his help. They were up from Denver to do some repairs and upgrading of the microwave station that served Saddlestring when they had run into a cow moose who wouldn’t let them near the building. The microwave station was on the summit of Wolf Mountain. Between the microwave dish and the metal shack, they said, stood the moose. They showed Wacey the dent in the door of their pickup from her first charge. They had never experienced anything like it before.

Wacey had explained to them that moose couldn’t see very well at all, and when panicked, they sometimes charged at whatever blur threatened them. He said it was likely that the moose had a calf somewhere up there in the bushes near the station and she was protecting her young.

He had driven to the summit with the engineers, but they never saw the cow moose. What they found instead was the stillborn body of her calf, still warm, the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around its neck. The engineers had probably appeared just after the calf had been born, when the cow was crazed with rage.

Wacey stood in the front yard of Joe Pickett’s yard and looked up at the lone red light on the top of Wolf Mountain where the microwave station was. He had volunteered to stay at the crime scene until morning when Sheriff Barnum would send McLanahan or someone to relieve him. Under the front porch light, he looked at his wristwatch. Then he looked back at the mountain behind the house, where he was certain Sheridan was hiding.

While he was on the summit that spring, the engineers showed Wacey the circuitry inside of the shack and the thousands of telephone wires that fed into the main trunk line. He had noted where the trunk line emerged from the station to begin its descent into Saddlestring. He had thought at the time that a single high-powered rifle bullet into the base of the trunk line would disable the telephone system for the entire valley. It might take days to repair, but Wacey was concerned only about tonight.

He had a .30-06 in his gun rack. He would chance it that Sheridan wouldn't even know he had left.

33

IT WAS 11 o'clock but seemed much later when Joe put coins into the telephone in the hospital lobby to call Missy Vankeuran. He had silently rehearsed to himself what he was going to say, how he was going to tell Sheridan and Lucy what had happened and try not to scare them into hysterics. It was time to be calm. It was time to be fatherly.

It took a few moments of ringing before Joe realized he had absently dialed the telephone number to his house on Bighorn Road. He found the Eagle Mountain number in his notebook and dialed. While he did, he wondered how it was possible that Barnum had already cleared the scene and left no one to watch the house. Maybe Barnum was incompetent after all. Maybe Wacey was right. Maybe Wacey would be a welcome addition as sheriff.

His mother-in-law picked up the telephone on the second ring. Her voice sounded angry and cold.

"Yes?"

"Missy, this is Joe."

First there was a pause. Then: "Oh, hello, Joe. You surprised me. I was expecting it to be Marybeth." Her reaction caught him off guard.

Joe was confused. Then he realized that no one had contacted her yet. But Wacey had said he would do it ...

"I called your house over and over at dinner time," Missy said, speaking fast. "It was busy every time. Every time. Then all of the sudden there is no one there. Marybeth said she would be home in an hour. That was four hours ago, Joe. My dinner is ruined!"

"Missy ..."

"I haven't cooked, actually *cooked* in ages. It took me all afternoon to make my famous lasagna. Marybeth used to love it. She said she was looking forward to it. I'm starting to think staying with her isn't such a good idea. For either of us, Joe ..."

To Joe it sounded like Missy had a good start on the wine she must have had planned for dinner. He was angry.

"Missy, goddamnit, will you stop talking?"

Silence.

“Missy, I’m calling from the hospital in Billings.”

Silence.

“Marybeth has been shot. Someone shot her when she went to the house. They don’t know who did it. The doctors say she’s going to make it, but the baby isn’t ...” There was more silence, and he realized that the line was dead. He wasn’t sure she had heard any of it. It didn’t seem possible she could have hung up on him.

He dialed again. There was no ringing. He dialed again, and a recording said that the number he was calling was not in service at this time. He tried Sheriff Barnum’s office. The line was dead as well.

JOE COULDN’T SIT. He couldn’t stand still. He tried several times to read a magazine from the stack in the waiting room, but found he couldn’t concentrate on the words or even remember what the article was about. He approached the nurses’ station to check if he could see Marybeth yet.

The nurse was polite but annoyed. She pointed at the clock on her desk and reminded him he had asked her the same question not ten minutes before. Joe could not recall time ever moving so slowly. It would still be at least a half an hour before Marybeth would be wheeled out of the operating room.

He tried three more times to reach Missy and Barnum. Then he tried Sheriff Barnum’s office again. He couldn’t believe his bad luck. The phone lines all over the county were apparently down.

So he wandered the hallways, looking at his wristwatch every few minutes. The halls were all the same: heavily painted light blue cinder-block walls, dimmed fluorescent lighting, occasional black marks from gurney wheels on the tile floors, nurses at every station looking him over from behind their desks. He located the room where Marybeth would be. Her name was written on a card outside the door and the ink was still wet. She would be alone inside, he noted. She wouldn’t have a roommate. He walked down the hall to the maternity ward and heard babies crying. He found himself staring at a young mother still plump and flushed from delivery. She was cradling a tiny red baby in her arms, waiting for a nurse to wheel her to her room. The scene poleaxed him. In a daze, he ascended a set of stairs to the next level.

Joe wandered aimlessly but conveyed a sense of purpose that he didn’t really have, and no one stopped him. When he glanced into the rooms he was passing, he saw there were older people on this floor. People waiting to get better or die. A television set was on and Jay Leno was interviewing someone.

A Billings police officer stood casually at the nurses’ station and leaned on the counter. He didn’t give Joe a second glance as Joe walked past. The policeman was talking in low tones to an attractive nurse who seemed interested in what he was saying but was feigning boredom. Joe noticed the policeman’s empty chair near a room at the end of the hall, and he walked past it. The card on the wall of the room read C. Lidgard.

Joe took a few steps before it hit him. He stopped and looked down the hall over his shoulder. The policeman had his back to Joe, and he could hear the nurse giggle.

Joe hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked into the room. He eased the door shut behind him.

Clyde Lidgard lay in the dark room illuminated by a small bulb mounted in the headboard. Joe hardly recognized him. Lidgard looked like he was 80 years old and was little more than a skeleton. His skin was waxy and yellow and harshly wrinkled. Webs of tubes sprang from his arms looking like the white roots of a neglected potato. His head was turned on the pillow toward the door, and the light from the bulb infused his feathery silver hair with a glow.

Joe stared at Clyde Lidgard's face as if willing him to wake up out of his coma.

"Tell me what you know, Clyde," Joe said. "Just tell me what you know."

When Clyde Lidgard's eyes slowly opened, Joe stood riveted to the floor. Lidgard's eyes were rheumy and caked with mucus. Joe wasn't sure Lidgard could even see out of them. It didn't seem possible that Lidgard was actually awake or had any idea that Joe was in the room. Maybe Lidgard normally did this while he slept.

"Can you hear me, Clyde?" Joe asked softly. He half-expected the nurse and police officer to burst in at any moment and throw him out.

Lidgard's lips pursed as if he were sucking on a candy.

"You're dry. Do you want some water?" Joe said, pouring some from a plastic pitcher into a small paper cup. He held the cup to Lidgard's lips, and Lidgard drank. His eyes followed Joe's movements.

"Do you know who I am?" Joe asked quietly.

"Warden." The response was so weak that Joe almost didn't hear it. "Warden." Joe replaced the pitcher and bent over Lidgard's face. He smelled the odor of decay on Lidgard's breath. It was the same smell a deer or an elk had after it had been shot.

"That's right," Joe said. "I'm Game Warden Joe Pickett from the Saddlestring District. You need to tell me what happened up there in that elk camp."

Lidgard's eyes closed momentarily then opened again. "I'm going to die now," Lidgard said.

"Not before you tell me about the elk camp," Joe persisted. "Not until you tell me about the Miller's weasels."

There was a tiny reaction on the corner's of Clyde Lidgard's mouth, as if he were trying to smile.

"I took some good pictures of them weasels," Lidgard replied. "But I never got to see if they turned out. Instead, I died."

Joe gave Clyde Lidgard some more water. It was still quiet in the hallway.

"You talked for a while and cleared your conscience. A huge weight lifted off of you," Joe said. "And *then* you died, feeling much better about yourself."

"I did?" Lidgard asked.

"Starting now," Joe said.

WHEN JOE CAME out of the room, the policeman was still leaning over the nurses' counter, and Clyde Lidgard was dead.

THE FIRST THING Joe noticed as Marybeth was rolled out of the operating room was that, compared to Clyde Lidgard, she looked remarkably healthy. He found her hand under the sheet and squeezed it as he walked alongside the gurney. The emotion he felt when he looked at her flat bandaged belly brought tears to his eyes.

They made him let go of her hand for a moment while they situated her bed in the room, but when the nurses moved to set up the IV bottle, he went back to her. They told him they had just given her some powerful sedatives and that she would be asleep until morning.

But the drugs hadn't kicked in completely yet, because for a moment, she awakened.

"You're going to be all right," Joe said, forcing a smile. "You're going to make it and be just fine."

She seemed to be looking to him for some kind of reassurance. He hoped he was providing it.

"Marybeth, do you know who did this?"

"I couldn't see. All I know is that it was a man."

"Is there anything you can tell me?"

"What about my baby?" Her voice was thick.

Joe shook his head.

She turned her away, her eyes closed tightly as she cried. He squeezed her hands.

Suddenly, Marybeth was looking at him, frantically searching his face. Her eyes were wide.

"Where's Sheridan?" she asked. "I told her to run."

PART SIX

Like blind men building a mechanical elephant, each of the players picked up a hammer and wrench and, working separately and often secretly, fashioned gears, soldered wires, and pounded sheet metal. One built a leg, another the tail, a third the trunk. Then suddenly this creation, like a dreadful android, sprung to life, catching its builders in its gears as it lurched, uncontrolled, toward unknown destinations, without purpose, limit, or remorse.

—Alston Chase, *In a Dark Wood*, 1995, commentary on the creation and unintended consequences of the Endangered Species Act

34

SHERIDAN HAD NEVER been so cold, so hungry, or so alone. Once the fire down in the woodpile had died out, utter darkness had descended over the mountain. She rolled herself into a tight ball against the base of the boulder and tried to tuck the horse blanket around her body, but it was too thick and too small to cover her completely. The boulder, the dirt, and the air were all cold. She wished she had brought the backpack with her because it was filled with scraps of food. This was the first time she had ever missed dinner. She wished she could do something routine, like change into her pajamas or brush her teeth, so she could at least feel kind of normal. She didn't know what time it was, but she knew it was late. There was no moon and the cold, hard stars were relentless.

Night animals were out. Something—it sounded like a dog by the way it walked—had come down the Sandrocks draw from above but had stopped when it either smelled or sensed her. With an abrupt *thump-thump-thump*, it had reversed course and crashed back through the brush up the mountain. It had scared her at the time, because for a moment she thought it was Wacey. But she was pretty sure it had been a coyote. There were lots of them up here, according to her Dad. They had eaten her puppy and her kitten, after all.

She had slept for a while, but she didn't know how long. A sharp crack—a gunshot from somewhere up in the mountains—had jarred her awake a few minutes ago. She listened for more shots but heard none. She crawled on top of the boulder again and looked down. The woodpile, now coals and ashes, glowed deep red. The lights were still on in the house but she couldn't see the man moving around inside or out. She

would feel better if she knew where he was. For a moment, she thought about going back down.

She wished she had some way to defend herself if he found her. She assessed what she had—the horse blanket, a barrette, two pennies from her pockets. She didn't even have a stick. If she were in a movie, she would be able to fashion something clever out of those items to beat the bad guy. But this wasn't a movie, and she wasn't that clever. She was cold—and scared.

Then she saw the headlights coming down from Wolf Mountain. She watched them as they crossed the river and came down Bighorn Road. The pickup pulled back into the driveway at the front of the house. She heard a door slam but couldn't see who had been driving.

After a few moments, she saw someone in the house pass by the back picture window. The porch light came on and Wacey stepped out. He was carrying a rifle.

"Yoo-Hoo! Sheridan? Are you still with us?"

Sheridan began to cry. For a moment, she had thought the driver was her father.

"Answer me, sweetheart, so I know you're okay!" His voice was friendly, as it always was when he started out.

She was crying hard now, uncontrollably. It was as if something had released inside of her.

"It's nice and warm inside, Sheridan. I've got some hot chocolate warming up on the stove. Hot chocolate with itty-bitty marshmallows that I found in the cupboard. Mmmmmmm! You've got to be getting a little chilly up there."

She could not stop crying. She covered her face in her hands.

For a few moments, there was silence from below.

Then: *"I can heeear you. I can hear you up there. Stop crying, or you'll make me feel bad. I don't want to drink all of this hot chocolate by myself."*

She scrambled down from the boulder. As suddenly as she had started crying, she had stopped. She was horrified that Wacey had heard her crying. Now he knew for sure where she was.

"You sound pathetic, Sheridan. Why don't you come on down so I don't have to come up and get you?"

She pushed her way around the side of the boulder through a juniper bush so she could see down into the backyard again. He was still standing in the light of the floods. He had raised the rifle and was trying to see her through the scope but he was looking in the wrong direction, somewhere off to her left. Maybe he didn't know where she was after all. Maybe her sobs had echoed and confused him. Either way, he wasn't coming up after her. Yet.

It would be different when the sun came up.

IT WAS THREE in the morning in Saddlestring, Wyoming, when Joe Pickett roared in from Billings. The four stoplights flashed amber, and no one was about. The last of the bars were closed, and it was too early for morning activities yet. The town was as dead as it would ever be.

Joe drove straight down Main Street and pulled around the corner from Barrett's Pharmacy. He stopped and turned off the motor and looked at himself in the rearview mirror. He expected his eyes to glow red, as if he were some kind of demon or alien. He was so tired, so drained. He had not slept in two nights and had not eaten since breakfast, now almost 20 hours ago.

And he was absolutely enraged. He knew it wouldn't be long before he would explode. The only question remaining was how many people would be involved in the blast.

Dim lights were on inside the pharmacy and Joe pressed his face to the window and looked in. In the parking lot, he had seen the pickup with a magnetic sign on the door that read HANS'S JANITORIAL SERVICE. Hans was in there all right, pushing a vacuum through the aisle that featured magazines and paperback books. Joe rapped on the window, but Hans didn't look up. He couldn't hear Joe over the vacuum. Joe hit the window again so hard he risked smashing it or tripping the alarm. But Hans, who has half-deaf anyway, didn't respond.

Joe took his flashlight from his belt and shined it through the window into Hans's face. Hans twitched and absently rubbed his mouth, not yet aware of what was annoying him. When he finally looked up, he jumped and nearly stumbled back into the best-sellers. Joe turned the flashlight on himself so Hans could see him, and he held his badge to the window. Hans stood thinking it over, his chin in his hand, then motioned Joe around to the backdoor.

"I probably shouldn't let you in," Hans said as he unlocked the door in the alley. "Bill Barrett told me never under any circumstances to let anyone in the store after hours, even him. There's all kinds of narcotics and stuff in the pharmacy."

Joe thanked him and brushed by. "It's official state Game and Fish Department business," Joe answered. "It's lucky you were here."

Hans grunted and locked the door after them.

"I gotta tell Bill Barrett about this."

"That's fine," Joe said, walking through the store to the photo counter.

"Hope you don't mind if I vacuum," Hans said. "I went hunting with Jack this afternoon, and I'm running late. Got a buck, though. Finally. Missed a nicer one. You can ask Jack about it."

"Hans, I've got to ask you something."

Hans stopped and stared at Joe. His hands shook. Joe could tell that Hans was trying to recall anything he might have done recently that could be a violation of the Game and Fish regulations.

"Don't worry," Joe assured him. "You haven't done anything wrong that I'm aware of."

Hans continued to shake.

"Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when I drove up on you and Jack after you got that pronghorn buck?"

Hans nodded his head yes.

"You asked me about whether or not I had heard of an endangered species in the mountains. Do you remember that?"

Hans nodded again.

"What do you know about it?" Joe asked. His voice was firm.

"Nothing," Hans said. "Honestly. We just heard rumors. You know, bar talk. Somebody said somebody else had found something up there."

"Who found it?"

"Somebody said it was Clyde Lidgard," Hans said.

"Vacuum away," Joe said, waving his hand. He slipped behind the counter and slid out the oversize drawer that held envelopes of developed pictures. The envelopes were alphabetized by name. Joe quickly leafed through them, finding the packets filed under "L." He found Lawton, Livingston, Layborn, Lane, and Lomiller. But he didn't find what he was looking for. Across the store, Hans fired up the vacuum cleaner. Joe slammed the drawer shut and said, "Shit!" But Hans was oblivious.

There was a stupidly simple reason, Joe thought, why Clyde Lidgard had no photos in his trailer from the two months leading up to the outfitter murders: he had not picked them up yet from the pharmacy after they'd been developed. But somebody apparently had.

Maybe, Joe thought with a grimace, he was about ten steps behind everybody else just as he had been since this whole thing had started. But maybe not.

He pulled open the drawer again and went to the back. Beyond "XYZ" he found a tab file that said "Unclaimed." In the file there were ten envelopes. Three of those were slated for pickup by Clyde Lidgard.

Joe ripped the first envelope open and slid the photos out onto the counter. They looked familiar: blurred, offkilter snapshots of trees, clouds, Clyde's penis, a manhole cover. Then he saw what he was looking for. There were dozens of them.

THE STOCKMAN'S BAR had been closed since two, but Joe drove by it just in case before he proceeded to the Holiday Inn at the edge of town. He parked under the motel's registration sign, clamped on his hat, and went in.

Like all night clerks and auditors, the man behind the desk was jumpy. He wore a greasy ponytail and thick hornrimmed glasses. His eyes, magnified through the lenses, were enormous. He slammed a *Penthouse* magazine shut in a night auditing folder but not quickly enough that Joe didn't see it as he approached.

Joe introduced himself and showed his badge. He said a package was supposed to be sent to him at the hotel in care of Vern Dunnegan. He said he had tried to call to check on it but couldn't get through.

"Phones are out all over town," the night clerk said. "We can't get in or out."

Joe watched carefully as the clerk used his finger to go down the registry. His finger stopped on room 238.

"I can't see a note for any package," he said.

"Can you check please?" Joe asked. "It should have come in today. Maybe it's still in the back."

The night clerk clucked to himself and excused himself for a minute. The door behind the desk swung closed after him.

Quickly, Joe jumped up and sat on the counter. He reached across the night clerk's desk and slid out the drawer. There were two extra keys for room 238. Joe took one of them.

Joe scanned the small office as he waited impatiently for the night clerk to return without a package. He noted the small plastic sign stuck to the wall under the clock, informing all guests that for their convenience, their room key would open the back door of the motel as well as the door to their rooms. The man finally reappeared, apologized, and Joe said good night. Once outside, Joe jumped into the pickup, wheeled around to the side wing of the motel and parked near the exit door. Using the key, he entered and took the staircase steps two at a time.

Two-thirty-four, two-thirty-six, *two-thirty-eight*. No one in the hallway. Joe pulled the Velcro safety strap from around the hammer of his .357 Magnum and turned the key in the lock. He stepped inside and shut the door after him. No lights were on.

Joe stood still for a moment, waiting until the objects in the room gradually took shape around him. It was a suite with a wet bar and some stools. A dark couch with clothes piled on it. Buckaroo prints mounted on the walls. A large-screen television. Two interior doors that he guessed led either to the bathroom or to the bedroom. Someone coughed, and he turned toward the room on the left. He walked across the carpet and eased the door open.

It smelled of stale bourbon and cigarette smoke inside. He couldn't see anyone, but he could sense there was more than one person in the bed. Pointing the revolver toward the bed with his right hand, he searched the wall in back of him with his left for the light switch.

Table lamps on either side of the bed came on, and Joe swung the revolver around until the front sight was squarely on Vern Dunnegan's sweaty forehead. Vern had thrashed in the sheets when the lights came on but was now sitting up in bed staring dumbly at the big black hole of the muzzle. An older, skinny woman with streaked blond hair clutched the blanket to her mouth. Her eyes were smudged with liner on the outside and road-mapped with red inside. She muffled a squeal.

"Joe, for Christ's sake," Vern said, his voice choked with sleep and anger. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you," Joe said. "And I found you."

The woman was beside herself. She was trembling and looking from Joe to Vern.

“What’s your name, ma’am?” Joe asked. He recognized her as a barmaid at the Stockman’s Bar.

“Evelyn Wolters.”

“Evelyn,” Joe said. “If you don’t get out of that bed right now, you’re going to have Vern Dunnegan’s brain splattered all over you.”

Evelyn Wolters shrieked and dove out from the covers. She had long pendulous breasts that swung from side to side as she scooped up her clothing from the floor.

“Evelyn, do you know Sheriff Barnum?” Joe asked.

She nodded her head “yes” very quickly.

“Good. Then get your clothes on and get in your car and drive over to his house as soon as you can. Tell him to get out to Joe Pickett’s house right away with every deputy he can find. Can you do that?”

Evelyn said she could.

“Aren’t you going to check with me?” Vern asked her, thoroughly disgusted.

Joe stepped aside so she could run past. She didn’t reply to Vern as she left the room. Vern and Joe stared at each other in silence, only the sounds of Evelyn Wolters getting dressed in a hurry—grunts punctuated with the snapping of elastic—breaking the quiet. Vern’s face was flushed, and his eyes were narrowed into slits. Joe had never seen him so angry.

The door slammed in the front room, and Evelyn was gone.

“Joe, what the fuck is going on here? You don’t really want to do this. Joe? Do you? This isn’t like you at all.”

Joe thumbed back the hammer on the Smith & Wesson. The cylinder turned from an empty chamber to one filled with a hollow-point bullet. Little muscles in Vern’s temples started to throb.

“Well, Vern, I don’t know about that,” Joe said, his voice betraying his rage. “Maybe you just haven’t seen me on a night when my wife gets shot, my baby son dies, and one of my daughters is missing.”

Vern shook his head. His famous chuckle rolled out. “Joe, you don’t think I had anything at all to do with any of that, do you? I was closing down the Stockman with Evelyn when one of the local boys who’d been out at your place came in and told me about Marybeth being shot. He said Wacey told him to come find me and tell me what had happened out at the Pickett house. Soon after that, Evelyn and I packed it up and came here.” Vern paused and shot Joe a look that was both petulant and accusatory. “Frankly, Joe, I don’t know how you could even imply that I might have been involved in all this stuff that you’ve been going on about.”

“Shut up, Vern. You’re so deep into this you’ll never get out.”

“Joe, I ...”

“SHUT UP!” Joe barked. His finger tightened on the trigger—Vern saw it and even though his mouth was still open, no sound came out.

“Here,” Joe said, tossing the envelopes with Clyde’s photos in them on the bedspread. Vern was confused until he shook one set of the photos out. He flipped through each

of them, his stubby fingers snapping each photo down on the bed as if he were dealing cards.

"They're lousy pictures," Joe continued. "Just like all of Clyde Lidgard's work. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you wouldn't even know that all of those brown, furry things sticking out of the ground were the last Miller's weasels on earth."

Vern returned the photos to the first envelope and took out the next set.

"Of course, the negatives are somewhere else so don't even consider that option," Joe said.

Vern seemed to get smaller in the bed as he looked through the photos. A look of utter defeat passed over his features.

"Now I know the majority of these photos are so bad you can't recognize anything in them. But Clyde did manage to take some pretty good ones of you and Wacey up there in the woods. In one you can even see a package of M-44 cartridges sticking out of your knapsack."

Vern neatly put the photos away, keeping his head down. When he raised it, he looked wounded.

"Where did you find all of this?" Vern asked. "How did you know where to look?"

"Barrett's Pharmacy," Joe said. "Clyde Lidgard told me all about it. He told me everything."

"Clyde Lidgard?"

"I'm not here to talk," Joe said. "You are the one who needs to talk. But right now, Vern, you have about twenty seconds to get dressed because we're going to walk out of here to go find my daughter."

36

JOE DROVE OUT of town on the Bighorn Road with his right hand on the steering wheel and his left hand on his lap holding the .357 Magnum, still cocked, aimed at Vern's big gut. The sky was beginning to lighten to the east, and the stars were not as brilliant as they had been. It was a cold, clear morning and there was no other traffic on the roads. Joe felt like he and Vern were alone in a world of their own making.

They were headed back toward Joe's house. Joe figured that if Marybeth had told Sheridan to run, there was a chance his daughter might still be somewhere not too far away from the house. It was a place to start anyway.

Vern wore a pair of baggy sweatpants, a T-shirt, slippers, and a bathrobe. Joe had not given him any more time to dress. When Vern had opened the closet to get his clothes, Joe had seen the butt of a handgun on the top shelf. Joe had ordered Vern to close the damned door and put on something from the dresser.

"I could use a drink right now," Vern said. "That would help."

"Shut up."

"I'm really sorry this turned out the way it did, Joe. I'm sorry you had to even get involved in it."

"Shut up."

"I'm an entrepreneur," Vern said, his voice rising. "I'm terribly misunderstood. I'm an endangered species just like you. I'm sorry about not being able to give you that good job when you finally wanted it. Especially now that it's available again. I bet you didn't know that, did you?"

Joe snorted. Vern just kept trying, Joe thought. He didn't quit.

"It's hard to believe how this all turned out," Vern moaned. "How screwed up everything got."

"Speaking of screwed, did Les Etbauer at headquarters owe you one?"

"He *still* owes me a couple," Vern sighed. "I got him that cushy job and covered for him a couple of times when he was too drunk to function."

Joe grunted. He had thought it must have been something like that.

"A lot of people owe me," Vern said. "Some of those favors could be called in on your behalf, if you would just ease up on me a little bit. We don't *have* to be on opposite sides, here."

Vern looked over as if to gauge if Joe had softened some.

"Joe, what I'm saying here is that we could either get you your old job back or you could work for InterWest. Your choice. I can call Etbauer if you want me to. Even Wacey could hire you if I told him to. You've got lots of options, Joe. We really don't have to go through with all of this."

"Shut up, Vern," Joe gritted out, through clenched teeth.

"In fact, Joe, you owe me, too. How do you think you got the job after me? Do you realize how many guys wanted this? Wade, from Pinedale. Charley Gardener over in rock Springs—"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Christ, Joe," Vern whined. "You could at least be civil."

The explosion of the pistol in the closed cab of the pickup was deafening, and the only thing louder than the ringing in Joe's ears was the high-pitched cursing of Vern as he searched himself frantically for the wound. There was now a hole in the truck door the size of a quarter, just a few inches from Vern's belly.

They drove in silence for a few moments. The truck smelled sharply of cordite. It also smelled of urine because Vern had wet himself.

"How did Wacey get involved in this?" Joe asked calmly.

"Jesus, this is really embarrassing," Vern said, looking down in his lap. He clutched his thighs with his hands to keep his legs from shaking.

"How did Wacey get involved in this?"

Vern rubbed his face and sighed. "Getting Wacey in this deal was the single most stupid fucking thing I ever did. But he was the one who told me about that idiot Clyde Lidgard. He said Lidgard had talked to him about some little creatures he saw up in the canyon. Wacey knew about the pipeline, of course, and he had heard about

Miller's weasels just like everybody else had. He told Clyde to keep it a secret, that it was some big government secret that just he and Clyde could know about. Clyde liked that shit. Then Wacey told me about it."

"So you and Wacey and Clyde went up there and wiped out the weasels," Joe said. "But unfortunately you didn't wipe them all out, and Ote Keeley and his buddies found what was left."

Vern nodded. Joe thought Vern figured he had nothing more to lose by talking.

"Ote must have hoped that if he delivered a Miller's weasel to you that you would drop the charges on him," Vern said. "That was how you got involved in this whole stupid fucking mess."

Joe grunted.

"I always thought of you and Wacey as *my boys*," Vern said, his voice cracking. "My protégés. Wacey was always a little hotheaded, but he was determined and he was tough. You were the straight-arrow. A little slow at times and you fucked up now and then, but basically you were a stand-up kind of guy. Now look what's happened: Wacey has gone over the edge and you're pointing a gun at me. I'm disappointed, Joe, at the way things turned out. How did they ever go so wrong?"

"Who killed the outfitters?" Joe asked.

Vern sighed, rocking his head back as if he were in pain. "Wacey killed the outfitters. Then he killed Clyde. He's a goddamned lunatic hothead. He likes to be the one in control. I had no idea he could be like that. That was never supposed to happen with the outfitters. He said they were drunk when he rode up on them, and they showed him a couple of the weasels they had dug up and they mouthed off. Wacey said one of 'em went for a rifle."

"So Wacey told Clyde Lidgard to stay up there and guard the camp until we showed up?"

Vern nodded.

"I wondered why Wacey slept so hard the night before we went into that camp," Joe said. "And how he could just walk right up to that camp like he owned the place. It's because he had spent the night before that up there and he knew exactly what we were going to find."

"Wacey made sure Clyde got shot," Vern confirmed.

"What was in it for Wacey?"

Vern slumped against the door of the truck. It was as if every question knocked him farther down. "He wanted in the worst way to be the sheriff, if you can believe that. He wanted to be the big shot."

"I believe it."

"I told Wacey I had some things on Barnum that would make Barnum drop out of the race. Barnum, back in the old days, liked Indian women. He used to hit on them when they were drunk and brought into jail. He's got a couple of grown kids on the reservation he pays support for. Nobody knew that but him and me. And eventually Wacey. That was part of the deal before it went so sour."

"That's how it started," Vern said, his voice small. "All I wanted to do was make a lot of money and all Wacey wanted was to be the sheriff. All I wanted were the big bucks I know I deserve after all of those years of working for the state. I was so close, too. The clearances were issued and that pipeline was just humming toward Saddlestring. But things got out of hand because of Wacey. All I ever wanted was a ton of money. Then Wacey went fucking nuts trying to cover up everything. The more he tried to cover it up, the worse it got. I warned him off of going after your daughter, but he was absolutely convinced that she knew about some living Miller's weasels. He kept saying if he could find those weasels and get rid of them that this whole thing would be over."

Joe had suddenly lost his concentration.

"What?" he yelled.

Vern looked scared. "You didn't know about your daughter?"

"Know WHAT about her?" Joe quickly switched the revolver from his left to his right hand and shoved the barrel into Vern's nose, pinning Vern's head against the passenger window.

"Jesus, Joe!" Vern honked.

"WHAT?"

"That Wacey thought she was keeping a couple of them as pets!" Vern said his eyes fixed on the gun barrel. "That's why he figured out a way to get you people out of your house and up to Eagle Mountain—so he could find those weasels. He told me this morning that he was going to head up to your place today to look for them."

Anguished, Joe pushed harder on the pistol. "Wacey went after my daughter?"

"Please, Joe ...," Vern pleaded, eyes bulging and blinking.

"Did Wacey shoot Marybeth, Vern? Did he? Is that what happened? He was up there looking for weasels and instead he fucking shot my wife?"

Vern started to sputter out a reply but Joe, already knowing the answer, cut him off. "That son-of-a-bitch was my *friend*," he said, more to himself than to Vern. Joe thought about how Wacey had blocked Joe's entrance into his own house earlier and how he had hustled Joe back out onto the road. Wacey had told the cop to find Vern and tell him Marybeth had been shot. Wacey had made a point of telling Joe he would stay and watch over everything. Wacey had seemed unnerved. *Wacey*.

"Shit," Joe said, finally looking at the road and jerking the truck back in his lane after it had wandered. "Sheridan was right after all. There *are* monsters out there."

37

WHEN DAWN BREAKS over the Bighorns, it breaks hard and fast and with cascades of bright sunlight gushing over the mountains like a broken dam. A shaft of sunlight burst through the windshield of the pickup.

Joe pulled over in a stand of mountain ash about a half a mile from his house. He shut off the motor and stuffed the keys in his pocket.

"Get out," he told Vern. "We're going to walk the rest of the way. I don't want him hearing us drive up. Shut the door easy."

Vern started to walk down the road bed, and Joe waved him into the ditch on the shoulder. Joe holstered his pistol and pulled his shotgun from behind the seat. He pumped a shell into the chamber. In his slippers, Vern gingerly stepped down from the road into the ditch. Frosted reeds in the ditch lit up with morning sun, and Vern's feet crunched through a skin of ice.

"This water's cold," Vern said.

Joe nodded and motioned with the shotgun for Vern to start walking.

"I look like a clown," Vern mumbled. Already his sweatpants were wet from the frost. A red "O" from the muzzle of Joe's revolver was still visible on Vern's nose.

"You *are* a clown," Joe said. "Now stay in the ditch and don't say anything when we get close. The only way to keep your life is to help me find my daughter."

Vern moaned. "Then we're through, right?"

"Then we're through."

Neither told the other what they meant by that.

SHERIDAN UNTWISTED HERSELF from beneath the horse blanket. The sun was coming up. She was surprised to see that the blanket was covered with frost. She stood and tried to rub some feeling into her legs, arms, and face. She was no longer hungry—she was beyond that.

The night had been long and terrible. She was dirty and she felt featherlight. Everything hurt. There seemed to be scratches, bruises, or imbedded thorns all over her body.

She could finally see what was around her, but she knew he could, too.

Rather than crawl on top of the boulder where she might be seen, she pushed her way through the juniper bushes on the side of it again. She tried not to rustle the bushes too much.

Wacey was not in the backyard. That meant he either was in the house or was already stalking her. She couldn't believe she had actually fallen asleep. She hoped she hadn't slept too long.

Then beyond the house, up Bighorn Road, something caught her attention. It was the glint of morning sun reflecting off of the glass of a windshield. It was a green truck way down the road, a green truck just like her dad's and parked in some trees. And in the foreground, between the house and the truck, there was movement in the ditch. Two men, walking in the tall weeds. The first man was big in a long flowing robe. Behind him was her dad!

Sucking in her breath, Sheridan scrambled out from around the boulder and started to run down the mountain.

WACEY STOOD AT the broken kitchen window sipping from a cup of coffee that he had just brewed. When he saw a flash of color on the mountain, he stepped back and picked up his binoculars from the table. He focused.

Sheridan Pickett, blond hair streaming in the sun, was racing down the hill like her pants were on fire.

“Damn.”

He had been beginning to believe that maybe she wasn’t up there after all, that maybe what he’d heard crying in the night was a cougar or a coyote. They sounded the same as kids sometimes.

The next business would not be pleasant at all. But like burning the Miller’s weasels, it needed to be done.

Boy, he thought, he had sure sunk low. He had gone from killing three heavily armed hunters to shooting an unarmed woman. Now he was waiting for a seven-year-old. Strangely, it wasn’t all that hard to do. He would make a damned good sheriff, he thought. He had a good understanding of the criminal mind.

Wacey placed the cup on the table. He started to reach for the .30-06 but decided that if she saw him come out with a rifle now, she might turn and run right back up the mountain. He didn’t feel like chasing her or possibly missing her with a long shot. She was remarkably fast for a girl her age—especially one with glasses, he thought. Instead, he would wait until she got to the backyard. Then he would step out and run her down. He knew of a sump hole at the base of Wolf Mountain where some hunters had once trailed a wounded elk. The animal had gotten caught in the sump and sunk out of sight, much to the hunters’ dismay. It would be a perfect place to throw a body. He would weight her down with rocks.

He waited until she ran through the back gate before he stepped out on the porch.

When she saw him, she froze in place. Her green eyes were so *huge*. He tried his best smile on her as the screen door slammed behind him.

What he didn’t understand was why those eyes had moved off of his face toward the side of the house. He followed them.

“Wacey,” Vern said in his deep voice, “it’s over, buddy. Our deal is done and we had better get the hell out of Dodge while we still can.”

Wacey turned toward him, confused. Vern looked like he just got out of bed and had walked all of the way from Saddlestring.

“You look real stupid, Vern,” Wacey said. “What’d you do, piss your pants?”

JOE CAME AROUND from the other side of the house near the garage. Wacey’s back was turned to him; he was facing Vern. Sheridan was out in the yard. Her clothes were tattered and she was smudged with dirt and blood.

“What are you *doing* here? What are you saying?” Wacey asked Vern, his voice high-pitched. “I wiped out the rest of the weasels, and we’re almost home free.” He gestured toward Sheridan and spoke to her.

“Don’t you move, darlin’.”

Sheridan stood absolutely still. But Joe knew she could see him. *Don’t give me away*, Joe silently implored.

“Let’s get out of here while we can,” Vern said to Wacey. “They know about the weasels, and Barnum’s on the way now.”

"How in the hell did that happen?" Wacey demanded, almost in falsetto.

"I'll tell you in the car," Vern said, shaking his head from side to side.

"Tell me now."

Vern sighed. "Clyde Lidgard woke the fuck up and told everybody what happened. Somebody found some pictures he took up in the mountains with both of us in them." His voice cracked again, like it had in the pickup. "Remember Clyde and his *goddamn* camera? We've got to get out of here NOW!"

"Not yet," Wacey said, reaching down for his 9mm pistol. "I've got to finish up here."

Joe thought Wacey would turn on Vern. But the pistol started to raise toward Sheridan, started to arc up from the holster as Wacey held it with a stiff arm, started to flush up into the air like a pheasant exploding from the brush into the sky, and Joe heard his daughter start to scream ... How could Wacey, the same Wacey who had shared coffee with Joe on so many mornings while they watched the elk come down from the mountains to eat hay in a rancher's meadow, the same Wacey who scrunched in between Joe and Vern on the bench seat of Vern's Game and Fish pickup, the same Wacey who, with that goofy laugh, recalled riding both bulls and buckle bunnies at the National College Rodeo Finals in Bozeman—how could this be the Wacey who was now leveling his 9mm pistol at Joe's older daughter?

With the shotgun, Joe shot Wacey's arm off at the elbow.

The blast spun Wacey around until he was facing Joe. Joe had never seen terror in Wacey's face before. Wacey's disembodied forearm, with the fist still gripping the pistol, flew end over end through the air and dropped to the ground near the base of the cottonwood tree.

Joe racked the shotgun and, with two more lightning blasts, blew both of Wacey's knees back in the wrong direction. Wacey buckled to the pavement on top of himself, howling.

Vern stood stock still with his palms out and his mouth open. His robe was spattered with Wacey's blood.

Sheridan rushed to Joe, and he bent to catch her. He didn't know she could squeeze his neck so hard. She was sobbing, and he kissed her and hugged her back.

"Your mom is okay," he told her, picking her up and rocking her as if she were an infant. "I saw her last night and she's okay."

"I was so worried about her," Sheridan sobbed. "It's all my fault."

"No it isn't, darling," Joe said, wincing. "Don't ever think that. Don't ever say that. You are such a brave girl. You are such a hero. Your mom will be proud of you."

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"I'm sorry you had to see all that," Joe said to Sheridan. "It makes me kind of sick."

"He deserved it. Nobody ever needed it more than him."

He lowered her to the grass when he noticed that Vern had bent over and dug the pickup keys out of Wacey's pocket and had started to walk away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Joe asked.

"We're through, remember?" Vern said over his shoulder. "I did my part. And shit, you sure did yours. I forgot what a wing shot you were." Out came the chuckle.

"Don't take another step, Vern," Joe cautioned. "We're waiting for Barnum now. You're going to prison."

"We're through, Joe. We had a deal." Vern was angry. "Remember that one you owe me." He never stopped trying.

On the porch, Wacey moaned. He was alive, but blood was pouring out of him. His legs were grotesquely bent backwards underneath him.

"Stop, Vern," Joe said. He didn't yell, but he knew Vern could hear him.

Vern continued to walk along the back of the house.

"Honey, turn your head," Joe said sternly to Sheridan.

"No, I want to see this," Sheridan said.

"Turn your head!"

Sheridan reluctantly obeyed.

Joe raised the shotgun and waited until Vern was far enough away that the shot pattern wouldn't be tight. Then he shot him in the hip. Vern dropped like a rock.

"Jesus!" Vern cried, writhing on the ground. "I can't believe you *shot me in the ass!*"

"It was the least I could do," Joe said. "If you try to get up, I'll shoot you again."

Joe found Wacey's pistol in the grass, and tucked it in his belt. He walked back to the porch and squatted on the pavement. Wacey was balled up with his back against the door. His good arm was pulling a smashed leg to his chest. His wounded arm, now a hamburger-like stump pulsing gouts of arterial blood, flopped about like a broken wing. Wacey's eyes were wide, and his mouth was fixed in a waxy snarl.

"Can you hear me, Wacey?" Joe asked.

Wacey grunted and nodded through the pain.

"Wacey, the only reason I didn't kill you for what you've done to my family is because if you were dead, you wouldn't think about it much," Joe said. "Do you understand what I'm saying? I want you to be able to think about what you've done to my family, and to me, and to those outfitters. Not to mention the Wyoming Game and Fish Department."

"Get an ambulance!" Wacey hissed through chattering teeth. "I'm bleeding to death!"

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Joe asked again, calmly.

"Yes! Goddamn you!" Wacey spat. He was trembling violently.

"No," Joe said, standing. "*Goddamn you to hell*, Wacey. And take Vern Dunnegan along on the same horse."

Joe picked up Sheridan and carried her around the house and through the front yard to Bighorn Road. He put her down near the gate.

"Dad, look," Sheridan said, pointing down the road toward Saddlestring.

Evelyn had done what she said she would. County sheriff's vehicles were roaring down the road from town, Barnum's Blazer in the lead with the siren and lights on.

Joe leaned his shotgun against the picket fence and stepped out onto the gravel road. Sheridan stayed with him. She was his shadow. He guessed that she might be his shadow for a very long time.

PART SEVEN

... Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization.

No living man will see again the long-grass prairie, where a sea of prairie flowers lapped at the stirrups of the pioneer ...

No living man will see again the virgin pineries of the Lake States, or the flat-woods of the coastal plain, or the giant hardwoods ...

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1948

EPILOGUE

SPRING.

Or at least what passed for spring in Wyoming, a place with only three legitimate but not independent seasons: summer, fall, and winter. Spring was something that occurred in other places, places where flowers pushed up from the soil during May when it warmed, places where leaves budded and opened on hardwood trees, places where flowers exposed themselves like sacrifices to the sun. Places where it was unlikely that after those leaves and flowers emerged, 10 inches of heavy, wet, and unpredicted snow would fall and would cynically, sneeringly, kill every living thing in sight and stop all movement.

Through the slush, Joe drove home on the Bighorn Road from the Crazy Woman Campground and thought that in his entire life in the Rocky Mountains he had never really experienced what spring was in other places, or truly appreciated what it stood for.

To him, and to the big game animals he was in charge of, spring was a particularly cruel natural joke: a season created and devised to remind living beings that things were often not what they seemed and that they had no real power or influence over it no matter how well educated, technologically advanced, or intuitive they had become. It was a season designed to remind the living that it wasn't safe to presume anything.

DAWN.

He entered the house as silently as he could, taking off his Sorel packs in the mud-room and exchanging them for his fleece slippers, hanging his parka, muddy Wranglers, and red chamois shirt on the nail in exchange for his robe, and tossing his Stetson onto the closet shelf.

It was Sunday, and it was his job to make pancakes.

He had left the house very early in response to a cellular telephone request from the campground, where the Defenders of nature group had called him in a panic to report that "a hyped-up black or grizzly bear" was rooting around their tents. He had responded and arrived at the camp and quickly determined that the bear was actually a moose and that the moose was gone. The Defenders of nature were dissatisfied with his conclusion, and they had tried to convince him that the snuffling sounds they had heard around their dome tents meant danger and not mere curiosity, but with a flashlight Joe had shown them the moose hoofprints and the still-steaming moose excrement near the fire pit, evidence that had led to his determination. The Defenders were outraged at the sudden heavy snow, and they seemed to blame Joe for it since he was a local. The Defenders—based in Arlington, Virginia, and encamped for nearly

two weeks to monitor Miller's weasel recovery efforts and wholly suspicious of anybody or anything local (this was, after all, the backward land of miners, loggers, ranchers, developers, and hunters)—had grudgingly accepted Joe's hypothesis and had returned to their \$800 sleeping bags.

With a whisk, Joe mixed eggs, flour, baking soda, and buttermilk into a bowl. He tested all of the heating elements to make sure the ones he replaced were now working. He greased the cast-iron skillet and set it on the stove to warm up.

ONCE THE REMAINS of the Miller's weasels had been confirmed, just about everything that Vern Dunnegan had predicted would happen was taking place in the mountains of Twelve Sleep County.

A moratorium on any kind of activity or recreation was quickly handed down by federal judges following scores of faxed legal briefs by dozens of environmental groups. Friend of the Court briefs appeared from organizations headquartered in Europe, Canada, Greenland, and Asia. The listing of Miller's weasels as an endangered species was petitioned for and granted in record time. The God Squad was convened to ram it through. Biologists, scientists, journalists, and environmentalists descended on Saddlestring, occupying every hotel and motel room as well as the campgrounds. Teams of agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service helicoptered in to the site of the killing field and beyond, and they soon discovered two more small colonies of Miller's weasels. Studies showed that the creatures had, in fact, evolved from subsisting almost entirely on buffalo to a diet of primarily elk. One of the colonies was dubbed the Cold Springs Group and the other the Timberline Group and the names became well-known in the media. Several networks broadcast the find live via satellite trucks during the evening news. It was, by one celebrity reporter's account, the "feel-good story of the year."

The heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Interior flew into the Saddlestring Airport in Air Force Two and were photographed sneaking up on the Cold Springs Group with binoculars. Television viewers delighted in videotaped footage of Miller's weasels standing upright and chirping on their dens with their backs to one another. The Wyoming legislature, after a nasty floor fight, declared the Miller's weasel the "Official Endangered Species of Wyoming," beating out grizzly bears, Wyoming toads, and transplanted wolves.

Joe worked very hard to avoid being interviewed by anyone. The murder of the outfitters, the injuries and threats to his family, the death of Clyde Lidgard, and the arrests of Wacey and Vern were treated as sidebar stories that had led to the discovery of the Miller's weasels—if they were mentioned at all.

ONE OF THE colonies, the Timberline Group, which was made up of 18 Miller's weasels, died out literally in front of the cameras, and a nation mourned their loss. Autopsies revealed that the animals had contracted a viral infection, probably from one of the researcher's dogs. The Cold Springs Group declined from 28 animals to 13 for no traceable cause. A debate was raging whether the remaining Miller's weasels should be transplanted to a breeding facility or left alone. Biologists were in a dither

over what to do. An additional 80 square miles were added to the newly designated Miller's Weasel Ecosystem. Everyone had an opinion, including the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, which was fighting in the courts for "custody" of the remaining animals.

The *Saddlestring Roundup* newspaper estimated that the discovery of the Miller's weasels had resulted in at least 400 local jobs lost in the lumber, grazing, agriculture, and recreation industries. Every day there were stories of families who were simply dropping off their house keys at the bank as they left town.

THE TRIALS FOR Vern Dunnegan and Wacey Hedeman had been postponed until summer. The rumor in town was that they had turned on each other and each was willing to implicate the other for every count of the charges. Vern had become a kind of far-right-wing media darling and was often interviewed in his cell talking about the Endangered Species Act. He was so glib and so capable of usable sound bites that his opinions were quoted by both sides of environmental controversies.

Wacey, however, had been shunned. A story leaked out from the federal detention facility in Cheyenne that Wacey had attacked a group of prisoners who were chiding him about his former profession and his new handicap and referring to him as "The Lone Arm of the Law."

Assistant Director Les Etbauer resigned from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department the day after Vern was arrested. The official statement from the department was that Etbauer had committed a serious lack of judgment when he suspended Joe Pickett and that Warden Pickett's position had been restored immediately with no further action required. There was even a commendation and a small increase in salary for Joe. Etbauer was then immediately hired as a consultant to the governor to serve as a liaison between the state and various federal land management agencies. Sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum won reelection with 87 percent of the vote with the remaining 13 percent going to write-in candidates that included pets, Marshal Matt Dillon, and two votes for Joe Pickett.

Joe had followed the news reports of how the pipeline that InterWest Resources had been building was capped and abandoned 50 miles from the western slope of the Bighorn Mountains. Despite congressional investigations, no credible evidence had been found linking InterWest with the webs Vern had spun on their behalf. InterWest eventually merged with CanCal to help build a single natural gas pipeline to Southern California, but market conditions were such that analysts were predicting that the project might be put on hold for years.

MARYBETH CAME IN from her walk with an armful of Sunday newspapers. She planned to start taking Maxine with her again in a couple of months, once she had built up her strength. Now though, she was walking with the aid of a cane and with a painful limp. The rigors of holding the Labrador back were too much for her. Marybeth's progress from wheelchair to walker to crutches to assisted walking on her own had all occurred before the doctors had said it would be possible. They marveled at her strength—and at her will. A full recovery was predicted. Joe had never doubted it.

Once they had moved back into the house from the Eagle Mountain Club, Missy Vankeuran had fled back to Arizona, saying she was needed to lend support for her new husband's run for the U.S. Senate.

There were now three children at the table for pancakes. Sheridan, now eight, and Lucy, now four, shared the table and the family with April Keeley, their foster child. It had been Marybeth's idea, and she had pursued it, even while she was in the wheelchair, after she had learned that Jeannie Keeley, Ote's widow, had left the county after she had given birth, taking only the baby with her. The youngest child had died of pneumonia. April, the sick child Joe had seen at the Keeley's home, had been left behind in Saddlestring. She was between Sheridan's and Lucy's ages, and she was slowly discovering that she could trust both of them. Marybeth had explained to Joe that April Keeley, likely to be a bundle of problems, would be the focus of all of the love and mothering that had been stored in her for the new baby. April was beginning to open up to Marybeth and Joe, although she was painfully shy and ashamed of her situation. Marybeth spent hours with her. Lucy was of course a little jealous, but Sheridan seemed to understand.

During the first month and a half when Marybeth returned home from the hospital, the situation had been difficult for all of them. Joe, Marybeth, and Sheridan had all been through separate but connected ordeals. Marybeth focused her hate on Vern Dunnegan, and Sheridan raged about Wacey Hedeman. Marybeth tried to explain to Joe how she felt about losing a child, how the feeling would never go away, how she would forever blame herself as a mother for allowing it to happen. There were many long nights when Joe held Marybeth while she cried. There were other nights when he held Sheridan.

Joe knew that he would never really fathom the depths of feelings both Marybeth and Sheridan had about what had happened. All he could do, he concluded, was what he did: be there and listen.

Joe had become concerned that both of them would be bitter, but it hadn't happened. Instead, they had become even closer as a family.

AFTER BREAKFAST, JOE and Sheridan put the remaining pancakes and bacon into a sack and went outside into the backyard. They walked around the house and sat in two lawn chairs facing the back of the garage. The morning had become warm, and the sun was out. Yesterday's snow was already melting. Muscular rivulets of runoff rushed down the Sandrocks draw.

Sheridan broke off pieces of the pancakes and bacon and scattered them on the ground near the foundation of the garage. Joe cut up a couple of small chunks of meat from the haunch of a road-killed cow elk he had stored in the freezer and tossed them out. It didn't take long for the Miller's weasels to zip out of their den and clean up the food. Joe and Sheridan exchanged conspiratorial smiles while they watched.

There was a good reason why the Miller's weasels had moved from the woodpile to the roomy cavern beneath the garage. It turned out that, while Sheridan had been right about Lucky being a male and Hippity-Hop being a female, she was wrong about

their “son,” Elway. This spring, Elway had produced 10 babies (Joe had learned from the biologists in the canyon that the young were called “kits”), and eight had survived.

The kits were fascinating to watch because, although they were a quarter the size of their parents, they were just as fast when they shot out from beneath the foundation, grabbed food in their forepaws, and flashed back into the den. When Joe pointed a flashlight into the den, the weasels were a mass of writhing, chirping, long, brown bodies equally annoyed at the intrusion. The kits would sometimes come out into the sun and try to stand on their hind legs like their parents, and Joe and Sheridan would laugh as the kits would lose their balance, fall over, and scramble upright again until they could hold the famous pose.

“They’re getting big,” Sheridan said, nodding at the kits and tossing small pieces of food.

“Yes they are,” Joe replied.

“Dad, what do you suppose would happen if anyone found out about these little guys?” Sheridan asked. He could tell she had been contemplating the question for a while. Joe had been amazed when Sheridan told him the entire story about the weasels, and she and Joe had promised each other not to tell anyone. As far as anyone knew, the Miller’s weasels that Ote Keeley had brought down the mountain with him had died in the woodpile fire, just as Wacey said they had.

“Well, I don’t know for sure,” Joe answered. “I’m pretty certain that what we’re doing isn’t legally the right thing. There’s some biologists who would go berserk if they found out. A lot of other people, too.”

“But aren’t they the people who are at the colonies where the Miller’s weasels keep dying?” Sheridan asked.

Joe chuckled. “That’s them,” Joe said.

Sheridan dutifully scattered the remains of the food near the den.

“You’re doing this for me, aren’t you?” Sheridan asked.

Joe nodded. “Yup.”

Sheridan settled back into the lawn chair.

“You know, Dad, these critters remind me of our family,” Sheridan said. “They were in great danger, and now they’re doing okay. They’re a family again.”

Joe nodded. This was the kind of conversation that made him uncomfortable.

“We’re sort of like them, aren’t we, Dad?”

Joe reached over and squeezed Sheridan’s hand. “Sheridan, sometimes we see things in animals that aren’t really there. It’s called transference, if that makes any sense.”

Sheridan was studying him now. “That’s okay, isn’t it?” she asked.

“As long as we admit it to ourselves, I think it’s okay,” Joe said. “I think there are a lot of people who say they do things for animals when they’re really doing it for themselves. They see things in animals that might not really be there. I think sometimes that hurts the animals in the end, and it hurts other people, too.”

Sheridan thought it over. “Transference,” she repeated.

“There are people on both sides of the issue who think animals are more valuable than people are,” Joe said. “That’s what’s happening here.”

Joe stopped speaking. He thought maybe he had said too much.

Joe was well aware of the fact that by keeping the Miller’s weasels and not reporting their existence, he was breaking more regulations and laws than he could count. And he knew that what he was planning to do with the creatures could probably land him in a federal prison. He could be accused of playing God. It could be construed as scandalous behavior by the Defenders of nature—an offense worthy of at least a death sentence. He didn’t try to justify his reasons, even to himself. He *was* playing God, after all. He was making a judgment simply because he thought it was the right one, and one that might somehow benefit his daughter.

“How long can we do this?” Sheridan asked. “Help the Miller’s weasels, I mean.”

“As long as you want to,” Joe said. “As long as you feel it’s important to you.”

“They might be ready in a couple of weeks,” Sheridan said, holding back a tear. She was admitting something. “We probably won’t have any snow after that.”

Joe told her about where he would want to transplant the animals. He had found a small, protected valley high in the Bighorns miles away from roads or trails. The valley lay in a natural elk migration route, and it was filled with mule deer. It was about 10 miles from the perimeter of the Miller’s Weasel Ecosystem.

She sniffed and asked him if she would ever see them again.

“This summer,” Joe promised, “you and I will put the panniers on Lizzie, and we’ll horsepack into the mountains together. I’ll take you to where the weasels are if you promise never to tell anyone about it.”

“Of course, I promise,” she said. “I can keep a secret.”

He laughed. “I know you can.”

Savage Run

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Acknowledgments
- PART ONE
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
 - Chapter 8
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
- PART TWO
 - Chapter 18
 - Chapter 19
 - Chapter 20

- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27

- PART THREE

- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39

[Dedication]

To Jack and Faye Box,
my parent

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A place called Saddlestring does exist, but it is a tiny post office located on a historic ranch, not a real Wyoming community. The fictional Saddlestring, Wyoming, is an amalgam of at least three different towns.

PART ONE

No compromise in defense of Mother Earth.
Earth First!

1

Targhee National Forest, Idaho
June 10

ON THE THIRD day of their honeymoon, infamous environmental activist Stewie Woods and his new bride, Annabel Bellotti, were spiking trees in the forest when a cow exploded and blew them up. Until then, their marriage had been happy.

They met by chance. Stewie Woods had been busy pouring bag after bag of sugar and sand into the gasoline tanks of a fleet of pickups in a newly graded parking lot that belonged to a natural gas exploration crew. The crew had left for the afternoon for the bars and hotel rooms of nearby Henry's Fork. One of the crew had returned unexpectedly and caught Stewie as he was ripping the top off a bag of sugar with his teeth. The crew member pulled a 9mm semi-automatic from beneath the dashboard of his truck and fired several wild shots in Stewie's direction. Stewie dropped the bag and ran away, crashing through the timber like a bull elk.

Stewie had outrun and outjoked the man with the pistol when he literally tripped over Annabel, who was unaware of his approach because she was listening to Melissa Etheridge on her Walkman as she sunbathed nude on the grass in an orange pool of late afternoon sun. She looked good, he thought, strawberry blonde hair with a two-day Rocky Mountain fire-engine tan (two hours in the sun at 8,000 feet created a sunburn like a whole day at the beach), small ripe breasts, and a trimmed vector of pubic hair.

He had gathered her up and pulled her along through the timber, where they hid together in a dry spring wash until the man with the pistol gave up and went home. She had giggled while he held her—*This was real adventure*, she said—and he had used the opportunity to run his hands tentatively over her naked shoulders and hips and had found out, happily, that she did not object. They made their way back to where she had been sunbathing and, while she dressed, they introduced themselves.

She told him she liked the idea of meeting a famous environmental outlaw in the woods while she was naked, and he appreciated that. She said she had seen his picture before, maybe in *Outside* magazine, and admired his looks—tall and rawboned, with

round rimless glasses, a short-cropped full beard, wearing his famous red bandana on his head.

Her story was that she had been camping alone in a dome tent, taking a few days off from a freewheeling cross-continent trip that had begun with her divorce from an anal-retentive investment banker named Nathan in her hometown of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. She was bound, eventually, for Seattle.

"I'm falling in love with your mind," he lied.

"Already?" she asked.

He encouraged her to travel with him, and they took her vehicle since the lone crew member had disabled Stewie's Subaru with three bullets into the engine block. Stewie was astonished by his good fortune. Every time he looked over at her and she smiled back, he was poleaxed with exuberance.

Keeping to dirt roads, they crossed into Montana. The next afternoon, in the backseat of her SUV during a thunderstorm that rocked the car and blew shroudlike sheets of rain through the mountain passes, he asked her to marry him. Given the circumstances and the supercharged atmosphere, she accepted. When the rain stopped, they drove to Ennis, Montana, and asked around about who could marry them, fast. Stewie did not want to take the chance of letting her get away. She kept saying she couldn't believe she was doing this. He couldn't believe she was doing this either, and he loved her even more for it.

At the Sportsman Inn in Ennis, Montana, which was bustling with fly fishermen bound for the trout-rich waters of the Madison River, the desk clerk gave them a name and they looked up Judge Ace Cooper (Ret.) in the telephone book.

JUDGE COOPER WAS a tired and rotund man who wore a stained white cowboy shirt and elk horn bolo tie with his collar open. He performed the wedding ceremony in a room adjacent to his living room that was bare except for a single filing cabinet, a desk and three chairs, and two framed photographs—one of the judge and President George H. W. Bush, who had once been up there fishing, and the other of the judge on a horse before the Cooper family lost their ranch in the 1980s.

The ceremony had taken eleven minutes, which was just about average for Judge Cooper, although he had once performed it in eight minutes for two American Indians.

"Do you, Allan Stewart Woods, take thee Annabeth to be your lawful wedded wife?" Judge Cooper asked, reading from the marriage application form.

"Annabel," Annabel corrected in her biting Rhode Island accent.

"I do," Stewie said. He was beside himself with pure joy.

Stewie twisted the ring off his finger and placed it on hers. It was unique; handmade gold mounted with sterling silver monkey wrenches. It was also three sizes too large. The Judge studied the ring.

"Monkey wrenches?" the Judge asked.

"It's symbolic," Stewie had said.

"I'm aware of the symbolism," the Judge said darkly, before finishing the passage.

Annabel and Stewie beamed at each other. Annabel said that this was, like, the *wildest* vacation ever. They were Mr. and Mrs. Outlaw Couple. He was now *her* famous outlaw, as yet untamed. She said her father would be scandalized, and her mother would have to wear dark glasses at Newport. Only her Aunt Tildie, the one with the wild streak who had corresponded with, but never met, a Texas serial killer until he died from lethal injection, would understand.

Stewie had to borrow a hundred dollars from her to pay the judge, and she signed over a traveler's check.

After the couple left in the SUV with Rhode Island plates, Judge Ace Cooper went to his lone filing cabinet and found the file with the information he needed. He pulled a single piece of paper out and read it as he dialed the telephone. While he waited for the right man to come to the telephone, he stared at the framed photo of himself on his former ranch. The ranch, north of Yellowstone Park, had been subdivided by a Bozeman real estate company into over thirty fifty-acre "ranchettes." Famous Hollywood celebrities, including the one whose early career photos he had recently seen in *Penthouse*, now lived there. Movies had been filmed there. There was even a crackhouse, but it was rumored that the owner wintered in L.A. The only cattle that existed were purely for visual effect, like landscaping that moved and crapped and looked good when the sun threatened to drop below the mountains.

The man he was waiting for came to the telephone.

"Stewie Woods was here," he said. "The man himself. I recognized him right off, and his ID proved it." There was a pause as the man on the other end of the telephone asked Cooper something. "Yeah, I heard him say that just before they left. They're headed for the Bighorns in Wyoming. Somewhere near Saddlestring."

ANNABEL TOLD STEWIE that their honeymoon was quite unlike what she had imagined a honeymoon would be, and she contrasted it with her first one with Nathan. Nathan had been about sailing boats, champagne, and Barbados. Stewie was about spiking trees in stifling heat in a national forest in Wyoming. He even asked her to carry his pack.

Neither of them noticed the late-model black Ford pickup that trailed them up the mountain road and continued on when Stewie pulled over to park.

Deep into the forest, Annabel watched as Stewie removed his shirt and tied the sleeves around his waist. A heavy bag of nails hung from his tool belt and tinkled as he strode through the undergrowth. There was a sheen of sweat on his bare chest as he straddled a three-foot-thick Douglas fir and drove in spikes. He was obviously well practiced, and he got into a rhythm where he could bury the six-inch spikes into the soft wood with three blows from his sledge- hammer, one tap to set the spike and two heavy blows to bury it beyond the nail head in the bark.

Stewie moved from tree to tree, but didn't spike all of them. He approached each tree using the same method: The first of the spikes went in at eye level. A quarter-turn around the trunk, he pounded in another a foot lower than the first. He continued pounding in spikes, spiraling them down the trunk nearly to the grass.

“Won’t it hurt the trees?” Annabel asked, as she unloaded his pack and leaned it against a tree.

“Of course not,” he said, moving as he spoke across the pine needle floor to another target. “I wouldn’t be doing this if it hurt the trees. You’ve got a lot to learn about me, Annabel.”

“Why do you put so many in?” she asked.

“Good question,” he said, burying a spike deep in the tree as he spoke. “It used to be we could put in four right at knee level, at the compass points, where the trees are usually cut. But the lumber companies got wise to that and told their loggers to either go higher or lower. So now we fill up a four-foot radius.”

“And what will happen if they try to cut it down?”

Stewie smiled, resting for a moment. “When a chainsaw blade hits a steel spike, the blade can snap and whip back. Busts the sawteeth. That can take an eye or a nose right off.”

“That’s horrible,” she said, wincing, wondering what she was getting into.

“I’ve never been responsible for any injuries,” Stewie said quickly, looking hard at her. “The purpose isn’t to hurt anyone. The purpose is to save trees. After we’re finished here, I’ll call the local ranger station and tell them what we’ve done—although I won’t say exactly where or how many trees we spiked. It should be enough to keep them out of here for decades, and that’s the point.”

“Have you ever been caught?” she asked.

“Once,” Stewie said, and his face clouded. “A forest ranger caught me by Jackson Hole. He marched me into downtown Jackson at gunpoint during tourist season. Half of the tourists in town cheered and the other half started chanting, ‘Hang him high! Hang him high!’ I was sent to the Wyoming State Penitentiary in Rawlins for seven months.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I read about that,” she mused.

“You probably did. The wire services picked it up. I was interviewed on ‘Nightline’ and ‘60 Minutes.’ *Outside* magazine put me on the cover. Hayden Powell, who I’ve known since we were kids, wrote the cover story for them, and he coined the word ‘ecoterrorist.’ ” This memory made Stewie feel bold. “There were reporters from all over the country at that trial,” he said. “Even the *New York Times*. It was the first time most people had ever heard of One Globe, or knew I was the founder of it. After that, memberships started pouring in from all over the world.”

Annabel nodded her head. *One Globe*. The ecological action group that used the logo of crossed monkey wrenches, in deference to late author Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. She recalled that One Globe had once dropped a shroud over Mount Rushmore right before the president was about to give a speech there. It had been on the nightly news.

“Stewie,” she said happily, “you are the real thing.” Her eyes stayed on him as he drove in the spiral of spikes and moved to the next tree.

“When you are done with that tree, I want you,” she said, her voice husky. “Right here and right now, my sweet sweaty ... *husband*.”

Stewie turned and smiled at her. His face glistened and his muscles were bulging from swinging the sledgehammer. She slid her T-shirt over her head and stood waiting for him, her lips parted and her legs tense.

STEWIE SLUNG HIS own pack now and stopped spiking trees. Fat black thunderheads, pregnant with rain, nosed across the late-afternoon sky. They were hiking at a fast pace toward the peak, holding hands, with the hope of getting there and pitching camp before the rain started. Stewie said that after they hiked out of the forest tomorrow, they would get in the SUV and head south-east, toward the Bridger-Teton Forest.

When they walked into the herd of grazing cattle, Stewie felt a dark cloud of anger envelop him.

“Range maggots!” Stewie said, spitting. “If they’re not letting the logging companies in to cut all the trees at taxpayer’s expense, they’re letting the local ranchers run their cows in here so they can eat all the grass and shit in all the streams.”

“Can’t we just go around them?” Annabel asked.

“It’s not that, Annabel,” he said patiently. “Of course we can go around them. It’s just the principle of the thing. Cows don’t belong in the trees in the Bighorn Mountains—they’re fouling up what is left of the natural ecosystem. You have so much to *learn*, darling.”

“I know,” she said, determined.

“These ranchers out here run their cows on public land—our land—at the expense of not only us taxpayers but of the wildlife as well. They pay something like four dollars an acre when they should be paying ten times that, even though it would be best if they were completely gone.”

“But we need meat, don’t we?” she asked. “You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

“Did you forget that cheeseburger I had for lunch in Cameron?” he said. “No, I’m not a vegetarian, although sometimes I wish I had the will to be one.”

“I tried it once and it made me lethargic,” Annabel confessed.

“All these western cows produce only about five percent of the beef we eat in this whole country,” Stewie said. “All the rest comes from down south, from Texas, Florida, and Louisiana, where there’s plenty of grass and plenty of private land to graze them on.”

Stewie picked up a pinecone, threw it accurately through the trees, and struck a black baldy heifer on the snout. The cow bellowed in protest, then turned and lumbered away. The rest of the small herd, about a dozen head, followed it. They moved loudly, clumsily cracking branches and throwing up fist-sized pieces of black earth from their hooves.

“I wish I could chase them right back to the ranch they belong on,” Stewie said, watching. “Right up the ass of the rancher who has lease rights for this part of the Bighorns.”

One cow had not moved. It stood broadside and looked at them.

“What’s wrong with that cow?” Stewie asked.

“Shoo!” Annabel shouted. “Shoo!”

Stewie stifled a smile at his new wife’s shooing and slid out of his pack. The temperature had dropped about twenty degrees in the last ten minutes and rain was inevitable. The sky had darkened and black roiling clouds enveloped the peak. The sudden low pressure had made the forest quieter, the sounds muffled and the smell of the cows stronger.

Stewie Woods walked straight toward the heifer, with Annabel several steps behind.

“Something’s wrong with that cow,” Stewie said, trying to figure out what about it seemed amiss.

When Stewie was close enough he saw everything at once: the cow trying to run with the others but straining at the end of a tight nylon line; the heifer’s wild white eyes; the misshapen profile of something strapped on its back that was large and square and didn’t belong; the thin reed of an antenna that quivered from the package on the heifer’s back.

“Annabel!” Stewie yelled, turning to reach out to her—but she had walked around him and was now squarely between Stewie and the cow.

She absorbed the full, frontal blast when the heifer detonated, the explosion shattering the mountain stillness with the subtlety of a sledgehammer bludgeoning bone.

FOUR MILES AWAY, a fire lookout heard the guttural boom and ran to the railing of the lookout tower with binoculars. Over a red-rimmed plume of smoke and dirt, he could see a Douglas fir launch into the air like a rocket, where it turned, hung suspended for a moment, then crashed into the forest below.

Shaking, he reached for his radio.

2

EIGHT MILES OUT of Saddlestring, Wyoming, Game Warden Joe Pickett was watching his wife, Marybeth, work their new Tobiano paint horse, Toby, when the call came from the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff’s office.

It was early evening, the time when the setting sun ballooned and softened, defining the deep velvet folds and piercing tree-greens of Wolf Mountain. The normally dull and pastel colors of the weathered barn and the red-rock canyon behind the house suddenly looked as if they had been repainted in rich acrylics. Toby, who was a big dark bay gelding swirled with brilliant white that ran over his haunches like thick paint that spilled upward, shone deep red in the evening light and looked especially striking. So did Marybeth, in Joe’s opinion, in her worn Wranglers, sleeveless cotton shirt, her blonde hair in a ponytail. There was no wind, and the only sound was the rhythmic thumping of Toby’s hooves in the round pen as Marybeth waved the whip and encouraged the gelding to shift from a trot into a slow lope.

The Game and Fish Department considered the Saddlestring District a “two-horse district,” meaning that the department would provide feed and tack for two mounts to be used for patrolling. Toby was their second horse.

Joe stood with his boot on the bottom rail of the fence and his arms folded over the top, his chin nestled between his forearms. He was still wearing his red cotton Game and Fish uniform shirt with the pronghorn antelope patch on the sleeve and his sweat-stained gray Stetson. He could feel the pounding of the earth as Toby passed in front of him, making a circle. He watched Marybeth stay in position in the center of the pen, shuffling her feet so she stayed on Toby’s back flank. She talked to the horse in a soothing voice, urging him to gallop—something he clearly didn’t want to do.

Marybeth stepped closer to Toby and commanded him to run. Marybeth still had a slight limp from when she had been shot nearly two years before, but she was nimble and quick. Toby pinned his ears back and twitched his tail but finally broke into a full-fledged gallop, raising the dust in the pen, his mane and tail snapping behind him like a flag in a stiff wind. After several rotations, Marybeth called “Whoa!” and Toby hit the brakes, skidding to a quick stop where he stood breathing hard, his muscles swelled, his back shiny with sweat, smacking and licking his lips as if he were eating peanut butter. Marybeth approached him and patted him down, telling him what a good boy he was, and blowing gently into his nostrils to soothe him.

“He’s a stubborn guy. A lazy guy,” she told Joe over her shoulder as she continued to pat Toby down. “He did *not* want to lope fast. Did you notice how he pinned his ears back and threw his head around?”

Joe said yup.

“That’s how he was telling me he was mad about it. When he does that it means he’s either going to break out of the circle and do whatever he wants or he’s going to do what I’m asking him to do. In this case he did what he was supposed to and went into the fast lope. He’s finally learning that things will go a lot easier on him when he does what I ask him.”

Joe smiled. “I know it works for me.”

Marybeth crinkled her nose at Joe, then turned her attention back to Toby. “See how he licks his lips? That’s a sign of obedience. He’s conceding that I am the boss.”

Joe fought the urge to theatrically lick his lips when she looked over at him.

“Why did you blow in his nose like that?” he asked.

“Horses in the herd do that to each other to show affection. It’s another way they bond with each other.” Marybeth paused. “I know it sounds hokey, but blowing in his nose is kind of like giving him a hug. A horse hug.”

Joe was fascinated by what Marybeth was doing. He had been around horses most of his life, and by now he had taken his buckskin mare Lizzie over most of the mountains in the Twelve Sleep Range of the Bighorns. But what Marybeth was doing with Toby, what she was getting out of him, was a different kind of thing. Joe was duly impressed.

A shout behind him pulled Joe from his thoughts. He turned toward the sound, and saw ten-year-old Sheridan, five-year-old Lucy, and their eight-year-old foster daughter

April stream through the backyard gate and across the field toward Joe and Marybeth. Sheridan held the cordless phone out in front of her like an Olympic torch, and the other two girls followed.

"Dad, it's for you," Sheridan yelled. "A man says it's very important."

Joe and Marybeth exchanged looks and Joe took the telephone. It was County Sheriff . R. "Bud" Barnum.

There had been a big explosion in the Bighorn National Forest, Barnum told Joe. A fire lookout had called it in, and reported that through his binoculars he could see fat dark forms littered on the ground throughout the trees. They suspected a "shitload" of animals were dead, which was why he was calling Joe. Dead game animals were Joe's concern. They assumed at this point that they were game animals, Barnum said, but they might be cows. A couple of local ranchers had grazing leases up there. Barnum asked if Joe could meet him at the Winchester exit off of the interstate in 20 minutes. That way, they could get to the scene before it was completely dark.

Joe handed the telephone back to Sheridan and looked over his shoulder at Marybeth.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"Late," Joe told her. "There was an explosion in the mountains."

"You mean like a plane crash?"

"He didn't say that. The explosion was a few miles off of the Hazelton Road in the mountains, in elk country. Barnum thinks there may be some game animals down."

She looked at Joe for further explanation. He shrugged to indicate that was all he knew.

"I'll save you some dinner."

JOE MET THE sheriff and Deputy McLanahan at the exit to Winchester and followed them through the small town. The three-vehicle fleet—two county GMC Blazers and Joe's dark green Game and Fish pickup—entered and exited the tiny town within minutes. Even though it was still early in the evening, the only establishments open were two bars with identical red neon Coors signs in their windows and a convenience store. Winchester's lone public artwork, located on the front lawn of the branch bank, was an outsized and gruesome metal sculpture of a wounded grizzly bear straining at the end of a thick chain, its metal leg encased in a massive sawtoothed bear trap. Joe did not find the sculpture lovely, but it captured the mood, style, and inbred frontier culture of the area as well as anything else could have.

DEPUTY MCLANAHAN LED the way through the timber in the direction where the explosion had been reported and Joe walked behind him alongside Sheriff Barnum. Joe and McLanahan had acknowledged each other with curt nods and said nothing. Their relationship had been rocky ever since McLanahan had sprayed an outfitter's camp with shotgun blasts two years before and Joe had received a wayward pellet under his eye. He still had a scar to show for it.

Barnum's hangdog face grimaced as he limped alongside Joe through the underbrush. He complained about his hip. He complained about the distance from the road

to the crime scene. He complained about McLanahan, and said to Joe, sotto voce, that he should have fired the deputy years before and would have if he weren't his nephew. Joe suspected, however, that Barnum also kept McLanahan around because the deputy's quick-draw reputation had added—however untrue and unlikely—an air of toughness to the Sheriff's Department that didn't hurt at election time.

While they had been walking, the sun had dropped below the top of the mountains, the peaks now no more than craggy black silhouettes. The light dimmed in the forest, fusing treetops and branches that had been discernible just moments before into a shadowy muddle. Joe reached back on his belt to make sure he had his flashlight. As he did so, he let his arm brush his .357 Smith & Wesson revolver to confirm it was there. He didn't want Barnum to notice the movement since Barnum still chided Joe about the time he lost his gun to a poacher he was arresting.

There was an unnatural silence in the woods, with the exception of Barnum's grumbling. The absence of normal woodland sounds—the chattering of squirrels sending a warning up the line, the panicked scrambling of deer, the airy winged drumbeat of flushed Spruce grouse—confirmed that something big had happened here. Something so big it either cleared the wildlife out of the area or frightened them mute. Joe could feel that they were getting closer before he could see anything to confirm it. Whatever it was, it was just ahead.

McLanahan suddenly stopped and Joe heard the sharp intake of his breath.

"Holy shit," McLanahan whispered in awe. "*Holy shit.*"

The still-smoking crater was 15 yards across. It was three feet deep at its center. A half-dozen trees had been blown out of the ground, and their shallow rootpans were exposed like black outstretched hands. Eight or nine black baldy cattle were dead and still, strewn among the trunks of trees. The earth below the thick turf rim of the crater was dark and wet. Several large white roots, the size of leg bones, were pulled up from the ground by the explosion and now pointed at the sky. Cordite from the explosives, pine from broken branches, and upturned mulch had combined in the air to produce a sickeningly sweet and heavy smell.

What little daylight was left was quickly disappearing, and Joe clicked on his flashlight as they slowly circled the crater. Barnum and McLanahan followed suit, and the pools of light illuminated the twisted roots and lacy pale yellow undergrowth in the crater.

The rest of the herd, apparently unhurt, stood as silent shadows just beyond Joe's flashlight. He could see dark heavy shapes and hear the sound of chewing, and a pair of eyes reflected back blue as a cow raised its head to look at him. He approached the nearest cow and shined the flashlight on its haunch to see the brand. It was the letter V with a U underneath, divided by a single line—the Vee Bar U Ranch. These were Jim Finotta's cows.

McLanahan suddenly yelped in alarm, and Joe raised his flashlight to see the deputy in a wild, self-slapping panic, dancing away from the rim of the crater and ripping off

his jacket as quickly as he could. He threw it violently to the ground in a heap and stood over it, staring.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?” Barnum barked, annoyed.

“Something landed on my shoulder. Something heavy and wet,” McLanahan said, his face contorted. “I thought it was somebody’s hand grabbing me. It scared me half to death.”

McLanahan had dropped his flashlight, so from across the crater, Joe lowered his light and focused a tight beam on the deputy’s jacket. McLanahan bent down into the light and gingerly unfolded the jacket, poised to jump back if whatever had fallen on him was still in his clothing. He threw back a fold and cursed. Joe couldn’t see for sure what McLanahan was looking at, but he could make out that the object was dark and moist.

“What is it?” Barnum asked.

“It looks like ... well ... it looks like a *piece of meat*.” McLanahan looked up at Joe vacantly. The flashlight reflected in his eyes.

Slowly, Joe raised his flashlight, sweeping upward over McLanahan and then up the trunk of a lodgepole pine and into the branches. What Joe saw, he knew he would never forget.

Part of it was simply the initial shock. Part of it was seeing it in the harsh beam of a flashlight that lit up the texture, colors, and shapes and threw misshapen shadows about in unnatural and unsettling ways. He was not expecting—and could never have imagined—what it would look like to see the whole of a half-ton creature exploded into a thousand shards of different lengths, hanging down from branches like icicles, as high as his flashlight’s beam would reach. Entrails looped across the branches like popcorn strings on a Christmas tree.

He gagged as he swept the flashlight from tree to tree on McLanahan’s side of the crater. McLanahan retrieved his own flashlight and started sweeping the trees with the beam as well.

“I want to go home and take a shower,” McLanahan said. “The trees are covered with this shit.”

“How about you go back to the Blazer and get the crimescene tape and your camera instead,” Barnum barked. Barnum’s voice startled Joe. The sheriff had been so quiet that Joe had almost forgotten he was there. He looked over to where Barnum stood, several yards away, his flashlight pointed down near his feet. “There’s a pair of big-ass hiking boots sitting right here. The laces are popped open.”

The sheriff paused and looked at Joe. “I think the poor dumb son-of-a-bitch who was wearing these got blown right out of them.”

THEY WEREN’T FINISHED taping off the area until well after ten. The clouds that had covered the mountains and kept the sky closed like a lid on a kettle had dissipated, leaving a gauze of brilliant blue-white stars, like a million pinpricks in a dark cloth. The moon was barely more than a thin slash in the sky, providing a scant amount of light to see, so McLanahan and Joe, their flashlights clamped under

their arms, fumbled clumsily through and around trees with rolls of the plastic band reading CRIME SCENE CRIME SCENE CRIME SCENE while Barnum tried in vain to maintain radio contact. Joe wondered how much evidence they were crushing or disturbing as they wound the plastic through the timber. He mentioned this to Barnum, but Barnum was busy trying to contact the Sheriff's Department dispatcher via his radio and just waved him off.

"We started with an explosion called in by the fire lookout and now we've got us a full-fledged murder investigation," Barnum growled into his handheld between ferocious bouts of static. "We need state forensics as fast as they can get here and we'll need the coroner and a photographer out here at dawn. We can't see a goddamn thing."

"Come again?" the dispatcher asked through more static.

"She can't hear a word I'm saying," Barnum declared angrily.

"Why don't you wait and try her again from the radio in the Blazer?" McLanahan asked. Joe was thinking the same thing.

Barnum cursed and holstered his radio. "I need to take a leak and then let's get out of here." Barnum turned and limped away into the dark brush.

Joe tied off the tape on a tree trunk sticky with pine sap and took his flashlight from where he had been holding it steady under his arm. He shined it on his boots. They were slick with blood.

"Jesus Christ!" Barnum yelled from the darkness. "We've got a body. Or at least half of one. It's a girl. A woman, I mean."

"Which half?" McLanahan asked stupidly.

"Shut the fuck up." Barnum answered bluntly.

Joe didn't want to look. He had seen enough for one night. The fact that Barnum was coming toward him, limping as quickly as he could around the crime scene tape, didn't even register with Joe until Barnum stopped two feet in front of him and waved his finger in Joe's face. Joe couldn't tell if the sheriff was really angry or he was watching another display of Barnum's famous bluster. Either way, being this close reminded Joe of how formidable Barnum still was, even after 26 years as Twelve Sleep County sheriff.

"Why is it, Game Warden Pickett, that we rarely if ever have any trouble in my county," the sheriff's voice rising as he spoke, "but every goddamned time we find dead bodies strewn about you *seem to be standing there in the middle of them?*"

Joe was taken aback by Barnum's sudden outrage. It was now obvious to Joe that Barnum had been harboring resentment for quite some time because Joe had solved the outfitter murders. Joe could not come up with a good response. He felt his cheeks flush red in the dark.

"Sheriff, you called me to the scene, remember?"

Barnum sneered. "But I thought we had a bunch of dead elk."

Abruptly, Barnum turned and began to limp in the direction of his Blazer. McLanahan dutifully fell in behind him after giving Joe a look of superior satisfaction. Joe wondered just what it was he had done to arouse Barnum. He guessed it was exactly

what Barnum had said: that he was *there* was enough. The new game warden, two years in the Saddlestring District, still wet behind the ears, who was now right square in the middle of another homicide. Or suicide. Or something.

There had been few violent deaths in Twelve Sleep County in the past two years aside from the outfitter murders. The only one of note was the rancher's wife who killed her husband by burying a hay hook into his skull, straight through his Stetson, pinning his hat to his head. In one version of the story that Joe had heard, the wife had gone home after the incident, mixed herself a pitcher of vodka martinis, and then called the sheriff to turn herself in. The pitcher was nearly empty when they arrived a short time later.

Before following the sheriff and his deputy, Joe stood quietly in the dark. He could hear the rest of the herd of cows grazing closer to the crater. In the distance, a squirrel chirped a message. The wildlife was cautiously moving back in. But there was something else.

A tremor quickly ran the length of his spine, and he felt the hairs prick on his forearms and neck. He looked straight up at the cold stars, then swept his eyes through the black pine branches. He knew that the fire lookout station was out of range. The black humps of the Bighorn Mountains did not show a single twinkling light of a cabin or a headlight. So why did he feel like someone or something was there with him, watching him?

DRIVING BACK ON the interstate toward Saddlestring, Joe watched the little screen on his cellphone until it indicated he was finally receiving a signal. As he had guessed, Marybeth was still awake and waiting to hear from him. He gave her a quick summary of what they had found.

She asked if the victim was someone local.

"We have no idea," Joe said. "At this point we don't even know if we've got one body or two. Or more."

She was silent for a long time.

"A *cow* exploded?" she finally asked, incredulous.

"That's what it looks like."

"So now we've got exploding *cows* to worry about?"

"Yup," Joe said, his voice gently teasing. "As if there weren't enough things to worry about with three little girls, now we need to keep them away from cows. And they're everywhere, those cows. In all of the fields and in all of the pastures. It's like there are ten thousand ticking time bombs all around us just waiting to explode."

She told him he was not very funny.

"It's been a bad night," he said. "Barnum asked me to notify the rancher who owns the cows tomorrow, which I'll do. He said that beyond that, he really doesn't need my help on the investigation. Hell, he was upset with me just because I was *there*. He's calling in the state crime boys tonight."

“Barnum just wants everything to go smoothly until he retires,” Marybeth said. “He just wants to cruise on out of here without a ripple. And he especially doesn’t want you to steal his thunder in the meantime.”

“Maybe,” Joe said, knowing she was probably right.

“Who’s the rancher?” Marybeth asked.

“Jim Finotta. All the cattle had his Vee Bar U brand.”

Marybeth paused. “Jim Finotta, the trial lawyer?” she asked warily. Joe knew her antennae were up.

“Yup.”

“I haven’t heard many good things about him,” she said.

“Maybe so,” Joe said. “But you know how people like to talk. I’ve never met the man.”

It was almost as if Joe could hear Marybeth thinking. Then she abruptly changed the subject. “I saved some dinner for you,” Marybeth said as the highway straightened out and Saddlestring came into view. The town at night looked like a handful of jewels scattered through a river valley.

“What did you have?” Joe asked.

Marybeth paused. “Hamburgers.”

Joe forced a bitter smile. “I’ll have to pass. I’ll grab some chicken at the Burg-O-Pardner.”

“I understand. Please hose yourself off in the front yard before you come in.”

3

AN HOUR AFTER the tail lights of the law enforcement vehicles vanished down Hazelton Road to return to Saddlestring, two men emerged from the darkness of the forest on the other side of the mountain. In silence, they approached a sleek black pickup that was parked deep in the trees, away from the rough logging road they had used to access the area. Using mini-Mag lights with the beams choked down to dim, they repacked their equipment and electronics gear—optics, radios, the long-range transmitter, and unused packages of C-4 explosives—into brushed aluminum cases in the bed of the truck.

“Too bad about that woman,” the Old Man said.

“Collateral damage,” Charlie grunted.

“Except for her, everything worked perfectly.”

Charlie snapped the fasteners shut on the optics case and looked up at the Old Man.

“Yup.”

THE OLD MAN had been stunned by the force of the explosion, even from the distance from which they had observed it. In rapid succession, he saw the flash as Charlie toggled the transmitter, felt a tremor surge through the ground, and heard

the detonation as the sound rolled across the mountains. The booming rumble washed over them several times as it echoed like distant thunder.

The Old Man had lowered his binoculars and whistled. Charlie, who had been watching through his spotting scope as Stewie Woods and the woman worked their way up the mountain, clucked his tongue.

THEY HAD TRACKED Stewie Woods across three states, and Stewie had never known they were there. Even when he took up with the woman and switched vehicles, they had stayed close. He had been sloppy, and more than a little preoccupied. When the judge in Ennis reported that they were headed to “somewhere near Saddlestring” in the Bighorn Mountains, Charlie had demonstrated to the Old Man, for the first time, why he was so good at what he did. When it came to hunting men, Charlie Tibbs was the best.

The national forest was huge, with dozens of access points. But Charlie anticipated exactly where Stewie Woods would end up, and they had beaten him there. From Charlie the Old Man learned that this part of the forest had been the subject of a dispute involving environmental groups, the U.S. Forest Service, and the local ranchers and loggers who had been leasing the area for years. The dispute had been used by the environmentalists as a test case, and they had thrown their best lawyers into it. They had wanted to end what they saw as sweetheart deals made to ranchers on public land. But, as Charlie explained to the Old Man, the ranchers and loggers won when the judge—once a rancher himself—ruled to continue the leases.

One Globe, Stewie Woods’s organization, had been the most vocal in the dispute. Woods himself had been forcibly removed from the courtroom for acting out when the verdict was read. On the courthouse steps, in front of television cameras, Woods had proclaimed, “If we can’t save the planet through the courts, we’ll do it in the forests.”

The tract that would lure Stewie Woods, Charlie guessed correctly, was the one most recently opened to both logging and grazing. The best access to the parcel was from a trailhead near Hazelton Road. From there, Charlie had determined, Woods would hike toward the peak where the trees to be logged would soon be marked. On the way, Woods would undoubtedly run into the herd of cattle that had recently been moved into the high country. The Old Man wasn’t sure what they would have done if Woods had skirted the herd of cows, especially with the tethered heifer that had been strapped with the explosives and the detonation receiver. But even if Woods had taken another route and evaded their trap, the Old Man had no doubt that Charlie would have quickly come up with another plan. The man was relentless.

AS THEY OPENED the doors of the pickup, the interior light came on. The Old Man looked at Charlie, and Charlie looked back. The harsh light emphasized their facial characteristics. They were both weathered, and aging. They shared a smile.

“Step one in winning back the west,” the Old Man said.

Charlie drove while the Old Man stared through the windshield. Their tires ground on the gravel road.

When they hit the pavement, Charlie turned the pickup north-west. They were headed to Washington state.

4

MORNING SUNLIGHT POURED over the jagged horizon as Joe Pickett turned his pickup off of the state highway onto the Vee Bar U Ranch's gravel road, which led to Jim Finotta's house. Maxine, the Pickett's yellow Labrador, sat in the passenger seat looking alert, as if helping Joe to navigate the turns. Joe drove the truck beneath the ancient elk antler arches and wound through 100-year-old cottonwoods. This was the first time Joe had ever had a reason to visit. He wished the reason for the call wasn't to tell Mr. Finotta that 10 of his cattle had been found dead and at least one of them had been blown up.

Finotta's ranch, the Vee Bar U, was, by all standards, huge. Counting both deeded and leased land, it stretched from the highway all the way to the top of the distant Bighorn Mountains. The ranch held the second water right on the Twelve Sleep River, and leased more than forty thousand acres of spectacularly scenic and remote national forest land, including a geological wonder of a canyon known as Savage Run.

Joe had heard a couple of stories about how local lawyer Jim Finotta acquired the ranch, and he wasn't certain which one was true. One version was that Mac "Rowdy" McBride, a fourth generation McBride, was a notorious drinker and carouser and had simply run the ranch into the ground. McBride could still be found from noon on perched on his corner stool at the Stockman Bar, or the booth closest to the bar at the Rustic Tavern. Finotta, fresh off of a string of personal injury cases with multimillion-dollar settlements, had purchased the ranch at a time when cattle prices were low and Rowdy McBride was too. But there was another theory on how Finotta had come to own and control the Vee Bar U.

The other version, which Joe had had whispered to him by an inebriated fishing guide at the Stockman Bar, was much more sinister. According to the fishing guide, Finotta had represented Rowdy McBride in a dispute when environmentalists were trying to persuade the federal government to proclaim the rugged, spectacular, and remote Savage Run canyon as a national monument. McBride, of course, was against it. Finotta persuaded McBride to take his claim all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, even though virtually all legal scholars who studied the case opined that he had no case, and Rowdy McBride had already lost on state and district levels. The Supreme Court refused to hear the case, which left McBride with hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal bills at a time when beef prices had plummeted to record lows.

Finotta settled for the ranch in payment, and the suspicion of the fishing guide and his friends was that obtaining the historic ranch was Finotta's plan all along—that Finotta had fueled McBride's anger at the Feds and confidently assured the rancher of an eventual win or settlement, knowing all along that it was virtually impossible.

Once he had taken over the ranch, Finotta had used his personal political contacts (of which he had many) to stall the canyon's national monument designation, which was finally forgotten by a new administration.

Ranching to Finotta, according to the fishing guide, was a hobby and a means of dispensing power and influence in a state where ranchers occupied an exalted status. When moneyed entrepreneurs sought the ultimate cocktail-party aside, they now talked about their ranches in Wyoming, Montana, or Idaho.

Joe didn't know Finotta well, although they nodded at each other when they happened to see each other, usually at the courthouse or occasionally at the post office. Finotta was a man known for his personal and political connections and for not being humble about them. He was a personal friend of the governor and was listed among the largest in-state contributors to the U.S. senators and the lone congressman for Wyoming. He treated local law enforcement officials well, and had half and quarter beefs sent to their homes at Christmas. Sheriff Barnum often had morning coffee with Finotta, as did the county attorney and chief of police.

So when Jim Finotta decided to create a subdivision—officially renamed Elkhorn Ranches—he had no trouble financing it or having it approved by the county. Elkhorn Ranches was a topic of conversation among the local coffee drinkers in the morning and the beer drinkers at night—a land scheme involving three-acre lots on 300 acres of Finotta's property nearest to the highway. The streets, curbs, gutters, and cul-de-sacs were already surveyed and poured in concrete. The sales effort was international. Three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar homes were being constructed on the prime lots, usually on the top of every hill. Only a few homes had been completed and purchased.

THE TREES PARTED, and the huge gabled stone house came into view, and so did a ranch hand on a four-wheel ATV who was racing up the road as if intent on having a head-on collision with Joe's pickup.

Joe braked to a stop and the ranch hand swung around the grill of the pickup and slammed on his brakes adjacent to Joe's door, a roll of dust following and settling over them both.

The ranch hand was wiry and dark with a pockmarked and deeply tanned face. He wore a T-shirt that said "I Know Jack Shit" and a feed store cap turned backward. He squinted against the roll of dust and the bright morning sun and rose in his seat with his fists on the handlebars until he could look Joe square in the eye.

"Name's Buster," the ranch hand said. "State your business." Only then did Joe notice the holster and sidearm that was tucked into Buster's jeans.

"I'm Joe Pickett. I'm here on business to see Mr. Finotta. I'm with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department."

"I can see that from your truck and your shirt," Buster said, raising himself a little more so he could see into the cab of Joe's truck. Maxine, always kind to strangers, lolled out her tongue and panted.

"What do you need to see Mr. Finotta about?"

Joe masked his irritation. No need to antagonize a hand. He said simply, "Ten dead cows."

This concerned the ranch hand. "Were they ours?"

"Yup," Joe said, and offered no more.

Buster was puzzled in thought for a moment. Then he told Joe to wait in his truck while he went to tell Mr. Finotta.

Joe winced at the racketing sound of the ATV as Buster revved it and spun around the back of Joe's pickup and on to the house. Disobeying Buster, Joe drove toward the house and parked against a hitching rack next to Finotta's black Suburban.

The house was impressive and daunting. It looked to be constructed at a time when ranchers thought of themselves as feudal lords of a wild new land, and built accordingly. There were three sharp gables on the red slate roof and a two-story stone turret on the front corner. The building was constructed of massive rounded stones, probably from the bottom of the river, in the days when dredging didn't require a permit. Huge windows made up of hundreds of tiny panes looked out over the ranch yard and beyond to the mountains.

When Buster opened the front door, Joe half expected the hand to bow and say something like "Mr. Finotta will see you now." Instead, Buster nodded toward the interior of the house and told Joe to go inside. Which he did.

The foyer was decorated in pure mid-fifties ranch gothic. The chairs and couches were upholstered with dark Hereford red-and-white hides. The chandelier, suspended from the high ceiling by a thick logging chain, was a wagon wheel with 50-watt bulbs on each spoke. The dominating wall was covered with the brands of local ranches burned into the barnwood paneling, with tiny brass plaques under each brand naming the ranch.

Joe stopped here. He was taken aback by the fact that he had surveyed the room without taking notice of a small seated figure in the corner of it, shaded from the window by a bushy Asian evergreen tree.

"Can I get you something?" Her voice was scratchy and high. Now Joe could see her clearly. He was embarrassed by the fact that he had missed her when he entered because she was so still and he was so unobservant. She was bent and small and still, seated in a wheelchair. Her back was curved so that it thrust her head forward, chin out. She held her face at a 45 degree angle, her eyes large but blank, her airy light-brown hair molded into a helmet shape by spray. One stunted arm lay along the armrest of her chair like a strand of rope and the other was curled on her lap out of view. He guessed her age as at least seventy, but it was hard to tell.

"I'm sorry I didn't see you there." Joe said, removing his hat. "Thanks for the offer but I'm fine."

"You thought I was a piece of furniture, didn't you?" she asked in a high voice.

Joe knew he flushed red. That's exactly what he was thinking.

"Don't deny it," she chided, letting out a bubble of laughter like a hiccup. "If I were a snake I could have bitten you."

Joe introduced himself. She said her name was Ginger. Joe had hoped for more than a name. He couldn't be sure whether Ginger was Jim Finotta's wife or mother. Or someone else. And he didn't know how to ask.

Jim Finotta, a small man, appeared in the foyer. Finotta wore casual pleated slacks and a short-sleeved polo shirt. Finotta was slight and dark, his full head of hair moussed back from his high forehead. His face was dour and pinched, foreshadowing the tendency of his mouth to curl downward into an expression that said "no." Finotta carried himself with an air of impatient self-importance.

His \$800 ostrich-skin boots glided over the hardwood flooring, but he stopped at the opposite wall under what appeared to be an original Charles Russell painting and spoke without meeting Joe's eye. He nodded kindly to Ginger and asked her if she minded if he met with the "local game warden" for a minute in his office. Ginger hummed her assent, and Finotta smiled at her. With a nod of his head he indicated for Joe to follow him.

Finotta's office was a manly classic English den with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled primarily with legal volumes. A framed fox hunting print hung behind the massive mahogany desk and a green-shaded lamp provided most of the light. A massive bull elk head was mounted on the wall in the shadows above the door. Finotta walked briskly around the desk and sat in his chair, clasped his small hands together, and looked up expectantly at Joe. He did not offer Joe a seat.

"You run cattle in the Bighorns near Hazelton Road?" Joe asked, feeling awkward and out of place in Finotta's study.

"I run two thousand head practically the entire length of the Bighorns in both Twelve Sleep and Johnson County." Finotta answered crisply. "We also feed another eleven hundred on our pastures for the summer months. Now how can I help you?" Finotta made no attempt to hide the impatience that colored his voice.

"Well," Joe said his voice sounding weak even to himself, "there are at least ten of them dead. And there may be a human victim as well."

Finotta showed no reaction except to arch his eyebrows in a "tell me more" look. Joe quickly explained what they had found the evening before.

When he was done, Finotta spoke with a forced smile. "The cows are mine but we aren't missing any employees, so I can't help you there. As for the cattle, those are—*were*—first generation baldy heifers worth at least \$1,200 each. So I guess someone owes me \$12,000. Would that be the Wyoming Game and Fish Department?"

Finotta's question caught Joe by complete surprise. He hadn't known how Finotta would react to the news that ten of his cows exploded—anger, confusion maybe—but Joe would never have guessed he'd respond this way. The state did pay ranchers for damages to property and livestock if those losses were the result of wild game, such as elk herds eating haystacks meant for cattle or moose crashing through fences. But he could not see how the department would be liable for the loss of ten cows in a freak explosion.

As Joe stood there, trying to think of a way to explain this, Finotta was drumming his fingers on his desk. The sound both irritated and distracted Joe.

“Joe Pickett ...” Finotta said, as if searching his mind for more information. “I’ve heard your name. Aren’t you the same fellow who arrested the governor a couple of years ago for fishing without a license?”

Joe flushed red again.

“The same warden who had his gun taken off of him by a local outfitter and was suspended for it? The same game warden who shot my good friend Vern Dunnegan in the hip with a shotgun?”

Joe glared at Finotta but said nothing. He admitted to himself that he was not handling the situation well. He was off balance and defensive.

“I came here to tell you about your cows,” Joe said, his voice cracking. “The sheriff asked me to come here because he was busy at the crime scene. This doesn’t involve me or the department.”

“Doesn’t it?” Finotta asked facetiously, sitting back in his leather chair. “It seems to me that a case could be made that because of the policies of both the U.S. Forest Service and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department we have in our state an overabundance of game animals. And because of that overabundance, there is an exaggerated sense that the ‘wild’ and ‘natural’ creatures are being crowded out of their rightful forage by cattle. Therefore, environmentalists are targeting cattle and ranchers, and poachers are targeting wild game. Which creates a state of affairs where this kind of violence can happen.

“I think we could win that one before a jury of my peers,” Finotta said, smiling. Finotta’s peers would be local ranchers. This kind of jury stacking had happened before in the county. “And we would be talking about the loss of my cows plus legal expenses plus punitive damages.” He let this sink in. “Or Game and Fish could save the taxpayers hundreds of thousands and simply pay the damage claim. That could happen very cleanly if the local warden made the argument in his report.”

Joe was flummoxed, angry, and completely off his stride. Joe could see himself taking three quick steps and knocking the smirk off of Finotta’s face. It would give him immediate satisfaction, but would also result in termination and, given Finotta’s obvious penchant for going to court, prosecution.

It was obvious that Jim Finotta enjoyed this, Joe thought. Finotta reveled in humiliating people he considered below his station. He was good at it. He knew the tricks. Finotta compensated for Joe’s advantage of youth by making him stand there foolishly. He addressed their height difference—Joe was at least six inches taller—by sitting behind his massive desk.

“Joe, I think you know who I am,” Finotta said, now charming. “I know how much the state pays its employees. Your family would probably appreciate a half a beef come Christmastime. We’re talking about prime steaks, roasts, and hamburger. This is good beef that will never exceed seven percent fat. I’ll need to add you to our gift list.”

Rather than continue to look at Finotta in a growing rage, Joe focused on the reflection of the mounted elk head in the glass of the hunting print above the lawyer's head. As Joe stared at it, he realized that there was something about the elk mount that bothered him.

"Do you have any questions, Warden?" Finotta asked gently.

Joe nodded yes.

"That elk on your wall ..." Joe asked, turning and looking at the impressive bull over his shoulder. The antler rack was thick and wide. It was a rare, exceedingly large bull. The kind of bull, and mount, that trophy hunters would pay \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a chance to get. "That's quite a prize, isn't it?"

Now Finotta was caught off guard. But he recovered very quickly. "Yes it is. He came off of my ranch, in fact."

"Seven points one side and nine on the other, that right?"

"Yes."

"You know, I think I'm familiar with this bull elk," Joe said, rubbing his chin. "I never saw it, but I heard of him. A guide I talked to about a year ago had scouted him out. He said he counted seven tines on one side and nine on the other. He said it was the biggest elk he had ever seen in his life."

Finotta studied Joe, clearly wondering where this was going.

"He had put the word out to some clients that this bull elk existed and would probably be the biggest one taken in the Bighorns in the last twenty years. That guide scouted that bull for an entire year. He knew where the bull grazed, where it slept, even where it drank water in the evening.

"Then that bull just went away," Joe said. "Broke that guide's heart. He reported it to me, and said maybe the big bull got poached since it was still four months until hunting season."

Finotta responded evenly. "Maybe it just died. Or maybe it moved. Wild animals will do that, you know." He paused. "Or maybe it exploded like ten of my cows."

Joe grabbed a hardback chair, slid it under the mount and stepped up before Finotta could stop him. He examined the head, then rubbed his hand along the antler. "There's still some velvet on these antlers," Joe declared.

Velvet is the soft felt-like layer that encases antlers of deer, moose, and elk as they grow back each year. Normally, the animals shed their antlers in winter and grow them back—usually larger—in the spring. By fall and hunting season, the velvet has been rubbed off completely and the antler takes on a hardened sheen and strength like polished bone. Joe had seen instances where patches of velvet remained on the antlers through October, but it was rare. Velvet on Finotta's elk might be suspicious but it was proof of nothing.

Joe stepped down. "When exactly did you shoot this elk?" he asked.

Finotta quickly stood up, slapping his palms down on the top of the desk. "Are you accusing me of *poaching*?"

Joe shrugged in innocence. "I'm just wondering when and where you shot the elk."

Finotta took a deep intake of breath and his eyes became hard. "I got him during hunting season. Last fall. *On my ranch.*" He hissed the last words out.

"Okay," Joe agreed. "That being the case, I'm sure you won't mind me checking. We found a huge bull carcass up on the forestland last May with the head cut off. We took a DNA sample of the carcass and it's in my freezer. The poachers hadn't even taken any of the meat, which personally, to me, is a crime of the first order because it means headhunter did it. I *hate* trophy hunters who just take the antlers and leave the rest. Not to mention that it's illegal as all hell."

The room was absolutely silent. Finotta glared at Joe under a bushy frown.

"So I would like your permission to take a small sample from this trophy."

"Forget it," Finotta cried, appearing offended. "I paid a lot of money for that mount in Jackson Hole. You don't have my permission to damage it."

Joe shrugged. "I won't damage anything. I'm just talking about a few shavings from the base of the horn, from the back side of it, where no one could ever even see it."

"You'll need a court order," Finotta said, back on firm footing. "And I don't think you can get that in Twelve Sleep County." What Finotta didn't say was what was well known—that Judge Hardy Pennock was one of Finotta's closest friends and had a financial interest in Elkhorn Ranches.

"You might have me there," Joe conceded. But Finotta was clearly still angry. Veins pulsed on his temples, although his eyes and expression remained serious and steady.

"This meeting is over," Finotta declared. "You should be aware that I plan to contact your immediate supervisor as well as the governor you once arrested."

Joe shrugged with resignation. That was to be expected. He knew something like this would likely happen if he mentioned the elk, but he hadn't been able to stop himself.

"Or," Finotta said, this kind of negotiating as natural to him as breathing, "you can consider making the case for damage reimbursement for my dead cattle."

Joe was being given one more chance. He knew that the governor was known to micromanage state agencies and also knew of state employees who had been drummed out of a job. He and Marybeth were still literally a paycheck away from poverty, and the house they lived in was state-owned. Joe had gained some political capital since he started out in the Twelve Sleep District following his run-in with Assistant Director Les Etbauer while he was investigating the murder of three local outfitters, but not enough for comfort. Grievance procedures were in place, of course, but the state bureaucracy had time-tested methods of making conditions so miserable that employees, even game wardens, eventually left on their own accord. Sometimes, game wardens who were out of favor were reassigned to areas that no one wanted, like Baggs or Lusk. These locations had become the Wyoming equivalent of the backwater, hellhole location that FBI agents were once sent—Butte, Montana.

"Let me get back to you on that." Joe heard himself say, and left the room.

Ginger had not moved from her place near the tree in the living room. Joe told her goodbye. She said again that if she was a snake that she could have bitten him.

HE LEFT VIA the subdivision, angrily negotiating wide and empty paved roads, one time screeching his tires when he took a wrong turn into a cul-de-sac, shooting bitter passing looks at new foundations and huge fresh dirt piles, nearly decapitating a hydrant, and wondering what kind of people would choose to buy a three-acre lot and live in Elkhorn Ranches.

And wondering what he would say when he got back to Jim Finotta.

JOE PULLED OFF of the highway into a hilly BLM tract hazy with new spring grass. He found a familiar hill, parked on top of it, and for an hour watched three-and four-month-old pronghorn antelope with their herd. He knew that watching the wild herd would soothe him, calm him down, help him, he hoped, put things into perspective. Related biologically to goats, not antelope (despite their name), pronghorn were uniquely evolved to survive and prosper in the arid and mountainous Rocky Mountain west. Yearling pronghorns, often produced as twins, were amazing wild animals, and becoming Joe's favorites. Young pronghorns didn't have the soft features, big eyes, and the bumbling cuddliness of most baby animals. Within a few weeks of their birth, they became tiny versions of their parents, with perfectly proportional but miniature long legs, brown and white camouflage coloring, and the ability to accelerate from 0 to 60 when they sensed danger, leaving only a rooster tail of dust.

He watched the antelope, but in his head he replayed his conversation with Jim Finotta. The conversation and the situation had gotten off track quickly and gone in directions Joe hadn't anticipated. He hadn't reacted well, either.

When he thought about the exchange, it wasn't so much what Finotta had said, or implied. It was what he *didn't* ask that unsettled Joe.

Joe had no experience with notifying a rancher that his cows had exploded, as ridiculous as that sounded when he thought about it. Nevertheless, it wasn't like notifying the next of kin about a highway accident, or even a hunter's wife about a terrible accident, which Joe had done and which resulted in several nights of lost sleep afterward. With Finotta, there had been no questions about possible human victims—how they came to die, no queries about whether the dead were local, or even the status of the investigation. Wouldn't a lawyer, litigious by trade, be at least somewhat interested in whether or not anyone could establish liability?

Something didn't sit right.

Joe's gaze slowly rose from the antelope in the sagebrush hills toward the blue-gray mountains that dominated the horizon. The Vee Bar U stretched as far as he could see, counting Forest Service leases. The ranch was one of the crown jewels of Twelve Sleep County, sweeping from the highway to up and over those mountains. And somewhere up there, practically inaccessible, was the place called Savage Run.

THE CANYON CALLED Savage Run cut a brutal slash through the center of incredibly rugged and almost impenetrable Wyoming mountain wilderness. The Middle Fork of the Twelve Sleep River, which created the canyon over millions of years of relentless shaving and slicing, was now a trickle due to upstream irrigation. But the results—knife-sharp walls, a terrifying distance from the rim to the narrow canyon floor,

virtually no breaks or cracks through the rocks to assure a crossing—was geologically stunning. The canyon was so steep and narrow that sunlight rarely shone on the stream. The canyon cut through eight different geological strata. While the rim was twenty-first century Wyoming in drought, the floor was pre-Jurassic rain forest. The last time the floor was exposed, *Tyrannosaurus rex* peered through gaping eyes at prey.

The legend of Savage Run came from the story of a band of a hundred Cheyenne Indians—mainly the elderly, women, and children—who were camped near the eastern rim of the canyon while their men were on an extended buffalo hunt in the Powder River country. The band was unaware of the Pawnee warriors who had been following them for days, and unaware that the Pawnees stayed hidden while the hunting party rode away.

The Pawnee had planned to attack fast and hard, both to claim their special reward from the U.S. Army of \$10 per scalp as well as to gain access to prime Rocky Mountain foothills hunting land when the Indian Wars were finally over. They were also after the large herd of Cheyenne horses.

Somehow, the band of Cheyenne learned of the impending attack before nightfall. The Pawnees had no idea they had been discovered, and they dry-camped and prepared for a vicious dawn attack.

Before first light, with weapons drawn and already painted black and white for war, the Pawnees swooped up the draws and flowed toward the Cheyenne camp. When the Pawnees moved in on the camp they found only the tipi rings, still-warm campfire embers from the previous night, and more than a hundred dead horses, their throats slashed. It appeared to the Pawnee that the Cheyenne had literally flown away. The Pawnee knew the logistics of moving all of those people out, and they knew that it should have been impossible for the Cheyenne to get by them at night. There was no way the band of Cheyenne had flown through them, the Pawnees thought, and the only escape had been away from them, toward a canyon that could not be crossed. Furious, they pursued.

What the Pawnee found when they reached the rim of the canyon was evidence of an otherworldly occurrence. The band of Cheyenne was gone, but there was visible evidence of their flight. Somehow, remarkably, the entire band had descended the sheer cliffs to the bottom and climbed back out on the other side. The evidence, hundreds of feet below, was the number of telltale discarded tipi poles and bits of hair and clothing clinging to spiny brush. The entire Cheyenne band—the aged men and women, their grandchildren and daughters, the few able men in the camp, as the story went—had somehow, one by one, climbed down the canyon side to the Middle Fork, forded the river, and climbed up the other side to their escape. The tipi poles had been discarded sometime during the night, and they now stood, to the Pawnee, as awful proof that the incomprehensible had happened: the Pawnee had lost their advantage of surprise, lost the horses, and lost the Cheyenne.

The Pawnee chose not to even try to pursue the Cheyenne. They admired the escape and were somewhat awed by the pure determination of the people who had managed

such an escape. That the Cheyenne would leave in the middle of the night, risking the lives of all, kill their horses, and succeed was beyond anything the Pawnee had ever encountered. It was that respect, as the story went, that caused the Pawnee to turn their horses around and go home to Fort Laramie. In Pawnee, the roughly translated name they gave the canyon was “Place Where the Cheyenne Ran Away from Us.” Soldiers who heard the story, and who were at war at the time with the Cheyenne (who they regarded as barely human), renamed the geological anomaly “Savage Run,” although none of them ever found the place or really knew where it was. The legend of Savage Run was passed on. Eventually, several white elk hunters claimed they had found the passage. A national historian wrote about it well enough to create interest; thus the move for National Monument designation. But outside of a few American Indian hunting guides and the original elk hunters, few were exactly sure where the passage across the canyon was located.

JOE LOOKED AT Maxine, and the Labrador looked back with her big brown eyes. Labradors forgave everything. Joe wished he could.

He wished he could get a handle on the uncharacteristic hatred he felt toward hobby rancher/lawyer Jim Finotta. But he sure wanted to get that son of a bitch.

5

THREE DAYS LATER, Joe Pickett sat idly sipping coffee and waiting for Marybeth to return with the newspaper from her morning walk. She walked every day, even through horizontal snowstorms in the winter, and was strong enough now that she could pitch 50-pound bales of hay from the stack in her barn. The exercise, she said, had helped her recover her balance and strength after her shooting injury, and she never missed a morning. She was proud of the fact that she could now handle all of the duties at the stables, where she worked part-time, including tacking up 15-hand horses and working them in the round pen. Marybeth often went to her other parttime job at the Twelve Sleep County Municipal Library smelling of horses. It was a good smell, Joe thought, and he was pleased that Marybeth wasn’t ashamed of it. The two jobs offered enough flexibility that she was able to see her children off to school in the morning and be there when they returned.

“Why didn’t you tell me that the man killed in the mountains was *Stewie Woods*?” Marybeth fired at Joe as she came into the kitchen. The *Saddlestring Roundup* was clutched in her fist.

Joe was raising a mug of coffee to his mouth. Sheridan, Lucy, and April were still bleary-eyed, in their pajamas, and were distractedly eating bowls of breakfast cereal. Everyone’s eyes were on Marybeth; Joe thought the girls all looked as if they had been caught in the act of committing a crime.

"How could you not tell me, Joe Pickett?" she asked angrily, her voice getting louder with each word. Joe had not moved. The coffee cup was still poised for a sip. He knew that whatever he said now would not be the right thing to say.

"Barnum called and said the victim was named Allan Stewart Woods," Joe said lamely. "I didn't make the connection at the time to Stewie Woods."

She glared at him with eyes that could melt ice.

"Besides," Joe said, "why is it so important?"

Suddenly, Marybeth gave an angry little cry, threw the newspaper onto a chair, and stormed up the stairs to the bedroom, where she slammed the door and noisily threw the lock.

Joe and the girls stared dumbly at the space Marybeth had just occupied.

"What's wrong with Mom?" Sheridan asked.

"She's just upset," Joe answered. "Everything's fine."

"Who is Stewie Woods?" Lucy asked Sheridan.

Sheridan shrugged, and turned back to her breakfast, giving Lucy a "please be quiet" glare.

"You girls need to finish up and get dressed for school," Joe said gruffly.

HE WALKED THEM to the bus, kissed them goodbye, and said hello and good morning to the driver, and then went back in to read the newspaper. Joe knew from experience that when Marybeth was upset she would need some time, and he would give her that time.

The front-page story was more accurate than usual and Sheriff Barnum was quoted throughout. While the woman who was killed at the scene was yet to be officially identified (although Joe knew that they had found her Rhode Island driver's license in a fanny pack at the scene and had been as yet unable to connect with relatives), the man was tentatively identified as environmental activist Stewie Woods. A wallet with his driver's license, credit cards, and One Globe membership card (he was member number one) had been found in an abandoned Subaru near the trailhead. Woods's shoes, backpack, and famous red bandana had been found at the crime scene. A carpenter's pouch, filled with sixty-penny spikes, was recovered as well as a small sledgehammer covered with fingerprints. Forest Service officials confirmed that trees had been spiked near the crime scene and that there was a discernible "trail" of spiked trees leading from the road to the crater. Forensics results had not yet come back from Cheyenne as yet, but all of the circumstantial evidence suggested the vaporized dead man was Woods.

Joe had talked with Sheriff Barnum the day before, when they had met on the same two-track gravel road. Each had eased to the shoulder so that their vehicles were parallel, and they rolled down their windows and had a "cowboy conference" in the middle of the sagebrush prairie. Barnum divulged his theory that Woods was attaching explosives to a heifer as a spectacular publicity stunt. Stewie Woods and One Globe were known, after all, for this kind of thing. Blowing up cows that were grazing on public land was just a short step up from spiking trees, disabling the machinery and

heavy equipment used for forest road building, or other “direct actions” that One Globe claimed credit for. Blowing up cows would be an escalation in ecoterrorism.

Barnum doubted that Woods or his cronies had the training or expertise required to use C-4 explosives in a safe manner. Barnum’s guess was that Woods and his companion were in the process of attaching the explosive to the animal when it went off.

Afterward, Joe had followed Barnum to his office. “I like my investigations the way I like my women and my eggs,” Barnum said to Joe, “I like ‘em over easy.”

Joe had heard Barnum say that more than once in the past two years and he still thought it was ridiculous.

Barnum showed Joe a sheaf of faxes that had come into the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff’s Department over the past two days, most filled with newspaper clippings of Stewie Woods’s and One Globe’s past monkey-wrenching activities. Joe read several of them. Woods and his colleagues had attracted a good deal of attention just a few years ago when they unfurled a massive canvas banner from the catwalk of a Colorado dam that made it look like the \$800 million structure had a huge crack in it. They had done this behind the U.S. Secretary of Interior as the secretary gave a speech about hydroelectric power. The stunt was caught on videotape and broadcast throughout the country and around the world.

“Blowing up cows is just another form of monkey wrenching,” Barnum said. “Some dead writer made up the term to promote sabotage in the name of the environment.”

“Edward Abbey,” Joe said, “it was Edward Abbey. He wrote a book called *The Monkeywrench Gang*.”

Barnum looked blankly at Joe. “Whatever,” he said dismissively.

Then Joe paused. “Any chance somebody tipped off Finotta about the explosion before I talked to him?”

Barnum’s eyes narrowed. “Why? What did he say?”

“It wasn’t what he said ... it’s what he didn’t say,” Joe continued. “It’s what he didn’t ask. About the victims, for example. When I thought about it later, I realized he hadn’t shown much interest in who died. Like he might have already known.”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“No.”

Barnum sighed, then shrugged. “Finotta has lots of contacts, so it’s possible. Maybe he heard about it over a scanner or something. I don’t see where it much matters, to be honest with you. The death of an environmental whacko probably wasn’t very high on his priority list. Or mine.”

Joe put the newspaper down and drained the last of his coffee. He hadn’t had a chance to tell Marybeth about the conversation when he got home the night before, other than to say that the victims had been identified and that they weren’t local. Joe wondered why the name of the dead man had affected Marybeth the way it had. Or was it the fact that he had forgotten to tell her?

Joe was aware that within the town of Saddlestring, Stewie Woods’s death was already turning into something of a joke. He guessed that it was the same throughout

the west in the logging communities, the mining towns, and the farm and ranch centers, where Stewie Woods and One Globe were known and despised. One Globe was one of the most extreme of the environmental groups, a media darling, and one of the few organizations that openly advocated direct action. They hated cattle, they hated the practice of grazing on public land, they hated the ranchers who had or applied for leases, and they hated the politicians and bureaucrats who continued to allow the practice.

Barnum had speculated that Woods was hoping for headlines like “Cow Explodes In National Forest”—something that would focus attention on the grazing debate—when something went horribly wrong.

An interesting angle raised in the newspaper, and previously unknown to Joe, was the fact that Stewie Woods was a local boy, born and reared in Winchester. He had attended high school in Saddlestring and had played middle linebacker for the football team with a recklessness that made him All-State. Then, according to his coaches and neighbors, he had gone to the University of Colorado in Boulder and instead of playing football for the Golden Buffaloes, he hooked up with the wrong people and went crazy.

Joe wondered about the embarrassing legacy Woods’s death would leave. Like an overweight Mama Cass, who died from choking on a sandwich, or Elvis Presley, who died on the toilet, or fitness author Jim Fixx, who died while running, Stewie Woods would forever be remembered as the environmental activist blown up by a cow. Despite the stunts, the publicity, the best-selling biography written by Hayden Powell, and the attention Woods had garnered through the years, Stewie Woods would always be linked with a cow explosion. Joe knew there were ranchers, loggers, and politicians who would find this all very amusing.

Joe raked a hand through his hair. What he still didn’t know was why Marybeth was so upset by the news. But he knew she would tell him when she felt she was ready. Since her shooting injury and the loss of their baby, Marybeth readily admitted that she was more prone to quick mood swings and tremendous bouts of strong emotion—mostly sentimental ones. Sometimes she couldn’t identify exactly what it was that triggered the tears. He had learned not to press her, not to make her give him a definitive answer right away because sometimes she simply didn’t have one. It bothered her more than it bothered Joe, for she was a woman who had no room or time for baseless theatrics.

So whatever it was, Joe knew he would find out what was bothering her when Marybeth was good and ready to tell him.

He waited half an hour and finished his coffee. When she didn’t come downstairs, he pulled on his hat, called Maxine, and walked outside to his pickup to go to work.

6

JOE CALLED IT “perching.” Perching was patrolling in the break lands in the foothills of the Bighorns, where the sagebrush gave way to pines, driving his truck

up rough two-tracks to promontories and buttes where, with his Redfield spotting scope mounted to the driver's-side window, he could scope flats, meadows, and timber blowdowns for game, hunters, hikers, and fishers. After two years on the job, he was still locating new adequate perches throughout his district, which consisted of 1,500 square miles of high plains steppe, sagebrush flats, craggy break lands, and mountains. These raised vantage points, where he could "sit and glass," generally had some kind of road to the top that had been established over the years by ranchers, surveyors, or hunters.

Perching is what Joe had done for the past few days, since Marybeth's outburst. He had left early, stayed late, and filled the hours between with routine patrolling of his district in the strange season between hunting and fishing activity. Even if he patrolled every working hour, Joe knew he could never adequately cover his 1,500-square-mile district. But it was an important part of his job.

At night, he had worked late in his small office near the mudroom at home, updating logs and reports, writing out a comprehensive purchase request from headquarters for the goods and equipment he would need in the coming fiscal year (saddles, tack, new tires, roof repair, etc.) and waiting for Marybeth to come to him and explain what had happened that morning. They still needed to talk and clear the air. Every time he heard her walk by his door, he paused, hoping she would enter and close the door behind her and say "About the other morning ...". He didn't push her, either, although the incident hung around the house like an unwelcome relative. Several times, he wanted to go to her, but he talked himself out of it. The guilt he felt about her injury, and the subsequent loss of their child, was like a blade, ever poised, near his heart.

That morning, after the girls had left for school and the silence between them seemed to approach white noise, he told her about his encounter with Jim Finotta. She listened, and seemed grateful to be discussing anything except what he wanted to discuss. Her eyes probed his while he talked.

"Joe, are you sure this is something you want to pursue?" she asked.

"He poached an elk. He's no better than any other criminal. In fact, he's worse."

"But you can't prove it, can you?"

"Not yet."

She stared at a spot behind Joe's head. "Joe, we're within sight of getting our debts paid for the first time since we've been married. I'm working two jobs. Is this the time you want to go after a man like Jim Finotta?"

Her question surprised him, although it shouldn't have, and it momentarily put him off balance. Marybeth was nothing if not a pragmatist, especially when it came to her family.

"I've got to check it out," Joe said, his resolve weakened. "You know that."

A slow, resigned smile formed on her face. "I know you do, Joe. I just don't want you to get in trouble again."

"Me neither."

And for a moment, he could see in her expression that she wanted to add more. But she didn't.

IT WAS RARE to find many people about in the mountains in the late spring and early summer, when unpredictable squalls could sweep down from the Continental Divide in buffeting waves of wet snow, and when the snowmelt runoff was still too foamy, cloudy, and violent to fish or swim in. Crusty drifts of snow still lay in draws and swales, but had retreated and regrouped from the grass and sagebrush into the safe harbor of thick wooded stands.

Maxine slept on the passenger seat, her head resting on her forepaws, her brow crinkled with concern from whatever peril she was dreaming about.

Hazelton Road, the route to the site of the cow explosion, cut upward through the timber to the west and there was a small streamside campground, empty except for a single vehicle that was partially obscured by trees. Near the vehicle was a light green dome tent. Joe zoomed in on the tent and the campsite with the spotting scope, feeling like a voyeur. Through a shimmer caused by the distance and warmth, he could see people sitting at a picnic table. Two stout women, one with a mass of thick brown hair and the other with short straight hair, sat on opposite sides of the table. Between them, on the tabletop, were pieces of equipment Joe couldn't identify from this distance. Their heads were bent over whatever they were doing, so Joe could not see the face of either woman.

Joe zoomed out and moved the scope through the rest of the campground. Empty.

Upstream, though, a reed-thin man with a straggly beard and baggy trousers cast a spinning lure into the boiling creek. The man stood bolt upright, with one shoe on shore and the other on a rock in the stream. Joe smiled to himself. No fishing vest, no tackle box, no creel, no waders, no stoop to his back as he sneaked up on a promising pool. This man did not look like a fisherman any more than Joe looked like a cricketer. The stream was wild and would calm down, clear, and become fishable in about six weeks, in mid-July. Now, it was swelled past the banks with spring runoff, and lures cast into it would rocket down the stream with the fast flow and hang up in streamside willows.

Nevertheless, fishers were required to have both licenses and state habitat stamps, even if it was unlikely that a fish could be caught, as was the case here. Joe's job was to make sure fishermen had licenses. He zipped the spotting scope in its case, rolled up the window, and started the truck, which woke Maxine from her worrisome adventure.

ONE OF THE stout women at the picnic table turned out to be a man wearing thick dreadlocks that cascaded across his shoulders and down his back, but the woman looked vaguely familiar. Both turned to him as he stepped out of his pickup in the campground. They had been reassembling a well-worn white gas camping stove on the table, and the man seemed frustrated by it.

Joe left Maxine in the truck in case the campers had dogs of their own and approached them on a moist, pine-needled path. Their vehicle was a twenty-year-old con-

version van with California plates. He introduced himself, and the couple exchanged a furtive glance.

The two were purposely ragged looking. He wore khaki zip-off trousers that were fashionably blousey and stained, and an extra-large open shirt over a T-shirt.

"Raga," the man said, wiping his hands on his pants and standing. "This is Britney. We can't get our stove to work."

"You could use the fire ring instead," Joe offered, pointing to the circle of fire-blackened rocks. "It's real early in the year and there are no fire restrictions as yet."

"We don't do fires." The man called Raga snorted. "We don't do charred flesh. We're low-impact." It was said as a kind of challenge, and Joe had no desire to follow it up.

"Raga?" Joe asked.

"It's short for Ragamuffin," the woman said abruptly. Her voice was grating and whiney. Joe turned to her, and the sense of familiarity was stronger.

Raga shook his hair and tilted his head back, and looked down his long nose at Joe. "This is Britney Earthshare. It's not her real name, of course, but it's the name she goes by. You might have seen her in the press a couple of years ago. She lived in a tree in Northern California to protest the logging of an old-growth forest."

Yes, Joe thought. She was familiar. He had seen her on television, being interviewed by reporters who raised their microphones into the air alongside the trunk of the tree she had named Duomo. She would answer their questions by shouting down from her platform, which was equipped with thousands of dollars of high-tech equipment and state-of-the-art outdoor gear.

Britney Earthshare glanced at Joe from her place at the table and then looked quickly away. She was already bored with him, he surmised.

"You may not do charred flesh," Joe said, "but do you know the guy who's fishing upstream?"

"Tonk?" Raga asked.

"Is he with you?"

Raga nodded yes. "Is he doing something wrong?"

"Probably not. I need to check his license, though."

Raga crossed his arms and Britney, at the table, rolled her eyes.

"A driver's license?" Raga asked.

"Fishing license."

Raga said "Hmmm."

As he did, Tonk walked into the camp from the stream, pushing his way through the brush. He was talking as he entered, and had obviously not yet seen Joe.

"... Fucking fast water threw my lures all over the place," he was saying. "Lost two good Mepps and a Rooster Tail and now I got—" Tonk saw Joe and froze in mid-sentence. Joe finished for him: "Now you've got a treble hook in your arm."

Tonk held his arm out and winced painfully and almost comically, like a child will do when an adult points out an injury the child has forgotten. The No. 12 Mepps spinner had bitten deeply into Tonk's sinewy bicep. All four sets of eyes moved to it.

"It got hung up in a bush and when I pulled it back—look what happened. It came flying straight back at me," Tonk said, looking a little sheepish. "It hurts."

Joe advised Tonk to drive into Saddlestring and get the lure removed at the clinic. "If Doc Johnson isn't in you can get it taken out at the veterinary clinic," Joe explained. "The vet removes fish hooks from fishermen and their dogs all the time, and it'll cost you about half of what doc Johnson charges."

Tonk nodded dully. He was fascinated by the lure embedded in his flesh. Britney and Raga seemed to be fascinated with it as well.

Sharply, Britney turned. "You said you were the game warden, right?"

Joe nodded.

"I read somewhere that there was a game warden present when the exploding cow was discovered a week ago," she said. "And that the place where the explosion happened is close to here."

Raga was suddenly more interested in Joe than in Tonk's mishap.

"That was me," Joe said. "I was one of the first on the scene."

The campsite seemed to have quieted, and Joe was being examined by all three campers with a different level of intensity than just a moment before.

"That's why we're here," Raga declared. "To find the place where they claim Stewie was murdered."

It took Joe a moment to respond. "Who says he was murdered?"

Raga displayed a self-satisfied smirk. He shook his head as if to say, *I'll never tell you.*

"Did you find his body?" Tonk asked, forgetting his own injury for a moment.

"All we found were his shoes," Joe said. "There wasn't a body to find."

"I fucking knew it," Tonk said, stepping forward to stand abreast of Raga. He spoke with the loopy intensity patented by generations of the drugged and dispossessed: "I fucking *knew* it, Raga!"

Joe stared back at Britney, who was performing surgery on him with her eyes.

"You found her body, but you didn't find his, right?" she asked.

"The state investigator's report concluded that he had an accident with explosives," Joe said. "The sheriff agreed with that. Accident, not suicide. And definitely no murder."

Raga laughed derisively. "Yeah, like President Kennedy's little 'accident.' " Tonk agreed by nodding his head vigorously.

"Stewie Woods is not dead," Britney Earthshare stated. Joe felt a chill crawl up his spine. Then: "Stewie will never be dead. They can't kill a man like Stewie."

Oh, Joe thought. *That's* what she meant.

"Just like they couldn't kill Kurt Cobain, or Martin Luther King, man," Tonk chimed in.

"I understand," Joe mumbled, not understanding. These three campers were not much younger than he was, but were so entirely different.

They asked for directions to the crater. Joe saw no reason not to give them. He pointed back toward the Hazelton Road, told them it was about six miles up, and where there was a turnout where they could park.

"I knew we were close," Britney said to Raga, "I could just feel it, how close we were."

"That's why you're here?" Joe asked.

"Partly," Raga said. "We're on our way to Toronto to an antiglobalism rally. Britney's speaking."

She nodded.

Joe turned to go.

"The people who did this will be back," Britney said quite clearly as he walked away. He stopped, and looked over his shoulder.

"They can't kill Stewie Woods that easily," she sang.

JOE WAS BACK up on his perch before he realized he had forgotten to ask Tonk to show him his fishing license. But he stayed in his truck.

Things were certainly more interesting since Stewie Woods had died in *his* mountains. Although the official investigation was already all but closed, and obituaries and tributes to Stewie had faded from the news, unofficial speculation continued unabated. That there was a strange, disconnected underground made up of people like Raga, Tonk, and Britney who now came to see the crater was disconcerting. They seemed to know something—or thought they knew something—that the public did not.

He hoped this had been an isolated incident. But he doubted it.

7

Bremerton, Washington

June 14

OUTSIDE A HUGE tree-shrouded home in a driving rain, the Old Man waited. Next to him, in the cab of the black Ford pickup, in the dark, was Charlie Tibbs.

The Old Man stole glances at Charlie, careful not to turn his head and stare directly at him. Charlie's face was barely discernible in the dark of the cab, lit only by the light from a distant fluorescent streetlight that threw a weak shaft through the waving branches of an evergreen tree. The rivulets of rainwater that ran down the windshield cast wormlike shadows on Charlie, making his face look splotched and mottled.

They were here to kill someone named Hayden Powell, the owner of the house. But Powell had not yet come home.

The Old Man and Charlie Tibbs had driven up the fern-shrouded driveway two hours before, just as the storm clouds had closed the lid on the sky above Puget Sound. They had backed their black pickup into a tangled thicket so that it couldn't be seen from the road unless someone was really looking for it. Then the rain had started. It was relentless. The rain came down so hard and the vegetation was so thick that the wide

leaves, outstretched toward the sky like cartoon hands, jerked and undulated all around them as if the forest floor was dancing. The liquid drumbeat of the storm intimidated the Old Man into complete silence and made the atmosphere otherworldly. Not that Charlie was the kind of guy to have a long—or short—discussion with anyway.

The Old Man was in awe of Charlie Tibbs. Charlie's stillness and quiet resolve was something from another era. Charlie had never raised his voice since they had been together, and the Old Man often had to strain to even hear him. Despite his age (the Old Man guessed 65, like him) and bone-white hair, Charlie was a powerful presence. Men who didn't know Charlie Tibbs, and who had never heard of his reputation, still seemed to tense up in Charlie's presence. The Old Man had seen that happen just this morning, as they neared Bremerton, Washington, from the east. When they entered a small café and Charlie walked down the aisle toward an empty booth, the Old Man had noticed how the rough crowd of construction workers and salmon fishermen paused over their chicken-fried steak and eggs and sat up straight as Charlie passed by them. There was just something about the man. And none of those workers or fishermen had any idea that this was Charlie Tibbs, the legendary stock detective, a man known for his skill at manhunting for over forty years throughout the Rocky Mountains, the Southwest, South America, and Western Canada.

Since the days of the open range in the 1870s, stock detectives had played a unique role in cattle country. Hired by individual ranchers or landowner consortiums, stock detectives hunted down rustlers, nesters, and vandals in an effort to bring those offenders to justice. Or, in some cases, to remove them from the earth. Few stock detectives still existed. Of those who did, Charlie Tibbs was considered the best. All these locals knew was that this tall man with white hair and a Stetson was someone out of the ordinary, somebody special. Someone who made them sit up straight as he passed by.

"I don't like this rain," the Old Man said, raising his voice over the drumming on the top of the cab. "And I don't think I like this part of the country. I'm not used to this. If you died out there tonight you'd be covered by weeds before morning."

The Old Man waited for a response or a reaction but all there was from Charlie was the twitch of a smile.

"I just don't think you can trust a place where they have leaves bigger than a man's head," the Old Man offered.

The Old Man watched as Charlie raised his hands—he had huge, powerful hands—and rested them on top of the steering wheel. Charlie's index finger flicked out, pointing through the windshield. The Old Man's eyes followed the gesture.

"There he is," Charlie said flatly. "He's home and it looks like he's by himself."

"Did he see us?" the Old Man asked.

"He didn't even look. He drove up without his headlights. He must be drunk."

The Old Man raised a heavy pair of night vision binoculars. Through the rain-streaked windshield, he could clearly see Hayden Powell's car cruise up the drive slowly, as if anticipating that the garage door would open, which it didn't. Powell applied the

brake inches from the door and his taillights flashed a burst of light that temporarily blinded the Old Man through the binoculars—and he cursed.

All the Old Man could see was a green and white orb similar to the after-effect of a flashbulb. While the Old Man waited for his eyes to readjust, Charlie gently took the binoculars from him to look.

“He’s drunk,” Charlie declared. “Just as we thought he would be. He couldn’t figure out how to open his garage and now he’s trying to figure out which key to use to open the door. He dropped his keys in the grass. Now he’s on his hands and knees looking for them. We could get him now.”

The Old Man looked to Charlie for guidance. What weapons would they use? What was the plan here? The Old Man fought back panic.

The Old Man didn’t know a lot about Hayden Powell but he knew enough. He knew that Powell was a well-known environmental writer who had originally come to fame by writing many articles about and later the biography of his boyhood friend, Stewie Woods. Powell had struck it rich, not in publishing but through an early investment in a Seattle-based software company. As the company took off, professional management was brought in to run it and Powell was eased out. With his huge home, bulging stock portfolio, and free time, he had returned to the two things he loved most: drinking tequila and writing provocative pieces on the environment.

The rumor was that his next book would be titled *Screwing Up the West* and was a vicious indictment of corporations, landowners, and politicians. Excerpts had been published in magazines and journals. Powell was in big trouble, though. The SEC was investigating the software company and investors who Powell had recruited—many of whom had sunk millions into the company—were furious. There had been death threats made against Powell, which he duly reported to the SEC and the FBI. Powell had even been quoted as saying that he looked forward to going to jail, where he would feel safer.

And now the Old Man and Charlie were here to kill him—but not because of the failing software company. Charlie had said it needed to look as if an angry investor had done it or had it done. There should be absolutely no link to the upcoming book.

The Old Man had not been told what the details of the plan would be. He was uncomfortable, and scared. He wasn’t like Charlie—these things didn’t come naturally to him. He did not want to disappoint either Charlie or his employers, but this thing was getting bigger and more complicated than he had thought it would be. What was he supposed to do, run across the grass and hit Powell in the back of the head with a hammer? Shoot the guy in the dark? What?

“He’s up and he’s in,” Charlie said, lowering the binoculars.

The Old Man watched as the porch light went on. They followed Powell’s drunken progress through his house as he switched on lights. First the kitchen, then the bathroom, then the living room. They waited.

“He’s probably passed out on his couch,” Charlie whispered after nearly an hour.

“What is the plan?” the Old Man asked, trying to suppress the panic he felt rising up in him.

Oddly, Charlie Tibbs smiled, showing his perfect teeth, and turned in his seat. The smile made the Old Man feel better, but it also disturbed him in a way he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Later ...” Charlie began, the word drowned out by the rain. “I’ll tell you later when you need to know.”

WEARING A RAIN suit with a hood that slipped over his clothes and covered his face, the Old Man waited in the soaking undergrowth until Charlie Tibbs reached the front door. When Charlie signaled him, the Old Man raised his scoped and silenced .22 rifle and shot out the back porch light with a sound no louder than a cough. The Old Man had shot from an angle so the bullet would pass cleanly through the lamp and lightbulb and off into the night. It would not be wise to leave a bullet lodged in the siding that might be found by investigators. Now the outside of the expensive home of Hayden Powell was once again dark. With a tiny flashlight in his mouth, the Old Man located the spent brass casing that had been ejected from the rifle into the mud. He pocketed it while he walked across the lawn toward the darkened back door. While the tire tracks and footprints would be washed away in the driving rain, bullet casings could be recovered.

Careful to not lose his footing on the rain-slick steps, the Old Man entered the house. Charlie had been right about Powell not locking the back door after him.

Inside it was warm and dry. The Old Man stood in the kitchen by the back door and concentrated on regulating his breathing. He did not want to be heard. The pounding of the rain was muffled inside the house. As he stood, a puddle formed near his boots from the wet rain suit.

The Old Man surveyed the room and then positioned himself behind the kitchen island with his back to the door he had entered. The kitchen island was built so that the end of it pointed to the living room. His job was to block the back door while Charlie entered the front. From where the Old Man stood he could see down a hallway into a sunken living room sparsely filled with leather furniture. A television set was on and the channel tuned to what looked like the local news. He could see half of the front doorway, and clearly heard Charlie knock on it.

The Old Man swallowed and readied his rifle. He was instructed not to use it unless absolutely necessary. According to Charlie, Powell would never even make it out of the living room, much less into the kitchen.

Charlie knocked again, this time louder. The Old Man heard a couch squeak and the back of Hayden Powell came into view. Powell was younger and more powerfully built than the Old Man had guessed. Powell’s hair was awry and he shuffled to the front door in his socks. He had been sleeping on the couch. Once again, Charlie had been exactly right.

Powell asked who was at the door. The Old Man couldn't hear what Charlie shouted back. Powell squinted into the peephole and the Old Man could only imagine what Powell was thinking: *There is an old cowboy standing on my front porch.*

The front door was not open three inches before Charlie's fist, wrapped in thick brass knuckles beaded with rain, smashed through the opening, flush into Hayden Powell's face. The power of the blow threw Powell straight back and he slid along the hardwood floor. The Old Man tensed and raised his rifle, keeping the barrel pointed at the hallway. Charlie entered the house and closed the front door behind him; his frighteningly intense eyes fixed on the crumpled form of Hayden Powell.

The Old Man let out a deep breath. It was already over.

But suddenly it wasn't, as Powell scrambled to his hands and knees with sudden sobriety and shot away from Charlie, straight toward the kitchen. The Old Man caught a glimpse of Powell's wide, bloodied face and frightened eyes and he raised his rifle just as Powell ducked below the kitchen island out of sight. Charlie yelled, "Get him!" and the Old Man kicked the back door shut a second before Powell slammed into it.

Powell was thrown backward again and was writhing on the kitchen floor between the island and a huge walk-in freezer. What the Old Man saw next reminded him much more of a hunter dispatching a wounded animal than a man killing another man. Charlie Tibbs mounted the three steps from the living room and pinned Powell to the floor with his knees. Powell struggled and tried to throw Charlie off, but after taking a half-dozen powerful and methodic blows with the brass knuckles, Powell was still.

Charlie Tibbs slowly got to his feet. The Old Man could hear Charlie's knees creak and his back pop. Charlie's face was flushed from the exertion and his right arm, from the elbow down, was soaked in blood.

"You almost let him go," Charlie barked, glaring at the Old Man.

"You did, too," the Old Man countered, instantly regretting that he said it. For the first time, the Old Man saw the chilling, ice-blue stare directed at *him*. But like a storm cloud passing, Charlie's eyes softened and the Old Man found that he could breathe again.

"It's done now," Charlie said softly. "Grab a foot and help me drag him back out into the living room."

The Old Man put the rifle down on the counter and rounded the island. He turned his head so he wouldn't see the mess that Charlie had made of Powell's face and head.

He caught Charlie looking at him, sizing him up, as they dragged the body through the kitchen and down the stairs.

THEY TOOK THE microcassette tape from Powell's answering machine because Charlie had called the house earlier in the afternoon to hear Hayden Powell's recorded voice and confirm they had the right address. Although no message was left, the ambient traffic sounds in the background might provide a clue for investigators that someone had called to check an occupancy. The old man pocketed the microcassette. They found Powell's Macintosh computer in the home office and ripped it from the wall. The computer, files, and a box of disks and zip drives were all thrown into the

back of the pickup. Charlie placed incendiary bombs in all four corners of the first floor of the house and splashed five gallons of gasoline through the kitchen and living room. As they left, the Old Man lit a traffic flare and tossed it through the back door. The mighty *whoosh* of the fire sucked the air out of the Old Man's lungs and left him gasping for the cold, moist air.

As they drove through Bremerton toward the highway, Charlie dutifully pulled over as each fire truck passed them, their sirens whooping and flashing lights reflecting back from rain-slicked streets and buildings.

At the scene the firefighters would find a \$1.7 million home burned to the ground. Later, tomorrow, a charred body would be found. An autopsy would show that the skull was crushed, probably by huge vaulted beams that crashed down from the second floor during the fire. The autopsy would also show that Powell's blood-alcohol level was far past the legal limit. Why and how the fire got started would be subject to debate. Speculation about whether one of his declared investor enemies had something to do with it or whether Hayden Powell lit the fire himself in a drunken fit of rage and depression would probably go on for months.

"I'm not sure I like this close-in work," the Old Man said as they approached the egress to the highway. "And I sure as hell don't like all this rain and jungle out here."

Charlie ignored the Old Man and asked him if he had picked up his shell casing. The Old Man sighed and showed it to him. Charlie was nothing if not thorough. And, in the Old Man's opinion, thoroughly efficient and coolly heartless.

"Where is the next project?" the Old Man asked.

"Montana."

"I was kind of hoping we'd get some time off. We've been going nonstop. I've seen the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean in the last four days. That's more miles than I want to think about."

This was the first time the Old Man had complained about their work. The result of his complaint was a pained squint from Charlie Tibbs as he drove.

"We took a job and we're going to finish it," Charlie said with finality. His voice was so low that it could barely be heard over the rain-sizzle of the tires.

The Old Man let it drop. He watched walls of dark wet trees strobe by in the headlights. The rain never stopped. The sky was close, seemingly at treetop level. It was as if they were going through a tunnel. He briefly closed his eyes to rest them.

When he opened them again his hands were still shaking. The big black pickup, like a land shark, was speeding east devouring miles of wet shining road.

Heading east to Go West, the Old Man thought.

MARYBETH SLAMMED DOWN the telephone receiver and, wide-eyed, looked around her house to see if anyone was watching her. Of course, no one was. But she was shaking, scared, and angry nonetheless. And very self-conscious.

It was the same voice on the telephone from the day before. He had called at the same time: after the kids had left for school and Joe had gone to work, but before Marybeth left for the stables. He had either guessed very well when he could talk to her alone or knew her schedule. Either way, it was disconcerting.

"Is this Mary?" the man had asked. "Maiden name Harris?"

That was as far as it went yesterday before she hung up. When the telephone rang again this morning, she knew intuitively that it was him. This time, she wanted more information about why he was calling, although she was afraid she already knew.

"Who is this?" she asked.

He identified himself as a writer for *Outside* magazine. He said he was doing research for a story he was writing about deceased ecoterrorist Stewie Woods.

"Why are you calling me?" she asked. "You should be talking instead to our sheriff or my husband. Would you like the sheriff's telephone number?"

The reporter paused. "You're Mary, aren't you?"

"*Marybeth*," she corrected. "Marybeth Pickett."

"Formerly known as Mary Harris?" he asked.

"My name has always been Marybeth," she insisted. This was not completely a lie. Only two people had ever called her Mary.

The reporter's voice was more tentative. "Maybe I've got the wrong person here, and if so, I apologize for wasting your time. But my research led me to you," he said. "Did you know Stewie Woods when you were growing up?"

She hung up on him.

IT HAD BEEN a wonderful summer. That summer, the one between high school and college, had been tucked away in her memory but still came back to her from time to time. She had fought it back successfully and never let it bloom. She had tamped that flower back into the earth with her heel. But when she read in the newspaper that Stewie Woods was dead it all came back. Even now, 15 years later, the memory of it was still vibrant.

Back then, Stewie Woods was terribly homely but very charismatic, a gawky teenager turning into a fine but unpredictable athlete, who was already envisioning the building of an environmental terrorist organization that would rock the world. Hayden Powell was handsome, sardonic, and talented and vowed to make Stewie and their joint mission to Save the West famous. Although she never shared their radical passion for environmental causes, Marybeth's attraction to both rogues was exciting in the same way that it was exciting for other girls her age to hook up with rock stars or rodeo cowboys. Stewie and Hayden were bad boys, smart boys, wild boys, but they had good hearts. They were already wreaking havoc with environmental vandalism.

An evening out with them generally involved pulling up survey stakes for a planned pipeline or removing the bolts from bulldozer tread. Although there were several close calls, the three of them never got caught.

And they loved her. Stewie, especially. He was so in love with her that it was as embarrassing as it was flattering. Once, after intercepting a pass for the Winchester Badgers and taking it into the end zone for a touchdown, Stewie had turned to the partisan Saddlestring crowd and spelled out “M-A-R-Y” with his long arms because he knew she was watching the game with her friends.

During the summer, the three of them spent nearly every evening together. They fished, they went to movies, they committed sabotage.

Hayden Powell went on to Iowa State for the writing program. Stewie got a football scholarship to Colorado. Marybeth went south to the University of Wyoming, intending to become a corporate lawyer. Instead, she met Joe Pickett, a gangly, soft-spoken sophomore majoring in wildlife biology.

She had not kept in touch with Stewie Woods or Hayden Powell because they were dangerous. With Joe’s job as a fledgling game warden, they had moved six times in the first nine years and so it had been relatively easy for her to miss the telephone calls, letters, or Christmas cards they might have sent. With her name change and the fact that her mother remarried and moved to Arizona, she knew she would be difficult to track down. But she had read about Stewie’s exploits and seen him on television. The biography had been published six years before, and had garnered minor critical attention but instant cult status. At the time, Joe and Marybeth were in Buffalo, Wyoming, with Joe’s first full-fledged district as game warden. Marybeth was pregnant with Lucy, Joe worked insanely long hours, and Sheridan was a four-year-old. Marybeth couldn’t have been further removed from the environmental derring-do of Stewie Woods or the literary escapades of Hayden Powell if she lived on the moon.

Finally, a year ago, during her breaks while working in the county library, she had read the biography. She had not checked the book out or brought it home. Stewie had mentioned “his first love, Mary Harris” but, thank God, he didn’t know her married name. But she was in there. And she had to admit to herself that when she found the volume the first thing she looked for was her name and what Stewie had said about her.

Marybeth assumed that the reporter had read the same biography, but unlike Stewie, the reporter had located her. And the reporter wanted some comments from her for his story.

She had never told Joe about this short period in her life. It hadn’t seemed necessary; it would have complicated things that didn’t need complicating.

But now, she thought, she needed to talk to her husband. She would do so when he got home that evening. He deserved to know why she was upset at breakfast the week before and he needed to know about the telephone calls from the reporter. It was better she tell him than that he find out when a story was published in a magazine or he heard it some other way. It was time.

Marybeth checked her watch and realized it was time for her to leave for her job at the stables.

As she grabbed her purse and headed out the front door, she could hear the telephone ringing in the kitchen.

9

BECAUSE THE SNOW had finally melted and backwoods mountain roads were opening up to four-wheel-drive vehicles, fishermen were starting to work the streams and spring creeks in the Bighorns and Joe Pickett needed to check licenses and limits. Most of the streams were still high and muddy and wouldn't clear and level out for another month, but local fly-fishing guides were already placing clients at deep pools and beaver ponds. Mayfly hatches, the first sign of summer for fly-fishermen, had begun. And if there were fishermen and -women, that meant there were licenses to check. Fishers used the Hazelton Road for access to the streams, which is how Joe found himself once again near the site of the exploding cow. He wanted to see the crater again, for reasons he wasn't quite sure of.

Joe approached the crater along the same path he had taken two weeks earlier with Sheriff Barnum and Deputy McLanahan. Because of the heavy foot and gurney traffic of the EMTs, forensics teams, state Department of Criminal Investigation (DCI) agents, curiosity seekers, and dozens of locals trooping back and forth from the road to the crime scene, the path had become a trail. It was churned up and easy to follow.

He wanted to visit the site again in the daylight and, possibly, resolve the impression he had that night of being watched. As he approached the crater he hoped that something would put that lingering suspicion to rest.

This kind of thing had happened to him before. There had been a turn on the road near the foothills of the mountains that had, for months, given him an uneasy feeling whenever he drove by. There had been something in an aspen grove that troubled him. The evening hours as the sunset lengthened shadows and a certain stillness set in unsettled him. Finally, he had stopped his truck and walked up the grassy draw. As he neared the trees he drew his weapon because the ill feeling, whatever it was, got stronger. Then he saw it and for a brief, terrifying moment, he was face to face with the Devil himself. Within the thick stand of trees stood the gnarled, twisted, coiled black figure of ... a single burned tree stump.

The distance to the crater through the trees seemed shorter than it had that night, and he was surprised how quickly he was upon it. Within and around the crater, Joe knew there would be nothing to be found that hadn't already been examined, tested, or photographed. The official conclusion of the joint report filed by both the Sheriff's Office and DCI bore out Barnum's original theory—that Stewie Woods had accidentally set off explosives because he was unfamiliar with them. They also found

out that the woman who was with him was actually his wife of three days. A Justice of the Peace in Ennis, Montana, had come forth with the marriage certificate.

He slowly circled the crater. The dead cattle had long been removed. Fallen pine needles had begun to carpet the exposed earth of the hole. A few pale blades of grass were the first soldiers to reclaim the ground. The exposed roots that had looked so white and tender that night had hardened or thrust themselves back into the earth.

If he looked at the trees and branches in the right light Joe could still see dried blood, but rain, insects, birds, and rodents had cleaned nearly all of the bark. Years from now, Joe thought, passing hikers or hunters might remark on the depression in the trail, bypass it when it filled with rain. But there would be nothing remarkable about it.

So far he hadn't seen anything that could make him forget or explain that feeling he'd had of being watched.

Squinting, Joe tipped his head back. The explosion had cleared a passage in the spruce trees through which he could see the sky and two lone clouds. High in the tree above him was a stout branch that had been stripped of bark. Joe stepped into the crater for a better look. Something about the color of the dead branch didn't look right. Exposed dead pine turned a cream color. This branch, angled up from the trunk in the shape of a fishhook, was coffee brown. The branch was thick enough to support a big man. Especially if the man were skewered to the tree by the force of an explosion.

Joe crossed his arms and shook his head. There was no way what he was thinking could be possible. Even if it was, he thought, there was no way that all of the people who had been there since the explosion would not have seen it. Someone, at some point, *had to look up*.

He left his daypack and holster at the base of the tree and started to climb. Dime-sized scales of bark snagged at his shirt and jeans, but there were enough sappy branches to provide footholds and handholds. He climbed until he was just below the dead branch and found a protruding knot he was able to rest a boot on. Hugging the trunk, he raised himself up until he was eye-level with the dead branch. His other foot was suspended in the air, so he wouldn't be able to maintain his position long. Already, the quad muscles in his thigh were beginning to burn.

The branch, close up, was certainly dark enough to have been stained with blood. But what he hoped to see was proof—dried rivulets or strands of fiber from clothing. He saw neither. Pulling himself even tighter to the tree with one arm, he reached out with his free hand and tried to break the branch, to no avail. Using his fingernails, he tried to chip off some of the stained wood so he could have it tested. But the branch was hard and he had no leverage to splinter it. His leg began to quiver and his calf and thigh muscles screamed. To relieve the pressure, Joe grasped the dead branch to balance himself. He pressed his cheek to the trunk of the tree.

Suddenly, there was percussive flapping above him. The sound frightened him and nearly made him lose his grip. He looked up at a huge black raven that had just landed inches from his hand. The raven looked down at him with sharp ebony eyes

and sidestepped along the branch until one clawed black foot touched Joe's hand. The bird stared at Joe and Joe stared back. He had never seen a raven this close, and it was remarkable how inert and shiny the bird's eyes were. Its beak was slightly hooked on the end and was the color of dull black matte. Its feathers were so black that they reflected blue, like Superman's hair in the comics.

Then the raven struck, burying its beak into the back of Joe's hand. Reflexively, Joe let go, which shifted his balance, and his boot slipped off of the knot. He clearly heard the hum of his shirt on the bark as he dropped and he felt his trouser cuffs gather up beneath his knees. A live branch that had been welcoming on the way up hit him under the arm on the way down and knocked him backward where he fell cleanly for a moment, then crashed through another branch, then landed hard on his back at the base of the tree with his knees wrapped around the trunk like a lover.

WHEN HE WAS able to breathe normally, Joe opened his eyes. Small orange span-gles floated through the sky along with the clouds. He did an inventory of his limbs and found that nothing was broken. His back ached, his hand was punctured and bloody near the knuckles from the raven, and his shirt and pants were disheveled and torn. The insides of his legs were rubbed raw and his shins were scraped. But he was all right.

He rolled to his feet and stood up warily. He had landed on his hat so he retrieved it and tried to restore the smashed-in crown. Painfully, he looked back at the dead branch. The raven was still there, and stared coldly back at him.

"You okay?" someone asked from the other side of the crater. The voice startled Joe, and he turned toward it. "You really made a lot of noise coming down out of that tree. We thought a tree was falling over or something."

It was Raga and Tonk, the two campers he had met the week before. They had just emerged from the pathway in the trees. Both wore daypacks.

"I'm fine. You're still here?" Joe asked. "Weren't you going to Canada or somewhere?"

Raga leaned forward on a walking stick. "Been there and back."

"Where's the woman who was with you?" Joe asked.

Raga and Tonk shared a conspiratorial glance, but didn't answer Joe's question.

"Did you hear about Hayden Powell? The writer? His house burned down in Washington state," Raga said, his eyes cold. "This time, they found the body."

Joe had heard the name Hayden Powell somewhere, but was not familiar with him or Tonk's story.

"Charred beyond recognition," Tonk added for emphasis.

"So first there was Stewie, then Hayden," Raga continued, his tone fused with deliberate irony. "I wonder who will be next?"

Joe clamped his misshapen hat on his head. "You folks like conspiracies, don't you?"

Raga sneered and gestured toward the crater. "The people who did this will come back. I hope you're ready for them when they do."

Joe tried to read the faces of the two men. Raga was still sneering, Tonk nodding in agreement with what Raga had just said.

“Do you know something you should tell me?” Joe asked.
Raga slowly shook his head no. “They’ll be back here,” he said simply.

10

RETURNING HOME, JOE crossed the bridge that spanned the Twelve Sleep River and drove through the three-block length of Saddlestring’s sleepy downtown. The insides of his thighs and the palms of his hands still stung from the fall. There was a dull ache in the back of his neck. Worst of all, his hat was crushed. It was just after five o’clock and most of the shops were already closed and the street virtually empty of traffic. Knots of cars and pickups were parked in front of the two bars on Main Street.

Saddlestring, once on the verge of a natural gas pipeline boom two years before that Joe inadvertently helped stymie, had once again settled into being a place considered “unchanging and rustic” in the view of some or “nearly dead” in the view of others. The discovery of species thought extinct—Miller’s weasels—had created a tourism surge at the same time the town was seeing a brief cessation of traditional industries such as logging, mining, and outfitting in the remote area of the Bighorns, now known, sort of, as the Miller’s Weasel Ecosystem. Inter-agency squabbling was still delaying the official unique designation of the ecosystem. In the meanwhile, the last known colony of Miller’s weasels, the Cold Springs Group, had died out. Although Joe knew of another colony, the location remained a cherished secret between Sheridan and him, and neither ever talked about it. Scientists, biologists, and ecotourists no longer came for the purpose of seeing where the creatures that “captured a nation” once were, but the town, and the valley, continued to limp along. Saddlestring, as a place of interest to most outsiders, had once again dropped out of view.

Joe stopped at the corner before he turned toward Bighorn Road. Across the street were two buildings with ancient western storefronts, Bryan’s Western Wear and Wolf Mountain Taxidermy. The taxidermy studio was a rarity in that it was so well known in the state and throughout the Northern Rockies that it stayed open the entire year. Most studios closed for three or four months until hunting seasons opened again. The taxidermist, Matt Sandvick, had won dozens of awards for his work and was sought out by wealthy hunters. In addition to moose, deer, pronghorn antelope, and other Wyoming big game and fowl, Sandvick often did tigers, Alaskan brown bears, and other exotic species from around the world. He was the taxidermist of choice for wealthy, status-conscious men.

Which is why Joe canceled his turn signal and proceeded through the intersection and parked his pickup on the curb. He had been thinking of Matt Sandvick’s work for several days. He was the best Joe had ever seen. A Sandvick mount had a certain clean, natural simplicity that brought the animal back to life. His work was subtle but regal, and left an impression on the admirer. Joe was just such an admirer. And it made him wonder about something.

As usual, there was no one in the outer office when Joe entered Wolf Mountain Taxidermy. Dozens of photos of mounts were beneath a sheet of glass on the counter, and a huge moose head dominated the wall above a door that led to the studio. Joe rang a bell next to a brochure rack full of price lists and waited.

Matt Sandvick was a short, powerful man with close-cropped red hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses. He emerged from his studio cleaning his hands with a stained towel. Joe had met him several times and had been in the shop during hunting season to confirm that hunters had properly tagged all of the game animals turned over to Sandvick. Sandvick took a good deal of pride in his work. They got along well.

"What happened to you?" Sandvick asked, his eyes widening as he looked at Joe's torn shirt, bloody hand, and crushed hat.

Joe tried to think of something snappy to say, but couldn't think of anything.

"Fell out of a tree," Joe said, smiling with a hint of embarrassment.

Sandvick stifled a laugh. "Okay," he said, drawing the word out to indicate disbelief.

"Getting ready for hunting season?" Joe asked in a neighborly way.

"Always," Sandvick nodded. "Things are slowing down around here. A few fish is all. A nice twenty-two-inch cutthroat trout back there. You want to look at it?"

Joe shook his head no. He agreed that 22 inches was big for a cutthroat. *Matt*, Joe thought, *I'm sorry for what I'm about to do.*

Then: "You know that big bull elk you did for Jim Finotta last year? Was that an eight-by-eight?"

"Nine-by-seven," Sandvick corrected. "The only one I've ever seen."

"I would have sworn it had eight on each side." Joe said, looking quizzically at Sandvick. "I saw it just a few weeks ago in his office."

"Nope," Sandvick countered, "I'll prove it to you." Sandvick pushed his glasses up on his nose and studied the photos under the glass on the counter. He settled his index finger on a shot of Finotta's bull elk mount while it was still in the studio. Joe bent, a little stiffly, to get a better look.

"You okay?" Sandvick asked.

"My back hurts from that fall," Joe said, distracted. He studied the photo. There were nine tines on one antler and seven on the other, just like Sandvick said. There was also a very small LCD date stamp on the bottom right of the photograph that read "9-21."

"That's it, all right," Joe conceded. "You were absolutely right."

"That was a damned big elk," Sandvick said, but there was something different about his voice. Joe looked up to see that Sandvick was studying him intently, practically squinting. There was fear in Sandvick's eyes.

"You had this mount finished by the twenty-first of September," Joe said. "And rifle hunting season doesn't open until the fifteenth of October. You say in your brochure that it takes about six to eight weeks to finish a mount. So when did he bring it in? June or July?"

Sandvick's face drained of color and his eyes widened. He was caught. A taxidermist who worked on a game animal that wasn't accompanied by paperwork to prove it was properly taken could not only get his license revoked and be put out of business, but he could be jailed or fined. Matt Sandvick was well aware of that. So was Joe Pickett.

"June or July?" Joe asked, not unkindly.

"Maybe I ought to call my lawyer or something," Sandvick said weakly, then swallowed. "Except I don't have a lawyer."

"I'll tell you what, Matt," Joe said, feeling ashamed of his trick but pleased with his discovery, "if you agree to sign an affidavit stating that Jim Finotta brought that animal in to you out of season I won't ask the County Attorney to prosecute you. I'll even argue against it if he brings it up. But I can't promise that he won't do it anyway."

Sandvick brought both of his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes. "Finotta didn't bring it in himself. His ranch hand brought it in."

"When?"

"I think it was June," Sandvick said. "I could check my records for the exact date. I talked to him on the phone. Finotta offered me one of his new lots for it. That was kind of hard to pass up. Plus I didn't want to piss the man off."

Sandvick continued to rub his eyes, then his face. It was painful for Joe to watch.

"You do good work," Joe said. "Finotta told me he had that mount done in Jackson Hole, but everybody knows you're the best around and you're right here in town. So it makes sense he would come to you."

"He said he had it done in *Jackson*?" Sandvick asked, clearly hurt by that.

Joe nodded. "I'll leave you alone now. But I'll be in touch about that affidavit, okay?"

"That's really an insult. *Jackson*?"

Before Joe left the studio, he reached across the counter and patted Sandvick on the shoulder. "You're a good guy, Matt, but don't ever do that again."

Sandvick didn't need to be told. He was still trembling.

"The thing was," Joe explained, "they *left the meat*. Finotta shot it, probably got his flunky to cape it and take the head off, and they left the body to rot."

Sandvick said nothing. He lowered his hands to grip the counter and steady himself.

"That just makes me mad," Joe explained. Then he tipped his bent hat brim at Sandvick and left the shop.

"I THINK I got him," Joe told Marybeth when he entered the house, tossing his misshapen hat through his office doorway.

She looked him over carefully, her eyes widening in alarm at his appearance.

"I'm fine," Joe said. "I think I've nailed Jim Finotta."

"I heard you," she said, approaching him and fingering a tear in his shirtsleeve.

In his excited state, he blurted: "Marybeth, we have to talk."

She probed his eyes with hers, then patted his cheek.

"Soon," she said.

MARYBETH PICKETT was replacing videotapes in the shelves behind the check-in desk when she heard the door to the library open and close. It was weekend procedure to try to keep count of the people in the library because of the early afternoon closing. Several months before, one of the other volunteers had inadvertently locked a patron who was in the bathroom inside the building. The man locked inside had to call the sheriff and wait for someone with a key to be tracked down.

Marybeth glanced around the video shelf at a shrunken woman in a wheelchair being pushed by a dark man who had a toothpick in his mouth. The man saw her, tipped the brim of his dirty ball cap, and looked Marybeth over as he walked past. Marybeth nodded cryptically and continued to replace the videos. Since the Twelve Sleep County Library had started renting movies for two dollars each a year ago, the librarians fretted over the fact that books would become an afterthought in the community. That had happened, to some degree.

When she was done with the videos, she returned to the front counter to find the man there. He was leaning forward on the counter resting on his elbows, and chewing his toothpick. He had dark eyes and rough skin, and the expression on his face was a self-satisfied leer.

"May I help you find something?" she asked coolly.

He grinned at that, showing a mouthful of broken yellow teeth, and when he did the toothpick danced.

"I just love it when pretty ladies ask me that question."

Marybeth shook her head. It wasn't often that a man was so pathetically transparent. She had no desire to engage in any kind of banter with him.

"Was that your mother you brought in here?"

He chortled. "Shit, no. That's Miss Ginger."

"Should I know her?"

"I'm surprised you don't. I bring her to the library once or twice a week. She's doing some kind of research for a book she claims she's writing."

Marybeth looked beyond the man. The woman in the wheelchair, Miss Ginger, was parked in an aisle in the western history section. She had pulled a book from the shelf that was now on her lap. It was obvious to Marybeth that the woman wanted to go to one of the tables to read it, but didn't have the strength to push herself there.

"I think she needs your help."

"She can wait," the man snorted. "My name's Buster, by the by. I work out on the Vee Bar U for the boss. But instead of workin', I have to bring *her* into town and sit around on my ass in this place while she does research for a book she's never going to finish. I guess we've never been in here before when you were working."

Marybeth nodded, ignoring the opening provided to reveal her schedule to Buster. She did her best to keep her reaction in check. "You work for Jim Finotta, then?"

"Yup," Buster said proudly.

"Then she's Jim Finotta's mother?"

"She's his *wife*, for Christ's sake." Buster laughed. "Not his ma."

Marybeth recalled Joe telling her about an old woman at the house, as well as about the stupid ranch hand who she now knew as Buster.

"What is wrong with her?" Marybeth asked gently.

"You mean besides the fact that she's a crabby old bitch?" Buster asked, raising his eyebrows. He actually seemed to think he was charming her, Marybeth thought in amazement. "She's got Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS or ACS or something like that. She's getting worse all of the time. Pretty soon, she'll be flat on her back and her speech will go away completely."

"Are you going to help her?" Marybeth asked archly.

Buster rolled his eyes. "Eventually, yeah. When we're done here."

Marybeth looked at him coldly. "We *are* done here," she said, and left him leaning on the counter while she approached Ginger Finotta.

Ginger Finotta's face was contorted and her lips were pressed together in a kind of sour pucker. Her eyes were rheumy with fluid, but they welcomed Marybeth as she approached. Marybeth removed one of the straight-backed chairs at the nearest table and wheeled Ginger into the empty space.

"Did you find everything you need?" Marybeth asked over Ginger Finotta's shoulder. Marybeth noted the stiff helmet of hair and the woman's skeletal neck and shoulders, which couldn't be hidden by her high-necked print dress.

"Isn't Buster an awful man?" Ginger Finotta asked in a scratchy voice.

"Yes, he is," Marybeth agreed.

"He is an *awful* man."

Marybeth said "Mmmhmmm" and walked around to the other side of the table so they could see each other. It took a moment for Ginger Finotta's eyes to catch up. When they did, Marybeth sensed the immediate pain that the woman was in.

"I'm doing research for my book."

"That's what I understand from Buster."

"How much do you know about the history of Wyoming?" Ginger asked. Her voice was not well modulated, and questions sounded like statements.

Marybeth said she knew a little from school, but wasn't a scholar or historian by any means.

"Do you know about Tom Horn?" Ginger Finotta asked.

"A little, I guess," Marybeth said. "He was a so-called stock detective and he was hanged in Cheyenne for killing a fourteen-year-old boy."

Ginger Finotta nodded almost imperceptibly. "But he didn't do it. He did so many other bad things, though, that it doesn't matter if he shot that boy or not."

Buster had finally left the counter and was approaching the table.

"Mrs. Finotta, do you need anything?" he asked, and shot Marybeth a conspiratorial wink that she ignored.

"I need you to go to some other part of this building. I'll call you when I want to go home."

Buster raised his palms and said "Whoa!" before departing with a smirk on his face.

Ginger Finotta's attention remained on Marybeth. Marybeth wondered if the woman knew anything about the situation between Jim Finotta and Joe. It was hard to guess how lucid she was. She was a prisoner of her twisted and contorted frame.

"You need to know about Tom Horn," Ginger Finotta said, tapping the book on the table. It was called *The Life and Times of Tom Horn, Stock Detective*.

"Why is that?"

The question hung in the air while Ginger's eyes closed, slowly at first and then so tightly that her face trembled. She seemed to be battling through something. When her eyes reopened they were almost blank.

"Because if you know about history, it's easier to understand the present. You know, why we do the things we're doing now."

"What do you mean?" Marybeth asked softly.

Ginger's eyes searched Marybeth's face. She clearly wanted to answer, but suddenly couldn't. Her face trembled, tiny muscles and tendons dancing under waxed-paper skin. She seemed to be concentrating on conquering the tics, trying to get her own body under some kind of control. But when she opened her mouth there was a bubble of spit, and the only sound she made was an angry hiss. Her eyes betrayed her immense disappointment.

Marybeth could not discern where this was headed, or if the woman truly needed help, but she did have to get back to the front counter. A woman with two children was waiting with an arm full of books to check out.

"Are you okay, Miss Finotta?"

The woman nodded that she was.

"I'll read about Tom Horn when you're done with the book," Marybeth said with a forced smile. "I promise. But now I've got to get back. Please let me know if you need anything else while you're here."

As Marybeth started to turn there was a slight movement of Ginger Finotta's thin hands on the table. She was trying unsuccessfully to raise her hand and stop Marybeth from leaving.

"*You don't understand!*" Ginger Finotta squawked, finding her voice again.

Her voice made Marybeth freeze. It carried throughout the library. Newspaper readers in the small lounge area lowered their papers. The woman at the counter and her children turned and stared at the trembling woman. Buster emerged from the periodical aisle with a sour look on his face.

"Are you all right?" Marybeth asked.

"Do I look all right to you?"

Marybeth was confused. "What don't I understand?"

Ginger Finotta's moist eyes swept the ceiling before once again settling on Marybeth. "I know who you are and I know who your husband is."

Marybeth felt a chill crawl up her spine and pull on the roots of her hair.

"That's why you need to know about Tom Horn," Ginger Finotta said, her voice shrill.

"*Let's go,*" Buster spat, suddenly appearing behind Ginger Finotta's wheelchair. Roughly, he pulled the chair out from under the table and started for the front door. Ginger clutched the book to her shrunken breast, as if saving it from a fire.

"Sorry, ladies," Buster called over his shoulder, his toothpick dancing. "Mrs. Finotta is having some trouble here and she needs her rest. *Bye-bye!*"

Marybeth stood stock still, wondering what exactly had just happened. She watched as Buster pushed Mrs. Finotta down the sidewalk, much too fast, toward the handicapped-accessible van he had parked near the front door. Marybeth slowly unclenched her fists, and took a deep breath.

THAT EVENING, MARYBETH told Joe about her experience at the library with Ginger Finotta.

"His wife?" Joe asked, surprised. "That woman was his *wife*?"

Joe said he had heard of Tom Horn before, had read a book a long time ago, about the infamous stock detective.

"I don't get it," he said, confused.

"Neither do I," agreed Marybeth, still shaken.

12

1-90, West of Missoula, Montana

June 27

THE OLD MAN awoke to the sound of the early morning news playing on the pickup radio. He had been having a dream that he was evil. It was a dream like any other dream, but it was from a different perspective. It was on the outside looking in, and his thoughts in the dream were dark, breezy, and grotesque. He saw other people, strangers, in the dream as vacant stooges to be bent to his will or disposed of if they got in the way. There were men, women, and little children and they were crying out. He had pure contempt for them and their suffering, which he saw as weakness. He had never had a dream like that before, and it unsettled him.

He grunted and pulled himself into a sitting position before readjusting the truck seat. It was a beautiful day in Western Montana and it wasn't raining. The Old Man was more comfortable here than in Washington State. The Clark Fork River was on their right. It was fast, white, and tumbling with early summer runoff. Mist hung low and stayed in the valley like a relative. The forested mountainsides were still and dark because the morning sun had not yet lit them, and they were shot through with a mosaic pattern of burn from the fires that had ripped through the land two summers before.

Through bleary eyes he looked at Charlie Tibbs, who was driving. Tibbs nodded good morning, then gestured to the radio. The Old Man yawned and listened. The huge black Ford pickup with smoked dark windows shot through the Lolo National Forest.

It was toward the end of the national news: U.S. Congressman Peter Sollito of Massachusetts had been found murdered in his Watergate apartment in Washington, D.C. The District of Columbia police and the FBI were investigating. Sollito's body had been discovered by his longtime housekeeper. The woman had come in to give the apartment a final cleaning as the congressman had called her the previous week to tell her that he would be going home to Massachusetts in a few days for summer recess. The police were investigating, but so far they had no suspects. The cause of death was not revealed.

But it *would* be, the Old Man said to himself. The news that Sollito was strangled to death by a pair of panty hose in his own bed, and that he was intoxicated at the time of his death would soon be splashed all over the headlines. Trace evidence of lipstick, long, tinted hair, and fibers from a cheap, loud miniskirt would be found in the sheets; a woman's shoe with a long spike heel would be discovered under the bed. The police would have certainly noted the singles' tabloid on Sollito's kitchen counter with the pages opened to listings of prostitutes and escort services. The conclusion to be drawn from all of this was very simple: Sollito had been playing sex games with a woman and the game got out of hand. It would be embarrassing, of course, and humiliating. He was not known for this kind of thing.

The important thing about all of this, as Charlie Tibbs had pointed out to the Old Man as they entered the elevator at the Watergate dressed in maintenance uniforms, was that Sollito would only be remembered for how he died, not for what he did in Congress.

Rep. Peter Sollito, with his position on the Natural Resources Committee and his relationship with the media, was by far the foremost advocate of environmental legislation in the House. Sollito introduced bills halting timbering, mining, natural gas, and petroleum exploration on many federal lands. He killed a proposal to declare a moratorium on grazing fees. He was the most visible "green" Congressman, and the most vocal. Environmental groups loved him and showered him with awards. His constituents were proud of his tough stands on the environment and his high profile.

In Charlie Tibbs's toolbox, in the elevator, had been an envelope with the fibers and hair, the shoe, the singles tabloid, and the pair of black panty hose. The Old Man carried a small daypack containing three bottles of cheap champagne, and he had the pistol. Sollito had opened the door after looking at them through a peephole and deciding they were legitimate. They were just two old guys, after all.

"That took a while, didn't it?" Charlie said after the news was over. "Four days to find him. You'd think a congressman would be missed."

"It seems like months ago," the Old Man said. They had crossed the country from Washington, D.C., to Washington State in the meanwhile. And now they were back in Montana.

"Charlie, don't you ever sleep?" the Old Man asked.

Charlie Tibbs clearly disliked personal questions and so he ignored this one as he had all of the other personal questions the Old Man had asked.

The Old Man shifted his weight and looked through the back window into the bed of the pickup.

"Where did the computer and all that other stuff of Powell's go?"

"Dumped them in a canyon by Lookout Pass," Charlie said. Lookout Pass was on the Idaho-Montana border.

"I didn't even know we stopped."

"I know."

Charlie seemed to resent the fact that the Old Man slept at night. Charlie seemed to resent anything that suggested human frailty of any kind. The Old Man recalled the look Charlie gave him back at Hayden Powell's house when the Old Man didn't want to see Powell's injuries.

"There's some coffee in the Thermos," Charlie said.

"Charlie, do you dream much?" the Old Man asked, finding the Thermos of hot coffee and pouring the remainder into their cups. He knew the question would annoy Tibbs, which was why he asked it. Waking up to the news of Sollito had unsettled him and brought it all rushing back. The situation in Washington, D.C., had been especially troubling to the Old Man. It was much worse than what had happened in the Bighorns or at Hayden Powell's house. Sollito had begged, and had continued begging, for his life even after he was forced to drink the second bottle of champagne and his voice had become a slurred whine. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to escape. He had looked deeply into the Old Man's eyes and asked for mercy, mercy that wasn't granted.

Charlie didn't respond to the question. He seemed uncomfortable with it, and shrugged.

"I had a hell of a dream," the Old Man said, sipping the coffee. "I dreamed I became an evil man. Then I woke up and I still feel evil."

The Old Man watched for a reaction. He knew he was pushing it with Charlie.

"That's a bad dream," Charlie said, finally. "You should just wash that right out of your mind. You are not an evil man."

"Didn't say I was," the Old Man said. "Just said I woke up feeling that way."

"You are a noble man. What we're doing is noble work." It was said with finality.

The Old Man rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I think I need a real bed and a real rest. I hope I can get both when we get to where we're going."

"I hope you can, too," Charlie said. It was another shot at the Old Man's weakness. The set in his face made it clear that as far as he was concerned the topic was finished.

After a lapse of some time, Charlie cleared his throat to speak. "Our employers have heard rumors that some environmental whackos believe that Stewie Woods is still alive because they never found a body."

The Old Man snorted. "He was blown to bits."

"That's how goddamned nuts some of those people are, though. I guess they've got stuff on the Internet about it."

The Old Man just shook his head and chuckled. The early morning sun heated the tops of his thighs through the windshield.

"They don't believe it, do they?" the Old Man asked. "Our employers, I mean."

"No."

The Old Man sipped his coffee and watched Charlie Tibbs drive. He enjoyed watching Tibbs drive. There was such a display of competence, and competence was something the Old Man admired because it was so extremely hard to find. With Charlie Tibbs you always knew where you were going and why. The fears he had the night before about Tibbs he dismissed as manifestations of stress and fatigue.

But the feeling the Old Man had from the dream lingered.

13

ON THE SAME morning, 580 miles to the south-east of Missoula, Montana, Joe got a call about a mountain lion from a homeowner who lived in Elkhorn Ranches. The homeowner claimed he had been stalked. Joe took down the address and said he would there soon.

"You better be quick or I'm going to shoot that son-of-a-bitch," the homeowner told Joe.

On his way out, Joe stopped at the breakfast table to kiss the girls and jokingly complained about "sloppy milk kisses," which set them to howling. Even Sheridan, at the ripe old age of ten, still participated in the mock outrage over their dad's early morning taunts. It was either about "breakfast kisses" or when he complimented them all on their lovely early morning hairdos before they got dressed and groomed themselves for school.

Marybeth followed him out the front door. Joe was already at his green Game and Fish pickup before he realized she was still with him. Maxine bounded out of the house and launched herself into the cab of the truck.

"I'm still disturbed about what happened yesterday in the library," Marybeth said. Joe hoped for more.

He nodded, and turned to her.

Marybeth shook her head. "I feel horribly sorry for that woman, but she scared me."

"What she looked like or what she said?" Joe asked, putting his arms around her, tucking her head under his chin and looking out toward Wolf Mountain, but not really seeing it.

“Both.”

Her hair smelled fresh, and he kissed the top of her head.

“She scared the hell out of me the first time, too,” Joe said. “She was sort of hidden in the curtains at their house.”

“I feel bad about being so repulsed.” Marybeth said quietly. “A disease like that could afflict any of us.”

Joe wasn’t sure what to say. He rarely thought in those terms. Right now, he only wanted to keep her close. He was grateful for the moment.

“That Tom Horn business puzzles me,” she said. “I’m still not sure if Ginger Finotta is just crazy, or if she’s trying to tell me something.”

“Maybe we ought to read up on the guy,” Joe offered.

“I’m waiting for her to return the book,” Marybeth said. “It’s the only copy the library has. I did a search on the computer trying to find it in another collection, but the book is really obscure. I found a copy in Bend, Oregon, and sent them an e-mail but haven’t heard back.”

He hugged her tightly. After a moment, she pulled away, but gently.

“Any chance you’ll get home early this afternoon?” she asked slyly. “The girls all have swimming lessons after school and won’t be home until five.”

Finally, Joe thought.

He smiled at her. He was wearing a department baseball cap until he could get his hat reshaped.

“Sounds like a proposition.”

Marybeth smiled mysteriously and turned toward the house.

“Get home early enough and you’ll find out,” she said over her shoulder.

THE THREE-STORY red brick home was easy to find because it was the only house on Grand Teton Street in Elkhorn Ranches. All three acres had been recently landscaped with grass, mature Caragana bushes, and ten-foot aspens. The sod was so new that Joe could still see all of the seams in the yard. Joe couldn’t see a mountain lion anywhere.

As he pulled into the driveway from the road, one of the four garage doors began to open. As the door raised Joe saw a pair of fleece slippers, pajama legs of dark blue silk, a thick beige terrycloth robe cinched tight around a large belly, and the rest of a large gray-bearded man holding the garage door opener in one hand and a semi-automatic pistol in the other. The gun startled Joe and he froze behind the wheel. One arm was raised toward Joe. Luckily, it was the remote that was raised, not the pistol. Beside Joe, Maxine growled through the windshield.

Both Joe and the homeowner, at the same instant, realized that if Joe drew and fired, the shooting would be considered justified. The homeowner was armed and standing in the shadows of his garage. The man’s raised arm could have easily been mistaken for a threatening gesture. Quickly, the homeowner sidestepped and placed the pistol on a workbench. The man then shook his empty hand as if he had dropped something too hot to hold and an embarrassed look passed over the man’s face. Joe let his breath

out, aware for the first time that he had been holding it in. If he had been out to get me, Joe thought sourly, it would all be over and he'd be the one left standing. Joe wasn't even sure where his pistol *was* at that moment. In the field, where nearly every human Joe encountered was armed, Joe was duly cautious and kept his gun with him at all times. But at this huge new showplace home, in a perfectly square three-acre oasis of textured and manicured greenery, in the middle of a huge sagebrush expanse, he had not expected to run into an armed man.

The homeowner approached Joe's pickup with a forced smile.

"Do you need to change your pants inside?" the homeowner grinned at Joe as if sharing an inside joke. Joe knew he must have looked terrified for a moment, and he felt an embarrassed flush crawl up his neck.

As Joe stepped out and shut the door to the pickup, he shot a glance inside the cab. His holster and gun belt were on the floor where he had left them the night before, the belt buckled around the four-wheel-drive gearshift.

"You okay?" the man asked, thrusting out his hand. "I'm Stan Wilder."

Joe shook it and said he was just fine. Joe guessed that Stan Wilder was in his late sixties and new to the area. His accent was north eastern and his words came fast. He had perfect big teeth that he flashed as he talked. The faded blonde-gray mustache and beard that surrounded the man's mouth looked dull and washed out in comparison with his gleaming teeth.

"I was walking out to get the newspaper," Stan Wilder nodded toward the red plastic *Saddlestring Roundup* box mounted on a T-post at the end of his driveway, "when the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. Then I looked over there"—Wilder pointed toward a new row of spindly aspen trees—"and saw the mountain lion stalking me. I'm not ashamed to say that I was about as scared as you were just a minute ago!" He clapped Joe on the back.

Joe stepped far enough away so that Stan Wilder couldn't do that again.

"How long ago did you see the mountain lion?" Joe asked. He chose not to reciprocate Stan Wilder's banter.

"Must have been about seven this morning."

"Did you see him run off?"

Wilder laughed, throwing his head back and showing his teeth again. Joe guessed that he must have been in sales and marketing before he retired and moved west to Elkhorn Ranches.

"Nope, but he saw *me* run right back into the house! That's when I got my weapon out and called you."

"You didn't take any shots at him, did you?"

Somehow, Joe knew he had. Stan Wilder's face betrayed the answer.

"He was on my property, Warden," Wilder explained. "I popped a couple of caps. But I didn't hit him."

Joe nodded. "You ought to reconsider the next time you want to fire your pistol out here. The highway is just over the hill and there are construction workers framing a

house in the next draw. You could hit one of them and you could also hit one of Jim Finotta's cows. They graze fairly close to here."

Stan Wilder snorted and rolled his eyes heavenward.

Joe walked over and checked the ground around the aspen trees. Because the trees had been planted just a few days before, the earth around them was still soft. A four-inch-long cat track was obvious and fresh near one of the trees.

"Big cat," Joe said.

"Damn right," Wilder agreed. "I need him removed."

Joe turned and sighed. "Removed?"

"Damn right. I don't mind the antelope and the deer. I see them all the time. I *paid* for antelope and deer and access to the trout streams. Finotta told me that elk sometimes come down this far and I'd like to see a few of them. That'd be added value.

"But I didn't pay for this," he swept his hand toward his new house, "to have mountain lions stalking me."

Joe said it was unlikely that the lion was stalking him. He told Stan Wilder that he had never heard of a mountain lion actually stalking and attacking a full-grown man.

"What about those babies in Los Angeles?" Wilder asked aggressively. "Didn't a mountain lion come down from the mountains and kill some babies?"

Joe said he thought he remembered something about that story, but the predator was a coyote and the circumstances were questionable.

"Well, I remember it being a mountain lion," Stan Wilder said gruffly.

"Look, Mr. Wilder, mountain lion sightings are rare. There's no doubt you saw one, but he didn't do any harm. Up until a year ago this was probably his range. These cats cover about two hundred miles. He was likely as surprised to see a big house and a lawn here as you were to see him. I know *I* was surprised to see this place out here."

Stan Wilder told Joe that he had just heard a perfect load of bureaucratic bullshit.

"If he comes back, can I shoot him?" Stan Wilder asked. "I mean legally?"

Joe grudgingly said that yes, if the cat was actually close enough to do real harm, he could shoot him.

"But I would advise against it," Joe cautioned.

"Whose side are you on here, Mr. Game Warden? The cougar's or mine?"

Joe didn't answer that question.

"That mountain lion better watch his step," Stan Wilder cautioned, nodding his head toward the handgun in the garage. "If you catch my drift."

"Like I said, there are cars on the highway, workers at other lots, and cows all around."

Wilder snorted again.

"You should be aware, Mr. Wilder, that some of these cows have been known to explode," Joe said soberly.

That got Wilder's attention.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Wilder asked, trying to gauge Joe's demeanor to see if he was being made fun of.

"Don't you read the paper?" Joe asked, then walked back to his pickup.

A BIG GREEN Suburban with license plates reading "VBarU-1" turned from the highway onto the ranch road as Joe approached the turnoff. Joe stopped his pickup, and the Suburban slowed until the two driver's-side windows lined up. A dark power window lowered and Jim Finotta, looking patiently put upon, asked Joe if he could be of help.

"Yes, you can." Joe said. "You can help me out with a couple of things."

Finotta raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

"First, you might want to advise the owners of the starter castles out here that in addition to this being a place where the deer and antelope play, that there might be the occasional bear, badger, skunk, or mountain lion."

Finotta nodded and smiled with condescension.

"Second, you can let me get that sample of bone or antler from that bull elk mount in your office. I'll send the sample to our lab in Laramie and we should be able to clear this all up in two or three weeks."

Finotta's eyes became hard.

"Did you forget what we talked about?" Finotta asked Joe.

"Nope."

"Then why are you bothering me about this elk again?" Finotta asked in a barely controlled tone. "You can't be that stupid."

"I don't know," Joe said, "I can be pretty stupid."

Finotta's window began to rise.

"I talked to Matt Sandvick," Joe said quickly.

The window stopped just below Finotta's chin. Finotta's lips were now pressed together so tightly that they looked like a thin white scar. He was obviously furious, but fighting it. When he spoke his voice was oddly calm.

"Just leave it be, Warden."

Joe shrugged. "I'm doing my job. It's important for me to check these things out."

Finotta sneered. "Important for who? The Governor won't care and therefore your director won't care. Judge Pennock won't give a shit."

"It's important for me," Joe said, and he meant it.

"And just who in the hell are *you*?" Finotta asked with such contempt that Joe felt as if he had been kicked in the face.

"I'm the game warden of Twelve Sleep District," Joe said. He was fully aware of how lame that sounded, how weak it had come across.

Finotta glared at him. He began to say something, then thought better of it. The window closed and Jim Finotta drove away, leaving Joe sitting in his pickup with a sick feeling in his stomach and the premonition that he was going to be real alone in this.

THAT AFTERNOON, AS he drove home, Joe called County Attorney Robey Hersig on his cellphone, only to get Hersig's voicemail. Joe outlined what he suspected regarding Jim Finotta's elk and what he had learned from taxidermist Matt Sandvick.

"I'm ready to move on Finotta but need Sandvick's affidavit and your okay," was how he ended his message.

14

TO JOB'S SURPRISE, Marybeth had both horses in the corral and saddled when he got home. She was bridling her paint, Toby, as he walked up. She looked at him provocatively and said: "Let's go for a ride."

"Sounds real good to me," Joe grinned.

Joe rode his buckskin, Lizzie, who was happy to follow the gelding, and they wound up the old game trail behind their house through the Sandrock Draw.

While they rode, Joe watched his wife and her horse and admired them both. Marybeth had taken an interest in horses in the last year, and he had learned things about them through her. Previously, he had always thought of horses the same way he thought about an all-terrain vehicle. A horse was a tool; a way of getting to places without roads, of accessing rough country. In Joe's opinion, a horse would lose in many, if not all, of the straight-up comparisons with an ATV, in fact. Although the initial investment was about the same, horses required daily maintenance and care. ATVs could be parked in the garage and forgotten. Hay, grain, and vet bills were expensive, and horses were always breaking things in the corral or injuring themselves in ridiculous ways. ATVs just sat there. If a single stray nail flipped into the corral, there was a 100 percent chance that a horse would step on it, eat it, or puncture himself on it while rolling. Horses could be counted on for eating things that would make them sick or not eating enough to keep them healthy. They were magnificently proportioned and heavily muscled and all of that bulk was held up by four thin bony legs that could, and did, snap at any time. And despite their size and heft, a horse was a prey animal. In the face of a real threat like a grizzly bear or a perceived threat like a motorcyclist on a side road or even a plastic bag blowing in the wind, a horse could bolt and take off like a rocket. Most of the injured hunters Joe encountered in the mountains had been injured by horses. He couldn't even guess the number of times that horses simply ran off from camps or makeshift corrals. Lizzie had once trotted miles away after Joe dismounted to look through his binoculars, and he spent the rest of the day chasing her on foot. In comparison, ATVs sometimes ran out of gas or broke down, although not very often.

But through Marybeth, Joe was starting to think about horses differently. She was firm with them, but nurturing. She brought out their personalities. Toby had been an impetuous youth. He was never mean or dangerous, but he preferred his own company and was loath to do anything he didn't want to do—and what he wanted to do, primarily, was eat and rest. But she worked with him for months. Unlike old-time horsemen who were quick to reach for a whip or a two-by-four, Marybeth "asked" the horse to do things and he eventually did them. It was amazing that a woman

Marybeth's size could gain the trust and respect of a big lazy gelding like Toby who weighed 1,100 pounds. It was as if she had convinced him—connected with something somewhere in his cloudy, preconditioned, herd-instinctive brain—that she was bigger and more dominant than he was.

All these years, Joe had simply been *using* Lizzie, not *riding* her. She was a good horse, trouble at times, but generally docile. He had been lucky she was so easy to manage because he was no horseman. Through watching and admiring Marybeth he was coming to appreciate true horsemen and horsewomen. And horses.

And there was something to be said for the feeling he got when he was riding a horse. That feeling—Marybeth called it “equine communication” or “being one with the horse”—could not be replicated in an ATV.

They cleared the Sandrock Draw and emerged on a grassy bench strewn with glacial boulders. The Bighorn Mountains, as well as the distant encroaching foothills furred with early summer grass were in the distance in front of them and the view was awe-inspiring. A fading jet trail cut across the sky, calling attention to the lack of clouds. Joe urged Lizzie forward so he could ride side-by-side with Marybeth.

That's when she told him about Stewie Woods and Hayden Powell and the reporter who kept calling.

Joe listened, asking only a few questions, steering away from the one he really wanted to ask.

“I slept with him once. Only once,” Marybeth said, wincing, anticipating Joe. On cue, Joe moaned and slumped in his saddle as if hit by a rifle bullet.

“Aaugh,” he groaned. “Yuck. Yipes.”

She stifled a smile.

She told him that she had read in the library that Hayden had died recently as well; killed just a week ago in a fire in his home. Joe said he had learned of the fact from two anti-globalist drifters.

“So were you an ecoterrorist?” Joe asked, still wounded. This was a disquieting circumstance to be in, asking his wife about things he had never known about her.

“No, I never was,” Marybeth answered. “But I was with them a few times when they did things like pull up survey stakes and pour sugar in gas tanks. I never did any of those things, but I was there. And I never told on them.”

Joe nodded.

“This reporter,” he asked. “Has he called back?”

“Twice,” Marybeth said.

“Do you want me to talk to him? Would that help?”

She waved her hand. “He'll go away. I'm not worried about that.”

Joe fell behind because they had to thread through two boulders, then caught up again.

“So why didn't you ever tell me any of this? Stewie Woods was a pretty famous guy in his way.”

Marybeth thought for a moment. "It just didn't seem necessary. How could it have mattered?"

"It might just have been good to know," Joe said, unsure of whether or not that was true.

"Why?"

Joe shrugged. Like most men, he had a tough time believing that his wife had had any kind of interesting life before she met *him*. Which was ridiculous on its face.

"The good part of my life started when I met Joe Pickett," Marybeth said, looking deeply into his eyes. Joe felt his face go red. He knew what that look meant. He had just never seen it on horseback before.

"I brought a blanket," she said, in a tone so low he hoped he had heard her correctly.

THEY APPROACHED THE corral as the school bus stopped and the door opened and the girls ran out. Lucy and April ran into the house to dry their hair from swimming. Sheridan, with her towel and sack of clothes in her arms, walked up to meet them, her thongs snapping on her bare feet.

"Hi, darlin'," Joe greeted her, leading Lizzie into the corral.

Sheridan just looked at him. Her gaze moved from Joe's face to her mother's. Joe noted that Marybeth's face glowed and she looked very pleased with herself, although she now sternly returned Sheridan's gaze.

"What?" Joe asked.

Sheridan slowly shook her head. It was the same gesture Marybeth used when she couldn't believe what her children had just done.

"You still have grass in your hair," Sheridan told her mother, her voice deadpan.

Marybeth gently scolded Sheridan. "You should be happy that your mom and dad like each other so much that they go on a ride together." While she talked she self-consciously brushed through her hair with her fingers to remove the grass.

Then Joe got it. For the second time in an hour, he flushed red.

From the house, Lucy yelled out that there was a telephone call for Marybeth.

"Go ahead," Joe said. "I'll untack. Sheridan, why don't you go with her?"

He didn't want Sheridan staring at him anymore. She was getting too old, and too wise. She huffed and went into the house, making sure to stay several feet away from her mother.

AS JOE WAS hanging the bridles on a hook inside the shed, Marybeth entered the barn. Joe assumed she was there to talk about how Sheridan had reacted. He was wrong.

"It happened again," Marybeth said.

"That reporter?"

"I think so ..." Marybeth looked troubled. "But this time he was posing as Stewie. He said he wanted to see me again."

"Are you sure it was the reporter?"

Marybeth held up her palms. "It had to be."

Joe carried the saddles to the saddletrees and folded the warm, moist horse blankets over a crossbar to dry.

“Did he *sound* like Stewie?” Joe asked.

Marybeth let a chuckle creep into her voice. “I haven’t talked to Stewie Woods in years. It kind of sounded like him, but it didn’t sound right. It was sort of as if someone were trying to imitate his voice.”

Joe stopped and thought. He gripped his chin in his hand in a pose that made the girls whisper, “*Dad’s thinking!*”

“It was weird,” she said. “I just hung up on him.”

“Next time,” Joe said, “Don’t hang up. Keep him talking until you can figure out who it is. And if I’m here, let me know so I can get on the other line.”

Marybeth agreed, and they walked back to the house together. Before they opened the door, Joe reached out for her hand and squeezed it.

THAT NIGHT, IN bed, Joe lay awake with his hands clasped behind his head on the pillow and one knee propped up outside the sheets. It had been the first warm evening of the early summer and it hadn’t cooled off yet. The bedroom window was open and a breeze ruffled the curtains.

“Are you awake?” he whispered to Marybeth.

Marybeth purred, and turned to look at him.

“Sometimes I wish I were smarter,” he said.

“Why do you say that?” Her voice was hoarse—she had been sleeping. Marybeth was a light sleeper, a carry-over from when the children were younger.

“You’re one of the smartest guys I know,” she said, putting her warm hand on his chest. “That’s why I married you.”

“I’m not smart enough, though.”

“Why?”

Joe exhaled loudly. “There’s something big going on all around us, but I can’t connect the dots. I know it’s out there, and I keep trying to look at things from a different angle or perspective, thinking maybe then I’ll see it. But it’s just not coming clear.”

“What are you talking about, Joe?”

He raised his hand and counted off: “Stewie Woods, Jim Finotta, Ginger Finotta, that Raga character and his friends, the reporter, Hayden Powell, Jim Finotta—”

“You already said Jim Finotta,” she murmured.

“Well, he really pisses me off.”

“*Anyway—*” she prompted.

“Anyway, I think that if I were smarter I could see how they all connect. And there *is* some kind of connection. That I’m sure of.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

He thought, rubbed his eyes. The breeze was filling the room, taking the temperature down to comfortable sleeping conditions.

“I just am,” he said.

She laughed softly. "You're smarter than you think."

"You're shining me on, darling."

"Good night." She hugged him and rolled over.

"That was fun this afternoon," he said. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*. Now, good night."

Joe remained awake for a while longer. He recalled Raga saying the "people who did this will come back." He wondered if he would recognize them if they did.

15

Choteau, Montana

June 29

CHARLIE TIBBS AND the Old Man were parked behind a chain-link fence bordering an airstrip near Choteau, Montana. To the west were the broad shoulders of the Flathead range under a bleached denim sky. A morning rain—one of those odd ones where the bank of clouds had already passed out of view before the rain finally made it to earth—had dampened the concrete of the two old runways and beaded the black hood of the pickup.

Three-quarters of a mile away, a door opened on the second of four small private airplane hangars. Charlie Tibbs raised binoculars to his eyes. He would provide the commentary.

"They opened the door."

"I see that," the Old Man said.

The Old Man was, if possible, even more miserable than he had been the week before. Even though they had eaten a real dinner at a truckstop (steak, mashed potatoes, corn, apple pie, coffee) and had taken a break en route to Choteau to sleep the night at a motel in Lewistown, he didn't feel like he had gotten any real rest. His mind was doing things to him that were unsettling and unfair. He had nightmares about Peter Sollito, Hayden Powell, and Stewie Woods, as well as dreams peopled by friends and neighbors he hadn't seen in 40 years. Everyone seemed to disapprove of him now. They clucked and pointed, and shunned him when he walked over to them. His own grandmother, dead for 22 years, pursed her lips defiantly and refused to speak to him. He'd had the same kind of disturbing, unconnected, fantastic dreams before, but only when he was feverish. His back was sore from sitting in the pickup and even the real bed two nights before hadn't helped unbend him. His back muscles were in tight knots and it hurt to raise his arms. His eyes were rimmed with red and they burned when he opened them. He wouldn't have been all that surprised if his reflection in the visor mirror showed two eyes like glowing coals. He had taken to wearing dark glasses. It flabbergasted him that Charlie Tibbs did not seem to require sleep. This must have been what the Crusades were like, the Old Man thought.

Now they were here in Choteau, 150 miles south of the Canadian border, waiting for a woman to get her airplane out of a hangar and fly away so she would die. The world did not seem particularly real to him this morning.

Their target was an effective and obsessive wolf-reintroduction advocate named Emily Betts. Betts had almost single-handedly brought about gray wolf reintroduction into Yellowstone and Central Idaho through her writings, protests, website, and testimony at hearings. The reintroduction was violently opposed by ranchers, hunters, and other locals. She had been photographed several years before walking side-by-side with the Secretary of Interior when he helped carry the first reintroduced wolves through the snow to their release pens in Yellowstone Park. The Old Man had once read the transcript of a speech Emily Betts gave before the Bring Back the Wolf Foundation in Bozeman. She had said that if the Western ranchers and Congress would not allow nature to exist in the sacred circle of predator and prey, then the same disgusting breed of animals that eliminated the predators in the first place must take the responsibility for their animal genocide and legally or illegally reintroduce the species they had destroyed. By “disgusting breed of animals” she meant humans, and by “animal genocide” she meant the poisoning, trapping, and shooting of wolves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But the reintroduction by the federal government wasn’t happening fast enough for Emily Betts, and so she was now running a secret operation of her own, funded by donations. Wolves were being trapped in Canada where they were plentiful, transported to Choteau, and reintroduced throughout the mountain West by Betts in a private plane.

REMARKABLY, WHEN THEY arrived at the hangar at 3 a.m., the Old Man and Charlie Tibbs had found an unlocked side door and they quietly entered, shutting the door behind them. It was completely dark inside.

Before the Old Man could thumb the switch on his flashlight, there was a desperate scramble of sounds. They were not alone in the hangar.

The Old Man had instinctively dropped to one knee, and Charlie Tibbs did the same. The Old Man heard the distinctive sound of Charlie working the slide of his pistol to jack a cartridge into the chamber and fully expected a blaze of light to suddenly reveal them—*caught at last!*—followed by a volley of explosions as Charlie blazed away. But instead of light, there was a low rumbling growl that had chilled the Old Man to his bones.

They were frozen in place, completely in the dark, all senses tingling. The Old Man imagined the yawning muzzle of Charlie’s pistol sweeping across the inside of the hangar.

Finally, Charlie whispered for the light. The Old Man lowered the toolbox until it settled silently on the concrete floor and then unsnapped his gun holster. The Old Man aimed the unlit flashlight toward the sounds with his left hand and with his right, parallel to the flashlight, pointed his 9mm. He snapped on the flashlight and beyond

the beam, in the gloom, eight dull red eyes looked back. The growl tapered into a whine.

Four full-sized gray wolves, ranging in color from jet black to light gray, their heads hung low, stared at Tibbs and the Old man with pagan laser eyes reflecting from behind the bars of a stout metal cage. The wolves had no doubt been live-trapped in Glacier Park or Canada, and transported to Choteau. From there they would be loaded on Emily Betts's aging Cessna airplane and flown south to the unknown mountains to further re-establish the breed.

Tibbs and the Old Man stood up, their old bones crackling. Tibbs holstered his revolver and followed the Old Man toward the airplane.

It was simple work, but it required skill. The Old Man held the flashlight while Tibbs took a razor blade utility knife to a half-dozen black hydraulic hoses snaking out from the motor. He shaved long slices from them, but was careful not to cut through the hoses completely. The idea was to weaken the hydraulic hoses so that under pressure, in the air, they would burst. It wouldn't do to cut all the way through the hoses and leave telltale puddles of hydraulic fluid beneath the aircraft that might be seen in the morning. The hoses need to burst in flight, while Emily Betts was flying down the spine of the Rocky Mountain front.

Whether Emily Betts would realize she was out of fluid from the gauge and turn back or continue on would make no difference. Either way, she wouldn't likely be able to land safely, unless she was just one hell of a pilot. Tibbs had said he doubted that was the case.

"LOOK. THERE SHE is," Tibbs said, and leaned back. The Old Man rubbed his eyes beneath his dark glasses, trying to see.

The propeller of the small airplane was nosing out from the dark inside, as Emily Betts and a man pushed it out. Betts was wearing an olive-drab flight suit. She was a heavy woman, and looked strong as she bent forward, pushing the strut. The Old Man could not see her face clearly from such a distance.

"They must have already loaded the wolves in the airplane," Tibbs said. "I wonder what kind of ruckus they make inside."

"She's opened the door and about to climb in," Tibbs continued. "She started the engine. Oh-oh, there is fluid coming out of the engine. One of the hoses already broke."

The Old Man felt himself tense up. The plan could go awry. If it did, they would have to stay until the job was done. The thought of that possibility nauseated him.

"It's pouring out of the airplane," Tibbs said. "I can't tell whether her assistant can see it or not."

"She's going to check the gauges," the Old Man speculated. "She's going to know there's something wrong."

"The plane's moving," Tibbs countered.

The Old Man watched. The airplane was moving too quickly now for Tibbs to keep the binoculars on it. The Cessna built up speed on the runway. Both of them knew it

still wasn't too late for Emily Betts to notice the leakage and abort the takeoff. The sound of the engine wound up to a high pitch.

The Old Man held his breath and watched the airplane, and saw its shadow form below it as it moved down the runway. The shadow began to shrink, and then it shot away into the sagebrush. Emily Betts was airborne. Back at the hangar, the man who had helped Betts push the Cessna stood by the open door, watched the plane with a hand at his brow, and then went inside. The hangar door closed. He had obviously not noticed anything wrong.

They watched the Cessna turn south until it was a shiny white speck above the mountains.

THE BIG BLACK Ford was approaching the town of Augusta, Montana, from the north when the Old Man rolled his head over in the seat to address Charlie. The headrest pinched the bow of his dark glasses so that the lenses shifted on his face to the right, making his face look lopsided. He didn't care.

"How many more, Charlie?" He asked.

Tibbs didn't respond with his usual glare. He was always in an especially good mood when his plans worked out as intended.

"One," Tibbs said. "Just one more."

The Old Man let his breath whistle out through his teeth. "Thank God for that," he said.

"You won't mind this one," Charlie said. "This one is a *lawyer*."

The Old Man smiled, more at Charlie's rare attempt at levity than the fact that the next target was a lawyer.

Tibbs turned and smiled an awkward smile back at the Old Man. "We've done good work. We've been losing for thirty years. We've just been sitting back and taking it and taking it and *taking it* because we think that somewhere, somehow the politicians or judges will wake up and set things right. But we've waited too long and we've been too quiet. We've let them have just about everything they want from us. It's about damn frigging time our side went on the offensive. And you and me are the front line. *We are the warriors*," Charlie's voice hissed.

"We've opened a gaping hole in the front line of the environmentalists. All of those bastards with their sandals and little glasses and lawsuits and trust funds don't even know what's hit them yet. Now it's up to our employers to take advantage of that gap in their front line and ram straight the hell through it. This is the first step in reclaiming our land, and our West."

The Old Man was speechless. Since he had met Charlie Tibbs three months before, throughout the training and the traveling, Tibbs had not spoken this much in a single week. Charlie Tibbs was eloquent, determined, and filled with righteous vengeance and passion. He was also, the Old Man reflected, the most terrifying man he had ever met.

THE NEXT MORNING, Twelve Sleep County Attorney Robey Hersig looked up from his desk, saw Joe Pickett standing at his door with his hat in hand, and sighed theatrically.

“Joe, come on in and please close the door,” Hersig said, pushing his chair back. “You’re not going to like what I’m going to tell you.”

Joe entered and sat down in a worn hardback chair facing Hersig’s desk. The office was tiny and claustrophobic. Even with his knees tight up against the desk, Joe could still be hit by the door if someone opened it. Three of the four walls in the office were covered with bookcases of legal volumes. An old beige computer monitor, stained with fingerprints, sat lifeless on the desk. Behind Robey was his framed University of Wyoming Law School diploma and a photo of his young son holding a 13-inch brown trout. Hersig was in his first term of office but was well known throughout the county because his father and uncles were third-generation ranchers. Hersig had rodeoed in college until he broke both his pelvis and sternum at the Deadwood rodeo, which was when he decided to get serious about law school. Joe did not know Hersig well on a personal level, but they had gotten along professionally. Joe had come to Hersig with two previous cases. Hersig had aggressively prosecuted a local pilot who used a helicopter to herd elk into a clearing so his 13-year-old son could shoot them. In the second case, Hersig hadn’t had any qualms recommending high fines for a fisherman Joe caught with 57 trout—51 over the limit.

Hersig was tall and balding, with short salt-and-pepper hair and a close-cropped beard. He liked to wear his large rodeo buckles with his suit in court. He was methodical and persuasive, and the only criticism Joe had heard about him was that he was extra cautious, that he insisted the sheriff bring him only cases that were airtight.

“I was going to call you,” Hersig said.

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d see if you were in,” Joe explained. “I need to ask Sheriff Barnum a couple of things about that Stewie Woods incident.” Barnum’s paper-strewn office was down the hall in the county building.

“I hope to hell that’s the last exploding cow in my county,” Hersig lamented.

“So what is it that I’m not going to like?” Joe asked.

Hersig leaned back in his chair and put his boots up on the desk. He looked squarely at Joe.

“Jim Finotta is an asshole. Everybody knows that.”

Joe nodded.

“But we’re not going to take these poaching charges against him any further.”

Joe waited for a punch line. There wasn’t one. He felt anger start to well up, but he stayed measured.

“Yes?”

Hersig swung his feet down and leaned forward. “I went and talked to Matt Sandvick so we could prepare his affidavit. He denies that he ever did any work for Finotta and

denies he even talked with you about the man. He no longer has that photo you told me about, and his records from June suddenly can't be found."

"I can't believe it," Joe said, stunned.

"You should have kept that picture, Joe," Hersig said.

Joe looked away. Of course he should have. But he had taken Sandvick at his word.

"Did you tell Finotta that Sandvick was going to blow the whistle on him?" Hersig asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Joe thought for a moment, then: "Yup. I did tell him that when I saw him the other day."

Hersig raised his hands in a "what can I do?" gesture.

"I trusted Matt," Joe said.

"What's not to trust about Matt?" Hersig said cynically.

"Finotta got to him, didn't he?" Joe asked.

Hersig looked thoughtful. "Probably. But there's not a whole hell of a lot we can do to prove it unless Sandvick changes his mind again. And believe me, if he changes his mind, Finotta will slaughter him in court and point out that Sandvick changed his story three different times. That's not real credible."

Joe shook his head. "What kind of a guy are we dealing with here? Finotta, I mean. Would he intimidate a witness over a poaching charge?" Joe knew that if Finotta were convicted, he would, at best, lose his hunting privileges and have to pay \$10,000 in fines. Finotta could certainly afford *that*. Game violations were shamefully lenient compared to other crimes, Joe thought.

Hersig smiled ruefully. "You know about those big hunters he hosts every year. He's got the governor, both senators. Lawyers and judges from all over. It would be a real loss of stature if word got out that he was convicted for poaching. That's a crime for low-lives, not big-time lawyers and developers. It would get press attention and embarrass the hell out of Finotta in front of his big-shot pals. So you bet he'll fight it. He's the kind of guy who will work behind the scenes and call in all his chits to get what he wants. Finotta isn't the kind of guy to just accept a bad hand."

"Look, Joe," Hersig said, "Finotta's made most of his money by settling cases out of court. He's merciless in working the system and putting pressure on people. He's even been officially warned about intimidating those who plan to testify, but never brought up on charges, and no sanctions have ever been filed against him."

Joe sighed. Then he thought of something.

"I still have the DNA sample of the dead elk," Joe said eagerly. "We don't need Sandvick if we can get that mount and prove that it's a match."

Hersig shook his head. "I thought of that. I brought it up with Judge Pennock and he won't sign a warrant to go get that elk. He told me he thinks you've harassed Mr. Finotta quite enough."

"He said *that*?"

"It's a direct quote."

Joe banged the desk with his knuckles. "Finotta is Pennock's pal. Pennock has an interest in Elkhorn Ranches." Finotta, Joe thought, played in a different league than he or Robey Hersig.

Hersig held up his hand to caution Joe. "It's best not to cast aspersions on the judge in this office."

"Shouldn't Judge Pennock give this one to another judge? Isn't this a conflict of interest?"

"Recuse himself, you mean?" Hersig said, raising his eyebrows. "Do you actually want me to suggest that to him?"

Joe read in Hersig's expression that challenging Judge Pennock was absolutely the last thing Hersig wanted to do.

"Yup," Joe said. "That's exactly what I want to do. What about Judge what's-his-name in Johnson County?"

"Judge Cohn?" Hersig placed both of his hands on his face and rubbed his eyes as if Joe were torturing him.

"There isn't a person in Twelve Sleep County that wouldn't think it was wrong for Judge Pennock to preside over a crime involving his business partner," Joe said. "Even Pennock can understand *that*."

"Joe—"

"So you need to ask Pennock to assign the case to another judge," Joe said, and stood up.

Hersig looked up and spoke sharply. "Joe, what you're talking about will get you in all kinds of trouble. You think Finotta is going to give up? He's got a personal line to the governor, and to your director. I've got to tell you this case is really weak. You've got a witness who recanted and the only way you can prove anything is to get an order from a judge in another county to search the home of a Twelve Sleep County rancher and lawyer. Do you really think that mount will still be on the wall when you go to get it? My guess is that instead of that elk, there will be a charming English hunting print or some damn thing."

Now Hersig stood up, his face softening. "Joe, I like you. You are one of the few good guys I know. But this has turned into one of those cases where a truck backs up to the courthouse and dumps a huge pile of steaming shit on the floor. My job would be to try to convince the judge and jury that somewhere in all of that shit a gem of a case is buried, if they'll just be patient and get used to the smell. And to tell you the truth, if you were to keep pressing, it *would* start to sound a little like harassment."

Joe listened. He was surprised how vehement Hersig was.

"Keep this up and I might be prosecuting *you*, Joe."

"This just really makes me mad," Joe said. "The guy killed the biggest elk in the Bighorns and left the meat."

Hersig waved Joe away. "I know. I know. You already told me that. There's just not much I can do here."

Joe turned and fumbled to open the door without banging the chair he had been sitting in.

“Joe!” Hersig called after him.

Joe leaned back into the office.

“I hate to say this, but usually the assholes win.”

Joe stood silently for a moment, then put his hat on his head.

“Seems like, in this county, they do,” Joe said, and closed the door hard.

SHERIFF O. R. “Bud” Barnum was in his office and Joe walked in as Barnum checked his watch.

“I’ve got a lunch meeting planned,” Barnum said, raising his heavy-lidded eyes. “You should have called ahead.”

“This will take five minutes,” Joe stated. The meeting with Hersig had battered him. He was humiliated, angry, and frustrated with how it had gone. He was mad at himself for trusting Sandvick and not anticipating how slick and effective Finotta could be. He wondered how much time Finotta had spent in the last week anticipating Joe’s moves and countering them, and wondered what Finotta was telling the judge, the governor, and the director of the agency about him.

Joe decided to start the conversation with the less incendiary topic and told Barnum about the branch in the tree and asked if it had been examined for blood, hair, or fiber. Barnum looked at Joe with barely disguised impatience.

“You’re here to ask me about one particular branch in a particular tree?”

“It’s in the shape of a fishhook,” Joe said.

Joe accepted how silly it sounded. But after the meeting with Hersig, his well of embarrassment was dry. Joe described the location of the tree, how the branch could almost certainly support the weight of a man, and how the branch was stained dark red. He left out his feeling of being watched that night.

Barnum shook his head slowly, as if Joe Pickett had disappointed him.

“So you’re cowboying again, huh?” Barnum asked. “Following up on my investigation like you did when those outfitters got killed?”

Joe fought the urge to bring up the fact that Barnum had botched that investigation and had reached the wrong conclusion well before Joe ever got involved.

Barnum stood up and looked at his watch again. “The state crime lab boys photographed, tested, and measured everything up there. I would guess they looked at your branch as well. However, I will ask my deputy to send them an e-mail to confirm that. Are we through?”

“We’re through except for one thing.”

“And that is?” Barnum asked, reaching for his jacket.

“I’m going to petition Judge Cohn in Johnson County for a search warrant for Jim Finotta’s residence,” Joe said flatly. “Then I’m going to arrest that son-of-a-bitch for poaching.”

This froze Barnum. Slowly, the sheriff swiveled his head toward Joe. Barnum’s eyes, which had seen just about everything, showed surprise.

"I just thought you ought to know, so that when you hear about the arrest, you can say you were officially forewarned," Joe said calmly.

A crooked smile formed on Barnum's face. "I'd sure miss that half a beef at Christmas," he said. "But something tells me I don't have much to worry about in that regard."

Joe ignored the insult. "And when I bring him in I'm going to ask him how he knew about that exploding cow before I told him about it."

THERE WAS A "closed" sign in the front window of Wolf Mountain Taxidermy and a hand-lettered sign taped to the inside of the front-door window.

Joe stopped to read it.

GONE FISHING UNTIL SEPT. 1.

CAN'T WAIT UNTIL HUNTING SEASON!

FOR RATES AND ORDERS, SEE

WWW.SANDVICKTAXIDERMY.COM

Joe slumped against the doorframe and looked down the empty Main Street of Saddlestring. At the end of the street, on the bridge, a knot of teenage boys were cheering on a buddy who was underneath them in the river. The boy had tied a rope to the railing on the bridge and was waterskiing in place on the fast summer runoff of the Twelve Sleep River. Joe suddenly felt very old.

MARYBETH WAS AT the master bathroom sink, cleaning her face for bed and thinking about the day, when Joe came and flopped down on their bed. He was in a foul mood.

"Finotta outmaneuvered me," he said bluntly. "He was ten steps ahead of me all the time, and he got to Sandvick. I really screwed that one up by not getting that photo from Sandvick on the spot."

Marybeth sighed inwardly. Sometimes her husband was a little too quick to take people at their word and it frustrated her. She hated it when he got taken advantage of. "You're too trusting, Joe." She looked at him in the mirror. "You're not cynical enough sometimes."

"I'm working on that."

She turned, the washcloth still poised near her cheek. "Finotta is a reptile, but you need to give up on him right now, Joe. He could buy and sell us if he wanted to. And if he's as bad as we think he is, you'll get another crack at him some day."

Joe grunted.

Marybeth thought of Ginger Finotta and about their aborted conversation in the library. She thought about the Tom Horn book, which hadn't yet been returned.

17

Thermopolis, Wyoming

July 1

THROUGH BILLOWS OF sulfur-smelling steam, the Old Man watched and waited for Charlie Tibbs. The Old Man reclined on the mineral-slick steps of a very hot pool and closed his eyes. He willed the muscles in his neck and back to begin to loosen up and untie what he imagined as a series of complicated, technical knots. He sighed heavily, and slid forward another step so the hot water lapped at his chin.

They were in the Central Wyoming town of Thermopolis, hard against the border of the Wind River Indian Reservation. Thermopolis claimed to have the “largest hot springs in the world,” a claim based not on the number of spas or facilities but on the volume of hot water that poured from the earth.

The Old Man slid forward on the step and leaned further back. His mouth was now under water, then his ears. Total submersion created a static whooshing sound. He breathed slowly through his nose. He was big and white and the hair on his legs and chest riffled beneath the water like a bed of kelp. In addition to helping his sore back, the Old Man hoped the water would somehow purge his wracked, tormented soul. But that was a lot to ask of Thermopolis.

It had been the Old Man’s idea to drive to Thermopolis and he had been mildly surprised that Charlie had agreed. The Old Man had limped from the pickup, rented a suit at the counter, and located the hottest and calmest water. In another part of the complex, children and families splashed and shrieked and funneled down a water slide. The pool he sat in was for old people. The Old Man’s only company was an ancient Shoshone woman with jet black eyes and droopy, chocolate-colored skin. Occasionally, she coughed wetly. After half an hour, she left the pool and the Old Man was alone.

From the corner of his eye, the Old Man saw the black Ford pickup come into view through the chain-link fence that surrounded the pools. The truck parked against the curb. Afternoon sunlight penetrated the smoked windows enough that the Old Man could see Charlie inside the cab talking on the cellphone. The Old Man had not expected that Charlie would join him and was relieved that he hadn’t. They had been spending too much time together and the Old Man couldn’t even imagine what Charlie would look like in a swimsuit. Charlie had said he would try to contact their employers, and apparently he had. The cellphone was a technologically advanced model that scrambled voices so that eavesdroppers, or innocents with FM-band radios, could not overhear the conversation.

The pickup truck was a wonder and a virtual weapon in itself. Although from the outside it simply looked like an intimidating late-model four-by-four, the truck had been customized to serve as a rolling armory capable of “taking on an entire police department if necessary,” as Charlie had put it. Even though the job was nearly finished and they had so far accomplished what they had set out to, they hadn’t used even one-tenth of their available firepower and equipment. Apparently, Charlie said, their employers had listened to him when he told them he believed strongly in the old Western maxim about never being caught outgunned. And they hadn’t been.

In addition to the pickup truck, they were also armed with shotguns and hundreds of rounds of double-ought buckshot shells, a MAC-70 machine pistol, plastic explosives

with both altitude-sensitive and remote-control detonation devices, a 400-pound cross-bow with telescopic sights, nightvision goggles and scopes, remote audio transceivers, nerve gas, and concussion grenades. Charlie Tibbs was especially proud of the custom-made, machine-tooled Remington Model 700 .308 sniper's rifle with the Leupold 4 x 14 scope. The rifle had been built to his specific demands and specifications. It used custom match .190 grain boattail bullets that were accurate beyond 1,000 yards, even after the slug began to flip end over end. The rifle could be steadied by bolting it to a special pole-mounted stand in the bed of the black Ford pickup. The stand itself was connected to a small atmospheric theodolite computer that gauged wind, altitude, trajectory, and distance to enable incredibly longrange shots.

Under hidden panels beneath the bed of the pickup was a shoulder-fired rocket launcher as well as an armored pod of pressure-sensitive and frequency-activated land mines.

The cab of the pickup had the scrambled cellphone, handheld wireless e-mail, and a pager, as well as an experimental computerized GPS directional mapping system loaded with American backroads and routes. They had only used the road-map computer once, and that was on the streets of Washington, D.C. Both the Old Man and Charlie Tibbs knew the Rocky Mountain region well enough that the computer was not necessary.

Their employers had supplied them with a lockbox of cash—thousands of dollars in used bills. Charlie kept track of their expenditures, but there was nothing they were prevented from buying at any time. They paid for everything with cash and cashiers often acted as if they didn't know what to do when, for example, Charlie counted out \$400 in bills to pay for hotel rooms. They left no paper trail, no credit card receipts anywhere in the United States.

Originally recommended for this job by Charlie Tibbs himself, who had already been hired to oversee the field operations, the Old Man had been contacted late at night by a man who wouldn't leave his name. When the Old Man stated that he was interested in hearing more, a meeting with Charlie Tibbs was arranged at a local Denny's Restaurant to fill him in on the details. Tibbs told him that their employers had recommended at least six operatives, and possibly two different teams, but Charlie had convinced them that everything could be accomplished by two experienced men. Since then, only Charlie Tibbs had been in contact with their employers. The Old Man was not included in these conversations by design, to minimize the number of people involved in the planning of the operations. It was understood that Charlie would speak to the intermediary, who would then speak directly with their employers. The Old Man was kept in the dark except for the details of the operation most immediately at hand. The Old Man had agreed to this, but now wished he had a better idea, overall, of what was going on. Obviously, they were targeting highprofile environmentalists. But how many? And for how long? He had expected their work to take about two weeks going in, and they were now into their second month.

He had no idea what Charlie Tibbs had told their employers about him. He wondered if his recent doubts and complaints were being reported. Charlie could honestly say

that the Old Man had recently shown more reluctance on the job. Would they relieve him if the complaints got too loud? Would they pay him off? Would they have Charlie Tibbs walk up behind him and put a bullet in the back of his head?

The Old Man had begun to question Charlie Tibbs's sanity. One of the reasons for this was that Tibbs had recently insisted on replaying a CD of *Oklahoma!* over and over again while they drove. Tibbs sang along with full force. And even before Emily Betts crashed, Charlie seemed to like this job way too much. He *enjoyed* what they were doing. It was as if Charlie had been given the opportunity to vent a lifetime of rage, and he just got a big old kick out of it. Charlie was driven by something, and absolutely relentless. He believed in this cause even more, he said, than their employers believed in it. And he still did not sleep.

Charlie emerged from the pickup and signaled through the fence for the Old Man.

Grunting, and moving very slowly, the Old Man pulled himself out of the hot pool and trudged over to the fence where Charlie was waiting. He left wet splayed footprints on the pavement behind him. His skin had turned bright pink in the hot water. As he approached the fence, he bowed his wet head to listen.

Charlie spoke softly. "They've located the lawyer so we have to get going."

"Please tell me he's close," the Old Man said, dreading another cross-country trip.

"Yellowstone," Charlie said. "Very close."

"In the park?"

Charlie nodded yes.

"Then we're through?" the Old Man asked with hope.

"Not quite."

The Old Man felt as if Charlie had reached through the fence and punched him in the side of the head. Charlie *knew* how the Old Man felt about this. He had told Charlie countless times in the last few days: he wanted this job to be *over*.

The Old Man shook his head. "I can't see our luck holding out forever, Charlie. They can't keep adding targets to the list. They just can't." His voice was anguished.

"Just one more after the lawyer," Charlie said. "And please keep your voice down."

The Old Man looked up. Charlie was staring at him coolly, evaluating him. Under this withering glare, the Old Man capitulated.

"But this will have to be the last one, Charlie. Any more, and so help me, I'll quit. And you can tell our employers that. This is *it*." The Old Man spat out the last word.

Charlie Tibbs was silent.

"So after the lawyer where do we have to go? Who is the target?"

Charlie hesitated. The Old Man understood why. This was violating their agreement not to discuss the details of more than one job at a time. It had probably been a good idea, the Old Man conceded, since he wouldn't have stuck with it this long if he had known in advance how elaborate and twisted their mission would become. The Old Man wished he were stronger, more sure of himself and their cause—more like Charlie.

Charlie quickly looked left and right before speaking, and then leaned closer until his hat brim touched the fence.

“Our duty isn’t to question,” Charlie bit out the words. “We don’t know the reasons these targets were chosen and that’s good. All we know is that a lot of thought has gone into this and they’ve got the whole thing figured out. We just follow orders.”

“No one’s questioning anything,” the Old Man answered, his tone deliberate. He wondered why Charlie seemed so defensive.

Charlie sized up the Old Man again, his light blue eyes raking across the Old Man’s face like talons.

“Saddlestring, Wyoming,” Charlie spoke in a voice that was barely audible over the amplified swimming pool sounds from elsewhere in the complex. “That rumor about Stewie Woods isn’t going away. Now it’s that he—or somebody pretending to be Stewie Woods—is contacting his old colleagues.”

The Old Man felt a rush of anger. “That’s not possible. You *know* that’s not possible.”

Charlie nodded. “It’s probably one of his hangers-on trying to get something going. But we have to check it out.”

“It’s not possible,” the Old Man said again, shaking his head, trying unsuccessfully to come up with a scenario where Woods could have walked away from that explosion.

“And there’s something else,” Charlie said. “Because this guy, whoever he is, is pretending to be Stewie Woods, the local game warden in Saddlestring is snooping around. Other law enforcement might follow. That’s heat we don’t need. So we need to squash this pretender as quickly as possible.”

“Do they have any idea who the pretender is?” the Old Man asked.

“Not yet,” Charlie answered, narrowing his eyes. “But they expect they will shortly.”

PART TWO

Early in April of 1887, some of the boys came down from the Pleasant Valley, where there was a big rustler war going on and the rustlers were getting the best of the game...s Things were in a pretty bad condition. It was war to the knife between cowboys and the rustlers, and there was a battle every time the two outfits ran together. A great many men were killed in the war.

From Tom Horn,

The Life of Tom Horn: Government Scout and Interpreter, 1904

18

IT WAS A month after elk-calving season in the Bighorns and Joe Pickett was doing a preliminary trend count. The purpose of the trend count was to assess how the elk had wintered, and how many babies had been born to replenish the herd. The season for calves was generally May 20 through June 30, so all of the new ones should have dropped. He rode near the tree line on his buckskin, Lizzie, looking down the slope into the meadows and brush for the elk. It was one of those rare, perfect, vibrant July mornings that pulsed with color and scent. Wildflowers were bursting open in the meadows like strings of mute fireworks, and saplings were stretching sunward after recently breaking out of the solitary confinement of the snowpack. Swollen narrow streambeds were flexing their muscles with runoff. Summer was here, and it was in a hurry.

The cow elk used the tall sagebrush just below the tree line for calving, and Joe had found seven elk cows and six month-old newborns so far. It was a good year for elk given the fairly mild winter and the moist spring. He could smell their particular musty presence even before he saw the first mother and calf. The mothers eyed him warily as he quietly rode by in the shadows of the trees. One tried to lure him away from her calf by fully exposing herself in the meadow and trotting through the open field toward the opposite rise. She stopped in clear view to look over her shoulder, and snorted when Joe rode on and didn't pursue. Her calf looked at him through a fork in the tall brush. The calf was all eyes and ears, and Joe was close enough to see a bead of condensation on the calf's black snout.

Joe rode deeper into the trees and further up the mountainside until the mother elk turned back to her calf. He goosed Lizzie through the timber, toward a patch of

sunlight that became a small grassy park and dismounted. He tied up his horse and sat on a downed log, where he stretched out and let the sun warm his legs. Pouring a cup of coffee from his battered Thermos, he tipped up the brim of his hat and sighed. The coffee was still hot.

Joe had put off doing any serious thinking until he was in the mountains, hoping the quiet solace of the outdoors would help him find the answers he was looking for. Now, he reviewed the particularly odd chain of events that had started with Jim Finotta getting to Sandvick and Judge Pennock's refusal to advance Joe's charges against Finotta.

Judge Cohn in Johnson County had reluctantly agreed to review the charges against Finotta but had yet to take any action. It was very likely that the charges, and the case, would go nowhere. The previous day, Joe had received a call from Robey Hersig saying that Judge Pennock was furious with him—and Joe, for taking the case out of the county. Hersig reported that Finotta was burning up the telephone lines between his law office in Saddlestring and the governor's office in Cheyenne. Joe was being accused of engaging in a vendetta against Finotta. Words like "harassment," "land owner abuse," and "bureaucratic arrogance" had been used. It wouldn't be long, Joe knew, before he heard something from Game and Fish headquarters in Cheyenne. He could imagine the furtive meetings and handwringing that was almost definitely going on at headquarters over what he had done. If the governor got involved, which was likely, the issue would be elevated immediately, probably to the office of director. It wouldn't be the first time he'd gotten in trouble, and probably wouldn't be the last time. He hoped if the boys at headquarters in Cheyenne decided to admonish him that they'd do it in a straightforward manner, but sometimes that was too much to expect from them.

If it weren't for mornings like this in a place like this, Joe thought, they could have this job.

He was not very good about letting things drop, Joe decided. It wasn't as if elk were an endangered species. There were tens of thousands of elk in the state, and probably more than there should be. Elk were killed every day by cars, disease, and predators. Hunters harvested thousands every fall. Other elk would replace dead elk.

But a huge bull elk had been killed out of season by a man who simply wanted the head of the animal on his wall. The elk's headless, massive body was left where it fell, and seven hundred pounds of meat left to rot. And nobody, it seemed, was as outraged about the crime as Joe Pickett was. For reasons he had trouble defining, he had taken this particular offense personally.

It wasn't that Jim Finotta was a millionaire lawyer, or a rancher, or a developer. Joe didn't harbor any ill will toward successful men. What outraged Joe was the casualness of the crime and Finotta's reaction when accused.

Most poachers Joe caught lied about their crime when confronted. But Finotta lied with contempt and a haughty arrogance that suggested that it was somehow beneath him to have to waste his good, valuable lies on the likes of Joe. Jim Finotta didn't

need a trophy head on his wall for any other reason than to impress his guests and boost his own sense of worth. He certainly didn't need the meat, like a lot of poachers and hunters, but instead of giving it away or donating it to a shelter in town, he left it. If it was just a trophy Finotta had wanted, he could have hired a guide and hunted the elk in season like a sportsman. Instead, Finotta chose to shoot the bull elk off season, when no one else could hunt it, order his lackeys to behead it, cover up the crime when accused, and use his influence and connections to discredit his accuser. As Robey Hersig had put it, the assholes usually won.

But Joe had more than just Jim Finotta on his mind.

TWO DAYS BEFORE, "Stewie" had called again. This time Sheridan had answered the telephone. When she asked who was calling, the caller had, at first, refused to tell her. But when Sheridan said she would have to hang up, the man identified himself as Stewie Woods and said he would be calling back when her mother was home. Sheridan wouldn't tell him when that would be.

Marybeth confided that evening when they were in bed that she had a strange feeling about this. If it were some kind of joke, there was nothing remotely funny about it. She said it didn't make sense that even the most dogged reporter would call twice using the same ruse. It had to be someone else, she said, calling for some other reason. She hoped it wasn't some morbid follower of *One Globe*.

But it *couldn't* actually be Stewie Woods. That was one thing both Joe and Marybeth left unsaid. There wasn't any reason to speculate further.

Whoever it was, Joe was irritated by the calls. They had requested Caller ID in the hope of tracing the number, but it not yet been installed. He hoped he would be there the next time a call came so that he could snatch the telephone away and try to determine what was going on. It offended him that a stranger would call his wife, and it offended him even further that the reason they were calling was because of her past relationship with another man. As innocent as Marybeth made it out to be, it made him grit his teeth when he thought about it. It was hard to imagine her in her high school and early college days laughing and trading jokes with two guys like Stewie Woods and Hayden Powell. Both of those men would later become well known, at least in the environmental community. They were semi-famous and charismatic. *And both of them had loved his wife*. However, Marybeth had chosen Joe and opted out of her potential life of excitement and notoriety. He hoped like hell she didn't regret the path that she had chosen. Instead of hanging out with two big-shot environmentalist celebrities, Marybeth got to move around the state of Wyoming with Joe Pickett from one falling-down state-owned house to another. Choosing Joe had resulted in discontinuing her legal career and adopting severe month-by-month budgeting to make ends meet, not to mention getting shot in her own house and being left for dead.

Joe sighed, smiled grimly to himself, and tried to calm down. But he vowed that when he found out who was calling Marybeth he would punch him right in the nose.

LEADING LIZZIE DOWN to the stream so she could get a drink before he continued his ride up the summit, Joe marveled at the very bad run of luck the environmental

community was having of late. First there was Stewie Woods, right here in his own district, blown up by a cow. Then their champion, Rep. Peter Sollito and his scandalous death. Then Hayden Powell is killed in a house fire in Washington State. Powell's publisher claimed that Hayden had been two weeks away from delivering his book but no trace of the manuscript could be found.

Joe climbed back into the saddle and clucked at Lizzie to go. The string of bad luck had been capped this last week by the discovery of the body of wolf advocate Emily Betts. Her small private airplane had crashed in the Beartooth Mountains southwest of Red Lodge, Montana. Hikers found her body. They reported that upon approaching the wreckage they had seen two wolves emerge from the cockpit and flee. Emily Betts, likely dead on impact, had been partially devoured by her cargo.

Joe Pickett was not the only one to wonder if this series of deaths had a common thread. Speculation ran rampant in both the environmental community and over coffee in Saddlestring's local diner. But each incident was vastly different from the others. If there was a pattern it was incomprehensible. There was nothing about any of the deaths that suggested murder, except perhaps for Rep. Sollito's, and Joe had read that a prostitute had recently been arrested who was accused of the murder—although she was denying it and had hired a celebrity lawyer.

Now Emily Betts had joined the list; a wolf advocate who died while trying to illegally transplant wolves into Wyoming.

But even devoted conspiracy theorists could not connect the deaths in any way other than the fact that they were recent and all involved high-profile environmental activists. And that most of the deaths were, in some way, humiliating to talk about.

Joe had heard stories, though, of locals high-fiving each other in the bars. Apparently, there were allegations being made on a national level within the fringe environmental groups, accusations of conspiracies, calls for a congressional and FBI investigation into the string of deaths.

Reining Lizzie to a stop, Joe pulled his notebook from his shirt pocket, and flipped it open to a fresh page. He drew a crude outline of the United States. Then he drew stars and dates at four locations: Saddlestring, Wyoming, June 10; Bremerton, Washington, June 14; Washington, D.C., June 23; and Choteau, Montana, June 29. There were four days between the deaths in Saddlestring and Bremerton; nine days between Bremerton and Washington, D.C.; and six days between Washington, D.C. and Choteau.

If a killer or killers were responsible, Joe thought, then they had been criss-crossing the country by air or road for almost a month. And there could possibly be two, three, or even four of them, each with a separate assignment. That seemed unlikely, he thought, simply because it was too complicated, with too many factors and possibilities where something could go wrong. But if it were one killer or a team of killers, they were having a hell of a busy month. He thought about the time lapses between the incidents and concluded that it was possible, although unlikely, that one team could have done all of the killings. The longest span of time between incidents was between

Bremerton and Washington, D.C., which was also the longest distance by car, which meant it was possible the killer or killers were traveling by car.

He stared at the drawing, thought about the dates.

He was getting nowhere.

JOE TURNED LIZZIE back into the trees. He planned to work his way up to the summit and back down toward his pickup and horse trailer through a drainage on the other side of the mountain. He expected to find, and count, additional elk calves. He might find some fishermen as well near the road, or campers setting up early for the weekend. He would take the long way.

He remembered to lean forward in the saddle and stroke Lizzie's neck and tell her what a good horse she was. He didn't used to do that.

19

SHERIDAN PICKETT ANSWERED the telephone Thursday during breakfast, listened for a moment, made an unpleasant face, and then handed the receiver to Marybeth.

"It's that man again," Sheridan said with distaste.

Joe and Marybeth exchanged worried glances and Joe mouthed, "Keep him on the line." He pushed back from the table to go upstairs to get on the other extension.

"Can I talk to him?" Lucy asked through a mouthful of breakfast cereal. Lucy wanted to talk with anyone who called.

Joe bounded up the stairs and closed the door in the bedroom. He sat on the unmade bed and gently lifted the receiver to his ear. The conversation had already begun. The connection was poor and filled with static. The baritone voice of the man sounded drugged-out, slurred. The words came slowly as if through a mouthful of pebbles, the tone distorted.

"This is Stewie again, Mary," the man said. "Please don't hang up again."

"Who is this really?" Marybeth demanded.

Through Marybeth's phone in the background, Joe could hear Lucy asking again if she could talk on the telephone and Sheridan telling her to be quiet.

"Stewie. Stewie. Come on, Mary, you know who it is." He paused for a long beat. "I'm trying to think of how to prove it to you."

Her name is *Marybeth*, Joe thought.

"That would be a good idea," Marybeth said, "since Stewie Woods is dead."

The man chuckled. "The old Stewie might be dead, but not the new one. Hey ... I know. I wish I would have practiced for this quiz, but it looks like I have to do it off the cuff." His words tumbled out and ran into each other. Joe guessed that the caller would be easier to understand if he could see him gesticulate. He imagined hands and arms flying through the air, the telephone pinned in place between jaw and shoulder, and determined pacing.

"Anyway, in high school you drove a yellow Toyota. Whenever it got cold, it wouldn't start, and I figured out how to get it going by taking off the air cleaner and opening up the intake valve with a screwdriver. Who else could possibly know that?"

Joe felt his face go slack.

"Just about everybody in high school," Marybeth answered, but her voice was tentative. "And it was a Datsun, not a Toyota."

"Whatever," the caller said, then bulled ahead with the confidence of a telephone solicitor trying to get as much across as possible before the phone went dead in his ear: "Okay, here's another one. Our football team, the Winchester Badgers, once played in Casper and you and Hayden Powell drove down on a Friday to see the game. After we won—I think the score was 27 to 17 and I intercepted a pass and ran it in for a touchdown—the three of us drove up on top of that hill on the east side of Casper and pulled up all of the survey stakes for their new mall. Remember?"

Marybeth was silent. Joe could hear Sheridan and Lucy squabbling at the kitchen table, and Marybeth's breathing.

"Who would possibly know that happened except you, me, and Hayden?"

"Maybe you told someone about it," Marybeth said, her voice weak. "Or you wrote about it in your newsletter or something."

Joe, Marybeth, and the caller all realized at once that Marybeth had said "you." Joe was stunned.

"Did you just hear yourself?" the caller asked.

"I ... I did," Marybeth answered.

"Do I need to go on?"

"I'm just too shocked to answer right now," Marybeth said. Joe wished he were with her. He hoped she wouldn't hang up the telephone.

"Mary, I just want to see you again." His voice was kind.

"I'm married," Marybeth stammered. "I have three children eating breakfast at the table right in front of me."

"Everyone's married," Stewie said slyly, "but the big question, the one I've learned to ask is: are you *happily* married?"

You bastard, *Joe thought*. I can't wait to punch you right in the nose.

"Of course I'm happily married. To a wonderful man named Joe Pickett."

Stewie sighed. His voice changed. "I kind of figured that would be the case but I guess I hoped it wasn't."

Stewie was distancing himself. Now Joe hoped Stewie wouldn't hang up. Joe quickly buried the receiver in blankets from the bed so Stewie wouldn't hear the click of him hanging up, and scribbled a note in his spiral pad. He descended the stairs and handed it to Marybeth. Her face was pale and her eyes were vacant.

Joe had written: Keep him talking—Ask him where he is.

Marybeth read the note and frowned, and looked to Joe for confirmation. Joe nodded yes. Faintly, Joe could hear Stewie talking to Marybeth again.

"How can it possibly be that you're still alive?" Marybeth asked.

Now Joe could only hear one side of the conversation.

“What do you mean when you say that?”

The school bus honked outside the house and all three girls scrambled as if an electric current had been simultaneously shot through their chairs.

They were suddenly grabbing backpacks, sack lunches, jackets, shoes. Joe signaled to Marybeth that he would take care of things. He opened the front door, waved at the driver, and shooed his girls toward the front gate. Sheridan gave him a look to indicate that she was getting a little old for shooing. The driver, a retired lumberjack named Stiles, leaned out of the door and asked Joe about the mule deer count in his hunting area.

“I’ll have to talk with you tomorrow,” Joe said, trying not to dismiss Stiles out of hand. “I’ve got a little bit of a situation inside I need to handle.”

Stiles waved him off and Joe literally ran back to the house. Marybeth, with wide, disbelieving eyes, was gently replacing the receiver on the cradle.

Joe and Marybeth simply stared at each other.

“Did that actually happen?” *Joe asked.*

Marybeth shook her head, stunned.

“He wants to meet me Saturday,” she said. “I wrote down the directions.”

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” Joe said, as much to himself as anyone. “I saw where he died.”

Marybeth smiled cryptically. “Joe, Stewie said that he *did* blow up. But that he was *reborn*.”

“He actually said that?”

She nodded, and started across the room toward Joe.

THAT EVENING, IN the library, Marybeth saw the handicapped-accessible Vee Bar U van cruise through the parking lot. The sight of the van froze her to her spot behind the counter, her fingers poised and still over the keyboard of the computer. She slowly swung her head toward the front doors, anticipating the arrival of Ginger Finotta and Buster. But Ginger didn’t enter and the van was no longer in sight.

Instead, in the side office behind the counter, Marybeth heard the metallic clunk of returned books being dropped into the drive-up return. The sound, familiar as it was, startled her.

She waited for the van to pull away from the building and didn’t move until the sound of the motor had vanished.

She quickly finished her entry, then went into the side office. On top of the pile of returns was the single, aged, dog-eared copy of *The Life and Times of Tom Horn, Stock Detective*.

20

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

July 5

IT WAS DUSK when the Old Man realized he had truly become evil.

The setting had nothing to do with it. The heavy evening sun had painted a wide bronze swath through the tall buffalo grass of the clearing below them and had fused through the lodgepole pines that circled the clearing like a spindly corral. Breezes so gentle they could barely be felt rippled across the top of the grass and looked like gentle ringlets on water. The air was sweet with pine and sage but there was an occasional whiff of sulfur from seeping, newly punctured pockets in a swampy hot spring flat where they had ridden the horses a few minutes before. And there was another smell, too. It was the smell of slightly rancid pork.

Earlier that day they had located Tod Marchand, attorney at law, near his tent on the bank of Nez Perce Creek. Marchand had been remarkably easy to find. He had checked in at the ranger station the day before at the South Entrance of the park and noted where he intended to camp. Tibbs had found the entry while the Old Man chatted with the female ranger and filled out the forms that permitted them to transport their newly acquired horse trailer and horses through the park.

They had ridden up on Tod Marchand just after noon, while Marchand was scrubbing his lunch plate clean with biodegradable soap. Marchand had looked back over his shoulder when he heard the horses approach, and stood up and turned around just in time for the butt of Charlie Tibbs's rifle to crack down hard on the top of his head.

"Counsel, approach the bench," Charlie Tibbs had said, without explanation, as Tod Marchand crumpled to the grass.

They had gagged and hog-tied Marchand and thrown him across the back of the Old Man's saddle. They took the horses up into the trees far away from the trail and the creek—away from the places other hikers or trekkers might be.

Yellowstone was remarkably big and wild beyond the tourist traffic that coursed along the figure-eight road system in the park. As they rode up into the timber and over a rise, the sounds of the distant traffic receded, replaced by a light warm breeze wafting through the treetops. The chance of anyone seeing them, or of the two men stumbling upon another person, were remote.

Still, to the Old Man, Yellowstone Park was a disquieting place to do business. Despite unreasonable demands by environmentalists and mismanagement by the federal government, Yellowstone was a special place, in his opinion. It was somehow sacrosanct. It had just felt wrong to be riding through the lodgepole pine with a bound and gagged lawyer on his horse.

They had ridden down the slope to where the trees cleared and the creek wound through a draw with very high eroded banks. They let their horses droop their heads to drink. It was then that they heard a splash upstream, somewhere over the high bank and out of view. The instant they heard the sound, Charlie Tibbs slid his big .308 Remington Model 700 rifle out of his saddle scabbard. The Old Man fumbled for his pistol.

Within two minutes, the water on the stream was covered with floating feathers within a swirl of a dark oily substance. They watched the feathers float by in front of them. It was as if a duck had exploded on the water less than 100 yards away.

Both horses had begun to snort and act up. When the Old Man's horse reared and turned back the way they had come, he muscled the horse around to face the water. The Old Man knew well enough that even experienced horses might be uncontrollable this close to bears.

They had quickly retreated back into the trees, tied off the horses, and tried to calm them. Marchand had been thrown to the ground when the Old Man's horse spooked, but as Charlie said, he probably couldn't feel it anyhow. Armed, they walked back down to the stream and cautiously climbed the bank. They heard muffled grunting and woofing even before they actually saw the bears—grizzlies, a sow and her two cubs. The sow was a shimmering light brown color with a pronounced hump on her back. Her snout was buried in the rotting bark of a downed tree, feeding on larvae. The cubs, already over a hundred pounds each, were further down on the tree trunk taking off shards of bark with lazy swipes of their paws. Apparently, the duck hadn't been much of a meal.

TOD MARCHAND WAS propped against a tree trunk when he regained consciousness. The Old Man and Charlie had carried Marchand across the stream through a swampy meadow and into the timber on the other side of the slope. The bears had remained across the river. The first thing Marchand did when he awoke was pitch over sideways into the grass and throw up. When he was through, the Old Man helped him sit up again with his back against the tree. It took a while for Marchand to seem lucid.

The Old Man studied Marchand, while he waited for him to fully regain his senses. Marchand was, by all accounts, a good-looking man, the Old Man decided: tall, with thick blond hair cut into an expensive, sculpted, swept-back haircut. He was tanned and fit and he looked much younger than his 53 years.

The Old Man had, of course, seen his photograph in the newspapers and had watched him several times on television news shows. Tod Marchand was the most successful environmental lawyer in America when it came to winning court decisions. Marchand had been the lead attorney in the five-year case that forced the National Park Service to dismantle several recreational vehicle campgrounds because the area the campgrounds were located in was thought to be prime grizzly bear habitat. The RV campgrounds had, in fact, been within ten miles of where Marchand was camped.

The Old Man distinctly remembered a shot of Marchand standing outside the federal courthouse in Denver talking to reporters after successfully arguing for a halt to a multimilliondollar gold mine about to be started up in southern Wyoming.

"Gold is a matter of perception," Marchand had told reporters. "Gold for many of us is wildlife running free in untrammelled wilderness."

Marchand had paused for effect and looked straight into a major network's camera (he was so experienced at this sort of thing that he knew by sight which were the

network's cameras and which belonged to local stations), *Our gold won*, Marchand had said, which had since become a rallying cry.

Tod Marchand looked much different now, the Old Man thought. The lump on his head from Tibbs's rifle butt was hidden under tinted layers of hair, but a single dark red track of blood from his scalp had dried along the side of Marchand's sharp nose.

Tod Marchand also looked different because he was now tied up with a thin horsehair cord. The horsehair cord bit into Marchand's shoulders in several places, and continued down his waist and then was crisscrossed around his legs from his thighs to his ankles.

Horsehair was good, Charlie had said, because the bears would eat every inch of it and leave nothing. To make sure the bears would be attracted, Charlie had bound thick slabs of raw, uncured back-bacon under each of Marchand's arms and between his legs. The pork was pungent.

Now fully awake, Marchand looked slowly at the cord and the bacon. His thoughts were transparent. He was very scared, and not in a noble way, the Old Man thought. Marchand was scared out of his wits.

Charlie Tibbs walked past the Old Man and squatted down in front of Tod Marchand. Tibbs tipped his Stetson back on his head, then pulled an envelope with a sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it.

"I found this in your pack," Tibbs said, in his low deep drawl. "It says: 'Dear Tod: We need your help fast. Run like the fucking wind.' It is signed 'Stewie.'" "

Marchand's eyes were white and wide. It reminded the Old Man of the look the horses had when they first smelled the bears.

"Then there are some directions to a cabin. This Stewie wouldn't happen to be Stewie Woods, would it?" Tibbs asked. "How come you're up here camping, if your celebrity client needs you so badly?" Tibbs said, not unkindly.

Marchand's eyes darted from Tibbs to the Old Man and back.

"I've been planning this long weekend all year," he said.

"Some pal you are." Tibbs snorted. "Unless you're not really sure that Stewie Woods is even alive. Unless you think someone mailed you this as a joke."

Marchand quickly broke down and nodded his head yes. "It's Stewie," he said. "I know exactly where he's at. I'll tell you if you'll let me go. I'll never say a word about this to anyone."

The Old Man dropped his eyes and stared at the ground for what became an interminable amount of time. Marchand shook visibly. Marchand looked to the Old Man for some kind of reassurance or humanity, but the Old Man refused eye contact. The Old Man knew Tibbs well enough to know that Tod Marchand had said exactly the wrong thing, and much too fast.

Finally, Tibbs swiveled slightly and looked back at the Old Man. "This is going to be a good one," Tibbs said. "Maybe the best one yet."

The Old Man nodded blankly. Charlie Tibbs, he suddenly knew, was a man beyond his own understanding. This would be ugly to watch. He was sure Tod Marchand felt

the same way. The Old Man decided at that moment that things had gone too far. Maybe so far into evil he could never go back.

"I smell bacon." Tibbs said, turning back around to Tod Marchand. "It makes me kinda hungry. D'you suppose those grizzlies over the hill smell it, too?"

CHARLIE TIBBS WAS eating piece after piece of beef jerky and drinking from a Thermos of iced tea. Periodically he would lift his binoculars to his eyes. Below them, in the swampy meadow, the grizzlies were eating Tod Marchand.

The sow had found him quickly after Tibbs had dumped the lawyer in the grass between her and her cubs and ridden away on horseback. She had killed Marchand by taking his entire head into her mouth and shaking it violently from side to side, like a puppy with a knotted sock. Marchand's scream stopped so suddenly that it seemed to hang in the air like a lost ghost. A powerful swat from her paw had sent the body flying end over end. The strength of the bear was awesome.

"The cubs are feeding now," Charlie Tibbs said, lowering the binoculars. "It would be a shame if those cubs ate every bit of the lawyer and nobody ever found him out there."

Since they had ridden up on him that day, Tibbs always referred to Tod Marchand as "the lawyer." He had never once spoken his actual name.

The Old Man felt sick. He had waved away the offers of jerky and iced tea by saying he thought he thought he was coming down with the flu.

"If folks just knew that the lawyer vanished and not that he was attacked by the grizzlies he saved, it would be a shame," Tibbs said.

"I understood the first time," the Old Man said with irritation.

Tibbs's face had a way of going dead that had unnerved a lot of people. It unnerved the Old Man now.

"I just don't like this, Charlie," the Old Man said.

"It's nature at work, is all," Tibbs said, his face assuming life again.

Nature and four pounds of bacon, the Old Man thought.

"Far as I can tell those cubs gobbled that horse hair straight away," Tibbs said, still peering through the binoculars. "No one'll ever know he was tied up."

"I WONDER WHO is impersonating Stewie Woods?" Tibbs asked suddenly, lowering the binoculars. It had become so dark that the Old Man could no longer make out the individual forms of the bears in the clearing, but he knew that Tibbs's glasses gathered what little light there was, so he could still see. Tibbs also had a night-vision scope in his saddlebag. "Whoever he is, he was trying to draw the lawyer into some kind of situation."

It was so still that the Old Man could hear the bears feeding, hear bones crunching.

"Who would do a thing like that?" the Old Man asked. His mouth was dry and he had trouble speaking. If Tibbs knew what he had been thinking, the Old Man figured he'd be in danger.

"Don't know," Tibbs shrugged.

"We couldn't have screwed up with Stewie Woods, could we?"

Tibbs snorted. The question was beneath him.

From the clearing they could hear the sound of the two cubs fighting over something.

"I like this," Tibbs said. "Great Grizzly Bear Savior Eaten by Bears in Yellowstone Park."

"Yup," the Old Man said, not agreeing, not disagreeing. He slowly stood up.

"Charlie, how much longer you going to wait here?"

"Couple a hours. Just to make sure."

"Make sure of what?"

Tibbs didn't answer. Long enough to make sure you see everything there is to see, the Old Man thought.

"I think I might ride back and get some sleep in the truck. My stomach's doin' flip-flops and I think I'm coming down with something."

Tibbs leveled his gaze on the Old Man. The Old Man was glad it was almost dark, but knew he looked miserable anyway.

"It's not a good idea to split up," Tibbs said.

"Yeah, I know," the Old Man said. "But it's not a good idea to move in on that pretender tomorrow with me feeling like I do now. I need some rest."

The Old Man sensed Tibbs giving consideration to the argument. Then without a word, Tibbs turned back to the bears.

"See you in a little while," the Old Man said. "I'll just stretch out in the horse trailer in some blankets. Don't forget to wake me up."

Tibbs said nothing. They both knew that the Old Man wasn't going to get away, that he was in this until Charlie let him go. Charlie Tibbs had the keys to the truck, and the Old Man had never had a set. Tibbs didn't offer them now, and the Old Man didn't ask. They also knew how unlikely it would be for the Old Man to try to ride the horse away. Charlie was twice the tracker and horseman the Old Man was, and would be upon him within a few hours.

The Old Man mounted after being sure his horse had calmed down and likely wouldn't bolt because of the bears. The horse was still spooked and white-eyed, but was under control.

Before he left, he looked over his shoulder. He could see Charlie Tibbs's wide back in the moonlight, his shirt stretched tight between his shoulder blades. For a brief moment, the Old Man thought of how easy it would be right then to put a bullet in Tibbs's back. Right into his spine, between the shoulder blades. Then he considered the possibility of the horse bolting as he fired, or of simply missing. He knew if either happened, it would be his last act on earth.

The Old Man had literally felt himself cross over a line and truly become evil. He knew it for a fact. There was nothing he could do to redeem himself in full. But he could, at least temporarily, stop the killing. He wasn't doing it for Stewie Woods or Hayden Powell or Peter Sollito or Emily Betts or Tod Marchand. He still didn't like what any of them stood for. He was doing it for himself.

Someday, in some place, he would need to answer for what he had done these past two months. He at least wanted to be able to tell the inquisitor about one good thing.

He shifted in his saddle and rubbed the right thigh of his trousers. The keys for Tod Marchand's green Mercedes SUV, that the Old Man had found back at the Nez Perce Creek campsite, made a hard little ball in his pocket.

21

EARLY ON SATURDAY morning, Joe Pickett finished his monthly report for his area supervisor, Trey Crump. In it, he dutifully explained the status of the situation regarding Jim Finotta. At the conclusion of the report, after a summary of elk herd trend counts and citations issued, he wrote that he had reason to believe that someone impersonating the environmental terrorist Stewie Woods was holed up in a remote cabin somewhere in the Bighorn Mountains. He said he planned to investigate the possibility later that day.

When the report was complete, he attached it to an e-mail and sent it to Crump's office in Cody.

Joe rolled his chair back and exited his tiny home office. Both Lucy and April had been picked up earlier for a weekend church camp, leaving ten-year-old Sheridan (whose age group would go to the camp in the next week) alone and in front of the television watching morning cartoons and enjoying her solitude.

Marybeth was descending the stairs. Joe stopped and watched her, then whistled. She waved him away. She had already been out to the stables to feed the horses. She had returned, showered, and changed clothes. Her hair was up and she wore a white blouse and pleated khakis. She would be working at the library today until three. She looked concerned.

"Is it still your plan to see if you can find that cabin today?" She didn't say "Stewie" or "Stewie's cabin," Joe noted. She spoke low enough not to be overhead by Sheridan in the other room.

"I'm going to leave as soon as I finish getting ready," he said.

She met him at the base of the stairs and stopped on the last step. "I don't like the idea of you going up there alone."

He reached for her and put his hands on her hips. "Are you afraid I'm going to punch him in the nose? I just might, you know."

"Joe, I'm not kidding. He's expecting me and if you show up ... well, who knows?"

Joe sized up Marybeth. "You look good today," he said. "What time do you need to leave for the library?"

"We don't have time for that." A look of exasperation came over Marybeth's face. "I'm not kidding you, Joe. It's not a good idea for you to go up there without any backup. You *know* that."

Joe thought about it for a moment.

"You're letting your feelings cloud your judgment." Marybeth said. "That's not like you."

Joe had to agree. "I'll call Sheriff Barnum."

She nodded. "Good."

"And I'll run it by Trey in Cody."

"Better still."

He stepped aside so Marybeth could get her purse and sack lunch for her day at the library.

Before she left, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. It was much more than a morning goodbye kiss.

"I've never seen you jealous before, Joe, and don't get me wrong ... it's flattering," she said, holding his face inches from hers. "But you have nothing to worry about. You're my man." Then she smiled.

Slightly flustered, Joe smiled back.

"I should be back by dark," he said. "I'll call as soon as I'm back in cellphone range."

She fluttered her eyes coquettishly. "I'll be waiting."

Sheridan overheard her mother and moaned from the living room.

MARYBETH'S CAR WAS pulling out onto the Bighorn Road when Trey Crump called Joe on his office telephone. Crump was a game warden with 21 years of experience and was known as one of the real good ones. He was tough, fair, independent, and knowledgeable and as area supervisor he had the reputation of standing by the wardens he oversaw. It was rare for him to call, and even rarer for Crump to read Joe's monthly report the day Joe sent it.

"Before we get to this part about trying to find Stewie Woods," Crump said gruffly, "what in the hell did you do to piss off this Jim Finotta guy so bad?"

Joe said there was nothing more than what was in the report; he suspected Finotta of poaching and was trying to pursue the case.

"I hear he's an asshole," Crump said.

"What you hear is correct."

"There's all kinds of heat and light going on at headquarters over this," Crump sighed. "The director has called me twice in the last week to ask you to cool it. He kind of wanted me to agree that you're being overzealous and need to be reined in."

Joe smiled to himself. "But you didn't call."

"Hell no, I didn't call. I don't raise hell with game wardens for doing their jobs. If a guy shoots an elk out of season, I don't give a shit how much a guy has contributed to the governor's campaign or who he knows in Washington."

"So why are you calling now?"

He could hear Crump shuffling papers. "How much credibility do you give this Stewie Woods thing?"

"I'm not sure," Joe answered. "Marybeth isn't sure, either, and she actually knew the guy. I mentioned those phone calls she's been getting in my report. So I'm going to check it out."

"It would be a hell of a note if this guy was still alive," Crump grumbled. "Most everybody I know would look at that as bad news."

Joe laughed. "That's how most of the folks think around here, too. But it sure is curious, isn't it?"

Crump had to agree with that. He asked Joe to call and let him know what he found out.

SHERIFF BARNUM WASN'T in and neither was Deputy McLanahan. Joe left a message with the dispatcher for either man to call him and left his cellphone number. He was secretly pleased they were both unavailable. The last thing he wanted to do was turn this over to them or to get their assistance.

JOE HOOKED UP the two-horse slant-load trailer, saddled Lizzie, and loaded her in. After starting the engine of his pickup, Joe paused to take inventory. The radio, GPS unit, cellphone, and light-control switchbox mounted to the dashboard were all operational. His Redfield spotting scope was on the console next to his file of maps, as well as his Steiner binoculars. Under his seat was the department issued M14 carbine, and the short 12 gauge shotgun was mounted upright in back of the passenger seat. A .22 revolver loaded with blanks, for the purpose of scaring game animals out of private pastures or other places they didn't belong, was in a holster on the floor. The evidence kit, camera and lenses, first-aid kit, rain gear, and flares were packed into the center console. He checked the batteries on the small tape recorder he used for interviews. On his belt were handcuffs, a thin canister of pepper spray, a Leatherman, and his holster with the .357 Magnum Smith and Wesson revolver. Joe's personal weapon of choice, his Remington Wingmaster, 12 gauge shotgun, was behind the seat, secured by Velcro straps. His water bottle and Thermos of coffee were full, and he had packed a lunch of salami, cheddar cheese, and an apple.

From inside the house, Maxine howled a pathetic, mournful wail. She did not like to be left behind. Joe looked up to see Maxine being pulled away from the front window by Sheridan, who waved at him.

"Bye, babe," Joe waved back at Sheridan.

He unfolded the paper with the directions to the cabin that Marybeth had been given over the telephone.

Then he pulled his hat brim down low, backed the pickup down the driveway to the Bighorn Road, and pointed it toward the mountains.

22

North-west of Saddlestring, Wyoming

July 6

DRIVING FOUR MILES over the speed limit with the Mercedes SUV set on cruise control, the Old Man noticed a small tape recorder pressed upright between the seats and pulled it out. Lawyers liked to talk in these things, he thought, and later give their

valuable musings to their secretaries to decipher. Then he remembered the microcas-
sette tape they had taken from Hayden Powell's telephone answering machine. With
his left hand on the wheel he dug through his daypack on the passenger seat until he
found the cassette, then inserted it into the player. It fit.

He rewound the tape and glanced again at the rearview mirror. He had been driv-
ing all night. The Old Man continuously watched for the black Ford pickup to come
roaring up behind him. Every time a dark-colored vehicle approached, he reached for
his handgun on the console. He had absolutely no doubt that Charlie Tibbs was some-
where behind him, and the two-lane highway he was on was the only southbound route.
It could be later today, or tomorrow, but Charlie would come. The Old Man hoped
like hell he would be in and out of town by then. If he wasn't, the Old Man would be
dead. It was as simple as that.

He listened to the tape from the beginning, getting insight into Hayden Powell's
life for the week prior to the night when Charlie Tibbs and the Old Man showed up
to end it.

There were several messages from Powell's New York editor asking for selections
from *Screwing Up the West* so he could send them out in the hope of getting good
quotes from other authors and environmentalists for the book jacket and publicity kit.
The editor told Powell not to worry about having the entire manuscript complete and
to send chapters that could stand alone and garner praise.

There was a message from Powell's attorney warning Powell that the SEC had called
and requested an interview because of the failing dot-com company. The attorney said
he recommended delaying the interview as long as possible, but that the two of them
would need to get together soon to decide on a strategy for dealing with the allegations.

There were several curt "Call me" messages left by a woman the Old Man guessed
was Powell's ex-wife.

It was near the end of the tape that Charlie Tibbs called. There was silence except
for traffic sounds. The Old Man had been seated next to Tibbs when he made the call
as they entered Bremerton.

Assuming that this was the last of the messages, the Old Man reached to stop the
tape. But now he heard one more.

The last message was a bad connection, with static in the line. The voice was thick
and slurred.

"You know who this is. You need to get out of there as fast as you can. First they
tried to get me, now Peter Sollito is dead. These things work in threes, and who knows
who might be next. Hayden, it might be *you*. We need to get together and think this
thing out, come up with a strategy before it's too late."

The Old Man was stunned. That message could have been left only by Stewie
Woods.

The Mercedes topped a hill on the highway. The Bighorn Mountains loomed ahead;
they were light blue, peaked, and crisp in the morning sun. The small town of Sad-

dlestring, from this distance, looked like a case's worth of glinting, broken bottles strewn across the hardpan at the base of the foothills.

23

SHERIDAN PICKETT, STILL in her pajamas, was nestled in a pile of couch cushions in front of the television when Maxine began barking at the front door. This ruined Sheridan's perfect Saturday morning. She tossed candy wrappers and a half-eaten bag of chips aside and scrambled out of the cushions, wrapping herself in her terrycloth bathrobe as someone knocked heavily and then rang the doorbell.

Sheridan had been instructed never to open the door for strangers and she was rarely tempted. Ever since the man had broken into their house and hurt her mother she had been especially cautious.

People often came to the door looking for her dad, because his office was in the house. Sometimes they were ranchers who wanted to file damage claims or complain about hunters or fishermen, and sometimes they were hunters or fishermen who wanted to complain about ranchers. Her dad always asked people to call first and set an appointment, but sometimes they just showed up. Since it was her dad's job to serve the public, her parents had told her that if she was home alone and someone stopped by, she should be polite and get a telephone number where her dad could call them.

She cinched her robe tightly and approached the window. Pulling aside the front window curtains, Sheridan peeked outside.

An older, portly, pear-shaped man stood on the front porch. He had a round, full, red face and was not shaved. He wore a low-crown gray cowboy hat, and a weathered canvas ranch jacket and blue jeans. Scuffed lace-up outfitter boots with riding heels poked out from the bottom of his Wranglers. Sheridan always noted the boots men wore because she thought that boots, more than anything, defined who a man was.

The man stood looking at the door, his shoulders slumped, his head tipped forward, as if he were very tired. She looked out through the yard and could see the roof of a car over the fence but couldn't tell what kind of car it was. Sensing her eyes on him, the man turned his head and saw Sheridan looking out at him. He smiled self-consciously at her. Sheridan thought he had a friendly face and that he looked like somebody's grandfather.

Nevertheless, she made sure the door chain was secured before opening the door the several inches the chain would allow.

"Is your father the game warden in this area?"

There was a wooden sign out front on the fence that said exactly that, but oftentimes strangers either didn't see it or chose not to acknowledge it.

"Yes, he is," Sheridan said. "He's not here right now but he'll be back soon." This is what she was supposed to say, that he would be back soon. Sheridan's mother had drilled this into her, this deliberate vagueness.

The man seemed to be thinking. His brow furrowed and he stroked his chin.

"It's important," he said, looking up. "How soon will he be back?"

Sheridan shrugged.

"Do you think it will be in a few minutes or a few hours?"

Sheridan said she didn't know for sure.

The man rocked back on his boot heels and dug his hands into the front of his jeans pockets. He looked annoyed and troubled, but not necessarily with Sheridan as much as with the circumstances in general. She had not been much help to him, but she would only say what her parents had told her to, nothing more.

"I can give you his cellphone number," Sheridan offered. "Or if it's an emergency you can call the 911 number and ask the dispatcher to radio him." She wanted to be helpful.

The man didn't respond.

"I suppose you can't let me come in and wait for him?"

"Nope," Sheridan said flatly.

The man smiled slightly. It was clearly the answer he expected.

"If I leave him a note, would you make sure he gets it?"

"Sure."

"Back in a minute."

The man turned and walked through the picket fence gate toward his car. Sheridan went into her dad's office and got a business card from the holder on his desk. She waited at the front door. Then she saw the man emerge from his car. As he came through the gate he was licking the back of an envelope.

"Here's his card," Sheridan offered, exchanging it for the envelope through the crack in the door.

The man's handwriting on the envelope was wavery and poor but it said "Game Warden," followed by the word "Important," which was underlined three times. She read the return address on the envelope.

"Are you a lawyer?" she asked. The printing was for the law offices of Whelchel, Bushko, and Marchand, Attorneys at Law, in Denver, Colorado.

When the man looked at her there was something very sad in his eyes.

"No, I'm not. I just borrowed the paper."

"Okay."

"Make sure you give that to him the minute you see him, little lady," he said as he backed off of the porch.

"My name's Sheridan Pickett."

He stopped before opening the gate and looked over his shoulder.

"My name is John Coble."

Sheridan shut the door and threw the bolt home as he slowly walked to his car and got in. Through the windshield, she watched him as he collapsed into the driver's seat. He seemed exhausted. Then he rubbed his eyes with both of his hands, ran his fingers

through his gray hair, and reached forward and started the engine. He backed up and drove away on the Bighorn Road.

Sheridan took the envelope into her dad's office and put it on his computer keyboard where he would see it right away.

JOHN COBLE, THE Old Man, felt remarkably good about what he had just done. It was the first thing he had felt really good about in two months. It was possible, he hoped, that he had set some wheels in motion. The girl had been suspicious of him, which was a sign of both intelligence and smart parents. She was a good girl, it seemed to him.

But there was more to be done. His next trick would be harder, and much more unpleasant.

Luckily, he knew these mountains well, and after seeing the crude map that Charlie had pulled from Tod Marchand's pack, he had a very good idea of where Stewie Woods' cabin would be.

24

JOE WAS APPROACHING the grade that would lead to switchbacks up the mountain, when he looked in his rearview mirror and saw the horse trailer listing to the side. There was Lizzie, who liked to thrust her entire head out of the false window opening in the trailer as if she was desperate to force air in through her nostrils, leaning to the left.

He pulled over onto the shoulder and got out. Curls of acrid dark smoke rose from the flattened right tire. He'd been riding a flat for a few miles. The bearings were white hot and smoking in their sleeves of steel and the asbestos brake pads had sizzled and melted.

He unloaded Lizzie and picketed her in tall grass, which she munched as if she had never eaten before. With her weight out of the trailer, Joe assembled the jack and raised the trailer into the air to change the tire. He barely even noticed the green Mercedes SUV that roared by him on the highway.

JOHN COBLE SAW the horse trailer and the familiar pronghorn antelope decal on the door of the pickup as he passed and he took his foot off of the accelerator.

It had to be the game warden, he thought.

Coble studied the reflection in his rearview mirror as the Mercedes began to slow. The driver of the truck was in the ditch next to the trailer, working the handle on the jack. Behind the man, a buckskin horse was staked down, contently grazing.

Coble looked at his watch. It was approaching eleven. He had no idea how far behind him Charlie Tibbs was but he still expected to see the black Ford at any moment.

He had already wasted time in Saddlestring finding the game warden's house. He had left his message for the game warden, done his good deed. Coble had been a little

reluctant to meet the game warden face to face in the first place, having no idea how that would go.

Coble made the decision to continue on to the cabin. He pressed on the accelerator and his head snapped back into the headrest as the Mercedes rocketed up the base of the mountain.

THREE MILES PAST Crazy Woman Creek, Joe slowed and pulled off the highway onto a gravel two-track. The thick lodgepole pine trees formed a high canopy above, casting deep shadows over the road. The crude map he had drawn from Marybeth's directions was on the console between the seats. He had never been on this particular road before, but knew it led through the National Forest to several sections of state and private land where there were old hunting lodges and mining claim cabins. As he drove further up the mountain, the road worsened, pocked now with spurs of granite that slowed him down considerably.

Because of the thick trees, Joe was surprised when he crested the mountain and a massive valley opened up before him. He stopped before he had completely emerged from the forest, put the truck in park, and grabbed his binoculars from his pack on the seat beside him.

It was a beautiful valley, pulsing with summer mountain colors. The two-track wound down the mountain and along the length of the valley floor before disappearing into a grove of shimmering aspen. The groves fingered their way down the slope to access a narrow serpentine creek. On Joe's left, to the south, the mountainside was rugged, marked by cream-colored granite buttes that jutted from the summer grass like knuckles of a fist straining against silk. Between the knuckles were dark stands of spruce in isolated pockets.

A shadow from a single high cumulus cloud scudded slowly across the valley from east to west, its front end climbing up tree trunks while its mass engulfed entire stands of timber, darkening them, before sliding back over the top of the grove to hug the ground again.

On his right, to the north, the mountain was heavily forested. A few grassy parks could be seen through breaks in the timber where tree branches opened up. Matching the terrain to a worn topo map he pulled from his map file, Joe guessed that the lodges and cabins were tucked into the trees to the north.

Through the binoculars he could find only one structure, an ancient log cabin that was leaning so far to one side that it looked like it could collapse any minute. The door gaped open and the windows were gone. This was obviously not the place.

Joe eased down the road into the valley with his handdrawn map on his lap. Whatever would happen this afternoon would happen here in these mountains and forests, he thought. Either Stewie would be waiting for Marybeth in the cabin he had described to her or this was a hoax of some kind. And if Stewie was in fact alive, what would his reaction be when instead of his old girlfriend, he met the girlfriend's husband?

Joe scanned the trees and undergrowth that lined the edge of the road, looking for an old, lightly used road that supposedly broke off from the two-track and headed

north to the top of the mountain. The road would be blocked by trees that had been dropped across it, the directions said, so it was necessary to approach the cabin on foot.

As he descended further into the valley, Joe watched the signal strength on his cellphone dwindle to nothing. He tried his radio to contact the dispatcher and heard only static in return. He was effectively isolated and out of contact, and would remain so until he eventually emerged from the mountain valley.

IT WAS WARMER on the valley floor and Joe unrolled his window. His slow drive toward the aspen was accompanied by the low hum of insects hovering over the carpet of newly opened wildflowers, with spasmodic percussion from small rocks being squeezed and popped free under the weight of his tires. He noticed, as a matter of habit from patrolling, that there was already a fresh tire track on the road—which was unusual in such a remote area.

He followed a road through the trees where the noon sun dappled the aspen leaves, looking for a turnoff to the right.

When he saw the glint of steel and glass—a vehicle—deep in the Caragana brush through the passenger window, he immediately tensed up, but kept driving slowly as if he had seen nothing at all.

A half-mile from the vehicle, the aspen began to thin, and Joe eased to a stop off the road and turned off his motor. If the person in the car was trying to hide from him, Joe expected to hear a car start up and retreat up the mountain. But it was silent.

Quietly, Joe got out of his pickup. He slipped his .12 gauge shotgun from behind the seat, loaded it with three doubleought buckshot shells, and filled his shirt pocket with additional shells. Then he eased the pickup door shut.

Lizzie anxiously backed out of the trailer, and he was grateful she didn't slam a shoe against the metal floorboard or whinny when she was free. He mounted, secured his hat tightly on his head, slid the shotgun into the saddle scabbard so only the butt of it showed, and nudged Lizzie back toward the road. He kept her in the trees with the road on his right, and she picked her way back to where he had seen the vehicle.

Joe narrowed his eyes as they entered the alcove where the old road was and leaned forward in the saddle to avoid a chest-high branch. It was quiet here, away from the stream, and Lizzie's footfalls were the only sound. He was tense, his senses tingling, and he could feel his heart beat in his chest.

As he approached, Joe could see that the car was a dark green, late model SUV with Colorado plates. Someone had broken leafy aspen branches and laced the hood and windshield with them in an attempt to hide the car. Joe recognized the familiar Mercedes logo on the grille. Because he couldn't call a 10-28 in to the dispatcher, he noted the license plate number in his notebook for later, when he would have a radio signal again.

He dismounted, reins in hand, and peered through the branches at the leather interior. There was an open backpack on the front seat, but there was no one in the car. He felt the hood with the palm of his hand—it was still warm. That puzzled Joe

because he had assumed that the vehicle belonged to Stewie, or whoever was posing as Stewie, and therefore that it would have been parked for some time. But the cuts on the branches were fresh as well. Joe squatted and confirmed that the vehicle's tire tread matched the tread pattern he had noticed out on the road.

Joe stepped back and, with his eyes, followed the old road through the trees until it ended beneath two massive spruce trees that had fallen—or were dropped—over it. A single footprint in the loose dirt of the old road pointed up the mountain. This had to be the place, he said to himself. But someone had gotten here before him.

Joe mounted Lizzie and nudged her out of the shaded alcove into the grassy park where the old road led. Riding parallel to the two downed trees, he finally reached their crowns, then turned Lizzie to go back down, along the other side of the trees, to get back on the road.

He wasn't sure what he should do now, how he should proceed. His original plan was that he would ride up to the cabin, find out who was in it, and make a report. But circumstances had changed. The SUV meant that a third party had entered the picture. He was out of radio contact and the threat that he could be entering a situation, alone, that he wasn't prepared to handle was very real. Everything he had ever learned told him he needed backup and that the smart thing to do right now was to retreat back to the road, drive to the top, and call the dispatcher for assistance.

That's when he heard a truck rumbling down the twotrack.

CROUCHED BEHIND THE wall-like branches of the downed trees that blocked the road, Joe waited for the vehicle to drive by. He saw flashes through the trees as it came down the road from the east, the same direction Joe had come. When it passed by the alcove he saw it in full: a sleek, massive black pickup with dark windows, pulling a horse trailer. Then, almost immediately after it passed him, Joe heard the low hiss of brakes and saw brake lights flash through the brush. The truck was backing up.

Joe turned to check on Lizzie and saw that she was feeding on grass just behind him. He hoped against hope she would keep her head down. If she heard or sensed another horse in the trailer, it would be just like her to raise her head up and call to it. Horses were like that, mares especially, he had noted. They wanted to connect with other horses.

"I'm sorry, girlie," Joe whispered in her ear as he unlash a coil of rope from the saddle horn and slipped it down over her head as she ate. Then he circled the coil around her front legs with his right hand, caught the loop with his left, and pulled it hard and fast. With a double hitch, he tied her head down against her ankles so she couldn't raise it.

Lizzie's nostrils flared and her eyes flashed with white. Joe tried to keep her calm, patting her shoulder and whispering to her, so she wouldn't panic and try to buck the rope off. He could feel her muscles tense beneath his hand, but kept talking to her in what he hoped was a soothing voice, telling her he was sorry but it was for her own good, telling her that there would be some good grass to eat at the end of the day.

She calmed, exhaling with resignation, and Joe briefly closed his eyes with relief.

When he turned back to the tree and the alcove beyond it, he saw that a tall man wearing a gray Stetson had emerged from the black Ford and was now studying the SUV.

Joe considered calling out to him, but something about the man precluded it. Joe watched as the man approached the vehicle, much as Joe had, but the man did it looking down the sights of a semi-automatic pistol he held stiffly in front of him. Joe watched as the man circled the SUV, nudging branches away so he could see inside. The man was now on the driver's side of the car. If the man were to look up, Joe thought, he would see Joe in the trees. But the man didn't look up because he was busy smashing in the driver's side window.

The Stetson twisted and lowered as the man reached inside the car toward the dashboard. Then Joe heard a small pop and saw the hood of the SUV open.

The old man strode to the front of the vehicle, raised the hood, reached inside, and stepped away with a fistful of loose wires. To ensure the car was disabled, the man bent over and twisted the air valves out of both front tires with a Leatherman tool he had pulled out of a case attached to his belt.

The way the man moved was fluid and calculating, Joe thought. He wasn't quick, but he was deliberate and purposeful. This man did not hesitate; he didn't stop and think about what he was going to do next. He had dismantled the SUV in a couple of minutes without even looking over his shoulder to see if someone was watching. He knew what he was doing, Joe thought, as if he had done this kind of thing before. Joe realized, with a shiver, that he was watching a professional.

Suddenly the man turned from the car, pliers still in his hand, and a pair of icy blue eyes seemed to bore a hole through the branches into Joe. Joe froze, his breath caught in his throat. It was as if the man had heard Joe thinking, sensed Joe's fear the way a predator sensed prey. Joe lowered his hand to the butt of his revolver and felt his thumb unsnap the strap that secured it in his holster.

Only when the blue eyes raised over the top of the trees did Joe realize that the man was following the road, past the downed timber and into the spruce. Joe found he could breathe again and his breath shuddered out.

The man stood staring into the trees above Joe for a moment, then turned and peered through the opening in the alcove at the other mountain, the one on the east side with the granite knuckles. It was as if he were taking a measurement, comparing this mountainside with the other.

The man turned on his heels, without a glance back, and Joe heard the engine of the truck come to life. But instead of proceeding down the road, the pickup turned sharply and started climbing up the other side of the mountain, straight away from Joe. A plume of dirt shot out from the Ford's tires as the black pickup shifted into four-wheel-drive low.

Joe untied Lizzie, ignoring her glare, and swung himself into the saddle. He could breathe again, but the terror he had felt when he thought the man saw him had not yet released its grip.

He could hear the Ford as it climbed, but could no longer see it through the trees. He was surprised there was a road over there because he hadn't seen it.

Then he had a thought, and it chilled him. The man had estimated where the cabin was located in terms of elevation on the mountain. Joe guessed the man was working his way up the facing mountainside to take a position directly across from where he thought the cabin would be.

Joe had a decision to make, but none of his choices were worth a damn. "Joe," he could almost hear Marybeth telling him, "You have *really* done it this time."

"Let's go, Lizzie." Joe barked, turning her and spurring her on so she loped up the mountain road in the direction of where the cabin was supposed to be.

25

TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE Joe had discovered the Mercedes SUV, John Coble had drawn his gun, stepped up on the slatboard porch of the low-slung log cabin, and kicked the door open. He had entered and had pointed his pistol at the man inside, who was seated at a table eating his lunch. Coble was winded from the climb so he leaned back against the doorframe to rest. The cabin was simple: a single large room with a kitchen, dining area, fireplace, and desk. A darkened doorway led to the only bedroom.

"I know you were expecting your lawyer, Stewie, but let me introduce myself," Coble wheezed. "I'm Mr. John Coble, and I've spent the last two months trying to kill you and others of your ilk."

Stewie Woods was frozen where he sat, a spoon filled with soup raised halfway to his mouth. Stewie's face was hard to see because Coble's eyes had not yet adjusted to the darkness inside the cabin.

Coble paused to take a couple of deep breaths of air and then continued. "What I have to say is simple. Get out of this place as soon as you can and don't look back. Don't ask a bunch of questions because we Don't have the time. A manhunter named Charlie Tibbs could show up here any minute. Don't stop until you're out of the country; get yourself to Mexico or Canada or wherever you can get to fast. Get on a plane and go overseas if you can. Contact no one and *just flat run.*"

Stewie lowered the spoon into the bowl. His words were raspy and filled with air when he spoke, as if his voice box was a carburetor that had the mixture set too lean.

"I guess I've been expecting you. I just didn't realize you would be so old," Stewie rasped. "Somehow, that makes it worse."

A woman stepped from the bedroom rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Stewie, I ..." she said before she noticed Coble and gasped.

"Britney, this is John Coble," Stewie said, looking stiffly over his shoulder at her and wincing in pain as he did so. "He is one of the men I told you about." Stewie Woods is in bad shape, Coble thought.

Britney's face drained of color as she stared at Coble.

Stewie turned back in his chair. "This is Britney Earthshare. She lived in a tree to protest the logging of an old growth forest. She's famous."

Coble squinted at her. "Yeah, I remember. I remember I thought that was stupid."

Stewie chuckled at Coble. "Britney's been helping me out while I recover. She's a saint."

Coble grunted.

"Why don't you sit down and talk to me for a few minutes?" Stewie asked politely. "You've probably got a pretty good story to tell."

Coble's eyes were still adjusting to the darkness in the cabin. As Stewie Woods's features began to appear, it seemed to Coble like a Hollywood special effect where the closer he looked, the worse it got. Stewie was horribly disfigured. His face was monstrous. His prominent features had once been a jutting jaw, well-defined cheekbones and languid blue-green eyes, but now those outstanding features were ragged mutations. One eye was completely closed, the lid concave over an empty, seeping socket. Stewie's nose was flattened to one side of his face, and the exposed nostril burred and flapped like the beating of a hummingbird wing when he exhaled. Coble cringed and looked away. Britney took a position in back of Stewie with her chubby hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were still wide.

"I don't blame you," Stewie said to Coble. "I still scare myself sometimes. Especially in the morning when I look in the mirror and expect to see the old Stewie. I used to be a pretty good-looking guy, you know."

Coble looked back but focused on a spot somewhere above and to the left of Stewie's head so he wouldn't have to look at him again.

"I don't have time to sit down and chat."

"You're doing a good thing, aren't you?" Stewie asked. "That's impressive."

"I'm not here to save you or protect you. I don't want to be your friend. I still think you and your ilk are shitheels." Coble shook his head. "I'm amazed that you are still alive."

"Me, too," Stewie said. "So why are you doing this?"

Coble had a strange thought. He had not yet holstered his gun and it was at his side in his hand. It would take no effort to raise it, shoot Stewie and the tree-loving woman, and return to Charlie Tibbs. He could tell Tibbs he just wanted to finish this job himself. Tibbs may or may not believe him. There was comfort in evil, Coble thought. It was simpler.

"I'm doing this for me, not you," Coble snapped. "Our job seemed right at first. It seemed like the only way left to strike back. You people threatened our way of thinking and our way of life. All you environmentalists just showed up one day and told us that everything we've done for years was now wrong, and that everyone living in the West was a stupid ignorant criminal."

"You people expect everyone out here to suddenly give up the only jobs they've ever known in mines and the fields," he shot a dirty look at Britney, "and the forests."

Somehow, all of us are expected to get jobs working out of our homes with computers, telephones, and modems. That's all you've offered up as an alternative, you know. Like lumberjacks and cowboys can just change over to being software programmers."

Coble's voice began to rise, and his face began to flush. "None of you know or appreciate how tough and raggedy-assed it used to be in this country. Hell, a hundred and forty years ago this was still a wilderness out here. Indians ran the show. Even thirty-odd years ago when I started working for the state of Montana as a brand inspector, it was rough and it was real out here. There was bad weather and bad land and no water. If you looked over your shoulder the country was gaining on you and ready to wipe you out at any minute. The last thing anybody ever thought of was that they were *ruining the earth*. Hell, we all thought the earth was ruining *us*."

Coble gestured to Stewie: "You people want to stop us from doing everything we know. You do it just so that if you ever want to travel out here from the East in your new car, you might be able to see a wolf out of the window. You're trying to make our home a real-life theme park for environmental whackos. You don't give a shit how many people lose their jobs or are displaced—just so you can see a goddamn wolf that hasn't lived here in over a hundred years."

Coble caught himself. He realized he was giving a speech, one that had been put together in bits and pieces in the pickup and rehearsed in silence as he and Tibbs drove across the country. Although he believed in what he said, he didn't have time for it. He stood and looked at Stewie Woods. Stewie stared back. The man was grotesque.

"But as Charlie and I began to do what we were hired to do, it didn't seem so damned noble to me anymore. In fact, I started feeling like the worst kind of criminal."

Coble paused and shook his head.

"Not Charlie, though," Coble said, grimacing. "Charlie enjoyed it more as we went along, and got more and more excited. He got righteous about it. We started getting sloppy, starting with your friend, Hayden Powell, that writer. There was no planning, no strategy, no nothing except Charlie and me turning into animals trying to kill somebody as fast and as nasty as we could. And we had no idea that our first project failed," he said, looking at Stewie, the first project.

"Charlie Tibbs really does think he's doing righteous work, you know," Coble said with caution. "Charlie's lost something in his head along the way. Something's malfunctioned. His moral compass is gone, and that fact is very frightening, given Charlie's skills and abilities. Charlie's the best tracker and hunter I've ever seen, and I've seen one hell of a lot of 'em. Charlie thinks he's doing this not just for the Stockman's Trust, but for America."

Britney Earthshare was horrified by what she had heard. She covered her mouth with her hand.

"You got paid for this." Stewie said. "You didn't do this entirely for your beliefs."

Coble nodded uncomfortably. He didn't like talking about the money. "I was going to get three-quarters of a million dollars," Coble said flatly. "Two-hundred and fifty thousand was up front, the rest will be sitting in an escrow account for me once the

list is cleared. Charlie is probably getting at least double that. We never discussed how much each of us was getting.”

Stewie whistled.

“You’ve got to understand something,” Coble said. “When I worked for the state of Montana I maxed out in salary at \$30,500 per year. That was the highest annual salary I ever got. My state retirement is half of that a year. Charlie always made a lot more in his work as a stock detective, but I have no idea what that amounted to.”

Stewie said he understood.

“It wasn’t hard to recruit us,” Coble said, challenging Stewie with an arched-brow glare. “But the difference between Charlie and me is that Charlie Tibbs would have done this for free. It’s not a money thing with Charlie. It’s never been a money thing, and they knew it when they hired him. I don’t see him stopping even when he’s sure he’s got everybody on the list.”

Stewie’s unblinking eye had been boring into Coble as he spoke. “So the purpose,” Stewie said, “was to eliminate each person on your list in the most humiliating way possible so they would avoid martyrdom, and only be remembered for the ridiculous way they died.”

Coble stared back.

“You were pretty successful at that, John Coble,” Stewie said.

“Yup,” Coble agreed.

“But what is the Stockman’s Trust?”

Coble was about to answer but stopped himself and rubbed his eyes. He was absolutely exhausted, completely spent.

“Who is in charge? Who are your employers?”

One of Coble’s old hands weakly waved Stewie away. The other hand continued to rub his eyes.

“I’ve stayed too long and talked too much,” Coble said, grunting and pulling himself to his feet. “You two best get out of here. I need some air.”

John Coble opened the door and leaned against the inside of the door frame.

26

JOE TRIED TO stay in the trees, avoiding the grassy open meadows, as he rode hard up the mountain. Lizzie was tiring, her easy lope giving way to lunges, and she was throwing her head in annoyance. Her hooves launched chunks of wet black earth into the air behind them.

He tried to anticipate and play out the scenarios that might occur when he reached the cabin. Should he ask them to come out with their hands up or yell for them to get down on the floor? Should he tell them about his suspicions in regard to the man in the alcove? A stream of sweat trickled down the back of his neck from his hatband.

Sensing that Lizzie was just about to give out, Joe reined her to a stop in the shade of a tree. While she rested, her nostrils billowing, Joe raised his binoculars and looked across the valley to the opposite mountain. He swept the binoculars over the mountain parks and granite spires, looking for the black Ford truck. A glimpse of movement in a meadow startled him, but when he looked back he saw it was only a cow moose grazing at the edge of a treeline.

Then he saw a flash of glass. Fumbling, he dialed the focus in tighter and tried to concentrate his view while Lizzie heaved, breathing hard, and his own heart whumped against the inside of his sternum. He found it. The glint was from something in the rear of the black Ford truck.

Joe reached out to grab a branch to steady himself and raised himself up in his stirrups so that he could see better. He took a sharp intake of breath. The man in the Stetson was in the back of the Ford, leaning over a long rifle mounted in the bed of the pickup. The glint was from the telescopic lens. Joe imagined a line of fire from the black Ford to the cabin, which must be just above him through the trees.

Joe heard the bullet before he heard the shot; a sound like fabric ripping that suddenly ended in a hollow and sickening *pock* sound.

IN THE DOORWAY of the cabin, John Coble flipped backward through the air and landed heavily on the table where Stewie Woods sat. Britney screamed and backpedaled until the wall stopped her. Her T-shirt and face were spattered with blood and bits of bone and tissue.

Stewie kicked back his chair and scrambled to his feet, looking down at Coble. The top half of Coble's head was gone.

Outside, a heavy rifle shot rolled across the valley, sounding like thunder.

CROUCHING FORWARD IN the saddle like a jockey, Joe spurred Lizzie out of the trees and into the open meadow that rose up the mountain to culminate at the shadowed front of a dark cabin. The boom of the shot swept through the timber.

"Get down!" he shouted at the cabin, not knowing how many people were inside. *"Get down on the floor!"*

And suddenly Joe felt an impact like an ax burying itself into soft wood. Lizzie stumbled, her front legs collapsing as her rear haunches arced into the air, her head ducking as she pitched forward, throwing Joe. He hit the ground hard, crumpling against the foot of the steps to the porch of the cabin, his chest and chin taking the brunt of the fall. Lizzie completed her thousand-pound somersault and landed so hard, just a foot short of Joe, that he felt the ground shudder.

BRITNEY WAS STILL shrieking inside but she had screamed herself hoarse and was practically soundless when the doorframe filled with Joe Pickett. The fall had knocked the wind out of him and he leaned into the cabin with his hands on his knees, fighting for breath. The rope he had looped around the saddle horn was tangled around one foot.

Stewie lurched around the table where Coble lay twitching and helped Joe inside, leading him from the open door, as a fist-sized hole blew through the front window and shattered all of the glass.

"Get down!" Joe barked, as he dropped to his hands and knees, pulling Stewie with him.

Methodically, bullets hit the front of the cabin blowing holes through the walls that looked alternately like stars, hearts, and sunbursts—followed by the rolling thunder sound of the heavy rifle fire.

"You must be Stewie Woods," Joe said, looking over to the man who had helped him inside the cabin.

"And you *aren't* Mary Harris," Stewie said.

"I'm her husband," Joe said, glaring at Stewie's disfigured face. Now was not the time to punch him in the nose, Joe thought. "Her name's Marybeth Pickett."

Stewie wheezed. "You're a game warden."

"Right."

"Do you know how many there are out there shooting at us?" Stewie asked with remarkable calmness.

"One older man in a black Ford pickup. He's got a hell of a rifle and he knows what he's doing."

"Look what he did to John Coble," Stewie gestured to the table above them. For the first time, Joe noticed the two boots that hung suspended from the edge of the table and a single still arm that dropped over the side. A stream of dark blood as thick as chocolate syrup strung from the table to a growing pool on the floor.

"Is he—"

"He's dead," Stewie said. Britney Earthshare had now crawled over to join them on the floor. Her face was a mask of revulsion and frozen shock. Joe sympathized. He couldn't yet grasp the magnitude and danger of the situation he was in.

"Do you have any weapons in the cabin?" Joe asked them both.

"No, but Coble has a pistol with him," said Stewie.

"Get it," Joe commanded. "Can you shoot a gun?"

"Of course," Stewie said. "I'm from Wyoming."

Stewie rolled toward the table and began to rise up. As he did, the kitchen window imploded with the force of another bullet and threw shards of glass skittering across the floor. Stewie dropped to a sprawl, his attitude accusatory toward Joe.

"Forget *that!*" Stewie yelled.

"What about you, Britney?" Joe asked. She was closer to Coble.

"I will not touch a gun."

Joe cursed. They were useless.

Joe's mind raced as he lay there, his cheek pressed to the rough wood. Stewie was a few feet away, and despite the immediacy and danger of the situation, he couldn't help staring. Stewie, Joe thought, was hideous. Seen in the dusty rods of light from the bullet holes in the walls, Stewie's face looked as if it were made of wet papier mâché

that had been raked from top to bottom with a gardening claw and allowed to dry. His mouth was misshapen and exaggerated, capable of making a perfect inverted U when Stewie was angry, like he was now. His mouth looked like a child's drawing of a sad face.

Under Stewie's rough, loose clothes, it was obvious that he had been bigger but had recently lost most of his muscle tone. Skin sagged on big bones. His left arm was limp and thin. Stewie's fingernails and toenails needed trimming, and a beard, once full and red, was now pink and wispy. The hair on his head grew in patches, like putting greens on a desert golf course.

Joe, however, pulled his attention away from Stewie as he realized that the gunshots had suddenly stopped. Joe guessed that the shooter was reloading. He reached down to make sure his .357 was still in his holster and was relieved to find it was. Unfortunately, Joe was a notoriously bad shot, and he knew that it would be close to impossible for him to hit the shooter at this distance.

The shots resumed, but inside the cabin nothing happened. The shooter had shifted targets. Joe heard a faraway shattering of glass, and a metallic clang from the impact of a bullet.

"He found my truck," Joe spat.

He remembered that his shotgun was in the saddle scabbard. On his knees and elbows he scrambled toward the open door.

"Where are you going?" Britney asked hysterically. "Are you leaving us?"

"Try to calm down, Britney," Stewie implored.

Joe crawled to the side of the doorframe and cautiously leaned forward. His face and head felt stunningly exposed when he peered outside. He wondered if he would hear the bullet before it hit him.

Joe was practically useless as well. The shooter was over 1,500 yards away on the other mountain. Joe's .357 Magnum was not capable of even half of that range. The fat, heavy bullets he fired would fall short at about the distance of the road.

LIZZIE WASN'T WHERE she had fallen, but Joe spotted her further down the meadow. She stood in a pool of shadow just inside the treeline. His saddle had come loose and hung upside down beneath her belly. She took a step, faltered, and stopped. She stood stiffly. He could see that the bullet had shattered her right rear leg. Her leg, from her hock down, hung like a broken branch.

Suddenly, there was a puff of dust and hair from her shoulder and the horse jerked and buckled into the summer grass as the reverberating sound of shot rolled across the valley.

That son of a bitch, *Joe thought*. That son of a bitch killed Lizzie!

Joe suddenly scuttled back as another .308 bullet blew a football-sized chunk out of the doorframe directly above where his head had been.

"Jesus Christ!" Stewie bellowed.

Joe knew his face was white and contorted with fear—he could feel his own skin pulling across his skull—when he joined Stewie and Britney Earthshare under the table. His voice choked as he asked them if there was another way out of the cabin.

Stewie said there was a side door but that Charlie Tibbs could probably see them if they went out that way.

“There’s a window in the bedroom,” Britney said, her teeth chattering as if the temperature were subzero.

They crawled across the floor of the cabin toward the bedroom over shards of glass, splinters of wood, and congealing globules of blood and tissue. A bullet tore through the wall a foot above floor level and smashed into the base of the stove where Britney had huddled just a few minutes ago. Joe felt the cabin shudder with the impact.

In the bedroom, Joe ripped the curtains and rod off of the only window and shoved it open. It faced the back of the cabin, away from where Charlie Tibbs was positioned on the mountain.

Britney was trembling beneath her T-shirt as Joe helped her out the window. There was a five-foot drop, and she landed awkwardly but recovered. Stewie sat on the sill and grunted, trying to fit his broad shoulders through the frame.

“I’m stuck, dammit,” he complained.

With the heel of his hand, Joe thumped Stewie’s left shoulder, forcing him through. Stewie dropped to the ground and landed gracefully.

A sound like a cymbal crashed in the main room as a bullet tore through the wall and hit a cast-iron skillet hanging above the stove.

Joe dropped through the window and his boots stuck fast to the soft earth covered with pine needles.

“Which way?” Britney asked.

“North.” Joe pointed into the timber. “Keep the cabin between us and the shooter. Stay in the trees and don’t look back until we’re over the top of the mountain.”

“I was really looking forward to seeing Mary,” Stewie said. “What a shitty day this has turned out to be.”

Joe wheeled and hit Stewie square in the nose. Stewie lost his footing and sat down.

Stewie reached up and covered his nose with his hand, then looked at the smear of blood in his palm. He glared at Joe with his one good eye.

“Enough about my wife.” Joe commanded, shaking his hand that stung from the blow.

Britney ran to Stewie and helped him to his feet. Stewie rose with a twisted, manic grin that looked almost cartoonish.

“The man who is shooting at us,” Joe asked, “do you know who he is?”

Stewie nodded, still rubbing his nose. “His name is Charlie Tibbs.”

“Charlie Tibbs?” Joe repeated. “Oh, shit.” Joe had heard of Tibbs. He hadn’t realized the legendary stock detective was still working.

“Okay,” Stewie said, shaking his head with bemused disbelief. “Let’s resume fleeing now.”

AS THEY CLIMBED through the thick trees in back of the cabin, Joe grimly went over what had just happened, wishing he could call it all back, wishing he could start over from the time he saw the man he now knew as Charlie Tibbs.

Wishing he knew then what he knew now, Joe thought how easy it would have been to pump his shotgun and level Charlie Tibbs with a cloud of buckshot as the man stood in the alcove by the hidden Mercedes. If he had done that, Joe thought, John Coble would still be alive, Joe would still have his horse and his dignity, and he would not be deep in the timber, running north, with Stewie Woods and Britney Earthshare, into mountain country so rough and wild that no one had ever bothered to cut a road into it.

Behind him he heard another heavy bullet slam into the cabin, followed by another booming roll of a rifle shot.

27

AFTER ENTERING THE house and kissing Sheridan, Marybeth asked if Joe had called. Sheridan, still lounging on her pillows in front of the TV, answered that he hadn't.

Marybeth dropped the Tom Horn book on the kitchen table and launched herself into scrubbing the counters and washing the dishes. It was a way of fighting off the sense of dread she had been feeling since the telephone calls and the incident with Ginger Finotta in the library. It was barely four in the afternoon and Joe had said he would be back by dark or call first. It was still early, and she had no good reason to feel such anxiousness.

Reading the book hadn't helped. Although it meandered through Tom Horn's Indian fighting days—he was one of those hired to pursue Geronimo—and his service with the U.S. Army in Cuba, what interested her were the chapters at the end of the book. Those chapters covered the period when Tom Horn was hired by Wyoming ranchers to clear out rustlers and homesteaders in southern Wyoming. The ranchers were a gentlemanly, genteel group. Many had nothing to do with day-to-day ranch work, which they hired out to their foremen, and they spent their days in the men's clubs wearing fashionable clothing and their nights in a cluster of beautiful Victorian homes in Cheyenne. Some had visited their vast holdings up north only for occasional hunting trips. They knew, however, that the presence of rustlers, outlaws, and settlers threatened not only their income but also their political power base and the concept of open range. The ranchers were all members of the nascent Wyoming Cattle Growers' Association. So it was decided among a cabal of association members that the rustlers had to go, and it would be best if it were accomplished ruthlessly, to send a powerful message. Based on the landowners' experience in the territory thus far, local law enforcement couldn't handle the job. The rustlers were local and their connections within the community

were pervasive. For example, the rustlers knew well in advance when a sheriff's posse was forming or where deputies were going to be sent to try to break them up.

So Tom Horn was hired, supposedly to break horses for the Swan Land and Cattle Company. He lived alone in a rough cabin in the rocky Iron Mountain range, which was country better suited for mountain lions than for people. But there was no mistaking the real reason he was in the area, and it had little to do with horses.

One by one, men suspected of rustling turned up dead. They were found in the high sagebrush flats and amid the granite crags of the Medicine Bow Mountains. There was a pattern to their deaths. All were found shot in the head, probably from a great distance, with a large caliber rifle bullet. And under their lifeless heads, someone had placed a rock.

"You be good," parents of the time would say to their children, "or Tom Horn'll get you!"

AT FIVE, MARYBETH called the dispatcher to find out if there had been any word from Joe. The dispatcher said that according to the log, Joe had not called in the entire day. At Marybeth's request, the dispatcher tried to reach him, but after several attempts, she reported that either Joe's radio was turned off or he was simply out of range. Both Marybeth and the dispatcher knew how difficult it could be at times to make contact with officers in the mountains.

At five-thirty, Marybeth called the Sheriff's Office. Joe had promised to call the sheriff and advise him of his whereabouts, as well as his agenda. Sheriff Barnum was out of town at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy in Douglas for firearms recertification, and Marybeth didn't trust Deputy McLanahan enough to tell him her suspicions. Barnum was not expected back until late Sunday afternoon. The Sheriff's Office told Marybeth that Joe had called early in the morning and had left his cellphone number for the sheriff to use when and if he called in.

Marybeth felt a flash of anger at Joe. Knowing Joe, he had probably been grateful that Barnum wasn't in. This way, he could investigate the cabin on his own. This was the kind of stubborn behavior that worried and enraged her. She tried to relax, telling herself that he was probably just fine, simply out of radio or cellphone range. He was probably rumbling up out of the trees with the horse trailer after having met Stewie Woods—or not. He would certainly call her when he could. But dammit, he had no right to put her through this.

She stepped out of Sheridan's line of sight while she composed her thoughts. She breathed deeply and calmed herself. The one thing she didn't want to do was to worry Sheridan, because the two of them would feed off of each other and their dual concern would escalate—which wouldn't accomplish anything of value. Marybeth was grateful that Lucy and April were both at church camp so there were two less children to hide her feelings from. But then, at times like these, she wanted all of her children around her. She wanted to be able to shelter and protect them.

She thought of Trey Crump, Joe's district supervisor in Cody. He was a good guy, and wouldn't begrudge her calling him for advice. It was still much too early to panic,

but if Trey was aware of the situation he might have some ideas on how to proceed, and he was the closest to the mountains—although from the other side—if it were necessary to start a search.

Joe had taken a copy of the directions she had written down when Stewie called, but Marybeth assumed the original was still in the small desktop copier in his office. She noted that Sheridan's eyes were on her as she crossed the family room and entered Joe's office.

"Anything wrong, Mom?" Sheridan asked.

"No, nothing," Marybeth answered a little too quickly.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Sheridan said from her cushions. "A man came here today and left a letter for Dad."

Marybeth stepped from the office doorway holding the envelope that was printed with the return address of Whelchel, Bushko, and Marchand, Attorneys at Law.

"You need to tell me these things," Marybeth snapped.

Sheridan did her best "Hey, I'm innocent" shrug. "I just did," she explained. "Besides, people drop stuff off for Dad all the time."

Marybeth sighed, knowing Sheridan was right. Still holding the envelope, she found the directions in the copier, exactly where she thought they would be. Then she stared at the writing on the envelope.

Game Warden. Important.

Important enough to open now, she wondered? Important enough for the game warden's *wife* to open it?

"Tell me what the man looked like," she asked Sheridan.

"Jeez, chill, mom," Sheridan said, turning the television volume down with the remote control. "He was an older guy, probably sixty or so. He had on a cowboy hat and jeans. He had a potbelly and he seemed like a nice guy. He said his name was Jim Coble or something like that."

Marybeth thought about it. The description wasn't much help, except that the man wasn't someone they knew.

TREY CRUMP WASN'T at home so Marybeth talked to his wife. They agreed that this kind of situation was maddeningly familiar and would probably reduce both their normal life expectancies. Mrs. Crump said she would have Trey call Marybeth as soon as she heard from him.

"Tell him I'm not panicking," Marybeth asked. "That's important."

Mrs. Crump said she understood.

THE GENTLEMEN RANCHERS, the pampered sons of industrialists and shipping magnates and bankers from Europe and New York and Boston, had gotten together and conspired over brandy and cigars and had determined that the local authorities were too stupid, too ineffectual, and too familiar with the rustlers and the settlers to eliminate the problem. What they needed, to preserve the status quo and the dominant concept of open range, was a calculating hired assassin from the outside who would answer only to them.

So Tom Horn was brought in, hired by an associate who could not directly implicate them, to do the job.

The rustlers were criminals, but they were not treated with the condemnation by the public that they deserved, the ranchers thought. Rustlers were often portrayed as dashing cowboy rogues, the last of the frontiersmen. The settlers, who were building shanties (some actually burrowing into the earth like human rodents) and putting up fences on their open range, were thought of as rugged individualists. Public sentiment was growing against the gentlemen ranchers. Locals spoke of a distinction between the ranchers who lived on their land and took on the elements and the markets as opposed to the gentlemen ranchers who lived in Cheyenne and managed their affairs over fine dinners and liquor sent out daily on the Union Pacific.

So the ranchers started a small war. And they were very successful, at least for a while.

Marybeth lowered the book and her eyes burned a hole into the clock above the stove. It was six-thirty, and shadows were beginning to grow across the road on Wolf Mountain. Joe hadn't called in. Neither had Trey Crump.

Maybe this is what Ginger Finotta was trying to tell her. Maybe, she thought, the ranchers were going to war again.

She drew the envelope from her pocket. It could be anything. It could be a letter asking about where the man could get permission to hunt. In the Rockies, men generally thought that anything to do with hunting should be labeled "Important." And ranchers thought anything that had to do with their land was important.

She ripped open the envelope and pulled out a single folded sheet and read the wavering script.

"Oh My God," she said aloud.

"Mom, what is it?" Sheridan called from the other room.

PART THREE

I'm not much of a prophet. I suppose the conflict between conservation and development will grow more intense each year with the pressure of a growing population and economic demands. That's all I can see in the future—more conflict.

Edward Abbey
author of *The Monkeywrench Gang*,
NPR interview, 1983

28

WITH THE CABIN behind them, Joe Pickett, Stewie Woods, and Britney Earthshare ascended the first mountain. Joe led, keeping to the trees, and eventually found a game trail that switchbacked its way to the top. Descending, they plunged steeply into twisted, gnarled, almost impenetrable black timber. They crawled more than walked through it, sometimes covering much more ground moving sideways to find an opening in the trees than actually distancing themselves from the cabin.

The frequency of the rifle fire had slowed. Joe checked his watch. It was now three to five minutes between shots. Then the shots stopped altogether.

Finally, they reached the bottom of the slope. By then Joe was thinking about the probability of being tracked. While the black timber would be as difficult for a horse as it was for them, it would be obvious that the only place they had to run was downhill. There was no reason to flank the cabin or try to work their way back to the road where they could possibly be seen. The best strategy, Joe figured, was to get as far as away as possible, as quickly as possible.

Stewie was doing remarkably well, considering the circumstances and the tough climbing. As they crawled through the timber his chatter was non-stop. He filled Joe in on what John Coble had told them about how it had been he and Tibbs who had rigged the cow with explosives, and how boring it was to be a fugitive.

"If this was a movie, we would have stayed at the cabin and plotted and then set a bunch of booby traps," Stewie riffed. "You know, we would have dug a pit and filled it with sharpened sticks or fixed up a tripwire on a bent-over tree or something so when Charlie came tonight—*whoops!*—he would get jerked into the air by his feet. Then we'd surround him and beat him like a piñata.

“But this ain’t no movie, man. This is real life. And in real life when some dickhead is shooting at you there is only one thing you can do, and that is to *run like a rabbit*. Like a scared fucking bunny.”

Joe ignored him.

Occasionally, when a branch snapped dryly or two trees rubbed together with a moan in the wind, Joe would spin and reach back for his pistol. At any time, he expected Charlie Tibbs to appear above them or for long-range rifle shots to start cutting them down.

At the bottom of the slope was a small runoff stream that coursed through boulders. Joe stepped up on the rocks and led them downstream for half a mile before cutting back up the next slope.

Britney objected and Joe explained that the foray was meant to make them more difficult to track since they would leave no marks on the stones.

THEY STAYED IN the shadows of a steep granite wall and followed it up the second mountain until the wall finally broke and let them through. After 500 yards of spindly lodgepole pines, the trees cleared and they started toward the top of the mountain, laboring across loose gray shale. The temperature had dropped ten degrees as they climbed due to the increase in altitude, although it was still hot and the late afternoon sun was piercing.

Stewie’s labored breathing and the cascading shale as it loosened under their feet were the only sounds as they hiked upward.

“Try to get over the top without stopping,” Joe called over his shoulder to Stewie. “If Charlie Tibbs is going to see us with that spotting scope of his, it’s going to be here, while we’re in the open.”

“Stewie can’t get his breath!” Britney pleaded to Joe. She had dropped back and was climbing with Stewie, his good arm over her shoulder.

“He’s fine,” Joe grumbled. “Let’s keep going. We can rest on the other side.”

“What an *asshole*,” Britney said to Stewie in a remarkably out-of-place Valley Girl intonation. “First he *hits* you and then he tries to *kill* you.”

Stewie tried, between attempts to catch his breath, to reassure Britney that he was all right.

Joe sighed and waited for them to catch up, then pulled Stewie’s other arm over his own shoulder. The three of them summited the mountain and stumbled down the other side, again through loose shale.

Joe kept urging them on until they approached larger trees that provided some cover and shade. He stepped out from Stewie’s arm, letting it flop down, and found a downed log to sit on.

Stewie crumpled into a pile of arms and legs and sat still while he slowly caught his breath. Britney positioned herself behind him in the crux of a weathered branch. Joe noticed that she had gouged her shin sometime while they were climbing and that blood from the wound had dried in two dirty streams running down her leg and into her sandaled foot.

Sitting back, Joe felt cool as the sweat beneath his shirt began to dry. He removed his hat and ran his fingers through hair that was getting stiff with salt from sweating beneath his hatband. Patting his shirt and trouser pockets, he did a quick inventory of what he had brought with him. While he had started the day in the cocoon of his pickup surrounded by radios, firearms, equipment, as well as Lizzie, he now counted among his possessions his clothing, boots, and hat, his holster and belt, the long coil of rope, small binoculars hung by a thong over his neck, and his spiral notebook and pen.

Looking at Stewie and Britney, he saw that they had brought even less with them from the cabin.

Stewie painfully untangled himself and sat up, his arms around his knees. He looked up at Joe.

"Thanks for helping me up the mountain."

"Sure."

Britney rolled her eyes.

"What do you think our plan should be?" Stewie asked. "How long should we hide out before we head back?"

Joe had been thinking about this on their long march up the mountainside.

"I don't know."

Britney huffed, blowing her bangs up off her forehead. The Valley Girl speech pattern was back. "What do you *mean* you don't know? Why did you *lead* us up that freaking *mountain*, then?"

Joe grimaced. This was not where he wanted to be, he thought, and these were not people he wanted to be there with.

"We don't know if Charlie Tibbs is tracking us," Joe explained patiently. "If he is coming after us, he has a horse and he seems to know what he's doing. Even I could follow our sloppy tracks up this mountain."

"I didn't know we were supposed to tiptoe," Britney whined.

"John Coble said that Tibbs was the best tracker he had ever seen," Stewie said.

Joe addressed Stewie. "If he turns away and goes back to where he came from, we'll know it tonight, I think. He might even follow our tracks down to the stream, where I hope he'll get confused about where we came out and turn back. I can't imagine him trying to run us down at night. If he leaves, we can sneak back to the cabin tomorrow. You've got a cellphone and a radio in there, right?"

Stewie nodded yes. *How do you think I called your wife?* was what Joe expected him to say. But Stewie wisely kept his mouth shut.

"The phone only works at certain times," Britney said. "Like when the weather is just perfect or the sunspots are lined up or something. Most of the time we can't reach anybody and nobody can call us."

Joe nodded. "I've got a phone and a radio in my truck, if we can get to it. Provided Charlie Tibbs doesn't get there first." He thought of Tibbs's methodical work on the

SUV and imagined him doing the same to his pickup. "Plus they'll be looking for us by tomorrow, is my guess."

"At least when I was in the tree I had electricity and could use my cellphone to call my friends," Britney said, speaking as much to herself as to Stewie or Joe. "I had *food*, at least. But I guess that was California and this *isn't*."

Stewie's misshapen mouth exaggerated his frown. "And if he comes after us?"

"Then we die," Britney offered.

IN A THICK pocket of aspen trees below where Stewie and Britney were resting, Joe found a spring that bubbled out of a granite shelf into a small shallow pool that had been eroded into the rock. From the shelf, trickles of water dribbled down the rock face and, with the help of other springfed trickles further down the mountain, worked their way in unison toward the valley floor to birth the next stream. Joe drank from the pool, pressing his cheek against the cool lip of it, sucking the water in through his teeth to catch the pine needles that floated on the surface. If there was bacteria in the water, he didn't care. Giardiasis was the last thing he was worried about right now.

He put his hat in the water, crown down, and filled it as much as he could. Holding it in his hands like a newborn puppy, he walked back up the mountain to give Stewie and Britney a drink.

Stewie accepted the hatful of water and Britney crinkled her nose at the very idea. She left to find the spring for herself.

After drinking, Stewie wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"I'll bet you ten thousand dollars that he's already coming after us," Stewie said.

"No bet."

"A thousand?"

"No bet."

"Can you hit anything with that pistol?" Stewie asked, gesturing with his head toward Joe's holster.

"Nope."

"How well do you know this country?"

"Not as well as I wish I did," Joe confessed, sitting back down on the log.

Stewie cursed the fact that they didn't have a map.

He looked beyond Joe to the jagged peaks of the mountains, which were brilliant blue and snow-capped. "Unless I'm completely wrong, it seems to me if we keep going west we will hit a big canyon that will stop us cold."

Joe nodded. "Savage Run."

"I always wanted to see that canyon." Stewie's face screwed up in a clownish, pathetic grimace. "But not like this."

THE SUN BALLOONED and settled into a notch between massive and distant peaks, as if it were being put away for the night. There was a spectacular farewell on the westward sides of the mountains and bellies of the cumulus clouds as they lit up in brilliant fuchsia.

They were still in the tall trees below the rim, and Joe had searched in vain for a natural shelter of some kind. But he had not located a cave, or a protected wash, or even an exposed root pan large enough for the three of them. As the evening sky darkened, there were no signs of thunderheads, so he hoped there wouldn't be rain. The temperature had dropped quickly as the sun had gone down. At this elevation, there were wide swings of temperature every day. Joe had estimated that it had been about 80 degrees that afternoon, and he expected it to drop to 40 by the predawn hours.

They were, by Joe's guess, only five miles from the cabin. That was all the progress they had made, despite an entire afternoon of climbing, hiking, and crawling over exceedingly rough terrain.

The place they had chosen to stop had its advantages. It was close enough to the top of the ridge that they could peer over it into the valley. Because they were on the other side of the second mountain, their camp could not be seen if Tibbs was glassing the country with his spotting scope. There was water nearby, and the grade of the slope behind them was not nearly as difficult as the two they had already come across. If Tibbs suddenly appeared, they could move into the trees and down the mountain fairly quickly. And if a helicopter arrived, on the remote chance that one had been called out, they could scramble out into the open areas and be seen from above.

JOE LAY ON the still-warm shale at the top of the ridge and looked through his binoculars at the first mountain and the valley below them. As it got darker, the forest appeared to soften. There was no way, looking at the country now, to know how rough and ragged it was beneath the darkening velvet green cover of treetops.

Joe looked for movement, and listened for sounds in a vast silence so awesome it was intimidating. Although he didn't expect to see Charlie Tibbs riding brazenly through an open meadow, there was the chance that Tibbs might spook deer or grouse and give away his location. That is, Joe thought, if he were out there at all.

Joe didn't turn when he heard the crunching of heavy steps as Stewie joined him on the top of the ridge.

"See anything?" Stewie asked, settling into the shale with a grunt.

"Trees."

"Britney's not in a very good mood, so I thought I would join you," Stewie said. "She tried to wash John Coble's blood out of her shirt but she couldn't get it all out."

"Mmm."

"Damn, it's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yup."

"Do you ever actually talk?"

Joe lowered the binoculars for a moment. "I talk with my wife." Then he cautioned Stewie: "But I don't talk *about* my wife."

Stewie nodded, smiled, and looked away.

"Have you wondered how it is I came to be?" Stewie spoke in hushed tones, barely above a whisper. "I mean, now. After getting blown up by a cow?"

"I did wonder about that."

"But you haven't asked."

"I've been busy."

"It's an amazing story. A horrible story. You got a minute?"

Joe smiled in spite of himself. *Did he have a minute?*

"The force of the explosion pinned you to a tree trunk," Joe said. "I saw the branch you hung from. I even climbed up to look at it."

Stewie nodded. That's where it began, he said.

HE WAS ALIVE.

Either that, or he was in a state of being that was at least similar to being alive, in the worst kind of way. He could see things and comprehend movement. His imagination flowed around and through his brain, like warm fingers of sludge, and the sludge had taken over his consciousness. He imagined that a thin sinewy blue string or vein, a tight wet cord that looked somewhat like a tendon, tenuously secured his life. He thought that the tendon could snap and blink out the light, and that his death would come with a heavy thumping sound like a wet bundle of canvas dropped onto pavement. An impulse inside him, but outside his control, was working like mad to keep him living, to keep things functioning, to maintain the grip of the tendon. If the impulse ran out of whatever was fueling this effort, he would welcome the relief and invite whatever would happen next. And for a moment his senses focused.

Blood painted the trees. Bits of clothing and strips of both human and bovine flesh hung from branches. The smell of cordite from the explosion was overpowering and it hung in the air, refusing to leave.

He was not on the ground. He was in the air. He was an angel!

Which made Joe laugh out loud, the way Stewie said it.

He watched from above as the three men wearing cowboy hats approached the smoking crater. He could not hear anything beyond a high-static *whooshing* noise that resembled the sound of angry ocean breakers. Red and yellow globules that his own damaged head had manufactured floated across his field of vision. It reminded him of the time he ate peyote buttons with four members of the Salish-Kootenai Nation in northwestern Montana. Then, however, he had been laughing.

But he was not an angel—the thought of that alone was preposterous—and he was not having an out-of-body experience, although he couldn't be sure since this was his first. His soul had not left his body and had not floated above in the blood-flecked branches of the trees.

When the heifer went up, so did he. He had flown upward and back, launched out of his shoes until stopped fast, skewered through his shoulder by a thick pine bow. His feet, one sock off and one sock on, had floated below. They swung a bit in the wind.

He had not thought such things were possible.

What an awful tragedy it was that his wife was dead, atomized, before he had really known much about her. Conversely, he wondered if perhaps he had known her at her absolute best and that he was blessed to have known her at all. Nevertheless, she had done nothing to deserve what had happened to her. Her only crime was to be with him. Blinking hard, he had tried to stay awake and conscious.

The men below had stretched yellow tape around the crater and had left in the dark. Two of them were talking, their cowboy hats pointed at each other and their heads bobbing. He waited for the man who was standing to the side to look up. He wondered if the pattering of his blood on the leaves far below the leaves made any sound.

"That was me," Joe said.

"I know that now."

I will be dead soon, he had thought, and sleep took him.

But he wasn't dead yet. The thoughts of his bride had, strangely, given him strength. When he awoke, the men were gone and the forest was dark and quiet.

A raven landed directly in front of him on the bloody branch. Its wings were so large that they thumped both sides of his head as it settled. He had never seen a live wild bird this close. This was not a Disney bird. This was an Alfred Hitchcock bird. The raven's feathers were black and had a blue sheen, and the bird hopped so closely to Stewie's face that he could see his reflection in the beads of water on its wings. The raven cocked its head from side to side with clipped, seemingly mechanized movements. The raven's eyes looked intense and passionless, he thought, like glistening ebony buttons. Then the raven dug its black beak into Stewie's neck and emerged with a piece of red flesh.

He had closed his eyelids tightly so the raven could not pluck his eyes out. The raven began to strip flesh from his face. The raven's beak would pierce his skin near his jaw and clamp hard, then the bird's body would brace as it pulled and ripped a strip upward, where it would eventually weaken and break near his scalp. Then the raven would sit back calmly and with lightning nods of its head devour the stringy piece whole, as if it were a thick, bloody worm.

The thought he had, as the wind increased and his body swayed gently, was that he really hated this bird.

"I saw the same bird when I climbed your tree," Joe said. "The bird made me fall out of it."

He freed himself by forcing his body up and over the branch, sliding along the grain of the wood, in the single most painful experience of his life. Disengaging himself from the skewer left him weak and trembling, and he fell more than climbed from the tree. For ten days he crawled. He had become an animal and he had learned to behave like an animal. He tried to kill something to eat but he was hampered by his bulk and lack

of skill. Once, he spent an entire agonizing day at the mouth of a prairie dog hole with a makeshift snare, missing the fat rodent though it raised its head more than forty times. So he became a scavenger.

As he crawled southwest, through the forest, he competed with coyotes for fresh deer and elk carcasses. Plunging his head into fresh mountain springs, he had crunched peppery wild watercress. He had stripped the hard shells from puff-balls and had gorged on mountain mushrooms, grazing in the wet grass like a cow. A thick stand of rose hips near a stream had provided vitamin C. He had even, he was ashamed to say, raided a campsite near Crazy Woman Creek and had gorged on a two-pound bag of Doritos and six BallPark franks while the campers snored in their dome tent. He had seen the earth from inches away for weeks on end. It was a very humbling experience. His clothing was rags. He slept in the shelter of downed trees. He wept often.

He had purposely not crawled to a road or campsite where he could be found, because he thought to do so would be to invite his death—when the men who had already tried to kill him once found out about it.

At a ranch house near Story, Wyoming, a lovely woman, a widow, found him and took him in and agreed to keep it quiet. She fed him, let him use a guest room in the bunkhouse, and gave him her dead husband's clothes to wear. He gained enough strength to walk again. She had been a tough, independent rancher and a woman of strength. She was exactly the type of rancher he had convinced himself in previous years to despise.

Eventually, he was well enough to get a ride from her to the cabin. He had known about it from his youth and it belonged to a family friend who never used it. Slowly, he had initiated contact with colleagues. Britney had been the first to respond, and had come bearing groceries and communications gear. Hayden Powell said he was coming but he died mysteriously. Attorney Tod Marchand didn't make it, either. Both, he now knew, had been murdered by Coble and Tibbs.

"That's a hell of a story."

Stewie shrugged and looked away. His good eye was moist. Joe couldn't tell whether the retelling of his story made Stewie cry or if it was something else.

"What's that glow over there?" Britney Earthshare suddenly asked from behind them. Joe had not heard her approach.

To the west, the peak of the first mountain was illuminated by a faint band of orange.

"That's your cabin burning down," Joe said, feeling the words catch in his throat. "That means Charlie Tibbs is still with us."

JOE'S EYES SHOT open to utter darkness, his heart racing. Something had set off an alarm in his subconscious that had jolted him completely awake.

It took a moment to assess exactly where he was. He had fallen asleep in the camp beneath the ridge. The sky was brilliant with stars. There were so many of them their effect was gauzy. There was a blue sliver of moon like a horse's hoof print.

Stewie and Britney were huddled together near Joe's boots, their arms and legs entwined. They were both sleeping from sheer physical and mental exhaustion, like he had been.

Above him, somewhere near the tree line, Joe heard a muffled snap and the rustle of something heavy-bodied in the trees.

As quietly and deliberately as he could, Joe shifted his weight so he could unsnap his holster and slip out his .357 Magnum. His mouth was dry as cotton. With his eyes wide open, he tried to will himself to see better in the dark.

There was a footfall. Was it the step of a horse? Was Charlie Tibbs on top of them already? Would Tibbs, on horseback in the shadows, suddenly appear before him?

He pulled the hammer back on the revolver, felt the cylinder turn, and heard it ratchet and lock. He raised it in front of him with two hands. Using the muzzle as a third eye, he moved the pistol as he swept his gaze through the darkness.

A large black form disengaged itself from the gloom and passed in front of the gray trunks of the trees. There was a snort and a cough, and Joe felt his face twitch involuntarily.

It was an *elk*. The form had a light brown rump that absorbed the starlight. Joe eased his finger off of the trigger. The elk continued to move through the trees until it was out of view. Joe noticed the familiar musky elk odor in the air.

Then something in the night seemed to snap, and it looked like the trees themselves were moving, the pale color of their trunks strobing light and dark, light and dark. Joe suddenly realized that it wasn't the trees that were moving but the elk—dozens of them—streaming across the mountain. They moved in a steady run, their ungulate hooves pounding a drumbeat. They were now all around him, passing through the camp like a ghost army. Four feet high at the shoulder, several huge bulls trailed the herd. Glints of their eyes were reflected in the moonlight and he heard the wooden click of massive antlers catching low branches.

Then they were gone. It wasn't as if he could see that last cow, calf, or bull elk pass as much as he could feel a kind of vacuum, an emptiness in the stand of trees that just a moment before was full.

He stood and let the gun drop to his side. Carefully, he lowered the hammer back down. Stewie was now awake and sitting up. Britney rubbed her eyes.

But it wasn't over, as he again felt the presence of animals, this time swift and low to the ground. Shadows were moving through the grove in the same direction as the elk had, as quickly but with more stealth. Their movements had a liquid flow. He squinted and listened, his senses almost aching from the force of his effort. He saw a glimpse of long silver-black fur and a flash—no more than a halfsecond—of a pair of large canine eyes reflecting the slice of moon.

Wolves! It was a small pack of wolves, no more than five. They were following the elk, hunting for a calf or straggler to drop off from the herd.

Then as quickly as they had come, the wolves were no longer there.

Joe stood and waited, wondering almost absurdly what would happen next. Nothing did. He looked at his wristwatch. It was only ten-fifteen.

"There are not supposed to be wolves in the Bighorn Mountains," Joe said.

"Maybe they're Emily's wolves," Stewie answered, smiling so widely that Joe could see his teeth in the starlight.

Joe holstered his revolver and walked to the top of the ridge. In the darkness there was no definition to the land, no difference in degrees of blackness between one mountain and the other. There was only the horizon and the first splash of stars.

Charlie Tibbs, he knew, was out there and closing in on them.

Joe pictured his children as he last saw them that morning. April and Lucy had been silly, giddy, chattering as they waited to go to overnight church camp. Lucy was wearing a pink sweatshirt, denim shorts, pink socks to match her sweatshirt, and blue snub-nosed tennis shoes. April was wearing a turquoise sweatshirt and jeans. Their faces had been wide and fresh, their eyes sparkling, their hair summer blonde.

Sheridan stayed away from the fray, waiting until the littler girls left so she could take over the television and the house. Sheridan in her sleeveless shirt and Wranglers, starting to look like her mother, starting to molt from childhood. Sheridan, who had been through so much but had come through it so well.

And then there was Marybeth.

"Help me, Marybeth," he whispered.

30

THE STOCKMAN's BAR in Saddlestring was dim and smoky, and Marybeth wore her determination like an invisible suit of armor. As she closed the door behind her and absorbed the scene on this Saturday night, she confirmed to herself that the armor was necessary.

Ranch hands, mechanics, fishing guides, and flinty divorcées peopled the bar. Dark booths were behind them. The walls were covered with faded black-and-white rodeo photos and local cattle brands, and the support and ceiling beams were made of twisted and varnished knotty pine. In the back of the long and narrow building, low hanging lamps made fields of light green on three pool tables. Loose billiard balls in abstract geometrical configurations glowed beneath the lights. Eight-ball specialists in cowboy hats or backward caps either sipped from beer mugs or leaned across the pools of light to sight in on cue balls, like elk hunters aiming at a bull.

Marybeth sat on the first empty stool at the bar and waited for the bartender to work his way down to her. She ordered a glass of beer. Throughout the Stockman at least a half dozen sets of eyes were working her over. She felt the eyes on her in a way that made her think of her law career, the bar's patrons like judges waiting for her answer to a question.

She had been to the Stockman only once before, four years earlier, when Joe had brought her to meet with his supervisor, Vern Dunnegan, and Vern's then-wife, Georgia. Vern had a booth near the pool tables that he had claimed as his and where people met with him. Marybeth had smiled politely with Georgia as Vern and Joe discussed department policy and disputed directives, and she had nudged Joe with her foot to get his attention so they could leave. The Stockman was historic, dark, local, and corrupt, and she had seen enough at the time. Both Vern and Georgia made her uncomfortable, and the mounted elk, deer, sheep, and moose heads on the walls seemed to want to draw her back to an earlier, rougher era. She had not planned on ever coming back. When Sheridan, still outside in the car, had realized that her mom was leaving her to go inside the Stockman Bar, she had erupted.

"What if the sheriff comes by and sees me here?"

Marybeth had stopped with the door half open and the dome light on.

"Tell him I'll be back in a minute."

"What if he says it's child abuse? I mean, you *are* leaving your loving daughter outside in your car while you go into a saloon!"

"I'm investigating something, and I think there may be a man inside who can help us," Marybeth said patiently, but her eyes flashed. "Don't forget that your dad is missing."

Sheridan started to speak, but caught herself.

"There's somebody in there who might know where Dad is?"

Marybeth took a deep breath. There was a lot to explain.

"That's what I'm hoping," she said, almost pleading.

"Please don't do your thing on me now."

Sheridan thought about it, nodded, then leaned forward in her seat to hug her mother's neck.

"You look like a fox," Sheridan said, leaning back and looking at her mother as a peer. "You're a hottie."

MARYBETH HAD DRESSED in new jeans, a dark French-cut T-shirt, and a denim ranch jacket. Her blonde hair was lit with the glow of the neon beer signs. She was here to meet with a rancher. Or ex-rancher, to be more precise. Only he didn't know it yet.

She recognized him, as her eyes grew used to the bar gloom. He sat at the farthest end of the bar, on a stool by the wall, which he leaned against. Although he was situated in the shadows and the only illumination of his features was from a small-watt neon tube in an aquarium on a shelf of stuffed prairie dogs playing pool, there was something foreboding about him. She felt it right away. He was avuncular, short, and solid. He had a large head with a bulbous, alcohol-veined nose. His head was mounted on a wide body, and he wore a silver-gray 24X short-brim Stetson Rancher that was sweat stained and battered, but had cost \$400 new. He was in his sixties. When he ordered another bourbon he cocked his finger and raised an eyebrow almost imperceptibly and the bartender knew what it meant—and scrambled.

There was an empty barstool next to him, and Marybeth picked up her glass of beer and carried it there. She sat the glass on the bar, settled into the stool, and looked at herself and the ex-rancher in the mirror. He looked back, narrowed his eyes, and smiled with puzzled amusement.

"I'm Marybeth Pickett, Mr. McBride. Can I have a few minutes of your time for an important matter?"

"I know who you are." His grin grew, and he looked her over. "Babe, you can have as much of my time as you want. Call me Rowdy."

"Okay, Rowdy," she said. "Tell me about the Stockman's Trust."

Something passed over his face and his eyes inadvertently widened. He took a sip. "It seems kind of ironic that you're asking a man drinking in the Stockman's Bar about something called the Stockman's Trust, don't it?"

"I hadn't thought about that."

"What about it?" His voice was gruff.

"I received some information today that there are two killers who have been hired by the Stockman's Trust. My husband may be in danger."

"Killers?"

She withdrew the note written by John Coble from her jacket pocket and slid it over to him. He read it, then folded it and handed it back.

Dear Game Warden:

It is my understanding that you have been investigating the murder of Stewie Woods and that there is a possibility that someone is impersonating Woods and causing trouble. A man named Charlie Tibbs (stock detective) has been hired to rub out environmentalists and has done a good job of it. Stewie Woods was the first target on our list. I assisted him in this task, but I have quit.

Charlie Tibbs was last in the vicinity of Yellowstone Park, but I think he's coming here.

The men that hired us is the Stockman's Trust. I don't know the names of the men, but you should investigate.

I'm writing you this to help relieve my conscience.

Signed, John Coble

P.S. Don't try and look for me. I have left the country and changed my name and I done you a kindness here.

McBride seemed to be contemplating what he would say next.

"Before you sold your ranch to Jim Finotta, you were a member of the Stockman's Trust, right?"

"Before Finotta stole my ranch out from under me, you mean." His eyes flared.

“Whatever.”

“Before I turned into a goddamned drunk at the end of the bar instead of a fourth-generation rancher?” he said bitterly. “If you’ll excuse my French.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said softly.

He shook his head. “I know it isn’t.”

She drank from her glass of beer, giving him a moment to collect himself.

“Yup, I was a member. I was never on the board, but I was a member.”

“Who else is a member?”

“What you need to understand is that there’s an oath. I took that oath. Don’t expect me to spill my guts out to you now, just because you look so fine, Marybeth Pickett.”

She turned her head so he wouldn’t see the look of distress on her face.

“Members of the Stockman’s Trust are everywhere,” McBride said after a beat. “Our bartender Jim might be a member. Your state legislator might be a member. Sheriff Barnum may be a member. In fact ... never mind.”

“But Sheriff Barnum wasn’t ever a rancher.”

“It’s not just ranchers anymore. You just never know.” He looked around them to see if anyone was paying undue attention to the conversation.

“Were you just kidding me about Sheriff Barnum?” Marybeth asked.

One of the ranch hands splayed in a nearby booth was ogling Marybeth, and McBride stared him down as he might a curious dog. “There’s a lot of bitter men out here,” he whispered. “Under the surface, there is real anger. They see their whole way of life getting undermined and laughed at. It’s a real culture war.”

Marybeth nodded.

“The Trust got started back in the Tom Horn days,” he said. “That was the name of the group that hired Horn. They were all members of the Cattleman’s Association, but kind of a splinter group. They all chipped in, hired Horn, and then let the man work his magic on the rustlers down around Cheyenne.”

Marybeth nodded, listening intently. He liked that.

“After Tom Horn got hanged, the Stockman’s Trust kept on as a group. But instead of a bunch of guys who had come together for one particular thing, the Trust became sort of a secret men’s club. They elected officers and met semiregularly to discuss the matters of the day.” Rowdy paused and gestured at Marybeth’s glass. “D’you want another beer?”

Marybeth agreed. Anything to keep him talking.

Up until the 1940s, McBride said, the Stockman’s Trust membership was exclusively ranchers. It was a secret society, and new members swore an oath to keep it that way. Although all of the members knew why the organization had been formed in the first place, the Trust became a kind of salon. Because so many legislators, judges, oilmen, lawyers, and doctors were also ranchers, the organization prided itself in its old-fashioned exclusivity. It was an honor to be asked to become a member.

McBride's father had been a member, as had his grandfather. At one time his father had been vice-president.

The Stockman's Trust was financed by a voluntary levy by ranchers of a few pennies on every cow and by oilmen on barrels of oil they produced. Over time, quite a treasury was amassed. They used it to buy a discreet building in Cheyenne for a headquarters and to pay lobbyists to advance their agenda and protect their interests. The Stockman's Trust was as effective in its quiet way as Tom Horn had been with his Winchester.

"Is it possible that the Stockman's Trust has turned a culture war into a real one? That they've gone back to their roots?" Marybeth asked.

McBride pushed the fresh beer the bartender delivered toward Marybeth and drank a long pull from his bourbon.

"I wouldn't put it past them," he declared. "You've got to understand that the Stockman's Trust had completely changed even before I got out of it. It wasn't that old gentleman rancher's club anymore. Most of the new board members were out-of-state absentee ranch owners. You know, the kind who likes to come out, put on his hat and boots, and play rancher a couple of times a year, so he can let it drop at cocktail parties in New York or L.A. that he owns a ranch in Wyoming. The old guys, like me, got pushed out. By the time I got out, I hardly knew any of them personally. They did all of their meetings by conference call instead of at the headquarters in Cheyenne. These jokers called in from their private planes or from cellphones in limos. They bitched about the bad PR ranchers were getting because of loudmouth environmentalists. It was getting to be a joke. These guys weren't *ranchers*. They just *owned* ranches."

"Did you quit?" she asked.

He stared into his drink. "I said some things I shouldn't have said when I was drinking. Called a couple of 'em out-of-state cocksuckers, pardon my French. They rescinded my membership after I lost the ranch."

"Why did those guys even want to be members?"

McBride was ready for that. "I kind of wondered that myself at first. Then I realized they liked the idea of the exclusive club just like they liked the idea of owning a third-generation Wyoming or Montana ranch. It's the same impulse to be a local big dick and to call the shots. You know, like Jim Finotta."

She nodded. She thought of what Ginger Finotta had been trying to tell her.

"He's a member, isn't he?" Marybeth asked.

"Shit," McBride snorted. "I wouldn't be surprised."

AT HOME, THERE were no messages from Joe. It was ten-thirty. Trey Crump had called and said he would be leaving in the morning for the cabin, and he had asked Marybeth to fax him a copy of the map. If Joe was still missing in the morning, he would notify the County Sheriff to organize a search and rescue team.

Marybeth sat alone at the kitchen table. Her palms left a moist smear on the surface. She stared straight ahead and fought an urge to cry out of sheer frustration.

Suddenly, she pushed away from the table and dug the slim Twelve Sleep County telephone book from a drawer. She looked up and dialed the number for the Finotta Ranch.

The phone rang eight times before it was picked up. The voice was cold and distant.

"Is this Jim Finotta?" She asked.

"Yes."

"May I please speak to your wife, Ginger?"

"Who is this?"

She told him. There was a long pause.

"Ginger is in bed."

"It's important."

He hung up on her.

31

ON SUNDAY MORNING before the sun rose, and cool air was flexing through the trees and over the mountainside, about the time Joe should have been home mixing pancake batter and frying bacon for his girls, Britney Earthshare came scrambling down from the ridge through the shale saying she had just seen Charlie Tibbs.

Stewie had been stretching and commenting how good bacon and eggs would be for breakfast.

"Show me where," Joe said, and followed her back to the ridge.

She pointed to a series of openings on the mountainside on the other side of the valley. Joe looked with his binoculars but could see nothing.

"He came out of the trees into the clearing and then he went back into the trees," she said, her teeth chattering from fright and the early morning cold.

"Where was it again?"

She pointed generally.

"Can you be more specific?"

She hissed angrily. "Damn you, I saw what I saw!"

"Was he on horseback or on foot?"

She glared at him. "Horseback, I think."

"You think," he repeated, still glassing the mountain. The binoculars gathered more light than his naked eye, but it was still too shadowy even in the meadows to see Charlie Tibbs. "Was he coming our way?"

"Straight at us," she declared.

Joe lowered the binoculars and looked at her, trying to decide if she had actually seen Tibbs or had only *thought* she had seen him. He had already been making plans about returning to the cabin and his pickup, plotting how they could travel up the ridge and work their way back through the heavy timber covering a massive saddle slope to the south. If the terrain was agreeable, they could be back by noon.

But if Tibbs was coming straight at them, had found their track, they would have to either make a stand or run.

"*There he is!*" Britney screamed, gesturing frantically across the valley. "Oh, my God!"

Joe wheeled and jerked his binoculars to his eyes. He saw a tiny movement on the edge of a far-off meadow. It was dark and passed into the trees before he could see it clearly. But it could have been the shoulders and head of a man on horseback.

"STAY IN THE elk trail," Joe cautioned as they scrambled down the mountain, away from the camp and the ridge. "If nothing else, the trail may foul him up a little."

The path of the elk herd from the night before wasn't hard to follow. They had churned up a two-to three-foot swath of earth, mashing pine needles into the dark loam and littering the trail with upturned black divots. Joe was pleased by the way their own tracks blended into the elk tracks.

"I'm sure getting hungry," Stewie sang out. "If we catch those elk I might need to take a bite out of one of 'em."

"Yuck," Britney said. She had already mentioned that she didn't eat meat. She made a point about how the elk had become their metaphysical guides through the wilderness and how Emily's wolves played a part in providing the trail.

"Seeing those wolves running wild and free last night was, like, *awesome*," Britney rhapsodized. "It was, like, *orgasmic*. These beautiful creatures were all around us and for a minute there, I felt like I was one of them. Once you've seen those magical creatures with your own eyes, it makes it really hard to understand why they were trapped and killed almost to extinction. It really makes you hate the people who did that. What were they possibly thinking, to want to kill a magnificent animal like a wolf?"

They walked.

"There's an irony to all of this whole situation that I bet neither one of you know about," Stewie said.

"What's that?" Britney asked.

"Whatever it is, I hope it's short," Joe grumbled.

Stewie giggled at that. "The irony is that just before I headed out here and got married to Annabel and got blown up by a cow, the executive board of One Globe had a meeting and *kicked me out!*"

"You're kidding!" Britney was outraged.

"It's true." He was starting to breathe hard with the exertion of the fast trek. "They met at the new headquarters on K Street in Washington, D.C., and voted me off of the board, eight to one. My old buddy Rupert was the only one who stuck with me. They said they didn't like my methods anymore, that I was an embarrassment to the organization. They said that direct action wasn't as effective as lawsuits and that my egomania was holding back membership funds."

"But you started One Globe!" Britney argued. "They can't kick you out of your own organization."

"Yes, they can," Stewie said. "And they did. The suits took over. The fund-raisers beat the hellraisers."

"Shameful!"

"So," Stewie said, directing it at Joe, "the irony is that Charlie Tibbs is coming after a big, fat has-been."

"You're not a has-been," Britney cooed.

Joe, however, was too preoccupied with the scene in front of him to answer Stewie.

A COW ELK stood off of the trail, in a small clearing, in a yellow shaft of early morning sunlight. She was straddling what looked like a wet bundle of fur. She watched them approach with her large black eyes. As they neared, her big cupped ears rotated toward them. Her legs trembled, as did her moist black nose.

Joe stopped. Stewie and Britney froze behind him.

"Jesus," Stewie whispered.

The bundle of wet fur was the cow's dead calf. Joe could see now that the calf's throat had been ripped open and its lower jaw was gone. It lay dead in a slick pool of dark blood. Near the calf, tufts of long canine fur clung to shafts of the long grass.

The cow elk would soon die as well. She had been disemboweled as she fought off the wolves that killed her calf. Loops of intestine, like long blue ropes, hung from her abdomen. One of her front forelegs had been skinned to the bone. Dark blood clotted in the thick fur of her upper shoulder.

Joe had seen female elk fight; they sat back on their haunches and lurched forward, striking with their hooves. The power of their strikes could crush the skull of a badger or break the back of a coyote. The mother elk had connected with at least one wolf from the pack, hence the fur in the grass.

Britney broke down. She covered her face with her hands.

"You've got to *do* something," Britney sobbed. "It's horrible."

Joe scanned the trees that surrounded the clearing. The wolves were there, he was sure, but he couldn't see them. They were in the shadows, or hunkered down and still in the brush. He could feel their eyes on him.

"*Do something*," she begged, her voice wracked.

"Shoot that poor elk so she won't have to suffer," Stewie murmured.

"No," Joe sighed. "A gunshot will give our position away."

"Who cares about that?" Britney cried, her voice raising to an emotional pitch. "Who cares about that? *Do something!*"

Joe turned toward her, his face a tight mask. His glare was so intense that she involuntarily stepped behind Stewie for protection.

"Look away," he hissed, his voice coldly furious. He strode toward the cow elk and unsheathed his Leatherman tool, pulling out the blade. The mother elk turned her head away, but did not have the strength to run or strike out, and he reached out and grabbed her ear to steady her while he cut her throat.

Stewie stood with an ashen face, watching, while Britney buried her head in his back. As Joe walked back to them, he heard the cow elk gurgle and settle into the grass on top of her calf.

"This is what wolves do," Joe said, his voice calm, a betrayal of what he felt. "I'm not saying they shouldn't be here, but this is what they do. *They're wolves*. I know it sounds real nice to say they're magical and beautiful and they balance nature and restore an ecosystem—and it's true, they do that. But this is how they do it. They go after the weakest first. When the mother stays back, the wolves open a hole in her belly and pull out her entrails. Then they wait until she doesn't have the strength to protect herself, then they'll move in and tear her throat out."

Joe slid the sticky Leatherman back into its case and wiped hot blood on his pants from his hand and sleeve.

"You people just like the idea of things, like bringing the wolves back. It makes you feel better." He looked from Britney to Stewie, both of whom averted their eyes. "I agree that it is a beneficial thing overall. But you don't like to see what really happens out here when those grand ideas become real, do you?"

THEY FOLLOWED THE elk trail to the bottom of the mountain, through another small stream swelling with icy runoff. They drank, and continued up the next mountain through twisted black timber, crawling in and out of scalpel-cut ravines.

The terrain finally flattened as they rose, and the walking became easier. Joe was drenched in sweat, and light-headed from lack of food. The water sloshed in his empty stomach as he hiked. The incident with the elk had dampened the enthusiasm and frequency of Stewie's monologues, and Britney was still so angry with him that she didn't talk—which was fine with Joe.

Trees thinned in number but the ones they hiked through became thicker and taller. Joe felt as if they had entered a land of giants, their bodies becoming specks on the forest floor as they trudged on. He thought about Marybeth, and Sheridan, Lucy, and April. At times, the thought of them almost overwhelmed him.

The trees cleared enough that he could now see the mountain behind them. As Britney and Stewie rested, he glassed the forest with his binoculars, guessing where the elk trail switchbacked down the mountain, and followed it all the way to the top with his binoculars. He saw no movement.

Then, far to the right on the shoulder of the mountain, a flock of spruce grouse rose out of the trees. They glided over the treetops, veered, and settled back into the timber out of view. Something, or someone, had spooked them.

"The elk trail threw him off," Joe said, keeping his voice low. "He's way over there to the right coming down through the trees. Probably trying to pick up our track."

"Shit," Stewie hissed, angrily throwing a pinecone away from him. "How far?"

Joe tried to estimate the distance between the flock of pine grouse and where they now stood. Charlie Tibbs was closing in on them.

"An hour. Maybe an hour and a half."

“We can’t keep running,” Britney said, more to Stewie than Joe. “We’re exhausted, and we keep getting deeper into the wilderness. Maybe we can just *talk* to him. That’s something we haven’t tried.”

“You can stay and talk with him if you want,” Stewie grunted, as he pulled himself back to his feet. “This is the same guy that blew up my bride and shot his friend’s face off a foot away from me.”

LIKE TRIBUTARIES FEEDING a great river, small individual tracks started to peel away from the elk trail. Joe noticed it first, how the once-prominent trail was diminishing as they walked.

He felt a sensation ahead of him that at first he couldn’t comprehend. It was a sense of vastness, of openness, that belied the dark woods.

He pushed through a thick wall of Rocky Mountain juniper. The branches were so full and tough that it seemed they were trying to throw him back. Stewie and Britney complained behind him that they were having trouble figuring out which way he went. Britney cried out as a branch whipped back from Stewie and hit her flush in the face.

The juniper was sharp smelling and acrid, and the dusty clustered berries that fell to the ground looked like rabbit pellets. Joe ducked his head forward so the brush wouldn’t knock his hat off.

With a hard push he cleared the brush wall and stumbled into the open and gasped.

One more clumsy step and he would have plunged 700 feet to the floor of the canyon known as Savage Run.

32

SAVAGE RUN WAS sheer, sharp, beautiful, and, to Joe, virtually uncrossable, so they followed a game path that skirted the rim. Periodically, Joe would near the edge and look down. The Middle Fork of the Twelve Sleep River was a thin gray ribbon of water on the shadowed canyon bottom. Occasionally, he could see a twiggy falcon nest blooming out from the rock face below them.

The canyon was as unique a geographic phenomenon as Joe had heard it was. Instead of tapering down from an elevation, it was a sharp slice that cleanly halved the mountain range. The other rim was no more than two hundred yards away and it, like the side they were on, was brushy with juniper and old-growth spruce. Joe could clearly see the layers of geological strata that made up the mountain on the face of the opposite canyon wall. It looked as if the mountain had been pulled apart recently, instead of millions of years before. The undergrowth and exposed roots that snaked out from below the two canyon rims seemed to be reaching for their counterparts on the other side.

Beyond the other rim and two slump-shouldered mountains, the range descended into the Twelve Sleep Valley ranch land and, eventually, to the highway and on to the town of Saddlestring.

Joe knew what kind of trouble they were in. Now that they had found the canyon, they could only go either east or west, and it wouldn't be difficult for Charlie Tibbs to figure out which way they'd gone. Joe knew that an offshoot canyon intersected Savage Run a mile to the east and would have cut off progress in that direction. If they went that way, they would have, in effect, trapped themselves. So their only choice was a westerly route.

From where he had seen the birds rise from the forest and signal what he thought was Charlie Tibbs's location, Joe tried to determine where Tibbs was headed. Tibbs would either follow their track to the rim and ride up on the trail behind them or ride ahead and try to intercept them. Joe wished he knew more about Tibbs—how Tibbs acted and thought, his past tendencies—so he might have a better inclination of what Tibbs would do next. Professionals like Charlie Tibbs didn't just make things up as they went along. They stuck to procedures and maneuvers that had worked for them in the past. And whatever happened next, it seemed to Joe, a confrontation was inevitable. He wished he could be more prepared for it when it came.

It was essential to stay focused. He tried to trim all of his musings, memories, and daydreams into one central purpose: that of being ready to react. Joe tried to force his eyes to see better and his ears to hear more. He hoped that if Tibbs were near, he would be able to feel his presence and prepare. Staying in the heavy timber was no longer an option for them, Joe thought, which meant that Tibbs, with his deadly long-range rifle, could take out all three of them from a position with good sight lines.

Tibbs had the edge of being better prepared and equipped, and of being on horseback, so he was likely well rested, well fed, and well armed. Hunting down human beings was something Tibbs clearly had experience with. In any kind of encounter, Tibbs had the overwhelming advantage. Joe, with his .357 Magnum revolver and his history of missing whatever he aimed at, felt practically impotent.

If Charlie Tibbs suddenly bulled his way through the brush and cut them off on their trail, what would Joe do? He tried to think, tried to visualize his reaction so that it would be instinctual. He tried to envision himself drawing his pistol cleanly, raising it with both hands in a shooter's stance, and squeezing the trigger of the double-action until every bullet was fired. He would aim at the widest point of his target. The commotion, if nothing else, would divert Tibbs from aiming and give Stewie and Britney a fighting chance to bolt into the brush and back into the trees. Even if he were unable to hit Tibbs or his horse, there was the possibility that his booming shots might spook the animal, causing it to rear and tumble into the canyon with its rider. Targeting Tibbs's horse felt wrong to Joe, but in this situation soft sensibilities were not an option. Besides, Joe thought bitterly, that son of a bitch shot *Lizzie*.

"There is no way in hell that those Indians crossed this canyon," Britney declared. Joe had to agree, because he could see no possible way to the bottom of the canyon and up the other side. Even the falcon's nests in the rock walls seemed precarious.

"Don't give up, Miss Steinburton," Stewie cajoled.

"Is that your real name?" Joe asked. "Steinburton?"

"Margaret Steinburton," Stewie offered. "Heir to the Steinburton Chemical Company of Palo Alto, California."

"Shut up, Stewie," she said. "He asked me, not you."

Stewie giggled, and Joe continued on in silence.

Despite his almost constant monologues, his occasional whining, and his cocky attitude, Joe found himself warming to Stewie. He had gotten used to his freakish appearance and his face-splitting grimaces, and wasn't as alarmed at them as he had been at first. Stewie had a cheerful optimism about him that was reassuring, and helpful. Stewie seemed to be gaining in strength the more they traveled. While Britney (or Margaret, or whoever the hell she was) descended into a prickly dark funk, Stewie kept pointing out wildlife and points of interest (to him) as if he were on a nature walk and Joe was the stoic guide.

"If you had to run for your life," Stewie had declared happily that morning, "you just couldn't have picked a nicer day!"

No wonder Marybeth liked him, Joe thought.

Joe realized he had once again put too much distance between Stewie and Britney so he stopped, turned, and waited for them to catch up.

Stewie was marveling at the canyon as he walked. He was not watching in front of him, and didn't see the snout of a large rock that had pushed up through the trail. The toe of his boot thumped into the rock and tripped him, and he lost his balance.

Joe turned and lunged for Stewie but there was too much distance between them. Stewie's arms windmilled and one of his legs crashed into the other. Stewie tried to regain his balance by stepping into a thick tangle of juniper perilously close to the edge of the canyon only to have the branches give way under his weight.

Stewie dropped so quickly that the only thing Joe could reach for was the fleeting afterimage of Stewie's outstretched hands.

Joe approached the juniper as Britney wailed, holding her face in her hands and retreating from the place where Stewie had fallen.

"Britney!" It was Stewie. "Stop screaming! I'm all right."

Joe knelt and cautiously parted the stout, sticky branches. Stewie's large hand, like an inert pink crab, was in the bush, gripping onto its base so hard that his knuckles were blueish white. Joe braced himself, grabbed Stewie's wrist with both hands, and began pulling.

"Whoa, Joe!" Stewie said from over the rim. "Whoa, buddy! I'm okay. I'm standing on a ledge."

Joe sighed and sat back, and watched Stewie's hand unclench in the brush and slide down out of it.

"*Stewie!*" Britney cried in relief, leaning back against a tree trunk. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"Don't you want me to help you up?" Joe asked.

There was a beat of silence, and something small and brown was tossed up from below the juniper. Joe caught it, releasing a puff of dust.

It was an ancient child's doll. The head was a dried ball of rocklike leather and the arms and legs were stuffed with feathers and sewn from rough, aged fabric. The face, if there had ever been one, had washed clean over the years. The doll's matted black hair, sewn on the leather head, looked human. The doll, no doubt, had belonged to an Indian child.

Joe scrambled forward on his belly and pushed the juniper branches aside. Stewie looked up at him with a massive, radiator-grille grin.

Stewie stood on a narrow shelf of rock no wider than a stair step. The shelf ran parallel to the ledge, then switched back, still descending. Far below Stewie, trapped against the rock ledge by an outgrowth, were gray tipi poles that had come unbundled and fallen over the edge a hundred and fifty years before.

Joe studied the opposite rock wall as he hadn't before and now he saw it. A narrow shelf, a natural geological anomaly, barely discernible against the same yellow and gray color of the canyon wall and hidden in places by overgrowth, switchbacked up the other wall as well.

"This is the crossing," Joe whispered. "This is where the Cheyenne crossed the canyon."

33

"DID I WAKE you up?"

"Are you kidding? I haven't slept," Marybeth said, as she swung out of bed, the phone tight against her ear. The floor was cold beneath her bare feet. "Did you find Joe?"

Trey Crump hesitated.

"I located his pickup in the valley. It was parked just off the road."

The phone reception was crackling and waves of static roared through the receiver. Marybeth looked at the clock on her bed stand—it was 5.45 A.M.

"You haven't seen Joe?"

"Negative," Crump yelled over the static. "I had to drive back up to the top of the mountain to get any radio or telephone signal, Marybeth. I might cut out at any minute."

"I understand," she shouted, surprised at the loudness of her voice in the empty room. "Tell me what you found."

"The pickup and the horse trailer are empty. The pickup's been shot up ..." Marybeth gasped and covered her mouth with her other hand, "and somebody disabled the engine and deflated the tires. I found two other vehicles as well; one is a Mercedes SUV with Colorado plates and the other one I just located about a half-hour ago up on the other mountain. It appears to be a black pickup with a horse trailer. There's no one at the scene of ..."

A whoosh of static drowned out the end of his sentence. Marybeth closed her eyes tightly, trying to hear through the roar and willing it to subside.

"... The cabin was burned to the ground just last night. It's still smoking. There was a body inside that was not Joe. I repeat, it was *not* Joe!"

Marybeth realized that she was gripping the telephone receiver so tightly that she had lost feeling in her hand.

"Marybeth, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Trey!"

"I found your buckskin horse, and I'm sorry to say the horse has been killed. I searched the vicinity around the horse but couldn't find any sign of Joe."

She let out the breath she had been holding. It raked out unevenly.

"Marybeth, I've contacted the sheriff and he is on his way now. He told me he will call for a helicopter out of Cody. It should be in the air above us by mid-morning."

"The sheriff?" Marybeth recalled her conversation with Rowdy McBride from the night before. She recalled that McBride never actually *confirmed* ... "When will the helicopter get there?"

"A couple of hours. But the sheriff should be here any minute. I just talked to him."

"My God, Trey, what do you think happened?"

She missed the first part of his sentence. "... happened. I can't tell who is who with these vehicles up here or if they're even connected with Joe's disappearance. I ran the plates with dispatch and the SUV belongs to a Denver lawyer but they can't find anything on the plate on the black pickup."

"You mean it can't be traced to *anyone*?"

"That's what they tell me. But they're checking again."

"Trey," Marybeth said, increasing her volume again as a wall of static began to build, "It's the Stockman's Trust. That's who is behind all of this. The pickup belongs, I think, to the Stockman's Trust!"

"... Say again?"

She cursed. Someone was knocking on her bedroom door. Sheridan.

"*The Stockman's Trust!*"

"I see Barnum's vehicle now, Marybeth," Trey Crump said, distracted. "I'll call you back when I know more."

"Trey!"

"Got to go now, Marybeth. Stay calm and don't panic. It's a good sign that I didn't find Joe here because it probably means he's in the area. Joe's a smart one. He knows what to do. This is big country, but we'll find him and I'll advise you of our progress."

The connection terminated and Marybeth couldn't tell if it was because the signal was lost or Trey Crump had hung up.

She lowered the receiver to her lap. Sheridan entered, and sat down beside her on the bed.

"No, they haven't found him yet," Marybeth said, finding the strength to smile with reassurance. "But they've located his pickup."

“Why were you yelling?” Sheridan asked.

“It was a bad connection.”

34

ONCE THEY HAD crawled down through the steep, narrow, and brushy chute to the trail, their commitment was made. The ledge Stewie had found was a seven-foot drop down a tongue of slick rock. It was clear to Joe that if the switchback ledge became impassable on the canyon wall, or had broken away somewhere below, it would be hard for them to turn back.

Because the ledge was so narrow, Joe did not try to shoulder around Stewie into the lead. Hugging the wall, Stewie sidestepped along the jutting fissure, calling out hazards such as a break in the trail or loose rocks. Joe followed, and Britney, with tears of fear streaming down her dirty cheeks, stayed close. They had tied the rope around their waists to each other.

“There’s something, like, *cinematic* about this,” Stewie called over his shoulder.

“Watch where the *fuck* you’re going!” Britney hissed.

“Stay calm,” Joe sighed. “We’ve got a long way to go.”

Joe buttoned the doll into his shirt. If there was any luck or mystical charge emanating from the doll, Joe wanted as much of it as he could get. The doll rested against his sweating skin as a lucky talisman. He vowed that if he somehow made the descent and got back to his family, he would clean up the doll and give it to his girls.

After the first switchback, the trail widened and they were able to square their shoulders and hike down it slowly. Like Stewie, Joe kept one hand on the canyon wall at all times. If he slipped on loose earth, he wanted to fall into the wall and not plunge into the canyon.

“I swear if I get home I’ll go to church,” Britney promised. “I don’t know which church yet. It needs to be spiritual, and healing, and forgiving. And without a lot of that religious baggage so many churches seem to have nowadays.”

Joe’s thighs began to burn as he descended. He perversely welcomed the sensation, because it took his mind off of other concerns. He was hungry, and his mouth was cottony with thirst. His clothing had been ripped by branches. His eyes burned due to lack of sleep, and despite his efforts to concentrate, there was a thick fog born of exertion, fear, and unusual self-doubt that was clouding his thinking.

They were far down the trail, which Stewie had taken to calling the Cheyenne Crossing, when Joe started to question if they had done the right thing. It would be amazingly easy to become rimrocked, that is, to get to a point where they realized they could not get back. Joe had been involved on a search-and-rescue effort of a bighorn sheep hunter who had meandered up a boulder-strewn mountain and found out he couldn’t figure out how to get back down. He fell, and the hunter’s broken body was

found wedged beneath two upthrusts of granite, where he had been for 72 hours. The hunter died of exposure on the way to the hospital.

If suddenly the wedge of rock that served as a path ended, they would have to backtrack up the wall. Balance and gravity had helped carry them this far down, and going back up with aching muscles and minds dizzy with hunger and exhaustion would spell trouble. It would be extremely difficult to crawl up the slick rock chute they had used to slide down to the ledge.

Only when Joe looked across the canyon at the opposite wall did he realize that they had already dropped two-thirds of the way into the canyon. He looked at his watch and confirmed that it had only taken 20 minutes.

"When we get to the bottom," Britney asked, "will we go downstream or up the other side?"

"Up the other side!" Stewie shouted triumphantly. "Then on to Saddlestring and cheeseburgers! And beer! And chicken-fried steaks swimming in country gravy!"

"A shower would be nice," Britney said lamely.

Getting rid of you two nuts would be more than nice, Joe thought with such clarity that for a moment he feared he had actually said it.

Joe smiled, his spirits recovering. The exhaustion combined with their progress seemed to supercharge his emotions. His mood swung from the utter despair he had experienced a few moments before to near euphoria as they approached the canyon floor. It was a sensation he didn't welcome, or trust.

The path narrowed, now only slightly less wide than the length of his boots. He pressed his cheek against the cool rock wall and held its unforgiving firmness with outstretched arms as he shuffled along. Soon, he could hear the tinkling of the stream below, but he dared not readjust and look down.

Then he heard a splash and a whoop as Stewie dropped from the ledge into the Middle Fork and screamed, "*Hallelujah!*"

Joe followed, landing ankle-deep in snow-cold water that was a pleasing shock to his system. After helping Britney down from the ledge, Joe dropped to his knees in the stream, fell forward, and drank from it until the icy water numbed his mouth and throat.

He sat back, water dribbling down his shirt, while Stewie and Britney did the same. He looked at them on all fours in the water, sucking and slurping from the stream, and thought, *We look and act like animals.*

THEY WERE IN complete shade on the canyon floor. Joe looked up at the brilliant blue slice of sky. He guessed that because of the extreme narrowness of the walls, the floor got no more than an hour of full sunshine a day as the sun passed directly over. Then he heard the deep chopping sound of a helicopter.

Stewie rose, hearing it too. The sound reached its zenith as the helicopter, looking like the silhouette of a damselfly, shot across the opening above. The chopping slowly receded until it melded with the rushing sound of the stream.

“They’re looking for us!” Stewie cheered, rising to his feet. “Just our luck we’re down here in this hole, but they *are* looking for us!”

DOWNSTREAM, THE WALLS constricted and forced the mild Middle Fork river to boil and become whitewater. There were no banks, and therefore no place to walk, even if they had decided to head downstream instead of up the canyon wall.

Joe led the way, stepping up on the ledge that paralleled the wall they had just come down. He paused, sighed, summoned his strength, and began climbing. It was harder going up than down, and Stewie called out for frequent breaks. Joe’s shirt was again soaked. Sweat streamed from his hatband into his collar and pooled on his temples.

Eventually, Joe passed from shade into sun and he could tell from looking at the other canyon wall that they were nearly to the top. While pausing to rest, Joe tried to survey the opposite rim. He could not yet see over the top, and couldn’t tell if Charlie Tibbs had made it to the trail along the rim yet. If Tibbs were to find the trail, Joe thought, the three of them would be nakedly exposed to him. There was no place to hide along the ledge, and the rock wall would serve as a backstop to the bullets Tibbs would fire.

“Listen to me,” Joe said to Stewie and Britney, who were resting on a ledge below him. “I know you’re tired, but we need to get to the top of this canyon. No stopping, no resting. We can rest once we get over the rim. Okay?”

Britney shot a hateful look at Joe and cursed.

“Do you think he’s close?” Stewie asked, concerned.

“I don’t know,” Joe answered flatly. “But let’s go.”

IT CAME QUICKLY, a feeling like a storm rolling through the mountains—the intuitive realization that Charlie Tibbs was upon them. Joe tried to look over his shoulder at the opposite rim. He could see nothing, but he could feel an impending force as if an invisible hand was pushing him down. He implored Stewie and Britney to pick up their pace.

Joe figured he was less than twenty yards from the top, and the ledge was narrowing. Ahead, Joe could see where the ledge receded into the wall and, for all intents and purposes, vanished from view. The last ten feet from the end of the path to the top of the rim would involve climbing up the rock face. There were enough burrs and fissures on the face to make climbing possible, but there was nothing underneath to stop a fall if he, or one of the others, lost their footing.

It was silent except for the watery sound of a warm breeze high in the trees and Stewie’s labored breathing. Stewie was wheezing with exertion. Mirroring the feeling of dread Joe felt, the sky had taken on a darker patina and the light was fusing into the rock. A bank of dark thunderheads, heavy with rain, was beginning to roll across the sun. The temperature had dropped and there was the feeling of static electricity in the air, which signaled that a summer rainstorm was indeed on its way.

Looping the rope over his head and shoulder to get it out of the way, Joe began to climb. Hand-over-hand, he found holds that would support his weight and he pulled himself up the wall. His biceps and shoulders were screaming with pain by the time he

reached the top, but he managed to kick out and swing himself over the edge, where he lay gasping for breath. But he needed to fight through his exhaustion and hurry to bring Stewie and Britney up.

Crawling toward the trunk of a tree, Joe looped the rope around its base and tied it fast. He tested it with his full strength, then crawled back to the edge of the rim. Stewie and Britney stood still, their pale faces tilted up to him. He dropped the rope in a loose coil at their feet.

"Can you climb up the rope or do I need to try and pull you up?" Joe asked, his voice hoarse. "It's tied off on a tree up here."

"Ladies first," Stewie said, then made a mocking face as if realizing what he had said and taking it back. This guy takes nothing seriously, Joe thought.

"I don't think I can climb it," Britney said vacantly.

"Then tie it around your waist and do your best to help me when I pull you up. Use the handholds in the rock to help yourself. If the rope slips, don't panic—it'll pull tight from the tree."

Stewie helped Britney tie a harness, and when it was secure he smiled up at Joe and gave him the thumbs-up signal.

"I hate this," Britney whined.

"Joe hates it even worse," Stewie cackled.

Joe wrapped the rough rope around his forearm and backed away from the rim until the rope was taut.

"Here goes!" he called out, and eased his weight backward. She was heavy, but he was able to pull the first three feet of rope up fairly easily. But then Britney apparently lost her hold on the wall and the rope pulled back, straining against him, cutting through his shirt and skin. He grunted, and braced against the tree, raising Britney another two or three feet. He expected to see her hand reach over the rim at any time, which it did, and he watched through the pain as her hand groped around in the grass, trying to find a root or rock she could use to pull herself over the top.

Then there was a rifle shot and Britney's hand vanished. Her body instantly became dead weight against the rope and Joe was flung forward into the dirt, the rope sizzling through his hands until he was finally able to double it around his wrist. Another shot boomed across the canyon and Joe felt a tug on the rope that was not unlike that of a trout taking his fly.

Suddenly, Joe was being pulled forward, hard, toward the edge of the canyon. The rope burned through his hands, flaying his palms open, before he managed to dally it around his forearm where it held tight. It made no sense that Britney's weight could cause this. Then he realized that Stewie was climbing the rope, scrambling to get to the top.

"Stewie, I've got to let out the slack!" Joe yelled, letting the rope hiss through his hands until it pulled tight, straining the knot he had tied on the tree.

Another shot ripped through the canyon, but the rope didn't jerk.

"Stewie, are you okay?"

Stewie's terror-filled face and wild hair appeared at ground level above the rim, and Joe held out a bloody rope-burned hand to help him over the edge.

The two of them stumbled back away from the rim and fell into a gaping depression in the dirt made by the upturned root pan of a spruce tree.

"Britney?" Joe asked, still trying to get his breath.

Stewie emphatically shook his head no.

"The son of a bitch practically cut her in half," Stewie spat, enraged. "Then he shot her again to keep her spinning." He reached over and grasped Joe's arm, his eyes wild. "Don't let her hang there and get blown apart."

Joe unsheathed his knife. Reaching through the vee of two gnarled roots, he sawed through the rope, letting Britney's body drop. The pounding of his heart in his ears drowned out the sound of her body hitting the surface of the Middle Fork of the Twelve Sleep River.

"Poor Britney," Stewie seethed. "That poor girl."

As a bullet slammed into the tree trunk, shaking pine needles and pinecones to the ground, Joe realized that cutting Britney loose had pinpointed where they were for Charlie Tibbs.

With his chin in the mud of the depression, Joe peered through the roots to the opposite rim. Thunder rolled across the mountains, reverberating through the canyon.

There was a stand of thick juniper on the other side of the canyon, bordered on both sides by spruce. The juniper would be the only place, Joe thought, for Tibbs to hide. The distance was 150 yards—out of range for Joe to aim accurately. Nevertheless, he fitted the thick barrel of his .357 Magnum through the roots and held the weapon with both hands. He sighted on the top of the juniper bushes, aiming high, hoping to lob bullets across the canyon and into the brush.

Joe fired five shots in rapid succession, squeezing the double action until it clicked twice on empty chambers. The concussions seemed especially loud, and they echoed back and forth against the canyon walls until they dissipated and all Joe heard was a ringing in his ears.

He rolled onto his back, ejected the spent cartridges, and reloaded, keeping one cylinder empty for the firing pin to rest.

"Did you hit him?" Stewie asked.

"I doubt it," Joe said. "But at least he knows we'll fight back."

"You bet we fucking will," Stewie said.

THEY LAY IN the root pan depression for what seemed like an hour waiting for more rifle shots that never came. To Joe, the images and sensations of the last two days played back in his mind. He could not believe what he had seen and been through. His entire life had been reduced to one thing: *getting away*.

The first few raindrops smacked into pine boughs above their heads, sounding like gravel on a tarp. Thunder boomed. The sky was close and dark, the bank of thunderheads pushing out what little blue remained. Any possibility of a rescue by air was now remote.

Joe lay on his back with his .357 Magnum on his chest. The first drops on his face made him flinch. He closed his eyes.

The rain came.

35

“YOU KNOW, JOE, I learned a lot during that thirty days I spent crawling across the country after I got blown up by that cow,” Stewie said as they walked. “This is bringing it all back—the hunger, the elements, the cloud of absolute terror hanging over us.”

They were walking through the night in a steady but thin rain. Joe was soaked through, and rivulets of water streamed down from his hat when he cocked his head. The heavy clouds obscured the moon and stars, but there was enough ambient light for them to see by. Both Stewie and Joe lost their footing from time to time on rain-slick pine needles, and they had tripped over branches hidden in dark low cover. But they kept going; they kept bearing south. They stayed close together, within reach, so they wouldn’t run the risk of losing each other in the darkness. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Joe thought, they were descending the mountain toward the river valley. The terrain on this side of the mountains was easier to cover.

“‘So what does it bring back?’ one might ask if one were interested in the question posed,” Stewie said sarcastically, since Joe hadn’t spoken. “Well, I’ll tell you. What it brings back are feelings and theories I got when I was huddled up under a tree for the night or crawling beside a road hoping to find a particular residence I knew about. You see, Joe, I knew where a certain gentleman—one of the biggest contributors to environmental causes in the country—had a second home. I had been there once for a meeting. It had a helipad so the gentleman could get back and forth from San Francisco when he needed to. Anyway, this gentleman owns thousands of acres and a multimillion-dollar gated palace on an old ranch homestead. And I crawled all the way to his land.”

Stewie had conducted a series of monologues through the night as they walked. Joe didn’t mind, because they kept his mind off of his hunger and exhaustion. He likened it to listening to talk radio while he drove down the highway.

“But you know what happened when I got to his land, Joe?”

“What?”

“The son-of-a-bitch had put up a ten-foot buffalo fence and electrified it. I made the mistake of touching the fence and it just about cooked my ass off. I crawled around it for a day and couldn’t find a way in.”

Stewie spat angrily. “Here is a guy who gives hundreds of thousands of dollars to groups like One Globe so we can fight the bastards who are ruining the earth, but he buys a huge old ranch in the mountains and puts up an electrified buffalo fence to keep everyone out.”

"Isn't that his right?" Joe asked.

"It's his right, but there's nothing right about it," Stewie argued angrily. "It's so fucking elitist and hypocritical. Think about it: He builds a castle where a little ranch house once was, he closes roads that had been open to the local public for years, he puts up 'No Trespassing' signs, he builds a helipad, and he shuts the world out. Tell me how this guy is any better than an oil company that moves into an area and sinks wells? Or a lumber company that comes in and cuts the trees? *And he's one of us!*"

"That is something I've always wondered about," Joe said.

"I can see why," Stewie agreed. "Some of our own behave worse than the ranchers they bought out and, in many cases, the companies who lease and exploit the land. They fight development because they've already got theirs. This kind of selfishness destroys the credibility of the movement."

JOE REALIZED HE was now operating under the assumption that Charlie Tibbs was no longer following them. Joe no longer cared about the sloppiness of the trail they cut, and no longer felt it was necessary to do anything other than head straight south. He couldn't envision Tibbs attempting to cross the canyon the way they had. Leaving his horse and the bulk of his equipment would lessen Tibbs's advantage, and it was inconceivable that he would expose himself against the canyon walls the way Joe, Stewie, and Britney had done.

This assumption caused a lessening of immediate pressure, and Joe realized how hungry he was. His last meal had been breakfast on Saturday. It was now—*what day was it?*—Monday morning.

Joe wondered if it had been possible that one of his shots had actually hit Tibbs. He doubted it. At the range he was firing, the slugs would not have traveled in a true arc. They would have fluttered and tumbled end-over-end. But if Tibbs had been hit, Joe thought, the damage would have been devastating. Tumbling .357 Magnum slugs would make a big hole.

No, Joe decided, Tibbs wouldn't attempt to follow them. He would have turned back. On horseback, it was possible that Tibbs could make it back to his truck before Joe and Stewie hiked down the mountain. Racing around the mountain range to meet Joe and Stewie would be difficult, given the time, but possible. Considering what they'd already seen of Charlie Tibbs—his ruthlessness, his tracking abilities—Joe opted to push through the night.

"JOE, TELL ME about Marybeth," Stewie said after nearly an hour of silence. "Is she still a babe?"

Joe stopped, and Stewie nearly walked into him.

"I thought we agreed that Marybeth was not a topic of discussion," Joe stated.

"We did, but I was just thinking about how it was that you came to the cabin in the first place," Stewie said in a reasonable tone.

"Think all you want," Joe said, turning to walk again. "Just try to resist the urge to let everything you think about come out of your mouth."

A long roll of thunder rattled across the sky.

“Yup,” Joe said, after a long pause. “She’s still a babe.”

THE RAIN STOPPED and the sky opened up to reveal brilliant swirls of stars that lit the ground and gave shape to the dripping trees and brush. The fluttering sound of wings shedding rain in the shadows ahead signaled to Joe that they had come upon a flock of spruce grouse. The birds were nested in for the night, perched on low branches and downed logs, backlit in romantic blue by the stars and moon.

Spruce grouse were not intelligent birds—they were known as “fool hens” by local hunters. Joe and Stewie exchanged glances and came to an immediate understanding: *Get those birds!*

Picking up a stout branch, Joe bounded into the flock and stepped into his swing like a hitter pulling a fastball, lopping the head off a grouse perched on a log. He stepped back and swung again, connecting with another grouse as it started to rise. Stewie killed one with a well-thrown stone. The rest of the flock, finally realizing the threat, rose clumsily through the trees. The three downed birds flopped and danced in the dark grass.

They found dry pinecones under brush to use for kindling, and started a fire with a plastic butane lighter Stewie had found in his trouser pocket. As the fire grew, they added short lengths of wood. Stewie built the fire up while Joe cleaned and skinned the birds. Their flesh was warm to the touch and their blood smelled musky.

Roasting the grouse on green sapling sticks, Joe found himself trembling. He could not remember ever being as hungry as he was now. The hardest part was waiting for the grouse to be cooked through.

“Are they done yet?” Stewie asked repeatedly. “Jesus, that smells good.”

Eventually, Joe pricked one of the grouse breasts with his knife and the juice ran clear. It dripped into the fire and there was a sizzling flare-up.

“Okay,” Joe said, his mouth watering so badly that he had trouble speaking. He lifted the stick to Stewie, who hungrily grabbed the first bird.

The grouse breasts were tender white meat and they tasted faintly of pine nuts. Joe ate one grouse with his hands and split the remaining down the middle, giving half to Stewie. In the firelight, Joe could see Stewie’s lips, fingers, and chin shine with grease. Joe sat back and finished off a drumstick.

“This,” Stewie declared loudly, each word rising in volume, “is the best fucking meal I’ve ever had!”

Joe Pickett and Stewie Woods sat across from each other on the damp earth, the fire between them, and grinned goofily at each other like schoolboys who had just pulled off the greatest practical joke in the history of fifth grade.

Joe looked at his watch. It was 3.30 in the morning.

“Let’s go,” Joe said, scrambling to his feet. “We can’t afford any more breaks.”

“Even if we find more of those birds?” Stewie asked.

“IF I HAD known then what I know now, I never would have structured One Globe the way I did,” Stewie was saying. “I formed the organization the traditional way, with me as the president and a board of directors, with bylaws, newsletters, the whole works.

I was told I needed to do it that way for effective fund-raising, and we did raise some good money. But I fucked up when I let the board talk me into moving our headquarters to Washington, D.C. I was best at monkey wrenching and public relations, as we all know. But the fund-raisers started taking over. That was the beginning of the end for me and they booted me out.

“One thing that discourages me about One Globe and most of the other environmental groups is that we need crises to raise funds. There’ve always got to be new demons and new bad guys in order to raise awareness. That means we can never be happy. Even when we win, which is often, we’re never really happy about it. I’m inherently a happy guy, so this started to be a drag.

“And when we do win, we’re out of business. Headlines are only headlines for a day, and then they’re old news. So we constantly need new headlines. That gets pretty old, and it’s hard not to get cynical when we start thinking of our cause as a fund-raising business.

“If I had it to do over again, and I still might, I’d organize differently. I’d do it like the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front, with no centralized hierarchy. They can operate cheaply without all the fund-raising crap. They’re effective, too. Where do you think the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, got his Eco-Fucker Hit List? The future of our movement is in small, mobile, hard-to-find groups like Minnesota’s Bolt Weevils, Hawaii’s Menehune, Wisconsin’s Seeds of Resistance, or Genetix Alert. If we were set up that way it would be harder for a group of bastards like the Stockman’s Trust to find us.”

“What do you think about that, Joe?” Stewie asked.

“About what?” Joe answered, although he had heard every word.

DEEP INTO THE night, Stewie declared that much of his life had been wasted. He turned morose, blaming his own egomania for the death of his wife of three days, Britney, and the others.

“When I was crawling across these mountains I had a thought that haunts me still,” Stewie said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I wondered if I would have done more good if I had spent all my time and energy raising money to buy land, then planting trees on it, and turning the whole shiterree over to the Nature Conservancy or some other white-bread outfit. At least then I’d have something to show for my life. What I’ve got now, is this ...” He gestured toward the sky and the treetops, but what he meant was *nothing*. “That thought just won’t go away.”

He told Joe that his new mission in life, though, was to be an avenger. An *ugly* avenger.

“It’s a bummer looking like a monster,” Stewie lamented.

IT WAS AN hour before dawn, the coldest time of the day. The ground was spongy from the rain and the long grass was bent double as raindrops still clung to the blade tips. Mist began to rise from the meadows.

Joe pushed through a thick stand of aspen and emerged in an opening. He stopped suddenly and Stewie walked into him.

"Sorry," Stewie apologized.

"Do you see it?" Joe asked, his attention focused on the sight before them. 15 miles away, on the dark flats below, a tiny yellow light crossed slowly from right to left.

"It's the highway," Joe said.

36

THE IRRIGATED HAYFIELD had recently undergone its first cutting of the season and it still smelled sharply of alfalfa. Mist rose from the still-wet ground and blunted the outline of the cottonwood trees in the dawn horizon. Joe and Stewie slogged through the wet field, their boots making slurping sounds in the mud.

Joe felt giddy with happiness. The barbed-wire fence they had crossed a half hour before was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. Stewie had reluctantly agreed. Struggling across the cut, flat hayfield seemed easy compared to the rugged country they had been through. Cottonwoods were a welcome sight, because cottonwoods grew where there was water. Therefore ranch houses and buildings were more likely located near groves of cotton-wood. In the rural west of the Northern Rockies, cotton-wood trees meant that people would be somewhere nearby. Stewie picked up a crumpled Coors beer can in the stubby grass and held it aloft.

"This," he declared, "is a sure sign of civilization."

Joe marveled at Stewie's strength, and wondered how it was possible that Stewie seemed stronger now than when they had begun their trek. Stewie also seemed strangely wistful, and content. He was no longer thundering on about environmental politics or revenge. Stewie Woods was certainly a puzzle, Joe thought.

They crossed another barbed-wire fence and entered a herd of black baldy cattle. The cows shuffled, then mindlessly parted so Joe and Stewie could walk through the herd. Joe noticed the brand on the cows—it was the Vee Bar U.

"Damn!" Joe spat. "Of all of the places to end up. This is Jim Finotta's ranch."

"Jim Finotta?"

"Long story," Joe said.

AS THEY APPROACHED the thick cottonwoods in the mist, the sharp angles of the gabled roof of the magnificent stone ranch house emerged, as well as the sprawling outbuildings. Between where they were in the mud and the ranch buildings were a series of corrals filled with milling cattle, separated by age and weight. They heard heifers bawling, splitting the silence of the early morning. They climbed over several wood-slat fences, which reminded Joe of how sore and bruised he was. The cattle let them pass. The smell of fresh manure was ripe in the air and hung low in the mist.

After the last fence, Joe walked across the gravel ranch yard toward Finotta's house. He skirted a massive steel barn building on his left. As they passed the windows of the building, Joe glanced in and saw a parked vehicle. He had already taken several steps

past the window before what he had seen connected: it was a new model black Ford pickup.

Joe grabbed Stewie, pulling him against the building and out of sight of the ranch house. Silently, Joe pointed at the pickup through the window.

"That looks like the pickup Charlie Tibbs was driving," he whispered. Stewie's eyes widened and he mouthed the words, "*Holy fuck!*"

They backtracked along the building, going from door to door, finding each one locked. Around the corner was the big garage door. A set of muddy tire tracks crossed the cement threshold pad into the building. Joe leaned against the garage door and tried it. It raised a few inches.

"It's unlocked," Joe whispered to Stewie.

Stewie arched his eyebrows in a *let's see what's inside* expression.

Joe paused, and looked back at Stewie, who was inches away.

"I don't know what to do now," Joe confessed.

"You mean, do we go in?"

Joe nodded yes.

"Or do we leave things be and go to the ranch house and ask to use the phone?"

Joe nodded again. This didn't make sense to him. Could this possibly be Charlie Tibbs's pickup truck?

He decided that he had to find out. Opening the door slowly to make the least possible noise, Joe raised it two feet. If Charlie Tibbs was in the truck or somewhere in the garage, Joe didn't want to startle him. He dropped to his belly and crawled inside the garage and Stewie followed.

Inside, the floor was cold, polished concrete. The room was large. They shut the garage door and stood up. A muddy tractor and the four-wheeler Joe had seen Finotta's ranch hand, Buster, drive were parked under a high ceiling. There was enough room in the building for several more vehicles. The corners of the big room were dark, and the only light came from three small, dirty windows along the outer wall. The black Ford was parked and partially hidden behind the tractor, its muddy tracks still moist on the floor. There was a dull glow in the dark coming from where the black Ford was.

Stewie tapped Joe's shoulder, and Joe turned. Stewie had located a light switch. Joe withdrew his revolver and nodded to Stewie, who flipped on the overhead lights.

To their left, along the wall, was ranch equipment: welding machines, drill presses, benches scattered with hand tools, rolls of fencing, and stacks of posts. There was also a set of wooden steps that led to a second level in the building and a closed door.

They approached the pickup from the back. It no longer had a horse trailer attached. A large metal toolbox was in the bed of the pickup. Joe noticed the mounts inside the bed for a telescope—or a mounted sniper's rifle. It was parked at an awkward angle and the front door was open, the dome light on. That was what had made the glow.

Inside the cab there was blood on the floor and seat, and spatters of it leading from the open pickup door toward the wooden stairs.

"He's hurt," Stewie said, amazed. "Maybe you hit him after all. Damn!"

Joe was astounded, both sickened and a little proud. While Joe inspected the inside of the cab, Stewie rooted through the toolbox in the back.

“Son of a bitch!” Stewie whispered. “Look at this.”

Stewie held a brick-sized package of C4 explosive in one hand and a blue nylon harness in the other. “These are the tools you need to blow up a cow by remote control.” Stewie whistled. “Isn’t this just a hoot?”

“Do you see a phone anywhere?” Joe asked.

“Nope,” Stewie answered, pointing toward the stairs and the closed door. “But if there is one, I bet it’s up there. That looks like where the ranch hands live and where our friend Charlie Tibbs went.

“So the question is,” Stewie continued, “Do we follow the blood or get the hell out of here?”

Joe paused a beat. He thought of Lizzie and all that he and Stewie had been through. “Follow the blood. That son-of-a-bitch is hurt.”

“What if there are more bad guys up there?” Stewie asked.

Joe shook his head. “Finotta only has one ranch hand that I know of.”

Stewie grinned maniacally.

JOE CREPT UP the wooden stairs—they were handmade of rough-cut two-by-fours but slick on the surface from years of use—as quietly as he could. Stewie was behind him. Joe’s eyes were wide and his breath was shallow; he was scared of what might await him on the other side of the door. On the landing he paused with his rope-burned hand on the doorknob. It did not open quietly, but with a moan, and he pushed the door open and dropped into a shooter’s stance with his revolver pointed ahead of him. A dark hallway led to the right. Nothing moved.

Removing his hat, Joe cautiously peered around the doorway. There were four other closed doors along the hallway, two on each side. At the end of the hallway, there was an L of gray light from a door that was slightly ajar. Staying low and trying to be ready to react if a door opened, Joe moved down the hallway toward the L of light. Stewie stayed back at the landing.

Joe stood with his back to the slightly open door, then swung around, kicking it open and stepping inside. There was a surge of red-hot panic in his throat when he realized that the man he had seen damaging the Mercedes near the mountain road—Charlie Tibbs—was splayed out on an old brass bed just a few feet away.

Charlie Tibbs lay on his back, fully clothed, on top of a faded, worn quilt. He had not removed his boots; Joe could see their muddy soles cocked in a V before him. Charlie’s head, still wearing his Stetson, was turned to the side on a pillow, and his face was the color of mottled cream. His mouth was slightly open, and Joe could see the tip of Tibbs’s dry, maroon tongue. His brilliant blue eyes, once piercing, were open, but filmed over and dull. Above the breast pocket of Tibbs’s shirt was a pronounced dent and in the middle of the dent was a black hole. A spider’s web of blood had soaked through the fabric of his shirt and dried.

With his heart thumping, Joe cautiously lowered his weapon and stood next to Charlie Tibbs. Tibbs was a big man constructed of hard edges and sharp angles. Both of Tibbs's large hands were open beside his thighs, palms up. Joe held the back of his hand to Tibbs's mouth and nose: no breath. He touched his fingertips to Tibbs's neck: it was clammy, but not yet cold or stiff. Charlie Tibbs had died within the hour.

Joe reached down and turned Tibbs over slightly. The quilt beneath him was soaked through with dark blood from his back, where the bullet had exited. The exit wound was ragged and massive. The smell of blood in the room was overwhelming, and it reminded Joe of the stench of the badly hit or badly dressed big game carcasses he saw during hunting season. Joe thought it astounding that Tibbs had been able to ride back to his truck, unhitch the horse trailer, and drive all the way to the Finotta ranch to die.

What a lucky shot, Joe thought.

"You shot my horse, you son-of-a-bitch," Joe whispered. "If you ever see her where you both are now, I hope she kicks the hell out of you."

Then to Stewie out in the hallway: "He's here and he's dead!"

"Charlie Tibbs?"

"The same," Joe said, sliding his revolver into his holster. Suddenly, Joe felt very weak and sick to his stomach. He stared at Tibbs's face, trying to find something in it that indicated thoughtfulness, or gentleness, or humility. Something redeeming. But Joe could only see a face set by years of bitter resolve.

"Okay," Stewie said from the doorway after studying the scene, "Charlie Tibbs is dead. But why is he here?"

Joe looked up. He had no idea, although one was forming.

JOE REMEMBERED PASSING under a telephone in the dark hallway. It was an old-fashioned, wall-mounted rotary-dial telephone, probably installed there years before, for the use of ranch hands, who were no longer needed on Finotta's hobby ranch.

As he and Stewie had descended the mountain, Joe had practiced over and over the first words he would say to Marybeth. He would tell her how much he loved her, how much he missed her, how much he loved their girls. How he would never again approach a suspect's location without proper backup. Joe didn't even care if Stewie was standing next to him to overhear; his emotions were heartfelt and boiling within him.

He picked up the receiver and was about to dial when he realized there were voices on the line. It was a party line, presumably connected to the ranch house.

"Who is that?" someone asked. "Did somebody just pick up a phone?"

"I didn't hear it," another voice said.

"I heard a click," another, deeper voice intoned.

"Don't worry, gentlemen." Joe recognized this voice as belonging to Jim Finotta. It was louder and more clear than the others, due to Finotta's proximity. "I'm the only one here, so it's not on my end. These lines are old."

No doubt Finotta had long forgotten about the unused phone in the outbuilding.

Stewie was now leaning against Joe, his face in Joe's face so they could both hear. Joe cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and listened. It was a conference call and there were at least six men on the line. There was a meeting going on, and Jim Finotta seemed to be presiding. One of the voices called Finotta "chairman."

"You know what this is?" Stewie hissed, his eyes bulging, "You know *what this is?*"

Joe shot Stewie a cautionary glance and gripped the mouthpiece harder so they wouldn't be heard.

"This," Stewie said through clenched teeth, "is an emergency meeting of the *Stockman's Trust!*"

THE DISCUSSION WAS rushed at times, and participants talked over one another. The only voice Joe could clearly discern was Jim Finotta's, who was 500 feet away in the ranch house.

What Joe heard was fascinating, disturbing, and disgusting. He wished he had his small pocket tape recorder with him so he could tape the conversation and use it later as evidence at the murder trial.

Finotta: "He's dead in my bunkhouse right now. I don't know what in the hell to do with him. Does anyone want him?"

Laughter.

Gruff voice: "What happened to John Coble? Did he say?"

Finotta: "He said Coble turned tail and tried to inform Stewie Woods. Charlie caught him at the cabin and put him down. Coble's remains burned up in the cabin when Charlie torched it."

Gruff voice: "Thank God for that."

Fast voice: "I'm surprised at Coble. I thought he was more solid than that."

Finotta: "You just never know what a guy is going to do under pressure. But we have another matter at hand."

Texas twang: "Soooo, you have a body and you don't know what to do with it. Do you have any hogs, Jim? They'll eat just about anything."

Finotta: "No, this is a cattle ranch."

New voice: "Jim, you've got to come clean with us about this game warden deal. It really disturbs me that a game warden somehow got involved. He had absolutely nothing to do with our effort."

Gruff voice: "I sure as hell agree with that."

Finotta: "Charlie Tibbs said the game warden was at the cabin when he got there. He called me about it and explained the situation, and I told him to proceed. It was just a bad coincidence that the game warden was in the middle of everything when Charlie took action. Besides, I knew the guy. He's the local game warden. Name is Pickett, Joe Pickett. He's been a pain in my side recently."

Silence.

New voice: "I still think Charlie went way over the line. You should have let us know about this, Jim."

Gruff voice: "Before now, we mean. Now it's too late."

New voice: "That's why we have an executive board—to agree on these things. No one has the authority to just willy-nilly decide who lives and who dies. Not even you. That's why we made that list in the first place—to clearly define all of the targets."

Finotta: "Can't we discuss this later? I've got Charlie Tibbs in my bunkhouse and we don't know where in the hell Stewie Woods and the game warden are."

Gruff voice: "Probably dead of exposure. You say the local sheriff sent out a helicopter to look for them?"

Finotta: "Yes, but the weather got bad and the helicopter was grounded. But the pilot and spotter never saw anybody."

Gruff voice: "Yup, those two saps are worm food by now."

Texas twang: "But Charlie got that lawyer and that wolf woman, that's what I'm hearing?"

Finotta: "That's what Charlie said."

Gruff voice: "So he cleared the entire list, huh?"

Texas twang: "That Charlie was something, wasn't he?"

Joe despised these people. He held the phone away from him, stunned. Stewie had been so close as they listened that Joe felt uncomfortable. Stewie had been practically on top of him, pressing closer to hear. They both smelled bad after their time in the mountains, but in Joe's opinion, Stewie smelled worse. Joe felt a tug on his belt. Then Stewie suddenly wrenched the telephone from Joe's hand, and held the receiver to his mouth.

"You were wondering about Stewie Woods?" Stewie cut in. "Guess what? *It's your lucky day, you assholes!*"

"Who the hell was *that*, Jim?" Joe heard the Gruff Voice say before Stewie slammed down the phone.

When Joe reached to retrieve the telephone, Stewie pointed something so close to Joe's eyes that Joe couldn't focus on what it was.

The blast from his own canister of pepper spray hit Joe full in the face and eyes and he went down as if his feet had been kicked out from under him.

"Sorry, buddy," he heard from somewhere above him. Joe was thrashing, his arms and legs jerking involuntarily, his lungs burning. He tried to speak but his voice only made a hoarse, bleating sound he couldn't recognize. A jet turbine roared in his ears. His head was on fire and his eyes felt like they were being burned from their sockets by a blowtorch. He was literally paralyzed, and excruciatingly painful muscle spasms shot through his body. Coughing and gasping for breath, he felt himself being pulled across the floor. His hands were wrenched together. Through the howl of the jet engine in his ears, he heard the phone being ripped from the wall and felt the phone cord looping around his wrists and being knotted tightly. Then he heard the unsnapping of his holster.

IT TOOK TWENTY minutes for Joe Pickett to recover enough from the pepper spray to stand up. His eyes and throat still burned, and it seemed as though most of the liquid in his body had drained out of him in bitter streams through his nose, mouth, and eyes. He leaned against the wall in the hallway, next to the telephone that Stewie had ripped from the wall as he left, and tried to shake the fog from his head.

Slowly at first, he regained control of his legs and moved down the hall, clomping unsteadily like Frankenstein's monster. He kept his left shoulder against the plaster for balance until he reached the door to the stairway. He descended the stairs one deliberate step at a time and held the rail with both tied hands. The building was empty; the black Ford truck still parked with both doors—and the toolbox—open.

Joe shouldered the overhead door open and stood outside, gasping damp fresh air and blinking back tears from the sting of the pepper spray. He turned toward the ranch house, where he presumed Stewie Woods had gone.

The front gate was open and so was the massive front door. Joe entered, stopped, tried to see in the gloom. On the floor was the writhing body of Buster the ranch hand. Buster's hands were covering his face, and he was rolling from side to side, whimpering. Pepper spray, Joe thought. Probably a shot of it from Stewie on the way in and a second shot of it a few minutes ago, judging by the whiff of the spray still hanging in the air.

"If I were a snake I could have *bitten you*." Her voice startled Joe, as it had the first time. She was in her chair, its back pushed up against the wall. Her face was cocked to the side and thrust forward at Joe, twisted as if she were confronting him.

"Did a crazy-looking man just come in here?" Joe asked, his voice still thick with mucus.

Ginger Finotta raised her thin arm, pointing a gnarled finger past Joe's ear.

"They went outside together," she said, her voice high and grating. "Tom Horn is in our bunkhouse!"

"Joe stopped. *Tom Horn?*

"You mean Charlie Tibbs."

"He's in our bunkhouse!" she repeated. "Someone shot him!"

Joe tried to focus on her face, but couldn't. Her face swam in his vision. "That was me," Joe coughed. "I shot him."

He wished he could see her face to gauge her reaction. But he heard it.

"Bravo, young man," she squawked. "Hanging a man like Tom Horn would have been a waste of good rope."

BACK IN THE ranch yard, Joe heard a shout from a distance. "Hey Joe!" It was Stewie. Joe turned toward the voice. It came from beyond the corrals, over the tops of milling cattle. "I'm glad you're okay, buddy!"

Joe walked toward the voice. His vision was still blurry. The cord bit into his wrists, but he didn't want to take the time to try and unknot it. As he climbed the first fence he saw Stewie standing in the pasture beyond the corrals. Stewie and a lone cow.

"Don't come any closer, Joe!" Stewie cautioned.

Joe ignored him, and pushed his way through the cattle. When he climbed the back fence he stopped, focused, and felt his eyes widen and his jaw drop.

At first, he thought that Jim Finotta was slumped over the back of the cow in the pasture next to Stewie. Then he realized that Finotta was strapped on, his hands tied under the cow's belly, with another rope around the hips of his stretch Wranglers, securing him to the cow. Finotta's face was pressed against the shoulders of the animal, looking out at Joe. Blue nylon webbing, loaded with full charges of C4 explosive from the toolbox in the black Ford, was lashed between Finotta and the cow. A single, springmounted antenna bobbed from one of the charges.

Stewie stood near the animal's haunches holding a remote-control transmitter in one hand and Joe's .357 Magnum in the other.

"Don't come any closer, or the lawyer gets it!" Stewie hollered cheerfully. Then Stewie's voice took on a more determined tone. "I'm serious, Joe. I'm sorry I sprayed you with pepper spray back there, but I knew you wouldn't help me do what I needed to do."

"Oh, Stewie," Joe croaked.

"We were just having a chat," Stewie explained. "Mister Jim was about to tell me the names of the executive board of the Stockman's Trust, and why they voted to wipe out me and so many of my colleagues."

Joe swung his other leg over the fence and now sat on top of it. The scene in the pasture was beyond comprehension. Stewie had maced Joe, gathered up the nylon webbing and the explosives from the truck, selected a cow from the corral, charged the house, maced Buster, marched Finotta at gunpoint to the pasture, and tied him and the explosives to the cow.

"Please help me," Finotta called to Joe. "You are an officer of the law. Despite our earlier disagreements, you have a duty to protect me. Please ... I'm friends with the governor ... I can be of great influence on your behalf."

Stewie snorted. "Up until that last bit, he was kind of convincing." Stewie stepped forward so Finotta could see him, then raised the transmitter and took several steps backward. Finotta shrieked and buried his face in the hide of the cow. The cow continued to graze, and Stewie lowered the remote control, and winked at Joe.

"You've given him a scare," Joe said, his voice as steady and flat as he could make it, given the circumstances and his condition. "You've scared the hell out of him. Now let's untie him and go have some lunch. Think about it, Stewie: Does Finotta seem like the kind of guy who wouldn't rat out his buddies in a plea bargain? We'll find out who the Stockman's Trust is and we'll put them all into prison. If Finotta ordered the killings, he may get the death sentence."

Stewie listened, thought about it while he rubbed his chin and studied Finotta, then laughed.

“Like I believe that a great lawyer and butt-buddy with the governor will ever see the inside of a prison in this state,” Stewie said sarcastically.

Then Stewie turned to Finotta, waving the remote control in front of him like a wand. “Let me remind you, Jim Finotta, of some names,” he said. “These names are only names on a list to you. But to me they are real people—friends, lovers, colleagues.”

“Annabel Bellotti. Hayden Powell. Peter Sollito.” Stewie shouted each name. And with each, his face got redder, and he got angrier. “Emily Betts. Tod Marchand. Britney Earthshare. Even John Coble and Charlie Tibbs!”

Stewie was so enraged that Joe, even from a distance, could see Stewie shaking.

“You started the first fucking range war of the twenty-first century!” Stewie bellowed. “You waged that war in a vicious, cowardly way! And now you’re going to find out what it is like to be on the receiving end!”

Stewie backed away further from Finotta and the cow. There was now about one hundred feet between them. He again raised the remote control.

“The headlines about the environmental activist getting blown up were good ones, Jim. I bet they made you chuckle. But the headlines about the president of the Stockman’s Trust getting blown up *by his own cow* are *even better!*”

IN HIS PERIPHERAL vision, Joe saw a stream of vehicles with flashing lights emerge from the cottonwoods on the ranch road from the highway. Joe turned. Sheriff Barnum’s Blazer was leading two other sheriff’s trucks. Trey Crump’s green Game and Fish pickup, lights flashing, followed. The vehicles drove straight across the ranch yard and braked at the first fence. Doors opened and officers poured out with rifles and shotguns. Joe saw Barnum, Trey Crump, Deputy McLanahan, and Robey Hersig. Marybeth jumped down from the passenger door of Trey Crump’s pickup. Joe didn’t recognize the armed deputies who spread out along the corral fence.

“Is that you, Mary?” Stewie called, working his way behind the cow in the distance so that Finotta and the cow were between him and the deputies. Joe heard the racking pumps of the shotguns and the bolts being thrown on the rifles.

“It’s me, Stewie,” Marybeth answered. Her voice was strong. “Please don’t hurt anyone, and don’t hurt yourself.”

Joe felt a strange pang hearing the familiarity with which she addressed Stewie and he addressed her. For a moment he was buffeted with several emotions; jealousy, confusion, anger, and deep sadness.

Mary?

“Joe,” she cried, “you need to get back here with me.”

“You are still a beauty, Mary,” Stewie said, both admiring and wistful. “Joe is a lucky man. And Mary—Joe Pickett is a good man. That’s a very rare thing out in this cow pasture.”

Finotta swung his face toward the line of officers behind the corral fences. “Barnum, you need to take him out! *Now!*”

Joe heard Barnum hiss at his deputies not to fire.

Deputy McLanahan, farthest away from Barnum in the line, used the post of the fence for a rest, fitted the top half of Stewie Woods into the notch of his rear open sight, and squeezed the trigger of his rifle. The high crack of the shot snapped through the air.

Stewie jerked and sat back heavily in the wet grass. Marybeth screamed, and Barnum let loose a firecracker string of curses toward McLanahan.

Jim Finotta raised his head, saw Stewie sitting on the ground with the remote control and revolver in his lap, and yelled, "Hit him again! He's still moving! *Take him out!*"

Joe slipped down from the fence into the pasture and took a few tentative steps. He locked eyes with Stewie across the field. Pain gripped Stewie's face, making the edges of his mouth tug up in an inappropriate smile. *How alone he is*, Joe thought, feeling gut-wrenching pity. *Practically everyone he cares about is gone*. Joe thought about rushing Stewie and wrenching the transmitter away, but the look in Stewie's eyes warned him not to. With a wistful shrug, Stewie pushed the button on his transmitter.

The force of the explosion hurled Joe back toward the corrals, where he smashed full force against the fence.

Through slitted eyes and with the dead silence of instant deafness, Joe watched as pieces of Jim Finotta, the cow, Stewie Woods, and brome-grass turf rained from the sky for what seemed like hours.

38

THE DREAMS JOE had in the hospital were not good dreams. In one, they were once again climbing out of Savage Run Canyon with Charlie Tibbs and his long-range rifle on the opposite rim. Only, this time, Stewie was the target. One shot ripped Stewie's left arm off at the socket, but he kept climbing one-handed. Stewie kept making jokes, saying he was happy he still had his right hand because without that he would have no dates anymore. Joe was scrambling to the top, ahead of Stewie, his muscles shrieking, contracting, in terrible pain. Another shot hit Stewie in the thigh, breaking the bone, leaving his right leg useless. A third hit Stewie square in the back and exited out the front, his entrails now blooming from a hole in his stomach like a sea anemone. But he just kept climbing behind Joe, joking that he no longer had the guts for this sort of thing.

JOE'S PROBLEM WAS that a large piece of the cow—either the head or a meaty front shoulder—had hit him hard enough in the chest to crack his sternum and break his collarbone. He couldn't remember actually being hit. Marybeth told him that when she had reached him near the fence, he had been vomiting blood. The EMTs had suspected much more serious injury at first as well, because he was spattered by gouts of blood and it was difficult to discern if the source was internal or external. Marybeth

rode with him in the Twelve Sleep County ambulance, holding his hand, wiping his face clean.

Although neither injury required a cast, his doctor decided to keep him for rest and observation at Twelve Sleep County Hospital for three days. He had lost 15 pounds since Sunday, and was dehydrated enough to require an IV.

Outside the hospital window, cottonwood leaves rattled in the summer wind. Daylight was lengthening. Joe could smell and feel a long summer coming.

WHILE HE WAS in the hospital, Joe was interviewed by the Wyoming Department of Criminal Investigation (DCI), the FBI, the Game and Fish Department, and an officer from the Washington, D.C., Police Department who was in charge of the investigation into the death of Rep. Peter Sollito. He told them all the same story, the truth. When they asked him questions about the motivation behind the Stockman's Trust or Stewie Woods, Joe said he wasn't the person to ask and that he wouldn't speculate. Trey Crump came and Joe went into great detail about the long march through the Bighorns, about Savage Run. In turn, Joe asked about the events of the day when Trey Crump discovered his disabled pickup and the black Ford.

NEWS OF THE Stockman's Trust and what they had done was strangely muted. It was a scandal few really cared about, because it was too murky and too complicated to grasp. No one knew, or was willing to admit, who the executive board members were. Inquiries went nowhere, because a search of Finotta's home and office revealed no list of membership, no past meeting minutes, no record of incorporation. A run of Finotta's phone records showed that all of the participants in the conference call had apparently called him, so there were no clues in Finotta's outgoing calls. The Stockman's Trust, apparently, had long ago reorganized without a centralized hierarchy—a perfect model of the nonstructural organization Stewie had wanted to emulate. Although he tried, Joe was unable to positively identify the voices that were on the telephone, even when the FBI asked him to listen to tapes of various nationwide wiretaps. As far as the various law enforcement agencies were concerned, Jim Finotta was the president of the board of executives and Jim Finotta had been blown to vapor by an exploding cow. Further investigation, as far as Joe knew, would go nowhere.

Just as the Stockman's Trust had gone into dormancy after the hanging of Tom Horn at the turn of the last century, the new Stockman's Trust had seemed to recede into silence once again, at the turn of this century. The Stockman's Trust had arisen, won their brief war, and had vanished.

SHERIFF BARNUM HAD come, hat in hand, to see Joe the day before he was released. They exchanged pleasantries while Joe eyed the sheriff warily. Barnum stared at the tops of his own boots and mumbled that it was unfortunate he had been out of town when Joe rode up to the cabin.

"According to Trey Crump, you were with him the day he found my pickup and the burned-up cabin," Joe said gently. Barnum nodded, looking up above the dark bags under his eyes.

“You volunteered to stay there while Trey circled around the mountain in the helicopter.”

Barnum nodded again.

“So how did Charlie Tibbs ride back, get in his truck, unhook his horse trailer, and drive to Jim Finotta’s place without you seeing him?”

Joe watched Barnum think, watched the tiny veins in his temples pulse. Barnum had lowered his eyes again, and stood still. Joe could hear Barnum’s nicotine-encased lungs weakly suck breath in and push it back out.

“You saw Charlie Tibbs ride back out of the mountains, didn’t you?” Joe asked, nearly whispering. “He was badly wounded, but you saw him coming back toward his truck, didn’t you? And when you called Jim Finotta, you both agreed that you ought to get away fast, so you would have no contact with Tibbs and plenty of deniability.”

Barnum coughed, looked around the room at everything except Joe.

“I can’t prove it, and you know that,” Joe said. “Just like I can’t prove you’re a member of the Stockman’s Trust, unless you admit it to me.”

Barnum shuffled his boots on the hard linoleum floor, then briefly raised his eyes to Joe. Joe detected an almost imperceptible quiver of Barnum’s lower lip. Then the sheriff clamped on his hat, turned, and reached for the knob on the door.

“Sheriff?” Joe said from the bed. “I know now that you’re a man who will look the other way.”

Joe lowered his voice and spoke calmly, but with a hint of malice: “Someday, we need to have a conversation.”

Barnum hesitated, his back to Joe, then let himself out of the room.

THE BIGGEST FOCUS of attention was on Stewie Woods. Oldline environmental activists now had themselves a mythic, noble, butt-kicking martyr. One Globe exceeded all of its records for fund-raising. A photo of Stewie’s pre-explosion face was now used on their stationery, envelopes, business cards, website, and on the cover of their magazine. He was being touted as the “Environmental Movement’s Ché Guevara.” A move was afoot to rename Savage Run the “Stewie Woods/Savage Run National Wilderness Area.” It was a losing effort, using Stewie’s name, but it gave the group a new cause to rally around. Politicians and others who objected were called “environmental racists” and targeted for future vitriol. Joe smiled bitterly when he read about it, knowing that in his last days on earth, Stewie considered himself an outcast from the organization he had founded, promoted, and lived for. Now One Globe had taken Stewie back. He was good for business.

39

AT HOME, JOE placed the battered Cheyenne doll on top of the bookcase. Both April and Lucy said they wanted to play with it, and Joe let them after they promised to be gentle. But they preferred their Barbies, choosing nice clothes, long hair, and

massive breasts over featureless leather, and Joe later found the doll on the floor and put it back on the bookcase.

After a fried chicken dinner, Joe's welcome-home request, he and Marybeth cleared the dishes and the girls went out to play.

Marybeth told Joe that she had received another call from a reporter looking for a comment. According to the reporter, the rumor was floating through the environmental community that Stewie's body had not been positively identified. Joe scoffed, saying that the damage had been so great that it was unlikely that Stewie, Finotta, or the cow could have been positively identified. So it was a good thing there was no need for medical testing, since seven law enforcement officers and Marybeth had witnessed the entire incident.

"I couldn't tell the reporter with any assurance that I actually saw Stewie's body," Marybeth said. "There was so much smoke and stuff falling from the sky that we all covered our heads and eyes. When we finally recovered from the shock of the explosion, you were the only person I looked for."

Joe liked hearing that. Marybeth asked if he still felt jealous. Joe said yes, a little. But he said that it was hard not to like Stewie. And he told her that he had punched him in the nose.

"Somehow, I like it better that no one is sure about Stewie," Marybeth said. "This is what he would have wanted. It's right up his alley."

Joe smiled.

SITTING ON A bale of hay in the last light of the evening, Joe watched Marybeth work Toby in the round pen. Sheridan sat beside him, reading a Harry Potter book. Lucy and April played in the backyard. It was a perfect, still, warm summer evening. Joe wished he could drink it in. Instead, he settled for a tumbler of bourbon and water.

"Are we going to get another horse?" Sheridan asked, while Toby's hooves thundered in the soft dirt.

"Eventually," Joe said. He still didn't like thinking or talking about Lizzie.

"Dad, I'm trying to figure out what happened between the environmentalists and the ranchers, how it got so bad."

"First, Sheridan, it isn't *'the ranchers.'* Most ranchers take their role as stewards of the land seriously. This was a particular group of people who went too far."

"But how did it happen?"

"I'm not sure what it was that set it off," Joe said, putting the drink down. "I think it had been building for the last ten years, maybe more. On this end of the scale," Joe started to gesture with his hands, felt a sharp pain from his right arm, which was in a sling, and settled for gesturing with his left hand, "you've got the environmental terrorists, the most extreme of the extreme. Stewie Woods was one of those guys, at least at first."

"Over here," Joe straightened his fingers from the fold of the sling in lieu of sweeping with his arm, "you've got the other end of the scale, which is the Stockman's Trust

group of hardcore, violent men. What this war did was cut back just a little on both sides of the scale.”

“Where do we fit on the scale?”

Joe chuckled. “Somewhere near the middle. Like most folks.”

“I hope it doesn’t happen again.”

Joe nodded. “Me, too. But I’m not as optimistic as I’d like to be. This wasn’t the first range war. There will be others, I’m afraid.”

Sheridan turned and looked hard at him. They had had a conversation like this before.

“I love you, Dad,” she said. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Joe felt his face flush. He leaned forward and buried his head in her hair. “I love you too, honey. And it’s good to be back.”

SLICKED OUT AND sweating, Toby pounded the packed earth in the round pen. Marybeth turned him and asked him to lope in the other direction. She was working him hard, very hard. As if she were exorcising something out of him. Or herself. Joe was intrigued by the fact that he was still learning about the woman who was his wife.

Joe’s eyes wandered away from the horse, over the corral to the humpbacked Bighorn Mountains. There was no conceivable way that Stewie could have survived the explosion. No possible way.

No possible way.

Winterkill

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Part One Severe Winter Storm Warning
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
 - Chapter 8
- Part Two Snow Blind
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
 - Chapter 18
 - Chapter 19
 - Chapter 20
 - Chapter 21

- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Part Three Whiteout
 - Chapter 25
 - Chapter 26
 - Chapter 27
 - Chapter 28
 - Chapter 29
 - Chapter 30
 - Chapter 31
 - Chapter 32
 - Chapter 33
- Part Four Snow Ghosts
 - Chapter 34
 - Chapter 35
 - Chapter 36
 - Chapter 37

[Dedication]

For Morris and Joanna Meese
and for Laurie, always

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C.J. Box

Cheyenne, Wyoming

[Epigraph]

winterkill ['win-t● r●, kil] vt to kill (as a plant or animal) by, or to die as a result of, exposure to winter weather conditions

PART ONE: Severe Winter Storm Warning

1. Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming

A STORM WAS coming to the Bighorn Mountains.

It was late December, four days before Christmas, the last week of the elk hunting season. Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett was in his green four-wheel drive pickup, parked just below the tree line in the southern Wolf range. The terrain he was patrolling was an enormous wooded bowl, and Joe was just below the eastern rim. The sea of dark pines in the bowl was interspersed with ancient clear-cuts and mountain meadows, and set off by knuckle-like granite ridges that defined each small drainage. Beyond the rim to the west was Battle Mountain, separated from the Wolf range by Crazy Woman Creek, which flowed, eventually, into the Twelve Sleep River.

It was two hours away from nightfall, but the sky was leaden, dark, and threatening snow. The temperature had dropped during the afternoon as a bank of clouds moved over the sky and shut out the sun. It was now twenty-nine degrees with a slightly moist, icy breeze. The first severe winter storm-warning of the season had been issued for northern Wyoming and southern Montana for that night and the following day, with another big Canadian front forming behind it. Beneath the high ceiling, clouds approached in tight formation, looking heavy and ominous.

Joe felt like a soldier at a remote outpost, listening to the distant rumble and clank of enemy artillery pieces being moved into place before an opening barrage.

For most of the afternoon, he had been watching a herd of twenty elk move cautiously from black timber into a windswept meadow to graze. He had watched the elk, then watched the sky, then turned back to the elk again.

On the seat next to Joe was a sheaf of papers his wife Marybeth had gathered for him that had been brought home from school by his daughters. Now that all three girls were in school—eleven-year-old Sheridan in fifth grade, six-year-old Lucy in kindergarten, and their nineyear-old foster daughter April in third grade—their small state-owned house seemed awash in paper. He smiled as he looked through the stack. Lucy consistently garnered smiley-face stamps from her teacher for her cartoon drawings. April wasn't doing quite so well in rudimentary multiplication—she had trouble with 5's, 8's, and 3's. But the teacher had sent notes home recently praising her improvement.

Sheridan's writing assignment had been to describe what her father did for a living.
MY DAD THE GAME WARDEN
BY SHERIDAN PICKETT
MRS. BARRON'S CLASS, 5TH GRADE.

My Dad is the game warden for all of the
mountains as far around as you can see. He
works hard during hunting season and gets
home late at night and leaves early in the
morning. His job is to make sure hunters are
responsible and that they obey the law. It can
be a scary job, but he's good at it. We have
lived in Saddlestring for 3 and one-half years,
and this is all he has done. Sometimes, he saves
animals from danger. My mom is home but she
works at a stable and at the library ...

JOE KNEW HE wasn't alone on the mountain. Earlier, he had seen a late-model bronze-colored GMC pickup below him in the bowl. Swinging his window-mounted Redfield spotting scope toward it, he caught a quick look at the back window of the pickup—driver only, no passenger, gun rack with scoped rifle, Wyoming plates with the buckaroo on them—and an empty truck bed, indicating that the hunter hadn't yet gotten his elk. He tried to read the plate number before the truck entered the trees, but he couldn't. Instead, he jotted down the description of the truck in his console notebook. It was the only vehicle he had seen all day in the area.

Twenty-five minutes later, the last of the elk sniffed the wind and moved into the clearing, joining the rest of the herd. The elk seemed to know about the storm warning, and they wanted to use the last hours of day-light to load up on food in the grassy meadow before it was covered with snow. Joe thought that if the lone hunter in the bronze pickup could see the meadow there would be a wide choice of targets. It would be interesting to see how the scenario would unfold, if it unfolded at all. There was just as much chance that the hunter would simply drive by, deep in the trees, road-hunting like 90 percent of all hunters, and never know that an entire herd of elk had exposed themselves above him in a clearing. Joe sat in his pickup in silence and waited.

WITH A SHARP crack, then three more, the calm was shattered. The shots sounded like rocks thrown against sheet metal in rapid succession. From the sound, Joe registered at least three hits, but because it often took more than a single bullet to bring down a big bull elk, he couldn't be sure how many animals had been shot. Maxine, his

yellow Labrador, sprang up from where she had been sleeping on the pickup seat as if she'd gotten an electric shock.

Below, the herd had come alive at once and was now running across the meadow. Joe could see that three brown dots remained behind in the tall grass and sagebrush.

One hunter, three elk down. Two more than legal.

Joe felt a rush of anger, and of anxiety. Game violations weren't uncommon during hunting season, and he had ticketed scores of hunters over the years for taking too many animals, not tagging carcasses, having improper licenses, hunting in closed areas, and other infractions. In many cases, the violators turned themselves in because they were honorable men who had lived and hunted in the area for years. Often, he found violations as he did random checks of hunting camps. Sometimes, other hunters reported the crimes. Joe Pickett's district took up more than 1,500 square miles, and in four years, he had almost never actually been present as a violation occurred.

Snatching the radio transmitter from its cradle, Joe called in his position over a roar of static. Distance and terrain prohibited a clear signal. The dispatcher repeated his words back to him, Joe confirmed them, and he described the bronze pickup and advised that he was going to approach it immediately. The answer was a high-pitched howl of static he was unable to squelch. At least, he thought, they knew where he was. That, unfortunately, hadn't always been the case.

"Here we go, Maxine," Joe said tersely. He started the motor, snapped the toggle switch to engage the four-wheel drive, and plunged down the mountain into the dark woods. Despite the freezing air, he opened the windows so he could hear if there were more shots. His breath came in puffs of condensation that whipped out of the window.

Another shot cracked, followed by three more. The hunter had obviously reloaded, because no legal hunting rifle had more than a five-shot capacity. The lead bull elk in the herd tumbled, as did a cow and her calf. Rather than rush into the forest, the rest of the herd inexplicably changed direction just shy of the far wall of trees in a looping liquid turn and raced downhill through the meadow, offering themselves broadside to the shooter.

"Damn it!" Joe hissed. "Why'd they turn?"

Two more shots brought down two more elk.

"This guy is *nuts*!" Joe said to Maxine, betraying the fear he was beginning to feel. A man who could calmly execute six or seven terrified elk might just as easily turn his weapon on a lone game warden. Joe did a quick mental inventory of his own weapons: the .308 carbine was secured under the bench seat, a .270 Winchester rifle was in the gun rack behind his head, his twelve-gauge Remington Wingmaster shotgun was wedged into the coil springs behind his seat ... none of them easily accessible while he drove. His side arm was a newly issued .40 Beretta to replace the .357 Magnum that had been destroyed the previous summer in an explosion. He had barely qualified with the Beretta because he was such a poor pistol shot to begin with, and he had little confidence in the piece or his ability to hit anything with it.

Using a ridge line as a road, he found an old set of tire tracks to follow as he descended. Although the forest was criss-crossed with old logging roads, he didn't know of one that could take him directly to where he needed to be. Plus there was the fairly recent problem of the local U.S. Forest Service closing a number of the old roads by digging ditches like tank traps across them or blocking access with locked chains, and Joe wasn't sure which ones were closed. The track was rough, strewn with football-sized boulders, and he held the wheel tightly as the front tires jounced and bucked. A rock he had dislodged clanged from beneath his undercarriage. But even over the whining of his engine he could hear still more shots, closer now. The old road was still open.

THERE WAS AN immediate presence in the timber and a dozen elk—all that was left of the herd—broke through the trees around him. He slammed on his brakes as the animals surged around his truck, Maxine barking at them, Joe getting glimpses of wild white eyes, lolling tongues, thick brown fur. One panicked bull ran so close to the truck that a tine from his heavy spread of antlers struck the pickup's hood with a sharp ping, leaving a puckered dent in the hood. A cow elk staggered by on three legs, the right foreleg blown off, the limb bouncing along in the dirt, held only by exposed tendons and a strip of hide.

When they had passed him, Joe accelerated, throwing Maxine back against the seat, and drove through the stand of trees much too quickly. The passenger-side mirror smacked a tree trunk and shattered, bent back against the door.

Then the trees opened and he was on the shooter.

Joe stopped the truck, unsure of how to proceed. The hunter was bent over slightly, his back to Joe, concentrating on something in front of him, as if he hadn't heard Joe's approach, smashed mirror and all. The man wore a heavy canvas coat, a blaze-orange hunting vest, and hiking boots. Spent brass cartridges winked from the grass near his feet, and the air smelled of gunshots.

Out in front of the shooter, elk carcasses littered the slope of the meadow. A calf bawled, his pelvis shattered, as he tried to pull himself erect without the use of his back limbs.

Joe opened his door, slid out of the pickup, and unsnapped his holster. Gripping the Beretta and ready to draw it if the shooter turned around, Joe walked to the back and right of the man, so that if he wheeled with his rifle he'd have to do an awkward full turn to set himself and aim at Joe.

When Joe saw it, he couldn't believe what the shooter was doing. Despite violent trembling, the man was trying to reload his bolt-action rifle with cigarettes instead of cartridges. Dry tobacco and strips of cigarette paper were jammed in the magazine, which didn't stop the man from crushing another cigarette into the chamber. He seemed to be completely unaware that Joe was even there.

Joe drew the Beretta and racked the slide, hoping the sound would register with the hunter.

"Drop the weapon," Joe barked, centering his pistol on the hunter's upper torso. "DROP IT NOW, then turn around slowly."

Joe hoped that when the hunter turned he wouldn't notice Joe's hands shaking. He gripped the Beretta harder, trying to still it.

Instead of complying, the man attempted to load another cigarette into the rifle.

Was he deaf? Joe wondered, or crazy? Or was it all a trick to get Joe to drop his guard? Despite the cold, Joe felt prickling sweat beneath his shirt and jacket. His legs felt unsteady, as if he had been running and had just stopped for breath.

"DROP THE WEAPON AND TURN AROUND!"

Nothing. Shredded tobacco floated to the ground. The mortally wounded elk calf bleated in the meadow.

Joe pointed the Beretta into the air and fired. The concussion was surprisingly loud, and for the first time the hunter seemed to wake up, shaking his head, as if to clear it after a hard blow. Then he turned.

And Joe looked into the pale, twitching, frightened face of Lamar Gardiner, the district supervisor for Twelve Sleep National Forest. A week before, the Gardiners and the Picketts had sat side by side and watched their daughters perform in the school Christmas play. Lamar Gardiner was considered a dim, affable, weak-kneed bureaucrat. He wore a wispy, sandy-colored mustache over thin lips. He had practically no chin, which gave him the appearance of someone just about to cry. Locals, behind his back, referred to him as "Elmer Fedd."

"Lamar," Joe yelled, "What in the *hell* are you doing? There are dead elk all over the place. *Have you lost your mind?*"

"Oh, my God, Joe ..." Gardiner whispered, as if coming out of shock. "I didn't do it."

Joe stared at Lamar Gardiner. Gardiner's eyes were unfocused, and tiny muscles in his neck twitched. Even without a breeze, Joe could smell alcohol on his breath. "What? Are you insane? *Of course* you did it, Lamar," Joe said, not quite believing the situation he was in. "I heard the shots. There are spent casings all over the ground. Your barrel's so hot I can see heat coming off of it."

In what appeared to be a case of dawning realization, Gardiner looked down at the spent cartridges at his feet, then up at the dead and dying elk in the meadow. The connection between the two was being made.

"Oh, my God," Gardiner squeaked. "I can't believe it."

"Now drop the rifle," Joe ordered.

Gardiner dropped his gun as if it had suddenly been electrified, then stepped back away from it. His expression was a mixture of horror and unspeakable sadness.

"Why were you putting cigarettes into your rifle?" Joe asked.

Gardiner shook his head slowly, hot tears welling in his eyes. With a trembling hand, he patted his right shirt pocket. "Bullets," he said. Then he patted his left. "Marlboros. I guess I got them mixed up."

Joe grimaced. Watching Lamar Gardiner fall apart was not something he enjoyed. "I guess you did, Lamar."

"You aren't really going to arrest me, are you, Joe?" Gardiner said. "That would mean my career. Carrie might leave me and take my daughter if that happened."

Joe eased the hammer down on his Beretta and lowered it. Over the years he had certainly cited people he knew, but this was different. Gardiner was a public official, someone who made rules and regulations for the citizens of the valley from behind a big oak desk. He wasn't someone who broke the law, or, to Joe's knowledge, even bent it. Gardiner would lose his job, all right, although Joe didn't know his family situation well enough to predict what Carrie Gardiner would do. Lamar was a career federal bureaucrat, and highly paid compared to most residents of Saddlestring. He probably wasn't many years away from retirement and all of the benefits that went with it.

The bleating of the wounded calf, however, brought Joe back to the scene in the meadow. The calf, its spine also broken by a bullet, pawed the ground furiously, trying to stand. His back legs were splayed behind him on the grass like a frog's, and they wouldn't respond. Past him, steam rose from the ballooning, exposed entrails of a cow elk that had been gut-shot.

Joe leveled his gaze at Gardiner's unfocused eyes. "I'm arresting you for at least a half-dozen counts of wanton destruction, which carries a fine of a thousand dollars per animal as well as possible jail time, Lamar. You may also lose your equipment and all hunting privileges. There may be other charges as well. Given how I usually treat slob hunters like yourself, you're getting off real easy."

Gardiner burst into tears and dropped to his knees with a wail that chilled Joe to his soul.

And just like that, the snow began to fall. The barrage had begun.

WALKING THROUGH THE heavy snowfall in the meadow with his .270 rifle and his camera, Joe Pickett killed the calf with a point-blank head shot and moved on to the other wounded animals. Afterward, he photographed all of the carcasses. Lamar Gardiner, who now sat weeping in Joe's pickup, had shot seven elk: two bulls, three cows, and two calves.

Joe had locked Gardiner's rifle in the metal evidence box in the back of his truck, and he'd taken Gardiner's keys. In the bronze pickup were a half-empty bottle of tequila on the front seat and several empty Coors Light beer cans on the floor. The cab reeked of the sweet smell of tequila.

Although he had heard of worse incidents, this was as bad as anything Joe had personally witnessed. Usually when too many game animals were shot, there were several hunters shooting into a herd and none of them counting. Although it was technically illegal for a hunter to down any game other than his or her own, "party" hunting was fairly common. But for one man to open up indiscriminately on an entire herd ... this was remarkable and disturbing.

The carnage was sickening. The damage a high-powered rifle bullet could do when badly placed was awful.

Equally tragic, in Joe's mind, was the fact that there were too many animals for him to load into his pickup to take back to town. The elk averaged more than 400 pounds, and even with Gardiner's help, they could only load two of the carcasses at most into the back of his vehicle. That meant that most of them would be left for at least one night, and could be scavenged by predators. He hated to see so much meat—more than 2,000 pounds—go to waste when it could be delivered to the halfway house, the county jail for prisoners, or to people on the list of the county's needy families that his wife Marybeth had compiled. Despite the number of dead elk to take care of, the sudden onslaught of the storm meant one thing: *get off the mountain*.

By the time he got back to his pickup and Lamar Gardiner, Joe was seriously out of sorts.

"How bad is it?" Gardiner asked.

Joe glared. Gardiner seemed to be asking about something he wasn't directly involved in.

"Bad," Joe said, swinging into the cab of the pickup. Maxine, who had been with Joe and was near-delirious from sniffing the musky scents of the downed elk, jumped reluctantly into the back of the pickup, her regular seat occupied by Lamar Gardiner.

"Help me field-dress and load two of these elk," Joe said, starting the motor. "That'll take about an hour, if you'll help. Maybe less if you'll just stay the hell out of the way. Then I'm taking you in, Lamar."

Gardiner grunted as if he'd been punched in the stomach, and his head flopped back in despair.

JOE'S HANDS WERE stained red with elk blood and gore, and he scrubbed them with handfuls of snow to clean them. Even with Lamar's help, field-dressing the elk had taken over an hour. The snow was coming down even harder now. Joe climbed back in the truck and drove slowly out of the meadow toward the logging road Gardiner had used earlier. Joe tried to connect with the dispatcher on his radio, but again all he got was static. There was nothing for him to do but try again when he reached the summit.

Joe was acutely aware of his situation, and of how unique it was in law enforcement. Unlike the police or sheriff's department, who had squad cars or SUVs with back doors that wouldn't open from the inside and cage-wire separating prisoners in the backseat from the driver, Joe was forced to transport violators in his pickup, sitting right next to him in the passenger seat. Although Lamar hadn't threatened Joe in any way, Joe was very aware of his proximity within the cab of the truck.

"I just can't get over what I've done," Gardiner moaned. "It's like something took over my brain and turned me into some kind of a maniac. A mindless killer ... I've never done anything like that before in my *life*!"

Gardiner said he had hunted elk for sixteen years, first in Montana and then as long as he had been stationed in Wyoming. He whined that when he saw the herd of elk in broad daylight, something inside him just snapped. This was the first year he'd actually got one, and he guessed he was frustrated.

"Lamar, are you drunk?" Joe asked, trying to sound understanding. "I saw the bottle and the empty beer cans in your truck."

Gardiner thought about it before answering. "Maybe a little," he said. "But I'm sort of over that now. You know, I see elk all the time when I'm not hunting." It was a familiar complaint. "But when I'm hunting I can't ever seem to find the bastards."

"Until today," Joe said.

Gardiner rubbed his face and shook his head. "Until today," he echoed. "My life is ruined."

Maybe so, Joe thought. Lamar would certainly lose his job with the forest service, and Joe doubted he'd find another in town. If he did, it would most likely offer only a fraction of the salary and benefits that cushioned a longtime federal employee. On top of that, Joe knew Saddlestring's local newspaper and the breakfast coffee gossips would tear Lamar Gardiner apart. Never popular, he'd now be a pariah. Unlike other crimes and criminals, there was no patience—and virtually no compassion—for game violators. The elk herds in the Bighorns were considered a community resource, and their health was a matter of much concern and debate. A large number of local residents endured Twelve Sleep County's low-paying jobs and dead-end prospects primarily for the lifestyle it offered—which in large part meant the good hunting opportunities. Nothing provoked more vitriol than potential damage to the health and welfare of the big game habitat and population. While it was perfectly permissible—even encouraged—for hunters to harvest an elk each year, the stupid slaughter of seven of them by one man would be an absolute outrage. Especially when the guy at fault was the federal bureaucrat who was in charge of closing roads and denying grazing and logging leases.

Joe couldn't comprehend what could have come over Lamar Gardiner. If that kind of rage lurked under the surface of a Milquetoast like Gardiner, the mountains were a more dangerous place than Joe had ever imagined.

THE TWO-TRACK road to the summit was rugged and steep, and the buffeting waves of snow made it hard to see it clearly. The pickup fishtailed several times on the wet surfaces. *It might even be difficult to get back into the bowl tomorrow if the snow continued like this*, Joe thought.

They were grinding through a thick stand of trees when Joe remembered Maxine in the back with the elk. In his mirror, he could see her hunkered against the cab, snow packed into her coat and ice crystals around her mouth.

"You mind if we stop and let my dog in?" Joe asked, pulling over on a short level stretch that led to another steep climb.

Gardiner made a face as if *this* were the last straw, and sighed theatrically.

"Everything in my life is completely and totally destroyed," he cried. "So I might as well let a stinking wet dog sit on me."

Joe bit his tongue. Looking at Gardiner, with his tearstreaked face, bloodshot eyes, and chinless profile, he couldn't remember anyone quite so pathetic.

When Gardiner turned to open his door to let Maxine in, his knee accidentally hit the button for the glovebox and the latch opened, spilling the contents—binoculars,

gloves, old spare handcuffs, maps, mail—all over the floor. Maxine chose that moment to bound into the truck, tangling with Gardiner as he bent to pick up the debris.

Gardiner cried out and pushed the dog roughly into the center of the bench seat.

“Calm down,” Joe said, as much to Maxine as to Gardiner. Shivering, Maxine was ecstatic to be let in. Her wet-dog smell filled the cab.

“I’m soaked, my God!” Gardiner said, holding his hands out in front of him, his voice arcing into hysteria: “*Goddamn it, Goddamn YOU!* This is the worst day of my entire life!” His hands swooped like just-released birds and he screeched: “*I’m cracking up!*”

“CALM DOWN,” Joe commanded.

The human desperation that filled the cab of the pickup, Joe thought, contrasted bizarrely with the utter and complete silence of the mountains in the midst of a heavy snowfall.

For a moment, Joe felt sorry for Lamar Gardiner. That moment passed when Gardiner leaned across Maxine and snapped one of the handcuffs on Joe’s wrist and the other on the steering wheel in a movement as quick as it was unexpected. Then Gardiner threw open the passenger door, leaped out, and was still running with his arms flapping wildly about him when he vanished into the trees.

THE HANDCUFFS HAD been an old set that required a smaller type of key than the set he now used. Joe tore through the glove box, his floor console, and a half-dozen other places where he might have put the keys, but he couldn’t find them. Like every game warden he knew, Joe practically lived in his vehicle, and it was packed with equipment, clothing, tools, documents ... *stuff*. But not the right key for the old handcuffs.

It took twenty minutes and his Leatherman tool to pry the cap off the steering wheel and loosen the bolts that held it to the shaft. Maxine laid her wet head on his lap while he worked, looking sympathetic. Thick falling snow from the still-open passenger door settled on the edge of the bench seat and the floorboard. A hacksaw would have cut through the wheel, or through the chain of the cuffs and freed him, but he didn’t have one.

Seething, Joe strode through the timber in the storm. He carried his shotgun in his left hand while the steering wheel, still attached by the handcuffs, swung from his right.

“Lamar, damn you, you’re going to die in this storm if you don’t come back!” Joe hollered. The storm and the trees hushed his voice, and it sounded tinny and hollow even to him.

Joe stopped and listened. He thought he had heard the distant rumble of a motor a few minutes before, and possibly a truck door slamming. He guessed that whoever drove the vehicle was doing what he himself should be doing—retreating to a lower elevation. The sound may have come from beyond the stand of trees, but the noises were muffled, and Joe wasn’t sure.

Tracking down Lamar Gardiner should go quickly, he thought. He listened for branches snapping, or Gardiner moaning or sobbing. There was no sound but the storm.

He sized up the situation he was in, and cursed to himself. Lamar Gardiner wasn't the only one having a miserable day. Joe's prisoner had escaped, he was out of radio contact, it had already snowed six inches, there was only an hour until dark, and he had a steering wheel chained to his wrist.

He thought bitterly that when he found Gardiner he would have the choice of hauling him back to the truck or shooting him dead with the shotgun. For a moment, he leaned toward the latter.

"Lamar, YOU'RE GOING TO DIE OUT HERE IF YOU DON'T COME BACK!"

Nothing.

Gardiner's tracks weren't hard to follow, although they were filling with snow by the minute. Gardiner had taken a number of turns in the trees and had been stymied several times by deadfall, then changed direction. He didn't seem to have a destination in mind, other than away from Joe.

The footing was deteriorating. Under the layer of snow were crosshatched branches slick with moisture, and roots snatched at Joe's boots. Gardiner had fallen several times, leaving churned-up snow and earth.

If he's trying to get back to his own vehicle, *Joe thought*, he's going the wrong way. And what was the chance that he had a spare set of keys with him, anyway?

A snow-covered dead branch caught the steering wheel as Joe walked, jerking him to a stop. Again he cursed, and stepped back to pull the wheel free. Standing still, Joe wiped melting snow from his face and shook snow from his jacket and Stetson. He listened again, not believing that Gardiner had suddenly learned how to move stealthily through the woods while Joe crashed and grunted after him.

He looked down and saw how fresh Gardiner's tracks had become. Any minute now, he should be on him.

Joe racked the pump on the shotgun. That noise alone, he hoped, would at least make Gardiner *think*.

The trees became less dense, and Joe followed the track through them. He looked ahead, squinting against the snow. Gardiner's track zigzagged from tree to tree, then stopped at the trunk of a massive spruce. Joe couldn't see any more tracks.

"Okay, Lamar," he shouted. "You can come out now."

There was no movement from behind the tree, and no sound.

"If we're going to get to town before dark, we've got to leave NOW."

Snorting, Joe shouldered the shotgun and looped around the spruce so he could approach from the other side. As he shuffled through the snow, he could see one of Gardiner's shoulders, then a boot, from behind the trunk. Steam wafted from Gardiner's body, no doubt because he had worked up a sweat in the freezing cold.

"Come out NOW!" Joe ordered.

But Lamar Gardiner couldn't, and when Joe walked up to him he saw why.

Joe heard himself gasp, and the shotgun nearly dropped out of his hand.

Gardiner was held to the trunk of the tree by two arrows that had gone completely through his chest and into the wood, pinning him upright against the tree. His chin rested on his chest, and Joe could see blood spreading down from his neck. His throat had been cut. The snow around the tree had been tramped by boots.

The front of Gardiner's clothing was a sheet of gore. Blood pooled and steamed near Gardiner's feet, melting the snow in a heart-shaped pattern, the edges taking on the color of a raspberry sno-cone. Joe was overwhelmed by the pungent, salty smell of hot blood.

His heart now whumping in his chest, Joe slowly turned to face the direction where the murderer must have been, praying that the killer was not drawing back the bowstring with a bead on *him*.

Joe thought:

... His job is to make sure hunters are responsible
and that they obey the law. It can be a scary job, but
he's good at it. We have lived in Saddlestring for 3
and one-half years, and this is all he has done.
Sometimes, he saves animals from danger ...

2

SHERIDAN PICKETT, ELEVEN years old, slung her backpack over her shoulder and joined the stream of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders out through the double doors of Saddlestring Elementary School into the snowstorm. It was the last day of school before the two-week Christmas break. That, coupled with the storm, seemed to supercharge everyone, including the teachers, who had dealt with the students' growing euphoria by simply showing movies all day and watching the clock until the bell rang for dismissal at 3.30 P.M.

A dozen fifth-grade boys, her classmates, surged through the throng. They hooted and ran, then squatted in the playground to try and gather up the winter's first good snowballs to throw. But the snow was too fluffy for packing, so they kicked it at the other students instead. Sheridan did her best to ignore the boys, and she turned her head away when they kicked snow in her direction. It was snowing *hard*, and there was already several inches of it on the ground. The sky was so close and the snow so heavy that it would be difficult, she thought, to convince a stranger to the area that there really were mountains out there, and that the humped backs of the Bighorn mountain range really did dominate the western horizon. She guessed it was snowing even harder up there.

Free of the crowd, she turned on the sidewalk at the end of a chain-link fence and walked along the side of the redbrick building toward the other wing of the school. It was a part of the school building she knew well. Saddlestring Elementary was shaped like an H, with one wing consisting of kindergarten through third grade and the other fourth through sixth, two classes of each. The offices, gym, and lunchroom separated the two wings. Sheridan had moved into what was known as the “Big Wing” the previous year, and had once again been in the youngest group of the crowd. At the time, she thought fifth graders were especially obnoxious; they formed cliques designed solely, it seemed, to torment the fourth graders. Now she was in fifth grade, but she still thought it was true. Fifth grade, she thought, was just no good. There was no point to fifth grade. It was just *in the middle*.

The sixth graders, to Sheridan, seemed distant and mature, and had already, at least socially, left elementary school behind them. The sixth-grade girls were the tallest students in school, having shot up in height past all but a few of the boys, and some were wearing heavy makeup, and tight clothing to show off their budding breasts. The sixth-grade boys, meanwhile, had morphed into gangly, honking, ridiculous creatures who lived to snap bra straps and considered a fart the single funniest sound they had ever heard. Unfortunately, the fifth-grade boys were beginning to emulate them.

As she had done after school every afternoon since September, Sheridan went to meet her sisters when they emerged from the “Little Wing” and wait with them for the bus to arrive. She was torn when it came to her sisters and this particular duty. On one hand, she resented having to leave her friends and their conversations to make the daily trek to a part of the school building that she should have been free of forever. On the other, she felt protective of April and Lucy and wanted to be there if anyone picked on them. Twice this year she had chased away bullies—once male, once female—who were giving her two younger sisters a hard time. Six-year-old Lucy, especially, was a target because she was so ... *cute*. In both instances, Sheridan had chased the bullies away by setting her jaw, narrowing her eyes, and speaking calmly and deliberately, so low that she could barely be heard. She told them to “get away from my sisters or *you’ll find out what trouble really is*.”

The first time, Sheridan had been mildly surprised that it worked so well. Not that she wasn’t prepared to fight, if necessary, but she wasn’t sure she was a good fighter. When it worked the second time, she realized that she could project the determination and strength that she often felt inside, and that it unnerved the bullies. It also thrilled Lucy and April.

While she waited for the doors of the Little Wing to open, Sheridan tried to find a direction to stand where the snow wouldn’t hit her and melt on her glasses. Because the snowflakes were so large and light and swirly, she had no luck. Sheridan always hated her glasses, but especially in the winter. Snow smeared them, and they fogged when she went indoors. She planned to lobby her parents even harder for contact lenses. Her mom had said that once she was in junior high they could discuss it. But the seventh grade seemed like a long time to wait, and her parents seemed overly cautious

and more than a little old-fashioned. There were girls in her class who not only had contacts, but had asked for pierced navels for Christmas, for Pete's sake. Two girls had announced that their goals, upon entering seventh grade, were to get tattoos on their butts!

Sheridan searched the curb for her mother's car or her dad's pickup, hoping against hope that they would be there to pick her up, but they weren't there. Sometimes, her dad surprised them by appearing in his green Wyoming Fish and Game Department pickup truck. Although it was tight quarters inside with all three girls and Maxine, it was always fun to get a ride home with her dad, who would sometimes turn on his flashing lights or whoop the siren when they cleared Saddlestring and drove up the county road. Generally, he would have to go back to work after unloading them all at home. At least, she thought, her mom would be home from her part-time jobs at the library and the stables when the three girls got off of the bus. Arriving home in this storm, on the last day of school for the calendar year, had a special, magical appeal. She hoped her mom would be baking something.

The street where the bus parked beside Saddlestring Elementary was also marked as a secondary truck route through town. It shot straight through town, merged with Bighorn Road, and, eventually, curled into the mountains. So the heavy rumble of motors and vehicles on the street wasn't, in itself, unusual enough for Sheridan to look up.

But when she did, tilting her head to avoid falling snow, she recognized that this was something strange: a slow but impressive column of rag-tag vehicles.

They passed her one by one. There were battered recreational vehicles, old vans, trucks pulling camping trailers, and school buses that didn't look right because they were full of cardboard boxes. Four-wheel-drives pulled trailers piled high with crates, and the arms and legs of furniture poked out from water-beaded plastic tarps. It was as if a small neighborhood's residents had gathered their possessions before a coming threat and fled. Sheridan thought of the word she had learned in social studies. Yes, the caravan reminded her of *refugees*. But in Wyoming?

The license plates were from all over: Montana, Idaho, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, North Dakota, Georgia, Michigan, and more. This in itself was odd, especially in the winter, when most people avoided traveling long distances because of the weather. Many of the drivers seemed rough and woolly; the men had big beards and they were bundled in heavy coats. Some of them looked at her, others looked away. One bearded man rolled down his window while he passed and shouted something about "government schools." He didn't say it in a nice way, and she instinctively stepped back toward the building and the chain-link fence. There were more men than women in the vehicles, and Sheridan saw only a few children, their hands and faces pressed against the windows as they passed. It was then that she noticed Lucy and April. They were standing on each side of her in their coats, hats, and mittens, watching the transient convoy rumble by. Under her coat, Lucy wore a dress and shiny shoes, fashionable as

always. She was undeniably cute. April wore more practical corduroy bib overalls, the legs of which poked out from a hand-me-down parka that used to be Sheridan's.

Sheridan noticed the regal, dignified profile of a big man at the wheel of a newer-model Suburban. The man turned his head as he passed, and he smiled. For a moment, their eyes locked. There was something kindly about him, and Sheridan picked him as the leader of the group simply by the way he sat up straight. He had confidence.

"Where's our bus?" Lucy asked.

"Probably behind all of these cars and trucks," Sheridan answered, looking for the end of the procession to see if the familiar yellow bus was there. She couldn't see beyond the end of the block through the snow, and her wet glasses didn't help.

"Who are all these people?" Lucy asked again.

"I don't know," Sheridan said, reaching back for Lucy's and April's hands. "One of them shouted at me."

"If they yell again, let's go in and tell the principal!" April said with some force, gripping Sheridan's hand in its red cotton glove.

The three girls stood and waited while the parade slowly passed. They all had blond hair and green eyes. It would take a discerning observer to notice that April didn't share Lucy's and Sheridan's rounded features and big eyes. April's face was angular, and her demeanor stoic and inscrutable.

A battered blue Dodge pickup, the last of the caravan, swerved slightly and slowed as it approached. The back was piled high with bulky shapes covered by a soaked canvas tarp. Behind the pickup, Sheridan could see the red lights of the bus approaching, and Lucy pointed at it and yelled "Yay! Here it comes ..."

But the Dodge stopped in the street directly in front of the three girls. Sheridan watched as a water-streaked window rolled down. A tiny, pinched-faced woman looked out at them. Her hair was mousy brown and had blond streaks in it, and her eyes were piercing and flinty. A cigarette hung from her lips, and it bobbed as she rolled the window down all the way.

Sheridan stared back, scared, squeezing her sisters' hands tighter. The woman's look was meaningful, hard, and predatory. It took a moment for Sheridan to realize that the woman was not looking back at her, but lower and to the side. She was staring at April.

The truck started to roll again and the woman swung her head inside and barked something at the driver. Again, the pickup stopped. The school bus was now right behind it, crowding the blue Dodge, the bus driver gesturing at the stopped vehicle in front of him and the faces of children filling the windows to see what the problem was.

The woman continued to look at the three girls. Slowly, she reached up, pulled the cigarette from her mouth, and tapped the ashes into the snow. Her eyes were slits behind the curl of cigarette smoke.

The bus driver hit his horn, and the moment was over. The pickup lurched forward and the window rolled up. The woman had turned her head to yell at the driver. The

blue Dodge raced off to join the rest of the caravan, and the big school bus turned into the bus stop.

As the accordion doors wheezed open, Sheridan could hear the raucous voices of children from inside the bus, and feel a blast of warm air.

"That was creepy," Sheridan said, leading Lucy and April toward the door.

"I'm scared," Lucy whined, burrowing her face into Sheridan's coat. "That lady scared me."

April stood still, and Sheridan tugged on her arm, then turned. She found April pale and shaking, her eyes wide. Sheridan pulled harder, and April seemed to awaken and follow.

On the bus, April sat next to Sheridan instead of Lucy, which had never happened before. She stared straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of her. She was still shivering. The bus driver had finally stopped complaining about the "gol-danged gypsy hoboes" who had blocked his route all the way into town.

"Where in the heck is that group headed?" the driver asked no one in particular. "No one in their right mind camps in our mountains in the middle of the gol-danged *winter*."

"Are you cold?" Sheridan asked April. "You're still shaking."

April shook her head no. The bus pulled onto the road. Long windshield wipers, out of sync, painted rainbows across the front windows against the snow.

"Then what is it?" Sheridan asked, putting her arm around her foster sister. April didn't shrug the arm away, which was unusual in itself. Only recently had April started to show, or willingly receive, real affection.

"I think that was my mom," April whispered, looking up at Sheridan. "I mean, the mom who went away."

3

WITH THE STORM moving in, Joe found himself with no backup, no ability to communicate, and a dead district supervisor of the Twelve Sleep National Forest. Standing in the timber with Gardiner's body pinned to the tree and fresh snow quickly covering their tracks back to his pickup, Joe needed to make some decisions and he needed to make them now.

He had just returned from the stand of trees where he assumed the arrows had been fired, assured that the killer was gone. Enough snow had fallen that the tracks left by the killer, or killers, were already filling in.

Joe looked skyward into the swirl of falling snow. He wasn't sure what to do. *Of course* he should leave a crime scene undisturbed.

Suddenly, Gardiner's body shivered and a fresh hot gout of blood coursed down his chest between the arrows. Joe leaped back involuntarily, his eyes wide and his breath shallow. He pulled off a glove and felt Gardiner's neck for a pulse. Amazingly, there was

a tiny flutter beneath the cooling skin. Joe shook his head. He hadn't even considered, given the wounds, that the man could still be alive.

Joe tried to pull one of the arrows out. He grunted with effort, but it was stuck fast. He tried to break off the back end of the arrow, but the graphite shaft was too strong. Finally, he lifted Gardiner from beneath the arms, Joe's face pressing into Gardiner's bloody parka, and pulled him free, sliding his body up and over the arrows' fletching.

Fueled by adrenaline and desperation, Joe heaved the body over his shoulder, still dragging the steering wheel at the end of the handcuffs. He turned clumsily and started back toward the truck. Snow fell into his eyes as he walked, melting into rivulets that ran down his collar. He realized belatedly that moving Lamar this way might do more damage than good, but he didn't see an alternative.

Despite his own heavy breathing, Joe tried to listen for signs of life from Gardiner. Instead, as Joe staggered through a stand of shadowed saplings, he heard the sound of death. A deep fluttery rattle came from Gardiner's throat, and Joe felt—or thought he felt—a release of tension in the body. Now Joe had no doubt that Lamar Gardiner was dead.

Joe finally reached his truck on the road. A layer of snow had already covered the roof and hood. Leaning Gardiner's body against the front wheel with as much dignity as he could, Joe opened the passenger door. He dragged the body around the open door, then tried to lift it into the passenger seat, but Lamar's long legs had stiffened with cold and would not bend. The body maintained the posture it had assumed over Joe's shoulder, with Gardiner's outstretched arms parallel to his legs and his head turned slightly to the side, as if sniffing an armpit.

For a brief, horrifying second, Joe pictured himself as if from above, struggling to bend or break a body to make it fit into the cab of his truck while the heavy snow swirled around him.

Joe gave up, and dragged Gardiner's body to the back of the truck and unlatched the tailgate. To make room, he hauled one of the still-warm elk carcasses out of the back, and it fell heavily to the ground. Then he lifted Gardiner's body into the back of the truck next to the remaining carcass. Gardiner's eyes were wide open, his mouth pursed.

Joe's muscles quivered and burned with the effort. The steam of his sweat curled up from his collar, head, and cuffs. He closed the tailgate. He covered the body as well as he could with two blankets and a sleeping bag. He searched through the toolbox in the bed of his pickup. Finding a set of bolt cutters he wished he had thought of earlier, he severed the chain between the handcuffs. Then he reattached the steering wheel to the column. Finally, utterly exhausted, he sank back against the driver's seat and started the engine.

By the time he got to the summit, it was dark. He drove down the mountain with the body of Gardiner and the remaining elk carcass in the back of the pickup, stopping several times to scout the road ahead. In the back, blood and ice from both Gardiner's body and the elk had melted and mixed and had filled the channels of the truck bed.

The reddish liquid spilled from under the tailgate to spatter the snow each time he stopped.

As he drove, he thought of Mrs. Gardiner—how she might feel if her husband’s body had been simply left where it was for the night. The forest was home to coyotes, wolves, ravens, raptors, and other predators who could have found the body and fed on it. *This is best*, he thought, despite the gruesome circumstances of carrying the body out.

THE STORM OBSCURED the outside view as he labored to stay on the road. The swirling snow, lit up in his lights, was mesmerizing. Beyond the illuminated flakes, he could see nothing. With no posts or road markers to guide him, Joe turned off his lights, extinguishing the pinwheel of snowy fireworks, and drove by feel. When he felt the dry crunch of sagebrush under his tires, he would search for the road, saying a prayer each time his wheels found the two-track.

Normally, in the distance, he could have seen the lights of Saddlestring in the river valley, looking like sequins flung across black felt. But he could see nothing. He could hear the fluid sloshing against the cab now that he was driving downhill.

The situation he was in was maddening, and frightening. For the first time, he realized that he still wore one bloodsoaked glove and that his bare, thawing hand was red with dried gore.

“Damn you, Lamar,” he said aloud, “*damn* you.” Maxine looked to him with her condolences.

Now that he should be within radio range, Joe reached for the mike and tried to put together the words he would use to report what had happened.

O. R. “BUD” Barnum, Twelve Sleep County’s longtime sheriff and a man Joe had tangled with before, was livid when Joe brought Lamar’s body to the hospital.

As Joe backed into the lighted alcove of the hospital emergency entrance, Barnum stepped out of the well-lit lobby through the double doors and angrily tossed a half-smoked cigarette in the direction of the gutter. Two of his deputies, Mike Reed and Kyle McLanahan, followed Barnum. Joe and McLanahan went back four years, ever since McLanahan had carelessly wounded Joe with a poorly aimed shotgun blast.

“Tell me, Warden Pickett,” Barnum drawled, his voice hard, “why is it that every time someone gets murdered in my county, you’re right in the middle of it? And how are we supposed to investigate this murder when you’ve destroyed the crime scene by bringing Lamar down in the back of your truck?”

Barnum had obviously been rehearsing his opening remarks for the benefit of his deputies.

Joe climbed out and glared at Barnum, who was harshly lit by overhead alcove lights that made his aging face and deepset eyes look even more severe than they really were. Barnum glared back, and Joe saw Barnum’s eyes narrow at the sight of Joe’s appearance.

“He was alive when I found him,” Joe said. “He died as I carried him back to my truck.”

Barnum harrumphed, not apologizing, and shined his Maglite into the back of the truck. "I see a big elk," he said, and then the ring of the beam settled on the snowcovered blanket. Barnum reached in and peeled back the fabric.

"Jesus, somebody butchered him," Barnum said.

Joe nodded. The gaping wound on Lamar's neck looked savage and black in the harsh white light of Barnum's flashlight.

Deputy Reed told Joe that the county coroner was on his way, fighting through the snowdrifts on the road to the hospital.

Joe and the sheriff's team stepped aside as hospital orderlies pulled Gardiner's body from the back of Joe's pickup and strapped him onto a gurney. The four of them followed the gurney into the building, then waited in the admissions area. As the orderlies rolled the body down the hallway, McLanahan said it reminded him of the elk he had brought down from the mountains during hunting season.

"Seven-point royal," McLanahan boasted. "Just shy of the Boone and Crockett record book. We had to quarter him just to get him to fit into the back of the truck."

At this, Barnum turned, smirking, toward Joe. "Well, Warden Pickett," he said, "I'm surprised you didn't gut Lamar before you brought him in."

JOE DROVE TO the Gardiner house to break the news to Mrs. Carrie Gardiner. He had volunteered for the job, tough as it would be. He was grateful to get away from Barnum and McLanahan. Even in the cold, his cheeks burned. He stung from Barnum's comments, and fought his welling anger at them. As he drove, however, thoughts of what had happened that afternoon, and what he was going to tell Carrie, crowded out Barnum's words. He still couldn't believe Gardiner had used the handcuffs—or that Gardiner had gone on his shooting rampage in the first place. Or that he had been randomly murdered in the middle of a forest during a snowstorm.

As Joe pulled up in front of the Gardiner's house, the realization of what he was about to do hit him, and he sat in the truck for a moment, working up his courage before pushing himself out into the cold and up the front steps of the house. When Lamar Gardiner's daughter opened the door in her nightgown, Joe felt even worse than he had before.

"Is your mom home?" Joe asked, his voice stronger than he expected.

"You're Lucy's daddy, right?" the girl asked. She had sung next to Lucy at the Christmas play. Joe couldn't remember her name. He wished he were anywhere other than where he was at the moment, and felt ashamed of his wish.

Carrie Gardiner emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands in a towel. She was a heavy woman with an attractive, alert face and short dark hair.

"Let Mr. Pickett in and close the door, honey," she said. Joe stepped in and removed his Stetson, which was soaked through and heavy.

The door closed, and both Carrie Gardiner and her daughter waited for him to speak. The fact that he didn't, but simply looked at Mrs. Gardiner, said enough.

Her eyes moistened and flashed.

"Go watch TV, honey," she told her daughter in a voice that would be obeyed.

Joe waited until the girl had left the room and took a deep breath. "There is no way to tell you this other than to tell it straight out," he said. "Your husband Lamar was murdered in the mountains while he was elk hunting. I found his body and brought him down."

Carrie Gardiner looked both stunned and angry, and she almost lost her balance. Joe stepped forward to steady her but she refused his hand. She let out a yelp, and threw the hand towel she was clutching at his boots.

"I'm so sorry," Joe said.

She waved him away, excusing him as the bearer of bad news. Then she turned and walked back into the kitchen.

"Please call me or my wife if there is anything we can do at all," Joe said after her.

She came back into the living room.

"How did he die?"

"Somebody shot two arrows into him." He chose not to mention the cut throat.

"Do you know who did it?" she asked.

"Not yet," Joe admitted.

"Will you find him?"

"I think so. The sheriff is in charge."

"Is that Lamar's blood on you?"

"Yes," Joe said, flushing, suddenly aware that his coat was blackened with blood, and profoundly angry with himself for not realizing it earlier. He should have taken it off in the truck before he knocked on the door. "I'm sorry," he said. "I ..."

She shook him off, bent and picked up the towel, and touched her face with it.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," she said, and again walked away. She didn't elaborate, and Joe didn't follow up.

Joe let himself out and stood on the porch for a moment. Inside, a wail began and grew louder and louder. It was awful.

AT THE SHERIFF'S office. Barnum was already giving assignments for the coming day. Joe stood uncomfortably in the back of the briefing room. He had been asked to give a statement earlier, but had insisted on going to the Gardiner house first, promising to return later. Barnum told his deputies to forget whatever they were doing and to focus entirely on Lamar Gardiner's murder. He explained that he'd already called the state Division of Criminal Investigation, and notified the Forest Service. As soon as they could, he said, they would follow Joe Pickett to the crime scene to retrieve the arrows and any other kind of evidence they could find. Gardiner's staff would be questioned, as would his wife and friends, "... if he had any." This brought a muffled guffaw from someone. Gardiner's office would be searched, with the goal of gathering credible evidence of threats or conflicts. The records and sign-in sheets of the public meetings Gardiner had recently held about road closures, lease extensions, and other access issues would be gathered. Barnum wanted the names of everyone in Twelve Sleep Valley who had confronted Gardiner or expressed disagreement over public-policy

decisions that had been made by the forest service. Joe had attended the meetings, and he knew that Barnum was likely to end up with a lot more names than he wanted.

"I want this investigation to proceed quickly and I want somebody rotting in my jail by Christmas," Barnum barked. "Pickett, we need your statement."

The deputies in the room, many wearing the sloppy civilian clothes they'd had on when they were abruptly called into the department, turned and looked at Joe, seeing him back there for the first time.

"You're a damn mess," one of them said, and somebody else laughed.

IT WAS 2.30 in the morning before Joe got home, and he drove by his house twice before seeing the yellow smudge of the porch light that looked like an erasure in the storm. The wind had come up, turning a heavy but gentle snowfall into a maelstrom.

After bucking a three-foot snowdrift that blocked the driveway and sent him fish-tailing toward the garage, he turned off the motor and woke Maxine. The Labrador bounded beside him through the front lawn, leaping over drifts. Joe didn't have the energy to hop, so he plowed through, feeling snow pack into the cuffs of his Wranglers and into his boot-tops for the second time that day. Snow swirled around the porch light like smoke. Christmas decorations, made by the girls in school, were taped inside the front window, and Joe smiled at the Santa drawing that Sheridan had done the previous year. Unnoticed by most, Sheridan had added a familiar patch, with a pronghorn antelope profile and the words WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT, to Santa's red coat-sleeve.

The small house had two storeys, with two small bedrooms, a detached garage, and a loafing shed barn in the back. Forty years old, the house had been the home and office of the two previous game wardens and their families. Across Bighorn Road was Wolf Mountain, which dominated the view. In back, beyond rugged sandstone foothills, was the northwest slope of the Bighorn range. He could see none of it in the dark and through the snow.

The people he met in the field were mostly hunters, fishermen, ranchers, poachers, environmentalists, and others Joe lumped into a category he called "outdoorsmen"—but his home was filled with four blond, green-eyed females. Females who were verbal. Females who were emotional. He often smiled and thought of this place as a "House of Feelings." If the expression of feelings produced a physical by-product, Joe could imagine his house filled with hundreds of gallons of an emotional goo that sometimes spilled out of the windows and doors and seeped from the vents. But his family was everything to him; this place was his refuge, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

He shut out the storm as he closed the door, and he clumsily peeled off his first layer of clothing in the tiny mud room. He hung his bloody parka on a peg and unbuttoned his green wool Filson vest. He stamped packed snow out of his trouser legs, then left the Sorel Pac boots on a bench to dry. His wet black Stetson went crown down on an upper shelf.

Sighing, wondering why Marybeth still had her light on, he entered the living room in the dark, banged his shin on the foot of the fold-out couch bed, and fell on top of his sleeping mother-in-law. She woke up thrashing, and Joe scrambled to his feet.

"What are you *doing*, Joe?" she asked, her tone accusatory.

Up the stairs, another light came on. Marybeth had heard the commotion, Joe hoped.

"I didn't want to turn on a light," Joe answered, sheepishly. Not adding: *I forgot Marybeth told me you'd be here.*

When Joe had called home earlier from the sheriff's office, Marybeth had said that her mother, Missy Vankueren, might be staying with them tonight. Apparently, Missy had been flying to Jackson Hole to go skiing with her third husband, a wealthy and politically connected Arizona real estate baron, when the weather diverted the plane to Billings. So Missy had rented a car, driven the two hours to Saddlestring, and arrived just as the storm moved in. Mr. Vankueren was to meet her in a couple of days, after some important meetings in Phoenix. And now Joe Pickett, the man her favorite daughter had chosen despite Marybeth's incredible potential and promise, had just awakened her in a half-dressed state by falling on her bed.

"Hi, Missy," Joe grunted. "Nice to see you." Missy clutched her blankets to her chin and peered over them at him. Without the expertly applied mask of makeup she usually wore, she looked all of her sixty-two years. Joe knew she hated being seen when she wasn't prepped and ready.

Marybeth came down the stairs tying her bathrobe, instantly sized up the situation between her mother and her husband, and forced a smile. Joe wanted to mouth *help me, save me*, but he didn't dare for fear Missy would see. The small front room was filled not only with the length of the couch bed but the seasonal addition of the Christmas tree that stood silent and dark in the corner. Floor space was at a minimum, and Joe had to scuttle sidewise like a crab to cross the room.

"Sorry, Mom," Marybeth said, tucking the disturbed sheet corners back under the mattress. "Joe's had a very bad day."

"And I'm having a bad night," Missy said, averting her gaze from Joe. "I'm supposed to be in our condo in Jackson Hole."

"But instead you're on our crummy couch bed in our lousy living room," Joe finished for her, deadpan as he headed for the stairs. Marybeth shot him a look over her shoulder as she finished re-tucking her mother. He listened as Marybeth calmed Missy, told her that it was still snowing, asked her if she was warm enough, asked her ... something else, which he didn't pay attention to.

Missy Vankueren was the last person Joe wanted to see in his home right now. The day had been a nightmare. *Now this*, he thought, as he slowly climbed the stairs.

MARYBETH LOOKED TIRED and worn out, but she had listened in wide-eyed silence as he told her everything. When he came to how he had found the body, she had pressed her hands to her mouth and winced.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked in a whisper when he was through talking.

“Yes,” Joe said, but really wasn’t sure about that.

Marybeth held him and looked him over. “I think you should take a shower, Joe.” He nodded dumbly.

In the shower, he wanted to see blood wash down the drain so he could feel clean. But the blood from Lamar Gardiner had been on his coat and clothes, and it had not seeped through to his skin.

JOE DRIED AND slid into bed next to Marybeth. Her bed lamp was still on, and he asked her about it.

“It’s been a bad day for the girls and me as well,” she said, turning to him. “Jeannie Keeley is back in town.”

Joe ran a hand over his face and rubbed his eyes. Now he understood why Marybeth looked so drawn and tired. He had originally thought she had been worried about him, or because of the unexpected visit by her mother. It was those things, he realized, and more.

Marybeth told Joe what the girls had seen after school—the procession of vehicles and particularly the one that stopped. She said April had described the woman who stared as “the mom who went away.”

“Joe, why do you think Jeannie Keeley is back?” Marybeth asked.

Joe shook his head, not knowing. He was too tired to think clearly.

Waves of exhaustion washed over him, pounding at him. He moaned at the possibility of further delays, or a fight for April.

The hard fact was that April’s situation was precarious. Although she had been with them for four years and was as much a daughter as Sheridan or Lucy, April was not legally theirs.

April’s biological mother, Jeannie Keeley, had dropped two things off at the local branch bank when she left town after her husband Ote had been murdered: her house keys and April. Marybeth had heard about it and immediately offered to keep the girl until the issue could be resolved.

Eventually, they had petitioned the court for consent to adopt, and Judge Hardy Pennock had started proceedings to terminate Jeannie Keeley’s parental rights. But then Pennock had been hospitalized with a brain tumor, and the proceedings languished in his absence. Finally, the matter had gone to another court—but the original paperwork had been lost. Another delay had resulted when the new court received a letter from Jeannie Keeley saying she was coming back for her daughter. But that was six months ago now, in the summer, and Jeannie Keeley had never come. A technicality in Wyoming law stated that parental rights couldn’t be terminated if there had been contact from the birth parent at least once a year, and the letter qualified, which again delayed the proceedings. Judge Pennock was now back on the bench, but hopelessly backlogged. Joe had tried to expedite the case, with some success, but the rights hearing had not yet been held.

The legal proceedings had been frustrating and endless, but Marybeth and Joe had remained optimistic that a resolution would come.

"As soon as you can, you need to look into this," Marybeth said.

"I will," Joe said.

"That woman scares me, Joe. If she's back, we've got real trouble on our hands."

"That we do," he said, and put his arm around her, pulling her close.

"I've got to lead the sheriff to the crime scene first thing tomorrow," Joe said. "Then I'm sure they'll want to get rid of me, so I should have some time."

"Wherever it stands, when school starts back up, we've got to try and pick up the girls ourselves after school," Marybeth said, her voice rising. "I don't want to take the chance that something will happen to April."

Joe nodded, trying to fight sleep. He knew Marybeth needed him, that she'd been worried about this all afternoon with no one to talk to about it. He wanted to say something that would make her feel better, that would calm her, but his tongue felt thick and heavy and his eyes kept dropping shut. He felt immensely guilty about not being able to emerge from the problems and horrors of the afternoon and night he had just experienced, because he knew that her concerns were real. But he was slipping away, into unconsciousness.

TWO HOURS LATER, Joe awoke sweating. He had dreamed that he was back in the timber, suffering under the weight of Lamar Gardiner. The wounded man's coat had been caught in the branch of a tree, and Joe had swung his shoulders to tear it free. A spatter of bright red blood had flecked the snow ...

He rose quietly and went to the window. An icy breeze flowed under the sill—he would need to pack it with insulation tomorrow, he thought.

It was still dark, still snowing, and the wind was still blowing.

He turned and looked at Marybeth, who had finally fallen asleep under the quilts. Then he tiptoed downstairs and looked in on Sheridan—Maxine was asleep at the foot of her bed—and on Lucy and April, who shared a bunk bed. He could not see their faces, only tangles of blond hair. After gazing at them for a moment, he returned to his bedroom.

He stared out at the storm, mesmerized. The wind had increased. There was now a bare spot on the front lawn where the brown grass showed through. It was never just the snow in Wyoming that caused problems. It was always the snow plus the wind that sculpted it into something hard, shiny, and impassible. A foot-high stream of blowing snow, like cold smoke, coursed across the ground.

It struck Joe as he stood there, the floor cold beneath his bare feet, that Lamar's murder had an oddly personal feel to it. Saddlestring was not a violent place, and murders were almost unheard of, yet someone had hated Lamar Gardiner so much that he not only shot him with arrows but slashed his throat open, bleeding him like a wounded deer.

Joe wondered if the killer was still out there, caught in the storm. Or if the killer, like himself, had made it off of the mountain. And he wondered if the killer was also standing at a window somewhere, his gut churning, his mind replaying what had happened that day, as the storm pummeled Twelve Sleep Valley.

JOE WAS BEING gently shaken awake by Marybeth, who held a telephone out to him.

"It's Sheriff Barnum," she said, cupping her hand over the phone. He sat up quickly in bed, rubbed his face hard, and looked around. Marybeth was fully dressed. The curtains were drawn, but on the ceiling and walls were blooms of muted light. The digital clock radio showed that it was 8:20 A.M. *That's impossible*, Joe thought.

His immediate fear was that Barnum had assembled his deputies, the state Division of Criminal Investigation unit, and the county emergency team, and that they were in town—all waiting for him.

Marybeth read the panic in his eyes, and shook her head. "Don't worry," she said, her hand still covering the telephone. It was his cellphone, instead of the handset to the telephone near the bed. "You won't believe the snow outside."

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier?" Joe asked, groggy. "I can't believe I slept this late."

"You needed the rest. And I don't think anybody is going anywhere this morning."

Joe took the phone while he swung out of bed. "Sheriff?"

Barnum's voice was gravelly. "Have you looked outside?"

"I'm doing that now," Joe said, opening the curtains. The blast of pure white light temporarily blinded him. For a moment, he got a sense of vertigo. There was no sky, no grass, no trees or mountains. Only opaque white.

"I can't even see the road," Joe marveled.

"Neither can the snowplow drivers," Barnum grumbled. "We've got thirty-six inches of snow and the wind's supposed to hit fifty miles per hour this afternoon. Everything's closed—the highways, the airport, even our office officially. The phone lines are down again, and half the county doesn't have power. The DCI boys started up here in a state plane and made it as far as Casper before they turned back. The storm was right on their ass, so they had to outrun it and ended up somewhere in Colorado."

Joe squinted. He could make out ghostly shapes of his pickup, and a snow-covered pine in his yard below.

"So what's the plan?" Joe asked.

"Shit, I don't know," Barnum sighed. "I'm trying to get ahold of a Forest Service Sno-cat to take up there. But I can't reach anybody who can find the keys."

Joe thought briefly about using snowmobiles but it was too far.

"Keep your cellphone on," Barnum barked. "As soon as we can move around here we'll try to assemble and get up there. You'll have to get to town when that happens so you can show us where Gardiner got rubbed out."

"I'll chain up all four tires," Joe said, ignoring the "rubbed out" comment. "I'll be ready when you are."

"You've got power, then?" Barnum asked.

"For now."

"Keep that cellphone charged," Barnum said again. "Who knows when they'll get the lines fixed."

"Sheriff?" Joe asked, before Barnum hung up.

"What?"

"Good thing I brought him down, wouldn't you say?" Joe turned to Marybeth, who had a satisfied look on her face.

Barnum hung up.

"Are you up for making pancakes?" Marybeth asked. "The girls want to know."

Joe looked again out of the window. What little he could see looked like a freeze-frame of a storm at sea, with bucking waves of snow and ground blizzards instead of spray.

"You bet," Joe said, smiling. "I'm not going anywhere for a while."

"The girls will like that."

Then he remembered: "Your mother."

"What about her?"

"Oh," Joe moaned, "nothing."

JOE STOOD AT the window after he dressed, blinking at the whiteout, a combination of feeling the frustration and dread churning within him. His thoughts from the night before still haunted him. He fought a wave of nausea as he recalled the brutality of Lamar's murder. The fact that the murderer had sliced Gardiner's throat—and while Gardiner was still alive and pinned to the tree—was particularly hideous. Whoever had done it was unimaginably brutal, and Joe couldn't help but think that there wasn't any randomness about it. He assumed that the killer had known Gardiner, or at least known who and what he represented. The longer it took to begin the investigation, the more time the murderer would have to get rid of evidence, wipe out his tracks, and build his alibi. The crime scene itself was inaccessible, with potential evidence—hair, fibers, blood—being pummeled and scattered by ice and wind.

Joe felt that, unlike hunters, who often policed themselves, whoever had killed Lamar Gardiner was not wracked with guilt. The killer was likely local, possibly someone Joe knew, possibly someone who would not stop with killing Lamar Gardiner if he felt threatened. Someone without a conscience.

And the murderer was out there, shielded by the fury of the storm.

BEFORE BREAKFAST, JOE retreated to his office to type up the report on Lamar's murder for his supervisor, Terry Crump. He wouldn't be able to e-mail it to him until the phones were back up, but he wanted to get the details down while they were still fresh in his mind. As a game warden, one of only fifty-five in the entire state of Wyoming, Joe Pickett had unique duties and obligations. Within his district, he worked virtually alone. His office was in a small anteroom off the living room in his house, and he had no administrative or secretarial staff. Marybeth, and sometimes Sheridan, took messages and served as unpaid assistants. The job of a Wyoming game warden was supposed to consist of one-third public contact, one-third harvest collection, and one-third law enforcement—with no area to exceed 35 percent. Supposedly,

the percentages would balance out over the year. The hours ranged from 173 to 259 per month. Joe was paid \$32,000 per year in salary by the state of Wyoming and provided with housing and a vehicle. He was supervised, sort of, by District Supervisor Terry Crump, a game warden as well, who was 250 miles away in Cody. Crump's supervision consisted of an occasional telephone call or radio dispatch, usually after Joe had sent in his monthly report via e-mail attachment. Generally, Terry simply wanted to bullshit or trade departmental gossip. He had never called Joe to task, even when Joe's activities had enraged the bureaucrats in Cheyenne, where the headquarters were. Although Joe sometimes worked in tandem with the county sheriff's office or the Saddlestring police department, and even with federal agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the BATF, and the FBI, he was almost always on his own. He liked the autonomy, but there were problems inherent in it that came up when he encountered situations like he had the day before.

Joe was just finishing up his report when he looked up to see Sheridan, April, and Lucy crowding the door. They were still wearing their pajamas and slippers.

"If we don't eat breakfast soon, I think I shall faint," Lucy said dramatically.

BREAKFAST ACTUALLY WENT quite well, the euphoric mood of his children carrying them all through it. Joe flipped pancakes to them from the stove, and they caught them on their upraised plates while squealing. For Marybeth and Missy Vankueren, Joe delivered pancakes to the table. Missy picked at her breakfast, foregoing both bacon and syrup.

"Do you have any idea how many fat grams there are in these pancakes?" she asked Joe. The three girls looked up, waiting for his answer. He didn't disappoint them.

"Ten thousand apiece?" Joe speculated. Even Marybeth laughed at that. Missy made a dismissive face.

For his girls, a storm that forced all the adults to stay inside, play with them, and cook for them constantly was the best of all possible worlds. With the mood created by the Christmas decorations and the wrapped packages under the tree—as well as the unexpected visit by their grand-mother—there was simply no better time. Sheridan said she loved storms. She declared that the worse the storm, the better she liked it.

As the girls ate, Marybeth did an inventory of her cupboards and the refrigerator, and declared with obvious relief that they had enough food and milk to last for several days without a trip to the grocery store. Joe added that the freezer in the garage was filled with elk and pronghorn antelope steaks, roasts, and burger.

"We can't just eat red meat!" Missy protested.

"Why not?" Joe asked. The three girls laughed.

"He has a captive audience," Marybeth observed to her mother.

"I see that," Missy said, sipping her coffee

ALTHOUGH IT LOOKED impossible, Joe wanted to see if he could get his pickup running and free of the drifts. Wearing insulated Carhartt coveralls, a knit cap, face-mask, and knee-high boots, Joe turned away from the wind and let the snow hammer his back. Despite the heavy clothing, the pure relentless ferocity of the storm chilled

him. He'd had to dig into a drift that had formed around his pickup to find the tires before he could even start putting the chains on them. It had taken an hour on his hands and knees to slide the chains over the rear tires and secure them, and the icy steel links had frozen his fingers through his thick gloves. Two tires down, two to go. He kicked through the heavy snow until he found his already covered shovel.

As he dug out the front wheels, he looked up at the house. Lucy and April were watching him through the window. They were still in their pajamas, and both had candy canes stuck jauntily in their mouths like cigars. They waved, and Joe waved back. They watched him for a while as he put the remaining snow chains on. When he finally stood up and knocked packed snow from his clothes, they were gone.

Joe found himself staring at the window even though they were no longer there, specifically the spot where April had been.

April had appeared after Marybeth had been shot in the stomach, and their own unborn baby lost. There would be no more children. If Jeannie Keeley was in town and wanted April, there would be a battle. Marybeth wouldn't stand idly by. Neither would Joe.

SHAKING HIS THOUGHTS aside, Joe climbed into his pickup and started the engine, slamming the truck forward, then back, letting the chains bite into the drifts. Gradually, he was able to maneuver around so that the truck faced the road. In an emergency, it would be easier to go forward than to try to back out. That was as much as he could do for a while, he thought, until the road was cleared. No one was going anywhere today.

Lumbering through the drifts like a monster, he fought his way back to the house.

Inside, after shedding his outer clothing, he found Marybeth, Missy, and the three girls crammed into the small room that housed the washer and dryer.

"Dad, you've got to see this," Sheridan called out.

They parted to let him look.

The dryer's door was open, and snow filled every inch of it. Apparently, the swirling winds outside had forced snow up through the outside wall vent, packing it inside.

"This is amazing," Marybeth laughed.

Joe smiled—it would be a day of playing board games, baking cookies, and unusual proximity in their small house. As much as he felt he should get back out to the mountain, he simply couldn't. He listened on his radio as one of Barnum's deputies tried to reach the mountain by snowmobile, only to get lost in the blizzard, clip a tree, and turn back. All Joe could do was to stay in contact with dispatch and wait out the storm like everyone else.

He finally resolved to embrace his immobility, and he changed from his uniform to sweat clothes and made chili for everyone for dinner. He cubed elk steaks to brown with diced onions and peppers in his cast-iron pot. As the chili simmered, he added more ingredients and the aroma of tomato sauce, garlic, and meat filled the house. It was a good smell. Cooking also meant he got to stay in the kitchen while Marybeth and Missy visited in the living room, which was fine with all of them.

THAT EVENING, THE girls cleared the chili bowls and silverware from the table while Missy tried in vain to call her husband on her cellphone.

"He never leaves it on," she said angrily as she sat down at the table. "He only turns it on when *he* wants to tell somebody something." Her tone was bitter, and Joe exchanged glances with Marybeth. Neither really knew Missy's third husband well, but there had been rumors lately about the possibility of his indictment for land-use fraud. Missy had said little of this, except that the impending "issues" were one of the reasons they'd wanted to get away to their condominium in Jackson Hole in the first place.

"I guess you're stuck with us," Sheridan said as she opened the box of a Monopoly game.

Missy patted her on the head. "I *enjoy* being with you, darling." Sheridan rolled her eyes as soon as Missy looked away.

"Sit with me, Princess," Missy directed Lucy, who gladly did as she was told. Missy liked Lucy's sense of style, and Lucy liked Missy's huge traveling bag of makeup and hairspray.

After a protest from April, Sheridan returned to the table with Pictionary instead of Monopoly. They divided up into teams. Joe was on Missy's team, which meant that he gave himself permission to have another bourbon.

During the game, while the sand ran through the oneminute timer and the designated "artists" drew frantic sketches on pads for their teammates to guess at, Joe found himself paying special attention to April. She was the most determined artist on his team, and she drew very deliberately. When her pictures were complete, she was deliriously happy with herself, and she beamed. Joe had noticed before that April didn't have the lively features and sparkling eyes that Sheridan and Lucy had. Marybeth had said that "the sparkle got beaten out of April early on." He remembered that phrase as he watched her now.

After a round that Joe and Missy won by correctly identifying April's drawing, April whooped and punched the air with pure joy.

"I like it that you're getting more normal," Lucy said to April. "You're not so weird anymore."

"Lucy!" Marybeth said, alarmed.

But April didn't explode and start swinging, or withdraw and freeze her face into a pinched glare, as she had in the past. Instead, she smiled and reached across the table and mussed Lucy's hair. Both girls laughed. Joe thought April seemed flattered. Sheridan beamed with relief, her eyes sliding from her mom to her dad.

During the second game, with Joe about to draw and Sheridan poised to flip the timer over, Joe suddenly looked up. "*Listen*," he said.

"What?" Missy asked, alarmed.

"Do you hear that?"

"I don't hear anything."

"That's right," Joe said. "The wind stopped."

“Too bad,” Sheridan chimed, turning the timer over and setting it down. “This is fun.”

“Sherry’s right,” Lucy smiled, her eyes wide. “Storms are good for our family.”

Joe smiled and sipped his bourbon, enjoying the moment despite the ticking of the timer. April tugged on his sleeve, her face urgent.

“*DRAW SOMETHING!*” April pleaded. “We’re running out of time!”

5

IT WAS TWO days before they could get back onto the mountain, and they needed three borrowed Sno-cats to do it. The meeting point was at a clearing outside Winchester where the road ascended into the mountains. There were more people in the assemblage than Joe expected.

After the weather delay, the DCI agents had arrived in their state plane at the Twelve Sleep County Airport with two additional passengers, a U.S. Forest Service official and a female journalist. The Forest Service official had also brought two small dogs with her, a Yorkie on a leash and a cocker spaniel that she clutched to her breast. Joe noticed an attractive, dark-haired woman with the official who seemed to be keeping a close eye on the proceedings. A lone *Saddlestring Roundup* reporter, a twenty-three-year-old blonde wearing a Wyoming Cowboys basketball parka and driving a ten-year-old pickup, approached the gathering carrying a notebook opened to a blank page.

The Forest Service official intercepted the reporter in mid-stride, and an interview was begun. Joe was helping a deputy hook his snowmobile trailer to the back of a Sno-cat, and he was close enough to overhear their exchange.

“My name is Melinda Strickland,” the Forest Service official said. She spelled her name for the benefit of the reporter.

“I’m here on special assignment on behalf of the U.S. Forest Service as the head of a special investigative team that needs to remain classified and off of the record for the time being.”

“Why?” the reporter asked vacantly. Joe wondered the same thing. The Forest Service was not a law enforcement agency, although individual rangers had some regulatory responsibility within their jurisdiction, and while Joe assumed it was possible, he had never before heard of a “special investigative team” sent by the agency. He thought it more likely that the agency would ask the FBI to intervene.

“You’ll be told in due course, if we confirm some of our suspicions,” Strickland said.

The reporter obviously didn’t know how to react. The woman sounded so ... official.

The Yorkie pulled at Melinda Strickland’s pant cuff, but was ignored.

“You’ll be the first to get the information when we decide to release it, but if you burn me by printing something before that, I’ll have your ass,” Melinda Strickland said, her eyes narrowing.

This got Joe's attention, and he watched the reporter nod meekly. The brittle edge in Strickland's voice seemed out of place and unnecessarily severe.

What, *Joe asked himself*, is she implying, beyond the murder itself? What suspicions is she referring to?

The Yorkie, frustrated, growled and pulled on Strickland's pant leg, nearly knocking her off balance. She wheeled, and Joe watched with alarmed interest as she drew back a foot, seemingly about to kick the dog hard in the ribs. But something stopped her, and she quickly looked up to see Joe staring at her. To the side, the Yorkie yipped and cowered.

"That dog is going to get seriously hurt if he keeps it up," Melinda Strickland said through gritted teeth. "I picked him up at the shelter to be a companion for Bette, here," nodding at the cocker spaniel she held in her arms. "But it *isn't* working out."

Joe said nothing. Strickland turned from him back to the reporter, whom she dismissed with a few short words. Joe watched Strickland turn and look at the idling Sno-cats as if nothing had just happened.

Joe was taken aback. She had restrained herself at the last possible moment, but it was obvious to him by the Yorkie's reaction that he'd been kicked before. The incident left Joe feeling unsettled.

The DCI agent-in-charge, Bob Brazille, turned away from another conversation, and walked up to Joe. Brazille had an alcoholic's mottled face and heavy-lidded eyes, and he made the introductions.

"Melinda Strickland, this is Game Warden Joe Pickett and Sheriff Bud Barnum."

With a chilly smile, Melinda Strickland stepped forward and extended a gloved hand from under the belly of the cocker spaniel. Barnum shook it; Joe followed suit, but more warily. He expected her to mention the Yorkie again, but she just smiled.

Melinda Strickland had wide hips, medium-length copper-colored hair, a long sharp nose, and dark eyes that made Joe think of a raven's. Wrinkles framed the corners of her mouth like parchment parentheses. She smiled with her mouth only—the eyes remained dark. Her manner of speaking contained lilt and chuckle, as if she were leading up to a punch line that didn't come.

"I understand there are some folks up here who aren't real crazy about the Forest Service, or the U.S. government, you know?" she said, as if sharing common knowledge. "And that Lamar Gardiner wasn't well liked because he strictly interpreted Forest Service policies."

"I doubt that was the reason," Joe answered, puzzled.

"I've been *hammered* by calls from people who want to know what's going on up here," she said, as if Joe had just agreed with her assessment.

"We need to get going," Barnum interjected, and for once Joe was grateful for the sheriff's brusqueness.

IN A RUMBLING, clanking, slow-motion procession, the tracked vehicles ascended on the still-unplowed road. Joe Pickett was in the one in front, sitting next to the driver, with two DCI agents wedged into the backseat. Joe's snowmobile and trailer-

sled were hitched to the back of the Sno-cat. Breathing diesel fumes and keeping the windows clear of fogging with a towel, Joe pointed out the turnoff from the highway into the forest, which had been transformed by the heavy snowfall. In the second Sno-cat were the sheriff, his two deputies, and a photographer from the Saddlestring police department. The third vehicle contained Melinda Strickland, the attractive journalist shadowing her, two more DCI agents, and Melinda Strickland's two dogs.

The sky was sharply blue and the sun's reflection off the cover of snow was blinding. They passed from sun into shadow and into sun again as they approached the Wolf Mountain bowl. Snow ghosts—pines so packed and coated with snow that they looked like frozen spectral beings—stood sentry as the three battered, spewing vehicles passed below.

"So he grabbed your handcuffs and locked you to the steering wheel, huh?" Bob Brazille asked Joe from the back. Brazille was overdressed in a mammoth down parka, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"Yup," Joe answered over the engine noise. His voice was flat.

"That son-of-a-bitch, huh?" Brazille said.

"Turn here," Joe told the driver.

"The Feds are hot about this, judging by the temperament of that Strickland woman," Brazille continued, shouting over the roar of the engine. "Governor Budd got a call from some Washington mucky-muck. That's probably why Strickland is here. They don't like it when a federal employee gets whacked. The governor showed special interest in you, I was told. How does he know you?"

Joe felt a hot, embarrassed flush spread up his neck. "I arrested him a few years ago for fishing without a license."

Brazille's eyes widened, and he shook his head from side to side. "So you're the one, huh? I heard about that."

Joe nodded and looked away.

After a half-hour of silence, Brazille tapped Joe on his shoulder to get his attention.

"That info-babe with Strickland is a looker, eh?" Joe agreed, although he refused to admit that to Brazille. The journalist with Melinda Strickland was tall and thin and dressed in chic ski-wear: black tights, faux fur-lined boots, and a puffy yellow parka. She had short black hair, green eyes, very white skin, high cheekbones, and bee-stung red lips.

"What did you say her name was?" Joe asked.

"Elle Broxton-Howard," Brazille said, using a mocking British accent. "She's actually American, but she's lived in London for fifteen years or so. Some stuffy Brit magazine has her writing a story on Melinda Strickland."

"What's so significant about Melinda Strickland that they'd do a story on her?" Joe asked.

"I asked Elle Broxton-Howard that," Brazille answered, butchering the accent even worse than before. "She said Melinda Strickland heads up some task force on the increase of violence against federal land managers by local yay-hoos 'out here in the

American outback,' as she put it. And Melinda's a woman in a man's world, so yada-yada-yada."

Joe turned to ask Brazille what "increase of violence" he was referring to, but the driver downshifted and the racket within the cab was too loud to continue the conversation.

THE SNO-CAT nosed over the rim, and the wooded bowl was spread out in front of them. The brilliance of the snow hurt Joe's eyes. The snow had changed everything; the melded, muted greens, grays, and blues of the meadows and tree-covered folds of before were now portrayed in stark black and white, as if someone had adjusted the contrast of the picture to its most severe. The day had warmed up and the sunshine was lustrous. Pinpricks of reflected light flashed like sequins from the snow in the flats and meadows.

The next thing Joe observed was that something was wrong in the meadow where the elk had been killed. The area should have been undisturbed, but it was crisscrossed with tracks. Tapping him on the shoulder to get his attention, Joe asked the driver to stop, and swung outside the Sno-cat. Standing on the running board, he raised his binoculars. Behind him, he heard the other two vehicles approach and stop, their motors idling.

It looked like a circus down there. He could see where the snow had been dug up and piled in places, and spots where the snow was discolored.

Joe re-entered the cab and closed the door. He turned to Brazille. "When you boys are through with me I need to take my snowmobile down there and look around."

"What's the problem?" Brazille said.

"It looks like somebody found those elk," Joe said.

"Who in their right mind would be up here?" Brazille asked. "Who would give a shit about dead elk in these conditions?"

Joe shook his head. He was wondering the same thing. He turned back toward the front. "Me," he said, more to himself than to Brazille.

"If we find whoever it was, we've got to question them about Lamar Gardiner's murder," Brazille said. "Maybe they heard something, or saw something."

Joe nodded.

"Hell," Brazille said, raising his eyebrows, "Maybe they were the ones who did it."

JOE LED ALL of them through the heavy timber toward the tree where he had found Gardiner. The snow was thigh high, with the consistency of flour. The men grunted and cursed behind him, and Joe felt a thin film of sweat growing between his skin and his first layer of clothing.

"How much farther?" Deputy McLanahan called out, between breaths.

"It's right up ahead," Joe answered, gesturing vaguely. It was hard to get his bearings, and he hoped he wouldn't walk beyond the tree.

"You *carried* Lamar all this way?" Barnum asked, his voice wheezing. "Jesus!"

"The snow wasn't as deep," Joe explained.

"Can we rest for a minute? I need some air," Melinda Strickland said, supporting herself against a tree trunk while she got her breath.

"Plus I've got some important calls to make," she said as she pulled a cellphone from her coat. She looked at the phone. "Shit, I don't have a signal up here."

"Don't you remember me saying that I couldn't get a signal from up here?" Joe asked, annoyed that she hadn't listened during the briefing that morning.

"Let's take a break before proceeding," she said, as if Joe hadn't spoken.

"You'd think she was leading the investigation," Barnum grumbled, although not loudly enough for Strickland to hear him. But the reporter, Elle Broxton-Howard, caught his remark and shot him a withering look.

"I don't think you're being fair to her," Broxton-Howard sniffed. "She is an amazing woman."

"Right," Barnum coughed, rolling his eyes toward Joe.

"When a man takes charge like that, he's a leader," Broxton-Howard said. "When a woman does it she's a nasty bitch."

Joe waded away from them in the fresh snow. He felt a sharp tug in his stomach. First, an elk slaughter. Then a murder. Then a storm. Now this Melinda Strickland. What in hell is her official involvement?

HE FOUND THE tree, spotting it by the glint on the twin shafts of the arrows. He had been concerned that the killer might have returned and dug them out of the soft wood with a knife blade. Finding the arrows brought a sense of relief.

Joe stopped and pointed. "I found him right there."

The party stopped and caught their breath. Billows of steam rose from them and dissipated above. The morning was eerily quiet, almost a vacuum. The storm had stilled the birds and the squirrels, who usually signaled the presence of strangers. The only natural sound was the occasional hushed *whump* of heavy snow falling from tree branches. One of the DCI men slid his day-pack from his shoulders and let it drop at his feet before unzipping it to dig out his evidence kit.

Joe stepped aside while the sheriff's officer and DCI men approached the tree.

"These arrows are Bonebuster-brand broadheads," one of the DCI agents said, leaning close to the thick, camouflage-colored shafts, but not touching them. "They have chisel-point tips that'll cut right through the spine of a big animal. These arrows are vicious bastards, and judging by how far they're sunk into the tree, whoever shot them had a compound bow with a hell of a pull on it. It's going to be tough to get these suckers out."

Joe shot a glance toward Strickland, who had been quiet up until then. She stood in the trail, again cradling her cocker spaniel, cooing into the dog's ear. The Yorkie had been left to follow her, and did so by leaping through the deep snow in clumsy arcs. Strickland had not offered any advice, or suggested any procedure, since they had found the crime scene. Joe wondered if she really knew anything about conducting an investigation.

As if reading Joe's mind, Melinda Strickland spoke. "Elle needs to take some digital pictures of it," Strickland said, nodded to her. "We can use them in our investigation," she said.

"I can?" Elle Broxton-Howard asked, honored.

The local photographer had attached a filter to his lens to cut down the glare, and his camera made a distinctive sipping sound as he shot. Elle Broxton-Howard was obviously new to both her camera and this kind of photography, and she mimicked his actions with her digital camera. Getting the hint, the photographer offered to assist her. When she bent over to retrieve a dropped lens cap, McLanahan and Brazille eyed her form-fitting tights and exchanged boyish grins.

"I don't know what in the hell we can possibly find up here besides these arrows," Barnum complained. "This is a whole different world than it was three days ago."

Brazille shrugged, and agreed. Then he ordered one of his team to fire up the chainsaw they had brought. Brazille's idea was to cover the arrows with a bag and cut down the tree, which was about a foot thick. They would then cut the trunk again, above the arrows, and transport the section back to town, where it would be shipped to the crime lab in Cheyenne. This way, he said, they wouldn't damage the arrows or smudge prints by trying to remove them from the wood.

"McLanahan, go through the trees over there to the other road and look for tracks or yellow snow," Barnum barked at his deputy. "If you find anything, take a picture of it and then bag it."

McLanahan made a face. "You want me to bag yellow snow?"

"It can be tested for DNA," one of the DCI agents said.

"Shit," McLanahan snorted.

"That, too," Barnum said flatly, which brought a laugh from Brazille. McLanahan scowled.

As one of the agents primed the chainsaw, Joe turned.

"Do you need me for anything else?" he asked Brazille and Barnum. "If not, I need to check out that meadow."

Brazille waved Joe away. Barnum just glared at Joe, clearly still annoyed that Joe was there at all, butting in on his investigation.

Joe said nothing, accepting the fact that Barnum had a problem with him. The feeling was mutual.

But if Joe had been given the choice to decide who would head up the investigation—Sheriff Barnum or Melinda Strickland—well, he was glad he didn't have to choose.

The chainsaw coughed and then started, the high whine of it invasive and loud, cutting a swath through the silence of the morning.

JOE SLOWLY CRUISED through the meadow on his snowmobile, half-standing with a knee on the seat, studying the tracks and re-creating what had happened. There had been at least three snow machines in the meadow, he judged. Two of them were similar, with fifteen-inch tracks and patterns. The third track was slightly wider, with a harder bite, and the machine that made it had been towing some sort of sleigh with

runners. The visitors had been there the evening before, since a few fingers of fresh white snow had blown into the tracks during the night.

Whoever had been there had ignored Gardiner's pickup, which was encased in snow near the tree line. Two deputies were in the process of digging their way to it so they could photograph the inside of the cab.

The piles of snow he had seen from above were where the elk had been found and butchered. The visitors had found all of them.

The discoloration in the snow was from flecks of blood, hair, and tissue. The hindquarters and tenderloin strips had been removed from the elk and, Joe assumed, loaded onto the sleigh. He noted scald marks in the snow, and tissue blowback from where the cutting had been done. They'd used chainsaws. Although Joe was grateful that the meat hadn't gone to waste, the circumstances of its harvesting were bizarre. It wasn't likely that three snowmobilers had been out for recreation the night before, as the storm finally let up. Their tracks showed that they had entered the meadow from the west, from the Battle Mountain area, and had left the way they'd come. They had driven directly to the meadow, then scouted it in wide circles until they began to find the lumps of the carcasses. He could see that their tracks dug deeper on the way out than when they entered, no doubt due to the thousand pounds of meat they had hauled.

More than a thousand pounds of meat, Joe thought, and whistled. Who had the manpower, the equipment, and the acumen to butcher five elk during a mountain blizzard? How had the visitors known the elk were there? And, obviously, was there a connection between the snowmobiles in the meadow and the murder of Lamar Gardiner?

Joe used his hand-held radio to contact Barnum and Brazille.

"They took *five* elk somewhere on snowmobiles?" Barnum asked. He heard Brazille ask Barnum for the radio.

"Can you see any tracks heading up this direction?" Brazille asked.

"Nope," Joe said.

"Then it's unlikely these meat-lovers knew about Gardiner being up here, or I think they would have checked on him," Brazille concluded.

"That's possible," Joe said. "But they could have done that earlier. It's been two days. There's been a lot of new snow since Gardiner was killed, so it's impossible to see if they were up here before last night."

"Hold on just a second," Brazille asked, and clicked off.

A few minutes later, Brazille came back on and asked for Joe.

"McLanahan found some yellow snow near the other road," Brazille reported. "He bagged it. So we've got a little something to go on."

The thought of McLanahan grumbling and digging through the powder made Joe smile to himself.

"I think I'll find out where these tracks end up," Joe said. "They go west toward Battle Mountain."

He heard Brazille consulting with Barnum for a moment, then Brazille came back on.

“Don’t confront anyone if you find them,” Brazille said. “And keep your radio on at all times.”

“Will do,” Joe said.

“Sheriff Barnum asked me to tell you not to do anything that will piss him off.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” Joe said.

Joe and Barnum had never been close, but their working relationship had been strained further since the previous summer. Joe had suspected Barnum of complicity and corruption in regard to the events that took place at Savage Run. But there was no proof, and the sheriff had fessed up to nothing. There was now an underlying hostility between them, and Joe knew that someday it would break out into something ugly.

BEFORE RESTARTING HIS machine, Joe photographed the tracks, the remnants of the carcasses, and the blow-back and jotted his observations in his spiral notebook. He patted his coat to make sure he had everything he might need: binoculars, handcuffs, pepper spray, batteries for the radio, his .40 Beretta.

Then he fired the motor, goosed it, and sat back as he entered the timber, staying in the tracks of the visitors.

OVER THE TOP of the west rim, six miles into the forest, the tracks stopped at a forest service road. Joe was out of the wind now, on the south side of the mountain, and the snow was not as deep. The vehicle that had pulled the snowmobile trailer up the mountain was long gone, but Joe could see footprints in the road where someone had loaded the machines, and where the truck had turned around. He took more photographs.

The reception was scratchy, but he was able to reach Brazille on his radio and tell him what he had found.

“Never mind that,” Brazille answered. “We just got a report that a rancher saw a vehicle coming down the mountain that night about the same time as you did. The rancher says he identified the vehicle and the driver and that he’s some badass local yahoo who lives alone out in the sticks. So we’ve got to get back down in the valley and regroup. And get this,” Brazille continued. “He’s a bow hunter.”

Then Joe heard Strickland’s voice from somewhere near Brazille: “Let’s get that bastard.”

WHEN JOE RETURNED, the team was trudging back to the Sno-cats carrying the section of tree with the arrows in it. Joe shuttled back and forth between them and the vehicles, giving rides on the back of his snowmobile. The Sno-cats roared back to life and started clanking down the mountain, but then Joe saw the lead machine stop abruptly. The driver crawled out, and was peering under his vehicle. Joe got out of the cab and walked over to him. They were joined by Melinda Strickland.

“Aw, I’m so goddamned sorry about this,” the driver said, clearly upset. “I saw that little dog dart right under my track and felt the bump before I could do anything about it.”

Joe squatted, trying to see any sign of the dog under the heavy metal track. He could see a tuft of hair on the snow, and the still paw of the Yorkie sticking out from beneath the metal cleat.

He braced himself for the explosion. It didn't come.

"The only place that dog could run was in the packed down snow from the Sno-cats. It's too deep everywhere else," the driver said. Joe noticed that his eyes were moist and he looked like he was about to be ill.

More of the team had gotten out and were standing around the lead Sno-cat, looking down at what remained of the dead Yorkie.

"How did the dog get out of the Sno-cat?" Joe asked.

"I didn't let it in," Strickland said.

Joe felt a chill. It had nothing to do with the cold.

"Ma'am, I'm so ...," the driver started, but Strickland dismissed him with a wave of her hand. Joe watched her walk clumsily back through the snow toward her vehicle. If she was upset, he couldn't tell.

As she opened the door to climb back in her vehicle, she glared at the men still standing in the snow.

"We need to stop wasting time here," she snapped. "Lamar Gardiner's killer isn't going to wait for *us*."

Everyone stood there for a moment, then silently shuffled back to their Sno-cats. The first machine lurched forward and resumed its pace. From the second, Joe saw a flat, tan, pie-shaped object in the road. He winced as he rolled over it, but there was no bump.

THE SUSPECT'S NAME was Nate Romanowski, and he lived on a small tract of land south of Saddlestring near the river. Joe had heard the name before, somewhere, but he couldn't place it. The procession of vehicles made their way along a county road toward Romanowski's cabin.

Sheriff Barnum had called ahead and ordered a county snowplow driver to start clearing the road toward the river. By the time the sheriff's department, the DCI team, and Joe Pickett had taken the Sno-cats back down the mountain to the highway and gotten back into their trucks, the snowplow driver had reported that 75 percent of the road had been cleared. The snowplow operator was attacking the last 25 percent when the parade of four-wheel drive vehicles caught up with him and settled in behind.

While the plow roared ahead of them, tossing windhardened plates of snow to the shoulder like winter flagstones, Joe thought that he must be taking part in the slowest-moving raid in law enforcement history.

He had listened to the conversations on the radio while they drove. A local rancher, Bud Longbrake, had told the dispatcher that he'd been checking on his cattle in his winter pasture at the confluence of Bitter Creek and Crazy Woman Creek when the storm hit. He had gotten disoriented in the heavy snowfall, taken a wrong turn, was briefly lost, then found out where he was when he hit the road that led down from Wolf Mountain. As he turned onto the road in the blizzard, he was almost broadsided

by an older-model Jeep that was screaming down the two-track. As the Jeep passed him, Longbrake said, he could see the driver clearly in his headlights. He recognized the profile, as well as the long blond ponytail. It was Nate Romanowski, all right. And Longbrake said Romanowski was a strange son-of-a-bitch—a recluse who hunted for all of his food with a bow and arrow and who raised birds of prey to hunt with as well.

Now Joe remembered where he had heard the name before. Romanowski had sent in an application for a falconry permit. It was the only falconry-hunting application he had ever encountered on the job.

6

NATE ROMANOWSKI LIVED in a stone house on the banks of the north fork of the Twelve Sleep River. Across the river, a steep red bluff rose sixty feet into the air, topped by a crew-cut juniper brush that this morning supported sixteen inches of frosting-like snow. The sun lit up the red face of the bluff. The deep river was slowed by its cargo of slush.

Inside the stone house, Romanowski threw off his quilts after a midday nap. The inside walls of the house were cold, and the only light was a quarter-inch shaft from the edge of the shuttered window. He opened the shutters and squinted at the snow. After lighting a wood fire in his stove, he pulled on a pair of insulated coveralls and a tall pair of black rubber Wellington boots. He tied his blond hair into a ponytail with a leather thong, clamped on his cowboy hat, and started to cook a late lunch of pronghorn antelope steak, eggs, and toast.

After he'd eaten, he stepped outside into the deep snow. The sun had begun to soften it, and it crunched slightly as he high-stepped through it. Rocky Mountain winters were nothing like most people perceived, he thought. In the foothills and flats, the snow didn't stay on the ground all winter like it did in the Northeast or Midwest. It snowed, blew around, then melted, then snowed again. The mountains were a different situation.

He thought he heard the sound of a motor in the distance. He stopped and cocked his head. He was too far from the highway to hear traffic, so the sound of a motor usually meant someone was either lost, stuck, or coming to see him. The rushing sound of the river was loud this morning, and he didn't hear the sound again.

IN THE SHACK, or "mews," where the birds were, strips of light caught swirling dust mixed with crystals of ice. The peregrine falcon and the red-tailed hawk perched on opposite corners of the mews on dowel rods. They were motionless. A slash of sunlight striped their breasts.

Romanowski pulled on a welder's glove and extended his right arm. In a leather hawking bag slung from his belt, two pigeons struggled. The hawk stepped from the dowel rod and gripped the weathered leather of the glove. Romanowski raised his arm and studied the bird, turning it slowly to see the tail feathers. They were still broken

off evenly, but were regrowing. In two months, the hawk would once again be in the air. It was a much-changed bird from the one he had found crumpled on the side of the highway, stunned and still from bouncing off of the windshield of a cattle truck. The hawk had eaten well and filled out, and its eyes had regained their cold black sharpness, but it wasn't out of danger yet. For the first six weeks, while it recovered, Romanowski had kept the leather hood over its eyes to keep the bird calm. Dark meant calmness. Only recently had he begun to remove the hood for short stretches of time. At first, the hawk had reacted poorly, screeching hysterically. But now the bird was getting used to the light, and the outside stimuli.

He dug for a pigeon with his free hand and brought it up flapping. Nate trapped the pigeons in barns and on top of old stores in downtown Saddlestring. He stuffed the head of the pigeon between his gloved fingers while the hawk watched, very intent. When the pigeon was secured, the hawk bent down and took the pigeon's head off.

The hawk ate the entire pigeon—feathers, bone, and feet—his gullet swelling to the size of a small fist. When the pigeon was gone and the hawk's beak and head were matted with bloody down, Romanowski put the bird on a perch outside the mews. The peregrine now stepped up to his fist.

Romanowski took the falcon out into the dry cold. Jesses—long leather straps attached to the bird's legs—were wrapped in Romanowski's gloves. The other pigeon lay motionless in the hawking bag.

The peregrine had not yet focused attention on the sack; it had locked its eyes on something beyond the stone house and through the triad of formidable cottonwoods, out toward the sagebrush plains. *Perhaps*, Romanowski thought, *the peregrine heard a motor too*.

Romanowski released the peregrine, which flapped loudly upward until it caught a thermal current near the river. The bird circled and rose, soaring up in a tight spiral. He watched the falcon until it merged with the sun.

He reached down into his bag and pulled out the pigeon. He tossed it into the air, and the bird flapped furiously downriver for the cover of the trees.

Romanowski's eyes moved from the falcon to the pigeon and back.

At the altitude of a thousand feet, the peregrine tucked its wings, contracted its talons, rolled onto its back, and dropped head-first like a bullet. It cut through the air in a wide, daredevil arc, slicing across the fabric of the light-blue Wyoming sky. Sensing this, the pigeon increased its speed, darting from bank to bank, close to the surface of the water.

The peregrine, feet tight like fists, connected from above with a sound like a fastball hitting a catcher's mitt. The pigeon exploded in blood and feathers. The peregrine caught air a few inches above the river, pitched up, and dived again quickly to snatch the largest chunk of the pigeon before it hit the water. Then the peregrine settled gracefully on a narrow sand spit and devoured the dead bird.

Pigeon feathers floated down softly all over the water and swirled downriver on the way, eventually, to the town of Saddlestring.

Romanowski whistled in awe, and rubbed his forearm until the goose bumps flattened.

ROMANOWSKI HEARD THE sound again, and this time he saw what was making it. He cupped his hands around his eyes to shade them against the glare of the snow, and saw the top of a snowplow on the flat, and a procession of other vehicles behind it. The fleet shimmered in the distance.

“Here we go,” he said aloud.

7

UPON ORDERS FROM the sheriff, the snowplow stopped short of the final sagebrush crest that rose between the road and the river. Joe saw the snowplow veer to the left, off of the road, and the brake lights of the sheriff’s Bronco light up. Then, doors were flying open and heavily armed men were pouring out of the vehicles into the deep snow. Barnum walked back from his Bronco and stopped at the rental DCI Yukon to gather everyone around him.

Joe Pickett dug for his shotgun behind the seat. It was a new model, slicker and lighter than the old Wingmaster he’d bird-hunted with until recently. That shotgun, like his side arm and pickup, had been replaced after they were destroyed a year ago during his flight through Savage Run. He and Marybeth were still scouting for a new horse to replace Lizzie.

As he quietly closed his pickup door, Joe felt oddly removed from the rest of the unit. He was a game warden, after all, not an assault-team member. He was used to working alone. But the sheriff had jurisdiction now, and Joe was in a mandated support role.

Joe looked around him at the DCI agents and the deputies from the sheriff’s department. Although he assumed they had all received some kind of training, this situation was well beyond what he or any of them was used to. The police-blotter column that ran every week in the *Saddlestring Roundup* consisted of small-time domestic disputes, dogs without tags chasing sheep, and moving violations. This was no SWAT team. The men were doing their best, though, Joe thought, to look and act as if they were big-city cops on another routine raid. Given the pent-up aggression they no doubt had and their general lack of experience, Joe hoped the situation would stay under control. He had seen Deputy McLanahan empty his shotgun at tents and pull the trigger to hit Stewie Woods in a cow pasture. How much restraint would he use when confronted with a brutal murderer?

Once again, he thought of how he had found Lamar Gardiner—sitting among the elk carcasses and stuffing cigarettes into his rifle. No one could have anticipated Gardiner’s state of mind, or his subsequent actions. If Joe had had a secure location in his vehicle, or if he’d had backup, this could all possibly have been avoided. But Joe hadn’t had either of those things. He was expected to bring lawbreakers to jail, but wasn’t exactly

equipped for it if they were hostile or resisted arrest. Nonetheless, what had happened in the mountains had triggered this chain of events. He felt guilty, and responsible. And he wanted, and needed, to see this thing through, even though this was the last place he wanted to be. Only when he was convinced that Nate Romanowski had killed Lamar Gardiner, and that Romanowski was in custody, would Joe's conscience let him rest.

It was the day before Christmas, after all, and the place he should be was home. Instead, he loaded six double-aught buckshot shells into his shotgun, racked the slide, and approached the group of officers who were clustered around Barnum.

"SPREAD OUT NOT more than twenty feet from each other and form a skirmish line as we approach," Barnum said. "I want Agent Brazille on the left end and I'll be on the right. I want this Romanowski perp to think a thousand men are advancing on him. As we approach the cabin, Brazille and I will close on it and flank it from both sides in a pincer movement. I want everyone in the line to move from cover to cover, but keep moving forward. Imagine you're kickreturners in football. No lateral movements. Keep advancing up the middle toward that cabin."

Barnum sounds impressive in these kinds of situations, Joe thought. This was Joe's first raid of this kind, however, so he couldn't compare Barnum's orders or plan to anything he had experienced before. Watching the DCI agents, Saddlestring police officers, and sheriff's deputies loading and checking weapons, he was reminded of Barnum's theory of addressing every situation with overwhelming firepower, which they certainly had.

"I'll take the point, if you want," Deputy McLanahan offered, slamming the clip into a scoped M-16 semi-automatic rifle. As if for maximum effect, McLanahan worked the bolt as well, sliding a cartridge into the breech.

"No way, McLanahan," Barnum said, sounding tired. "We don't need cowboys."

Joe watched McLanahan carefully, noting the sting as McLanahan's eyes narrowed in embarrassment and anger.

"No firing unless it's in self-defense," Brazille interjected, eyeing McLanahan as well as his own men.

"I've heard he has some kind of big fucking handgun," McLanahan said. "If he goes for it—the party's over."

Barnum and Brazille exchanged worried glances. "If he goes for his big gun," Barnum said, "we turn him into red mist."

Joe grimaced. "Red mist" was a term prairie-dog hunters used when they hit the indigenous rodents with highpowered rifle bullets and the impact reduced the animals, literally, into puffs of spray.

"I've got some questions for him when you've got him in custody," Melinda Strickland said, speaking for the first time since they had arrived.

Again, Joe wryly noted that although Strickland seemed to want to be in charge of something, she had no apparent experience with tactics or strategy. And she seemed more than willing to stay out of danger.

“That’s fine,” Barnum agreed. “But please stay back here since you’re not armed.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Strickland chortled.

ODDLY, JOE PICKETT thought of his children as he approached the stone house in the skirmish line. He thought of his girls getting ready for the Christmas Eve church service; trying on dresses and tights, asking Marybeth what she thought of their outfits, furtively checking out the brightly wrapped presents under the tree. It was a Pickett family tradition that, after a supper of clam chowder and a trip to church, the children could choose one present to unwrap. Except for Lucy, the girl with style, it was a catastrophe if the present they chose turned out to be clothing. Sheridan, especially, wanted games or books to tide her over until Christmas morning. April claimed she wanted a toaster oven. (She wasn’t getting one.) She had explained that she used to warm up her own meals when she was with her mother and father, and would like to be able to do that again. Marybeth had assured her that there would be plenty to eat, but April didn’t seem to completely understand.

Joe shook his head to clear it knowing he needed to focus on the situation at hand. He snapped his shotgun’s safety off, and tried to keep the recommended distance between himself and two DCI agents as they neared the crest. A stand of cottonwoods crowned by snow provided the only “cover” he could see.

He approached the crest as he would if he were hunting or patrolling—inch by inch. He saw the snow-covered roof of the stone house, then the ragtop of the Jeep. Above them was the blood-red rim of the wall on the other side of the river.

Then he rose far enough to see a surprising, and jarring, sight: Nate Romanowski stood in plain view near a clapboard shed. The suspect stood tall and ready, with both hands empty and away from his body. He was facing the skirmish line, as if waiting for them to come.

Joe stared at Romanowski, and was impressed—and intimidated—by his size and his calm. Romanowski stood stock-still, but Joe could see the man’s eyes move from deputy to deputy as they approached. Joe didn’t see alarm or threat in Romanowski’s demeanor, just that steely calm.

In his peripheral vision, Joe saw both Barnum and Brazille appear from the sides with their weapons drawn. Romanowski saw them too, and leisurely raised his hands.

Then the skirmish line broke and they were on him, a half-dozen high-powered weapons trained on the breast pocket of Romanowski’s coveralls. Brazille held his pistol to the suspect’s temple with one hand and ran his other hand over Romanowski’s person, checking for weapons. When he got to the empty hip sack, he jerked it away to the ground. Barnum barked an order, and the suspect put his hands behind his head and laced his fingers together.

The skirmish line stood erect and began to crowd Romanowski. Joe lowered his shotgun and followed. Two of the DCI agents peeled off and walked toward the stone house.

“You want to confess now or wait until you get into my nice warm jail?” Barnum asked, his voiced raspy.

Romanowski sighed deeply, and looked straight at the sheriff.

"I'm just surprised that they sent the local yokels," Romanowski said. "Do you think there are enough of you?"

Sheriff Barnum didn't know what to make of Romanowski's comment. Neither did Joe. They looked toward Brazille, who shrugged.

Joe tried to read Nate Romanowski. The man certainly didn't display any fear, which seemed unnatural—and suspicious—in itself. Joe realized with a chill that he had no trouble picturing Romanowski drawing a bow and firing two arrows into an unarmed Lamar Gardiner, then walking up and drawing a knife across his throat while his victim watched him, wild-eyed.

"I understand you're a bow hunter," Barnum asked.

Suddenly, from inside the mews, there was a rustling noise and a screech. Deputy McLanahan turned on his boot heels and, his M-16 on full auto, blasted a solid stream of fire at the structure, which heaved and collapsed in on itself in a cloud of dust and feathers. The smell of gunfire was sharp in the air and the thundering echoes of the shots washed back from the bluffs. The snow was scattered with steaming brass shell casings.

"Nice job," Romanowski hissed through clenched teeth. "You just killed my red-tailed hawk."

Miraculously, the hawk was unharmed. Squawking with an annoyed *reep-reep-reep* chorus, the bird extricated itself from under fallen boards and hopped to the top of the new pile. With several heavy flaps of its wings, it clumsily caught air and began to rise.

McClanahan started to raise his weapon and Joe reached out and caught the barrel.

"What are you doing, McLanahan?" Joe asked, annoyed.

"Leave it be," Barnum said to his deputy who, with a scowl at Joe, relaxed and swung his rifle back to Romanowski.

A DCI agent tumbled from the stone house, clearly alarmed by the gunfire. He righted himself, and looked to Brazille. "We've got a compound bow and a quiver of arrows in there. And this ..." He held up a leather shoulder holster filled with a massive, long-barreled stainless-steel revolver. This, Joe guessed, was the "big fucking handgun" that McLanahan had mentioned earlier.

This guy is no complete innocent, Joe thought. He had never seen a handgun as large.

Melinda Strickland, who had been far behind in the raid, now strode into the gathering.

"Do you hate the government, Nate?" Melinda Strickland suddenly asked Romanowski. Elle Broxton-Howard was at Strickland's shoulder, scribbling notes on a pad.

Romanowski seemed to think about it for a minute. Then he turned toward her slightly—not quick enough to elicit a reaction from the trigger-happy team—and said, "All of a sudden I don't have any idea what we're talking about."

Joe studied Romanowski. What he saw, for the first time, was confusion.

"What I do know is that you people came onto my property with firearms and tried to kill my recovering falcon," Romanowski said, his calmness eerie and out of place. "Who is the Barney Fife in charge of this outfit?"

As a response, McLanahan stepped forward and slammed Romanowski in the mouth with the butt of his rifle. Romanowski's head snapped back, and he stumbled. But he didn't lower his hands. Despite the slash of burbling crimson and bits of broken teeth on his lips, Romanowski sneered at McLanahan.

Joe had taken a step toward McLanahan again, but Barnum had flung his arm out to stop him. Joe couldn't believe what the deputy had just done.

"You people have no idea what you've just gotten yourselves into," Romanowski warned, his voice barely perceptible.

"Neither do you," Melinda Strickland said, her face hard.

"Hit the son-of-a-bitch again," she ordered. And despite Joe's shout to stop it, McLanahan did.

8

JOE WAS PLEASED to see that the plow had come down Bighorn Road that day as he drove home. It had cut a single lane through the drifts, and massive flagstone-sized plates of wind-hardened snow had been flung onto both sides of the cut, making the edges look jagged and incomplete. He smiled slightly to himself, thinking how disappointed the girls would be that they would have to go to church after all.

But, he thought, *I need to go to church, even if they don't*. He needed to leave the blood, gore, and violence of the last few days behind him. The Christmas Eve service wouldn't wash him clean, but it might, at the very least, change the subject to something better and more hopeful. The apprehending of Nate Romanowski left a sour taste in his mouth. Although from the outside, it might look like a highly successful investigation and arrest—hell, they identified the killer and captured him all in the same day, and in miserable conditions—to Joe things seemed tainted. His mind melded the death of Melinda Strickland's little dog with the rifle-butt beating of Nate Romanowski. He couldn't get the image of Romanowski's face pulled tight with confusion out of his mind. Given the eyewitness testimony and the discovery of what appeared to be the murder weapon, there was no reason to think that Romanowski wasn't the killer—except that something in Romanowski's face bothered Joe. It was as if the man had expected to be arrested, but for something else. Or, Joe thought, as if Romanowski thought he had a perfect alibi but no one was biting. *Something ...*

Joe wanted a sense of massive relief that this was over, that the murder investigation was complete, that the thing he had started had finally ended. But he didn't feel that way.

Maybe I'm asking for too much, he thought. Maybe these things just weren't as neat and clean as he hoped they would be. His experience pointed in that direction, after all. Maybe this was a hangover of success, and tomorrow he would see it all in a different light.

He needed to put it out of his mind, at least for a while. And he needed to go to church.

WHILE THEY DRESSED, Joe told Marybeth about what had happened during the day. She listened intently.

Moments before, Marybeth had entered the living room where the girls were playing, clapped her hands sharply and announced, "Ladies, we are going to church."

Sheridan was silent, but glared at her mother. April had moaned. Lucy had begun to chatter about what she would wear.

"So we might have wrapped this thing up," he said now. "Like a Christmas present to Saddlestring."

Marybeth paused a beat. "Why don't you sound convinced?"

He saw his own bitter smile in the mirror.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I need to sort it out in my mind, I guess."

She nodded, but kept her eyes on him. He had tried to sound upbeat, but she always read him correctly. He could see her reflection watching his.

"That poor little dog," she said, shaking her head.

"Yup."

"Do you think it was deliberate?" she asked.

"That's my suspicion. Either she wanted to punish the dog by making it run behind the Sno-cats, or to leave it up there, or to set the stage for what happened. I just don't know."

"She might have let that dog in the Sno-cat if you or someone had said something," Marybeth said. "Maybe out of shame, if nothing else."

Joe whistled. "I don't know, darling. I don't think anyone knew the dog was out. And she doesn't seem the type who feels shame."

Marybeth shook her head. "At least now she'll go back to wherever she came from."

"Let's hope," Joe said, admiring his wife in her dress. "You look like ten million bucks, you know."

IN A TIE and his unfashionable topcoat, Joe Pickett herded his children into the aged minivan after the Christmas Eve church service. Missy, dressed to the nines in black formal wear and pearls she had packed for Jackson Hole cocktail parties, joined her grandchildren in the backseat with a sigh. Marybeth slid into the passenger seat.

The service had been good, Joe thought. Surrounded by his family while the songs and message washed over him, he felt partially cleansed of the scene of unnecessary savagery he had witnessed earlier in the afternoon. Lamar Gardiner or no Lamar Gardiner, there had been no reason for McLanahan and Barnum to beat Nate Romanowski. He said a prayer for Mrs. Gardiner, and a little prayer for the dead dog, but he felt self-conscious doing it.

Sheridan was seated directly behind Joe in the van.

"How about two presents, just in case the first one is clothes?" she asked.

"Sheridan has a point," April said from the back.

Joe grunted as he started the motor. The influx of bodies into the car steamed all of the windows. The night was clear so far, although snow had once again been predicted, and the moon was framed by a secondary halo.

If it came to a philosophical debate, he knew he would lose on passion points. He was inclined to let them open everything. Just as he was inclined to back Marybeth.

"It's tradition. One present on Christmas Eve," Marybeth interjected, turning in her seat. "And besides, you need clothes."

"But I don't *want* clothes," Sheridan whined.

"Me neither," April added sourly.

"I do," Lucy squealed, cutely. Missy laughed.

"We *know*!" Sheridan shouted. "And maybe you expect some pearls like Aunt Missy's."

Joe said nothing. His mother-in-law liked to pretend she was not a grandmother, but an aunt. She suggested that the girls call her "Aunt Missy" in mixed company. Joe thought it was ridiculous. This was a sore point. Sheridan had obviously picked up on it.

"Let's all be kind to each other," Marybeth said, in her most calming tone. "*It's Christmas Eve.*"

It worked. Joe felt Sheridan give up her debating points and settle into her seat. Marybeth was amazing, Joe thought.

They drove through Saddlestring with the heater on high and the defroster at full strength. The girls pointed out the good decorations and dissed the poor ones.

After they had cleared the town limits, Joe sped up. They passed the feed store, the Saddlestring Burg-O-Pardner (the lighted outdoor sign beckoned: ROCKY MOUNTAIN OYSTERFEST FREE WITH PURCHASE OF SAME), and the Mini-Mart. But it was the unusual number of parked cars at the First Alpine Church of Saddlestring that made Joe slow down and look.

"I've never seen so many cars at *that* church since we moved here," Marybeth said.

Neither had Joe, and he often passed the church on his way home from work. The number of parked vehicles—more than thirty—was unusual in itself, but it was the license plates that caught his attention. There were campers, vans, battered four-wheel-drives, and SUVs from Montana, Idaho, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, North Dakota, Georgia, Michigan, and Wyoming. The small parking lot was filled with them, and late arrivals had lined up bumper to bumper along the entrance road.

"I'm pulling over," Joe announced. He wanted to check this out, even if it wasn't his business. As expected, his children responded with a collective moan.

Marybeth gave him a look. "Joe, you can take the night off."

"Wait," Sheridan suddenly said from the backseat. "It's all of those cars we saw in front of the school."

Joe shot a glance in the rearview mirror at April, to gauge her reaction. Her eyes had suddenly grown very large. But she said nothing.

“It’ll just be a minute,” he said.

Marybeth started to say something—Joe knew it was going to be a “be careful” admonition—but caught herself for the sake of the children and her mother.

“Don’t be long,” she said instead, turning to comfort the children, and especially April.

Joe left the van’s engine running and the heater on, and walked down the middle of the road that led to the church. It had started to snow, and the moon was now blocked by swift-moving storm clouds.

The First Alpine Church of Saddlestring was a small structure made of logs with an adjoining double-wide trailer that served as living quarters for the “unconventional” Reverend B. J. Cobb and his wife, Eunice. The Reverend Cobb normally served a small congregation of Twelve Sleep County’s survivalists and the dispossessed. These were the people who had chosen Saddlestring because it was the end of the road—people who built bunkers, stockpiled weapons and food, and reported sightings of black helicopters to the sheriff’s department. Normally, even on Christmas or Easter, there were not more than a half-dozen cars at the church. The tiny congregation provided so little income that the Reverend Cobb supported himself and his wife by working full-time as a certified welder. Eunice was the Welcome Wagon lady, who met with new residents and gave them coupons to local retail stores.

The footing was icy. Large flakes wafted through the air and settled into vague cotton-ball shapes on the ice. The three steps to the front door were slick, and Joe steadied himself on the handrail as he climbed them. The church was heated inside by a stove; the sweet smell of woodsmoke hung in the air.

He stopped at the door, his fingers around the elk antler handle. He could hear the Reverend Cobb finish a passage with a flourish. When Eunice began to play the electric piano—the church was too small and poor for an organ—he opened the door and stepped inside. A harsh mixture of woodstove heat, candlewax, and body odor assaulted him. Eunice was playing *Silent Night*. Most of the congregation sang in English, but a few were singing the words in poor German.

Stille Nacht! Heil’ge Nacht!

Alles schläft, einsam wacht ...

The rough-hewn pews were packed with visitors wearing big, weathered coats. Their backs were to him. He recognized no one except for the Cobbs, and two locals, Spud Cargill and Rope Latham, who co-owned a company called Bighorn Roofing. He had recognized their identical white Ford pickups outside—the ones with the company logo of winged roofing shingles on the doors. Joe suspected them of poaching, but had never caught them in the act.

As the congregation began the second verse, Reverend Cobb noticed Joe standing in the back. Still singing, the minister skirted the row of pews and greeted Joe with a handshake.

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh'

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh'

Reverend B. J. Cobb was a blocky ex-Marine who had served in Vietnam. He had short-cropped silver hair and a big jaw. His wife, Eunice, was just as short and just as blocky, with a mat of iron-gray curls on the top of her head. She had also been a Marine.

"Can the Lord, or this humble servant help you, Mr. Pickett?"

Joe surveyed the wall of turned backs and heavy coats.

"Maybe both of you can," Joe said. "Who are all these people?"

The Reverend Cobb smiled, and shrugged happily. "They're here to worship and celebrate Christmas. Who am I to question that?"

Joe looked sharply at Cobb.

"I don't know them all yet," Cobb confessed. "I was happily surprised when they showed up for services."

Joe felt a pair of eyes on him and looked over Cobb's shoulder. A big, bearlike man had turned slightly in the back row. The man had a massive head with deep, soft eyes and fleshy lips. His expression was alert, but somehow calming. The man looked Joe over carefully, and Joe looked back. *He must be the one Sheridan described as their leader*, Joe thought. The man turned back to his hymnal.

"They've established a camp in the forest on Battle Mountain," Cobb said. "They all drove down tonight."

"You're kidding," Joe said, alarmed. "In the national forest?"

"That's what they told me. I haven't visited it yet."

"That sounds like trouble in the making," Joe mumbled.

Cobb smiled sweetly. Despite Cobb's unique take on things, Joe liked the man.

"I might give you a call in a few days," Joe said, thanking Cobb and shaking his hand good-bye. "Merry Christmas."

"And a merry Christmas to you, Joe Pickett," the reverend said.

Joe turned toward the door but paused before he opened it, feeling eyes on him again. He wondered if the big man had once again turned, to make sure Joe was leaving.

Slowly, Joe looked over his shoulder. The big man still had his back turned, and was singing. Then Joe saw her.

Because she was small, she couldn't see him over the congregation, so she had to lean out into the aisle. Her face was thin and pinched, her eyes so hard and cold that Joe shuddered.

The first time he had met Jeannie Keeley was at her husband Ote's funeral. She had walked up to Joe, pulling April behind her like a rag doll, and said: "Aren't you the mother fucking *prick* who wanted to take my Otie's outfitting license away?"

And now she was back.

AFTER MAKING THREE piles of Santa's gifts for discovery in the morning, and after eating the cookie and drinking the milk left for Santa by Lucy (with plenty of telltale crumbs), Joe and Marybeth said good night to Missy. She acknowledged them by raising her pinkie finger above the rim of her just-filled wineglass. That annoyed Joe, who was still on edge from seeing Jeannie Keeley.

Later, Joe joined Marybeth at the sink in their bathroom.

"So it was her for sure?" Marybeth asked, while removing her makeup in the bathroom mirror.

"Yup."

"How awful, Joe."

"I know."

"That poor little girl. I feel like she's a target, and she doesn't even know it."

When Marybeth had finished washing her face, she removed her clothes and slid her nightgown over her head. She walked to the bedroom, threw back the covers, and slid into bed.

Joe climbed into bed, exhausted. He could hear Christmas music playing from the radio downstairs. He arose and firmly shut the door, something they had done ever since Missy had arrived. Usually, the door was open in case any of the girls needed anything. As he walked back, Marybeth spoke.

"Joe, I know my mother gets to you, but you're getting worse at disguising your feelings. You make this ... face ... like the one you just made a few minutes ago. I know she notices it."

"I make a face?"

She nodded, and tried to imitate it.

"I look that bad?"

"Yes."

"I'll work on it," he said. "Marybeth, I seem to be annoying you quite a bit lately."

"I'm sorry, Joe. I don't mean to needle you. It's this thing with Jeannie Keeley. I have a very bad feeling about it. I'm on edge."

"I understand."

"Merry Christmas," she said. "And come to bed. Now."

Joe recognized her tone and was genuinely surprised. "What about that thing you have about not enjoying sex if your mother is under the same roof?"

"I need to get over that," Marybeth said, raising her eyebrows. "She might be here awhile."

"Aw ..."

"Joe, get in this bed."

He did.

PART TWO

Snow Blind

9

CHRISTMAS WAS PLEASANTLY claustrophobic, and Joe and Marybeth realized that with their growing children—and the addition of just a single extra person—how small their home had become.

Joe roasted wild pheasant and grouse, while Marybeth and her mother made wild-rice casserole, mashed potatoes, fresh bread, vegetables, and pecan pie. The girls had been up early, of course, and their gifts were opened, played with, tried on, and strewn about the living room. Because of their limited finances, Marybeth budgeted throughout the year to provide a substantial Christmas for the children, and she and Joe economized on their own gift-giving. Marybeth gave Joe a new fly-fishing vest, and Joe reciprocated with two pairs of Canadian-made Watson riding gloves. Marybeth loved the gloves, which were suede, and lined with a thin layer of fleece. She said they were supple enough for reining her horses while riding, but tough enough to withstand stallmucking and other stablework.

Missy spent most of the afternoon on the telephone in Joe's office with the door closed, talking with her husband, and came out wiping away tears. She might be staying awhile, she announced. Mr. Vankueren was being indicted, his assets had been frozen, and she was *quite angry* with him. Marybeth offered support, and the couch bed. Joe greeted the news with the false courage he hoped he would display one day when the doctor told him he had one month to live.

ON CHRISTMAS EVENING, after the melancholy period when the girls became quiet because the day was nearly over, Joe sat with Marybeth on the couch with his arm around her. They sipped red wine in the glow of the Christmas tree lights, enjoying a rare moment of quiet. The girls were down the hall getting ready for bed and Missy was napping.

"Joe, are you still fretting about Lamar Gardiner and Nate Romanowski?" Marybeth asked.

He started to protest, but realized she was right. "I guess," he said. "It's a hard one to just put away."

She nodded, and burrowed closer to him.

"And to make things even more complicated," Joe said, "we've got Jeannie Keeley back in town. And ..."

He stopped himself.

"What?" she asked, then frowned. "Oh—my mother."

"Not that she's as bad as ..."

"Hush, Joe."

He took a drink of wine, and wished he hadn't started down that road. Luckily, she seemed willing to let it go.

"I wish we could just stay snowed in," Marybeth whispered. "With our family all together under our roof. Where no one, and nothing, can get us." Her voiced trailed off.

They sat without speaking, surrounded by the soft sounds of Missy's breathing and the internal popping of the woodstove. Joe drank the last of his wine as he thought about what Marybeth had said.

"We can't control what's happening," he said softly. "All we can do is stay focused and be prepared. That means first things first: We need to find out what Jeannie Keeley's intentions are."

Marybeth looked up. "How?"

"I'll ask her," Joe said. "It may be that we're worried over nothing."

"God, I hope that's the case. Did you see how happy April was today? She had a glow I've never seen before."

Joe nodded. "I'll just flat-out ask her," he said, almost to himself. Which meant he needed to approach the ragtag group of men and women who had been at the First Alpine Church of Saddlestring on Christmas Eve.

"Are you guys okay?" It was Sheridan, standing in the doorway in her new flannel pajamas. Joe and Sheridan shared a special look. She had been through a lot, and seemed specially tuned to gauging the moods and concerns of her parents. *She's getting older, more mature*, Joe thought. She was becoming formidable, like her mother.

"We're fine," Joe answered. "Go to bed, honey."

"Merry Christmas," she said, padding over to them for a hug and kiss.

"Merry Christmas, darling."

THE NEXT DAY, Joe pulled on his wool vest and parka over his red uniform shirt and drove toward the mountains. He intended to see if he could find out if Jeannie Keeley was at the camp on Battle Mountain.

Snow had been cut sharply on each side of the road, and he had the feeling of driving through a tunnel. The top reflectors of delineator posts nosed out just above the surface of the snow at the level of his pickup windows. Another storm like the last would bury the tops of the posts for the rest of the winter, and the snowplow driver would be without landmarks in finding the road to plow, and would give up on it until spring.

While his tire chains bit into the snowpacked road, and the sun beamed off of the icy glazed surface, he thought about the stories he had read in the *Roundup* over break-

fast. It was the first day that the newspaper had been delivered since the storm of a week ago. The arrest of Nate Romanowski commanded the front page. A photo of Romanowski in handcuffs, his eyes fixed boldly and contemptuously on the photographer, appeared under a headline that stated local MAN ARRESTED IN USFS SUPERVISOR MURDER. An old photo of Lamar Gardiner, looking particularly chinless, was inserted within the text. There was also a photo of Melinda Strickland, and she was quoted extensively throughout the article. Joe learned new information that Barnum had not passed along to him.

In addition to the compound bow found at Romanowski's home near the river, the DCI investigators had found two Bonebuster-brand broadhead arrows in a quiver, as well as a credit-card receipt for the purchase of four. Also found in the stone house were copies of letters Romanowski had sent to Lamar Gardiner protesting the closure of specific Forest Service roads that Romanowski claimed he used for accessing falcon traps and for hunting. With the account by the rancher placing Romanowski near the scene, the apparent murder weapon, the specific arrows, and the letters providing a motive, Melinda Strickland had "strongly speculated" that justice had been served.

The additional evidence was incriminating, Joe thought, and furthered the case against Romanowski. In a way, it surprised him. The doubts that he'd had when he saw Romanowski up close still nagged at him. But Joe had thought more about it over the past few days, and a few explanations had arisen. One, Joe recognized a tendency in himself to assume morality and rationality in others because he aspired to those qualities himself. Joe knew that if he was guilty of a murder, he certainly wouldn't be able to hide it. Hell, he'd confess to Marybeth so fast he'd leave skid marks. So Joe assumed others, even bad guys, would possess at least some of the same rationality and guilt, and that the guilt would be obvious in some way. But a person capable of the kind of cruelty that surrounded Lamar Gardiner's murder might not be rational at all, or even feel guilt in a conventional sense. Murderers and molesters of children were beyond Joe's comprehension, for example. And to assume that morality or guilt played a role in the mind of a molester was simply naïve. Maybe he was just as naïve about Nate Romanowski.

Two, Joe had followed his instincts before on occasions when it was later discovered that there was more to a crime than the obvious. This couldn't be the case every time, he conceded. Years ago, Barnum had told Joe that sometimes things are exactly what they seem. In the case in question then, Barnum had turned out to be wrong. But there was truth in that statement and Joe knew he needed to recognize it.

Nate Romanowski was not an average citizen, after all. He was a loner with a mysterious past and present. He lived alone, trained hawks, and carried a huge pistol. He was feared and talked about, but no one could really say why, except for his manner. He was just someone who seemed suspect from the start.

"This is only the beginning," Melinda Strickland was quoted near the end of the article. "The anti-government movement that resulted in Lamar Gardiner's tragic mur-

der still exists. Mr. Romanowski was merely a soldier. Our investigation, and my task force, will continue.”

Joe had been troubled by that, just as he had been troubled when she first brought up the prospect to him. Unless he had been stubbornly oblivious—a possibility, he conceded—he could not see the “antigovernment” threat she seemed so sure of. Certainly, there were hunters, loggers, cattlemen, and now, apparently, *outlaw falconers*, who objected to some forest-service policies. But the opposition wasn’t violent, or even organized, as far as Joe Pickett could tell. He wondered if Melinda Strickland headed up a federal task force in search of a task. And he wondered how long she would remain in Twelve Sleep County.

10

THE FIRST THING Joe saw as he approached the Battle Mountain campground were the strands of barbed wire strung through the timber and stapled into the trunks of trees. There were several signs, two of them nailed over the top of the ubiquitous dark-brown Forest Service signs identifying the campground. Hand-painted in crude block letters. They read:

THE NATION OF
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SOVEREIGN CITIZENS.
ALL TRESPASSERS WILL BE VIOLATED.

The Sovereign Citizens, or “Sovereigns” as they called themselves, had literally taken over the old Forest Service campground. Their trailers, RVs, and pop-up campers occupied all of the camping spaces. Trails tramped down in the snow wound from unit to unit and clothing and equipment hung from ropes strung between trees. Crossbeams had been roped up to hang garbage, and possibly wild game, Joe surmised. In the center of the compound, tipi poles had been lashed together, but no canvas or hide had been attached yet. To Joe, the Sovereign Citizen Compound looked like a twenty-first-century version of a Plains Indian winter camp. The road into the compound was blocked by a barbed-wire gate with orange ribbons tied to it for visibility.

Joe stopped in front of the gate, and stayed in his pickup while it idled. He decided not to enter unless invited in.

Two men wearing insulated coveralls who had been working on the tipi poles stopped what they were doing and stared at Joe. One of them raised a single-bladed axe and let it rest on his shoulder. The other walked to the nearest and biggest travel trailer and loudly knocked on the side of it with his knuckles.

There were only two Sovereigns visible, but Joe had no doubt that there were others watching him. Although the camp was cleared except for a few large trees, the forest walls on both sides were thick and dark, with trails from the compound leading into it.

Joe considered backing up and driving away, now that he had seen the camp. Judging by the lack of tire tracks in the snow, he was their first visitor since the plow had come through. His heart whumped in his chest. As usual, he had no backup, and Marybeth was the only person who knew where he was. But with the two men still staring, and his goal incomplete, he took a deep breath, steeled himself, and slowly opened his door. His boots squeaked as they hit the snow-packed road. Although the compound seemed deserted, Joe noted the hiss of propane tanks feeding the trailers and curls of steam and smoke rising from chimney pipes. And there was a cooking smell—of meat, but—something sweeter than roasting beef or chicken. Wild game was being prepared—pronghorn antelope, or elk.

Joe was about to ask the two men where the leader of the camp was, but the distinctive metal-on-metal sound of a slide being racked on a shotgun stopped him.

“You need some help, mister?”

Joe turned toward the sound and the voice. Someone stood behind a bulwark of downed green timber and piled snow. He saw the dull glint of metal between two evergreen branches, and guessed he was looking into the opening of a barrel. He could not see the man who spoke.

“Game Warden Joe Pickett,” he said. “Please put the weapon away.” His voice sounded steadier than he thought it would.

The barrel withdrew from the timber, but the man behind it said nothing.

Joe turned back toward the compound and watched as a door opened on the trailer the tipi worker had knocked on. The large man who emerged was the same one Joe had seen in the church—the man Sheridan had guessed was the leader.

Slowly, the man walked down the slope toward the gate, his outline bearlike, with wide, slumped shoulders, a massive head, and a fleshy mouth framed by pouchy jowls. Joe guessed his height at six-foot-five, his weight at least 290. Joe noted in his peripheral vision that a few curtains had been inched back and blinds raised in some of the campers. He tried not to think about how many weapons might be pointed at him. He knew that if the situation suddenly deteriorated and he was forced to fumble through his coat for his handgun—the shotgunner in the trees, and perhaps dozens of others, would have the time to fire.

Clamping on a floppy brown felt hat, the man approached the barbed-wire gate. He didn’t open it, or invite Joe in, but extended a gloved hand through the strands.

“Wade Brockius,” the man said. Brockius read Joe’s name badge. “How can I be of service, Mr. Pickett?” Joe shook Brockius’s hand, and tried to mask his own trepidation, although he guessed that he failed at that.

Wade Brockius had a profoundly deep gravel voice with a hint of a southern accent, and soft, soulful eyes.

“I was hoping you could answer a couple of questions,” Joe said. He could hear the *tick-tick-tick* of the radiator cooling from the grille of his pickup directly behind him.

Brockius smiled slightly. “Is it about the elk we found in the field?”

“That’s one of the questions.”

"We harvested them," Brockius declared. "They provided enough food for our entire group for months to come. I don't think we broke any laws doing it."

"No, you didn't." Joe shook his head. "Actually, I'm glad the meat didn't go to waste out in the meadow."

Brockius nodded, studying Joe and waiting for what would come next.

"How did you know about them?" Joe asked, watching Brockius carefully.

"Our advance team heard the shots," Brockius answered easily, without hesitation. "Five of our party were up here holding the campground until we got there. They heard a bunch of shooting way up there on the mountain and after the rest of us had arrived, they took some snowmobiles out to see what had happened. That's when they found the dead elk."

Joe nodded. He saw no holes in that.

"Did your people see or hear anyone else up there in that meadow?"

Brockius shook his head. "It was the next morning when they went up there," he said. "There's no way they could have gone up that night in that storm."

That was the first day I was snowed in, Joe thought. The time line made sense. He changed the subject.

"You know, of course, that you're in a national forest."

"Yes, we're aware of that."

"So you know there's a limit to the number of nights you can camp?"

Brockius's eyes narrowed, and the softness Joe had noted earlier hardened. "Are you an agent of the Forest Service as well?"

"Nope," Joe said quickly. "Not at all."

"Good," Brockius responded. "Because I really don't want to have an argument about this with you. As far as we can tell, this is a *public* campground in a *national* forest. By definition, that means that the forest is owned by the citizens of the United States. We own this, as do all American citizens. So I'm pleased to hear that you're not asking us to leave our forest."

Joe tensed. "There are others ... Forest Service officials... who may want to make an issue of it, though. Stringing that barbed wire is an invitation for trouble."

Wade Brockius started to speak, then sighed deeply.

"The Forest Service are servants of the people, are they not?" Brockius didn't so much ask as state it. "They work for us. They are our employees, I believe. *I* didn't elect them, did you? So who are they to tell me where I can set up a camp in a place owned and operated by the people?"

"I'm not going to argue with you," Joe said. In fact, he wasn't sure he could make an argument with much effectiveness. "I just wanted to pass that along."

"Noted," Brockius said, his features softening once again.

"Do you know anything about the murder of Lamar Gardiner, the Forest Service supervisor here?" Joe asked suddenly, hoping to startle Brockius into revealing something.

"No, I do not," Brockius answered with gravity. "I heard about it on Christmas Eve. It's unfortunate. And I assume he was the man who shot all the elk in the meadow."

"Yes he was. Do you know a man named Nate Romanowski?"

"Never heard of him," Brockius said.

There was a beat of silence, and Joe heard the shotgunner shift his position behind the timber.

"Do you plan to stay here long?"

Brockius looked heavenward, then his deep eyes settled on Joe. "I honestly don't know. We might, we might not. In many ways, this seems like a good place to settle in for a while. It feels like the end of the road, the end of our journey. You see, we've been traveling, and I'm very, very tired."

Joe's face obviously betrayed his confusion.

"There are about thirty of us," Brockius said. "From all over the country. We've found each other, and are bound together through mutual tragedies and experiences. Nearly all of us are the last of our kind, the survivors of places and situations that are just incredibly sad."

Brockius turned and pointed to a pop-up camper at the south of the compound. Joe noted the Idaho FAMOUS POTATOES license plate. "Ruby Ridge," Brockius said. "They were there when the FBI snipers shot the dog, the boy, and the woman as she stood at her door holding her baby. If you'll recall, no one on the federal side was ever prosecuted for that. Only the survivors." He pointed toward a camper on a pickup with Montana plates. "Jordan," he said. "The last of the Montana Freeman, only recently released from prison. They lost their liberty, their land, their prospects, everything. No one on the federal side was prosecuted for that, either."

Joe felt an icy shiver crawl up his spine as Brockius spoke. *How can this be happening, right here, right now?* he thought. Brockius could be putting him on. Joe hoped like hell he was.

"Waco," Brockius intoned, motioning toward a fifthwheel trailer with a Texas plate parked next to his. "They lost their two young sons in the fire. No arrests were made of the officers or politicians who were there."

Brockius turned to Joe. His voice was still soft, but it suggested steel wrapped in velvet: "We see this place as our refuge, at least for a while. We pose no threat to anyone. We're beaten down and unbelievably tired. We've been wronged, but we just want to be left alone, and we intend to leave others alone. We need this place to rest."

Joe found himself staring back at Brockius. Oddly, he believed the man.

"It was nice meeting you, Mr. Pickett." Brockius thrust his hand through the fence again. "I think I've talked too much. It's a bad habit of mine."

Joe reached out, but felt weak.

"One more question."

Brockius sighed again. His expression was pained.

"Is a woman named Jeannie Keeley with you? And is she intending to contact the little girl she left in Saddlestring?"

"I understand it's her daughter," Brockius said.

"And mine," Joe said, his voice hard and low. "My wife and I are her foster parents. Jeannie Keeley abandoned April when Jeannie cleared out of Saddlestring five years ago. My wife and I are attempting to adopt her."

"Oh," Brockius said. "This is personal, then. And complicated."

"Not really."

"Yes, it is." Brockius looked apologetic. "I hope you understand that I have no control over the Sovereigns. They're here on their own free will, and can come and go as they please. They have their own business and personal interests. And if one of them is involved in legal action for custody of her daughter, that is no concern of mine or any of the others."

"Custody?" Joe repeated. His heart sank.

"She's not in camp right now," Brockius said, shaking his woolly head. "I'm not sure when she'll be back. But I'll tell her you were here."

Joe thanked Wade Brockius and watched as the big man trudged back toward his trailer.

Joe heard his own heartbeat in his ears. He had been hit with two hard blows within a few minutes. The explanation of who these people were. And the news that Jeannie had come back for April.

HEADING BACK DOWN Bighorn Road, Joe was grateful for the walls of snow on either side of the road, because without them he'd be likely to drive right off it.

Was it really possible that the survivors, criminals, accessories, sympathizers, and victims of several of America's worst events had grouped together and decided to set up a compound in *his* mountains? Or that one of them, Jeannie Keeley, was there to take April back?

It was too much, too fast. Then his cellphone rang.

"This is Nate Romanowski," the voice said. Romanowski spoke with a kind of drawled sarcastic lilt. "I've got one phone call and I'm calling you, buddy. Can you meet with me?"

"Why aren't you calling a lawyer?" Joe asked, stunned.

"Because I'm calling you," Romanowski said, sounding annoyed. "Because I thought about it for two days and *I'm calling you*, mister."

"This is ridiculous."

"It sure is," Romanowski agreed. Joe assumed Romanowski was referring to the case against him. "I'll be waiting for you. I'll clear my schedule."

"Clear your ..."

But Romanowski had hung up.

A FEW MINUTES later, his phone rang again.

Joe snatched it up.

"Please hold for Melinda Strickland," an unfamiliar female voice commanded.

"How did you get my number?" Joe asked. He knew he'd never given it to Strickland.

"Please hold for Melinda Strickland."

Joe held, anger welling up inside of him. He heard a click as the call was put through. “Uh, Joe, why is Nate Romanowski calling you?” Strickland’s voice was strained, as if barely under control.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Joe answered. “But how did you know that, and how did you get my cellphone number?”

“I don’t like being kept in the dark about things like this,” she said icily, ignoring his questions.

Joe was confused.

“He *just* called. Just minutes ago. And why should I report that to you, anyway?”

“Because, Joe Pickett, I am in charge of this investigation. A man was murdered, you know.” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. “I *need* to be kept in the loop. I *can’t* have this kind of thing happening behind my back.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Joe said, raising his voice. He felt his scalp twitch. “And there’s nothing going on behind your back.”

“He called *you*!” she shouted. “The man who murdered a federal employee on federal land called *you*, of all people!”

Joe stared at his cellphone as if it were a hyena. Then he raised it to his ear. She was still shouting.

“I’m losing my signal,” he lied, then turned the phone off and tossed it angrily aside onto his truck seat.

11

BUCKING A ROOSTER tail of plowed snow in the county building’s lot, Joe parked in the designated visitors section and got out. Three floors of institutional blond brick housed the sheriff’s office, the jail, the attorney, the court, the assessor, the treasurer, and other county administration offices. The sandstone inscription over the front doors read:

TWELVE SLEEP COUNTY—
WHERE THE PAVEMENT ENDS
AND THE WEST BEGINS

The slogan was an endless source of amusement, especially among a group of retired men who drank coffee every morning at the Burg-O-Pardner. They’d petitioned the *Saddlestring Roundup* for years with slogans that they preferred:

TWELVE SLEEP COUNTY—
TRAILHEAD FOR THE INFORMATION COWPATH
TWELVE SLEEP COUNTY—
MILLENNIUM? WHAT MILLENNIUM?
TWELVE SLEEP COUNTY—

TEN YEARS BEHIND WYOMING,
WHICH IS TEN YEARS BEHIND EVERYWHERE ELSE

Joe was still shaken from the events of the morning. The word “custody” hung in the air and wouldn’t go away. Joe hoped like hell that Brockius was wrong. And where was Jeannie Keeley, if she wasn’t in the camp?

Melinda Strickland’s rantings had angered and confused him further. She had sounded unhinged, hysterical. When would she go away?

And now this. Nate Romanowski.

After hanging up on Strickland, Joe had decided to visit Nate at the county jail. He was curious as to why the man had called him. He hoped as well that talking to Nate would dispel the lingering doubts he had about his guilt. And Joe also hoped it would really piss off Melinda Strickland. A newly installed metal detector and security desk were manned by a semi-retired deputy wearing a name tag that identified him as “Stovepipe.” He’d received the nickname years before in an elk camp when he fell over a woodstove in a tent and brought the chimney down all over himself. Joe had met Stovepipe during the previous summer when Joe had driven up on him to check out his fishing license. Stovepipe had fallen asleep on the bank of the river, where he had been bait fishing, and was angered to discover when he awoke that a trout had not only taken his bait, but had dragged his rod into the river.

This time, Stovepipe was awake, although barely.

“You ever find your fishing rod?” Joe asked, while he unbuckled his gunbelt and slid it across the counter.

Stovepipe shook his head sadly. “That was a hundreddollar Ugly Stik with a Mitchell 300 reel. I bet you that fish must have been seven pounds.”

“Maybe,” Joe said, patting his pockets for metal items.

“Don’t worry about it,” Stovepipe said conspiratorially, leaning forward over the counter to see if anyone else was around. “The machine’s broke anyway. It hasn’t worked since July.”

THE SHERIFF’S OFFICE and county jail were on the second floor. Joe mounted the steps and pushed through frosted glass doors. Barnum’s door was shut and his office was dark, but Deputies Reed and McLanahan sat at desks, staring into computer monitors.

“Which one of you told Melinda Strickland that Nate Romanowski called me?” Joe asked.

Reed was obviously puzzled by the question. That left Deputy McLanahan. When McLanahan looked up, Joe noticed two things. The first was a barely disguised hatred—a snake-eyed, thin-lipped countenance similar to a horse about to bite. The second thing he noticed were the stitches that appeared to fasten McLanahan’s nose to his face.

“What can I help you with, Mr. Pickett?” McLanahan asked, the question posed as a bored statement.

“What happened to you?” Joe asked, taking his coat off and hanging it on a hook. He kept his cowboy hat on.

"Nate Romanowski happened to him," Reed volunteered from across the room. McLanahan glared at Reed.

"When did he do that?"

"Two days ago," Reed answered again, ignoring McLanahan.

"What are you, my goddamned mouthpiece?" McLanahan asked, rising from his desk. He turned to Joe.

"I looked in Romanowski's cell and he was on his bed trying to choke himself. He had his hand in his mouth, and I told him to knock it off," McLanahan explained, his voice nasal due to his injury. "He wouldn't quit, so I went in there to make him stop."

"And Romanowski decked him," Reed said, pointing toward McLanahan. "Romanowski cleaned McLanahan's clock, then kicked him outside his cell, and shut his own door. He doesn't like Deputy McLanahan very much."

"SHUT UP!" McLanahan seethed. Reed looked away, obviously hiding a smile.

Joe looked from Reed to McLanahan. McLanahan's face was red, and his anger had caused tiny beads of bright red blood to leak through his stitches.

"He didn't try to escape?" Joe asked. "Seeing that you were on the floor and he could have stepped over you and walked away?"

McLanahan shook his head. "Maybe he knows what I would have done to him if he'd tried."

"I'm sure that's it," Joe said, deadpan. Reed continued to look away, but Joe could tell he was smiling by the way Reed's cheeks bulged out in profile.

McLanahan tried to gauge Joe's comment. He looked ready to fight—and if not Joe, then Reed. Anybody. But, *Joe thought*, McLanahan is at his best in a fight when he's surrounded by armed agents and his opponent is defenseless. Like Nate Romanowski was.

"Has he admitted to the murder?" Joe asked.

"He denies everything," McLanahan said. "He hasn't even requested a lawyer. Instead, he called you."

"Maybe you should have hit him again with your rifle butt," Joe said.

Reed turned back, expectant. McLanahan tried to grimace, but it clearly hurt his face to do so.

"Why exactly did he call *you*?" McLanahan asked.

"I don't know."

"Why the game warden and not a lawyer?" Reed wondered.

Joe shrugged.

"You going to meet with him?" McLanahan asked, looking at Joe with a suspicious eye.

"That's why I'm here."

McLanahan and Reed exchanged a glance, each waiting for the other to make a decision of some kind.

"It's his funeral," Reed said dismissively, "If Romanowski wants to talk to the game warden, he has every right to do so."

McLanahan crossed his arms over his chest. "Something about this doesn't sound right to me."

"Me either," Joe said truthfully. "I don't know the man."

"You're sure?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "Of *course* I'm sure."

Reed stood up, jangled his ring of cell keys, and threw Joe a "follow me" nod.

"You left your gun and everything with Stovepipe, right?"

"Yup."

"Watch that son-of-a-bitch," McLanahan called after them. "If he jumps you, I may not hear it."

As they entered the hallway, Reed looked over his shoulder at Joe. "I'll hear it," he said.

NATE ROMANOWSKI LOLLED on his cot with his hand in his mouth, just as McLanahan had described. His other arm was flung over his eyes. One of his feet was on the concrete floor of the cell and the other hung over the foot of the bed. He wore a sky-blue one-piece county jumpsuit and standard-issue slip-on boat shoes—no belt or shoelaces that he could harm himself with.

The cell was ten feet by ten feet square, with a cot, an open toilet, a desk and chair bolted to the wall and floor, and a stainless-steel sink with a faucet that leaked a thin stream of water into the basin. The single window was thick opaque glass reinforced with wire.

Joe Pickett had never been in the county jail itself. He had been in the anteroom, where, on two occasions, he had brought in game violators because they were either drunk or drugged and he didn't want to run the risk of leaving them out in the field. Unlike Lamar Gardiner, they had sat quietly in Joe's pickup while being transported to town.

Although it was uncomfortably warm, the bare walls and metal furnishings made the cell seem cold. Not for the first time that day, Joe asked himself what he was doing here, and questioned whether he should have come. He wondered if he was thinking clearly enough after his encounter with Wade Brockius and the Sovereigns. Maybe, he thought, he should have run this by Terry Crump, his supervisor.

But the door closed behind him, and Nate Romanowski was sitting up, both his feet on the floor now, fixing sharp, cold, lime-green eyes on Joe. Romanowski's head was bowed forward slightly, and he was looking out at Joe from under a thick shelf of brow bone that made him seem even more menacing. Romanowski was lanky and all angles, his sharp elbows and long arms jutting out from broad shoulders, his nose beaklike above a V-shaped jaw. His blond hair was thinning on top.

"Thanks for coming," he said. His hand remained in his mouth slurring his voice.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," Joe said honestly.

Romanowski smiled with his eyes, then ever so slowly withdrew his fingers from his mouth. Joe noticed that Romanowski was working his mouth gently with his tongue, probing his teeth. Then he realized what Romanowski had been doing: holding the

teeth that had been knocked free by the rifle butt in the sockets they had come from, so they would reattach.

"Think that's going to work?" Joe asked, impressed.

"It seems to." Romanowski shrugged. "They're loose—but my two front teeth are back in. They should stay there and firm up as long as I don't use 'em."

"You mean, like eating?"

Romanowski nodded. "Soup's okay. Broth is better."

"There *are* dentists in Saddlestring," Joe offered. "One could be sent up here."

Romanowski shrugged again. "It gives me something to do. Besides, I don't know if Barnum would be that helpful."

Romanowski's voice was low and soft. The cadence of his speaking rhythm was sarcastic, making him sound a little like Jack Nicholson. Joe strained to hear him.

Romanowski seemed oddly comfortable with his surroundings. He was the kind of man, Joe thought, who was probably comfortable in his own skin wherever he was. He was cool, confident—and intriguing. *And charged with murder*, Joe reminded himself.

"Why'd you clean Deputy McLanahan's clock?" Joe asked.

Romanowski snorted and pulled down the collar of his jail overalls. Joe could see two small burn marks, like snakebites, on Romanowski's neck. Joe recognized the marks as the after-effects of the Taser stun-gun that McLanahan carried on his belt. McLanahan, Joe guessed, hadn't been checking up on Romanowski as he'd claimed. He had been harassing him, probably trying to elicit a confession.

"I'll get right to it," Romanowski said. "I want to ask you two favors. If you can do either one of them I'll be in your debt. If you can do 'em both, I'll owe you a life. Mine, I mean."

Joe shook his head. What was *this*?

"First, you should try to get me out of here."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because," Romanowski said, displaying either a smirk or a smile—Joe was unsure which—"I didn't kill Lamar Gardiner. Not that I might not have if I was given the chance and considering the circumstances. I heard about those dead elk. Any asshole that shoots seven elk deserves a couple of arrows in his heart. But I'm innocent on this one."

"Why aren't you telling your lawyer this?"

Romanowski fixed his gaze on Joe. "My public defender is a twenty-six-year-old named Jason. He still has notes from college classes in the same legal pad he brought with him to see me. I'm his second client ever. When he was making conversation, he asked me if I listened to hip hop."

Joe listened blankly.

"*My lawyer is a twenty-six-year-old named Jason*," Romanowski repeated, his voice rising for the first time.

It was if Romanowski had said all he was going to say about this subject, and Joe should readily agree. But Joe didn't.

"Maybe you ought to be calling a real private-practice criminal lawyer instead of me."

Romanowski shifted slightly, and closed one eye as if to see Joe Pickett from a different angle.

"But I didn't. I called you."

Joe shifted in his chair, uncomfortable.

"How can I prove you didn't murder Lamar Gardiner?" Joe asked. "They've got your bow and the arrows, you were seen coming down from the mountain that afternoon, and you've got a motive. You've got to give me something to go on."

Romanowski snorted. "I *was* coming down that road. I was coming from the Longbrake ranch, where I had returned a certain item of clothing to Mrs. Longbrake."

"A certain item of clothing?" Joe asked.

"Her black thong underwear. I found it under a juniper bush at my house. I guess it had been there since the summer." Romanowski paused. "Mary Longbrake and I had a certain thing together. She would come out to my place when Bud was out of town. I'd wait for her naked in my tree. When she got out of her truck, I'd come down and get her. We would do it outside. Sometimes on my picnic table, sometimes on the bank of the river, sometimes *in* the river. She was a lonely woman, and I helped. Hell, I made her *whoop!*"

Joe didn't know whether to laugh or call for Reed to let him out.

"So did you tell the sheriff?"

"I did," Romanowski sneered. "He said he called Mary and she swore she's never heard of me. When she talked to Barnum she was packing for an around-the-world cruise and planned to be gone for a few months. She's lying about me, I understand that. Not about the cruise, though. Besides, Bud would pound her into jelly if she came clean."

"Okay," Joe said. "What about the bow and the Bonebuster arrows?"

Romanowski nodded. "I've hunted with a bow, and I own that brand of arrows. But it's not my weapon of choice. Even for a lowlife like Gardiner, I would use my weapon of choice."

"Which is?"

"My .454 Casull," Romanowski said, smiling. "A five-shot revolver made by Freedom Arms in Freedom, Wyoming. It's the most powerful handgun in the world. It's four times more powerful than a .44 Magnum."

Joe remembered hearing about it, and seeing the butt of the revolver in a holster at Romanowski's home.

"And the motive?" Joe asked, as if playing the game through.

"I already told you, I would have likely popped Gardiner given the circumstances, but I wasn't there. He was a bureaucratic little turd, floating in a bowl. He shut off the roads to where I trap falcons, and imposed policies and restrictions on the citizens of this county that were heavy-handed and dictatorial. I sincerely disliked the son-of-a-bitch, but somebody got to him first. And good for them."

Joe thought: *That ought to convince a jury.* The cadence of Nate's words was odd as well—a series of short, edgy pulses. Joe couldn't decide if he was credible or not.

"When we came to your place," Joe said, "You seemed to be expecting us."

Romanowski nodded.

"But when Barnum and Melinda Strickland started accusing you of Lamar Gardiner's murder, you looked confused. Did I read that right?"

"Absolutely," Romanowski said, nodding. "Absolutely."

"So explain."

Romanowski sighed, and looked away. "Let's just say I got into a little trouble a year and a half ago in Montana. I know there's a warrant, but I wasn't sure when they'd find me. So when the vehicles pulled up out there, I figured my time had come to go back to the Treasure State."

"What did you do up there?" Joe asked.

Romanowski winced. "I don't know how it can help me to tell you."

"You're probably right about that," Joe said. "But you're asking me to trust you. How can I trust you if you won't tell me the truth?"

A slow smile tugged at Romanowski's mouth. Joe waited.

Romanowski turned back. "I was in the Special Forces in a unit that doesn't officially even exist. If you try to check up on me, you won't find anything about it. I was involved in some things in other countries. Some of the countries are friendly, but most of them aren't. It was covert, and it was nasty.

"But I had a conflict with a supervisor," Romanowski said, weighing and measuring each word in an attempt, Joe thought, to tell his story without getting too specific. "I guess I don't deal with authority all that well, especially when there's a philosophical difference with regard to policy. Like when I get sent out to do things to people simply to further the career of a supervisor, and not to serve my country. In my opinion, at least."

Joe nodded for him to go on.

"So I quit, which isn't an easy thing to do in the first place. But I sent some letters about my supervisor before I left, and I named names and literally told them where some bodies were buried. That didn't make me very popular with my superiors, and they tracked me down. I knew they would, eventually."

Romanowski gazed at the ceiling, pausing. Then he lowered his sharp eyes until they locked with Joe's.

"The people they sent after me met with some trouble in Montana. Up by Great Falls. A car crash or something. Somebody told the local authorities that I might have been involved, might have seen something. But they couldn't find me, because I had left the state."

Joe sat silently as Romanowski finished, trying to judge what he had just heard. Romanowski was a convincing speaker, although his admission that he "didn't deal with authority all that well" didn't help his case. Lamar Gardiner had certainly been "an authority."

Romanowski seemed to be reading his thoughts, because he lowered his voice, leaned forward so that Joe was less than two feet from him, and said: "Forget Lamar Gardiner. He was an insect, and not worth swatting. Melinda Strickland is who you need to watch out for."

Joe was genuinely surprised at this, and he cocked his head.

"Why?"

"She's a psycho. She's real trouble."

"Do you know her?" Joe asked.

Nate shook his head. "I could feel it when she approached. It *emanated* from her. She reminded me a lot of my former supervisor, in fact."

Joe sighed. For a moment there, he'd been taken in.

Romanowski held up his hand. "No, I don't mean she is my former supervisor. She just reminds me of her. You just have to look into her eyes to realize she's trouble.

"I know these things," Romanowski said, looking hard at Joe. There was no hint of a smirk now. "That's why I ended up here in Wyoming. As far away from government bullshit as I thought I could get. How was I to know I'd find another one like her?"

"What are you talking about?" Joe asked, leaning back away from Romanowski.

Romanowski's eyes got hard. "Make no mistake, Joe—Melinda Strickland is a cruel woman, who doesn't give a shit about anyone but herself. I knew I was in the presence of someone evil. Even though that idiot deputy knocked my teeth in, I recognized him for the dumb, redneck cracker he is. There's a hint of evil with that sheriff, but nothing like what I felt from Melinda Strickland. It's like my gut seized up when she looked at me."

"Do you know who killed Lamar Gardiner?" Joe asked abruptly, breaking into Romanowski's monologue. Joe suddenly realized that he had crossed over; that he believed Nate Romanowski was telling the truth. He wasn't sure he really wanted to believe that, but he did.

"I don't have a clue. But from the details I've heard, I think it was a local thing, maybe a business or a family thing, even," Romanowski said.

Joe tried not to react: to say that Romanowski had just echoed his own thoughts from before.

"The bastard who did it is still out there," Romanowski said. "You might even know him."

Joe felt his own stomach knot. This was exactly what he had been thinking.

"Can Melinda Strickland really be as bad as you say?" Joe asked.

Nate held Joe's gaze for a long count. "Maybe worse. She'll climb over the dead body of her mother to get what she wants."

Joe sat and thought in silence, staring at Nate Romanowski, not sure what to think of this dangerous, fascinating man.

"I believe in right and wrong, and I believe in justice," Romanowski said. "I believe in my country. It's the bureaucrats, the lawyers, and the legal process I have a problem with."

“Okay, then,” Joe said, slapping his knees and standing up. “I think we’re through here.” He admitted to himself that he was thoroughly conflicted, and confused. He had not entered this cell expecting to be convinced of Romanowski’s innocence.

Joe stood, looking at Romanowski as he would a suspect, trying to assume that the man was guilty. He looked for a facial tic, for the averted eyes, bitten lip, or furtive glance of a liar. But Romanowski exuded calm, even a hint of righteousness. Or arrogance. Or self-delusion.

“So what was the other favor?” Joe asked.

“My birds,” Romanowski said. “I’ve got a peregrine falcon and a red-tailed hawk out at my place. I left them pretty abruptly, as you know. They’re probably circling, hanging around. I fed them just before I left, and there are wild rabbits and ducks around the river, but I’m worried about them. I was hoping you could go out there and feed them.”

“I think I could do that,” Joe said. “But understand that I’m doing it because I don’t want the birds to starve, not because I believe you.”

“The peregrine is a suspicious little bitch,” Romanowski said. “But she was coming around. She just doesn’t know who to trust.”

“Sounds familiar,” Joe said, thinking of his own predicament.

Romanowski smiled in an understanding, slightly defeated way.

“Do you know a man named Wade Brockius? Or the people who call themselves the Rocky Mountain Sovereign Citizens?” Joe asked, watching Romanowski carefully.

“I’ve heard of them,” he said, his tone conversational. “I don’t know any of them, but I overheard the deputies out there talking about some camp in the mountains.”

Joe nodded and turned to call for Reed, then remembered that one question was still unanswered. “Why did you call *me*?” he asked.

Romanowski nodded. “I know about you. I’ve been watching you for some time. I followed the situation with the Millers’ weasels, and what happened at Savage Run.”

Joe said nothing. It unnerved him to know that someone had been observing him.

“You like to fly under the radar,” Romanowski said, locking eyes again with Joe. “When you see something that’s wrong, you don’t give up. You value being underestimated. In fact, you encourage it. Then, if you have to, you turn fucking cowboy and surprise everyone.”

“REED!” Joe yelled, turning, ready to get out.

“I trust *you* to do the right thing,” Romanowski said evenly to Joe’s back.

Joe looked over his shoulder. “Don’t put that on me.”

“Sorry,” Romanowski said, smiling as if he had just touched Joe Pickett during a game of Ultimate Tag. “You’re the only guy between me and a needle.”

THAT NIGHT, JOE worked in his garage. Under a bare hanging lightbulb, he replaced the spark plugs and belt from his state-issued snow machine so it would be ready when he needed it again. The clear, sunny day had birthed a crisp and bitterly cold night. When he’d last checked, it was fifteen below zero outside and even with the propane heater hissing in the corner of the garage, he could see his breath. The

thick gloves he wore made it tougher to unscrew the plugs with his ratchet, but when he took them off, the steel tool burned his skin with cold.

Earlier, after dinner, while he and Marybeth had done the dishes, Joe poured out everything from the day: seeing the Sovereigns, hearing of Jeannie Keeley's intentions, the call from Melinda Strickland, the meeting with Romanowski, and the possibility that the real murderer was still out there. Marybeth listened in silence, her expression becoming more tense and alarmed as he talked. He noticed that she was washing the same plate twice.

"I don't know what to think, Marybeth," he confessed. "And I'm not sure I know what to *do* about any of it either."

"I wish Jeannie Keeley would have been up there, so you could see how serious she really was." Marybeth was focusing on the part most important to her. Earlier in the evening she had told Joe she'd spoken with a lawyer and that the lawyer hadn't been very optimistic about their chances if Jeannie Keeley sincerely wanted April back.

"Why is she back now? It's been five years, Joe—why the hell is she back now?"

Joe looked at his wife, her face pale with anger and fear and wished he had an answer for her.

THE SIDE DOOR opened and Marybeth stepped in wearing her parka. Her arms were crossed, her hands clamped under her armpits.

"It's not much warmer in here than outside," she said, closing the door and huddling back against it. "Are you coming in soon?"

"Is everyone in bed?"

"You mean my mother?" Marybeth sighed. "Yes."

"I'll be in in a minute," Joe said, ratcheting a plug in. It had been a year since he'd replaced the spark plugs.

"I've thought about what you told me tonight. Brockius, Romanowski, Strickland, all of it. I wish I had been with you."

Joe looked up. "Me, too. Maybe you'd have a better read on these people than I do."

"Do you put any stock into what Nate Romanowski said about Strickland?" Marybeth asked. "Could she really be that bad? Or does she just remind him of somebody he hated?"

Joe's socket wrench slipped on a spark plug and he struck his knuckles hard against the engine block and cursed. He looked up. "I don't know, Marybeth. But that woman gives me the willies. There's something ... off ... about her."

"Then you believe him? Do you think he's innocent, like he claims?"

Joe pulled the wrench out of the engine, slipped off his glove, and examined his skinned knuckles. His bare fingers immediately stiffened in the cold.

"He's either innocent, or he's an excellent liar," Joe said.

"I do know one thing he might not be lying about," Marybeth said, arching her eyebrows. "Mary Longbrake was seeing a much younger man. It could have been Nate."

“How in the ...” Joe caught himself, and rephrased, “How could you possibly know *that?*”

“From the library,” Marybeth said, smiling. “A couple of the women who work there used to play bridge with Mary every week. I guess they talk about all sorts of things in that club. Apparently, Mary made it very clear that her life had changed for the better since she had met this man.”

12

THE CLOSED-CASKET funeral for Lamar Gardiner was held on the morning of New Year’s Eve, while another dark winter storm front was forming and boiling in the northwest. The wind was icy and withering. The service took place at Kenneth Siman’s Memorial Chapel on Main Street in Saddlestring and was attended by about fifty mourners, most of whom were family, employees of the Forest Service office, or local law enforcement.

Joe sat with Marybeth in the next-to-last row of chairs. He wore a jacket and tie, and had left his hat on the coatrack. Carrie Gardiner, wearing black, sat in the front row with her two children. Behind them was Melinda Strickland, surrounded by Forest Service employees. Strickland’s hair, Joe noted, was a different color than when he had last seen her. Now it was tawny, almost blond. She wore her Forest Service uniform. Sheriff Barnum and his two deputies occupied a single row of chairs, but they all kept empty chairs between them. Elle Broxton-Howard, with her notebook in her lap, sat alone behind them all.

The ferocity of the wind outside made something flap and bang on the roof while the pastor spoke. Kenneth Siman, the earnestly sober funeral director and county coroner, appeared from a door near the front of the room, looked up to check that nothing within the building had been damaged, and silently disappeared.

When the pastor was done, Melinda Strickland approached the dais and withdrew a folded piece of yellow paper from her uniform pocket. Her demeanor was oddly melodramatic, and she consciously tried to meet the eyes of all of the mourners before she spoke.

“You’ve heard from Pastor Robbins about the life of Lamar, and I’m here to let you know that he didn’t die in vain. No Sirree Bob.”

No Sirree Bob? Joe felt Marybeth squirm next to him. And he felt it again when Melinda Strickland paused and forced a blazing, inappropriate smile.

Joe felt a cold shiver run through him. Was it just Strickland, he wondered, or was it Romanowski’s manipulation?

“Cassie,” Strickland said to Carrie Gardiner, getting her name wrong, “your dutiful husband was the casualty of a war that we must, and will, stop. When citizens turn against their federal government it will not stand, ya know?”

Joe tried to attribute Melinda Strickland's words, gestures, and behavior to nervousness. She was certainly making Joe nervous. And Marybeth seemed to be trying to shrink into her chair.

"Ya know, this little war some citizens have with federal employees has gone too far, don't you think?" She seemed to be looking straight at Joe, and she nodded conspiratorially.

"Ya know, a group of extremists have set up a compound on federal land. That's kind of 'in your face,' don't you think?"

Melinda Strickland went on for another five minutes. Her thoughts seemed random and disconnected, sound bites in search of a paragraph. Joe barely heard her, but he did hear Marybeth groan.

When she was through, Strickland approached Carrie Gardiner and her children, and grasped both of Carrie's hands in hers.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Cassie," Strickland said.

Joe noticed that Elle Broxton-Howard was scribbling furiously in her notepad. As Strickland rejoined her employees, she turned and handed her speech to Broxton-Howard, who accepted it with a grateful smile.

THE RECEPTION/WAKE was held at the Forest Service building. Joe noted right away that the Gardiners hadn't come. He felt sorry for Carrie, and especially for her children. The other mourners stood in the reception area, drinking punch in paper cups and eating cookies from plates on the office desks. USFS employees stood uncomfortably behind the desks, urging mourners to have another cookie with a lack of enthusiasm that led Joe to believe that they had been instructed to be good hosts by their immediate supervisor, Melinda Strickland.

Elle Broxton-Howard approached Joe and Marybeth and introduced herself. She wore a high-collared Bavarian wool jacket over black stretch pants. She handed Joe a card.

"*Rumour Magazine*," Joe read aloud. He gave her his card, and she slid it absently into a pocket without looking at it.

"It's very popular in the U.K.," Broxton-Howard explained. "It's kind of a cross between your *Maxim* and *People*, with a little of *The New Yorker* thrown in for highbrow literary content. I also freelance."

"I think my mother reads it," Marybeth said, making conversation.

Broxton-Howard nodded at Marybeth, but turned again to Joe. Joe knew how well this would go over with his wife.

"I'm doing a long-form story on the battle between the rural militia types and the U.S. government," Broxton-Howard said, "And I plan to feature Melinda Strickland as my protagonist. I see her as a strong-willed, independent woman in a man's world. A Barbara Stanwyck of our time."

She was interrupted, however, as Melinda Strickland joined them wearing her wide, inappropriate grin. Her cocker spaniel trailed behind her.

"I'm Marybeth Pickett, Joe's wife," Marybeth said, extending her hand, and smiling with a hint of malice, Joe thought.

"Joe's been working very closely with our effort, and we appreciate that immensely," Strickland said, looking at him. "He's been such a help."

"I didn't get that impression when you called me on my cellphone," Joe said.

Strickland reacted as if Joe had slapped her. "I'm sure I don't know what you're referring to," she said. Then her expression softened once again into her hostess face.

Wow, Joe thought.

"So tell me, Joe," Strickland asked, "have the extremist tendencies in this area affected the job you're trying to do?"

Joe thought for a moment. "To be honest, I'm not quite sure what you mean by 'extremist tendencies.' There are a few bad apples, but the community is generally supportive."

Strickland cocked her head skeptically at Joe. "*Really?*" she said, in a way that indicated that she didn't believe him, but didn't want to cause a scene.

Joe shrugged. "Some folks might get a little eccentric and hardheaded when it comes to land policies and rules and regulations. But I've found you can deal with them, if you're reasonable and fair across the board."

"'Eccentric' is an odd term for the murder of a Forest Service supervisor, I would think," Strickland said, looking to Marybeth and Broxton-Howard for confirmation.

Joe waded in, taking advantage of the moment, wanting to make a point while Melinda Strickland was in front of him.

"I want to let you know," Joe interjected, "that I met a man named Wade Brockius a couple of days ago. He's the spokesman of sorts for the—" But before Joe could get any further, Melinda Strickland suddenly noticed that the cookies were gone from the nearest desk and excused herself to admonish the employee. Broxton-Howard faded into the crowd.

Joe and Marybeth looked at each other.

"Well, *she's* interesting," Marybeth said. "In a bad kind of way."

"Remember what Nate Romanowski said," Joe added.

"You're quoting a murder suspect, Joe," Marybeth smiled.

"I'll stop doing that," Joe said sourly.

"But did you notice how Melinda was acting with you?"

Joe shook his head.

"She wasn't talking with you or even listening to you. She was *assessing* you," Marybeth said.

"Why?"

"To see if you'll be any value to her personally; if you'll buy into her agenda, her career path, or hurt it. Remember when you told me she almost turned back on the mountain? It sounds to me like when it got tough physically, she looked up and saw that probably nobody in that party really mattered to what was important to her. She saw a bunch of local yokels and the state DCI. A bunch of losers. The only person in

that group who mattered was the journalist, and she was already in her camp. The rest of you meant nothing. She's a user, and she's dangerous."

"You got all that from a two-minute exchange?"

"Yes."

Marybeth nodded toward Broxton-Howard, who now commanded the attention of McLanahan and Reed.

"She's nice-looking," Marybeth said in a flat tone. "It takes hours to make your hair look that casually windtousled."

Joe wisely said nothing.

WHILE MARYBETH SEARCHED for the bathroom, Joe sought out County Attorney Robey Hersig.

"What are your plans tonight, Joe?"

Joe rolled his eyes. Their New Year's Eve plans were the same as they had been since Sheridan was born eleven years ago: They would go to bed early. Missy had asked about parties and celebrations in town, and hinted that she might want to go. Joe had offered her the use of their minivan, and she had wrinkled her nose, but accepted.

"Got a minute?" Joe asked. Hersig nodded and motioned Joe into an office behind them. He entered and sat on a desk and loosened his tie. Joe eased the door closed behind them. The office had been Lamar Gardiner's, but was now, obviously, occupied by Melinda Strickland. A framed photo of her cocker spaniel stood on the desk. Joe hadn't realized that she'd already moved in.

Hersig was from one of Twelve Sleep County's oldest ranching families, and after a bout of college rodeo he had gone into law at the University of Wyoming. His first term as county attorney would end in the coming year, and there was speculation as to whether he would run again. Although almost brutally cautious when it came to prosecuting a case, Hersig had an impressive track record of convictions. The summer before, Hersig and Joe had discovered that they were both fly fishermen, and had floated the Twelve Sleep river together in Hersig's flat-bottomed McKenzie boat. They got along, and made plans to do it again. For both, fishing together successfully created a special bond.

Joe had called Hersig earlier in the week to talk about April, but their conversation had been brief; Hersig's phone was full of static, thanks to damage from the storm.

"We're not sure what we can do about Jeannie Keeley," Joe said. "Can we ask for a restraining order or something?"

Hersig shook his head. "Joe, she has to do something first. Just her presence isn't enough. And legally, since April hasn't been adopted, Jeannie has a damned good chance of getting her back."

Joe winced. "How could a judge possibly give her back to that woman after what she did?"

"Judges do things like that, Joe. Birth mothers carry a lot of clout, even when it's clear that you and Marybeth care for April. In Wyoming, if the mother's maintained contact in some way—even with the judge—the child isn't considered abandoned."

"We love her," Joe said firmly. "She's one of ours."

"Too bad the adoption got delayed so long," Hersig commiserated. "That's where the problem lies."

Joe cursed, and looked away for a moment.

"I wish this punch had a kick," Hersig said idly, looking into his cup as if willing a shot of bourbon into it. "It's New Year's Eve, after all."

"How's the case against Nate Romanowski?" Joe asked. "You know, he called me the other day—I met with him and he told me he was innocent."

"I heard about that," Hersig said, shaking his head. "Imagine a man in jail claiming *that*." Hersig threw down the last of the punch.

"I wish our case against him was stronger," Hersig confided. "It's compelling, but largely circumstantial. I'd be nervous taking it to a jury without more direct evidence. Did he tell you anything of interest?"

Joe relayed the story about Mrs. Longbrake and what Marybeth had told him about the women at the library, but nothing about what Romanowski had said about Melinda Strickland, or the supposed incident in Montana. Joe wondered why he felt guarded about what Romanowski had said. Joe's allegiance, after all, was supposed to be to Hersig and the law.

"I've got to admit that I found myself questioning his guilt," Joe said.

Hersig turned his head to look at Joe.

"Questioning his guilt, or being taken in?" Hersig asked.

Joe shrugged and admitted, "I'm not sure."

"Mrs. Longbrake is out of the country," Hersig said. "The sheriff checked. So we can't confirm that part of his story yet although now maybe we'll interview the women she played bridge with."

Joe nodded. "What do you know about Nate Romanowski? What's his background?"

"It's pretty mysterious." Hersig raised his eyebrows. "He's a Montana boy, from Bozeman originally. He was appointed to the Air Force Academy and played football for them. Middle linebacker for the Falcons ..."

"Falcons?" Joe repeated, thinking about Romanowski's birds. He hadn't fed them yet; there had been no time. He *had* to get out there soon.

"Then he vanished off the face of the earth from 1984 through 1998. Nobody can vanish like that unless they've got special help from the Feds."

"*Special Forces?*" Joe asked. "*He said something about that when I saw him at the jail.*" Two of Romanowski's claims—about Mrs. Longbrake's dalliances and his Special Forces background—were now much more likely true than false, *Joe thought*.

"Really? That's interesting," Hersig said. "I didn't know that. And Romanowski's not cooperating. Even with his P. D."

"I know. He says he's depending on me to help him out," Joe said sourly.

Hersig frowned. "Romanowski's only arrest was in 1999—he was held in Idaho for allegedly beating a rancher. He claimed the guy shot his falcon out of the sky. Spent ninety days in the Blaine County Jail for that."

"Do you see a connection between Romanowski, the Sovereigns, and Lamar Gardiner?" Joe asked. "They all sort of happened at once."

Hersig peered at the ceiling for several beats. "It almost seems like there's got to be one, doesn't it?"

"Maybe so," Joe said.

The door opened and one of the Forest Service employees looked in. "Oops, sorry," he said.

Hersig waved to indicate it was okay. "Leave the door open. We're through, aren't we?"

"Yup."

Hersig heaved himself off of the desk, and they stood in the doorway looking out. Elle Broxton-Howard stood in the middle of a gaggle of mid-level Forest Service managers as well as Reed and McLanahan. Hersig tilted his chin toward her.

"She likes 'em rugged and real, or so she says," Hersig confided to Joe. "Ranchers, cowboys, loggers. Real manly men."

Joe stared at Hersig. "How do you know that?"

Hersig smiled, but his face was flushed. "She told me that. And believe me, she's got a few notches on her lipstick case in this county already."

As if she'd heard Hersig, or read Joe's thoughts, Broxton-Howard suddenly turned, extricated herself from the knot of admirers, and walked boldly up to Joe Pickett.

"You were there when Mr. Gardiner was killed," she stated flatly. Joe was surprised she hadn't known that already.

"Yes."

"You've met with Wade Brockius and the Sovereigns as well."

"Sort of." Joe felt his neck getting warm.

"Then we *must* have an interview," she said, her eyes boring into his, her jaw set with sincerity. Without breaking her gaze, she fished Joe's card out of her pocket and raised it until it came into her view.

"Joe Pickett. Game warden," she said, in a breathy British accent. Then she turned on her heel and walked back to her admirers.

Marybeth entered the room from a dark hallway, looking for Joe. Joe felt both guilty and slightly exhilarated. As Marybeth made her way over, Hersig leaned toward Joe and mocked, "We *must* have an interview!"

"WHAT DID ROBEY say about April?" Marybeth asked, as they drove out of Saddlestring on Bighorn Road. The storm clouds had blocked out the moon and stars, and the wind was relentless. Tiny flakes of snow, like sparks, flashed past the headlights.

"He wasn't encouraging," Joe said. "But he didn't indicate that Jeannie's tried to get April back, either."

"That was a very strange experience back there," Marybeth said, sighing. "The funeral was disturbing, and the reception was even worse. The person I feel for the most is Carrie Gardiner. Or Cassie, as Melinda Strickland calls her. I almost look forward to seeing my mother."

Joe laughed. "Me, too," he said. But he was thinking of Melinda Strickland. And Nate Romanowski. And Elle Broxton-Howard.

"What did she say to you?" Marybeth asked abruptly.

"Who?" Joe asked. He sounded guilty, even to himself.

"You know who," Marybeth snapped. "The chick you and Robey were melting in front of when I came from the bathroom. Ms. Broxton-Howard."

Again, Joe felt his neck get hot.

"She wants to interview me," Joe said.

"I'll *bet* that's what she wants," Marybeth snorted.

Joe didn't say a word. He had learned that, in these kinds of situations, the less he said, the better.

He felt Marybeth looking at him and he turned to her.

"Honey, I ..."

"JOE!" Marybeth shouted. And Joe looked, saw the ragged form of a man bathed in the white of his headlights, his wide-eyed face black with streaming blood, outstretched frozen hands up as if to shield himself; then he heard the sickening thump despite his violent effort to wrench the car away into the ditch, saw what looked like a scarecrow turned bright red by the tail lights bounce and crumple on the glass-slick surface of the snow-packed highway in his rear-view mirror, heard Marybeth scream.

13

HIS NAME was Birch Wardell, he was an employee of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and Joe hadn't killed him after all. The collision did break Wardell's pelvis, however, which was just one of many injuries he sustained that day after wrecking his truck in a sharp ravine in the breaklands that led up to the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains.

The emergency-room doctor had recognized Joe from when he'd brought Lamar Gardiner's frozen body in.

"I'm seeing more of you than I want to," the doctor said. "And every time you show up, you bring trouble."

Joe agreed with him. But at least this time, *he thought*, the man's alive.

JOE SAT IN the hallway on a molded plastic chair, still in his jacket and tie, outside Wardell's room at the clinic. It was well into New Year's Day. He had called Marybeth to tell her that Wardell was alive and expected to recover. Marybeth thanked God.

"I can't believe that poor man was walking down the middle of the road," she said. "On a night like this."

"I'll try to find out why," Joe said. "Now go to bed and get some sleep."

"How are you going to get home?" she asked.

Joe hadn't thought of that yet. Marybeth had taken the car home after they had brought Wardell to the hospital.

"I'll figure it out," he said.

THE HOSPITAL WAS silent and subdued, the lights dimmed for the night. Mrs. Wardell had been in to see her husband after he came out of surgery, and she thanked Joe for bringing him into town.

"But I was the one who hit him," Joe said.

She patted Joe's arm. "I know," she said. Her eyes were puffy and rimmed with red. "But if you hadn't found him, the doctor said there was no doubt he would have died of exposure out there. It's eighteen below."

"I wish I could have missed him, though."

"It's okay, Mr. Pickett," she said soothingly. "He's alive, and conscious. The doctor says he'll be okay."

"You think it would be okay if I talked with him?"

Mrs. Wardell looked over Joe's shoulder for a doctor or nurse but the hall was empty.

"They gave him medication to help him sleep," she said. "I'm not sure he'll make much sense."

BIRCH WARDELL LAY in his hospital bed with his eyes at half mast. A thin tube of fluorescent light extending from the headboard lit up half his face and threw peaked shadows across his blankets. In addition to his broken pelvis, Wardell also had a broken collarbone and nose. Stitches climbed from his neck into his scalp like railroad tracks. Joe had overheard the nurses say that the tips of three of his fingers and four of his toes were severely frostbitten.

The man in the bed was stout and in his mid-forties, with a thick mustache and brown eyes. Joe had seen him before while patrolling.

Wardell's eyes found Joe in the doorway, and he raised his good hand slightly in greeting.

"You doing okay?" Joe asked softly.

Wardell seemed to be trying to find his voice. "Much better since they filled me full of drugs. In fact, I'm kind of ... happy."

Joe approached Wardell. The room smelled of bandages and antiseptic.

"Happy New Year," Joe said, smiling.

Wardell grunted, and then winced because the grunt clearly hurt his ribs.

"Thanks for saving my life. The doctor said I couldn't have stayed out there much longer."

"I'm just sorry I hit you," Joe said. "So what happened? You walked all the way out of the breaklands after you wrecked your truck?"

"I was on my way back to town," he said. "Must have been about four-thirty or so. I had about another half hour, forty-five minutes of light yet. I wanted to get home because Mrs. Wardell and me had tickets for the steak and shrimp feed at the Elks Lodge for New Year's."

Joe nodded, urging him on.

"I seen a white pickup truck on BLM land up on a ridge, past the signs that say the damn road is closed in the winter. You know, in that cooperative Forest Service/BLM unit?"

Joe had patrolled the area. It was a rough, treeless expanse of sharp zigzag-cut draws and sagebrush that stretched from the highway to the wooded foothills of the Bighorns. The "unit" had been recently designated a research area, jointly managed by the two federal agencies to study the spread of native buffalo grass in the absence of cattle or sheep. The designation had raised the ire of several local ranchers who had grazed their stock in the breaklands for years, and of some local hunters and fishermen who used the roads to get to spring creeks in the foothills. Wardell was the project manager.

"Well, this white truck was in the process of pulling my 'Road Closed' signs out of the ground with a chain. When I seen that, I thought: *'What the hell?'*" Wardell pronounced it "hay-uhl."

"I heard something about signs being vandalized," Joe said.

Wardell nodded his head slightly. It took him a moment to start up again—the sedatives were working. Joe hoped Wardell could finish the story before he went to sleep. "It's been going on for a few months now. Sometimes the signs are gone, and other times they're just run over.

"So I says to myself, *'What the hell?'*" Wardell said again. "And I turned up that closed road and give chase."

"Got it. Can you identify the vehicle?"

"White. Or maybe tan. Light-colored, for sure. Not brand new. The damn sunlight was starting to go bad on me about then."

"Ford? GMC? Chevy?" Joe asked.

Wardell thought. "Maybe a Ford. The truck was pretty dirty, I noticed that. There was mud or smudges on the doors, I think."

Joe smiled grimly. Finding a Ford pickup in Wyoming was about as hard as finding a Hispanic male in Houston.

"Anyway ..." Wardell swallowed, and his eyes fluttered. He was tiring. Joe felt a little bit guilty pushing him so hard. Joe looked at his watch: 3.30 A.M.

"Anyway, that truck saw me coming and the driver took off over the hill, still on the closed road. You know how it is out there with all them draws and hills. It's damn easy to get lost or turned around. But whatever ... I took off after him up that hill anyway."

"Did you try to call anyone?"

"Damn right I tried. But the BLM office closed early, on account it's New Year's Eve. Our dispatcher left early."

"Go on."

"I got to the top of that hill and the whole unit was out there to be seen. The road turned to the left and I started to go that way but then I seen that white Ford halfway down the hill. He had gone off-road and was barreling down the hill toward the bottom.

I said ‘*What the hell?*’ and followed him. All I wanted to do by then was get a license plate.”

“I think this patient needs some rest,” a night shift nurse said tersely from the doorway.

Joe turned. “We’re about done.”

“You better be,” the nurse said.

“Sassy little number,” Wardell commented, watching her walk away, her big hips making the hem of her skirt jump.

Joe turned back. “So, you saw the truck at the bottom of the draw. Doesn’t it start to get brushy down there?” Joe was becoming convinced that he knew the specific road and hill Wardell was describing.

Wardell nodded, then winced. “Yeah, it gets all tangly down there. And it was getting pretty dark, but I could see those tail lights go right into the bush and disappear. Hell, I had no idea there was a way to get across that draw down there in a vehicle.”

Joe stroked his jaw. He didn’t know of any way to cross there either.

“Then I saw the truck come out of the brush on the other side and start climbing the hill straight across from me. I said ...”

“‘*What the hell?*’” Joe joined in with Wardell.

“I tried to get a read on the plate through the binoculars, but I couldn’t get an angle on it. So I thought, shit, if he could cross down there, *I* can cross down there.”

“What about the snow?” Joe asked suddenly. “Wasn’t it deep?”

Wardell shook his head. “That hill is on a southern exposure. The wind and sun cleared it down to the grass. The big drifts are all toward the foothills.”

“Okay.”

“So I followed the tracks straight down that mountain, stayed right in ’em. Right into the big bushes ... and then WHAM! I was suddenly ass over teakettle, and in the air. I literally was airborne for a second until I hit the bottom of the draw. I hit harder than hell. Good thing I was wearin’ my seat belt.”

Joe agreed. “You didn’t see how the truck crossed down there?”

Wardell said no, he didn’t see how anyone could have done it. It was steep on the sides, and there was a frozen little stream on the bottom.

“So how did he get across?” Joe asked.

“I have no earthly idea,” Wardell said, his eyes widening with amazement. “No clue at all. But when I was hanging there, suspended by the seat belt with blood pouring out of my head, I could hear laughing.”

“Laughing?”

“That son-of-a-bitch in the truck was laughing out loud. I heard his truck start up again, and he just laughed his stupid head off. He must have been sitting up there on that hill watching me. I’m sure he thought he left me there to die.”

Joe stood up straight and crossed his arms. The scenario just didn’t sound quite right.

"I finally got out of the cab of the truck and started walking. To be real honest, there must have been an angel with me, because I wasn't even sure I was going the right direction toward town."

You weren't, Joe thought. Luckily, though, he had stumbled into Bighorn Road—and then Joe had hit him with his car.

Joe stared at the ceiling tiles, trying to figure it all out.

"I think it was those goddamned Sovereigns," Wardell mumbled.

"What makes you say that?" Joe asked, but although Wardell's eyelids flickered he didn't respond. Wardell was asleep.

The nurse was back at the door. "Good night, Mr. Pickett. Drive safely. It's cold and icy out there."

Joe let himself be ushered out.

In the lobby, the emergency-room doctor was pulling his coat on to leave after his shift.

"Quiet night, except for you," the doctor said, winking, and offered Joe a ride home. Joe accepted gratefully.

Outside, it was still dark and the wind was bitter, and it sliced right through his clothing. The doctor drove a Jeep Cherokee, a vehicle prized locally because of how fast the heater started working.

Joe sank back in the leather seat, realizing how exhausted he was. He liked the doctor because the man felt no compulsion to start up a conversation.

Joe thought about what Wardell had said. He thought about how cruel it was of the driver of the light-colored truck to leave Wardell behind like that. Surely the driver would have seen or heard Wardell crash, and realize that if Wardell wasn't killed on impact, he would likely freeze to death out there. Either way, it was a bad way to die. It had suddenly occurred to Joe when he was talking to Wardell that the viciousness was similar to how Lamar Gardiner had been treated.

If the same person who was responsible for Gardiner's murder was involved in leaving Birch Wardell to freeze to death, then the killer was not Nate Romanowski. The likelihood that the perpetrator was a Sovereign, as Wardell had suggested, didn't make sense to Joe, since Birch had seen the truck well before the Sovereigns had set up camp. It was unlikely, Joe knew, that any of the Sovereigns—including Jeannie Keeley—had the kind of intimate familiarity with the BLM land and the complicated terrain within it to know the secret route that Wardell said the lightcolored pickup had taken. Joe shuddered. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that neither the Sovereigns nor Nate Romanowski were to blame. And that the real killer was still out there.

THEY DROVE SLOWLY down Main Street while the defroster cleared ever-larger sweating holes in the ice on the windshield. Saddlestring was still. Streetlights illuminated the clouds of heat and steam that escaped from the vents of dark buildings, giving the illusion that they were silently breathing. Joe noticed a few more cars than

normal still parked downtown, and guessed they belonged to revelers who would come and get them in the morning.

The only place with lights and cars out front was the Elks Club. As they passed, Joe rolled his head over on the headrest. A couple stood in profile in the front door, backlit by a bare porch light, their outlines in silhouette. The woman wrapped her arms around the man, and his cowboy hat tipped back as he lowered his head to kiss her.

Joe moaned, and turned to stare straight out the front window.

"Are you alright?" the doctor asked.

"Yup," Joe answered. "I just thought I saw my mother-in-law back there."

JOE THANKED THE doctor and gingerly approached his front door, careful of the ice on the walk. Inside, he confirmed that the couch bed had not been slept in.

Dragging himself upstairs, he wondered how long it would take for word to get out that another federal employee in Twelve Sleep County had been assaulted.

The news would no doubt supercharge Melinda Strickland's crusade.

14

ON SUNDAY, NEW Year's Day, Joe mixed pancake batter in a bowl with a whisk and watched the snow fall outside the kitchen window. It was a light snow, powdery as flour, and it skittered along over the top of the week-old glaze, settling into cracks and crevices. In the living room, the girls watched the Rose Bowl parade—a sun-drenched pageant of flowers, floats, and Pasadena Parade Committee members in matching blazers—while wrapped in robes and blankets on the floor. Marybeth had made room for them by folding up the couch bed when Missy had finally awakened. Missy was now upstairs preparing herself for the day. Joe had learned that this took about two hours and ten minutes.

Joe let his mind wander as he prepared the batter, unwrapped the bacon, and put the "special" bottle of real maple syrup in a pan to warm. He was tired, and already forecasting an afternoon nap. The night at the hospital, and several sleepless hours afterward thinking about Birch Wardell, Nate Romanowski, the Sovereigns, Lamar Gardiner, Missy Vankueren, and Melinda Strickland had wiped him out. He woke up feeling worried and unfocused. Joe was thankful he had the day off, and the fresh snow was not unwelcome.

He had heard that the Inuit people had scores of words to describe snow, and that had always impressed him until he thought of how many *he* knew. Most described the condition of snow. There was powder, packed powder, slush, wind-groomed, wind-loaded, fluff, glazed, crud, rain crust, cold smoke, and corduroy. Also carvy, sugary, tracked out, white smoke, dust on crust, ice cube, gropple, granular, and wind butter. He knew lots of snow words.

Marybeth came into the kitchen and nodded her approval at the breakfast he was preparing. Then she checked over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening.

"Mom came in at *five-thirty* this morning." Her eyes were disbelieving. "I can't imagine ever coming home that late when I was growing up."

"I told you I saw her last night," Joe said. "She sure doesn't waste any time."

"Joe!" Marybeth scolded, but didn't really argue. "Don't let the girls hear you."

"I won't."

Marybeth leaned forward conspiratorially. "Could you tell who she was kissing?"

"I wasn't sure at the time," he said, pouring palm-sized rounds of batter onto the griddle. "But it might have been Bud Longbrake."

Marybeth moaned. She knew that Longbrake's wife—Nate Romanowski's supposed alibi—was out of the country.

"It fits the profile," Joe said. "One, he's a state senator. Two," Joe held up his hand and raised a finger as he made each point, "He's wealthy. Three, he's sort of single at the moment. Four, she's sort of single at the moment. Five, she apparently needs a man in the on-deck circle in case the one at bat strikes out." He grinned ruefully. "Like if he goes to federal prison or something."

Marybeth shook her head at him, mildly disapproving.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked.

"I've got a question for you," Joe said. "How in the *hell* did you ever turn out to be so wonderful?"

She smiled at him. Then, apparently jarred by the earlier mention of Mrs. Longbrake, she told Joe to follow her into his office.

"WHILE I WAS waiting up for you last night, I did an Internet search," Marybeth said over her shoulder while she settled into Joe's office chair. "I wanted to see if I could find anything on a car crash in Montana a year and a half ago."

Joe arched his eyebrows and waited for more. She handed him several sheaves of paper that she had hidden under a stack of files.

Joe took them and read. They were stories from the *Great Falls Tribune* from three consecutive days in June eighteen months ago. The first was headlined two DEAD IN U.S. 87 *ROLLOVER*. The story said that a damaged vehicle with out-of-state plates had been called in to the Montana highway patrol twenty-one miles north of town near Fort Benton. The identities of the occupants were unknown at the time, but authorities were investigating.

On the next page, a smaller story identified the victims of a multiple-rollover accident as two men, aged 32 and 37, from Arlington, Virginia and Washington, D.C., respectively. Both were killed on impact. The highway patrol suggested that, judging by the skid marks, it was possible that the engine of the late-model SUV had died on a sharp grade with several turns, and that the driver, unable to negotiate the sharpest of the turns, had blown through a guardrail. The SUV had rolled at least seven times before it reached the bottom of the canyon. The passenger was thrown from the vehicle, and the driver was crushed behind the wheel.

"The engine lost power. No power steering, no power brakes. Yikes," Joe said absently, and read on.

WITNESS SOUGHT IN ROLLOVER INVESTIGATION, the third and smallest headline read. In the story, the highway patrol reported that they were seeking a potential witness to the rollover on U.S. 87 that had killed two men from out of state. Specifically, they were looking for the driver of an older model Jeep with Montana plates that was seen passing a speed checkpoint near Great Falls. The authorities estimated that the Jeep may have been in the vicinity of the rollover and that the driver could have seen the accident happen.

Joe looked up at Marybeth and put down the papers.

"Doesn't Nate Romanowski drive a Jeep?" Marybeth asked.

Joe nodded. "Yes, he does."

"Interesting, huh?"

"Two guys sent from our nation's capital sent to clear up an internal problem crash on a desolate road in Montana," Joe said. "So what did he do, force the SUV off the road?"

"If the motor of the SUV wasn't working, he wouldn't have to, would he?" Marybeth asked. She had obviously been thinking about this.

"So how could he make a motor die in another car?" Joe asked, but halfway through his question, he guessed the answer.

THEY LISTENED TO the shower run upstairs while they ate breakfast. The girls ate pancake after pancake, soaking up every drop of the syrup. Because real maple syrup was expensive, it was saved for holidays and special occasions.

"Grandmother Missy takes long showers," Lucy observed.

"She uses up all our hot water," Sheridan grumbled.

"I like the sweet taste of the syrup and the salty taste of the bacon," Sheridan said, savoring it.

"I just like the syrup," Lucy declared. "I wish I could suck that syrup up through a straw." Lucy smiled, pantomiming exactly how she would do it.

"Remember when Mom caught you licking your plate clean of all of the leftover syrup like a dog?" Sheridan asked Lucy, baiting her. Lucy made a face, and Sheridan laughed. "Like Maxine, licking out her dog-food bowl!"

"Stop it!" Lucy howled.

Marybeth shut things down with a look of disapproval.

"What do you like, April?" she asked.

April had been silent through the Rose Bowl parade and breakfast. Joe looked at her from his place at the stove. Sometimes, April withdrew from the rest of them, seeming almost to shrink out of view even though she was in the middle of things—the invisible girl. Other times, like now, she looked lonely and haunted. Joe sometimes thought of her as a living, sweet ghost.

April mumbled something, and stared into her lap.

"What was that, honey?" Marybeth asked.

April looked up. Her face was hard, and pinched. "I said I had a dream my other mom was looking at me last night."

April's words froze everyone at the table.

Marybeth leaned closer to April. Sheridan and Lucy looked from their mother, to April, and back.

"Are you doing okay now?" Marybeth asked softly.

"She was outside my window, looking in at me through the curtains," April said, her eyes still downcast. "She sort of rubbed the window with her hand and smeared the glass. She kept saying 'I love you, April, I miss you, April.'"

April said it in a Southern accent that sounded just like Jeannie Keeley, and it disturbed Joe because he had never heard April talk like that before.

For the first time that morning, Joe was focused. The dull red ball of anxiety, dormant in the pit of his stomach for a few hours, awoke.

Then he realized that Marybeth was trying to catch his eye. When he looked back, Marybeth was using her chin to point toward the back door without April realizing what she was doing. Joe got it: She wanted him to go outside and check the yard. Marybeth obviously believed April, or at least wanted to dispel any lingering possibilities.

AS MARYBETH CLEARED the dishes away—leaving a clean one for Missy when she made her morning entrance—and the girls returned to their parade, Joe pulled on his insulated coveralls in the mud room. As he laced his boots, he looked up. Sheridan was the only one who looked back. She had caught the exchange between Marybeth and Joe, and knew where he was headed. Her eyes slid off of him and back to the television. She was complicit in the plan.

He went out the front door, shoving it hard to break through a small drift that had piled against it. It was bitterly cold outside, with enough of a wind to bite into his exposed skin. Pinpricks of snow stung his eyes. Pulling a stocking cap over his ears, he trudged around the house and into the backyard. His boots broke through the crust of snow, making it hard to walk without moving like Frankenstein's monster.

The girls' room was at ground level. April's and Lucy's bunk bed was near the wall and window, and Sheridan's single bed was near the door. The snow in the yard looked undisturbed except for a recent set of dog tracks and a yellow stain left by Maxine. He approached the back porch and squinted into the wind at the snow beneath the window.

The world was white-on-white—white ground, white sky, snow in his eyes—making it hard to see.

But they were there—two slight indentations beneath the window. They were only a little larger than a child's boot-prints. At least he *thought* he could see something. With the fresh snow filling them and the wind topping them off with powder it was hard to know for sure. Ground blizzards, like water flowing over a dam, rolled over the fence and snaked across the yard, obscuring the depressions under the window.

Joe stopped and closed his eyes. He hoped when he opened them he could see more clearly.

When he opened his eyes they were still there. Kind of. For Jeannie Keeley to have stood beneath April's window, she would have had to park on the road the night before, open the front gate, and walk around the dark house to the back. It had been extremely cold, as he knew. And if she had done it, it had to have been after Marybeth had arrived home from the funeral and Missy had taken the van back into town, or before she returned home that morning. Joe wondered when April thought she'd seen her mother, but knew it was unlikely that she'd noticed the time. He didn't want to upset April more by asking her.

His camera was in his evidence kit in his pickup, and he retraced his steps to the front to dig it out. If he had hard evidence of his daughter being stalked, it could be used in a custody hearing. Returning, he wondered if the camera's shutter release would be too cold to work properly. Photographing in snow was always difficult.

But it didn't matter. By the time he returned, the boot tracks under the window—if they had ever really been there at all—were gone beneath the shifting rivulets of windborne snow.

AS HE STAMPED the snow off his boots, Marybeth came into the mud room.

"Well?" she asked.

Joe sniffed and shrugged. "Maybe. It was too hard to tell."

Marybeth shivered, but Joe doubted it was from the cold.

THAT AFTERNOON, JOE smashed his pickup through snowdrifts on the dirt road to Nate Romanowski's house by the river. In the bed of the pickup were flattened, road-killed jackrabbits that Joe had collected on the highway, and two pheasants from his freezer. Blowing snow flowed like floodwater over the brush, obscuring Romanowski's house and the mews.

On the bank of the river, Joe stopped and opened his door, which snapped away from his grasp as the wind took it and threw it wide open. He leaned against the wind and snow, clamping his hat on his head, and carried the burlap sack of rabbits and pheasants to the river's edge. He tucked the carcasses between large round river stones so they wouldn't blow away. While he did this, he searched vainly in the howling sky for a glimpse of Nate Romanowski's hawks. If they were there, or watching him from the gorge, he couldn't see them.

As he drove home, his fingers thawing, he hoped the birds were still around and would find the food he had left them.

He was fulfilling one of Romanowski's requests. It was time to get working on the other one, he thought, now that he knew more. Now that he knew that Nate Romanowski had been telling the truth.

THE NEXT MORNING. Joe got a call from a local rancher who complained that elk had knocked down his fence and were in the process of eating the hay he had stacked to feed his cattle during the winter. When Joe arrived at the ranch, the elk had eaten so much hay out of the rancher's haystack that it leaned precariously to one side, ready to topple. The small herd of elk, lazy and satiated, had moved from the stack to the protection of a dark windbreak of trees. Because the animals of Wyoming were the responsibility of the state, ranchers called game wardens when elk, moose, deer, or antelope ate their hay or damaged their property. The warden's job was to chase the animals away and assess the harm done. If the damage was significant, the rancher was due compensation, and Joe would have to submit the paperwork.

Using a .22 pistol loaded with cracker shells, Joe drove toward the sleeping elk while firing out the window. The cracker shells arced over the animals and popped in the air. It worked: The herd rumbled out of the meadow and back toward the mountains, through the place in the barbed-wire fence that they had flattened to get in. *It's going to be a busy winter of chasing elk out of haystacks*, Joe thought. The heavy snow in the mountains would drive them down for feed, and the worst snows of the year, usually in March and April, were still to come.

At least elk are usually pretty easy to clean up after, Joe thought. Moose were far worse. Moose were known to walk through a multi-strand barbed-wire fence as if it were dental floss and drag the fence along with them, popping the strands free from the staples in the posts like buttons from a ripped shirt.

After chasing the elk away, Joe stopped by the rancher's small white house. The rancher, named Herman Klein, was a third-generation landowner who Joe knew to be a good man. Klein had told Joe before, after a similar incident, that he wouldn't mind feeding the elk if the damned things didn't get so *greedy*.

As Joe pulled into the ranch yard, Klein walked out of the barn, where he had been working on his tractor. He wiped grease from his hands on his Carhartt coveralls and invited Joe in for coffee. After they had performed the winter ranch ritual of leaving their boots and heavy coats in the mud room before walking in stocking feet to the kitchen table, Klein poured Joe a cup of thick black coffee. While Mrs. Klein arranged sugar cookies on a plate, Joe filled out a report to submit to the Game and Fish Commission confirming the loss of hay and the damage to the fence. Joe didn't mind doing this at all. He considered Herman Klein a good steward of the land, a thoughtful manager who improved the range and riparian areas on both his private and leased land.

"Joe, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," Joe said, as he finished up the damage claim.

Klein tapped the morning *Saddlestring Roundup* on the table. "What in the hell is going on in Saddlestring these days?"

The headline read SECOND FEDERAL EMPLOYEE ASSAULTED. There was a photo of Melinda Strickland holding a press conference on the steps of the Forest Service office the day before, deploring the “outrageous attack” on Birch Wardell of the BLM by “local thugs.”

“Is there really a movement afoot to go after the Forest Service and the BLM?”

Joe looked up. “That’s what she seems to think, Herman.” The press conference itself was a unique event in Twelve Sleep County.

“Is she serious?”

“I think she is.”

“That’s complete bullshit,” Klein snorted, shaking his head.

“Herman!” Mrs. Klein scolded, placing the cookies on the table. “Watch your language.”

“I’ve heard much worse,” Joe smiled.

“Not from Herman, you haven’t.”

HIS CELLPHONE WAS burring in his pickup when Joe climbed in. He plucked it from its holder on the dashboard.

“Game Warden Joe Pickett.”

“Joe Pickett?” asked a female voice he didn’t recognize.

“That’s what I said.”

“Please hold for Melinda Strickland.”

Joe moaned inwardly. Strickland was the last person he wanted to talk to. He was placed on hold. Background music played. He identified the song as “Last Train to Clarksville” by the Monkees. *Only the U.S. Forest Service would have a waiting tape that old*, he thought.

He held. Maxine watched him hold, and minutes passed. He assumed that when the President of the United States wanted to talk with the President of Russia, this was how it worked.

“Joe?” It was Melinda Strickland. She sounded chirpy.

“Yes.”

“Joe, my friend, how are things going? Are you hanging in there?”

Her tone was that of a lifelong chum who was concerned with his health and welfare, which puzzled him.

“I’m fine,” he said haltingly. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m getting hammered by the press asking questions about how you found Birch Wardell out on that road. They want to know how he got hit by your car, and all of that, you know?”

Joe took the phone away from his ear and stared at it. *Hammered by the press?*

“I hit Birch Wardell with my car because he was standing in the middle of the road,” Joe said flatly. “It was an accident. Then I took him to the hospital and stayed with him until I was sure he was okay.”

“Joe, you don’t need to use that tone,” she said soothingly. “I’m on your side here, you know? They just Keep asking me about you being there when Lamar Gardiner was killed, then you being there again when Birch Wardell was hurt.”

Joe felt a flush of anger. “Are you suggesting I had something to do with those incidents?”

“Oh, God no,” she said. “I’m on your side.”

“What other side is there?” Joe asked. “And who exactly is ‘hammering’ you with questions?” In Saddlestring, there was the *Roundup*, an FM radio station, and one local AM station that played preprogrammed music, stock reports, and CNN radio newsbreaks.

There was a long pause, and then she filled the silence with a rush of words. “That’s not why I called, Joe. Lamar Gardiner scheduled a public meeting for Friday night on the USFS strategic plan for this district ... you know, the road closures. He announced the meeting quite a few weeks ago and I’m going to go ahead and chair it. I was hoping you would come and offer support. I know Lamar’s policies were controversial, and I could use your help on this.”

The quick change of direction caught Joe by surprise.

“I can be there,” Joe said, although he immediately wished he hadn’t.

“Great, great. Thank you, Joe.” Her chirpiness resumed. “You be careful out there, my friend. Things may be a little dicey until we get all this stuff figured out with the Sovereigns—and who knows if they’ll go after state government representatives as well as federal land managers.”

“Are the Sovereigns being targeted for Birch Wardell’s ambush?” Joe asked. He had heard nothing of this.

“I’m not at liberty to say,”

Then she wished him a good day and hung up. Joe listened to the silence on the phone for a moment, still not sure what had just transpired.

The conversation left him flummoxed. He wished he had recorded it so he could replay it later, and try to make sense of it. Melinda Strickland seemed to be implying things—that Joe was the subject of controversy and suspicion, that forces were out to get her, that maybe Joe was aligned with those forces—while at the same time assuring him that everything was fine and that she and Joe were working well together. Her backtracking, when he asked her for specifics, he thought wryly, left a smell of burning rubber as she floored it into reverse.

He turned off his cellphone so she couldn’t call again.

INSTEAD OF RETURNING home and to his office, Joe turned toward the BLM joint range-management study area. He wanted a clearer picture of the crash site and the terrain that Birch Wardell described. It took nearly an hour and a half on drifted-in gravel roads to get to the place where Wardell had seen the light-colored pickup that had fled from him and led to the accident.

Joe stopped in the road and looked up the gently rising hill where Wardell said he had first seen the other vehicle. Gunmetal-gray sagebrush dotted the hillside, each

bush supporting a shark-fin wedge of drifted snow. The rest of the ground was blown clean of snow, revealing gray dirt and yellow grass. It was the first grass he had seen for a couple of weeks.

From where he sat in the idling truck, Joe could make out tire tracks in the crushed grass that led from the road he was now on to the top of the hill. The tracks, he assumed, were Wardell's. On the top of the hill, against the sky, he could see a broken signpost. It was all just as Wardell had described it.

Joe reached down and shoved the pickup into four-wheel drive, and ascended the hill, staying in Wardell's tracks. At the top, near the broken signpost, he stopped. Beyond him, the breaklands stretched for miles until they melted into the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains. The terrain was deceptive. At first glance, it looked flat and barren, like gentle corduroy folds. But the folds obscured rugged draws and arroyos, and small sharp canyons. Pockets of thick, tall Rocky Mountain juniper punctuated the expanse.

With his binoculars, Joe swept the bottom of the hill, where Wardell said he'd wrecked his pickup. Sure enough, through the thick brush, Joe saw the back bumper of a BLM pickup pointing toward the clouds. The truck had crashed headfirst into a steep draw. It had been there for two days, and the BLM had not yet sent a tow truck to pull it out. For once, Joe was pleased with bureaucratic inertia.

Joe found another set of tracks on the opposite hill that led up and over the top. Those tracks no doubt belonged to the vehicle Birch Wardell had been chasing. Slowly, Joe studied the bottom of the hill and the sharp draw that stretched out from both sides of the wrecked truck like a stiletto slash. He could see no obvious place to cross. There *was* no place to cross. But, damn it, that other driver had done it somehow.

Joe sighed and lowered his glasses. How in the hell did he do it? He thought about the possibility of a ramp or bridge that the vandal had carried with him. Maybe he carried it in the back of his truck, and laid it across the draw. But that was too far-fetched, Joe decided. The distance across the arroyo was too great, and the logistics of carrying, deploying, and retrieving a ramp while being pursued were impractical.

He sat back and thought about it. Maxine crawled across the seat and put her large, warm head in his lap. He studied the opposite hill, the dual sets of tracks up from the bottom of the draw, and the bumper of the wrecked truck, sticking up obscenely from the heavy brush.

While he thought, a pronghorn antelope doe and her yearling twins crossed in front of him. Their coloring was perfect camouflage for this terrain—finely drawn patches of dark tan, white, and black that blended in with the grassy, windswept slopes with their dark brush and dirty snowdrifts. At a distance, they fused so well with the landscape that entire herds were virtually invisible.

Joe smacked the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "Damn, Maxine," he said aloud, "*I just figured it out.*"

Now it would be a matter of finding the light pickup, and letting himself be drawn in.

THAT AFTERNOON, MARYBETH went to work at her part time job at the stables. Her mother, who had not left the house since her New Year's Eve sojourn, stayed at home with Lucy and April, and Sheridan was at basketball tryouts at school. Joe had left early that morning to respond to Herman Klein's call.

All eight of the horses had stalls in the barn and twentyfour-foot fenced runs outside. They were in the runs when she drove up. She loved being around the horses, who had nickered a greeting when she arrived. There were four sorrels, three paints, and a buckskin. All belonged to boarders who paid monthly for shelter, hay, stall-mucking, and in some cases, grooming and exercise. All of the horses had grown hairy for the winter, and she liked the look of them: frosted muzzles billowing clouds of condensation, and thick, shaggy coats.

She wore her thick canvas barn coat, Watson gloves, and a fleece headband over her ears and under her blond hair.

The owner of the stables, Marsha Dibble, had left her an envelope pinned to the bulletin board inside the barn. In it was her paycheck for the hours worked in December, a "Happy New Year" card, and a Post-it note reminding Marybeth to add a nutritional supplement to the grain of one of the older mares. Because Marybeth's arrival meant they would soon get their evening feed, all of the horses had come into their barn stalls to watch her. Using a long hay-hook, she tugged two sixty-pound bales of grass hay from the stack and cut the binding wires. She divided the hay into "flakes"—about one-fifth of a bale per horse—while the horses showed their impatience by stomping their hooves and switching their tails.

It was while Marybeth mixed the granular supplement in a bucket with the grain that she noticed that several of the horses had turned their heads to look at something outside. Their ears were pricked up and alert. Then she heard the low rumble of a motor and the crunching of tires on snow. The engine was killed, and a moment later, a car door slammed shut.

Assuming it was Marsha, Marybeth slid back the barn door to say hello. Her greeting caught in her throat.

Jeannie Keeley stood ten feet away, looking hard at Marybeth through a rising halo of cigarette smoke and condensed breath. Behind Keeley was an old blue Dodge pickup. A man sat behind the wheel, looking straight ahead through the windshield toward the mountains.

"Do you know who I am?" Jeannie Keeley asked. Her Mississippi accent was grating and hard. *Dew you know who Ah yam?*

Keeley wore an oversized green quilted coat. Her small hands were thrust into her front jean pockets. She looked smaller and more frail than Marybeth remembered her from their brief introduction four years before at the obstetrician's office. At that time, both were pregnant. Keeley had six-year-old April with her in the office at the time.

"I know who you are," Marybeth said, trying to keep her voice from catching in her throat. Behind her in the stalls, one of the buckskins kicked at the front of her stall to get her attention. Marybeth ignored the horse, her attention on the small woman in front of her.

"I know who you are, too," Keeley said. Her cigarette tip danced up and down as she spoke. "I want my April back."

The words struck Marybeth like a blow. Until this moment she hadn't realized just how much she had hoped Jeannie Keeley's arrival back in town was benign, that perhaps she was just passing through and making some noise.

"We consider April our daughter now, Jeannie. We love her like our own." Marybeth swallowed. "Joe and I are in the process of adopting her."

Keeley snorted and rolled her eyes.

"That process don't mean shit 'til it's done. And it ain't done if the biological mother don't consent."

"She's happy now," Marybeth said, trying to talk to Jeannie mother-to-mother. "If you could see her ..." Then she remembered the tracks in the snow and flushed with anger. "Or maybe you did see her. Jeannie, were you outside our house two nights ago? Were you looking into our windows?"

A hint of a smile tugged at Keeley's mouth, and she tipped her head back slightly.

"Your house? That musta' been somebody else." *Ay-else.*

Marybeth tried to keep her voice calm and measured, while what she wanted to do was scream and yell at Jeannie at the top of her lungs. In the back of her mind, Marybeth had been preparing for this fight ever since she heard that Jeannie Keeley was back. But she fought the urge to attack, choosing instead, and with difficulty, to try to appeal to Jeannie's emotions.

"Jeannie, you dropped April off at the bank with your house keys when you left town. I understand how painful losing your husband and your home must have been. But you made the choice to abandon your daughter. We didn't take her from you."

Keeley eyed Marybeth with naked contempt. "You don't understand nothin' at all. I fuckin' *hate* people who say they understand things about me they don't." Her eyes narrowed into slits. "There's nothing for you to understand, Miss Marybeth Pickett, except that I want my baby back. She needs to be with her real mama, the one who changed her diapers. She was a hard birth, lady. She got me to bleedin'. I like to bled to death to bring her into this world." Keeley's voice lowered: "I want my daughter ... back ... *now.*"

Marybeth glared back. She felt her rage, and her frustration, building. This woman hated her. This stupid, trashy woman hated *her*.

"We love April," Marybeth said evenly. The words just hung there.

"That's mighty white of you," Keeley smirked. *Tha's mahty waht uv you.* "But it don't matter. She's not your child. She's my child." *Chile.*

Marybeth realized that Jeannie was trying to bait her, trying to get her to lose her cool and say or do something that would look bad if they ever ended up in court. Jeannie had even brought a witness with her.

Again, Marybeth forced back her rage, and spoke softly.

“Jeannie, I do understand what it’s like to lose someone. I lost my baby four years ago. Did you know that? Remember when we met at the doctor’s office when we were both pregnant? I lost that baby when a man shot me. He was the same man who killed your husband.” Marybeth’s eyes probed for a sense of connection or compassion, but neither was forthcoming. “After I got out of the hospital, we found out about April. We took her in as our own. She’s part of our family now. She’s got wonderful sisters who care for her. Joe and I care for her. Can’t you see that ...”

Marybeth needed to be careful here, and she tried to be. “Can’t you see that April is happy, and has adjusted? That the greatest gift a mother can give is to make sure her child is loved and cared for?”

Jeannie Keeley took her eyes off Marybeth, and seemed to be searching the snow for something. Absently, she dug in her coat pocket for another cigarette and placed it in her mouth, unlit.

Marybeth noticed that the man driving the pickup had finally turned his head to look at her. He was severe-looking, older than Jeannie, with an unkempt growth of beard. He wore a dirty John Deere cap. His eyes were sunken and dark, his pupils hard dots.

A match flared, and Marybeth looked back to Keeley as she lit her cigarette. Was it possible she was reconsidering, that Marybeth had touched her?

Keeley let two streams of smoke curl out of her nose. “Fuck you, princess,” she hissed. “I want my April back.”

Marybeth clenched her teeth, and her eyes fluttered. She thought that in four steps she could be on this horrible woman, pummeling her head with the hay hook that hung within easy reach on an upside-down horseshoe inside the door.

It was as if the man behind the wheel could read her mind, and he quickly opened his door and walked around the front of the truck. He stopped and casually pulled open his coat so that Marybeth could see the faux-pearl grip of a heavy stainless-steel pistol stuck into his greasy jeans.

“We best go, honey,” the man said to Jeannie Keeley.

Keeley snorted, her eyes locked in hatred on Marybeth. The man reached up and put his hand on Keeley’s shoulder but she shook it off.

“We best go.”

“Look at that bitch,” Keeley said, her voice barely a whisper. “Look at her standin’ there like some kind of goddamned princess. She loses her baby so she thinks she can just steal mine to make up for it.”

That tore at Marybeth, but she stood still and firm. Four steps, she thought.

The man moved behind Keeley, and put his arms around her, squeezing her into him, his head close to her ear, "I said let's go. We'll get April back. The judge said we would."

Jeannie started to resist, but was obviously overpowered. She relaxed, and he released his grip. She never broke off her glare at Marybeth.

"What was that about a judge?" Marybeth asked, not able to stop a tremble in her voice.

Keeley smiled, shaking her head instead of speaking. "Never mind that," she said, and backed up past the man, never taking her eyes off of Marybeth until she bumped up against the door of the truck. "You just better be packing her stuff up so's she'll be ready when we come get her and take her home."

Jeannie Keeley turned and opened the door, climbed in, and slammed the door with a bang.

The man looked vacantly at Marybeth, his face revealing nothing. Then he patted the butt of the pistol without looking at it, turned on his heel, and climbed back behind the wheel. Neither looked over at her as they drove away.

MARYBETH STUMBLED INTO the barn and slid the door closed. Her legs were so weak that she collapsed on a bale of hay and sat there, staring at the door handle, replaying the scene in her mind, disbelieving what had just happened.

A judge, she said. Joe's experience with Judge Pennock had shown how nonsensical the courts could be in these cases, especially when it came to decisions involving a biological mother.

She could call the sheriff and report the incident, but she knew it would be her word against theirs, and it would go nowhere. Marybeth had not actually been threatened in any way she could prove. *Maybe Joe will have an idea*, she thought, and she tried to call him on his cellphone. She cursed out loud when he didn't pick up. He must have turned it off for some reason. He was due to pick up Sheridan at practice within the hour, and Marybeth would keep trying.

The mare nickered aggressively and she looked up at her.

"You'll get fed," Marybeth said aloud, her voice weak. "Just give me a minute to think and settle down."

AFTER FEEDING THE horses, she slid open the barn door again. She looked at the tracks that the pickup had made, saw the cigarette butt and spent matches that Jeannie Keeley had dropped in the snow. It was almost as if she could see Keeley standing there again, squinting against the smoke, putrid with hate, spewing filthy words. The dirty man stood next to her, his handgun stuck in his pants.

These two reprobates, these *scum*, wanted her April with them. The injustice of it filled her with violent passion. Children were not pets, not furniture, not *items* put on earth to bring pleasure to people who owned them, she raged to herself.

She clenched her hands into fists and shook them. She threw the now-empty bucket across the barn, where it clattered loudly against the wall and sent the horses scattering

back to the outside runs. Her eyes welled hotly with tears that soon ran down her freezing cheeks.

17

SHERIDAN PICKETT STOOD in the brick alcove of the school and waited for her dad. Her hair was still damp, so she pulled her hood over her head. The basketball tryouts had been held the day before school resumed, and tomorrow she and the other hopefuls would be greeted with a posted list revealing who had made the team.

It was always strange being at the school when it wasn't in session, she thought. The sounds they made in the gym echoed louder, and the hallways seemed twice as wide when empty. She had peeked into her locked classroom to see that her teacher had replaced all of the Christmas decorations with self-esteem motivational posters.

Most of the girls had walked home from school, but that wasn't an option for Sheridan. So she waited, hoping her hair wouldn't freeze.

Sheridan shook her head when she thought about how the tryouts had gone. She doubted that she'd made the team. Although she had hustled—her dad had told her that even if she couldn't shoot, every team needed players who hustled and played defense—the fact remained that she *was* a lousy shooter. In the scrimmage, she had gone 0-for-3, and one of her errant shots had bounced straight up off the top of the backboard. Worse, in one scramble after a loose ball, her glasses had been knocked off and gone skittering across the floor. The coach had whistled a time-out to protect them. The time-out called attention to her, and a couple of the girls giggled when Sheridan obviously had trouble locating her glasses, and the coach, because of her poor vision. When play resumed, and she had her glasses back on, she was called for two fouls in a row. She had hacked one of the girls who had giggled before when the girl went up for a layup, and she'd set a moving pick on another.

The doors wheezed open behind her and the coach, Mr. Tynsdale, who also taught art, came out of the building and locked it up behind him.

"Do you have a ride?" he asked. She tried to judge from the way he looked at her if he was asking out of sympathy or if he wanted to provide transportation to one of his new players. She couldn't tell.

"My dad is supposed to pick me up."

Mr. Tynsdale nodded. "He's the game warden, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then." Mr. Tynsdale smiled and walked toward the teacher's parking lot.

"Thanks for offering!" Sheridan called after him, wishing she would have thanked him earlier.

Mr. Tynsdale waved it off. As he started to climb into his car, he gestured toward the main road as if to say, "I think your ride is here."

Sheridan started toward the street, then saw that the big late-model SUV that had pulled to the curb was not her dad's. She stopped as the passenger window descended.

"Do you know where the Forest Service office is?" a man asked. He was thin, almost skeletal, with a close-cropped pad of curly gray hair. He had a long thin nose and wore silver-framed glasses. His eyes were blue and rheumy.

The driver was dark, but didn't look as old as the man who had asked the question. The driver had close-set eyes and a scar that hitched up his upper lip so that it looked like he was snarling.

"You scared her, Dick," she heard the driver tell the passenger, not intending for her to hear.

A slight smile pulled at Dick's thin lips, but he didn't acknowledge his partner's comment.

"Is this a school for the deaf?" Dick asked.

The driver chuckled at the other man's remark. Dick, Sheridan noted, didn't mind trying to intimidate young girls. Sheridan wasn't to be intimidated.

"No, it isn't," she answered a bit testily. "This is Saddlestring Elementary. The U.S. Forest Service office is three blocks down and a block to the right." She pointed down Main Street.

"You stand there much longer you're gonna catch a flu," Dick said dryly. The driver laughed.

"And if you keep talking to me, I'm going to call the police," Sheridan snapped, a little surprised that she'd said it.

"Woo-hoo!" the driver laughed.

Dick turned to him, then back to Sheridan. The power window began to whir closed.

"Thanks for your help, you little—" The window sealed tight, and the insult wasn't heard. But through the glass, Sheridan saw the man say the word "bitch."

The vehicle eased away from the curb and continued down the street. Sheridan watched it go. She noticed that the license plates weren't local. They read: U.S. GOVERNMENT.

Sheridan stood there for a moment, still shocked that an adult would call her that. It made her feel numb inside.

Before she could retreat to the alcove, her dad's green pickup appeared. She was relieved and grateful that he was there, and she ran out to greet him.

"Who was that?" her dad asked, nodding toward the SUV that was now two blocks away.

"A couple of men wanted to know where the Forest Service office was," she said, settling in and pulling the seat belt across her. Maxine's tail thumped the back of the seat in greeting. "They were jerks."

She sat in silence as they drove through town. Both Sheridan and her dad glanced down the street where the Forest Service building was and saw the two men getting out of their SUV. Her dad slowed his truck to a crawl as they drove by. The men wore heavy, high-tech winter clothing that looked brand-new. The man named Dick had a

large black duffel bag. The driver was sliding a long metal case out of the hatchback of the SUV.

"That's a gun case," her dad said.

She looked over to see if he was concerned or not, but couldn't read his expression.

"Why are we going this way?" she asked, since their home was in the opposite direction.

"I wanted to see these guys," her dad responded. "And I was wondering if you would want to help me check on some birds at a place out by the river."

"Some birds?"

"Falcons," her dad said. "I'm doing a guy a favor."

Sheridan had never seen a hawk up close, and she'd always wanted to.

"You bet, Dad," she said.

Sheridan noticed, however, that her dad wasn't looking at her. His eyes were fixed on his rearview mirror, watching the two men enter the Forest Service office.

"Oh," her dad said, as they cleared Saddlestring on the highway. "I'm sorry. How did tryouts go?"

"Bad, I think," she said.

"Did you hustle?"

She smiled. "That's the one thing I did right."

He winked at her. "That's the most important thing, Sheridan. Even if you're just hustling inside, and anybody who looks at you just sees calm. Always be aware of what's going on around you."

THE WIND PICKED up as they drove west. The fresh snow from the day before mixed with the gritty snow from the first storm and whorled in kaleidoscopic ground blizzards. *Snow in Wyoming never stays in one place*, Sheridan thought. *It just keeps moving and rearranging itself, as if it's constantly looking for a better place to live.* They turned off of the highway and drove several miles down a snow-packed gravel road. Drifts were high and sharp on both sides of the pickup.

"There it is," her dad said, pointing through the windshield.

"Is this the house of the man who's in jail?" Sheridan asked.

"Yes, it is. He's a falconer, and he asked me if I would feed his birds."

"Is he a bad man?"

"He's accused of murder."

Sheridan screwed up her face. "Then why are we helping him?"

"We're not," Joe said. "We're keeping the birds alive. There's no reason they should be punished. At least, I hope we're helping them. I didn't see them the last time I was out here to feed them."

There was a broken-down fence, and beyond that a small stone house and a little building of some kind that had collapsed. It wasn't much, she thought, although the steep red bluff on the other side of the river was beautiful and vibrant in the last half-hour of sunshine. Her dad drove into the ranch yard close to the house and turned off the truck. Before getting out, he pulled on a pair of leather gloves.

"It's cold but it's not too bad," he said, opening his door and jumping out. "Nate Romanowski picked a good place here. It's the only spot in the valley where the wind isn't blowing."

Sheridan patted Maxine and closed the door on her. Sheridan didn't need to be told that Maxine should stay in the cab of the truck if they were going to try to feed the birds.

Her dad stood near the front of the truck, looking at the stone house and shaking his head. The house's front door was flung open, and clothes and furniture had been tossed out. Books lay open and facedown in the snow, their pages swelled with moisture so that they were twice their normal size.

"It's been ransacked," her dad said. "They tore the place apart to find evidence."

Sheridan nodded. She thought that maybe her dad was a little ashamed that law enforcement had done this. After all, he was law enforcement, too.

He picked up a few of the books out of the snow. "*The Art of War*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Wealth of Nations*, *Huckleberry Finn*," he said, looking at the spines. Sheridan picked up two from the ground and followed him toward the cabin. Both of the books she had were about falconry.

Inside, they stacked the books on a counter before looking around. It was a mess. Cupboard doors hung open, drawers sagged. Their contents littered the floor. The mattress in the bedroom had been sliced open, its innards of cotton and spring exposed. Even sections of the interior walls had been smashed open.

Sheridan watched as her dad went back outside and brought the furniture back in. Most of the pieces—clearly not all that great to begin with—were damaged. "The least we can do is get this stuff out of the weather," he said. It took her dad eight trips to get everything back inside. She helped as much as she could. One thing she could not stop staring at was a framed photo with cracked glass. The photo was faded, but it was of four men standing shoulder to shoulder in the desert. The men wore white robes, and behind them was a camel. Three of the men looked like Arabs, with dark features and beards. The fourth man was fair, with piercing eyes and a slight smile.

Her dad saw her looking at the picture and picked it up.

"That's Nate Romanowski, by God," he said, pointing at the fourth man. Her dad sounded surprised. He nodded at the picture, and pursed his lips as if reaffirming something.

"What is it?" She asked.

"Nothing," her dad answered, but in a way that she knew meant he didn't want to talk about it.

They went outside, and her dad closed the door behind them. Then he scanned the sky.

"There's one of them," he said, pointing toward the river. She followed his sight line, and there it was, all right.

"That's a red-tailed hawk," he said. "He's immature, not older than a year. You can tell because he's still got a brown tail and a speckled dirty breast."

She looked to her dad, and he smiled. "Go ahead and walk up to him, but give him plenty of space. He needs sort of a cushion between you and him, or he'll get nervous. I'll go get some of their food and be with you in a minute."

The hawk stood on a piece of driftwood near the river. He stood so still that she thought it would be possible to miss him if they hadn't been looking for him. His eyes were on her as she approached.

Her first impression of the bird was that it was smaller than she would have guessed it would be. Still and compact, not revealing his wingspan, the hawk looked to be about the size of a large raven. But unlike a raven, the hawk had a sense of majesty about it, she thought. The bird's head was cocked back slightly, as if looking down on her. Its coloring was finely textured, a beige breast and mottled, bay-colored wings. His large, wrinkled talons gripped the driftwood, and she could see shiny black and curled nails.

From behind, she heard her dad approach. The hawk was now watching him instead of her. She found out why when he approached the bird and lowered a dead sage grouse on the ground in front of it.

The hawk looked at the grouse, looked at Sheridan, looked at her dad. Its movements were precise, almost mechanical.

Then, with a slight shuffle of his wings, he hopped down from the driftwood to the grouse and began to eat.

"This is kind of ... gross, honey," her dad cautioned.

But she was fascinated. She watched the hawk methodically take apart and consume the entire sage grouse. As he ate, a lump above his breast got bigger and bigger.

"That's called his crop," her dad explained. "It fills as he eats. The food is stored there for later. That's one of the reasons these birds can go so long between meals."

She noticed now that blood flecked the hawk's sharp beak, and that bits of down from the grouse floated through the evening air. She watched the hawk carefully. Although its eyes were hard and impassive, she sensed a kind of comfort in him now. He was full, and relaxed.

"This bird is somebody's *pet*?" she asked.

"It's not like that," her dad said. "Good falconers don't break the birds, or domesticate them. They work with them, like partners. The birds can fly away any time they choose to leave."

All that was left of the sage grouse was a pair of clawed feet. Sheridan watched as the hawk dipped down and took one of the feet in his mouth and started eating it. The crunching sound reminded her of when she opened peanuts to eat them.

"Here comes the peregrine," her dad whispered.

She looked up and saw it, an airborne "V" cruising upriver like a missile, a few feet from the surface of the water and ice. She could hear it cutting through the air with a hiss as it went by.

"Stay still," her dad said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I think he'll come back."

"Do you have another sage grouse?" she asked, concerned.

“Yup.”

It took a few moments before the peregrine reappeared. This time, it was flying downriver, and a little closer to the bank.

“What a beautiful bird,” Sheridan said.

“Peregrines are the ultimate hunters,” her dad said. “They’re not the biggest falcons, but they’re the fastest and the most versatile. They used to be endangered, but now there are lots of them.”

She was entranced.

And when the peregrine came back, flared, and lit with a graceful settling of his wings just a few feet away from them, she felt as if something wild, and magical, had happened.

Her dad lowered the other grouse to the ground in front of the peregrine. The little bird, darker and somehow more cocky and warlike than the red-tailed hawk, gracefully tore into it.

“I think I’d rather learn about these falcons than play basketball,” she heard herself say.

IN THE PICKUP, as they drove from Nate Romanowski’s place in the pre-dark of winter, Sheridan realized just how cold she was. Her teeth chattered as she waited for the heater to warm up. Seeing the falcons had made her forget about the cold, forget about how late it was getting.

She noticed that her dad’s cellphone, clipped to the dashboard, was turned off, and she mentioned it.

“I forgot about that, damn it,” he said, turning it on. Her dad rarely cursed.

Almost immediately, it rang and he grabbed it quickly. She watched him. His expression seemed to sag, then harden, as he listened.

“I can’t believe she said that.”

“Is it Mom?” Sheridan asked. But she knew it was.

“I’ll be home in half an hour, darling. I’m so sorry this happened. And I’m sorry you couldn’t reach me.”

Sheridan was concerned. His voice was low, and calm, and very serious. But she knew that inside, he was hustling.

18

THE NEXT MORNING dawned gray and cold, and there was a bulletin on the radio that said a stockman’s advisory had been issued for Northern Wyoming. For their first day back to school, the girls were dressed in clothes they had received for Christmas. Because the girls had become used to sleeping later in the morning over the break, Joe and Marybeth had trouble moving them along so they would be finished with breakfast and ready to go when the bus arrived.

“Christmas is over, ladies,” Joe told them. “Back to work we go.”

Marybeth was quiet, her eyes tired. She had spent most of the previous night awake and crying about her encounter with Jeannie Keeley. Joe had held her, and shared her rage and frustration. Both Joe and Marybeth were painfully aware of the fact that this might be the last “normal” breakfast with the three girls for a while. And both were determined to see it go smoothly. Neither Marybeth nor Joe had said anything to April, Sheridan or Lucy about Marybeth’s encounter with Jeannie Keeley the afternoon before. But April seemed prophetic, and was acutely alert. Throughout breakfast, her eyes darted furtively from Marybeth to Joe, as if trying to pick up a signal or read a glance. Just as Maxine always seemed to know when Joe was going to go out of town, April seemed to sense instinctively that something was afoot. Sheridan and Lucy, rubbing sleep from their eyes, were oblivious to the morning drama.

After they’d gathered their coats and backpacks, Joe ushered all three girls outside to meet the bus. As the bus doors opened, April turned and threw her arms around Joe’s neck and kissed him goodbye. Joe couldn’t remember such an open display of affection from April before. When he returned to the house, it was obvious that Marybeth had seen them from the front window, and she was wiping away tears again.

Before they could talk about it, the telephone rang. Marybeth picked the receiver up, and as she listened, Joe watched her face turn into an ivory mask.

“Who is it?” Joe mouthed.

“Robey Hersig,” Marybeth answered in a sharp voice. Joe could not hear the county attorney speaking, but he could tell what Hersig was saying by Marybeth’s reaction.

“Robey, I appreciate you letting us know,” Marybeth said, and hung up the phone. She looked up at Joe and her eyes were flat and distant. “Robey said that Jeannie Keeley got a judge down in Kemmerer to issue an order for April’s return. The judge issued the order last week, and Robey just got a copy of it. He’s going to fax it to us.”

Kemmerer was a small town in south-western Wyoming. Joe was puzzled. Why Kemmerer?

“Robey says the judge is a loose cannon, some kind of a nut,” Marybeth continued, still eerily matter-of-fact. “He said the order could probably be overturned in court, but until that happens we’re obligated to hand over April if Jeannie wants her.”

Joe stood still, his eyes locked with Marybeth’s.

“Joe, Robey says that if Jeannie comes for her and we don’t turn her over, that *we* could be charged.”

Joe shook his head, as if trying to shake away the news.

Her mask cracked and she broke down, and he welcomed her into his arms. “Joe,” she asked him, “What are we going to do?”

AFTER MARYBETH REGAINED control and seemed to hammer her emotions into the armor of icy resolve, she left for work at the library. Joe, frustrated, spent the day in the field. There was plenty to keep him busy, as always, and he threw himself into it in a barely controlled frenzy. Better to work himself hard physically, he thought, than to sit and contemplate what was happening at home.

He loaded his snow machine and mounting ramps in the back of his pickup, drove up the Crazy Woman drainage as far as the road was plowed, then chained up and continued until he reached a trailhead. He backed the snowmobile down the ramps with a roar, then raced across untracked snow up and over the mountain. In the drainage below was a designated winter elk refuge, and he cruised down through it. Because of the deep snow, most of the elk that normally would have been there had moved to lower ground, even though a contractor had dropped hay for them. Instead of using the refuge, though, the elk were eating Herman Klein's lowland hay, as well as the hay of other ranchers in the valley. Joe didn't particularly blame the elk, but wished they would have stayed around. The few elk that were present on the range were emaciated. He could tell they weren't likely to last through the winter. The storms and the coyotes would get them. They stood dark and mangy, looking pathetic, he thought.

He fought a totally uncharacteristic urge to challenge them with his snowmobile, to charge at them and watch them run. Instead, he turned back and raced up the mountain he had come down, flying through the trees with a recklessness that both frightened and exhilarated him.

He stopped short of his pickup and tried to collect his thoughts. He noted the elk population of the winter range—seventeen sick and starving animals—in his notebook. He would check the other ranges throughout the week, and compile a report for Terry Crump. Joe expected to find the same depressing results in the other refuges as well. A lot of elk were going to die this winter, he concluded. He couldn't protect them. Too damned many would die of winterkill.

ONE THING HAD crystallized in Joe's mind during his breakneck rush up the mountain: He needed to talk with Jeannie Keeley. He drove toward Battle Mountain and the Sovereign Citizen compound but was stopped by a sheriff's department's truck that was blocking the road. The Blazer was sideways on the plowed one-track, its front and back bumpers almost touching the walls of snow.

Joe slowed to a stop as Deputy McLanahan emerged from the Blazer and walked toward his truck. McLanahan raised a hood over his head as he approached. A short-barreled shotgun was clamped under his arm.

Joe rolled his window down.

McLanahan's damaged nose was a grotesque blue-black color and there were half-moons of dark green under his eyes. He looked worse than Joe remembered.

"Where are you heading, game warden?"

The way McLanahan said it, "game warden" sounded to Joe like "son-of-a-bitch."

"Patrolling," Joe said, which was not quite accurate. He had intended to go to the compound to see if Jeannie Keeley had returned. And to advise Wade Brockius that April should not be the pawn in the bitter game Jeannie was playing.

"I thought the hunting seasons were over," McLanahan stated. Joe could tell the deputy was in his hard-ass mode, and he guessed that being assigned to roadblock duty by the sheriff might have precipitated it.

"They are," Joe agreed. "But I've got winter range all over these mountains to check. What's going on here, anyway?"

McLanahan's face looked raccoon-like inside the hood.

"Roadblock. I'm supposed to check anyone coming in or going out."

"Because of the Sovereigns?"

"Yep. They've overstayed their welcome as of today. The eight-day camping limit has done run out."

Joe didn't understand. "What?"

"Folks can camp for eight days in this national forest campground. That's it. Then they have to move on. These yahoos extremists have not only overstayed their welcome, they've tapped into the electricity and the phone lines up there. I'm freezing my ass off down on this road and those assholes are up there surfing the Internet and using county power to heat their RVs." McLanahan spat, but the cold spittle didn't clear his lips. "Sheriff Barnum and Melinda Strickland want them to get the fuck out of our county. So they posted eviction posters up there last night, and I'm here to see if they leave."

So Barnum and Strickland are working together. How odd, *Joe thought*.

"And if they don't leave?" Joe asked.

A grim smile broke across McLanahan's face. "If they don't leave there's a plan in place to take care of business. We won't stand for any more incidents like what happened with Lamar or that BLM guy."

Joe rubbed his eyes. He knew it was a nervous habit, something he had the strong desire to do as stress built up inside him. "What's the connection between the Sovereigns and those two?" Joe asked. "Do they really think they're connected in some way?"

McLanahan's eyes were flat pools of bad pond water. "The day the Sovereigns showed up was the day Lamar got killed," he said, deadpan. "The BLM guy was a week later. Both are Feds. These Sovereign nutcases hate the government. We've got one of 'em in jail, but the rest are up in that camp. Is it really that hard to figure out, game warden?" McLanahan said "game warden" in that way again. Joe controlled his anger, and asked calmly, "What are they going to do?"

"You mean, what are *we* going to do," McLanahan said, the grin still stretched tight. "Melinda Strickland called in a couple of experts in the field. They're in charge of the situation, and they're a couple of bad-ass cowboys."

Joe thought of the two men who had questioned Sheridan, then driven to the Forest Service building. But he said nothing.

"So what are you going to do if they don't leave?" Joe asked again.

McLanahan's bruised and mottled face contorted even further into a kind of leer. Joe realized that McLanahan didn't have a clue what Barnum, Strickland, and the two "bad-ass cowboys" were planning. But he didn't want Joe to know that.

"Let's just say that we're not going to stand around and scratch our nuts like they did in Montana with those Freeman," McLanahan finally said.

"What's that mean?"

"That's priveleged information," McLanahan blustered. He stepped away. "I'm freezing to death standing out here," he said. "I'm going to get in my truck and fire up the heater. You want to go up there you're going to have to clear it with Barnum first."

"Have you seen an older-model blue Dodge pickup come up this road?" Joe asked. "With a man and a woman in it? Tennessee plates?"

"Nope."

Joe watched McLanahan walk away. Joe's mind was swirling with new implications. He rubbed his eyes.

IN THE AFTERNOON, Joe patrolled the breaklands. He drove the BLM roads boldly, and took the ones that would crest hills or traverse sagebrush clearings, choosing to fully expose himself. He was looking for the light-colored Ford. He hoped the driver of the Ford, the man (or men) who had lured Birch Wardell into the canyon, would try to do the same to him. He needed some kind of action that would make him feel he was doing something, and occupy his mind to delay the inevitable.

The inevitable would be later in the evening, when he and Marybeth sat down with April to tell her that her mother wanted her back.

19

JEANNIE KEELEY SAT in the dirty pickup wearing her best green dress and smoking a cigarette. The defroster didn't work worth a damn, and every few minutes she leaned forward and wiped a clean oval on the foggy windshield. When it was clear, she could see the redbrick façade of Saddlestring Elementary. It was Wednesday morning, the second day the children were back at school.

A bell rang, and despite the cold, children filed out of a set of double doors on the side of the building and across a playground that was mottled with snow and frozen brown gravel. Jeannie noted that there was a playground supervisor—a teacher, she supposed—walking stiffly on the perimeter of the children.

Her eyes squinted and fixed on a blond girl wearing a red down coat with a hood rimmed with fake white fur. The girl was in the middle of a group of three other girls huddling near the building. The girls, presumably classmates, were talking and gesturing with animation.

"There she is," Jeannie whispered, pressing her finger against the glass. "There's my April."

Clem, her man, cleaned a little oval for himself.

"Which one?"

"By the building. In that red coat."

Clem hesitated. He obviously couldn't pick her out. "Red coat?" he asked. "There's about twenty red coats."

Jeannie waved him off impatiently. "I goddamned know which one is my daughter, Clem."

“Didn’t say you didn’t,” he answered, clearly looking to avoid a confrontation. She knew he would choose to do that. Usually, she wished he wouldn’t talk at all. Rarely did he say anything worthwhile. She wished he would just shut up and drive.

JEANNIE HAD MET Clem in eastern Tennessee at a Cracker Barrel restaurant. She had been waitressing, just about to quit and move on, and he was seated in her section. He was alone. He had driven her crazy with the length and precision of his order—how, *exactly*, he wanted his eggs cooked (just shy of over-easy with a dollop of butter on the yolk), his gravy ladled (on the side, in a soup bowl and not a cup, with plenty of pieces of pork sausage in it), his fried apples prepared (a double order with extra cinnamon) and his toast toasted (hard on one side, soft on the other). She had stared at the man with his prison pallor and thin dark hair when he’d asked her politely to repeat his order back to him. She did, and then asked him where in the hell he was from that he could order a breakfast like that and expect to get it. Eastern Montana, he said. Jordan. And it wasn’t that he could get a breakfast exactly like that in Jordan. It was that he had been dreaming of this particular breakfast for three years in Deer Lodge, Montana, at the penitentiary. He told her his name was Clem. She told him her name was Suzy. She always lied about her name; it was habit. He ate his breakfast and read a newspaper, and didn’t move until lunch, when she came to take his order again.

“How come your name tag says ‘Jeannie’ if your name is Suzy?” he had asked her.

“If you want lunch, you’ll shut your goddamned pie-hole,” she answered, and was overheard by the manager, an overeager junior achievement type who didn’t even have the guts to fire her in person but sent the accountant to do it.

Jeannie had gathered her few belongings in a bundle and left the Cracker Barrel. Along with her possessions, she took some silverware and a few frozen steaks from the walk-in to her car. But the battery was dead, or something, and the car wouldn’t start. She was furious at this turn of events, but Clem had been waiting for her in the parking lot and he had offered her a ride.

That was nine months ago now. Neither one of them had a place to stay, a place to go, or family to move in with. When Clem heard that a man named Wade Brockius planned to provide some refuge for people like him, he told Jeannie about it and they bought a twenty-year-old travel trailer with what little money they had and drove northwest. She had no idea at the time that she would end up in a place she knew, a place she hated, where her husband had been murdered and her daughter lost to her.

“You look purty in that dress,” Clem said. She shot a look at him.

Here was a man, she thought, a Montana Freeman, who had held out in a dirty farmhouse outside Jordan, Montana, for months in defiance of local, state, and federal law enforcement. A man who had patrolled the flat scrub earth of eastern Montana wearing a ski mask and carrying a Ruger Mini-14 with a banana clip. (His image had been broadcast around the world during the siege.) A man who had spent three years at the state penitentiary in Deer Lodge rather than tell the authorities what he knew about the Freeman leadership. But a man who was so damned scared of *her* that he

flinched when she turned on him and started crying like a eunuch when she threatened to leave him. Clem the Freeman, she thought. *Clem the Freeman*.

The bell rang again. Recess was over. Jeannie watched April and the other girls go back inside the building.

"That woman, Marybeth Pickett, thinks she's a better mother to April than I am," Jeannie said bitterly.

Clem grunted in disapproval of Marybeth.

"She took advantage of me, and my April," Jeannie spat. "She took that child when I was at my worst, when I couldn't care for her. Now that woman wants to keep her because she lost one of her own."

Clem grunted again.

"People been taking things from me all of my damned life. Just because I'm smaller, or had less school than them, they figure they can just *take* what they want from me." Her eyes narrowed to slits, and she lit another cigarette. "My first husband, Ote, took my childhood and my future from me when he moved me out to this damned place so he could be a mountain man. Then that judge in Mississippi took my boy away after that. That damned judge said I abandoned my boy, which was a damned lie. Everybody has a right to go on a vacation, and that's all I done. How could I be blamed for the fact that my baby-sitter, that little bitch, went on vacation, too? But that judge took my boy away anyway."

Jeannie's youngest, her three-year-old daughter, was with Ote's parents in Jackson, Mississippi. They claimed they were going to keep her, but Jeannie had other plans.

She looked at Clem, her eyes blazing. He was shaking his head slowly.

"It's a crying shame," Clem said.

"You goddamned right it is," she said, turning back to the windshield, which was fogging again. "Once we get April, we'll go back for my baby."

Jeannie pulled two envelopes from her purse. One was old and brown, and the other was crisp and white. She shook out a thin sheaf of photos from the brown envelope. Clem watched as she shuffled through the snapshots.

"I'm gonna show these to April to remind her where she comes from," Jeannie said. "This one's her and her brother when they was babies. April used to suck her two fingers all the time, instead of her thumb. Ote said that was unnatural."

She went through all of the pictures again, smiling at some, riffling past others. Then she dropped them back into the brown envelope.

The white envelope contained a court order assigning immediate custody of April to Jeannie. The order was signed by Judge Potter Oliver of Kemmerer, Wyoming.

CLEM HAD BEEN the one who knew of Judge Oliver, and they had driven across the state to meet the judge, after hours waiting in his office. Clem had told her Judge Oliver was "eccentric," but had his heart in the right place. What he meant, she found out, was that Judge Oliver was sympathetic to the Freeman and had okayed several of their most outrageous financial schemes to fund their militia group. Despite petitions and threatened judicial and legislative action to have him removed from the court,

Oliver had somehow stayed on. He was now being forced to retire within the year, he told them. Because of his age.

Judge Oliver was massively fat, with a wispy beard and heavy-lidded eyes. A single green-shaded banker's lamp threw garish shadows across the judge and across the room. When he met with them, Oliver wore an ancient three-piece suit that was shiny from wear and stained with grease spots. Because of an attack of gout, Oliver explained, he was forced to wear slippers on his feet instead of shoes. She saw the slippers under his desk. They were big, like elephant slippers.

Jeannie had pleaded her case for April while Clem sat next to her, holding her hand. Judge Oliver listened impassively, his fingers intertwined across his stomach.

When she was through, the judge asked Jeannie to leave the room while he talked with Clem.

She had waited outside the door for less than ten minutes when Clem came outside to retrieve her. He nodded and told her things were going to be okay.

"I have remanded custody of your daughter to you upon your request," Judge Oliver told Jeannie in a wheezy voice. "My clerk is preparing the order as we speak, and we will fax it to Twelve Sleep County."

Jeannie actually cried with joy, and reached across the desk to shake his huge, crablike hand. She was so happy, and so grateful, thanks to Judge Oliver.

Oliver smiled back, but his eyes were on Clem.

Clem ushered Jeannie to the back of the room while the judge sat at his desk. She could tell when she looked at him that Clem had done something awful.

"The judge asked about compensation," Clem had whispered nervously. "I told him we couldn't pay him very much."

"Clem, you asshole," Jeannie had whispered back, furious. "We can't pay him *anything*!"

Clem had hesitated, then gulped, then pulled at his collar.

"What, damn you?" she asked. Her whisper was loud enough, she thought, to be heard by the judge.

Clem continued to look at his own boots. Then she understood. *The judge wanted compensation.*

She turned toward Judge Oliver and smiled sweetly.

"I'll wait for you out in the truck," Clem mumbled, still looking down.

"You bet your bony ass you will," Jeannie said over her shoulder, through smiling teeth.

"I GUESS I don't get it why you want to go into that school and get her," Clem said. "With that order and all, you could march right up to their house and take her."

Jeannie sighed and rolled her eyes. "Clem, sometimes you're even stupider than usual."

He looked away, stung.

"It's been three long years," she said. "Do you want to drag a crying, screaming kid out of somebody's house?"

Clem frowned. "But you're her mother. She'll want to go with you."

She glared at him. "Who knows what kind of crap and filth about me they've put into her head? Who knows what they'll tell her tonight, now that they know we've got this here order?"

Clem shook his head, confused. But it was obvious he didn't want to argue.

"What this order means," Jeannie said, "is that they can't get her *back*."

Clem dropped his eyes to the floorboards of the truck. "I'm just sorry what you had to do to get it."

Jeannie snorted. "I've done worse."

FOR ONCE, JEANNIE Keeley was lucky. She remembered the layout of the school well enough to walk straight to the office without asking anyone where it was.

Her heels clicked on the tile floor and her green dress swished with purpose as she walked down the hallway. Most of the classroom doors were open, and the sounds of children and teachers came and went like radio stations set on "scan" as she walked.

The school office was empty except for a secretary who sat at a computer behind the front counter. Jeannie had been thinking about this for a long time. This was a small town. Everybody knew damned near everybody else. She had not been inside the school for four years, since April was in kindergarten. She doubted she had made enough of an impression to be remembered. When she finally decided how to play it, it was simple. She operated on one premise: *What would Marybeth Pickett do?* When the secretary looked up, Jeannie smiled at her.

"Hi again. I'm April Keeley's mother," Jeannie said with such familiarity and assurance that the secretary should be ashamed for not recognizing her. "Third grade. I'm here to take her to the dentist."

The secretary looked befuddled, and plunged into a spiral notebook on her desk. "I'm filling in today for the secretary because she came back from Christmas vacation with the flu," the woman explained. "I'm trying to figure out how this works."

Jeannie tried not to whoop with jubilation. She hoped she hadn't looked too elated.

What would Marybeth Pickett do?

"No hurry at all," Jeannie said. "I sent the note with April this morning, so it could be that it didn't even get to you. I don't mean to cause any problems."

The secretary flipped page after page in the notebook, then looked up. Her face was red with embarrassment. "There's nothing here, but that doesn't mean she didn't bring in the note."

Jeannie made a "What can you do?" gesture.

20

SHERIDAN AND LUCY stood waiting at the curb when their father pulled up to the school to pick them up. Sheridan held Lucy's hand. It was darker than it had been

all day, and mist tendrils reached down from the sky like cold fingers. It wasn't really snowing, but ice crystals hung suspended in the air.

"Where's April?" her dad asked, as Lucy climbed over the bench seat to the narrow crew-cab backseat and Sheridan jumped up beside him.

"Mom came and got her this afternoon," Sheridan said, pulling the seatbelt across her.

Her dad nodded, and began to pull away from the curb. Then something seemed to hit him and he slammed on the brakes. Lucy yelled "*Dad!*" to admonish him, but Sheridan turned in her seat to face her father.

"Sheridan," he said slowly, enunciating clearly, each word dropping like a stone. "*How do you know your mother came and got her?*"

"I heard the announcement from the other room," she said. "The secretary came on and asked for April to report to the principal's office. That's what they do."

Lucy came to her older sister's defense. "They made an announcement like that for me when Mom came and got me to take me to the dentist. Whenever they do that it means your mom or dad is waiting in the office for you."

"Did you see her?" her dad asked. "*Did you see your mom?*"

Both girls shook their heads. Sheridan had seen a woman in a green dress pass by her classroom door. But it wasn't her mother. She had no idea why their father seemed so upset. Then she realized what must have happened—Jeannie Keeley must have come for April and taken her away. Sheridan clapped her hand to her mouth. She had been afraid something like this would happen. Her parents had never spelled out what was happening with April, but Sheridan knew whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"Your mom was at work all day at the library and the stables," he said.

And their sister April was gone.

Sheridan began to sob, and Lucy joined her. Sheridan felt awful. April was her responsibility because she was the oldest. Her dad closed his eyes tightly, then opened them and drove. He did not say *It's okay, it's not your fault*.

"I need to call your mother," her dad said, his voice resigned.

JOE LAY AWAKE in bed and waited for Marybeth to join him. It was late, and he was exhausted. He watched Marybeth brush her teeth and clean her face in the vanity mirror. He could hear the murmur of late-night television from downstairs, a nightly habit of Missy Vankueren's.

Marybeth had amazed him once again that night. By the time Joe got home, Marybeth had again channeled her rage and frustration into usefulness. Her ability to push her emotion aside and develop a strategy was stunning, Joe thought.

She had calmed Sheridan and Lucy as well as she could, and made dinner for them all. While she cooked, she methodically called both the principal and the sheriff to notify them of what had happened. She left after-hours messages with the county attorney and three local attorneys, asking them to call her in the morning.

While the girls bathed and watched television with Missy, Marybeth filled a suitcase and several boxes with April's clothing and toys. At the first opportunity, she

announced to Joe, they must make sure Jeannie received April's belongings. She said it with a kind of chilly determination that had unnerved him.

"Jeannie got April before we could prepare our little girl, or kiss her goodbye," Marybeth said. "I will never forgive her for that."

Missy always thought—and often said—that Marybeth would have made an excellent corporate lawyer if she hadn't married Joe Pickett and started having children. Now Joe could see what an efficient and cold-blooded lawyer she could have become.

Marybeth turned the vanity light off and came to bed. Joe held her.

"We're going to get April back," Marybeth said through gritted teeth. "We're going to get her back, Joe."

Three times during the night, Marybeth left the bedroom. Joe slept so fitfully that he woke up and noted her comings and goings each time. He knew what she was doing. She was checking to make sure that her other two girls were still there.

21

ON FRIDAY NIGHT, the public meeting on road closures in the national forests was held in the cafeteria of Saddlestring High School, home of the Wranglers. Joe Pickett arrived late. He parked in the last row of cars in the lot and shuffled through vehicles toward the building. It was bitterly cold, with a clear sky. The stars looked blue-white and hard, and he could hear the rattling hum of an overworked power transformer mounted on a light pole. A set of fluorescent pole lamps cast chilling pools of light on the snow and ice in the gravel lot. The storm predicted by the National Weather Service had skirted the Bighorns and slammed full-force into the Tetons, the Absarokas and the Wind River mountains to the west. Twelve Sleep Valley had received only a skiff of light snow and single-degree temperatures.

Before he had left his home office, Joe had sent a report to his supervisor outlining the doubts he had about Nate Romanowski's guilt, and saying that he thought there was a connection between Lamar Gardiner's murder and Birch Wardell's crash in the foothills. Joe wrote that he didn't have enough information to take his suspicions to the sheriff or Melinda Strickland, but that he hoped to draw out the driver of the light-colored vehicle. He ended his report to Terry Crump by saying that due to personal circumstances relating to his foster daughter, he might need to request time off in the near future. Then he had sent the e-mail, gathered his parka, walked out through the cold to his pickup, and left to attend the meeting.

JUDGING BY THE number of vehicles in the parking lot, Joe expected a full house inside for the meeting. A blast of warm air greeted him as he opened the cafeteria door, and he could see that the room was filled with locals sitting in metal folding chairs. This was definitely an outdoor crowd—hunters, fishermen, outfitters, ranchers. Most of the men wore heavy coats, boots, and facial hair. Melinda Strickland was speaking from behind a podium. Maps were taped to the wall behind her. Joe worked his way

toward the back of the room. A few men Joe knew in the audience nodded greetings to him.

Behind him, Melinda Strickland paused in her briefing about the meeting's protocol.

"Glad you could make it, Joe!" Melinda Strickland said with surprising enthusiasm.

Joe waved and felt his face flush as nearly a hundred men turned in his direction before they settled back around toward the podium. For a moment, Joe wondered why she had greeted him so warmly and publicly. When a number of the faces lingered on him with narrowed eyes, he realized why. It was Melinda Strickland's way of announcing to the crowd that he was on *her* side. The realization left him cold.

Several men were already standing behind the crowd, their backs to the wall, surveying the participants. Two of them, one with curly gray hair and another with hawkish eyes, stood with their arms folded, barely contained smirks on their faces. Joe recognized them as the men who had asked Sheridan for directions. Elle Broxton-Howard, looking smashing in a black outfit with a fleece vest, was there as well. She scribbled earnestly in her pad. Robey Hersig, the county attorney, still wore his jacket and tie from the office and stood off to the side of the crowd, against the wall. He slid over to make room for Joe.

"Any progress with April?" Hersig asked in a whisper out of the side of his mouth.

Joe shook his head. "Nope."

"It's a matter of time," Hersig said. "That's what I told Marybeth. If we can charge Jeannie with abuse or neglect, we can move in and get April back."

Joe turned his head and stared at Hersig. His neck was hot. "That's great, Robey. Let's hope April gets abused or neglected. We'll pray that happens."

"Joe, you know what I meant."

Joe didn't respond.

"Come on, Joe." Hersig leaned over and gently prodded Joe in the ribs. "You know what I meant."

Joe nodded, but didn't look over. Joe knew he was being unfair to Hersig but he didn't care. He was haunted from lack of sleep and frustration.

Hersig was an officer of the court, and Joe's opinion of the legal process right now was poor and getting worse. He was ashamed of the whole system, and angry with the people who made it up. Joe knew Robey wanted to be helpful, but there was little he could do. The situation with April seemed practically hopeless. Judge Potter Oliver's order was valid, if outrageous. An attorney Marybeth had hired (and who they didn't know how they would afford) was filing paperwork to contest the order. If they were successful in a preliminary hearing, a full hearing would be scheduled. But even without inevitable postponements or delays, the hearing wouldn't likely be for weeks or possibly months. The slow grind of the legal system was diabolical in circumstances like this, Joe had concluded. Who even knew if Jeannie Keeley would be around by the time a hearing was scheduled? And what would happen to April in the meanwhile? Marybeth had called the school to see if April was there, but Jeannie had kept her out

of school and out of sight both Thursday and Friday, telling the school that April was sick with some kind of virus.

With each day, April seemed farther away. The emptiness in their house seemed to shout at them. But the shouting would eventually fade. The most frightening thing of all, Joe thought, would be the day when he *didn't* wake up thinking of April—because too much time had passed. The thought depressed him and he shook his head in an attempt to dispel it. He tried to focus on the public meeting at hand.

Melinda Strickland was still talking, holding forth on the policy of road closures. Her voice seemed distant, disconnected, and singsong. Her hair color had been changed again, and was now off-orange.

“What’s she saying?” Joe asked.

Hersig quietly scoffed. “What we are witnessing is an amazing display of the most sanctimonious, dysfunctional, cover-your-ass, bureaucratic horseshit I have ever heard. And if you quote me on that I’ll deny it.”

Taken aback, Joe turned to listen to Melinda Strickland. A retired electrical contractor had been called on, and he asked why a certain road in the Bighorns had been closed to vehicle traffic. He said that he had used the road all his life when he hunted, and that his father had used the road for fifty years before that.

“I wish I had a choice in the matter,” Strickland was explaining to the crowd, “But it’s not as simple as that. I understand what you’re saying, but the policy is in place and there is very little we can do to change it at this juncture. We don’t have the manpower or resources to re-evaluate grazing leases or timber allotments in this fiscal year ...”

Hersig was right, Joe concluded. Strickland was talking in circuitous paths leading nowhere, with confusing little asides thrown in to divert attention from her meaning just as it threatened to become clear. Joe knew that, like Lamar Gardiner, Melinda Strickland had much more discretion in decision-making than she let on. And like Lamar Gardiner, Strickland blamed all of her own unpopular decisions on unnamed, faceless higher-ups, nebulous policy documents, or public meetings that had never been public and that might never have actually occurred.

“... strike a balance between resource management, recreation, the health and welfare of the ecosystem itself ...”

As she droned on, several hands were raised in the audience. She looked over the tops of the hands as she spoke, as if she couldn’t see them. Joe could sense the rising tension in the room. Men fidgeted and cleared their throats. Many sat back with their arms crossed, staring at the ceiling.

“... a thorough, top-to-bottom assessment needs to be completed in order to determine the biodiversity needs of the resource in regard to input from a wide range of scientific and recreator-derived opinions ...”

Finally, one of the men who had raised his hand stood up. As he did so, his flimsy folding chair fell over backward. The sound caught Strickland’s attention, and her face betrayed a flash of terror.

It was Herman Klein, the rancher Joe had shared coffee with the previous week. He introduced himself to Strickland and the room.

“Public comments need to be submitted in advance so we can address them, and I don’t believe your name is on the list,” she said to Klein. “Additional comments can be registered after the presentation. So please, sir, take your seat.” Two Forest Service employees who flanked Strickland at the podium stood up to reinforce her statement. But they did so reluctantly, Joe noticed.

Klein put his hands in the front of his jeans in an awshucks manner, but he didn’t sit down. “Ms. Strickland, I’ve been to enough of these things to know that by the time the ‘public comment’ period rolls around we’ll be either out of time or your decision will have already been made.”

His words sent a ripple of laughter through the room. Joe watched Melinda Strickland carefully. Her face betrayed fear and contempt. She *hated* this. She *hated* the fact that someone would interrupt her.

“Please excuse me for my stupidity,” Klein continued, “but I want to make sure I understand what you’re saying up there. Those of us not used to speaking in government rhetoric have a hard time following you.” More laughter rumbled through the room.

Joe looked around quickly. All of the faces were turned to Herman Klein. Joe recognized more of the attendees than he had thought he would. Several of Klein’s fellow ranchers were scattered throughout. Outfitters who used the forest for hunting and packing trips were there in full force. Local hunters made up the rest of the crowd. In a hunting community like Saddlestring, that meant doctors, lawyers, retailers, and teachers. Spud Cargill and Rope Latham, the roofers, wore their company jackets with the logo of a winged T-Lock shingle on the backs. Joe remembered them from the First Alpine Church. But as far as he could tell, there were no Sovereigns in the room. He had wondered if any of them would attend.

Melinda Strickland was falling into a trap that was being baited by Herman Klein. It was the “I’m just a poor dumb country boy” ruse that locals loved to spring on outsiders and especially government officials. Joe recognized the trap from experience.

“My understanding is that just about half of all the land in the state of Wyoming is owned and managed by the federal government,” Klein said, “Whether it’s the Forest Service, or the BLM, or the Park Service, or whatever. In any case, half of our state is run by federal bureaucrats. Not that I have anything against federal bureaucrats, of course.”

The crowd tittered and even Joe smiled. Melinda Strickland stood with her hands on her hips and her eyes cold. One of her employees started to sit down beside her and she shot him a withering look. He stood back up.

“The problem I got with this,” Klein continued, “is that there is no accountability. If all this land was run by the state, or even local politicians, we could vote them out if we wanted to. If it was run by a corporation we could buy stock and go to board meetings and raise hell. But because it’s run by bureaucrats who nobody elected—all

we can do is come to meetings like this to hear what you're going to do to our forests and our countryside." There were murmurs of assent.

"Excuse me," Melinda Strickland interrupted. "Excuse me. Our agency manages the resources on behalf of the public. We're not dictators here, ya know." She looked to the back of the room for approval. The two men standing next to Robey Hersig nodded to her.

"That may be," Herman Klein agreed, smiling. "But by saying you're managing things on behalf of the public you're basically saying that those of us here in this room who live here *aren't* the public, because you sure as hell never asked us anything."

"That's the purpose of this meeting!" Melinda Strickland countered, exasperated.

"If that's the case," Klein asked, "why did you try to shut me up just a minute ago when I stood up?"

"Because there needs to be order," Strickland said, her face flushed. "We can't do things based on mob rule."

Herman Klein feigned surprise. He slowly looked around the room. "This doesn't look like a mob to me," he said. "This looks like a group of concerned local citizens who came out on a cold-ass night to participate in a public meeting."

"Nailed her," Hersig whispered. "He nailed her."

Joe nodded.

"This," Melinda Strickland said, her voice rising and her finger pointed at Herman Klein, "This is an example of the problem. I've had a district supervisor murdered and a hardworking BLM employee assaulted because of this kind of hateful attitude."

"Me?" Klein asked, genuinely hurt. "What in the hell did I do?"

"You didn't do anything, as far as I know," she said. "But this kind of antigovernment attitude allows things like that to happen! It practically guarantees that things like that will happen!"

Hersig turned his head and he and Joe exchanged glances. The air had been sucked out of the room. Melinda Strickland had, within a minute, successfully shamed the crowd.

"What are you going to do about those Sovereigns?" someone asked.

Melinda Strickland jumped at the chance to change the subject, and compound her momentum.

"A plan is in place to evict the violators," she said. "I'm not at liberty to explain the steps that are being taken, other than to say that a well-thought-out, strategic plan is in place that will end in the desired results."

Several people in the crowd clapped with approval. While they did, Herman Klein quietly sat back down.

"Amazing," Hersig whistled, as he gathered his coat to leave.

AS THE CROWD filed out, Melinda Strickland strode toward Joe in the back of the room. She approached him as if she couldn't wait to shake his hand. The two men in the back joined them. She introduced them to Joe as Dick Munker and Tony Portenson of the FBI.

"This is Joe Pickett," she said to the two men. "He's the game warden I was telling you about."

The gray-haired, skeletal man with the deep voice was Dick Munker. Munker offered Joe a business card.

"Manager, Federal Bureau of Investigation Inter-agency Special Assignment Unit," Joe read. "What does that mean?"

"We defuse volatile situations." Munker smiled with his mouth, his eyes fixed on Joe. "We're here by special request."

"You two insulted my daughter, I believe," Joe said. "She was the one who gave you directions to the Forest Service office."

Munker looked quickly away, but Portenson stared back at Joe with what looked like anxiety. He seemed to Joe to be wishing that there was not a confrontation with Munker.

Melinda Strickland acted as if the exchange had not occurred. "They're very familiar with quite a few of the Sovereigns," she said. "That's why I wanted them here. We want to prevent another Ruby Ridge, or Waco."

Joe nodded.

"In Idaho they called it 'Weaver Fever,'" Munker added, taking Strickland's cue, his voice dropping an octave so he couldn't possibly be overheard by the departing crowd. "It's when the community and the press get whipped up into a fury by a standoff situation and things get ugly. We're here to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I thought it was the FBI who got ugly at Ruby Ridge," Joe said.

Munker set his jaw and his eyes bored holes into Joe. "You thought wrong," he said. He shot a look at Melinda Strickland. "Which side is he on, anyway?"

"Geez, I wished I could get away with wearing a hat like that," Tony Portenson interjected, clearly attempting to change the direction of the conversation. He nodded toward Joe's well-worn Stetson. "But I'm from Jersey, and everybody would know I was faking it."

"I know who you are," Munker said, stifling a smile. Portenson's joke hadn't diverted him. "You're the one who had Lamar Gardiner in custody when he escaped. The game warden, right?"

Joe felt a pang of anger and embarrassment.

"Joe," Strickland said, placing her hand on Joe's shoulder, "Mr. Munker and Mr. Portenson are experts in the kind of situation we have here in Twelve Sleep County. They're in demand all over the west. They're here to advise us on how we should proceed with the Sovereigns. They'll be working here, but also in Idaho and Nevada."

"Other hotbeds of insurrection," Munker added. "Where federal officials have been hurt or threatened."

Strickland opened her purse so Joe would look inside. "They advised me to get *this* to protect myself." He could see the checkered grip of a stainless-steel 9-millimeter Ruger semi-automatic pistol. "I still can't believe I'm actually carrying a gun around with me." Her half-giggling voice belied her words of concern, though, Joe thought.

Joe took his hat off and rubbed his eyes. *Melinda Strickland with a gun.*

He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I think saying this is a *hotbed of insurrection* is pretty strong," Joe cautioned. "I live here and I just don't see it. I'm not saying there aren't some real independent characters around, or some hotheads. But I just don't see that it could be organized like you seem to be suggesting."

Tony Portenson and Dick Munker exchanged glances.

"How familiar are you with the extremists up there in that compound?" Munker asked. "Do you know what kind of people they are? What they believe? We know them, and their type. Some of those individuals have been involved in some of the worst situations that have taken place in this country in the past dozen years. You've got ex-cons, and conspirators, and scumbags who just haven't been caught at anything yet. These scumbags have gotten this far because they've been tolerated and coddled. They need to know that not everybody will take their crap."

Joe stared at Munker in disbelief. He felt another hard twist in his stomach as he listened.

"Ms. Strickland has given us carte blanche to deal with the situation," Portenson said, grinning. "For once, we can deal with these assholes the right way."

Melinda Strickland returned his grin. She clearly liked being admired by colleagues. It made Joe slightly sick. "Sheriff Barnum is completely on board with this," she told Joe. "He's volunteered his complete cooperation."

"I met Wade Brockius," Joe confessed. "He told me they just want to be left alone. That they mean no harm."

"And you believed him?" Munker asked, cocking his eyebrow.

"I don't have any reason not to," Joe said.

"How about a dead Forest Service supervisor? How about a BLM employee left for dead?"

Joe felt a slow rise of anger. "Unless there's something you boys can tell me, I can't see the connection between those crimes and the Sovereigns. Nate Romanowski is already in jail for the Gardiner murder. Are you saying Romanowski is connected to the Sovereigns?"

"Maybe Romanowski scouted the mountains for them," Portenson said, raising an eyebrow. "Maybe Romanowski found that campground for them and called his buddies to come join him here in Lost Bumfuck, Wyoming."

Joe turned on Portenson with a withering stare. "Do you have a single shred of proof that what you say is valid?" Joe asked. "You sound like you're making this up as you go along."

"What about your little girl?" Munker asked. "Didn't one of them take her?"

Joe didn't reply. He couldn't believe April had been brought up. The wound was still too fresh.

"Maybe if you help us out, it will help you get her back sooner."

"How?"

Munker started to speak, then caught himself. A wry smile formed. "At least then we'll know whose side you're on."

Joe fought the urge to smash Munker's face with his fist. Instead, Joe fitted his hat back on and walked away.

JOE WAS SITTING in his truck waiting for it to warm up when Elle Broxton-Howard appeared in his headlights and approached the passenger-side window. She knocked on the glass, and Joe gestured for her to come in. She climbed into the truck and shut the door.

"The heater isn't hot yet," he apologized. "It'll take a minute to get going."

"It's so cold here," she said, shivering. She was huddled in her dark wool coat. "I don't know how you people can stand it out here."

"Sometimes I wonder that myself," Joe said, making conversation.

"Melinda was magnificent in there, wasn't she?" Broxton-Howard said, sounding awestruck.

Joe grunted—not a yes, not a no. He was still seething from his encounter with Munker.

As the cab warmed, Joe could smell her scent. The far-off light from the fluorescent pole lamp profiled her against the window. She was lovely.

Suddenly, Elle leaned across the seat toward him. "I'm starting to think you're the key to my story."

"What?" Joe asked, confused. "I thought you were writing about Melinda Strickland."

"Well ... it's *about* her. But you seem to be a pivotal character in all of this." She stared deeply into his eyes as she spoke. Her eyes glistened. Her lips were parted ever-so-slightly. Her scent seemed even stronger now, somehow. It both troubled and excited him.

"I heard that you've shot three men? That you wounded two men three years ago and that you killed a man last year at a canyon called Savage Run?"

Joe broke off their gaze and stared out the windshield.

"Who told you that?"

"Oh ... people around town."

He felt his throat constrict, and tried to recover.

"We need to talk ... soon," she said. "How about dinner?"

She smiled. Her teeth were white and perfect.

"Sure," Joe said, pausing. "At my house. With my wife Marybeth and the kids."

The light went out of her eyes, and although the smile remained it decreased in wattage. She assessed him coolly.

"I guess that would work," she said, businesslike. "Although I was kind of thinking of something more ..." The sentence trailed off into nowhere. He didn't prompt her to continue.

"I'll give you a call," she said, withdrawing and opening her door. "Your number's in the wonderful little half-inchthick Saddlestring telephone book, I presume?"

"Yup."

"Do you have a fax machine?" she asked suddenly, halfin and half-out.

He told her the number.

"I'll fax over the list of things I can't eat," she said, and was gone.

DRIVING HOME, HE tried to put the evening into some kind of perspective. He failed. All he could foresee, as he thought about it, was inevitable tragedy. Dick Munker troubled him. The man exuded a smug, chip-on-the-shoulder fanaticism, and he had Melinda Strickland's ear. Munker didn't seem like the kind of person who could *defuse* a situation, as he claimed, but the kind who would ignite one. The kind of guy who would spray a campfire with gasoline. Munker, and Portenson, seemed disdainful of the Sovereigns, the community, and Joe himself. They seemed to revel in being insiders with guns, specialists finally given a green light to do what they saw fit. Munker, Joe thought, was the kind of guy who would kill somebody and later claim it was for the victim's own good.

He opened his window and let a knife-edge of icy air cut into his face. Maybe, he hoped, it would sweep the scent of Elle Broxton-Howard's perfume from the cab of the pickup.

Joe felt like his head was caught in a vise. And every day, someone applied another half-turn.

MISSY WAS AWAKE in the dark, watching television on the couch when Joe got home. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw things more clearly. There was an empty wine bottle on its side near the foot of the couch, and a half-full bottle gripped in her other hand. Her face was shiny with tears.

"Are you okay?" Joe asked tentatively.

She raised her head, and her unfocused eyes settled somewhere to the left of his nose. She was very drunk.

"Okay?" she asked. "I'm just fucking wonderful."

He regretted that he had asked.

"It's my BIRTHday," she slurred. "I'm sixty-three. Sixtythree goddamned years old without a house, without a husband, without even a boyfriend for the first time in my life."

Yes, you're old, *Joe thought*, old enough not to act like this. *He began to mount the stairs.*

"It's been a long night," he said, hoping she would stop.

"Stuck here in the middle of nowhere-land, getting older by the minute, and missing my granddaughter April." She sipped from her glass and a bead of red wine ran down her chin. "Even though she's not *really* my granddaughter."

Joe stopped and turned. "That's right," he snapped. "Even though she's not 'really' your granddaughter. How generous of you. I can tell you're pretty busted up about it. You're so upset, you even opened a bottle of wine."

Missy's face fell. "I can't believe you said that to me," she said, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Sorry," Joe said, his voice unsympathetic. "Happy Birthday." He turned and resumed climbing the stairs.

"Ah, you don't really care," Missy said behind him. "You know, Joe Pickett, if you weren't my son-in-law, I'd say you were a very self-absorbed man."

Joe hesitated again on the stairs, thought better of it, and proceeded. He heard the clink of the wineglass against her perfect, six-thousand-dollar teeth.

ALTHOUGH THE BEDROOM was dark, Marybeth was awake.

"Joe, were you arguing with my mother?"

Joe stood still, trying to tamp down his anger from a moment before. Instead, something he had been bottling up gushed out.

"Is she going to *live* with us?" he asked. "Is she going to *stay* here?"

Marybeth turned on her bedside lamp. "Joe, she's going through a tough time. I can't believe you're acting this way." Joe couldn't quit. "*She's* going through a tough time? Look at us, Marybeth. All she has to do is snag another husband and she's home free. We've got the situation with April, and lunatics are running everything ... I've got a guy who somehow expects me to save his life, and I'm pretty sure there's a murderer out there running loose ..."

"Joe, lower your voice," Marybeth said sternly.

"... and I've got a mother-in-law downstairs feeling sorry for herself."

"JOE."

He stopped and caught himself.

"I don't need you to remind me what's going on." Marybeth's eyes flashed. "What do you want me to do, throw her out into the snow? All day long I've been trying to blot out this ... '*situation*' ... with April and do something constructive. And you lose your temper and bring it all back."

Joe looked at her, noticed the tears forming in her eyes. But he was still too angry to apologize.

In a silence that was deafening, Joe got ready for bed and climbed in. She switched off the lamp, turned her back to him and he thought she was pretending to sleep. He touched her shoulder but she didn't respond.

You're right, he wanted to tell her now, *I'm sorry*.

Joe rolled back over and stared at the ceiling and listened to the icy wind outside rattle the window.

JOE WOKE A few hours later, the remnants of another nightmare skittering in his head. He quietly slid out of bed and went to the window. He pressed his forehead against the cold glass and wondered how everything had gotten so bad so quickly.

Things are building up, *Joe thought. His family was coming unhinged, and he was not blameless*. Somehow, *he thought*, I need to do more. To try and fix things. Take some kind of action before everything explodes.

THE NEXT MORNING, Joe was eating breakfast early and alone when Marybeth came down the stairs. He could tell by the way she walked that she was still angry with him, and he watched as she went silently into his office, and came out with something in her hand and a glare in her eyes.

"You got a fax." Her voice was not kind. "I heard it come in late last night."

Joe winced, and reached for the single sheet.

"It's from Elle Broxton-Howard," Joe said, reading it.

"I know."

"She wants to interview me. I invited her to dinner with us."

"I figured that out."

"This is a list of things she can't eat. I guess she has a stack of these all made up and ready to send to people when she gets a dinner invitation."

"Apparently."

"Says here she doesn't eat beef, poultry, pork, olive or canola oil, sugar, processed foods of any kind, or genetically enhanced products."

"Mm-hmm."

"She has a suggested menu here. Baked trout, steamed broccoli, and brown rice. Hell, we don't have any of that stuff," Joe said.

"No, we don't—although I'd be happy to get it for you and your *friend* for your little dinner."

"That's not necessary, Marybeth."

Marybeth turned on her heel and went up the stairs to get dressed.

Joe cursed, and crumpled the paper into a ball and flipped it toward the garbage can in the kitchen.

IN A FOUL MOOD, Joe left the house and drove into the mountains on the Bighorn Road toward Battle Mountain and the Sovereign Citizen Compound. Again, McLanahan's Blazer blocked his path. Joe eased up to it and stopped, while the sheriff's deputy slowly climbed out into the cold to greet him.

"Still on roadblock duty, huh?" Joe asked, opening his window.

"Yes, goddammit," McLanahan said, his teeth chattering. Twin plumes of condensation blew from his nostrils.

"Is there any traffic up here?" Joe asked. "Do the Sovereigns come and go much?"

McLanahan shook his head. "Every once in a while there's a truck or two. But they also use Timberline Road on the other side of the mountain, so I don't see 'em all."

"Any activity this morning?"

"Just you," McLanahan said. "Things pick up at night. Those two FBI guys have been through here a lot. They had quite a bit of sound equipment with them, and I guess tonight they're planning a new phase."

"A new phase?"

McLanahan shrugged. "Don't ask me. They don't tell me anything, and I'm not here at night. All I know is that that Munker guy is a real prick."

Joe cocked his thumb toward the back of his truck. "I've got some clothes and toys to deliver to the compound for our daughter April."

Marybeth had packed the boxes early that morning, before it was light out. It must have been very hard on her, but she didn't say anything about it. Marybeth was not talking with him, and neither was Missy, which Joe counted as a blessing.

McLanahan shrugged. "I'm supposed to inspect all deliveries."

"Feel free," Joe volunteered.

McLanahan developed a pained look, and Joe could see him weighing the time it would take to search through the boxes in the bitter cold versus climbing back into his warm Blazer. He stepped aside and waved Joe through.

AT THE GATE to the compound, Joe stopped as he had before, and got out. A bearded man in a heavy army-surplus parka emerged from the nearest trailer and approached on the other side of the fence. He didn't carry a rifle, but Joe guessed that he was armed. Joe stacked the boxes and suitcase near the barbed wire.

"What you got there?" the man asked.

Joe explained that it was for April Keeley. "Is she here?" Joe asked. "Is Wade Brockius around?"

"I don't give out that kind of information," the man mumbled. "Is it important?" He reached through the strands and opened the top of the highest box to confirm that it was clothing.

"It's important."

The man lifted the top box over the barbed wire and carried it back to the large trailer that Brockius had come out of the last time Joe was there. "We've gotta go through all this stuff," the man said over his shoulder. "Then I'll be back for the rest. I'll ask about Wade and Jeannie."

"I'll wait."

Joe turned to get back in his pickup, his eyes sweeping through the timber around him. Something seemed out of place, and he tried to figure out what it was.

When he saw it, he was surprised he hadn't noticed it earlier. Four silver speakers poked into the sky above the tops of the trees. Their fluted metal openings were aimed at the Sovereign Citizen Compound. The speakers were mounted on poles that were apparently secured to tree trunks within the forest. The speakers were silent, for now.

Munker and Portenson had been busy.

WADE BROCKIUS EMERGED from the trailer and walked slowly down to the fence. His gait suggested arthritis, or a leg injury. Joe went out to meet him.

"This cold weather stiffens me up," Brockius mumbled. "The clothes are thoughtful. Thank you."

"There's two more boxes," Joe said. "Some of April's toys, too."

Brockius nodded, and Joe thought he looked uncomfortable. "Thoughtful," he said again.

Joe looked into the compound at the trailers and RVs. He hoped to catch a glimpse of April, or even Jeannie Keeley, through a window.

"Can I see her to make sure she's okay?"

"She's with her mother right now, Mr. Pickett."

"Does she know I'm here?"

Brockius sized up Joe from beneath his heavy brow. "No, she doesn't."

"Can you tell her?"

Brockius shook his massive head. "I'm sorry. I really don't want to interfere."

Joe swallowed. "I want to let April know that we miss her, and that we love her very much."

Brockius appeared to think it over. Then he shook his head again. "No, I don't think it would be a good idea," he said with finality.

"Just tell me she's here and that she's okay," Joe asked. "It would mean a lot to my wife to know that."

"She's here," Brockius said, in a tone so low that Joe could barely make it out. Then Joe realized that Brockius didn't want to be overheard by anyone in the RVs or hidden away in the brush. "And she seems fine."

"Thank you," Joe said.

"You best move on now, Mr. Pickett." Brockius's voice was raised back to normal now. "We'll make sure the clothes and toys go to good use."

Obviously, the conversation was over as far as Wade Brockius was concerned. He handed the remaining boxes to Brockius, who took them. He and Brockius exchanged a long, silent look. Brockius appeared troubled by the situation with April. *This is not the kind of thing*, he seemed to be communicating, *that I want to be involved in*.

"What comes out of those speakers back there?" Joe asked, as he prepared to leave.

Brockius paused and looked up and over Joe's pickup at the speakers.

"I don't know yet," he said in a bass rumble. "But I suspect we'll be finding out soon."

"Did your people have anything to do with that dirty trick down on the BLM land?" Joe asked, out of the blue.

Joe wanted to see Brockius's reaction to the question.

Brockius's face hardened, as it had before. He was not puzzled by the question, which to Joe meant that the Sovereigns were in communication with someone on the outside—or that they were involved with the ambush. Brockius turned to walk back to his trailer.

"I'd suggest you look a little closer to home, Mr. Pickett," Brockius said over his shoulder.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO look closer to home came almost immediately, as Joe descended from the snowy mountains. He was still in deep snow, with twenty miles of rugged BLM breaklands laid out in a vista below him. The town of Saddlestring, beyond the breaklands, glittered in the morning sun.

His radio crackled to life.

"I think I've got a situation out here." The signal was strong, and the voice belonged to a woman. "This is Jamie Runyan calling BLM headquarters. Does anybody read me?"

Joe heard a rush of static and assumed it was somebody trying to reply to Jamie Runyan from town.

"I didn't get that at all," she said. "Try again."

There was another squawk.

"Damn it," she said. "I don't know whether anyone there can hear me or not, but I'm out in the joint management unit and I see a light-colored pickup up on top of a hill. I think it might be the vehicle Birch Wardell described. I don't know whether to pursue it or not."

Contact, Joe thought. He reached for the microphone, and waited for Jamie Runyan to repeat her message to the dispatcher once again.

"This is game warden Joe Pickett," he said when she was through. "I read you loud and clear. Please stay put. I'm about fifteen minutes away from you."

He increased his speed, and roared down the mountain as fast as he could without sliding off the road.

JAMIE RUNYAN'S TAN pickup with the BLM logo was pulled to the side of the gravel road with its exhaust burbling. Joe stopped behind her and swung outside. While driving down the mountain, he had unfastened his Remington Wingmaster shotgun from his saddle scabbard behind his seat, and he carried it to her vehicle.

She was thick-bodied and plain, with a wide, simple face. She rolled her window down as he approached.

"Where did you see the truck?" Joe asked, scanning the horizon. Because she had parked in a depression, her truck would be hard to see from a distance.

She gestured up the road, over the hill. "I was going up that hill when I saw it. It was a light-colored, older-model pickup on the top of the next ridge. It looked to me like the guy was pulling our fence down with a chain."

"Did he see you?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. I backed down the road out of sight when I saw him."

"Has anyone from your office replied to you?"

She shook her head. "I think I'm out of range in these damn hills. The only person I heard was you."

Joe nodded. "Do you mind if I borrow your truck? You can stay here in my truck and keep warm."

She searched his face while she decided. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I've got a theory about what happened," he said. "If you let me borrow your truck I'll look like I'm BLM and I can test it out."

She hesitated. "I don't know. Only authorized government personnel are allowed to drive these vehicles."

"I'm authorized," Joe lied. "The Game and Fish has an inter-agency agreement with the BLM." He thought he sounded convincing, and it worked.

She got out of the cab, remembering to take her sack lunch.

Joe racked a shell into the chamber of his shotgun, then flipped the safety on and slid it muzzle-down onto the floorboards. He narrowed his eyes and gunned the truck up the gravel road.

As he cleared the hill he could see the light pickup Runyan had described. And she was right—it was in the process of pulling a post-and-wire fence down with a chain attached to its bumper. The fence had been erected by the BLM and Forest Service to keep the public off of the management study area.

The truck was about a half-mile from Joe. On his present course, he would soon be on the road beneath it. In his mind, he replayed the scenario Wardell had described to him that night in the hospital: how the truck took off out of sight over a hill while Wardell pursued. Joe wasn't sure of the terrain over the hill, but he assumed it would be similar.

Despite the cold, Joe rolled down his window so he could hear the other vehicle better as he drove. As his BLM truck bucked and pitched on the frozen gravel road, the light-colored truck dropped in and out of view. Soon, Joe could hear the motor of the light-colored truck grinding in the still morning air. In a minute, Joe would be close enough to look up and see the driver, he thought, or perhaps a license plate.

But the next time the truck came into view, it was speeding away. Joe saw its outline against the deep blue sky as it crested the hill and went over it.

Following Wardell's script, Joe jerked the wheel and left the gravel road, pointing the squat nose of his BLM truck up the hill where he had last seen the other truck. He crashed through two crusty drifts, and nearly lost traction as he approached the top of the hill. His back wheels threw plumes of frozen gray dirt as the pickup fishtailed on dirt and ice, but then they caught solid rock and propelled him up and over the top.

Joe's heart pounded in his chest as he crested the ridge and plunged over it. The tire tracks from the other truck went down the hill and vanished into a wide, tall swath of evergreen brush at the bottom.

Joe reached for the shotgun, which had slid toward the passenger door during the rough ride up the hill, and pulled it close to him as he descended.

On cue, a light-colored truck emerged from the brush below and started climbing the opposite slope, directly across from him. The truck labored up the hill as well, sliding a little in loose shale and kicking out puffs of dislodged rock. At the rate Joe was flying down the hill and the other pickup was laboring up the opposite slope, he would be on it in seconds.

Joe tapped the brakes to slow his reckless plunge and gripped the wheel tighter. The tracks he drove in would soon be swallowed in the tangle of ancient juniper.

Suddenly, the brush closed over the top of his BLM truck and branches scratched the sides of his doors like fingernails on a chalkboard. A sap-heavy bough slapped the

windshield, leaving needles and gray-blue berries smashed against the glass. He caught a flash of an opening through the branches ahead

But then Joe did something Birch Wardell hadn't done. He slammed on his brakes. Then, throwing the pickup into reverse, he floored the accelerator at the same time that he cranked the steering wheel to the right. The engine whined and the tires bit, and the vehicle flew back and to the side through the brush in a cacophony of snapping branches.

BOOM!

Joe hit something metal and solid so hard that his head jerked back and bounced off the rear-window glass. He slumped forward over the wheel as bright orange spangles washed across his eyes. Then smoke, or steam, enveloped the cab of the truck in darkness. Trying to shake his head clear, he looked up and smelled the steam. It was bitter and smelled like radiator fluid.

The spangles had shrunk to the size of shooting sparks when he fell out of the door of the pickup and landed on his hands and knees in the dirt and snow. His hat was smashed down hard on his head, and he pushed it up so he could see.

The twisted grille of the light-colored pickup furiously spewed green steam. A pool of radiator fluid smoked on the ground, and was beginning to cut its way through the snow toward him. Standing, Joe retrieved his shotgun from the seat. He walked around the back of the BLM pickup toward the vehicle he had smashed into.

The windshield of the light-colored truck was marred by a single spidery star where a man's head would have hit it. Joe skirted the steam and looked into the cab to see a man slumped over the steering wheel, a cap askew over his face and dark rivulets of blood coursing down from under the cap into the collar of his coat. Joe recognized the coat, and the logo that was painted on the truck's door even though a thick smear of mud had been applied to obscure it.

It was a flying T-Lock shingle with wings.

Joe opened the door, and Rope Latham, the roofer, moaned and rolled his head toward him.

"How bad are you hurt, Rope?" Joe asked.

"Bad, I think," Rope said. "I think I'm blind."

Joe reached into the cab and lifted the baseball cap that had fallen over Rope's eyes. A three-inch cut ran along Latham's eyebrows. The cut looked like it would require stitches, Joe thought, but it didn't look much worse than that.

"I can see!" Rope cried.

"Climb on out of there," Joe ordered, prodding Rope Latham in the ribs with his shotgun. "Turn around and put your hands on the truck and kick your feet out."

Moaning, Latham obeyed.

Joe pulled each of Latham's arms back in turn and snapped handcuffs on his wrists. Then he turned Latham and pushed him back into the truck. Joe saw a Motorola Talkabout handheld radio on the seat that Rope had obviously used to communicate with the other truck.

“Two trucks,” Joe said. “Two identical Bighorn Roofing trucks. One goes down the hill and pulls over at the last second into the brush. Another truck that looks just the same starts up the other side of the hill where it’s been parked out of sight. Looks like one truck that crosses the draw and goes on up the other side. Makes the poor BLM guy think he can cross the draw just like that other truck just did. Pretty good trick, even though he didn’t die out here like you two intended.”

Latham grimaced. Blood was pooling in his eyes as it ran down his face.

“There’s a six-foot drop down there once you clear the brush, isn’t there?” Joe asked.

“Spud thought of it,” Latham said. “But we waited a couple days for that BLM guy to bite. It worked pretty good before.”

Joe didn’t say that seeing twin antelope fawns had led him to think of how they’d pulled it off.

Keeping Rope Latham in his peripheral vision, Joe stepped back and looked up the opposite slope. Spud Cargill, the other half of Bighorn Roofing, had stopped at the top of the hill and was looking back with binoculars. Joe grabbed the hand-held radio from Spud’s pickup and held it up to his mouth.

“We’ve got you now, you son-of-a-bitch,” he said, then tossed the radio back inside. Joe raised his arm and pointed his index finger at Cargill, who was still looking back through binoculars, and pretended to shoot him.

Spud’s truck started to move again, and vanished over the top of the hill.

WHILE JOE WAITED for Jamie Runyan to arrive in his pickup, Rope Latham began to tremble. He hoped Latham’s injuries weren’t worse than they appeared.

Joe read Rope his Miranda rights, then turned on the micro-recorder that he hid in his shirt pocket.

“Why were you targeting the BLM boys?” Joe asked. He leaned against a tree with his shotgun pointed vaguely at Rope Latham. The back of his own head had started to throb from the collision.

“They owed us money,” Latham said dejectedly. “So did the goddamned Forest Service.”

“They owed you money?” Joe was confused. “What?”

“Those bastards owed us from last summer. Twelve thousand dollars’ worth of work we did for them on their buildings. We replaced all the roofs, and paid for the material in advance. But it’s been six months and we still haven’t been paid.” Latham spat bloody saliva into the brush. “Some goddamned problem with the check request the BLM sent to Cheyenne has held it all up, and me and Spud want our money. When it comes to paying their bills, our government is just fucked. ‘Maybe next month,’ they tell us. Shit, how would those BLM shitheads feel if their paychecks were even a week late, much less six months?”

Joe pushed himself off the tree. The back of his neck was tingling, and it wasn’t from hitting the window.

"These people throw money around like it isn't even real, you know? Just look at this stupid 'joint management' area that cost three million dollars between them just to string some fence and put up some signs."

"What did you say before about the Forest Service?"

Latham's voice suddenly caught in his throat. "Nothing."

"No, you said the Forest Service owed you money as well."

"Fuckers." Latham coughed. "They're the worst of all. They owe us fifteen thousand from work we did *last* summer!"

"This would be Lamar Gardiner," Joe said flatly.

"It *was* Lamar Gardiner," Latham said, smiling wickedly. His teeth were pink from a cut in his mouth. "He wouldn't even return our calls about it, and he told Spud that if he didn't stop harassing him, we'd be off the government bid list for good and he'd press charges!"

"Move aside," Joe ordered, and Latham slid along the truck away from the cab.

Reaching inside, Joe pulled the bench seat forward. A well-used compound bow was wedged between the seat and the cab wall. A narrow quiver of arrows lay next to it.

Joe slid one of the arrows out and held it up.

"Bonebuster," Joe said.

Latham's eyes bulged, and his face drained of color. At the same time, the cut on his forehead started to gush again.

Joe was stunned. "This was about some *unpaid bills*? You killed a man and tried to kill another because their agencies owed you money?"

Latham nodded, fear in his face because of Joe's tone.

"I ought to shoot you right here and leave you for the coyotes," Joe said icily. "Do you realize what you two idiots almost set in motion?"

SHERIFF O. R. "Bud" Barnum sat shell-shocked as Joe Pickett dropped the bow and arrows with a clatter on his desk after he had turned Rope Latham over to Deputy Reed.

"I got one of 'em," Joe said. "Spud Cargill is the other one and he got away. Rope shot the arrows and Spud cut Lamar's throat."

Barnum glared.

"Rope confessed everything on the way into town," Joe said. "I've got it on tape."

"Did you read him his rights?"

"That's on the tape."

"So where's Spud?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "Why don't you find him? You're the sheriff."

Barnum stared at Joe, his eyes darkening.

"I know you're busy with the Sovereigns and Melinda Strickland and '*Phase One*' and all, but Spud's driving a tan pickup with a Bighorn Roofing logo on the door and Wyoming plates. It shouldn't be all that hard to find," Joe said. He put his hands on Barnum's desk and leaned toward him.

"This had nothing to do with any antigovernment movement in the county. It had to do with roofers who didn't get paid when they should have been paid." Joe glared at Barnum. "And it had a lot to do with sloppy police work by the sheriff's department."

Veins in Barnum's temples began to throb. But he said nothing.

"When you release Nate Romanowski, please tell him I'm looking forward to talking with him," Joe said. "That is, if your deputy is through hitting him with a hot shot."

Joe turned and walked out.

THAT NIGHT, IN bed, Marybeth shook Joe awake. When he opened his eyes, he found her staring at him.

"I'm sorry about last night and this morning," she said. "You didn't deserve it."

"Yes, I did. You were right," he said, his mood suddenly lifting. "It's okay. The tension level was pretty high around here."

She smiled, but stayed silent.

"What?" he asked, finally.

"Joe, sometimes you amaze me. Two antelope fawns?"

He laughed.

23

IN THE MORNING, Joe confirmed Rope Latham's story with Carrie Gardiner. He found her standing in front of her house in a heavy coat, hugging herself with both arms. A big moving truck had backed up to her front door across the yard, and a crew was carrying furniture and boxes up a ramp from her house into the back of the trailer.

"I heard," Joe said, tipping the brim of his hat toward the moving truck. "Where are you going?"

"My parents live in Nebraska." She sighed. "Still on the farm. They've got room for all of us."

"I'm sorry to see you leave."

Her eyes flared briefly. "I'm not," she said.

"You heard about Rope?"

"Yes. The sheriff called this morning. Thank you for arresting him."

"Yup."

"Please tell me what happened," Carrie said.

She listened, staring at her winter boots, while Joe told her everything Rope had said.

When he was done, she nodded.

"I believe it," she said.

"You do?"

She nodded sadly. "I wish it didn't make sense, but it does. The roofers even called our house a couple of times to complain. I spoke with Spud Cargill once, and he told me about it, so I asked Lamar about it when he got home that night."

"Lamar was going through a real tough time last summer. I guess he realized he wasn't going any further in the Forest Service and it was really bothering him. He'd been applying for other districts for the past three years, and jobs at regional headquarters, but he wasn't getting any encouragement. I think he realized that he would always be a midlevel manager, and he didn't take it well at times. It was hard on me, and on the kids."

Joe listened, shifting his gaze occasionally to watch the team of movers emerge from the house with something and disappear into the back of the truck.

"I'm not excusing what Lamar did up there in the mountains," she said. "Shooting all those elk makes me sick to my stomach. But I know that his frustration level was really high. For the first time since we'd been married, he was snapping at me and the kids. He was drinking too much. I was thinking about leaving him just before, well, you know ..."

"Carrie, what about the roofers?"

"Oh, yes." She flushed. "From what Lamar told me, he did a standard request for bids in the spring to get all the buildings shingled. Bighorn Roofing—Spud and Rope—had the best bid. Lamar said he gave them a verbal okay to start working, then submitted the paperwork to the regional office in Denver. He said that in the past, submitting the paperwork was just a formality.

"But this time, after a couple of months, the regional office sent him everything back and said he hadn't filled out a couple of the forms properly. Lamar was really angry when they did that, so he resubmitted everything and didn't tell the roofers about it."

"When was this?" Joe asked.

"I think it was about August," she said. "The work was just about done already, and the roofers were getting mad about having to front the Forest Service all of the materials and labor without getting paid. Then the regional office denied the request altogether, because they said Lamar had entered into a contract without their approval."

Joe shook his head.

"Lamar was fit to be tied over that one."

"I can believe that he would be," Joe said.

"They hung him out to dry," she said. "They didn't give one bit of consideration to what it would be like for him out here in the field. They didn't really care that he had to look people in the eye and tell them they wouldn't get paid for the work they did."

It was so ... *believable*, Joe thought. And so frustrating. It didn't have to happen this way.

He thanked her and told her once again that he was sorry she was leaving.

As he approached his pickup, she called after him.

"Oh, Mr. Pickett—I didn't tell you who at regional headquarters kept sending back Lamar's request."

Joe turned.

"It was Melinda Strickland," she said bitterly. "The woman who thinks my name is Cassie."

THE COMBINED LAW-enforcement agencies in and around Twelve Sleep County scrambled to find Spud Cargill, who was still at large. From the radio in his small office, Joe monitored their progress while writing an overdue report to his supervisor. A rookie deputy sheriff reported that Spud Cargill's empty pickup had been found near the Saddlestring landfill with the driver's-side door open and tracks in the snow indicating that Spud had run toward the two-lane highway. "The suspect's tracks end at the pavement," the deputy said. "He either had another car to climb into, or he stole one, or somebody picked him up on the highway. I don't know where in the hell he is." A citizen in town reported seeing someone who looked like Spud running across the Saddlestring High School football field, and the police were sent to check it out. It turned out to be the boys' basketball team running outdoor windsprints for punishment. An all-points bulletin was issued by Sheriff Barnum, and the Wyoming highway patrol set up roadblocks on all four highways out of Saddlestring to check drivers, passengers, and anything that looked suspicious. Barnum dispatched his deputies to Bighorn Roofing, Spud's residence (where he lived alone except for a caged badger in the garage), and the Stockman's Bar, where Spud liked to drink beer after work.

Spud Cargill could not be found.

IT HAD TURNED out to be a nice day for a manhunt, Joe observed through his window. After he had come home from seeing Carrie Gardiner, the wind had stopped, the sky had cleared, and the sun swelled bright and warm in the western sky. Water from the melting snow dropped like strings of glass beads from the eaves of the house and melted holes in the snow on the ground. The sound of running water through the outside drainpipes sounded like music to Joe. He loved water like a true Westerner. There was never enough of it. It pained him when the wind kicked up and blew the snow away. It seemed unfair.

He finished the report and e-mailed it to Terry Crump. He ended it by writing that since Rope Latham was in jail and Spud Cargill would no doubt soon be caught, the pressure that had been building in Twelve Sleep County should ease up.

At least he hoped so. For the first time in days, he didn't have a dull pain in his stomach.

He wished he could have been there when Melinda Strickland, Dick Munker, and Tony Portenson heard that the likely motive for the killing of Lamar Gardiner and the ambush of Birch Wardell was not crazed, organized, anti-government hate, but anger at unpaid bills from federal agencies. Joe couldn't help but shake his head at that. He wondered if Munker and Portenson would simply sneak out of town now, and if Melinda Strickland would follow.

Then he could concentrate on something that mattered: April.

"JOE, THERE'S SOMEONE out front," Missy said from his office doorway. There was concern in her voice.

Joe had dozed off in his chair with his feet on his desk and his hat pulled down over his eyes. The week had worn him out.

He stood up and rubbed his face awake with his hands and looked at his mother-in-law through his fingers. Her face and hair were ... perfect, the result of at least two hours under construction, he guessed. She wore an oversized camel-colored cashmere sweater, pearls, shiny black tight pants, and shoes with straps and stiletto heels. She was obviously not dressed for dinner at their house.

Then he remembered why he was suddenly awake. She stepped aside for him and he parted the curtains in the living room.

"Who is that man?" she asked. "He didn't knock on the door or anything. He's just sitting out there."

A battered and ancient snub-nosed Willys Jeep was outside, its grille and mesh-covered headlights leering over the top of the picket fence like a voyeur. Canvas from the shredded top hung in strips inside the vehicle from a bentup frame. Sitting on the hood of the Jeep, with his heavy boots resting on the front bumper, was Nate Romanowski. The setting sun, now dropping into a notch between two mountain peaks, backlit the visitor in a warm and otherworldly glow. The red-tailed hawk sat hooded on Romanowski's shoulder, making him look like a pirate with a parrot. The peregrine gripped Romanowski's fist, flaring his wings for balance.

"I don't know how long he's been out there," Missy said, fretting. "Marybeth and Sheridan will have to pass right by him to get to the house."

That's right, *Joe remembered*. Marybeth's picking Sheridan up from basketball practice.

"His name is Nate Romanowski," Joe said.

Missy gasped and raised her hand to her mouth. "He's the one who ..."

"He didn't do it," Joe said bluntly.

Joe let go of the curtain and went to find his coat. Although the sun had warmed up the afternoon nicely, it would be much different when the sun dropped behind the mountains.

As he pulled his coat on, he noticed that Lucy had emerged from her bedroom and was standing next to Missy. It was a jarring sight, and he realized he'd done a double-take. Lucy was a miniature version of Missy Vankueren. The sweater, pants, pearls, and shoes she wore were identical to her grandmother's, except that the sweater was cotton and the pearls were fake. Even her swept-up hairstyle was the same.

Joe looked up for an explanation, and found Missy beaming.

"Isn't she adorable?" Missy gushed. "The outfit is a late Christmas present from me. We're going out to dinner tonight, my little granddaughter and me."

"Going out? Like that?" Joe asked, incredulous.

"Show him," Missy commanded.

Lucy swung her little hips and did a slow turn with her arms raised above her head. She looked and moved so much like Missy that Joe cringed.

“What did you do that for?” he asked, refraining from saying *what in the hell* because of Lucy.

Missy looked back, hurt.

“Come on, honey,” she said, turning on her heel. “Your daddy doesn’t appreciate style.” Lucy turned as well, following Missy stride for stride toward the bathroom. Unlike Missy, though, Lucy looked over her shoulder as she entered the bathroom and winked at Joe. Lucy knew it was a joke, even if Missy didn’t.

Joe didn’t know whether to laugh or run from the house.

“I OWE YOU,” Nate said, as Joe approached.

“No, you don’t.”

Nate fixed his sharp eyes on Joe. “I asked you for two things and you did both of them. I knew I could trust you.”

Joe stuffed his hands in his pockets and kicked uncomfortably at the snow. “Forget it. I’m just real glad we found the guys.”

“Is Spud Cargill still out there?” Nate asked.

“As far as I know.”

Nate nodded and seemed to be thinking about that.

“Why? Do you know something?” Joe asked.

There was a hint of a smile. “I know just enough to be dangerous. I overheard a lot of things in that jail—snippets between Barnum and his deputies and between Melinda Strickland and Barnum. And I could tell what they were thinking by what they questioned me about. Things are in motion to get those Sovereigns out of here. The sheriff and Strickland were convinced I was one of them, you know. Dick Munker even tried to get me to admit I was a soldier for the militia types. That whole sick crowd is real disappointed to find out that all the Sovereigns are guilty of at this point is hating the federal government—which isn’t a crime—and staying too many nights in a campground. They’re trying like hell to pin something on those people up there.”

“Maybe now things will ease off,” Joe said, hopeful.

“Don’t count on it.”

“No,” Joe said sternly. “It *needs* to happen.”

A set of headlights appeared on Bighorn Road from the direction of town. Absently, Joe watched the car approach and the headlights pool wider on the freezing road. It was Marybeth, and Sheridan.

“My wife’s home,” Joe said. “Would you like to come in? It’s getting cold out here.”

Instead of answering, Nate studied Joe, his eyes narrowing.

“What?” he asked, annoyed.

“You really are a good guy, aren’t you?”

Joe’s shoulders slumped. “Knock it off.”

“I’m not kidding around,” Nate said softly. “I’ve spent most of my life around hypocrites and assholes. McLanahan and Barnum types. Most of them haven’t had a thimbleful of character. So it’s just kind of heartwarming to see that there are still some good guys left.”

Joe was grateful for the darkness because he knew his face was flushing.

"Are you drunk, Nate?"

Nate laughed. "I had a few. After I saw what they did to my cabin."

"They trashed it, all right. Sheridan and I put a bunch of your stuff back in your house." The minute Joe said it he cringed, because he knew what was coming.

"See!" Nate exclaimed, raising his arm and turning it as if showing Joe off to his peregrine. "See what I mean? You *are* a good man. With a good wife and good children!"

After what seemed like forever to Joe, Marybeth had pulled off the road and parked her car next to the Jeep. She got out with an armful of groceries. Sheridan walked around the car, her eyes fixed on Romanowski and the hawks. Joe could tell she was entranced.

Joe introduced Marybeth and Sheridan to Nate Romanowski.

"I was just telling your husband what a nice family you have," Nate said. "I'm happy to find people like you."

Marybeth and Joe exchanged glances.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Romanowski ..."

"Call me Nate," he interrupted.

"... Nate," Marybeth amended, "But I've got to get these things in and get dinner started."

Nate shook his head ruefully. "And get dinner started," he repeated. "That's lovely."

"Would you like to join us?" Marybeth asked.

"Please?" Sheridan pleaded. "I'd like to ask you some questions about falcons and falconry."

Everyone looked to Joe.

"I already invited him in," Joe grumbled.

WHILE MARYBETH PREPARED dinner in the kitchen, Joe listened as Nate Romanowski discussed his birds with Sheridan in the living room. Nate spread newspaper on the floor and borrowed two chairs from the table for the birds to perch on. He lowered the birds to the tops of the chairs, where they perched facing backward with their tail feathers down the chairbacks. Missy had taken Lucy to town in the van for dinner. If Nate thought the sight of two identically dressed females with a fifty-something age difference was odd, he didn't say anything.

Nate and the falcons seemed to fill the living room, Joe thought. Although the birds were no more than twelve inches tall on the chairbacks, they projected a much larger aura. Like Nate himself, they seemed to be creatures of a different, wilder, and more violent world.

While Sheridan sat enraptured, Nate explained the accessories on the birds themselves, from the tooled leather hoods that covered their eyes but not their hooked beaks, to the long, thin leather jesses that hung from their ankles. The jesses, Nate said, were how the falconer kept a bird secured on his hand. Gently, he lifted the peregrine on his gloved fist and showed Sheridan how he twined the jesses through his fingers. The grip of the jess in his hand, he said, provided balance and stability for the

bird and also prevented it from taking flight or walking up his arm. At the end of the jess was a swivel and a leash.

"What if it tries to fly?" Sheridan asked.

"Then the bird just kind of flops around like a chicken," Nate answered. "You'd be surprised how much lift they've got and how much power. A scared falcon flapping his wings can almost pull you off your feet."

He held the peregrine close to Sheridan, letting her examine it.

"I feel sorry for it, having to wear that hood," Sheridan said, gently stroking the bird's breast with the backs of her fingers.

"Then let's get rid of it," Nate said, pulling two small strings and slipping the hood off.

The falcon cocked its head toward Sheridan, studying her with rapid, almost mechanical snaps of its neck. The bird's eyes were preternaturally alert and piercing. Nate told Sheridan how those eyes worked, how they had more cell surface area inside than human eyes so they could see in the dark and catch movement, like a mouse, from more than a mile away.

"I've heard it said that if you look into a falcon's eyes you can see forever," Nate said softly, in his strange blunt cadence. "I've also heard it's bad luck, because looking into a falcon's eyes is like looking into your own black, murderous heart."

Sheridan's own eyes widened at that, and she looked to Joe.

Joe shrugged. "I've never heard either one of those."

Nate smiled mysteriously.

"One thing I do know is that you can tell the difference between a falcon that's wild and a falcon that's broken by the look in their eyes. I've seen it at aviaries and zoos. The falcons there look at you, but something is missing behind the stare."

After a moment, Sheridan said, "Why don't we put his hood back on?" And Nate did.

"How do you get these birds?" she asked.

"Some I trap when they're young," he said, describing how he mountaineered on cliffs to find the aeries, or nests, to set the mesh webs. He would stay at the site, ready to pounce if a bird hit the trap. "Others I've rescued when they've been hit by a car, or shocked by high wires."

"Falconry is considered the sport of kings in some Middle Eastern countries," Joe added, nodding.

"How long can you keep them?" she asked.

"It's not how long you keep *them*. It's how long they decide to stay with *you*. They can fly away any time they want and never come back. So every time they come back, it's a precious gift."

"What do they hunt?"

Nate explained that while all falcons are hawks, not all hawks are falcons. He said that each bird had its particular specialty, and that falconers often chose the birds based on that. Red-tailed hawks, like the one on the chair, were best on rabbits and

squirrels. Falcons were best on sage grouse, ducks, and pheasants—upland game birds. The mere silhouette of a falcon in the sky, he said, would make ducks on the water freeze or seek cover, because a duck in flight would be instantly intercepted and destroyed. Ducks knew the imprint of a falcon from birth, and knew to fear it.

“The peregrine, though, is unique: It will hunt just about anything. That’s why peregrines are so prized, and why they were protected for so many years when it looked like they were going extinct. For a peregrine, its specialty is prey in general, and they can hunt ground game, upland game birds, or waterfowl.

“You can’t just keep a raptor like a pet and be a true falconer,” Nate said. “Falconry requires hours of patience, training, and communicating with your bird. The birds must be exercised daily and kept in top condition—to hunt well, and in case they leave. You have to think like a falcon, like a predator, but at the same time you can’t dominate the bird. If you do that, you break it. If it’s broken, it’s ruined forever. It’ll fly off for sure, and its defenses will never again be as sharp. You’re imposing a death sentence on a falcon if you break it. So if you respect the bird, you’ll work to keep that wild, sharp edge the bird naturally has.”

Then he nodded toward a thick glove in his falconry bag.

“You want me to put that on?” Sheridan asked.

“Don’t you want to hold the bird?”

“Dad, is it okay?”

Joe wasn’t sure what to say. Sheridan’s eyes were glowing, and Romanowski continued to smile inscrutably.

“Sure,” Joe finally said.

Nate took off the hood and leveled his fist near Sheridan’s gloved hand, and slightly swiveled his wrist, urging the falcon to step forward. It did, gracefully, and Sheridan’s arm dipped a little from the weight of the falcon on her fist. Nate helped her wrap the jesses through her fingers and pulled them tight near the heel of her hand. It was an oddly intimate moment that made Joe squirm a little. Nate was a big man, with a soothing veneer that was somehow calming as well as magnetic. Sheridan was only eleven years old. As Joe studied the falconer, he sensed the same kind of natural, violent wildness under the surface that Nate described in his birds. *Nate is a raptor*, Joe thought. *He’s a hunter and a killer, and he lives closer to the earth than anyone I’ve ever known.* In a way, Nate was terrifying. He could also be, Joe thought, a hell of an ally.

TO JOE’S CHAGRIN, Marybeth served meat loaf. It wasn’t her fault that she had played to type this way and further entertained Nate’s ideal fantasy of the Picketts—happily married, picket fence, loving family, Labrador, and now *meat loaf* for dinner—but that’s how it looked.

Nate smiled happily and took a double portion. He moaned almost obscenely as he ate it, which caused Joe and Marybeth to stifle smiles of their own. No one had ever loved Marybeth’s meat loaf quite so much, or so obviously. Sheridan picked at her

food, spending most of her time either watching Nate or looking over her shoulder at the two birds on chairs in the living room.

The telephone rang and Marybeth left the table to answer it. After a beat, she handed it to Joe.

"Please hold for Melinda Strickland," Marybeth said, mocking what the secretary had told her.

Joe winced, and excused himself. He felt Nate's eyes on his back as he took the telephone into the living room.

After a moment, Strickland came on. "Joe!" she cried, "You got one of the bastards! Good work, Joe!"

"Thank you," he mumbled. He knew that both Marybeth and Nate were quietly listening at the table.

"Too bad he didn't have an accident on the way into town, though."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, too bad the guy didn't try to escape or something."

He knew what she meant, but he wanted her to actually say it. But she was too good a bureaucrat to admit anything outright.

"Is there any news on Spud Cargill?" he asked.

What she told him froze him to his spot. He found himself still standing, still holding the telephone to his ear, long after she had said goodbye and hung up. The dull pain in his stomach that had been with him for days reappeared, and once again he felt the tightening jaws of the vise.

"WHAT'S WRONG?" MARYBETH asked as he sat back down on the table.

"Joe?"

He looked up. "They still haven't found Spud. Melinda Strickland said that someone thinks they saw him in a stolen truck on the way to Battle Mountain, and McLanahan said that a truck fitting that description ran his roadblock just a couple of hours ago."

"Didn't someone also say they saw him on the football field?" Marybeth asked skeptically.

"Yes."

"So why are you acting this way?"

Joe noted that Sheridan was watching him carefully.

Nate leaned back in his chair and he spoke in almost a whisper. "What this means is that Strickland and her FBI hit team can now go after the Sovereign compound. She can say that they're harboring a fugitive suspected of murdering a federal employee."

"I was thinking this thing was going to calm down," Joe said. "But Melinda Strickland is determined to prove there's a war on. And now she's got a much better reason to start it."

Marybeth instantly understood. "She wouldn't do that, would she?" Her eyes flashed. "April ..."

JOE WALKED NATE Romanowski to his Jeep in the dark. The sky was clear and gauzy with stars. The melting snow had frozen into a slick cold skin on the sidewalk and road.

Nate perched his falcons on the top of the backseat and secured the jesses to metal swivels he had installed on the framework for the purpose. Joe watched, his breath condensing into snaky wisps, his mind twenty miles away in the deep snow of Battle Mountain.

When he had secured the birds, Nate reached under his Jeep seat and pulled out a bundle that turned out to be a shoulder holster and his massive revolver. He looped a strap over his head and buckled it below his sternum. Another strap fit around his midsection. The curved black grip of the stainless-steel .454 Casull now offered itself to Joe.

“Why do you carry a gun like that?” Joe asked.

Nate smiled slightly. “Because I know how to use it and it’s all I need. It gives me the mobility of a handgun but with more firepower and velocity. It’s a Freedom Arms Model 83 with a seven-and-a-half-inch barrel. A hand cannon. I did my research and went to the factory in Freedom, Wyoming and paid twenty-five hundred for it. It shoots a 300-grain bullet and it can literally shoot through a car.”

Joe whistled.

“Or I could fire into the trunk and hit the driver. If three bad guys were lined up, I could put a single slug through all of them. And I could do it from three hundred yards away.”

Joe had been waiting for this moment. “I suppose you could even knock out the engine of an SUV driving down U.S. Highway 87 near Great Falls, Montana.”

Nate turned and leaned against his Jeep, folding his arms across his chest. His uncommonly sharp eyes bored into Joe.

“Theoretically, yes,” Nate said evenly. “That could happen. Now I really owe you.”

“No, you don’t, I told you that.”

“Do you want me to get your little girl back?”

Joe paused, and thought. He was torn. The question wasn’t unanticipated. Nate was well aware of the empty chair at the table, as they all were.

“We’ve got a lawyer working on it,” Joe said. “That’s our only recourse right now.”

Nate didn’t scoff, but his silence said enough.

“I worry about her, Nate. She’s been abandoned once already, then taken away from her school. If you go in and grab her, she might be even more messed up. We love her too much to put her through that right now. Plus the fact that we would be facing kidnapping charges. The law isn’t on our side in this.”

Nate nodded. “You’ve thought about it.”

“For days.”

“Something bad is going to happen up there in that compound. I think we both know that.”

Joe rubbed his eyes and sighed, and said nothing.

"Maybe something could happen to Melinda Strickland," Nate said.

Joe looked up, shocked. Nate was deadly serious. He had also crossed a line by threatening Strickland in front of Joe, who had a duty and obligation to take some kind of action. Nate knew all of this.

"Don't ever say anything like that to me again, Nate," Joe said, his voice low and hard.

Nate didn't react.

"Joe, thank you for dinner and the very nice evening. Your wife and daughter are wonderful. Sheridan is something special. I think she would make a good falconer."

Joe nodded, half-hearing Nate. His head was swimming with situations and consequences.

"I'll be available if you need me," Nate said. "Do you hear me, Joe?"

It seemed to have gotten much colder in the past two minutes, Joe thought.

"Joe?"

"I hear you."

24

AT THE SAME time on Battle Mountain, a convoy of vehicles had driven up the road outside the Sovereign compound. As they approached the fence, their engines rumbling, Jeannie, Clem, and April had pulled back the curtain and watched through the trailer window. Clem doused all the lights so they could see out but not be seen.

There were either six or seven vehicles out there. As they came up the road, they turned toward the fence as if they were going to drive through it. But then four of the trucks stopped abreast of each other, their headlights flooding the snow between the road and the compound. The trailing vehicles parked behind the first row. Framed by the rising, glowing clouds of exhaust, the front row of trucks looked like they had risen from a cauldron. Their drivers were silhouetted: Jeannie could see Sheriff Barnum behind the wheel of his Blazer. A woman sat next to him holding a little dog in her arms. A bullhorn squawked, and someone asked for Wade Brockius.

Brockius had been outside his trailer, and he ambled toward the headlights.

"Stop where you are."

Spotlights from two of the vehicles came to life and bathed him in light.

Brockius stopped.

"This is Dick Munker of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We have reason to believe that you're harboring a dangerous fugitive by the name of Spud Cargill, who is a murder suspect in an ongoing investigation. We would like your permission to conduct a thorough search of the premises."

Brockius raised his arm to block the spotlights from his eyes. His deep voice rumbled through the icy night. He didn't need a bullhorn.

"Permission denied. I don't know what you're talking about."

“We can show up with a court order tomorrow.”

“That won’t do you any good, Mr. Munker. There’s nothing to be found. Mr. Cargill is not here. There are people here who would consider your forced intrusion to be an armed attack.”

Wade Brockius paused, and lowered his arm, attempting to see the man with the bullhorn. “We know what happened at Waco, Mr. Munker. I know you were there. I remember your name. You were one of the snipers, as I recall. You were also on Ruby Ridge. You should be in federal prison, Mr. Munker.”

Jeannie tried to look into the darkness around her, but her eyes were scalded by the headlights and spotlights. She knew there were armed Sovereigns behind trailers, in the brush, and in the trees. There were probably a half-dozen sets of crosshairs focused on the man with the bullhorn, and open sights trained on Sheriff Barnum.

Munker spoke through the bullhorn, although it wasn’t really necessary. “All of the entrances and exits to this compound have been sealed off by deputies of the Twelve Sleep County sheriff’s office and the FBI. You’re trapped here, and Cargill has nowhere to run. We had planned to keep the power and telephone lines available as long as you were communicating and cooperating with us. But that doesn’t appear to be what’s happening.”

Although Munker lowered his bullhorn to speak to someone else, his muffled voice could be heard saying “Turn off their lights, boys.”

At that moment, the electricity was cut to the compound. Lights blinked out. Heaters whirled to a stop. Refrigerators ticked to silence. Almost immediately, the cold began to seep into the trailers.

Jeannie knew that all of the trailers and campers had full propane tanks in addition to a large community tank in the middle of the compound. There were gas powered generators as well as wireless telephones and transmitters hidden under tarps in the woods. So the power outage was simply symbolic, a way of showing who held the cards.

“We’ve got some musical entertainment lined up for you later, Mr. Brockius. I made it myself and it’s one-of-a-kind. It’s also on a continuous loop.”

They had all seen the speakers above the trees, Jeannie knew, and they had expected something like this to happen eventually. Wade had prepared them.

“We have children here,” Brockius said.

“Then you might want to reconsider your position,” Munker had said. The contempt in his voice was palpable. “If you do reconsider, call me personally. That’s why we kept your telephone line up. Just dial nine-one-one and the dispatcher will track me down day or night. Otherwise, I’ll be back in the morning with the court order for Spud Cargill.”

“I told you he’s not here.”

One by one, the vehicles backed up from the line and began to leave. The last remaining car was a dark SUV containing Dick Munker and a driver.

Jeannie knew what was happening. The good people of Saddlestring, along with the Feds, were trying to kick them out. Just like they had kicked her out before. To do so, they were going to make things as miserable as possible.

Her mouth curled into a snarl. *Fuck them*, she hissed.

AFTER MUNKER AND the trucks left, it took hours for April to calm down. She asked why they hadn't given the men in the trucks what they wanted.

Clem told April to shut up, and Jeannie backhanded him across the mouth. Clem glared at Jeannie, then went outside for a while. When he came back, he was half-drunk and docile, and April was finally sleeping.

LATE THAT NIGHT, from inside a heavy black box under the base of a tree near Battle Mountain, there was a dull click. The click was so faint that it could not have been heard beyond a few feet away. Through the snow, two amber lights now glowed, and a digital tape began to spin. Heavy, double-insulated electrical wires crawled up from the box through the snow and were stapled fast on the trunk of the tree. A hundred feet away and twenty-four feet in the air, the two speakers crackled to life. The mountain silence yielded to a swinging back beat, tinny horns, and a young Wayne Newton singing:

Danke schön, darling,

Danke schön,

Thank you for walks down Lover's Lane ...

INSIDE ONE OF the ice-encrusted trailers within the compound, Jeannie Keeley sat bolt upright in her bed. She listened, and realized that the song was not part of her dream. She looked through the gloom toward the rear of the trailer where April slept. April's bed was of a thin fold-down design made of plywood veneer. When the girl tossed or turned, the bed creaked. It was creaking now.

The song finally ended. Within a few seconds, it started up again. The same song, "Danke Schoen," by Wayne Newton. This time the song was slightly louder than before. Clem, sleeping next to Jeannie on the double bed that they built each night by fitting the tabletop between the trailer's two bench seats, had not stirred. As the music increased in volume, April began to cry.

Jeannie was enraged. This was the first night that April had gone to sleep without crying. Since April had been back with her, Jeannie thought, there were lots of signs that she'd turned back into a baby. She had obviously been coddled. The girl cried about everything. April seemed to think that life was supposed to be easy, not tough. Jeannie knew better. April would learn. She would toughen up. She would have to, or else.

Jeannie had just about had it with the girl. There'd been times in the last few days when she wanted to drive April back to the Picketts' house and toss her out the door. It annoyed Jeannie to no end that April referred to the Pickett girls, Sheridan

and Lucy, as her “sisters.” Jeannie had even rehearsed a “Here, you can have her back” speech in her mind.

But when April slept, she was lovely. When April slept, Jeannie felt some of her motherly feelings come back. When April slept, the girl’s face relaxed and gentled and looked like a photo Jeannie had seen of herself when *she* was nine. Which reminded Jeannie that April was *hers*. Now, though, there was this horrible music, music that was almost pleasant at first but that now was otherworldly, awful, and gruesomely out of place.

“Why do they keep playing that song over and over again?” April asked from her bed. Her voice was tiny and rough from crying.

“‘Cause they’re trying to get rid of us, honey,” Jeannie answered.

Danke schön, auf wiedersehen,

Danke schön ...

THE SONG STARTED up again, as soon as it was over. Jeannie had heard it six times now. Again, it was louder. The bass beat reverberated through the metal frame of the trailer, sounding to Jeannie like the devil’s own heartbeat.

“Why do they keep playing it again and again? Can you make them stop?” April said.

Another sound emerged, layered beneath the snappy tune of “Danke Schoen.” The first hints of it were distant: A knife being honed on a sharpening steel. There was a slight pop and the sound of tearing, like fabric being ripped, accompanied by a high-pitched, otherworldly squeal that set Jeannie’s teeth on edge. April cried harder, her body shaking. The squealing was now ear-piercing. It began to overwhelm the Wayne Newton song.

“You know what that is?” Clem said, now awake. “That’s a rabbit being skinned alive.”

Jeannie didn’t ask him how he knew that.

Finally, it stopped. The rabbit panted shallowly, then died with a death rattle.

April was now shaking, her hands covering her ears, her eyes closed tight.

Then the brassy music started up again, louder. Then the background sound of the knife being sharpened.

Danke schön, darling

Danke schön,

Thank you for walks down Lover’s Lane ...

PART THREE

Whiteout

25

THE TELEPHONE NEXT to the bed burred at 5.05 A.M. and Joe picked it up on the first ring. It was County Attorney Robey Hersig.

“Did I wake you up?”

“It’s okay,” Joe said. “I’ve been awake most of the night.” Marybeth had slept poorly again, tossing and turning and pining for April. Joe had tried to calm her, with partial success. After she went back to sleep, he replayed in his head the conversation he’d had with Nate Romanowski, playing “What if?” What if, he wondered, he told Romanowski he needed his help? What if he turned Romanowski loose?

“Joe, did anybody notify you about a meeting this morning at the Forest Service office?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t think so. Anyway, Melinda Strickland and Sheriff Barnum have called a meeting for seven-thirty. All county law-enforcement personnel have been ordered to be there. They’ve requested that all state personnel be there as well, so I assume that means the state troopers and you.”

Joe closed his eyes and breathed deeply. “What’s going on?”

“Hell has broken loose.”

THE COFFEE IN his road cup tasted bitter and metallic as he drove toward Sadlestring. It was unusually dark out for seven, and it took him a moment to see that the cloud cover was so dense and far-reaching that it blocked out the rising sun. It was as if a sooty lid had been placed over the valley. The only gap in the lid was a razor-thin band of orange that paralleled the eastern sagebrush plains. That band was the only hard evidence that it was daylight.

Joe knew that a big storm was coming.

He remembered the feeling he’d had in the wooded bowl before hearing Lamar Gardiner’s gunshots. It was the feeling of artillery being moved into place prior to a barrage. He felt it again—only this time, it was worse.

JOE WAS SHOCKED at the number of law-enforcement vehicles parked around the Forest Service office off Main Street. He parked half a block away and approached the building on a buckling concrete sidewalk. The air was still but seemed supercharged

with rising humidity and low pressure. It was still unusually dark out, and Joe recalled the otherworldly half-light created by a solar eclipse the previous summer. He looked at his watch and saw that he was right on time for the meeting.

The reception and conference area had been completely transformed since his visit on New Year's Eve. The standard-issue government desks had been turned and shoved against the walls to create more space. Deputies, town police officers, and state troopers milled in the open area drinking coffee. Joe had never seen so many big guts straining against uniform shirt fabric in one place at one time. Although there was little talking this early in the morning, he heard the clump of heavy boots and the creak of leather from holsters and Sam Browne belts. Deputies McLanahan and Reed were missing from the room, and Joe guessed they were still on roadblock duty. He scanned the room for Robey Hersig and found him near the back to the side of the coffee urn.

"Thanks for calling," Joe said to Hersig. "I think."

Hersig looked anxious. "Joe, did you get a fax this morning?"

Joe said that the last fax he'd received from anybody was a list of food items that Elle Broxton-Howard didn't want to eat.

"You're one of the few, then." Hersig reached inside his blazer and handed Joe a folded sheaf of documents. The cover page of the fax was addressed to Robey, and the letterhead showed that it was from the Sovereign Citizens of the Rocky Mountains. After the cover was page after page of dense legalese. Statutes were cited throughout, including the Uniform Commercial Code. Joe was puzzled, and glanced up to Hersig.

"What is this?"

Hersig smiled sourly. "Two things, actually. The first is a subpoena to appear before their court to defend against the charge of impersonating a public official. The second is a lien against the county courthouse, the sheriff's office, and my home for \$27.3 million dollars."

"What?"

Hersig nodded, and swallowed dryly. "Subpoenas and liens were faxed all over the place during the middle of last night." He held his hand out—Joe noticed it was shaking slightly—and started counting off with his fingers. "The mayor, the town council, the county commissioners, the chief of police, the BLM director, Melinda Strickland, the governor of Wyoming ..."

"Governor Budd got one?"

Hersig nodded and continued. "The Interior Secretary of the United States, the national Forest Service director, the director of the FBI, and I don't know who all else got them nationally. Those are just the phone calls we've received this morning. That's just the East Coast, which is two hours ahead of us. We don't know how many people in the West will call."

"What prompted this?" Joe had never seen Hersig so shaky.

Hersig's eyes narrowed. Joe thought Hersig was about to spit a name out when the likely bearer of the name walked into the room.

Melinda Strickland wore her Forest Service uniform, and her cocker spaniel trailed behind her on a leash. She strode purposefully to the front of the room and stationed herself behind a podium. Sheriff Barnum flanked her on one side, Dick Munker on the other. Munker sucked on a cigarette with the same intensity as an asthma victim using an inhaler.

"Thank you all so much for coming," Melinda Strickland said, her manner incongruously pleasant. Joe noted that her hair was a mousy brown color once again. "As you know, a situation developed yesterday that compounded during the night. I see Game Warden Joe Pickett in the back there—he somehow learned about this meeting—and we all have our friend Joe to thank for bringing at least one of the murderers to justice!"

Joe wished he could worm himself through the back wall, as officers, deputies, and troopers all turned and looked at him. His fellow state employees—the troopers—clapped sharply, but they were the only ones. Joe knew that the others, especially the deputies, probably felt they'd been shown up. His intuition was confirmed when he noticed how Barnum was glowering at him from the front of the room. *Someday, Joe thought, he and I will need to have it out. There are scores to settle.*

"The important thing ..." Strickland shouted over nonexistent applause, as if trying to bring the silent room to heel, "The important thing is that we've been anticipating this situation for quite some time and we have everything completely and totally and *awesomely* under control. So now I'd like to turn the briefing over to Dick Munker of the FBI, who is heading up the operation on my behalf."

Munker extinguished his cigarette and turned to the podium, but Strickland thought of something and remained. She raised a thick stack of papers in the air and waved them. Joe recognized them as similar to what Hersig had showed him.

"I don't know how many of you got these during the night, but now you know the kind of twisted people we are dealing with here, ya know!"

Munker lit another cigarette and gave her a moment to leave the podium. When she did, he surveyed the room with amusement in his eyes before stepping forward. He wore a gray sweater over a black turtleneck, and a shoulder holster. A two-way radio was hanging in a case on his belt.

Munker began by nodding toward Joe. "A federal official is murdered while in his custody. The reason he gets murdered is because he manages to escape under the nose of our game warden here. Then our game warden, with a steering wheel handcuffed to his wrist, chases the escapee through the snow only to find him pinned to a tree by arrows." His tone was accusatory, his eyes cold and mocking. "This is the man who is now our little hero. Well done, Game Warden."

Joe felt as if he'd been slapped. Even the deputies who had withheld applause seemed surprised by Munker's nastiness, and they didn't turn around to further embarrass Joe. Only Barnum stared and smirked.

After a long, leisurely drag that allowed his comments to hang in the air even longer, Munker cocked his head to change the subject. "Gentlemen, we are at war, and this is now a war room." Portenson wheeled a large chalkboard into the room. On it was

a large-scale diagram of the Sovereign Citizen compound in relation to the two roads that approached it.

"We've had entrance and exit roads blocked," Munker said, pointing at red X's on the map. "The only way out, or in, is via those roads or over the snow to nowhere. As soon as this meeting is over, the roadblocks will be manned again. The compound is currently quiet after a full night of audio Psy-Ops—psychological operations. We're waiting on a warrant being signed by the judge, and when we have it we can apply even more pressure. Unfortunately, the judge received one of those documents Ms. Strickland showed you earlier and he's a little shaken right now."

Munker smirked, and inhaled.

"These liens and subpoenas are old fucking news, gentlemen. The Montana Freemen invented the trick back in 1995. Those losers found out they could paralyze the local community and all of the goddamned 'officials' in the State of Montana by sending those things out. Nothing makes a politician crap his shorts faster than a threat of legal action. As some of you know, there are some dregs of the Freemen up there in that compound now, so they know how the scheme works."

Joe barely heard what Munker was saying. He was still stinging from the unprovoked attack that started the meeting. It seemed to have come from nowhere. Joe knew that it was calculated. Calculated to do exactly what, he wasn't sure. But it hurt.

When he glanced up, he realized that Elle Broxton-Howard was standing next to him. She looked at him with a mixture of false affection and pity. He hated that.

"... Sheriff, what can you tell us about Spud Cargill?" Munker asked, turning his head toward Barnum.

"Spud Cargill was thought to have been seen yesterday afternoon in a stolen vehicle driving like a bat out of hell up Battle Mountain Road," Barnum said, passing out copies of Cargill's photograph. Joe took one as the stack went by. It was a Saddlestring *Roundup* photo from two years ago, when Cargill caught a five-and-a-half-pound rainbow trout to win an ice-fishing tournament in Saratoga, Wyoming. "He was seen going up, and blew right through the roadblock, but he wasn't seen coming down. It's possible he came down between the shift change, but we have no information on that. There's too many old Forest Service roads up there to keep watch on all of them, but we've tightened up the security on the main roads as of today. Our assumption is that he is in the Sovereign compound, and the Sovereigns are harboring him. Last night, as many of you know, they refused to turn him over or even let us look for him. This leads us to believe that Cargill may have been in cahoots with them since the beginning."

"There's a leap of logic," Joe whispered to Hersig. Hersig pretended he hadn't heard.

"Cargill's partner, Rope Latham, is currently in custody. He's confessed to assisting Cargill with the murder as well as setting up the BLM employee."

"Has he confessed to being in cahoots with the Sovereigns?" Joe whispered, again for Hersig's benefit.

Hersig shot him an angry look that surprised Joe. Apparently, Hersig was more troubled by the lien and sub-poena than Joe had realized. Hersig was dead serious this morning.

“What about the press?” Munker asked rhetorically, nodding toward Melinda Strickland.

She stepped forward as Barnum had. “We’ve been getting hammered with calls since last night, just hammered.”

Joe stifled a smile.

“The Casper and Cheyenne newspapers, radio stations from all over the state, and network affiliates from Billings and Denver have been calling,” she said, with a hint of pride. “CNN and Fox have contacted us as well. They’re all trying to figure out where Saddlestring is and how they can get here with a satellite truck.”

“Do they know about the storm?” a deputy asked.

Strickland nodded her head. “I told them about it, but most of them were already watching the weather. I guess this one’s supposed to be huge, much worse than the Christmas storm.”

Joe heard men mumble about the severe winter storm warning, and predictions of three to five feet of snow in the mountains.

“Which poses an opportunity, gentlemen,” Munker interjected. “The last thing we want is for this to turn into a standoff that’s the subject of every fucking twentyfour-hour news show in America. We cannot let these Sovereigns use the media to create sympathy, which they will do given the opportunity. They cannot be provided a forum for their twisted, antigovernment ravings. Believe me, I know. I was at Waco. I was at Ruby Ridge. I was in Garfield County, Montana, when the Freeman held out. If the press is here, we lose all tactical advantage. And there will be no possible way in hell for an efficient solution.”

Munker’s face was red and he was practically snarling. “I’ve been there, fellows. I’ve been there when dildo Freeman wearing hoods patrolled their ranch for the cameras, making us look like a bunch of wussy assholes. I was there when infobabes showed up while the fire was still burning at Waco to ask us if the force we used was unreasonable.

“This storm is supposed to last at least three days. It’s likely the airstrip will be closed and the roads will be closed. If film crews can’t get here, it means there isn’t any news. That’s how it works. So we have a short window of time to act. In the past, too many of these situations have degenerated into fucking situation comedies. We can’t let that happen here, gentlemen. And lady,” he said, deferring to Melinda Strickland.

“Ladies!” Elle Broxton-Howard shouted, raising her hand next to Joe. There was a titter of laughter. Most of the men who turned to look at Broxton-Howard were still looking at her when Melinda Strickland spoke again.

“When I came here, I said we were going to stand up to these antigovernment outlaws,” Strickland said, looking to Broxton-Howard to make sure the reporter had her pad out. “Some mocked me. Some doubted the seriousness of the situation. Now we know just how serious this situation is!”

Robey Hersig's assistant, an ancient clerk named Bud Lipsey, wearing a gray Stetson and horn-rimmed glasses, blew into the room. He raised a manila folder.

"The search warrant has been signed by Judge Pennock," Lipsey announced.

Munker smiled. Joe saw it as a leer.

"Let's regroup at noon," he said. "The sheriff, Ms. Strickland, and I will set our strategy and make assignments."

JOE LEANED AGAINST the wall and rubbed his face with his hands. He couldn't believe what was happening. Law-enforcement personnel filed out of the building charged with a sense of purpose. There was back-slapping and shoulder-punching. A small army had been assembled, to be led by Munker, Strickland, and Barnum against the Sovereign compound. It all felt horribly wrong. The room was too hot. Somebody needed to turn the thermostat down or open a window.

When he opened his eyes, Elle Broxton-Howard was standing in front of him.

"Did you get my fax?" she asked.

Not now, he thought.

"We don't have any brown rice."

She smiled. "I can bring some. Or better yet, we don't do the interview at your house. I just need some quotes on how you trapped that bad guy. And I want to know more about what Mr. Munker was saying about the steering wheel. Is that true?"

Joe fought back an urge to shove her. "It's true."

She was joined by Melinda Strickland. Strickland was obviously concerned, which, to Joe, looked as patently false as all of her public emotions. It looked like she'd said to herself, "*Now put on your frowny face.*"

"Joe, we really have to talk."

Joe looked up. Elle Broxton-Howard stepped to the side. Munker and Barnum were still at the podium, but they were both looking toward Joe and Melinda Strickland, awaiting the outcome of what no doubt had been previously discussed among the three of them.

"Joe, we all really appreciate what you did when you arrested Rope Latham, but there are some issues."

In his peripheral vision, he saw Broxton-Howard scribbling the sentence in her pad. So this was for *her* benefit, Joe realized.

"What issues?" he asked. He hated words like "issues."

"It's interesting that you didn't get one of the liens or sub-poenas like all of the rest of us did," she said. "Or did you?"

He shook his head no.

"Joe, don't you feel that maybe you've got too many personal issues in this situation? Like with that little girl and all? Like maybe, you know, maybe you're a little too close to the Sovereigns up there, and that it would be best not to participate in the search and all?"

He stared at her. Broxton-Howard wrote.

"This whole sad affair started when, unfortunately, Lamar Gardiner escaped from you. The arrest of Rope Latham was good and all, but maybe you should sort of take a break and get some rest and leave it up to the professionals."

A hot surge began to crawl up Joe's neck as he looked at Melinda Strickland, and beyond her at Munker. The flush spread through his chest, ran down his arms, and settled behind his eyes. He stared at them both with blinders on, his rage coursing through him.

"I can see what's happening here," he said. His voice sounded strained, even to him. "It's a case of target fixation, just like when Lamar Gardiner saw more elk than he had ever seen in one place before. Like when he was reloading with cigarettes so he could shoot and kill some more."

"Joe ..."

"You see a chance to crush people like you've always wanted to do. You've found a situation where you think you're justified in doing it. You people hate so much you forget to *think*. There are big problems here. The first is that you've brought in a psychopath to run things." He nodded toward Munker. "The second is that I have a child up there in that compound. As you know."

From the front of the room, Dick Munker scoffed. He had been listening all along. "From what I understand she's not even yours."

Rage all but consumed him. He despised the fact that Munker and Strickland had discussed Joe and Marybeth's situation with April as freely as they had. Although the matter was not private, given the circumstances, he thought it should be treated that way. When he closed his eyes, spangles of red cascaded like fireworks down the insides of his eyelids. He felt someone grip his arm—Hersig—and he ripped his arm away.

It's not about children as property, *he shouted to himself*, or who belongs to whom. It's not about that. It's about bringing up kids who become good human beings, so they won't turn out like the people standing in front of me.

"Joe?" Hersig asked. Joe hadn't realized Robey was so close to him.

Joe opened his eyes. Melinda Strickland had stepped back, as had Elle Broxton-Howard. They had inadvertently cleared a path across the room to Dick Munker, who lit a cigarette behind the podium.

"Munker." His voice was hoarse.

Munker raised an eyebrow in response.

"If you do anything that hurts April even further, I'm going to paint the trees with your blood."

"My God!" Melinda Strickland said, looking to Broxton-Howard with alarm so her reaction would be noted.

"That goes for you, too," Joe said, shooting his eyes to Melinda Strickland. "You wanted a war and now you're going to get your wish."

"Joe, goddammit, go home," Hersig hissed into his ear. "Go home before Munker swears out a warrant on you for that threat that *we all heard*."

The silence in the room was conspicuous.

Joe let himself be led toward the door by Robey Hersig, who stepped outside with him.

"You were way out of line in there," Hersig said, shaking his head. "What are you doing, Joe?"

Joe set his jaw to argue, but the red shroud of rage began to pull back from his eyes. "Maybe I don't know what I'm doing, Robey."

"Go home. Keep out of this."

"April is up there."

"So is Spud Cargill."

"I don't know that. I honestly don't believe that. It doesn't make sense."

"Joe ..."

"We're taking McLanahan's word that he *might* have seen a guy who *might* have been Cargill driving past him yesterday afternoon. Based on that, all hell is breaking loose, to use your phrase."

"I know, I know," Hersig said wearily.

"Are we just going to let it happen?" Joe asked.

Hersig started to speak, then stopped. "Maybe it won't be so bad, Joe. That isn't exactly the cream of all mankind up there."

Joe's eyes flared. "Get the hell away from me, Robey."

Joe turned and stomped across the snow, knowing that if he didn't leave now, things were going to get much worse very quickly.

JOE CLEARED SADDLESTRING toward the mountains en route to ... *where?* He didn't know. He felt as if he were under water. His thoughts and movements seemed sluggish. They were someone else's thoughts.

He pulled over. Huge white flakes lit on his windshield, turning instantly into beaded stars against the glass. It was snowing hard. He opened his window and stuck his head out. The snow descended on his face. It felt cool against his skin.

He stared wide-eyed into the sky. Snowflakes swirled as far as he could see. A few stung his eyes. He tried not to blink.

26

THE SNOW WAS now falling at an overwhelming volume. As Joe drove toward Saddlestring with his defroster and windshield wipers on high, he fought a rising sense of desperation. The fresh snow crunched beneath his tires, and the tracks in the snow he had made on the way out of town were already filled in and covered over. Deer, passing shadows in the snowfall, silently climbed from the plains and draws into the timber of the foothills. Geese on the river found overhangs and brush. The looming, wide shoulders of the Bighorn Mountains that provided the constant, dependable horizon had vanished behind a curtain of deathly white. If it weren't for the dark metal

delineator posts that bordered the two-lane highway, he would not have been able to see where the road was located.

He tried to think, tried to put things into perspective, tried to fight the bile that was rising in his throat. He had cooled down enough to feel ashamed of what he'd said at the Forest Service office. He had lost it, which was unusual for him. The weakness he had showed to Strickland and Munker, and things he had said could come back to haunt him. Strickland, Munker, or even Robey could file a complaint with his supervisors. They could have him arrested. Jeannie Keeley could use the outburst against him when Joe tried to make the case that April would be better off with him and Marybeth.

Joe cursed, and thumped the dashboard with the heel of his hand.

THINK. Calm down and think.

Strickland and Munker were mounting an assault on the Sovereign Citizen compound because Spud Cargill was allegedly there. The judge had signed a search warrant based on probable cause. Joe couldn't imagine a scenario where Wade Brockius and the other Sovereigns simply stood aside while the agents ransacked their "sovereign nation." The Sovereigns would defend their compound and from there, it would likely get out of control.

Spud Cargill was the key. If Joe could find him, arrest him, or somehow prove that he wasn't in the compound—the assault could be delayed until Munker found another excuse. By then, possibly, enough time could pass to once again defuse the situation. Maybe by then the storm would let up. Exposing the situation to the light of day, with the possible help and/or interference of the media, could delay or spoil Munker's immediate plans. Maybe the Sovereigns would pack up and move on, taking their problems and their decades of miserable, irrational, and violent emotional baggage with them. Then they would be someone else's problem. The idea appealed to Joe, although he suffered a pang of guilt as well.

But Spud Cargill was the key. The only way to keep April out of danger, to delay things long enough for the courts to work, was to find Spud Cargill.

To do this, Joe would need help.

He drove through one of the three red lights in Saddlestring without seeing it.

THE PARKING LOT at the Twelve Sleep County Municipal Library was empty except for four cars already topped with eight inches of snow. Marybeth's van was one of them.

Joe pulled beside it and jumped out. He left his pickup running.

The library was locked, and a hand-lettered sign had been taped to the double doors saying that they had closed for the day due to the weather. Joe pressed his face to the glass and knocked loudly on the door. The lights inside had already been dimmed. A woman inside, one of Marybeth's co-workers, saw him and squinted. She started to shoo him away when Marybeth joined her, smiled, and approached the door with a set of keys.

"The librarian is sending everyone home," Marybeth said, letting him in. "They've released the kids from school, and I guess the roads and airport are already closed."

Joe entered after shaking snow from his coat and hat. He nodded hello to the other employees, who were gathering their coats and gloves to go home.

"Marybeth, we need to talk."

Her face showed instant concern. There was a sadness in her eyes that quickly emerged. It was a sadness that had not been very far from the surface since April had been taken.

Aware that the other library employees were hovering, Marybeth led Joe to a small, dark conference room. She told the others to go ahead and leave, and that she would lock up.

When she closed the door, he told her what had happened at the meeting.

"You said *that*? Joe!"

"I know," he said. "But I could smell blood in that room, Marybeth. It got to me."

Marybeth sighed and leaned back against a table, studying him, waiting for what would come next. He was taken by her profound sadness. It hurt him that she felt this way. Which meant he had to do something about it. It was his duty to fix it.

"I'm here for your permission," he said.

"For what?"

"To do what I think best."

"What? You don't need my permission for that."

Joe shook his head. "I've been giving this a lot of thought. For the past month, it's been eating at me."

She didn't understand.

"Marybeth, I've been a bad husband and father. I haven't protected April, or you, or our family. I've let lawyers do it. I've asked Robey about it, hoping he would do something. I've gone the easy, legal route."

"But Joe ..."

"Nobody cares for April like we do. The judge doesn't care, the lawyers don't care. To them, it's just more paperwork, another case. Robey tries to care, but he's busy. Now there are things happening where lawyers aren't going to help us." Joe stepped forward and gently grasped Marybeth by her shoulders. "I'm not sure I can do any good, honey. But I can try."

Marybeth was silent for a moment. Then she spoke gently. "You haven't been a bad father or husband, Joe."

He was pleased that she said it, but not sure he agreed with her. "The most important thing is that April is safe," he said. "It doesn't matter if she's with us or that awful woman. Those things can be sorted out later. For now, we need to see that she's safe."

Marybeth's eyes softened. "I agree," she whispered.

"We can't rely on the sheriff or the lawyers for this. We can't rely on *anybody*."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure yet," he confessed. "But I know that the reason Melinda Strickland and her stormtroopers are going to confront the Sovereigns is because they think Spud

Cargill is up there. If I can get to him first, or prove he isn't really up there, there's no reason for them to do it."

"I trust you," she said. "I trust you more than anyone I've ever known. Do what you have to do."

"Are you sure? I'm not sure that I trust myself."

"Go, Joe."

He kissed her, and they left the library together. While she started her car, he brushed the snow off her windshield and made sure she had traction to pull away. He told her to keep her cellphone on and call him if she had any trouble getting home.

As she started to leave the parking lot, he ran through the snow to stop her. She rolled the window down. He reached in and squeezed her hand.

"Marybeth ..." He had trouble finding the words.

"Say it, Joe."

"Marybeth, I can't promise I can save her."

MARYBETH LEFT THE parking lot and turned onto the unplowed street, and Joe watched until the snowfall absorbed her tail lights.

He could never remember Saddlestring being as quiet as it was now. The only thing he could hear was the low burbling of the exhaust pipe of his pickup.

Residents had retreated to their houses and woodstoves. Stores, schools, and offices had closed. The snow absorbed all sound, and stilled all motion. There was no traffic.

Joe fought back a horrendous feeling of inevitable doom.

Then he climbed into his pickup and roared out of the parking lot.

27

THINK.

Joe had no clear idea where he should go or how he should proceed. He drove through Saddlestring on streets that were becoming more impassable by the minute. It was the kind of once-every-fifty-years storm where sending the plows out was pointless until it was over.

He drove by Bighorn Roofing to confirm that it was dark and locked. The same with Spud Cargill's home. He knew he was treading old ground.

He thought of interviewing Mrs. Gardiner again, just to see if she could provide anything new, but dismissed the idea as useless. He wasn't sure she was still in town and not en route to Nebraska.

Rope Latham might know something, he thought. Latham might reveal where his friend was likely to run. No doubt Barnum and Munker had asked Rope about his partner, but if he had said anything to them, it hadn't resulted in anything. Now Latham was in jail, in the county building, guarded by sheriff's deputies. Barnum's crew might not let Joe in to see him, or might delay a meeting throughout the day. Joe didn't think he had the time to waste right now. Also, Rope Latham wouldn't exactly

have special feelings for the man who had arrested him, and if he was going to talk, it probably wasn't going to be to him.

Using his cellphone, Joe made sure Marybeth had made it home. She was there, but said the county had closed the road in back of her. And her van was stuck in the driveway.

On a chance, he tried another number.

"County attorney's office."

"Robey? You're there."

"Ah, Joe ..." he said it in a way that suggested he wished it was just about anybody else who was calling him.

"Robey, you need to help me."

Silence.

"Robey?"

"I shouldn't even be talking to you, Joe, after what you said this morning. How you treated me. I'll just assume that you're a little off your rocker right now. Can I assume that?"

Joe nodded, even though Hersig couldn't see it. "I guess you can assume that. I guess I get that way when I see a bloodbath coming."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Joe ..."

"Robey."

"What?"

"Are Strickland and Munker still gathering the troops? Considering the weather, I mean?"

"You are to stay away from that meeting, Joe. You're likely to be arrested if you even show up."

"So that's a yes."

"YES!"

Joe slowed to a stop in the middle of the street. There was no traffic to impede. "How are they going to get up the mountain? I just talked with Marybeth, and she said Bighorn Road is already closed."

"I don't know all the details, Joe. This isn't exactly my department. But I heard Barnum put in a request for those Sno-cats again. And the sheriff's department has snowmobiles of their own. My understanding is that they'll roll as soon as they can get enough vehicles."

THINK.

The first place Joe had ever noticed Rope Latham and Spud Cargill together was during the Christmas Eve service at the First Alpine Church of Saddlestring. He'd been concerned with the presence of the Sovereigns at the time, and hadn't given it much consideration until now.

Two single men, business partners, had gone to church together. That was a bit unusual in itself. And although he didn't know either man well, he couldn't say that the roofers showed any outward signs of deep religiosity. One never knew for sure

about such things, he thought, but neither seemed to approach business or life in a very Godfearing way. Unprovoked murder and assault for unpaid bills weren't exactly Christian acts.

But the First Alpine Church was more than just another denomination. It was "unconventional." Joe had heard that the weekly sermons by the Reverend B. J. Cobb were equal parts Gospel and God Damn the Government. It was the latter part, he surmised, that had drawn Spud Cargill.

Joe flipped a U-turn in the middle of the empty street and felt the back end of the truck fishtail in the snow. When it gripped, he gunned the truck eastward toward the edge of town.

ONE OF THE advantages of the storm, Joe thought, was that it drove everyone home and indoors. In normal circumstances, a search for the Reverend B. J. Cobb would have consisted of visiting various work sites where his contract welding unit might be set up. But today, Cobb would likely be home like everybody else. Home was a doublewide trailer behind the church.

Joe parked in front of the church and waded through the snow toward the doublewide. There were no fresh tracks of any kind around either structure. A snowmobile had been driven out from the garage and parked near the road, a wise precaution if an emergency came up.

He banged on the metal door and waited.

B. J. Cobb opened it wearing a ratty terrycloth bathrobe over a sweatshirt and stained white painter's pants. He was unshaven. The odor of simmering chili wafted out of the door.

"Hello, sir," Cobb said, not unfriendly.

Joe nodded and said he didn't mean to bother him at home. "Can I ask you some questions?"

Cobb smiled and looked up over Joe's head at the falling snow. "It seems like today you should be home with your family, waiting this out, instead of standing in it."

"If you let me in, I wouldn't be standing in it," Joe said.

Cobb looked down. He didn't invite Joe inside, which annoyed Joe slightly.

"What can I help you with?"

"Spud Cargill. He was a member of your church. I saw him there Christmas Eve."

Cobb nodded, and pulled his bathrobe together across his chest.

"B.J., would you please close that door?" Mrs. Eunice Cobb implored from somewhere inside the trailer. "You're letting all the heat out!"

"The game warden is here," Cobb called over his shoulder. "He's got questions about Spud."

That silenced Mrs. Cobb, and she did not reply. Cobb turned back.

"Yes, Spud was a member of the congregation. He faithfully attended church about two times a year, three in good years. He wasn't exactly a deacon in our church. You know, Mr. Pickett, I already answered these questions for the sheriff."

Joe nodded. "Did the sheriff ask you if you knew where Spud might hide out?"

"Of course he did."

"And your answer was ..."

"My answer was that it was none of his damned business."

Joe grunted and looked away. *What a storm*, he thought.

"You know that Spud murdered a man."

Cobb chuckled. "You mean Elmer Fedd?"

"Lamar Gardiner," Joe corrected, his voice flat.

"So I've heard," Cobb said, while finding the ties to his robe and making a loose knot. "Now, Mr. Pickett, I don't mean to be obtuse. I admire your tenacity, and I've heard you are an honest man. That's rare. But I have strong feelings about state interference in people's lives. It's not my *obligation* to help out the state. It's the state's obligation to provide services for me, the taxpayer and citizen. I object to the kind of power the federal agencies wield here."

"Still doesn't mean Lamar Gardiner should have been murdered," Joe said.

Cobb considered that. "You're probably right."

"And you know what?" Joe asked, shaking the snow off his coat. He raised his head and fixed his eyes on Cobb's. "I'm not really here to debate this question with you, Mr. Cobb. I don't really care all that much about Spud Cargill, either, if you want to know the truth. I'm here because I've got a little girl up there in that compound who might get hurt if the FBI and the Forest Service people have their way and raid it because *they* think he's there. So if I can find out where Spud is—or isn't—I might be able to help my little girl."

Cobb's expression changed. There was now a hint of confusion, as if he were weighing a dilemma. He searched Joe's face, then returned to his eyes.

"I didn't know that," Cobb said softly.

"Don't get me wrong," Joe said. "We don't think the same way, you and me. But in this case, I want to stop the Feds as much as you do. Just for a different reason."

Cobb seemed to be considering something.

"Honey ..." Mrs. Cobb said softly from inside. "I'm sorry, but I'm *freezing*."

Cobb started to speak, then stopped. Then he set his mouth hard and rubbed his buzz-cut hair with the palm of his hand.

"Is he up there, Mr. Cobb?" Joe asked.

Cobb stepped back and felt for the handle of the door. *Is he going to shut it in my face?* Joe wondered.

"You are a man of God," Joe said. "Convince Spud to turn himself in."

"I am and he won't."

Joe tried to hide his elation. This meant that Cobb was—or had been—in contact with Spud Cargill. It also meant that Cobb could be arrested for assisting a fugitive. Both men knew that.

"It's called sanctuary, Mr. Pickett," Cobb said. "Spud believes in it. So do I. And I can't help you any further."

"So he's here," Joe said softly.

Cobb shook his head. "He was here. But he's not anymore."

Before Cobb closed the door and Joe heard a lock snap shut, Cobb raised his eyes and looked over Joe's shoulder in the direction of the mountains.

THE ROAD TO Nate Romanowski's cabin was almost impenetrable, even though Joe had put chains on his tires before trying it. Four times, he got stuck. What should have taken an hour had taken three. It was midafternoon, although he couldn't tell that by the sun or the sky. It was just as dark, and the snow was coming down just as hard, as it had been all day.

Joe had tried to call ahead but got a message that Nate's phone was out of service. He remembered belatedly that the telephone had been damaged during the search of the cabin, that pieces of it had been scattered across the kitchen counter. He cursed while he dug under the front axle with a shovel to clear the packed snow that had once again stopped him. He hated to waste the time it took to dig himself out. Every hour that went by was an hour closer to the assembling of Munker and Strickland's assault team in town.

Joe's plan, formed as he left Cobb's trailer, was to ask Nate if he would go up to the compound with him. Joe had learned through experience that backup in volatile situations was essential. Not having backup at Savage Run had nearly killed him, and it had resulted in the deaths of others. He had vowed never to approach a predicament like that again without help. And Nate and his big gun might provide help.

Finally, Joe was able to rock the pickup and break through the snowbank and over the rise to the river.

Nate's cabin was dark and socked in, and his Jeep was gone. The complete absence of tracks suggested that Nate had been gone for at least a day.

Joe cursed again and thumped the truck seat with his hand. Pulling the evidence notebook from his pocket, he wrote out a note to Nate and attached it to the front door with a rusty penknife he found in his glove box. He also pinned a business card with his cell and home telephone numbers on it.

Nate:

You offered help. I need it now.

Joe Pickett

"Thanks for everything, Nate," he growled, turning the pickup around. He drove back out in his own tracks.

28

FOR SHERIDAN PICKETT, there was usually nothing more invigorating, or liberating, than having school let out because of snow. The announcement over the intercom had been received with unabashed cheers and whistles, and was followed by a mad scramble of books and uneaten lunches being thrown into backpacks.

Sheridan couldn't share in the enthusiasm, though. A snow day meant nothing with her sister April gone.

Outside, the small fleet of buses had been lined up on the street, their engines idling, great clouds of exhaust rising up to meet the heavy snow.

Now she was home, safe and warm, curled up on the couch in her sweats reading an introductory book about falconry that had appeared in their mailbox the day before in an envelope addressed to her. Paper-clipped to the book jacket was a note written on the back of a beer coaster with foreign printing on it.

Sheridan:

People don't choose the art of falconry like they choose
a sport or a hobby. Falconry chooses them. After
meeting you, I think you might be chosen. Please read
this book carefully, and if you're still interested I can
teach you.

Nate Romanowski

She raised the coaster to her nose for the fourth time that afternoon and sniffed it. It still smelled faintly of beer. She tried to imagine where he'd gotten it. The printing on the coaster was in English and Arabic.

She opened the battered old book and looked at the photo plates of falcons, hawks, and eagles. The birds captivated her.

When the telephone rang, Missy appeared from the hallway and took it off the hook as Sheridan was reaching for it. Sheridan watched her grandmother with annoyance.

Missy handed the telephone toward Sheridan. "It's some little girl for you."

As Sheridan took the receiver, Missy bent down near her. "I'm expecting a call from Bud Longbrake, so don't be long."

Sheridan made a face and turned away from Missy.

"Sherry?"

Sheridan felt a jolt shoot through her body. She immediately recognized the tiny, distant voice, where Missy had not.

"April?"

"Hi."

"I don't know what to say!" Sheridan looked around the room. She remembered her mother had said something about going outside to take care of their horses. Lucy was in their room, putting on makeup in front of a mirror just for fun.

"How are you guys doing?" April asked. "I miss you guys."

"We all miss you, too. Where are you?"

"Up here. Up here in the snow. It's really cold."

"Then come home!" Sheridan laughed nervously.

April sighed. "I wish I could." There was a beat of silence, and Sheridan could hear static growing. It was a poor connection.

"I'm not supposed to use the phone. My mom will really get mad if she finds out I'm talking to you."

"Where is she?"

"Oh, everybody is at a meeting. Mom, Clem ..."

"Who's Clem?"

"A guy who lives with us. I don't like him much, but he's the only person who knows how to keep the heater running."

Sheridan noticed that April's Southern accent was coming back. Sheridan had forgotten that April had had it when she first moved in with them.

"I miss you guys a lot." She sounded pathetic.

"April, are you coming home?"

April sighed. "I really do want to. I cry a lot. I like my mom and all, but ..."

"What's it like there?" Sheridan asked. She was in the kitchen now, parting the curtains. The snow was coming down so hard that the corral and shelter were smudged in the snow. She couldn't see her mother.

"It's cold up here. Really cold. I just stay inside all day. Last night, there were awful sounds outside that kept everybody awake. Clem said it was rabbits being skinned alive."

"You're kidding!"

"No. How's Lucy?"

Sheridan tried to picture April as she talked. She pictured her in a corner, wearing rags. For some reason, Sheridan couldn't see April's face, just her tangled blond hair. The image of April without a face made Sheridan shiver.

"Lucy's fine. Goofy as always. She's been dressing up with Grandmother Missy and going to town. Right now she's in our room putting on makeup."

April laughed a little. "She's our little girlie-girl, isn't she?"

Sheridan felt tears welling in her eyes. April seemed so close, but she wasn't.

"Do you want me to go get her? Do you want to talk to her?"

Over the phone, Sheridan heard the sounds of adults talking in the background. Their voices were muffled.

"Uh-oh, somebody's coming," April said frantically, her voice climbing in register. "Bye, Sherry. Tell Lucy I miss her. Tell Mom and Dad I love them ..."

The phone disconnected, and Sheridan stood there, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Goodbye, April," she said to the dead telephone.

SHERIDAN HEARD THE high whining sound of a snowmobile outside. She ran across the living room and saw out the window that her dad was home. His pickup was in the driveway, and he was driving his snow machine from the garage up a ramp into the bed of the truck.

Without putting on her coat or boots, she stepped outside on the front porch in the deep snow. Even though she was wearing only socks, she couldn't feel the cold.

Her dad saw her and killed the engine of the machine. He stood up in the back of his truck, looking at her like she was crazy.

"You need to get inside and close the door, Sheridan," he said. "What's going on?"

"Dad, I just talked with April."

"You *what*?"

"You've got to save her, Dad. You've *got* to."

29

JOE PICKETT MOVED silently through the trees in the dark. Although the moon was obscured by the storm clouds, there was enough ambient light that the virgin snow appeared a dark blue. The trunks of trees rose from it and the branches melded into the night sky. The snow had decreased in its fury, although it had not stopped. It sifted dust-like through the branches, so powdery that it sometimes hung suspended in the air. The temperature had dropped into the low teens, cold enough to evince an occasional pop or moan from freezing timber.

He was on Battle Mountain, approaching the Sovereign Citizen compound on foot from the north. He was not yet close enough to see lights or hear voices. He was there to arrest Spud or save April, or both. He was not thinking clearly.

Joe had been prevented from reaching the compound via Bighorn Road by two things. The first was the snow, which had literally rendered the road impassable. The second was the sheriff's Blazer, belonging to Deputy McLanahan, parked at the beginning of the summit. They had relocated the roadblocks farther down the mountain, but they were roadblocks nevertheless. Joe wasn't sure he could talk his way through it, or that he even wanted to try. It was obvious that the assault would be at least a day away, given the conditions. Even Munker wouldn't be hot-blooded enough to confront the camp in the dark, Joe reasoned. The Snocats they would use in the morning had been assembled, and were parked shoulder to shoulder near the Blazer. Joe had seen them through his binoculars, and had seen both Munker and Portenson checking out the Sno-cats from the backs of borrowed Forest Service snowmobiles. Joe had driven away, hoping he hadn't been seen, and had taken the other road.

As it darkened, Joe had driven as far as he could up Timberline Road until the snow got so deep that he almost got stuck again. Rather than try to go any farther with the night coming on, he pulled out the ramps and backed his snowmobile out of the pickup. Then he mounted the snowmobile and roared into the black timber. He cut through the forest rather than go around it, through a huge, dark, wooded wilderness that had been declared officially closed by Lamar Gardiner's Forest Service. The sledding had been a challenge. The snow was untracked, and so fresh and deep that at times the machine bogged down in it, the rear tracks digging down into the snow rather than hurling him over the top of it. The snout of the machine would raise and point to the sky as the snowmobile foundered in the powder. When this happened, Joe's adrenaline

rushed through him and he threw his weight forward or back with controlled violence, levering himself free and allowing the track to grip and hurl him forward. He knew that if he got stuck in snow this deep, in temperatures this low, he might never get out alive. No one knew where he was, and the Sovereigns certainly weren't expecting him.

If I get stuck, Joe said to himself in a mantra, I die.

And he could not slow down, because when he did, sometimes involuntarily as a result of trying to pick his route through dark timber with the single headlight, he could feel the machine start to sink and settle into the four-foot-thick powder. The only way to keep moving and not get stuck was to keep the machine hurtling forward over the top. So he had run the engine much faster than he was comfortable with, keeping the headlight pointing south, sometimes clipping trees so closely that he was showered with bark and snow from their branches.

Miraculously, he had made it through the timber and out the other side. The machine's engine was loud, however, and he didn't want the Sovereigns to hear him coming, so he had shut it down near the top of the mountain beneath a granite outcropping that had shielded the ground from much of the snowfall. Before leaving it, he had filled the tank with gasoline from a can he'd strapped on the back of the machine earlier. Buckling on oval snowshoes, he had left the snowmobile and its loud engine and worked his way south in silence.

A THIN SHEEN of sweat served as the first layer between his skin and his polypropylene underwear. Walking on snowshoes in deep powder snow was hard work. He tried to control his temperature by zipping and unzipping his parka as he walked. The cold wasn't a problem as long as he was moving but once he stopped, it might be.

He felt more than saw a dark presence in front of him in the trees, and he froze. He thought immediately about his weapon, which was secured and zipped up under his parka. It would be hard to get at. His eyes strained in the quarterlight and he saw movement and heard a footfall. His scalp crawled under his hat. Then the huge cow moose turned broadside across his field of vision, daintily high-stepping through the snow with her long legs that were perfect for these conditions.

He exhaled, and unclenched. He hadn't even realized he was holding his breath.

HIS INTENTION WAS to get close enough to the compound to discern whether or not Spud Cargill was there. He even considered knocking on Wade Brockius's trailer door and asking outright. He struggled with what he should and shouldn't tell the Sovereigns about the impending raid, or if he should tell them anything at all. Joe knew that if he tipped the Sovereigns off about the raid and Cargill escaped, Munker would undoubtedly see to it that Joe went to prison. *Maybe I would deserve to*, Joe thought.

Damn that Nate Romanowski, *he cursed*. THIS is the kind of thing I could have used some help with!

He thought about the telephone call Sheridan had received from April. It had broken his heart to see Sheridan's face. For his daughter to tell him "You've got to save

her, Dad,” tore him up inside. Sheridan, like Marybeth, trusted him completely. But Marybeth was more realistic about her expectations. Sheridan was his daughter, and they had a special bond. She was confident that he could save April. After all, he was her *dad*. He winced, and sighed. He had always tried to live up to her expectations but this time, he wasn’t sure he could.

Ahead of him there was a low muffled voice, and Joe sunk to his haunches in the deep snow. He was suddenly alert. He stayed still until his heart slowed and his breath evened out from the exertion. As gently as he could, he eased the zipper of his parka down and reached into his jacket for his service-issue .40 Beretta, unsnapped it from his holster, and withdrew it. Using his clothing to mute the sounds, he jacked a cartridge into the chamber and eased the hammer back down. He slipped the Beretta into his front parka pocket, where it would be easier to get at than in the holster under his coat, and stood back up. He stuffed his mittens into his other pocket, leaving only his thin liner gloves on his hands. If the Sovereigns knew what a poor pistol shot he was, he thought wryly, they would know they had nothing at all to worry about.

His breath billowed as he approached the compound. He could now make out squares of yellow light from windows through the trees. The light wasn’t bright, though, like electric lights would be. *They must be using lanterns and propane*, he thought. Then he remembered that Munker had cut off their electricity.

As he got closer to the compound, he could hear the hiss of propane from two dozen metal tanks. He found a thick spruce with a jutting V-shaped branch that he could hide behind near the compound. Normally, the branch would have been too high for Joe to see over. But with the three feet of snow as a step stool, he rested his chest against the trunk and peered through the notch.

Joe couldn’t see anyone outside their trailers and RVs. He noted the series of tramped-down paths that connected the units through the snow, and led to other facilities throughout the camp. He estimated that the paths were at least three feet in depth, although they could be deeper. A courtyard of sorts in the center of the compound where propane tanks were located had been crudely plowed. Only after studying the units within the camp for a while did Joe realize that there was at least one snowmobile, and sometimes two, parked near the entrance of each dwelling. Many of the snowmobiles were protected (or hidden) with blankets or tarps, which in turn were covered with at least a foot of fresh snowfall. *So the Sovereigns could get away if they had to*, he thought, *even in these conditions. Interesting.*

The metallic sound of a trailer door being opened carried across the camp. He heard it shut, then heard the crunch of snow beneath boots. The figure of a man moved across the squares of light, and he could see the profile of someone with a beard and broken nose. It wasn’t Spud Cargill. The man walked through the center of camp toward a set of outdoor Forest Service toilets. After a few minutes, the man came back outside and returned to his trailer.

Okay, *Joe thought*. That’s where everybody needs to go at some point tonight.

TWO HOURS WENT by and the cold settled in. Despite his heavy Sorel Pac boots and two pairs of socks, his feet were starting to get cold. He worked his toes to keep the circulation going.

Twelve people, most of them men, had exited trailers or campers and trudged to the toilets. In the stillness, he heard them cough, hack, and make disgusting sounds in the toilets. None of them was Spud Cargill. None of them was Wade Brockius. None of them was April.

THEN SHE WAS there. Joe had almost fallen asleep despite the cold and his awkward stance. But when he saw the small woman, Jeannie Keeley, emerge from a trailer with a small blond girl, he knew it was April.

He watched and listened. Their footfalls weren't as percussive in the frozen snow as the men's had been. When they passed the nearest window, he ignored Jeannie and saw April's frail profile against the light. The glimpse didn't reveal much. He couldn't have seen bruises, if they were there, or pain on her face. She just seemed vacant, glassyeyed. Her snowboots shuffled. Jeannie led her by the hand to the outdoor toilet.

April went inside and shut the door. Jeannie stood outside and waited, smoking a cigarette.

When April was through, Jeannie took her hand and they walked back together. April raised her face, which caught some light from a window, and said something to Jeannie. Jeannie laughed, and bent her head down to April and said something back, which caused April to laugh. The girl had a husky laugh, a belly laugh that Joe loved to hear. But the sound of it now filled him with violently mixed emotions.

They entered the trailer and shut the door, and April was gone.

Joe blinked.

If he wouldn't have known who they were, or what the circumstances were, he would have described the scene as heartwarming. The mother, Jeannie, obviously cared enough about the welfare of her daughter to walk her to and from the outhouse. They held hands, and April reached up for Jeannie's hand when she exited. The joke, whatever it was, was appreciated by her mother. And her mother bent down to share something that made both of them giggle.

Joe wasn't sure this is what he had wanted to see. He had envisioned a scenario where April, in tears, was dragged through the camp. If he'd seen that, he could also see himself running into the camp, throwing Jeannie aside, and rescuing April. He would carry her through the snow to the snowmobile and roar down the mountain. But that hadn't happened. Not at all.

He couldn't believe that April was in a better place. That was inconceivable. But unless he literally stormed into the trailer and took her—kidnapped her—there was little he could do.

He was freezing, and conflicted. There was nothing he could do here, and Joe shook snow from his parka and prepared to go back to his snowmobile.

WHEN "DANKE SCHÖN" started up, Joe turned in surprise and dropped a glove in the snow. He had not been four feet from the tree he had been hiding in when

the song blasted through the night and scared him. He stood and listened, stunned. Where was it coming from? Then he remembered the speakers he had seen when he last visited the compound.

From inside trailers, he heard shouted curses. Someone threw something heavy into a wall. If the intention of the song was to drive the Sovereigns crazy, Joe thought, it appeared to be working.

A door flew open and a man Joe didn't recognize stood framed in the light of his propane lamp. He swung an automatic rifle up across his body and leaned into it. A furious burst of fire lit up the night. Although the man was shooting at the speakers—and hitting them, judging by the sharp pings of metal—and not toward Joe, Joe sunk to his haunches and dug for his Beretta.

Another burst shredded the speakers with holes, but did little to stop the sound.

The song ended and, after a brief pause, started up again. Only this time it was louder.

Joe heard a sudden rustle close behind him, but he was too slow, and too cold, to react. He felt a heavy blow above his ear that sent him sprawling clumsily forward, snow filling his nose and mouth.

HE NEVER ACTUALLY lost consciousness, but the orange flashes that burst across his eyes and the thundering pulses of pain in his head prevented him from fighting back as he was dragged from his place in the trees into the compound.

Two men wearing oversized white fatigues and carrying scoped SKS rifles wrapped in white tape pulled him by his arms. Snow and ice jammed into his collar and into the top of his pants. One of them had taken his pistol.

Sliding easier now over the packed snow of the compound, Joe tried to twist away. They immediately let go of him, and kicked him in the ribs with their heavy winter boots.

The first kick was true, knocking the air out of him and leaving him writhing in the snow. He was surprisingly lucid, he realized. He knew what was going on around him as if he were watching it from somewhere else—he just couldn't do much about it. It wouldn't be that much of a surprise to him if someone pressed the cold muzzle of a shotgun to his neck and fired. Oddly, he didn't fear it. That just seemed like part of the deal.

"Stop, I think I know him." It was Wade Brockius. His voice was unmistakable.

Joe heard the crunching of snow from across the compound.

One of the men kicked him again, although not as effectively this time. Joe partially blocked it, and absorbed most of the blow in his forearms. "Asshole," the man spat.

Joe rolled and blinked as Brockius shined a flashlight in his eyes.

"Yeah, I know him. He's that game warden."

"We caught him at the edge of camp, bobbing and weaving when Clem shot at that speaker."

Joe suddenly realized that the music was still playing, and even louder. Still "Danke Schoen." But there was a hideous screaming along with it.

Joe started to sit up, but the pain in his head roared back and he sank down onto an elbow, waiting for his sudden nausea to recede. He kept his free arm up, wary of more kicks. Brockius knelt and wrapped a large arm around Joe and helped him to sit upright, to Joe's relief. Joe's mouth was full of hot blood and melting snow. He spit a dark stream out between his knees.

"Don't go anywhere quite yet, boys," Brockius said to the two men.

"Do you have to listen to that every night?" Joe asked, testing his voice. It sounded shaky.

"Since last night," Brockius said. "I think we're going to be serenaded by Wayne Newton every night now."

"Clem shot the hell out of those speakers," one of the men in white said. "But it didn't do any good."

"We'll cut the fucking wires," the other said.

Brockius nodded absently, but his eyes stayed on Joe.

"Mind if I come in?" Joe asked. "It's pretty cold out here."

Brockius considered it, then shook his head.

"You're the second person today who wouldn't invite me in," Joe said absently. "I don't know what to think about that."

Brockius showed a slight smile. "There are some things in my trailer I really don't want anyone to see."

Joe thought: *weapons*. The ATF had conducted raids for less. Either that, or Brockius's fax machine was loaded to broadcast more subpoenas and liens. Or both.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" Brockius asked.

Joe thought carefully before he spoke. The two men in white continued to crowd him. They blocked out the light where he sat.

"I wanted to see for myself if April was here and in good health."

"She is. I already told you that."

Joe looked up. "And I wanted to see if Spud Cargill was up here."

Brockius cursed, and shook his head. "Why does everybody think that man is up here, goddammit!"

"Because there was a report that he was," Joe said. "And because if he is up here, there will be ... trouble."

"Trouble we can handle," one of the men in white said.

The other one chuckled at that.

"Look," Brockius said, his voice commanding as he leaned close to Joe. Joe could smell onions on his breath. "I'm going to tell you the truth, because I don't ever want you up here again. You could have gotten yourself killed real easily."

"That's right," the more obnoxious of the two men in white agreed. Again, the other chuckled.

"Spud. Cargill. Is. Not. Here."

Joe studied Brockius's face, looking into his soulful eyes.

"That man tried to join us last night. He *did* come here. I spoke with him, and I turned him away."

"Why didn't you tell the Feds that?"

Brockius rolled his eyes and roared, "I DID TELL THEM HE WASN'T HERE."

"They just didn't believe you," Joe said softly.

"How unlike them," Brockius spat.

"Where did Spud go when you told him to leave?"

Brockius shrugged. "To wherever he came from, I guess."

Joe felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him. He was no closer to finding Spud now than he had been when he started. The pain in his head had reduced to a steady thump in his right temple. Joe reached up with a bare hand and cleaned packed snow out of his ear.

"Did you hear me?" Brockius asked.

"Yes. And I believe you," Joe said.

"Jackbooted thugs," Obnoxious White growled. "People that hide behind their regulations and their badges while they're skinning a rabbit on a tape."

Yes, Joe realized. That was the horrible squealing sound he heard with "Danke Schoen."

There was a long minute where no one spoke. The screaming of the rabbit was like icy metal rubbing along Joe's spine. Finally, it stopped.

"It's going to start up again," Obnoxious White said. "Is it all right with you if I go cut that fucking wire?"

Brockius looked up. "Watch out for booby traps in the trees. I wouldn't put it past them to tripwire the trees."

Obnoxious White snapped on a flashlight that was taped to the barrel of his SKS rifle and walked away toward the fence and the road.

"Do you mind if I say hello to April?" Joe asked. "I saw her earlier."

"You mean you spied on her."

Joe nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Did she seem happy to you?"

Joe hesitated. "She didn't seem unhappy."

"Then your question is answered. You can go now."

Brockius helped Joe to his feet. His legs felt weak. He had lost one of his snowshoes. While his head still pounded, the pain in his ribs hurt worse. He could feel a stabbing sensation with each deep breath.

"Your man broke my rib, I think."

"You're lucky it wasn't your head."

"He did a pretty good number on my head, too," Joe said, feeling slightly giddy for some reason.

Brockius walked Joe toward the edge of the compound where he had been dragged from. The other man in white stayed for a moment, then handed Joe's pistol to Brockius

before going to help Obnoxious White cut the wires. Obviously, the wires hadn't been found yet, because the song started up again.

"Can you get back by yourself?" Brockius asked. "Are you okay to do that?"

"I think so," Joe said, wincing from the rib pain.

"The roads are blocked and guarded. There's no way we could take you down, even if we wanted to. This snow has trapped us here."

"Will you leave when it stops snowing?"

Brockius stopped. Joe looked at him. The man had a kindly face. Joe couldn't help liking him, despite himself.

"I think we might," Brockius said softly. "We had a meeting about that this afternoon. But I can't speak for everyone yet."

"It would be a good idea," Joe said, not wanting to tip off Brockius about Munker. This was as far as he would go.

But if the Sovereigns leave, *Joe thought*, April will be with them.

"My wife and I will still try to get April back," Joe said.

"I don't doubt that for a minute." Brockius smiled.

"My wife is a very determined woman," Joe added.

Brockius nodded, but said nothing, as he shined his flash-light on the snow where Joe had been dragged. He held the beam when it found Joe's missing snowshoe.

While he buckled it on, Joe said that one of the men in white had taken his weapon. "I need that back."

Brockius again shook his head.

"I can't hit anything with it anyway," Joe said, mumbling, and Brockius laughed.

"That was pretty ballsy of you to enter our camp the way you did. I'm impressed as hell. I never would have thought someone would come through the forest like that."

Joe shrugged.

Suddenly, the music stopped. Cheers went up from trailers and campers throughout the compound.

"Thank God for that," Brockius whistled.

Joe stood. Both snowshoes were secure. It seemed immensely quiet now. Snow still sifted through the trees, so fine that it cast halos around the lights.

"I really did think Spud Cargill was here," Joe said. "The Reverend Cobb in town said that he had provided Spud sanctuary. I think he was looking for sanctuary here, too."

Brockius looked puzzled for a moment. "This is not sanctuary."

"But he said ..."

"A church is a sanctuary. This is not a church. This is a way station on the road to hell."

Instantly, Joe forgot the pain in his head and in his throbbing ribs, and the cold.

"I know where he is now," Joe said, his voice rising. "It's time to end this thing."

A slow, sad smile broke across Wade Brockius's face.

"Then you may need this," Brockius said, handing Joe his weapon back butt first.

Joe nodded his thanks, holstered the pistol, and turned back toward the dark timber he had come from.

30

IT WAS FOUR-thirty in the morning when Joe had a moment of panic and realized he might be lost. He was in his pickup, working his way down the mountain, fixated on the barely perceptible tracks in the road. He thought he knew where he was and expected to see the scattered lights of Saddlestring on the valley floor through his windshield, but he saw nothing. Had he somehow taken the wrong road? His sense of direction was confounded by the snowstorm and the darkness and the messianic swirl of huge snowflakes in his headlights. Only when he glanced down at the dashmounted GPS unit did he confirm that he was going in the right direction, and he sighed, his short-lived panic subsiding. The glow of the town lights had been sucked up by the snowfall, leaving only a faint smudge of off-color in a black-and-white night.

Joe was exhausted, frustrated, and injured. If it weren't for concentrating and driving precisely in the tracks he'd made previously when he went up the mountain, he wouldn't have had a chance of getting back down. He drove much faster than he was comfortable with, given the conditions and his impaired field of vision, but whenever he slowed he felt the tires digging too deeply into the snowpack. Even while driving fast and staying in his already-cut trail, he had gotten stuck twice. Both times he was highcentered. The first time he dug out, clearing hard-packed snow from beneath the front and back differentials, his head hummed with thoughts of having seen April, the pounding he had taken, and Spud Cargill. The second time, he was so exhausted he could barely lift the shovel out of the bed of the truck, and he seriously considered climbing back in with the engine running and the heater blowing and going to sleep for the rest of the night. But when he considered the rate of snowfall, he calculated that the exhaust pipe would be covered up within a few hours. Carbon monoxide fumes would overwhelm him while he slept, and that would be that. There was something slightly inviting in the thought, but he fought it. He slapped himself awake, wincing when he did it because of his broken rib (he was sure of it now), and he dug himself out once again.

Hours were going by. The assault team would be assembling. But conditions and circumstances kept slowing Joe down. It reminded him of dreams he'd had as a pre-teen on nights when his parents were drunk and fighting and he slept between bursts of angry accusations and crashing glass. In his dreams, he would be running, or swimming, or riding his bike as fast as he could—but he could make no progress. The harder he ran, swam, or pedaled, the closer he seemed to be to the house he was leaving. He would wake up in tears, seized by the sense of futility and frustration. He recalled that frustration now, only this time it was much worse than anything he had ever dreamed.

Joe played the scene with April and Jeannie over and over again in his mind. If only Jeannie had misbehaved, or if April had tried to resist or run, things could have been different. Now, his only hope was to extend the time it would take to find a resolution, and the only way to do that was to find Spud Cargill and force a cancellation of the raid.

He finally cleared the timber and the deepest snow and broke out into the foothills. The wall of trees receded in his rearview mirror. The sagebrush that carpeted the hills was completely covered with snow, and the lack of trees and brush created a spatial lack of perspective. Joe felt the tires dig down through the snow and grip actual frozen ground for the first time in hours, and he gained a sense of control. Still, though, it was wide-open country, and solid white for as far as he could see. Any wind at all would sweep the deep powder into high ridges and crests and make the going impossible.

In his fatigue, the dark form of the snow-covered Jeep that was stuck in the snow almost didn't register with him. It was only when he pulled alongside it and rolled down his window did he recognize the Jeep, and notice that it was running.

The plastic windows were steamed from the inside, and snow had accumulated on the top where there weren't holes or rips. Steam, looking like smoke from a chimney, rose from the top and dissipated into the cold night air. Joe rolled down the passenger window and leaned across his seat.

"Nate?" he called from his window, but there was no response. After a moment, Joe laid on his horn.

A gloved hand cleared steam from the inside of a plastic window in the Jeep, and was followed by two wide eyes that sleepily settled on Joe.

"Joe!" said a voice from inside the vehicle. "I didn't hear you. I was sleeping."

The door opened and Nate Romanowski grinned. An inch of snow, looking like frosting, crowned his watch cap. He held Joe's note in his big hand, and waved it at him.

"Got your note. I stopped at your house and your wife told me this is where you were. I was able to get this far before I got stuck. So," he said, "do you need help after all?"

"I do."

But Joe wasn't sure what help he needed, exactly, or what Nate's role should be. Whatever he was going to use Nate for, though, it would be better to have him in the truck with him.

"Why don't you get in my truck, then?" Joe called. "I've got all four tires chained up and I'm pointed downhill. I think I can make it to town. We can come back up and dig out your Jeep later."

Nate nodded once, then retrieved a daypack from his Jeep and waded through the thigh-high snow to climb into the cab.

"What in the hell happened to you?" Nate asked, looking Joe over.

"I got pounded on by a couple of the Sovereigns," he said. "I deserved it."

Joe slipped the pickup into gear and rolled forward to a dead stop in the deep snow.

“Uh-oh,” Nate growled.

Not responding, Joe shoved the pickup into reverse and gunned the engine, backtracking a few feet. Then he rammed it back into drive and hit the snow again with jarring force. The truck broke through, and Joe kept going.

“I’m not stopping again,” Joe said. “For anything.”

“JOE. I LEARNED a lot about Melinda Strickland and Dick Munker in Idaho. None of it is good.”

“That’s where you went? Idaho?”

“I didn’t know you needed me here,” Nate said defensively. “You said as much. And yes, Idaho. Seventy percent of the state is federally owned and managed. If there’s any place where the locals know about specific federal land managers, it’s Idaho. I’ve got some friends there, and I was curious about Strickland and Munker.” He paused for a moment.

“Go on,” Joe said. He wanted to hear the story, but he also needed Nate to keep talking to help him stay awake and alert.

“I don’t want to scare you, Joe, but the fact is you’re going to need all the friends you’ve got against these two.”

Joe grunted. That wasn’t very encouraging.

“You want some hot coffee?” Nate asked, digging into his pack.

Joe nodded.

“Melinda Strickland is even worse than I thought,” Nate said while he poured the steaming coffee into Joe’s travel mug. “The people I talked to down there think she’s evil and insane. What they don’t know is if she started out evil and went insane, or started out insane so she doesn’t realize what she’s doing.”

Joe gulped the coffee, not caring that it was scalding his tongue. His body ached and his back was stiffening. He wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to tolerate the exertion it took him to keep the truck from bucking out of the tracks and off into a snowbank. He knew he should have asked Nate to drive, but it was too late for that; he wasn’t going to stop and run the risk of getting stuck.

“Just give me facts, Nate, not analysis,” Joe barked. “We don’t need psychobabble. We don’t have a lot of time, and I’m not sure I’ve decided how to play this yet.”

Nate refilled Joe’s cup and fitted it into the holder. As the cab finally began to warm up, he unzipped his parka.

“Melinda Strickland is the daughter of a senator from Oregon. She’s a trust-fund kid,” Nate said. “Her dad greased the skids for her to enter the federal government after she’d bounced around the Pacific Northwest and through various agencies in Washington, D.C. Apparently, she spent a few years in various institutions as well. Drug and alcohol problems. But the rumor is she’s a card-carrying paranoid.”

Joe shot a glance at Nate that he hoped reminded him to stick to facts.

“Even though she probably makes a good impression on some people at first, she’s a classic loose cannon, not capable of working with people. In a nutshell, she’s consistently treated her colleagues and co-workers like pieces of shit, saying things about

them, playing one off of the other, and just general nastiness. She was involved in a bunch of lawsuits when she worked for the Department of Agriculture because of things she said and did to people. Her idea of management is to make subordinates cry. Oh, and she's a pathological liar."

Joe glanced over at Nate and could see that under his parka he was wearing his shoulder holster.

"Once she got into the Forest Service, she started bouncing all around the country. She left a mess everywhere she went. She's the type that creates chaos out of order. No one knows what deep-seated problems make her the way she is, but the way the Forest Service handled it is how they generally handle things in the big government agencies."

"Transferring her so she's somebody else's problem?" Joe asked. He knew how the game was played.

"Exactly," Nate said. He spoke in a low, rhythmic cadence and rarely raised his voice. "She was in Oregon, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, South Dakota, Idaho twice, and then somewhere in Colorado. You know how it works—we all do. Longtime federal employees—especially if they're middle-aged women and they like to threaten lawsuits and they're daughters of senators—just don't get fired very easily. Her big bosses are political appointees who know that if they can bury the problem for a while, the next administration will have to deal with it. Meanwhile, local communities are subjected to her and her *ways*."

"Specifically?" Joe asked.

"Well, in Nevada she became convinced that a couple of the local ranchers with grazing leases were out to kill her dog. So she had them followed twenty-four hours a day by Forest Service rangers. This was in a town of three hundred people, where there were, like, two places to eat. And every-where these ranchers went, two uniformed Feds went with them. Finally, one of the ranchers got drunk and forced a shoot-out. Both ranchers went down, and one Fed."

Joe shook his head sadly, and instantly regretted it as a throbbing pain burned into the back of his skull.

"Finally," Nate said, "The Forest Service ran out of places to hide her, and they were going to bring her up on harassment charges—finally hold her accountable for something—because she called a Latino contractor a "fat spic" in front of witnesses. Then her daddy stepped in and they figured out this new job for her. They made it up just for her—a position with a nice title but no staff or budget. It was a perfect place to stick her where she couldn't do any damage. My contacts said that even *that* was a mistake, because when the administration changed, she convinced somebody to shuffle the budget and get her some funding. All of a sudden she's got a travel budget, and in her mind a star was finally born. By the time the agency figured out what she'd done in a vacuum, that Elle what's-her-name had latched onto her to do a profile and their hands were tied. They couldn't get rid of the woman while she was being lionized by a journalist, so they just sort of let it go."

"And now we've got her," Joe said. His eyes burned with lack of sleep, and he felt a heightened sense of tension rising in his chest as they neared Saddlestring.

"They take a woman who *hates* people and put her in charge of a task force to go after rednecks who hate the government," Nate said. "This is what I love about the Feds."

Joe asked Nate to give him a minute and quickly called Marybeth on his cellphone. When she picked up, she sounded as if she had been up all night.

"I'm off the mountain and I've got Nate with me," he said. "Yes, I'm fine," he lied.

"DICK MUNKER," JOE said. "What's his story?"

Nate whistled. "It would be a good thing," he said, "If Dick Munker went away."

"Meaning?"

"The guy is a bitter, sadistic asshole," Nate said. "They knew this guy real well in Idaho, because he's one of the FBI sharpshooters the state was trying to put in jail for Ruby Ridge. He was one of the triggermen. The first guy to shoot, it was alleged. Unfortunately, the case got dismissed because of jurisdictional problems. Munker did get demoted, and like Melinda Strickland he's been bounced around the country in the hope that he'd retire so they wouldn't have to take administrative action. The FBI hates to call attention to itself and its problem agents—especially these days—so they do everything they can to keep things quiet when they have a psycho on the payroll."

Nate shook his head. "Melinda Strickland and Dick Munker are made for each other."

Joe didn't respond. The fear that had clenched his stomach for the past few hours was gripping harder. He held tight to the steering wheel and pushed on through the spinning snow, praying that he wasn't already too late. He needed to come up with a plan and he didn't have much time.

WHEN THEY ENTERED Saddlestring it was still dark, although there was now a gray morning glow in the eastern sky. The town was encased in snow and ice. The chains on the tires of Joe's truck were singing because there was so much packed snow in the wheel wells. Joe was amazed they had made it without getting stuck.

Joe briefed Nate on the situation as he saw it, and went over the plan he had come up with. He told Nate that he needed him there for support and backup only. Nate nodded and smiled slyly, leaving Joe with a queasy feeling.

He didn't go far into town. He turned off the road and into the parking lot of the First Alpine Church.

The church was sanctuary once again, Joe now knew, for Spud Cargill.

31

AS JOE PULLED into the small parking area for the church and the Reverend B. J. Cobb's trailer, he pointed out to Nate that there was no wood smoke coming from the tin stovepipe atop the church.

"It's too cold," Joe said, thinking aloud, "for someone to be inside the church without a morning fire. So if Spud is here, he'll be in the double-wide."

Nate grunted his agreement.

As they pulled to a stop in front of the trailer, something bothered Joe, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Then he remembered.

"Yesterday when I was here," Joe said, "there was a snowmobile parked out by the road. It's not there now."

"You think Spud took it?" Nate asked, zipping up his parka and preparing to open the truck door.

"We'll find out, I guess," Joe said, jumping out of the truck into the snow. He left his .40 Beretta in his holster and pulled the only weapon that he was comfortable with, his twelve-gauge Remington Wingmaster shotgun, out from behind the bench seat. Turning toward the trailer, he spun it upside down in his gloves to make sure it was loaded. The bright brass of a double-aught shell winked at him.

While Joe approached the front door of Cobb's trailer, Nate Romanowski pushed through the deep snow around the back where there was another door. Joe gave Nate a minute to get around before mounting the steps.

He knocked with enough force to send a line of icicles crashing from the eaves. Toward the back of the trailer, yellow light filled a curtained window. Joe assumed it was the bedroom. He stepped aside on the porch in case Cobb or Spud decided to fire through the door.

Joe heard heavy footfalls inside and watched the door handle turn. There was a kissing sound as it opened and broke through a thin seal of snow and ice. Joe raised the barrel of the shotgun, the butt firmly against his cheek, and aimed it at eyelevel where he expected Cobb to stick his head out.

The door opened and the Reverend Cobb's cinder-block head jutted out into the half-light of dawn, his eyes squinting against the falling snow. The muzzle of Joe's shotgun was six inches away from Cobb's ear.

"Throw down your weapon if you have one," Joe said quietly, as Cobb's eyes swiveled toward the black mouth of the shotgun.

A 9-millimeter handgun dropped with a thud on the porch, vanishing into the snow but leaving a distinct profile outline.

"That's not necessary, Joe," Cobb said, keeping his voice even.

"Step outside where I can see you," Joe ordered. He did not trust Cobb not to have another weapon on him, or not to jump back and slam the door shut.

"You can't enter a man's house without probable cause, Joe," Cobb cautioned.

"I'm not," Joe said. "I'm asking you to come outside. And if you don't do it, we've got a problem."

Cobb gave a slight smile and briefly closed his eyes. His face was pink and warm from sleep, and snowflakes melted on his cheeks.

"Okay," Cobb said opening his eyes. "My hands are up and I'm coming out. Don't do anything stupid."

"No promises," Joe said, immensely relieved that Cobb was cooperating.

Cobb stepped out on the porch in his slippers. He wore the same bathrobe Joe had seen him in the day before. His hands were raised and his expression was calm, but tired. There was a hint of defeat in the way he slumped his shoulders.

"I was wondering what happened to you yesterday after we talked," Cobb said.

"I went up to the compund," Joe responded, a little defensively. "I was too late to find Spud. The Sovereigns had already refused him a place to hide out, and they sent him away."

Cobb nodded. "I figured they probably wouldn't let him in. I was conflicted about telling you too much, though. I don't approve of what he did. I don't even like Spud much. But I have a real problem with the way the Feds are conducting themselves. We don't need another Gestapo."

Joe repressed the urge to hit Cobb across the face with the butt of his shotgun.

"Goddamn you, Cobb, just put that antigovernment crap away for a few minutes," Joe hissed. "I know about all that, and I don't care about any of it. All that matters to me right now is my little girl. You've just wasted twelve hours of my time when you had a pretty good idea he was coming back here." Joe angrily racked his shotgun, and pressed the muzzle against Cobb's ear.

Cobb flinched away from the icy metal on his bare skin, and Joe saw his eyes bulge with fear. Joe didn't mind that at all.

"I've always liked you, B.J.," Joe said, pressing the muzzle even harder. "I'm not sure why. But if you don't start telling me the truth, and I mean *every bit of it*, things are going to get real Western real fast."

Cobb closed his eyes briefly and Joe heard a wracking breath. He pushed the shotgun forward, so that now the side of Cobb's head was pinned against the opposite doorjamb and his closest ear was cupped around the muzzle and misshapen.

"Okay, Joe," Cobb said softly.

Joe felt a rush of relief mixed with a whiff of shame for what he had just done to Cobb. He eased up on the pressure he had been using.

"Is he inside?" Joe asked.

Cobb shook his head, and rubbed his ear. "He was in the church for the past few days. But I haven't seen him since he left."

"Then he ..." Joe started to ask when Nate shouted from the back of the trailer.

"Joe! There he is."

Turning, Joe looked through the heavy snowfall toward the church. A door was open, and a single shadowy form—Spud Cargill—was trying to run across an open field away from them. He had obviously been in the church when Joe and Nate arrived, huddling in the cold without a fire, and had just run out the back door behind the pulpit.

"Yes, there he is," Cobb said with resignation. "He must have known I wouldn't let him into my home."

Joe looked back to Cobb. The Reverend was shaking his head sadly, still rubbing his ear, but slumping as if he had given up. There didn't seem to be any fight in him. Joe made a quick decision that Cobb would stay put and wouldn't be a threat, since he had, in effect, already given Spud's location away.

Joe lowered the shotgun and jumped off the porch, turning his back to Cobb.

"Go inside and stay put," Joe shouted over his shoulder. "You've got no part in this anymore."

"Don't hurt him," Cobb implored. "He's an idiot, but there's no reason to hurt him."

Joe said nothing. Nate met him in the yard between the trailer and the church, breathing hard from bulling his way through the deep snow. Joe crossed in front of Nate on his way to his pickup.

As Joe threw down the ramps and fired up his snowmobile, he squinted through the storm. Spud Cargill was getting far enough away that with the hard-falling snow he was little more than a shadow in the field.

"Spud Cargill, STOP!" Joe shouted. "Don't make us come after you!"

Joe shouted several more times as he backed the machine out of the truck. Cargill didn't respond. He was struggling through the snow, high-stepping and stumbling. Several times, he pitched forward and vanished out of sight for an instant.

Joe idled the snowmobile alongside Nate.

"I can hit him from here," Nate said, sliding his .454 out of his shoulder holster.

"No!" Joe said. "I'm going to go get him."

"I could blow a leg off and shut him down."

"Nate!"

Nate smiled slightly and shrugged. "I'll cover you in case he's crabby."

"That's a deal."

As Joe roared by, he saw Nate out of the corner of his eye with his big pistol extended over a log, the sights, no doubt, on the back of Spud Cargill's head.

Joe quickly closed the gap between himself and Cargill. Joe drove one-handed, his right hand on the throttle and his left holding the shotgun. The snow was thigh-deep, and Spud Cargill was flushed and sweating. His eyes were wild. He didn't have gloves or a hat. Joe couldn't see if Spud had a weapon or not. Joe veered around him, cutting him off, then pointed the shotgun at Cargill's chest.

"That's enough," Joe said.

Cargill stopped, wheezing, his breath billowing from his nostrils like dual exhausts. Slowly, he bent forward and grasped his knees in an effort to catch his breath.

"Turn around and head back."

Cargill's hand came up with a tiny double-barreled Derringer in it. Joe flopped back flat on his seat as the little pistol cracked and the bullet missed. Still on his back but grasping the hand grip, Joe buried the throttle with his thumb and the snowmobile howled and pounced forward. The collision with Spud Cargill smashed the plastic windshield and cracked the fiberglass hood. Joe felt Cargill's body thump beneath the tracks as the snowmobile passed over him.

Once Joe was clear, he sat back up and circled back.

A hand pushed its way out of the tracked snow, and then a knee. Joe drove up alongside and grabbed the hand. With tremendous effort, he pulled Spud Cargill from the snow. Cargill came up with his mouth, eyes, and ears packed with snow but his hands empty of little guns. The tracks of the snowmobile had shredded the front of his coat.

It wasn't until then that Joe realized how absolutely terrified he had been, and how instinctual and unplanned his reaction was.

While Spud coughed and sputtered, Joe reached up and grabbed Cargill's coat collar from the back. "*Miranda rights!*" Joe spat, not having the time, energy, or inclination to say more at the moment. Spud started to speak, but with a firm grasp of the coat, Joe gunned the snowmobile and rode it back to the church, dragging a flailing and screaming Spud Cargill alongside. As Joe drove back, he saw that Spud's pickup was on the side of the church, obscured from the road and covered by a tarp that was now heavy with snow.

Nate stepped away from the church as Joe rode up and let go of the coat. Cargill rolled twice in the snow, coming to rest facedown at Nate's feet.

"Damn nice work," Nate said, smiling.

"I thought you were going to cover me," Joe snapped, his adrenaline still on high.

"If I'd shot, I would have hit both of you," Nate said sourly. "You were right in my line of fire."

Joe started to argue, then realized Nate was right.

"Anyway ..." Joe said.

"You got him," Nate said, finishing Joe's sentence. Nate stepped forward, rolled Spud Cargill over with his boot then bent down and expertly searched Cargill from his coat to his shoes. He found a folded Buck knife in a trouser pocket and a thin throwing knife in a sheath in Spud's boot. Nate put them both in his parka pocket.

"No more weapons."

"He's an idiot," Joe said. Then, to Spud: "You have caused me and my family more pain and heartache than you can ever imagine. I'm just real happy to see you, Spud."

"The hell you *talking* about?" Spud mumbled, genuinely confused. "Never went after you ... or *any* of the state agencies."

Joe didn't have time to explain, and didn't think Spud was owed an explanation.

THEY WERE STILL in the church parking lot. The three of them were wedged into the cab of Joe's pickup with Spud in the middle between Joe and Nate.

Spud Cargill was wet and ragged, and he complained to Joe that the handcuffs were too tight. Nate responded by elbowing Spud sharply in the mouth and snapping his head back.

"Shut up," Nate hissed. Cargill shut up. Joe glared at Nate, but said nothing.

The motor was running and the heat was on, and Joe breathed easier as he unhooked his radio mike from the cradle and called for dispatch.

There was now enough morning light to see ... just about nothing. The snow was falling hard again, and the air was filled with nickel-sized flakes.

"Dispatch." It was Wendy, a longtime county employee and conspiracy buff.

"This is Game Warden Joe Pickett," he said. "Can you patch me through to Sheriff Barnum?"

"No can do."

Joe waited for more. There wasn't any.

"Excuse me?"

"No can do."

"Then patch me through to anybody. It doesn't have to be Barnum."

"No can do."

"Wendy, damn you ..."

Another voice came on. Joe recognized it as Tony Portenson, Munker's partner.

"Call me back on a landline," Portenson said.

FURIOUS, JOE LEFT Cargill with Nate in the pickup.

"Don't leave me with *him*!" Cargill pleaded as Joe slammed the door.

He knocked again on the trailer door and asked the Reverend Cobb if he could use his telephone.

"I see you caught Spud," Cobb said, looking over Joe's shoulder toward the pickup.

"Yup."

Cobb stepped aside so Joe could enter. He was still obviously wary, and gave Joe a wider berth than necessary.

"You scared me a little out there, Joe," Cobb said, reaching again for his ear. Joe noted that the round imprint of the barrel could be seen on Cobb's earlobe.

"I'm sorry about that," Joe said earnestly.

Cobb shook his head, then nodded toward the window. "He tried to get the Sovereigns to shelter him, but they wouldn't. I don't blame them, but then I would have been rid of him."

"That's what they told me," Joe said. But something didn't fit. He thought of the porch steps he had come up when he approached the trailer that morning. They were completely untracked. How could Spud have told Cobb about what had happened? Joe had the impression that Spud had entered the church in secret. "Did Spud tell you that?"

Cobb shook his head.

"So you're in contact with the Sovereigns. How? By telephone?"

Cobb sipped from a mug of coffee. He nodded toward a PC in a darkened corner of the trailer. The computer was on, a screen-saver undulating on its monitor. "E-mail," Cobb said.

"With who? Wade Brockius?"

Cobb looked away. "Wade and I have corresponded for years. He's a brilliant man and a good friend."

"Are you the one who suggested they come to Twelve Sleep County?"

"Yes," Cobb said. "I thought they would be safe here. Now I wish to God they had never come."

Joe sighed. "You're not the only one."

Cobb handed Joe the telephone receiver and shuffled away in the direction of the computer to give Joe some privacy. Joe walked into the darkened kitchen, as far as the cord would allow him to go. He dialed the sheriff's office.

"Portenson."

"Joe Pickett. Can you tell me what's going on?"

Portenson's voice sounded tired. "All law-enforcement personnel in Twelve Sleep County are under orders to maintain radio silence."

Joe had never heard of this happening before. "Why?"

Portenson hesitated. "The assault team left this morning in the Sno-cats. Agent Munker was afraid the Sovereigns had scanners up there and that they would overhear the chatter and know they were coming."

Joe felt his skin crawl. "They've already left?"

"They assembled at four this morning and rolled at five."

Joe did a quick calculation. The Sno-cats, he determined, would be at the Sovereign compound within the hour.

"Portenson, can you reach them?"

"I told you, their radios are off."

Joe held the telephone away from his ear for a moment and looked at it. Then he jerked it back. "I'VE GOT SPUD CARGILL!" Joe shouted. "I arrested him at a church fifteen minutes ago. He's NOT at that compound."

"Oh, shit."

"Oh, shit is right," Joe said. "How can we reach them to call off the raid? *Think!*"

"Oh shit, oh shit, *oh shit*," Portenson repeated, his sense of alarm coming through the receiver.

"Hold it," Joe said suddenly. "Why aren't you with them?"

"I couldn't go."

"What do you mean."

"I mean I fucking couldn't make myself go!" Portenson cried. "I quit! I think this whole operation is a cluster-fuck in the making, just like Ruby Ridge and Waco. I insisted that we wait for approval from the director before moving on the compound, but the director's overseas and won't be back till Monday. Munker and Melinda Strickland refused to wait even three days because they're afraid the press will be here by then!"

Joe listened silently. Rage and desperation began to fill him again.

"Melinda Strickland, that nut, wouldn't even compromise with me and go on Saturday, you know why?"

Joe said nothing.

"Because she said she doesn't want to work on the weekend! Can you fucking believe it? She only kills people when she's on the clock! You should have seen her this morning, it was unbelievable. She was sitting in the backseat of the Sno-cat all bundled in

blankets like she was going on a fucking sleigh ride. And she had that damned dog with her. She's crazy, and so is Munker. I hate this operation. I hate this town. *I HATE THIS GODDAMNED SNOW!*"

Joe hung up on Portenson in mid-rant.

While he had raced down Timberline Road just a few hours before, the small convoy of Sno-cats and snowmobiles had been rumbling up the mountain on Bighorn Road toward the compound. He had not only missed Cargill coming down, he had missed the assault team going up. He slammed the counter with the heel of his hand and made the coffeemaker dance.

Joe opened the front door and stood on the porch. Nate saw him through the windshield and lowered his window.

"They've already left for the compound," Joe said flatly.

If Nate registered any alarm, Joe couldn't see it in his face.

"Nate, will you please check to see if Spud has his wallet? I'm going to need his identification to prove to Munker and Strickland that we've actually got him in custody."

Nate nodded. "Are we going to try to head them off?"

"*I'm* going to try," Joe said. "You have even less credibility with those folks than I do. I need you to take Cargill to the county building and make sure he gets booked into jail. Just ask for Tony Portenson. I just talked with him; he's at the building."

Suddenly, there was a flurry inside the cab of the truck as Spud Cargill tried to cold-cock Nate while he was talking to Joe. Joe saw Nate's head jerk from a blow. But instead of panicking, Nate signaled to Joe that everything was okay and closed the window. Nate turned his attention to Spud Cargill.

Joe was amazed.

"WARDEN?" IT WAS B. J. Cobb from inside the trailer.

Joe turned, assuming Cobb was going to ask him to close the door.

"You need to come see this." Cobb's voice was deadly cold.

Joe stepped back in and walked with Cobb across the cluttered living room. Cobb sat down in front of his computer.

On the monitor, an e-mail program was fired up. In the "Inbox" was a message from W. Brockius to B. J. Cobb.

The subject line of the e-mail was:

THEY'RE HERE.

The body of the message was short:

THEY'VE ESTABLISHED A PERIMETER. HELP US,
MY LOVE.

Joe was just about to ask Cobb why the e-mail said "MY LOVE" when he heard a scream outside that set his teeth on edge.

JOE LEFT THE trailer and shut the door, looking for the source of the scream. Nate Romanowski was now outside the pickup, rubbing his bare hands with snow.

"What was that?" Joe asked.

Nate gestured toward Joe's truck. Inside the cab, Spud Cargill was holding his hands to the sides of his head, his eyes white and wild, his mouth wide open. He looked like the painting by Edvard Munch. He screamed again.

"I got his wallet, but I didn't think that would be enough," Nate said. "Munker would just think you found his wallet in his house or workplace."

Oh no ..., Joe thought. "Nate ..."

Romanowski held his palm out. "So I got you his ear."

32

JOE SEETHED AS he attached his shotgun to the back of the snowmobile with bungee cords in the parking lot of the church. He could not believe that the assault team had launched in the bad weather, and he was furious that he had wasted so many hours chasing Spud up the mountain, down the mountain, and back to where he'd started in the first place.

Nate Romanowski declared that he should go to the compound as well. "You might need me," he said.

Still reeling from pocketing Spud's severed ear, Joe snarled at Nate.

"You cut off his ear!"

"Hey, once you think about it you'll agree with me that it was a good idea. Hell, you took the ear, didn't you?" Nate said. "The little bastard deserved it. Think about everything he set in motion in this valley."

Joe breathed deeply and collected himself. Nate was right, but the whole episode—his own behavior and Nate's—still disturbed him. Joe pulled on his thick snowmobile suit and started zipping the sleeves and pant legs tight.

"Nate, I need you to take Spud to jail so we know where to find him. I can't spare the time it would take to book him in."

Nate began to protest, but Joe cut him off.

"Just sit Portenson down and tell him the whole story. Maybe he can figure out a way to intervene. Maybe he can contact his director, or talk some sense into Melinda Strickland or Munker."

"I'm not sure you know what you're dealing with here, Joe," Nate said.

Joe had no response, but pulled his black helmet on.

"Don't worry, Joe, I'll take him to jail. And I'll give Marybeth a call."

"Good," Joe said, turning the key in the ignition. "Thank you. You've been more than enough help already."

Nate saluted, and grinned crookedly. Joe wondered whether or not Spud Cargill would make it to jail in one piece. Actually, he conceded to himself, he didn't really care that much either way.

ON THE SNOWMOBILE, Joe Pickett rocketed through Saddlestring and out the other side on unplowed streets with no traffic. Despite the protection of his helmet

and Plexiglas shield, his face stung from the cold wind and the pinpricks of snow. The windscreen had been smashed by Spud Cargill. The crack in the snowmobile's hood concerned him, but there didn't seem to be any indication of engine damage. The tank was full, and Joe thought that would be enough gasoline to get him to the compound. In his parka pocket was Spud Cargill's wallet and driver's license, as well as his ear.

The Sno-cats had groomed a packed and smooth trail up the mountain road, and Joe increased his speed. Dark trees flashed by on both sides. He shot a look at his speedometer: seventy miles per hour. Even in the summer, the speed limit for Bighorn Road in the forest was forty-five.

Help me save her, *he prayed.*

LORD, HE WAS tired.

The high, angry whine of the engine served as a soundtrack to his aching muscles, broken rib, and pounding head. He had not slept for twenty hours, and he rode right through spinning, improbable, multicolored hallucinations that wavered ahead of him in the dawn. More than once, he leaned into what he thought was a turn in the road only to realize, at the last possible second, that the road went the other way.

Despite the icy wind in his face that made his eyes water and blurred his vision, Joe's mind raced.

He thought about the words on Cobb's computer screen: THEY'VE ESTABLISHED A PERIMETER. HELP US, MY LOVE. "My Love"? Cobb had said he admired Brockius, but ...

Joe shook it out of his mind. At this point he wasn't sure that it mattered. Maybe later, once April was safe. There was no time now.

If he could somehow buy an hour back, he thought, he would pay anything.

Spud's driver's license should do it, he thought. The ear definitely would, as unorthodox as it was. Even if Munker and Strickland didn't back off, surely Sheriff Barnum would move to retreat or delay the assault, wouldn't he? Not because he cared a whit about the Sovereigns, but because Barnum was politically sensitive and the next sheriff's election was a year away. Barnum didn't have as much invested in this thing as Strickland and Munker did. Barnum could come out looking good by putting his foot down, stopping the assault by pulling his deputies out of it. That was how Barnum operated, after all. He wanted to look good. *Robey!* Maybe Robey was up there, Joe hoped. Robey could shut things down in a hurry and threaten action against Melinda Strickland and Munker if they didn't back off. Although Strickland didn't care much about the law, she might listen if Robey convinced Barnum to pull his men out.

He hadn't really thought through what Romanowski had told him about Melinda Strickland and Dick Munker, but he knew they spelled trouble. The thought of Melinda Strickland sitting, as Tony Portenson had described her, bundled in blankets and cuddling her dog as she ordered her minions to ascend the mountain, made him coldly angry.

Because he wasn't paying attention, he almost missed a turn; he would have been launched over a bank into a deep slough. But he corrected himself at the last moment and leaned into the track of the road.

Think of something else, *he pleaded to himself*. Something better.

So he tried to imagine how he would feel coming back down this road in a little while with April bundled up in his lap. Under his helmet, he smiled. And he vowed to make that scenario real.

A MAN ON a snowmobile blocked the road that led to the compound, and Joe figured he'd probably heard him coming from miles away. The man wore a heavy black snowmobile suit and had an assault rifle clamped under his arm, and he waved his hand for Joe to stop. Joe slowed—his broken rib and the muscles in his back were screaming from riding so hard and so fast—and he unbent from his forward lean while the snowmobile wound down. Joe stopped a few feet in front of the man. Early-morning light filtered through the canopy of pine trees but was absorbed by the heavy snowfall, giving the morning a creamy gray cast.

"Turn it off," the man ordered, nodding at Joe's snowmobile, which sizzled and popped as it idled.

Joe ignored him and raised the shield on his helmet with a squeak that broke a film of ice from the hinges. Joe's breath billowed in the cold from the exertion of the ride.

"Oh, it's you," the man said. "I recognize you from the meeting at the Forest Service."

"Are they up there?" Joe asked anxiously.

The man nodded. Joe recognized him as Saddlestring police, but didn't know his name.

"Anything happening yet?"

"I haven't heard anything. No shots fired," the officer said. "Our radios are off, so I don't know if they're negotiating or what."

Joe exhaled deeply. *Thank God*, he thought, *I'm not too late*. "I've got an emergency message for Sheriff Barnum."

"I can't let you in," the officer said.

"I said it was an emergency, deputy." Joe's voice took on a mean edge that he didn't recognize. "No one has been able to reach him because all the radios are turned off."

The officer hesitated. "I can't exactly call ahead and ask about this."

"No, you can't," Joe said. "Which is why I'm going."

"Well ..."

Joe flipped down his shield and roared around the officer and up the road. In his cracked rearview mirror, Joe saw the policeman throw up his hands and kick at the snow in frustration.

THE SNO-CATS were nose-to-tail on the road in front of the Sovereign compound, forming a glass-and-steel skirmish line, and snowmobiles were scattered at all angles behind them. Joe slowed and rose in his seat as he approached, trying to assess the situation as he squinted through watery eyes and snowfall so heavy that it obscured the scene like smoke.

As he approached the gathering of vehicles, he saw that the assault team all wore identical black snowmobile suits and black helmets, just like his own. Inside those suits were Highway Patrol troopers, Forest Service rangers, sheriff's deputies, Saddlestring P.D., maybe even more FBI—but he couldn't tell who was who. He wanted to start with local guys who might know and trust him, but he had no idea where to begin. Obscured by their suits and helmets, Joe thought, these men could be capable of anything.

Most of the men were huddled behind the steel wall of the Sno-cats with their weapons pointed across the hoods of the vehicles toward the compound. Someone in a black snowmobile suit waved at him—he couldn't tell who—and another stepped away from the line and blocked his path.

"Who in the hell are *you*?" the man asked, and reached over and flipped Joe's shield up. Angrily, Joe leaned forward on the handlebars and reciprocated, and the man stepped back as if slapped. It was Deputy McLanahan. Joe could see his dumb, rodent eyes and the bruises on his face.

"Where is Barnum?"

"Why in the hell are you here?" McLanahan asked.

"I asked you a question, McLanahan."

McLanahan squared his shoulders as if he were about to charge.

Joe instinctively reached back for his shotgun, which was still attached to the seat with bungee cords. McLanahan hesitated.

"Knock it off, deputy," Joe said. "I need to talk to the sheriff NOW! Spud Cargill isn't up here. I can prove it."

Confusion overtook McLanahan's tough-guy face.

"What?"

"He was at the church all along. The First Alpine Church. He tried to come up here but they wouldn't let him in. I arrested him and he's in your jail. Now, step aside."

"Bullshit."

"I can prove it," Joe shouted, turning the handlebars so the front skis pointed right at McLanahan. Joe engaged the gears and raced the engine. McLanahan knew enough about snowmobiles to know that Joe was poised to run right over the top of him if he didn't answer. "Now, where's Barnum?"

McLanahan stepped aside and pointed. Joe should have noticed it earlier—a single Sno-cat parked behind the skirmish line. *That would be the one holding the leaders, the one out of fire*, he thought. He revved his engine and covered the fifty yards in a flash.

Joe shut down his engine, leaped off, and ran around the Sno-cat. Its exhaust burbled in the cold. Joe threw open the door and stuck his head inside, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust.

Sheriff Barnum sat in the front seat, behind the wheel. Elle Broxton-Howard sat next to him in her faux fur-lined parka. Melinda Strickland took up the entire backseat, just as Portenson had described, her cocker spaniel snuggled into the blankets with

her. She held a small two-way radio in her gloved hand. All of them were shocked to see him.

"You scared me!" Strickland said. "I wasn't expecting you, ya know?"

"Jesus, Pickett. What are you doing up here?" Barnum growled. "You've got no jurisdiction in an operation like this."

"Is Robey here anywhere?" Joe asked.

"Nope," Barnum said.

"Listen," Joe said, trying to calm himself, wishing he could have started this with Robey present. He was out of breath, and shaky from the ride up the mountain. "Spud Cargill is in the county jail. I arrested him about an hour and a half ago."

The three of them looked at each other in disbelief.

"We couldn't call you to let you know because you were running silent, for some stupid reason," Joe said, looking from Barnum to Strickland to gauge their reaction to the news.

Then Joe realized: Where was Dick Munker? *Probably on the other end of Strickland's radio*, he thought.

"You're not pulling our chain, are you?" Barnum asked.

Joe fought an urge to smash Barnum in the mouth. He shook it off and briefly looked away, before turning his focus back to Barnum. *Someday*, Joe said to himself, drilling Barnum with his eyes, *you and I are going to go at it*.

"No, he's in jail," Joe said. "Look. I can prove it." While he dug into his pocket, he told them about finding Cargill at the church and running him down.

Pulling the worn black wallet out of his pocket, he flipped it open to Cargill's Wyoming driver's license. "I took this off him."

Melinda Strickland reached for it and looked at the license with distaste. "I don't know what to think," she said. A hint of confusion that Joe welcomed clouded her features.

"Are you sure you didn't find that in his truck or at his house?" Barnum asked, raising his eyebrows as if he had just come upon a clever discovery.

Again, Joe had to hold himself back. Nate had been right.

With his glove, Joe reached into his parka. Cargill's ear felt like a thin, greasy slice of apple. He flipped it onto Barnum's lap like a poker chip.

"Here's his ear."

"*Oh, my God!*" Melinda Strickland cried.

"That is absolutely disgusting," Broxton-Howard said, hiding her face in her hands. Barnum smiled sardonically, and shook his head in something like admiration.

"NOW, WHERE'S MUNKER?" Joe demanded.

Melinda Strickland looked to Sheriff Barnum for help.

"He's in a position to fire on the compound," Barnum said.

"Where?"

Barnum nodded vaguely toward the fence.

"Call him in," Joe said.

Again, Melinda Strickland looked to Barnum. Joe again saw her confused face. Barnum nodded, and she raised the two-way to her mouth. *Why is she looking to Barnum*, Joe wondered, *if she's running this operation?*

"Dick, can you hear me?" she asked. Joe noted that she used no official radio protocol. Everyone in the Sno-cat now watched her.

"Dick? Come in, Dick."

"He said he'd keep his radio on," Barnum muttered.

After a beat, there was a chirp from Strickland's radio.

"That means he can hear us but he doesn't want to talk," she explained to Joe. "He's in a position where they can't see him and he doesn't want to give himself away."

Joe nearly reached into the backseat and throttled her.

"Give me the radio," he said, reaching for it. Reluctantly, she handed it over.

Joe grabbed it and keyed the mike. "Munker, wherever you are, this is Joe Pickett. Your little show is over. Spud Cargill is in custody in Saddlestring with Agent Portenson. I repeat, Spud Cargill is NOT HERE." Joe spoke as clearly as he could, trying to keep the rage out.

Silence.

Joe withdrew his head from the Sno-cat and looked over the hood of the next vehicle into the falling snow and distant shadows of the trailers in the compound. He stood behind the open door and felt warmth from the cab radiate out. The silence was remarkable. Even with the Sno-cat's engine idling, the heavy snow hushed everything. Joe noticed that two members of the assault team—he couldn't tell who they were, of course—must have heard him talking to Munker, because they now looked back at him, and at each other. *They're wondering what's going on*, he thought, *waiting to see if the raid's being called off*.

Joe searched the shadowed trees and the meadow for a sign of Dick Munker. Between the Sno-cats and the fence was a ditch.

Joe guessed that Munker would hide in that ditch so he could rest his sniper's rifle on the opposite bank and see into the compound. There was enough snow-covered brush to hide behind, Joe noticed, and Munker would likely be in all-white winter gear.

The two-way crackled to life. "This is Munker. They've got a hostage."

Joe stared at the radio in disbelief. What was *this*?

Then he raised it to his mouth, still scanning the silent meadow for Munker. "What are you talking about, Munker?"

"Give me back the radio," Strickland whined from inside, putting her dog aside so she could reach for it.

Joe turned his back to her.

"What hostage?" Joe asked.

Munker's voice was a whisper. Joe assumed Munker had it pressed against his lips to muffle his voice even further. "She's the wife of that crazy minister in Saddlestring. Mrs. Cobb. I can see her in the trailer."

Instantly, Joe understood, and his blood ran cold. He understood why Eunice Cobb hadn't been with B.J. in the morning. He understood "My Love." He understood where the Cobbs' missing snowmobile had gone. She had come to the compound the night before to warn them in person after Joe's visit, rather than e-mail. Maybe she had come up to assure the Sovereigns that they shouldn't harbor Spud. For whatever reason—the increasing storm, or the fact that a convoy of law-enforcement personnel were coming up the road—she'd been forced to stay the night. *She was probably in Brockius's trailer when I came to the camp*, he thought. *She was the reason Brockius didn't invite me in.*

"How do you know she's a hostage?" Joe asked. "How do you know she isn't just visiting?"

"You're one stupid motherfucker," Munker replied in his deep cigarette-coated voice.

"Give me that!" Melinda Strickland said, reaching around Joe and snatching the radio from his hand. She settled back into the rear of the Sno-cat.

A hot, white veil of rage covered Joe's eyes, and it was all he could do to keep from launching himself into the cab. He sucked in a deep gulp of cold air and falling snow, forcing himself to stay in control of his actions. When he looked up, Barnum was eyeing him, as if waiting to see what Joe would do next. Panic flooded Joe as he looked into the cab and saw that Melinda Strickland was clutching the radio tightly to her chest. There was no way he was going to get it back without breaking her fingers.

Joe turned to Barnum.

"She's no hostage, for God's sake. Mrs. Cobb and her husband have been in contact with these Sovereigns since the beginning. They're all part of the black-helicopter crowd. It makes sense when you think about it."

Barnum raised his eyebrows and shrugged in a "Who knows?" gesture.

"Barnum, you need to call your deputies off," Joe said, glaring at Barnum's passive face. "Pull them off and they can't continue the raid."

"Hell, Joe, I don't even know which ones are mine and which ones ain't," Barnum said, staring back. "They all look alike to me out here."

Joe was too surprised to move for a moment.

"Besides," Barnum said, reaching for the handle of the door, "It'll be interesting to see how this thing plays out." Barnum slammed the door shut before Joe could stop him and he heard the lock click. He couldn't fathom what was happening. He stood outside the cab of the Sno-cat, furious, and depressingly alone.

THINK.

Joe was beside himself. No matter what he did, it wasn't enough. He had never been in a situation that seemed so... inevitable.

A SUDDEN SCRATCH of static ruptured the silence that had reclaimed the scene after Joe's outburst. Joe could hear the radio clearly through an open window in the Sno-cat that had been cracked an inch to prevent the glass from steaming up inside.

"I can see Wade Brockius through the window of a trailer," Munker reported over the radio. "He's pacing."

"Can you see the hostage?" Strickland asked.

“Not for the last few minutes.”

“If you took him out, could we rush the trailer and save her?”

“No. There are too many damned Sovereigns hidden in the trees.”

Joe couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He had been slumped against the outside of the command Sno-cat, but he now stood up. He rubbed his face hard. He didn’t know the procedure for a hostage situation—they didn’t teach that to game wardens—but he knew this wasn’t it. This was madness.

He reached into his suit and found his compact binoculars. Moving away from the Sno-cat, he scanned the compound. The nose of Brockius’s trailer faced the road. Through the thin curtains, he could see Brockius just as Munker had described.

Then he saw someone else.

Jeannie Keeley was now at the window, pulling the curtain aside to look out. Her face looked tense, and angry. Beneath her chin was another, smaller, paler face. April.

“Fire a warning shot,” Melinda Strickland told Munker.

“A *warning shot*?” Joe screamed. “What are you ...”

Before Joe could react, he saw a movement in the ditch behind a knot of brush. The slim black barrel of a rifle slid out of blinding whiteness and swung slowly toward the trailer window. Joe screamed “NO!” as he involuntarily launched himself from the cover of the vehicles in the direction of the shooter. As he ran, he watched in absolute horror as the barrel stopped on a target and fired. The shot boomed across the mountain, jarring the dreamlike snowy morning violently awake.

Immediately after the shot, Joe realized what he had just done, how he had exposed himself completely in the open road with the assault team behind him and the hidden Sovereigns somewhere in front. Maybe the Sovereigns were as shocked as he was, he thought, since no one had fired back.

But within the hush of the snowfall and the faint returning echo of the shot, there was a high-pitched hiss. It took a moment for Joe to focus on the sound, and when he did, he realized that its origin was a newly severed pipe that had run between a large propane tank on the side of the trailer and the trailer itself. The thin copper tubing rose from the snow and bent toward the trailer like a rattlesnake ready to strike. He could clearly see an open space between the broken tip of the tubing and the fitting on the side of the trailer where the pipe should have been attached. Highpressure gas was shooting into the side vents of the trailer.

No! Joe thought. Munker *couldn’t* have ...

He looked up to see a flurry of movement behind the curtains inside the trailer a split-second before there was a sudden, sickening *WHUMP* that seemed to suck all the air off the mountain. The explosion came from inside the trailer, blowing out the window glass and instantly crushing two tires so the trailer rocked and heaved to one side like a wounded animal. The hissing gas from the severed pipe was now on fire, and it became a furious gout of flame aimed at the thin metal skin of the trailer.

Suddenly, a burning figure ran from the trailer, its gyrations framed by fire, and crumpled into the snow.

Joe stood transfixed, staring at the window where he had last seen April. It was now a blazing hole.

He did not move as the shouting started from both the compound in front of him and the assault team behind him, as Sovereigns who had been hiding behind trees and under the snow screamed curses, as several of them fired back, the rounds smashing through the windows or pinging against the thin metal skins of the Sno-cats. He heard the sharp *snap* of bullets through the air around him.

The propane tanks near the burning trailer now flared and exploded, launching rolling orange fireballs veined with black smoke into the air. The trailer burned furiously, the wall consumed so fast that the black metal skeleton of the frame was already showing.

Joe's hands hung limply at his sides. Despite the distance, he could feel the warmth of the fire on his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mixed with melting snowflakes.

"Got 'em," he heard Munker say from somewhere in front of him in the snow.

Rage, vicious and hot, swept through Joe, and he started running straight ahead toward the compound, scanning the trees and ground in front of him for Munker. Joe plunged into the ditch, flailing through the snow, finally catching sight of Munker standing among thick trees on the other side of the ditch, with his back to the Sno-cats. Munker was watching the Sovereign compound with his rifle by his side, smoking a cigarette.

Joe charged out of the ditch toward Munker when he suddenly felt something sharp against his legs, jerking him backwards into the snow. He looked down and realized he had run straight into the barbed wire the Sovereigns had strung around the perimeter of the compound. Joe knew he was cut—he could see the rips in his pants, could feel hot blood running down his leg—but oddly the pain didn't register. Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed the wire and threw it over his head as he mounted the ditch. A guttural sound that was completely unfamiliar to him came out of his throat.

Munker heard the roar and turned, his eyes widening at the sight of Joe crashing through the deep snow toward him. As Joe narrowed the distance, wondering if he'd have time to unzip his suit and pull his Beretta from its holster, Munker calmly tossed the cigarette aside and worked the bolt on his rifle while he raised it.

An ear-shattering concussion came from somewhere behind Joe, and something big hit the stand of trees around Munker. The impact rocked the big tree behind Munker, sending a small mountain of snow cascading through its branches that covered Munker and whited him out.

Joe turned, trying to grasp what had just happened. He could see someone standing atop a wooded rise behind the Sno-cats, in an open area between two stands of dark spruce. The man wore a black snowmobile suit and helmet like everyone else, and he stood behind a snowmobile for cover. Despite the shroud of thickly falling snow, Joe caught a glimpse of the man sweeping a huge silver handgun across the chaos of the assault team diving for cover between Snocats and behind snowmobiles on the skirmish.

line. The team was now shouting, trying to figure out who was attacking them and where the assault was coming from.

Holding the revolver with both hands, Nate Romanowski began firing methodically from the top of the hill. He was putting a bullet or two into the engine block of each of the Sno-cats. The smashing impact rocked the vehicles, sending deputies who were hiding behind them diving into the snow. Joe watched as Romanowski speed-loaded, moved to the side, and started firing again.

Joe looked over his shoulder and saw that the Sovereigns were using the diversion to scramble as well, running for their vehicles in the compound.

"I see him!" one of the deputies shouted, sending a burst of automatic fire up through the trees. Joe heard bullets smacking frozen tree trunks and saw eruptions of heavy snow bloom from the branches and fall to the ground. Romanowski responded by shooting the hood of a snowmobile closest to the deputy, causing the machine to bounce a few inches into the air.

Joe didn't hear anything behind him until something clubbed his neck and sent him sprawling, and turned the world into exquisite aquamarine.

HE COULD HEAR gunshots, shouts, and motors being started somewhere in another world. He wasn't part of it anymore. There was a dull hum in both ears, and a stinging feeling in his face. When he opened his mouth to breathe, there was no air. He opened his eyes to beautiful, comforting light blue. Then his anger, and the pain, brought him back and he realized he was where Munker had left him—facedown, smothering in deep snow.

Joe thrashed in the snow, moaning, not sure for a moment where *up* was. As his senses surged back, he felt not only the dull roar at the base of his skull but also the searing bite of his broken rib, the barbed-wire slashes on his legs—and an overwhelming, almost physical hurt he felt over April.

WHEN JOE WAS able to sit up, Nate Romanowski was gone, but Joe could hear the whine of a snowmobile from where he had stood. And on the road, Dick Munker mounted an undamaged sheriff's department snowmobile and sped off toward the hill. Nate hadn't hit Munker with that first shot after all.

JOE STAGGERED THROUGH the deep snow until he reached the packed powder of the roadbed and climbed back up. The stench of the burning trailer filled his nose and mouth.

As he reached his snowmobile, Melinda Strickland and Elle Broxton-Howard ran toward him. Strickland's little dog leaped like a jackrabbit to keep up with her in the snow. Joe noted that Barnum was huddled over a disabled snowmobile and didn't look his way.

"Joe, I ...," Strickland started to say, but Joe ignored her. He noticed that both Strickland and Broxton-Howard's clothing winked from bits of glass in the folds and creases. He guessed they had huddled on the floorboards of the Sno-cat when the windows were shot out.

He pulled his shotgun from beneath the elastic cords on the back of his snowmobile and racked the pump. Strickland stopped, puzzled.

Fire a warning shot, she had told Munker. His eyes bored holes into her, but she looked back blankly.

“Get out of the way,” Joe said, starting the engine. Both women quickly and clumsily stepped aside for him as he roared into the trees on Munker’s tracks.

As he topped the rise where he had last seen Romanowski, he looked over his shoulder at the skirmish line and compound far below. Black-clad members of the assault team stood around their disabled vehicles, some gesturing, most still. In the compound, the big roll of black smoke obscured the remains of Wade Brockius’s trailer. The rest of the compound was now empty of Sovereigns.

33

FOLLOWING THE TWO snowmobiles through the trees was easy, and Joe did it through half-lidded eyes that were burning in their sockets and with a twelve-gauge shotgun across his lap. Munker had stayed exactly in Nate’s tracks, packing the trail even harder, and Joe knew he would gain speed on both of them.

He had no helmet, and the wind and snow tore at his exposed face and ears and pasted his hair back. He paid no attention to it, concentrating instead on the track in front of him and anticipating the first sight of Munker ahead. He had no doubts about what to do when he caught up to him. Focus was not a problem now.

He followed the tracks across an open meadow and back into the dark timber on the other side. Because he couldn’t hear anything but his own motor, he couldn’t tell if Munker had Nate in his sights or if he, like Joe, was simply following the trail.

The trees got thicker, flashing by on each side, and Joe had to slow down to stay in the track and not to hurtle into the timber. Nate had obviously tried to shake Munker by diving into the deep woods, making hairpin turns around pine trees, and ducking under low-hanging branches. The trail zigzagged through the trees, sometimes banking sharply near trunks or outcroppings.

The single thought in Joe’s mind was to find Dick Munker and kill him. He knew it would mean prison. He didn’t care. Today Agent Dick Munker of the FBI needed to die by Joe’s hand.

The terrain suddenly cleared, and the track went up the middle of a treeless hill. Joe hit his accelerator and the snowmobile whined, blindly surging up the rise.

He was going so fast, that he almost didn’t see the tracks he was following split in two as he plunged down the hill’s other side. One track had turned sharply to the right and the other plunged straight down the steep ridge into a dark and tangled mass of violently uprooted trees. Out of control, Joe rocketed down the slope, trying to avoid the trees while decelerating with one hand and crushing the handbrake with the other. He caught a glimpse of a smashed snowmobile below him, pieces of it scattered in the

tangle of downed trees, and the black shape of a body in the snow. The body was sprawled out flat on its back, as if making a snow angel. When Joe's machine finally stopped, his left front ski was six inches from Dick Munker's head. Hanging in the air directly in front of him, where his windshield should have been, was the broken-off end of an upturned lodgepole pine that would have skewered Joe if he hadn't been able to stop.

Joe killed the engine and climbed off his snowmobile. He instantly sunk into the snow to his waist. Using a heavylegged swimming motion, he approached Dick Munker.

It was clear from the two sets of tracks what had happened. Munker had followed Romanowski's trail over the ridge and plunged down into the maw of a violent forest blowdown. Trunks and branches had been wrenched and snapped, and were nakedly exposed. A stout branch had impaled the hood of Munker's snowmobile and thrown Munker into the blowdown. Romanowski had no doubt led him to this spot deliberately.

Munker's eyes were on Joe as he waded to him. Joe detected no movement from Munker other than in those eyes. Only when he was practically on top of Munker did Joe catch the ripe scent of hot blood and notice the steam wafting from the crotch of Munker's white camouflage suit. Joe stared. It was Munker's upper thigh, near his groin. A sharp branch had pierced Munker's suit.

"Didn't make the turn, huh?" Joe said dully, lowering the muzzle of his shotgun to Munker's forehead. Both heard the dull snap of the safety being thumbled off.

Munker started to say something, but decided against it. His sharp eyes moved from the muzzle to Joe's face. Joe noticed that a little clump of snow was packed into Munker's nostril.

"You murdered my daughter," Joe said. "No one in that compound needed to die."

"She wasn't even yours, was she?" Munker asked weakly. His eyes showed contempt.

Joe grimaced. This man *wanted* to die.

"Joe, don't do it."

It was Nate. He must have shut off his machine in the trees and struggled back through the snow on foot to check on Munker. Joe hadn't heard him coming.

"Why shouldn't I, Nate?" Joe said, feeling strangely giddy. He looked down to see if Munker was moving yet, trying to slap the shotgun away. But all that moved were Munker's sharp eyes.

Nate stopped to catch his breath. He leaned against one of the downed trees, puffing steam that billowed like a halo around his head.

"Because you're not scum like Munker. You don't murder people in cold blood."

"I do now," Joe said. God, his head hurt.

"You're a good guy, Joe. You don't do things like this."

Joe looked up. "I'm tired, Nate. I just lost a daughter."

Nate nodded. "If you shoot this guy, who will take care of Marybeth? What about Sheridan? And Lucy? Her name's Lucy, right?"

"Right." Joe thought Nate was being horribly unfair.

"Who will take care of them? They need their dad."

“Goddamn you, Nate.”

Romanowski grinned slightly.

“Besides, I think Munker here severed an artery, and he’s probably a few quarts low already. My guess is that he’ll go naturally and quietly in your heroic attempt to rescue him.” Joe looked down, and knew that Nate was right. Munker’s eyes blazed, but his face was ashen. His lips were already blue. The snow packed into his nose had not melted.

Joe cursed bitterly, raising the shotgun.

“Can you help me lift him up, please?” Joe asked Nate.

AS JOE ROARED away from the blowdown with Dick Munker slumped in the seat in front of him, he had second thoughts about Nate’s idea. As far as Joe could tell, Munker’s life was worth nothing. Joe couldn’t think of any value that Munker had brought into the world. Nevertheless, he gunned the engine, hoping against hope that he could deliver the FBI agent to the skirmish line alive. It was more than acceptable if Munker died while Joe transported him, he thought. But he had to give it his all. He couldn’t deliberately slow down and dawdle while Munker suffered. That went against his grain, as much as Joe hated the man. Joe knew it didn’t make sense, but he would have rather blasted Munker with his shotgun than be responsible for his death because he’d driven back in a half-assed way.

But Dick Munker died before Joe even got him as far as the meadow they had crossed. Joe knew it the instant it happened, because Munker stiffened and then went limp and heavy and nearly fell off of Joe’s snowmobile. Joe stopped, and used his bungee cords to secure the body before continuing on to the compound.

JOE PICKETT LEANED against his snowmobile and watched the deputies load Munker’s body into the back of the only Sno-cat that was still operational. Across the fence, the compound was deserted. Joe watched a few of the assault team check out trailers and RVs that were now empty. Nate’s intervention, and the chaos that resulted, had allowed the Sovereigns to proceed with a clearly well-rehearsed escape plan. They had vanished, leaving their belongings and vehicles. Nate’s disabling of almost all of the sheriff’s Sno-cats and snowmobiles had prevented any attempt at chasing them down. All that was left were their deserted homes, dozens of exiting snowmobile tracks, and the smoking remains of Wade Brockius’s trailer.

“You tried to save him,” Elle Broxton-Howard said, putting her arm around Joe.

“Yup,” he said. He hadn’t been thinking about Dick Munker.

“Too bad about that little girl.”

Joe shook her arm off and walked far away from her, far away from everybody. He couldn’t even speak. He stared at the smoldering carcass of the trailer. It had scorched the snow and exposed the earth beneath it—dark earth and green grass that didn’t belong here. Melted snow mixed with soot had cut miniature troughs, like spindly black fingers, down the hillside. When he stared at the black framework, all he could see was the face of April Keeley as he last saw her. She was looking out of the window, her head tucked under the chin of her mother. April’s face had been emotionless, and

haunted. April had always been haunted. She had never, it seemed, had much of a chance, no matter how hard he and Marybeth had tried. He had failed her, and as a result, she was gone. It tore his heart out.

Joe stood there as the snow swirled around him, then felt a wracking sob burst in his chest taking his remaining strength away. His knees buckled and his hands dropped to his sides and he sank down into the snow, hung his head, and cried.

PART FOUR

Snow Ghosts

34

TWO MONTHS HAD passed, and except for an occasional morning dusting, it hadn't snowed. Even in March, normally the snowiest month of the year in Wyoming, it didn't snow. A combination of high-altitude sunshine and warm Chinook winds that swept down and roared across the face of the Rockies had melted the snow on the valley floor, although there were still six to ten feet of snow in the mountains.

At the Sovereign Citizen compound, the disabled Sno-cats still sat as silent hulks. The empty trailers, campers, and vehicles of the Sovereigns hadn't been removed either, and probably wouldn't be until late spring, when the mountain roads were open and tractors and flat-bed trucks could get up there.

except for investigators and a very few journalists, there had been almost no visitors to the compound since it had erupted. For all practical purposes, it looked the same as it had on that day in January.

AN INTERNAL FOREST Service investigation had been launched immediately to determine whether or not policies had been breached and regulations followed. The FBI announced a similar investigation into the actions of Special Agent Dick Munker.

Robey Hersig had tentatively put out feelers to the attorney general in Cheyenne about an investigation on a statewide level. He was rebuffed on the basis that it was a federal matter.

Wade Brockius was among those found in the burned trailer. His body lay on top of Jeannie Keeley's as if he had been trying to shield her, and April's body was found beside her mother. Eunice Cobb's body was also found and identified. She had been the victim who had run burning from the trailer. The Reverend B. J. Cobb announced that he intended to file a wrongful-death suit against the U.S. Forest Service and the FBI, and that he would start a legal expense fund based at his church. Cobb had been told to expect that the suit would take as long as five years to culminate in a trial, if it ever went that far.

Cobb had noisily objected to the "internal" nature of the investigations carried out by the federal agencies. He called for an independent investigation instead and proposed that the U.S. Justice Department should form a task force. His proposal gained no traction.

In the meantime, Melinda Strickland had remained in Saddlestring. She had been named interim district supervisor, and had taken over Lamar Gardiner's office and desk. Two female employees had already filed a grievance, claiming that Strickland had hurled books at them in a rage.

JOE AND MARYBETH Pickett paid for the funerals of April and Jeannie Keeley with money they didn't have. Although they still had legal bills from the lawyer they had hired to get April back, they went further into debt to pay for the plots and coffins in the Twelve Sleep County cemetery. The plots were located next to the grave of Ote Keeley, the murdered outfitter who had been buried in his pickup four years before. The fact that they paid for the funerals raised some eyebrows in Saddlestring, and it became a topic of conversation at the Burg-O-Pardner restaurant.

THE "SHOOT-OUT at Battle Mountain," as it had been dubbed, faded quickly as a mainstream national news story, and didn't linger much longer than that within the state and region, except within pockets of the suspicious and dispossessed. Robey Hersig explained to Joe that the reasons for this had been the inaccessibility of the compound, the lack of media buildup, more pressing war news, and the absence of television coverage. Without visuals, Hersig said, there was no news. He gave the late Dick Munker credit for that.

Therefore, what happened at Battle Mountain didn't rank in the national conscience with Waco, Ruby Ridge, or the Montana Freeman standoff. Although the incident raged through Internet forums and simmered beneath the surface throughout the Mountain West, the lack of good information relegated the story to the back pages of newspapers. Robey told Joe that a few of the Sovereigns who had fled that day had contacted journalists in different parts of the country to offer their stories, but were generally deemed less than credible.

Melinda Strickland was hailed as a hero in a long-form feature in *Rumour* magazine written by Elle Broxton-Howard. Another feature in *Us* magazine—"Lady Ranger Bucks the System and Saves a Forest"—showed a photo of a shoeless Melinda Strickland on the couch in her home, with streaky blond hair, hugging her dog. A cable-television news crew came to Saddlestring and did a feel-good feature on Broxton-Howard and Melinda Strickland for a newsmagazine show.

As a result, Broxton-Howard's U.S.-based publicist parlayed the segment, which showcased his client's good looks, her on-screen presence, and an accent that seemed to have grown more refined and pronounced since she left Saddlestring, into a series of talk-show and twenty-four-hour cable-news bookings. Elle Broxton-Howard could now be seen on television several nights a week as a paid analyst specializing in gender and environmental issues.

Since January, Broxton-Howard had left three messages for Joe on his office answering machine. She still wanted to do his story, she said. She "smelled" a six-figure movie option. They could work out the details later, when they met, she said. Joe had yet to return her calls.

One night, while Marybeth was idly channel-surfing, Broxton-Howard's face appeared on their television screen. Marybeth scowled at Joe and quickly changed the channel.

BUD LONGBRAKE'S WIFE, the woman who had been Nate Romanowski's secret lover and who had gone on a world cruise, sent divorce papers from somewhere in Nevada to her husband. He signed them. A week after that, Missy Vankueren moved to the Longbrake ranch.

NATE ROMANOWSKI HAD vanished. Joe was surprised to find out that Nate had not been identified by the assault team as the man who had fired on them. His bulky snowmobile suit and helmet had disguised him. They mistakenly assumed that the shooter had been a Sovereign who had somehow flanked them. Ballistics reports couldn't positively identify the huge slugs that had disabled the Sno-cats because the bullets were damaged beyond recognition. Joe realized that only two people could have positively identified Nate Romanowski as the shooter—Dick Munker and himself.

JOE TOLD STATE and federal investigators everything he knew about the incident that day and the buildup to it, with the exceptions of Nate Romanowski's identity and the conversation Joe had had with Romanowski as Dick Munker lay dying. He knew that his account was at odds with those of other witnesses, namely Melinda Strickland, Sheriff Barnum, Elle Broxton-Howard, and a half-dozen deputies. Joe was the only witness to claim that Munker's "warning shot" damaged the propane pipe, or that Munker had manufactured the hostage situation on the fly when told that Spud Cargill was in custody. According to the others, the warning shot had been exactly that, as far as they knew. No one else claimed to have seen a severed copper gas line or heard escaping propane gas. Joe didn't think the members of the assault team were lying—after all, they had been bundled up and wearing helmets that blocked sound, and none of them had been as close as Joe was on the road to the trailer and the severed pipe. The heat of the fire had damaged the pipe that Joe claimed was severed, literally melting it into the snow so Joe had no way to prove his allegations. Despite this, he hoped that his account would not be dismissed.

Several of the investigators asked Joe pointedly, and with obvious skepticism, if he wasn't too far away to see with certainty what had happened when Munker fired. They also speculated aloud that perhaps his personal interest in the entire event—and his obvious animosity toward Dick Munker and Melinda Strickland—had colored his interpretation. The working theory reached by DCI and the FBI was that the trailer burned from the accidental or intentional ignition of materials within the trailer itself.

One of the FBI investigators, a small man named Wendt, told Joe in confidence that he believed him. He also told Joe that his account would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove. Wendt said he was afraid that the internal investigation would be written from the point of view that Munker was a hero who had died in the line of duty. However it went, he said, Joe would also be commended for his attempt to save Munker's life.

Joe didn't hold out much hope, but part of him wanted to believe that further investigation would somehow corroborate his version and justice would be done. He hoped that a deputy or other member of the assault team would confirm his account, or at least parts of it. Someone, he thought, *must* have heard the hissing of gas. Maybe time, and guilt, would make someone step forward. But he knew how unlikely that was, and he knew from experience how law-enforcement personnel stuck together and told the same story.

FOR JOE AND Marybeth Pickett, the two months following the death of April went by in a kind of bitter, dreamy fog. Joe relived the two days leading up to the deaths over and over, picking apart his feverish moves and decisions. He deeply regretted not pressing Cobb further when he'd first gone to his house, and not questioning Cobb's reference to "sanctuary" that day. Cobb had misled him, but Joe had allowed himself to be misled. Because he hadn't understood what Cobb was hinting at, he had gone on an errant trail and wasted almost sixteen hours when he could have intercepted Spud coming down the mountain. It gnawed at him.

Many nights, he didn't sleep more than a few hours at a stretch. Several times, when he couldn't sleep, he would wander downstairs to his office and rewrite his letter of resignation. He had once sealed it and stamped it—only to retrieve it from his out basket the next morning. He had also written—but not submitted—a request to be reassigned to another district. The thought of sharing Twelve Sleep Valley with Melinda Strickland was loathsome.

Marybeth was mercurial, her moods swinging from pure anger to a resigned depression that was new, and disturbing, to Joe. On the nights when Marybeth locked herself in the bedroom, Joe cooked dinner for his girls and told them that their mother wasn't feeling well. Sheridan had stared him down on that one, and had known without asking that he was using illness as an excuse.

Once, late at night, as Joe printed out the latest version of his resignation letter, he heard sounds from down the hallway. Marybeth had led Sheridan and Lucy into Joe and Marybeth's bedroom to sleep, and was shuffling things in the children's bedroom with a vengeance. When Joe found her, she was in the process of removing every last sign of April. She had bagged all of April's clothes, school papers, and toys, and was now stripping the bed. He watched with sadness as she scrubbed down the walls near April's bed, as if to remove any physical evidence of April having been there.

"I haven't cleaned her sheets since she left," Marybeth told him, her eyes strangely alert. "I don't know why I haven't done that. But I need to wash them and put them away now."

Joe had watched her, not knowing what to do. When Marybeth finally paused long enough to cry, he held her.

"I've never hated a woman as much as I hate her," Marybeth said. Joe knew she meant Melinda Strickland.

Joe had never seen her so angry, or so bitter.

"She'll go to jail. The investigation will prove that," Joe assured Marybeth, stroking her hair and hoping that somehow he was right. "It won't bring April back, but at least Melinda Strickland will pay."

Marybeth leaned her head back and met his eyes. "She never even sent a note. Think about that, Joe. Think how cold her heart is."

Joe just nodded, knowing there was nothing to say.

ON THE WAY home from the last basketball practice of the season, Sheridan sat quietly in the cab of the pickup, absently patting Maxine's head. Joe, driving, cast wary glances at the sky that filled the top half of his windshield. Thunderheads were moving in. It looked like snow.

"Dad?"

"Yes."

"Is Mom going to be okay?"

Joe paused. "She's going to be all right. It takes a while."

"I miss April, too."

"So do I, honey."

"I know we're not going to get April back," Sheridan said. "But I do want my mom back."

Joe reached over and put his hand on Sheridan's shoulder. Her hair was still damp from practice.

"Dad, can I ask you something?"

Joe nodded.

"Are you and Mom mad at me for not watching April closer that day in school? For letting Jeannie Keeley take her away?"

Joe was hurt by the question, and pulled quickly to the side of the road so he could turn in his seat and face her.

"No, honey, of course we're not angry with you," he assured her. "It wasn't your fault."

"But I was responsible for her," Sheridan said, fighting tears that seemed to come, Joe thought, much more easily than they used to.

"That's never even crossed our minds, Sheridan," Joe said. "Never."

As they pulled out into the road, Joe restrained a heavy sigh. He felt badly that he hadn't seen this coming, hadn't thought to talk to Sheridan about this earlier. *Of course she would feel this way*, he thought. Despite her maturity, despite what she's been through, *she's still a child*, he thought. And she naturally wondered if the difficulties her parents were having were somehow her doing.

It had been rough on Sheridan and Lucy, Joe knew. They missed April, and they missed the way their mother used to be. Marybeth had see-sawed between snapping at them and smothering them with physical affection. Lucy had complained to him that she didn't know what to say to her mother because she never knew what reaction she would get.

Joe knew he was far from faultless as well. He felt distant, and uninterested in so many of the things that used to give him joy. His thoughts were still up there on the mountain, in the compound, in the snow. He sometimes forgot that the living members of his family were in front of him and needed his attention.

"Your mom will be all right," Joe said. "She's tough."

Sheridan nodded.

"We've never really talked about what happened up there on the mountain, Dad," she said. "It seems like the good guys turned out to be the bad guys, and the bad guys weren't all that bad."

Joe smiled. "That's a pretty good way to put it."

"I can't really sort it out," Sheridan confessed.

"Sheridan, it's all about accountability," he said after a pause. It was something he had thought a lot about recently.

"What's that mean?"

"It means that people should be accountable for their actions. They *have* to be accountable. There needs to be consequences for thoughtless or cruel behavior," Joe said, wondering if he'd said too much. He didn't want her to think he was plotting revenge.

Sheridan sat silently for a few moments.

"Who is accountable for me losing a sister for no good reason?"

Joe frowned. "I am, to a certain degree ..."

"No, you're not!"

"Yes, honey, I am," Joe said, looking straight ahead out the window. "I didn't protect her as well as I should have. I didn't get her back."

"Dad!" Tears rolled down Sheridan's face.

"Others are even more accountable," he said.

THAT EVENING, AFTER dinner, the telephone rang. It was Robey Hersig.

"Joe," Hersig said.

Joe could tell that something was wrong. There was no greeting, no small talk, no mention of the coming storm.

"Yup."

"We got an early look at the findings of the joint FBI and Forest Service investigation. Munker and Melinda Strickland were not only exonerated, they were commended for their actions. There will be a formal announcement tomorrow."

Joe squeezed the receiver as if to crush it.

"How could this happen, Robey?"

"Joe, you've got to stay calm."

"I'm calm."

He looked up to see Marybeth staring at him from where she had turned near the sink. It was obvious she could tell what was happening by reading his face. Joe watched as her expression went cold and her fists clenched.

"Don't do anything foolish," Hersig said. "We knew this was a possibility. You and I discussed it. With an internal investigation and all ... well, they weren't too likely to find that their own people screwed up. Remember, these are the Feds—the FBI. We knew that going in."

Joe said nothing.

"Joe, promise me you'll stay calm."

MARYBETH HAD RUN upstairs to the bedroom and closed the door after Joe told her what Hersig had reported. He needed to give her some time, he thought, before he went up there. He needed some time to figure out what to say that wasn't angry and bitter. Grabbing his coat from the rack in the mud room, he went outside into the dark to try to clear his head.

It was cold, and there was humidity in the air. The stars were blocked out by clouds. After two months, there would be snow coming again. For some reason, he welcomed it. He zipped his coat as he strode up the walk toward the picket fence.

Joe heard a muffled rustling of bird's wings in the dark and stopped with one hand on the gate. He turned. Next to Joe's pickup in the driveway, Nate Romanowski sat on the hood of an ancient Buick Riviera with Idaho license plates. His peregrine was perched on his fist.

"Have you ever considered just knocking on the door?" Joe asked.

"Thanks for keeping me out of it," Nate said, ignoring Joe's question.

"You were helping me," Joe said, closing the gate behind him and approaching Nate and the Buick. "It was the least I could do."

"I heard about the results of the investigation," Nate said, shaking his head. "Their first rule of survival is that they protect their own."

"How in the hell did you know about it? I just heard."

"My contacts in Idaho," Nate said. "The decision was a foregone conclusion six weeks ago. All the Feds knew about it. Office gossip. It just took them a while to write it up with the proper spin."

Joe sat next to Nate on the hood of the Riviera. He sighed deeply, and fought an urge to hurl himself into something hard. He realized how much he had hoped for a miracle after the investigation, and how naïve that hope had been.

"It would be a good thing," Nate said, "if Melinda Strickland went away."

Joe turned and looked hard at Nate. This time, he didn't argue. Joe thought about his family inside the house, and how rough the past two months had been for them all. This wouldn't set things right, or take them back to where they were. But he thought about what he'd told Sheridan about accountability.

"I can take care of it," Nate said.

"No," Joe said hesitantly.

"You don't know what you want, do you?"

"I want her out of this state," Joe said. "I want her out of the Forest Service. I want her to pay something. And I don't mean money. I mean her job at the very least."

"She's evil." Nate frowned. "Leaving her on the street will result in somebody else getting hurt wherever she lands."

Joe thought about it. "That's as far as I'm willing to go, Nate."

"You're sure?" Nate asked.

Joe nodded. He was well aware of the fact that he was crossing a line. But, he thought, it was a line that needed to be crossed in these circumstances. If he was wrong, there would be a world of trouble for him. If he was right, there could still be trouble. The easy and safe thing would be to simply let things run their course. But that was something he couldn't do.

"Maybe a little more," Joe said, feeling both elated and guilty at the same time.

"There's my boy." Nate smiled and nodded and clapped Joe on the back of his coat. "Then we need to persuade her to retire and leave," Nate said. "So we need leverage. How well do you know her?"

"Not well enough," Joe said. "I'm not sure anyone really knows her."

"But you know her well enough to have a good idea about what she likes, what's important to her, right?"

Joe thought about it. He thought of two things. They went inside to Joe's office and Joe asked Nate to wait a moment. He went upstairs to check on Marybeth. She had been crying. Joe tried to comfort her, but she didn't want comforting. Seeing her like that steeled Joe's determination to *do something*. He left Marybeth, went downstairs to the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of bourbon, dropped ice into two waterglasses, and carried it all into his office. He shut the door.

For the next two hours, they discussed it. Eventually, they agreed on a plan.

It began to snow.

35

AT 4.52 THE next afternoon, Joe Pickett entered the U.S. Forest Service office in Saddlestring and sat down on a vinyl couch that looked as if it had been purchased during the Ford Administration. While he brushed snowflakes off the manila folder he had brought with him, he smiled at the receptionist.

"I'm here to see Melinda Strickland."

The receptionist glanced at the clock on the wall. The office would close in eight minutes. She had already put her purse on her desk and gathered up her coat. Joe knew from experience that no one in the office worked a minute past five. It was the same situation at most state and federal offices.

"Is she expecting you?"

"She should be," Joe said, "but I doubt it."

"Your name?"

"Joe Pickett. And please tell her it's important."

The receptionist was a new employee, someone recently hired by Melinda Strickland to replace the last receptionist, who was one of the two women who had filed the grievance. Joe recognized her from a previous job she had held in a local credit union. She was unsmiling, squat, and brusque. He watched her as she rapped on Melinda Strickland's closed door. Then she went inside and shut the door behind her.

Joe heard the murmur of voices, one of them raising in pitch. In a moment, the door reopened and the receptionist returned to her desk for her purse and coat.

"She asked that you make an appointment for later in the week."

"I see," Joe said. "Did you tell her it was important?"

The receptionist glared at Joe.

"Yes."

"Did you tell her it was about her *dog*?"

She was suddenly flustered. As Joe had suspected, the receptionist had been there long enough to realize the special relationship Strickland had with her cocker spaniel.

"No. What about her dog?"

Joe shook his head. "I need to talk with Ms. Strickland privately, please."

The receptionist huffed and turned on her heel and went back into Strickland's office. Behind him, Joe heard a brief rush of employees turning off lights and closing office doors. It was five, and they streamed out of the building so quickly that the outside door never shut between them.

Melinda Strickland opened her door, clearly agitated. She stood to one side to let the receptionist back through so she could go home. Strickland's hair was the coppery color it had been when Joe first met her three months before.

"What is this about Bette?"

Joe had forgotten the name of her cocker spaniel. He stood up.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked.

Strickland's eyes flashed. She hated surprises, but she loved her dog. Joe knew that.

"Ms. Strickland ...?" the receptionist asked, poised behind her desk.

"Yes, go on home," Strickland snapped at her employee. "I'll lock things up in a minute."

Joe pushed by Melinda Strickland in her doorway and walked into her office. The room was in a shambles. Papers, notebooks, and mail were piled on the chairs, on the desk, and in the corners. She had made quite a mess in a short period of time. He cleared a hardback chair of papers and sat down across from her desk to wait for her.

Peeved that he had entered her office uninvited, she strode around her desk and sat down facing him. "*What?*" she demanded.

He coolly looked around the room. The only things of a personal nature on the side wall were a framed cover of *Rumour* magazine and a photo of Bette.

"Joe, I ..."

"Your actions killed my daughter," Joe said simply, letting the words drop like stones. She recoiled as if stung.

"You and I both know what happened up there on the mountain," he said, holding her eyes until she looked away. "Your agency exonerated you. But we're talking about the real world now. I was there. You caused her death, and the death of three other people."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she spat. "You are a sick man." She looked everywhere in the room except at Joe.

"You didn't even send my wife a note."

"Leave my office this instant, Warden Pickett."

Joe leaned forward and cleared a spot on her desk for the manila folder he had brought with him. He placed it there but didn't open it.

"There's no way you can bring April back," Joe said. "But there are a couple of things you can do to at least partially absolve your guilt."

Her hands thumped on the desktop. "I'm guilty of nothing!"

"Of course, it's not even close to enough ...," Joe continued, opening the folder as if Strickland hadn't spoken, "... but it's something. It will make my wife feel better. And it will make me feel better. It might even make *you* feel better."

"Get out of my office!" Strickland screeched, her face contorted with rage. It was clear to Joe she wasn't used to people ignoring her orders.

Joe went on, directing his attention again to the paper he was reading. "The first document here is a press release creating the April Keeley Foundation for Children," he said. He glanced up and saw that she was listening, although her face was white and tense. "The initial twenty-five thousand dollars for the Foundation is to be donated by you from the trust fund your father set up for you. If you can give more than that, it would be even better."

He searched the document so he could quote directly from it. "The purpose of the Foundation is to 'advocate for better protection and legislation for children in foster care.' You'll be a hero again. Maybe there will be a story in a magazine about you not only saving a forest but also protecting foster children."

"What is this?" she said. "Where did you get that?"

"I wrote it up last night," he said, shrugging. "Press releases are not my specialty, but I think it's okay."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Release it under your signature. Then call one of your press conferences and announce it." An edge of sarcasm had crept into his voice, and a slight smile tugged at his mouth.

Strickland was clearly aghast. Joe hadn't seen her face so contorted before.

"And something else," he said, removing the other document from the folder. "Your resignation letter. You can sign it and announce it during your press conference. It will look like you're quitting in order to do good work for children. Everybody likes *that*. The real reason will be our little secret."

The resignation letter had been easy to write for Joe. He had simply used the one *he* had been working on, and changed the names.

"Sign these, and we can both go home," Joe said, placing the documents in front of her.

"This is sick."

"No, it's not sick."

"I should call the sheriff."

"No, you should sign these documents. There's a copy for you and one for me."

Joe leaned forward in his chair, and any semblance of a smile left his face. "Look, call the sheriff if you want. Tell him I'm threatening you with two pieces of paper. Tell him why this is so upsetting to you, that I would want you to create a foundation for children. That should play pretty well with the media as well, don't you think?"

Strickland erupted violently, lashing out with the back of her hand and sending a stack of paperwork that was piled on the edge of the desk fluttering toward the wall like a flock of wounded birds.

"GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!" she shrieked. "JUST *GET OUT!*"

Joe snatched the release and the letter before she could destroy them. Watching her carefully, he leaned back in his chair and shouted over his shoulder.

"Nate!"

He watched her eyes as they swung from him over his shoulder toward the door. He heard a shuffle behind him, and watched as her eyes widened and the blood drained from her face.

Joe glanced back. Nate Romanowski stood inside the office now. He cradled Bette in one arm and held the gaping muzzle of his .454 Casull to the head of the cocker spaniel.

"Sign your name," Nate said, "or the little dog gets it."

Despite the situation, Joe almost smiled.

"You're *monsters!*" Strickland whispered. "My poor Bette." Joe turned back to her. Silently, he slid the documents back onto her desk. He took a pen from his shirt pocket and took its cap off. Handing her the pen, he said, "Let's get this done."

Relief surged through him as she absently reached out for the pen.

He turned the documents around and pointed to the blank signature lines. Strickland leaned forward and her hand hovered over the papers for a moment, but then he saw something dark and malevolent wash over her face and angrily twist her features. Suddenly, she threw the pen aside.

"Go ahead and kill the dog," she snarled. "I'm not signing anything. What's in this for me? Huh? What do *I* get out of this? *Nothing!* Fucking *nothing.*"

Joe hoped she was bluffing. But when he looked into her eyes, into the cold fury of madness, he knew she wasn't. He had horribly miscalculated.

Behind him, he heard the metallic click of the hammer being pulled back on the revolver.

But Nate cocking the revolver made no difference. When he looked at Melinda Strickland, he saw a grotesque shell filled with venom and bile. He did not see a glimmer of human feelings. Even the death of her dog, the only thing she appeared

to have feelings for, could not break through the armor of her narcissism. He was outmatched, and felt utterly defeated. He knew he wasn't capable of pushing this any further. To do so would be to join her in her malediction.

"Nate, let the dog go," Joe said, sighing.

"What?" Nate's voice was hard with anger. "What are you saying?"

"Let the dog go."

"Joe, you've got to go through with ..."

He rose and turned. "It's not going to work."

Nate narrowed his eyes as he studied the leering face of Melinda Strickland, then came to the same conclusion Joe had. The dog licked his hand.

Nate released the hammer and shoved his revolver back into his shoulder holster with indignation. He bent and freed the dog.

"Get out of my office," Strickland said coldly, triumphantly. "Both of you."

Then she called her dog.

Joe walked past Nate into the reception area. He was crushed, humiliated. Nate joined him a beat later. They stared at each other in the reception area, both confounded by what had just happened.

"Bette, damn you, come *here!*" Strickland shouted from inside her office.

Instead, the cocker spaniel tore through the door and leaped toward Nate. The dog wanted him to hold her again.

36

JOE PICKETT STOOD at the bar in the Stockman's and ordered his third Jim Beam on the rocks. While darkness came and the snow fell outside and drinkers entered complaining about the weather, he stared at his face in the cracked mirror.

He felt impotent and defeated, and the slow warmth of the bourbon spreading through him didn't assuage his humiliation. When the glass came he threw back his head and drained it, then signaled to the bartender. The man looked skeptically at Joe for a moment, but poured another drink.

It was probably dinnertime at home, but it didn't register with him. Pool balls clicked in the back of the bar, but he barely heard them. He realized that somehow he had lost Nate as he walked the three blocks from the Forest Service office to the Stockman's, and he hadn't looked around for him until he was seated on the red leather stool. He didn't want to think anymore. He wanted another drink.

He had never felt like such a failure. He was a poor father and a poor husband. He hadn't protected April and she was dead as a result. She had died because of lack of protection, like winterkill. Now, in confronting Melinda Strickland, he had failed April once again.

Would it have been different if it had been Sheridan or Lucy instead of April? Joe wondered. Would he have reacted differently, been more aggressive early on and not

depended on the legal system to work, if it had been one of his own flesh-and-blood daughters up there? Would he have “turned cowboy,” as Nate once put it, if it hadn’t been April? The question tortured him.

He stared at his face in the mirror. He wasn’t sure he liked what he saw.

“WAITING FOR YOUR wife to join you?”

The question startled Joe out of his malaise, and he spilled his drink on the bar. It was Herman Klein, the rancher. Joe hadn’t seen him walk into the Stockman’s, but he’d been so deep in thought that he hadn’t been noticing much. He was now on his fifth drink, and the bar lights were starting to shimmy.

“Nope. Have a seat.” Joe recognized the birth of a slur when he said “seat.”

Klein sat and removed his hat to shake the snow off.

“I’m glad to see this storm,” Klein said, ordering a shot and a beer and another drink for Joe. Joe ignored the skeptical glare of the bartender, who wiped up the spill with a rag. “We need the moisture. That’s a strange thing to say after this January, but it’s true.”

Joe nodded. He felt a burbling in his stomach. He wondered if he would need to throw up.

They drank for a moment.

“Why did you ask about Marybeth?” Joe said.

Klein raised his eyebrows. “Because I never see you in here, and I saw her getting out of her van down the block. I just figured you were meeting her.”

It took a moment for this information to filter through Joe’s lethargic brain. Then he was puzzled. What would Marybeth be doing in town? The kids would have been home from school for the last few hours, and she should have been at home with them. Was she looking for Joe? He hadn’t called her, after all. In fact, he had told her nothing of the plan he and Nate had come up with. It was rare for him not to consult with her, but this had seemed like something she didn’t need right now. Or more rightly, something *he* didn’t need. In the back of his mind, knowing her feelings, he had been a little afraid of how far she would have wanted to go with Strickland. It wasn’t something he wanted to see in his wife, if he could help it, or something he wanted to give her the opportunity to act upon.

“How long ago was that?” Joe asked Klein.

He shrugged. “Half-hour, I guess.”

Joe had left his truck at the Forest Service office. Maybe, he thought, she saw it there on her way home from her job at the library and stopped. *Uh-oh.*

Hastily but clumsily, he slid off his stool and threw his last twenty on the bar.

“Gotta go,” he mumbled, sliding his coat up over his shoulders.

“You need a ride somewhere?” Klein asked, assessing Joe’s condition.

“I’m fine.”

Joe pretended not to hear Klein’s protestations as he weaved his way toward the door.

He spilled out into the darkness, his boots sliding on the three inches of fresh powder on the pavement. He clamped down his hat and buttoned his coat as he walked as quickly as he could down the street.

If Marybeth saw his pickup in front of the Forest Service office, she would probably go inside. Would Melinda Strickland still be there? If that was the case, Joe could only guess what could happen. *I've never hated a woman as much as I hate her*, Marybeth had said. But Melinda Strickland would surely have left her office right after he and Nate left, wouldn't she? Wouldn't she?

He wished he were sober.

He rounded the corner and could see through the waves of snow that a sheriff's department Blazer, lights flashing, and a Saddlestring Police Department cruiser were parked in front of the Forest Service office. Blue and red wig-wag lights painted the street. The door of the Blazer hung open, as if the deputy had just jumped out. Joe's truck was still parked in front, as was Melinda Strickland's green Bronco. Marybeth's van was not there, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

HE DID NOT want to see Melinda Strickland again. Had she called the sheriff on him? Had something happened between her and Marybeth after he'd left?

Joe approached the building and eased the door open far enough to stick his head inside. The bourbon had made him bold—or foolhardy, he thought. Probably both. Inside, it was just as he had left it, except that Deputy Reed stood in the reception area, his radio raised to his mouth. The Saddlestring policeman sat on the vinyl couch, still bundled in his winter coat, with a vacant, drained look on his face, like he had seen something awful.

"Sheriff Barnum?" Reed said into the radio, "How fast can you get over to the Forest Service building? We just got a call about the fact that the door was left open and the lights were on at seven at night, so I checked it out and ... well, *we've got a situation.*"

Joe looked quizzically at Reed, and Reed nodded toward the hallway where Melinda Strickland's office was. Her door, like the front, was ajar.

He stepped inside and walked across the reception area. The Saddlestring cop was upset. Something he had seen down the hall made him lurch to one side and throw up in a small garbage can. Joe was grateful that both Reed and the cop were too preoccupied to ask him why he was there.

Joe rounded the reception desk and looked into Melinda Strickland's office. What he saw seared the alcohol out of his system.

Strickland was still in her chair, but was slumped facedown over her desk in a dark red pool of blood. The wall with the framed cover of *Rumour* and photo of Bette was spattered with blood, brains, and stringy swatches of coppercolored hair. Strickland's stainless-steel 9-millimeter Ruger semi-automatic pistol was clutched in her hand on top of the desk. A single shell casing on the carpet reflected the overhead light. The room smelled of hot blood.

Joe gagged, then swallowed. The bourbon tasted so bitter this time that he nearly choked on it.

He *knew* it wasn't suicide. Just a couple of hours before, he had stared into that woman's soul and there was nothing there to see. Strickland had not succumbed to some sudden pang of guilt. No, Joe thought, someone had made it *look* like a suicide.

He started to push the door open farther but it stiffened. It wouldn't open enough for him to get through. He looked down and saw that he had shoved the bottom of the door over something that had jammed it.

In a fog, he bent down to clear the door. He pulled the obstruction free, and looked at it.

It seemed as if something had sucked all the air out of his lungs and out of the room itself. He wasn't entirely sure the groan he heard was his own.

The item jamming the door was a single Canadian-made Watson riding glove. It was one-half of Joe's Christmas present to Marybeth.

37

JOE CHECKED BOTH ways as he left the Forest Service office in the heavy snowfall. There was no traffic on the street. He heard a siren fire up several blocks away. That would be either Barnum or the police chief. The glove was jammed in Joe's pocket.

He was soon out of town and rolling on Bighorn Road toward his home before he allowed himself to think. He was ashamed of what he was thinking. It was unfathomable.

MARYBETH'S VAN WAS parked in front of the garage and the porch light was on, but the windows were dark. When he entered, he noticed immediately that the house was cool and that the thermostat had not been turned up since they had left in the morning.

Sheridan and Lucy, who should have been watching television or doing homework, were nowhere to be seen.

"Marybeth?"

"Up here." Her voice was faint. She was upstairs.

He bounded up the stairs and found his family in the bedroom. Lucy was sleeping on the top of the covers at the foot of the bed, and Sheridan and Marybeth were sitting on the side of the bed cuddling.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"We were just talking about April," Sheridan said, her voice solemn. "We were feeling kind of sad tonight."

Joe looked at Marybeth, trying to read her. She looked drained and wan. She did not look up at him.

"Have you eaten?" he asked. Sheridan shook her head.

"Please take Lucy downstairs and get yourselves something," Joe said. "We'll be down in a minute."

Marybeth untangled herself from Sheridan, but she wouldn't look at Joe.

When the girls were gone, Joe eased the door shut and sat next to Marybeth on the bed.

"You've been drinking," she said. "I can smell it."

Joe grunted.

"Marybeth, we have to talk about this," he said, pulling her glove from his coat pocket.

He watched her carefully when she looked at it.

"I didn't realize I lost it," she said, turning it over in her hand and squeezing it into a ball.

Joe felt something hot rising inside of him.

"You know where I found it, don't you?"

She nodded. Finally, she raised her eyes to his.

"I saw your truck," she said, her voice flat. "So I went inside the building. Melinda Strickland was sitting at her desk, and her blood was on the wall ..."

The relief Joe felt was better than the bourbon ever was. Then he realized something that jarred him.

"You think *I* did it," Joe said.

The same emotion Joe had felt a moment before was mirrored in Marybeth's face.

"Joe, you didn't do it?"

He shook his head. "I found her like that after you did. And I saw this glove ..."

"Oh," she cried, instantly aware of what he must have thought. "Oh, Joe, I knew you went there and I thought ..."

They embraced in a furious swirl of redemption. Marybeth cried, and laughed, and cried again. After a few minutes, she pulled away.

"So did she kill herself?" she asked.

Joe shook his head. "Not a chance."

"Then who?"

He paused a beat.

"Nate."

She stood and walked to the window, looking out at the snow.

"He went back after we left, while I was in the bar. He must have watched me go into the Stockman's to make sure I'd have a good alibi before he went back to her office. I thought I had just lost him. I wasn't thinking very clearly at that point. Somehow, he got Melinda Strickland's gun away from her and shot her point-blank in the head."

"My God," Marybeth said, turning it over in her mind.

"He told me once that he didn't believe in the legal system, but he believed in justice," Joe said. "We tried it my way and it didn't work. His way worked."

"What are you going to do?"

Joe sighed, and rubbed his face. He felt Marybeth watching him anxiously, felt her searching his face for an indication of what he was thinking.

He looked up at her and spoke softly.

"I'm going to make Melinda Strickland a hero," he said.

She was clearly puzzled.

"There are some papers on her desk we left there. They'll find them when they investigate the crime scene. But it will take a few days to analyze everything. Tomorrow, I'll call Elle Broxton-Howard and give her that interview she wants. In fact, I'll give her the *mother* of all interviews—the exclusive inside story of Melinda Strickland's last day on earth. I'll tell her that ever since the shoot-out at Battle Mountain, Melinda Strickland has been tortured by the death of April Keeley, that it was eating away at her. Strickland told me all about it in the meeting we had in her office, when she described the foundation she was creating. Her secretary will corroborate the meeting.

"She just couldn't overcome the guilt," Joe said. "So she took her own life. Before she did, though, she wrote out her resignation and established the April Keeley Foundation as her legacy."

The story was taking shape as he spun it out, and he was becoming convinced it would work. He stopped for breath, and looked to Marybeth for confirmation.

Marybeth looked at him with eyes that shined. "Sometimes you amaze me," she said.

"It'll be a hell of a story," he said, shaking his head.

There was a long pause.

"What are you going to do about Nate?"

Joe thought, and hesitated for a moment. He had crossed a line. He couldn't go back and pretend he hadn't crossed it. He would have to ride it out.

"I'm going to ask him to teach Sheridan about falconry."

He rose and joined her at the window and they looked out at the storm. A burst of wind sent snow tumbling toward them, and Joe felt the lick of icy wind on his hand near the window frame. He would need to put some insulation in the crack later. He had forgotten about it.

He leaned forward and looked down into the front yard. The heavy, wet spring snow was being carried by the wind and was sticking to the sides of the fence and the power poles. There were three small Austrian pine trees in the front yard that Joe had put in the previous spring. The girls had helped him plant them and, at the time, each had claimed a tree. The tallest was Sheridan's, the next was April's, the smallest belonged to Lucy. Joe found himself staring at April's tree, watching the blowing snow pack hard into the branches, changing it into a snow ghost, and felt oddly comforted.

Trophy Hunt

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Acknowledgments
- Part One
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
 - Chapter 8
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
- Part Two
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
 - Chapter 18
 - Chapter 19
- Part Three

- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39

[Dedication]

To Kelly, Sherri, and Kurt
... and Laurie, always

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C.J. Box
Cheyenne, Wyoming

PART ONE

IN TWELVE-YEAR-old Sheridan Pickett's dream, she was in the Bighorn Mountains in the timber at the edge of a clearing. She was alone. Behind her, the forest was achingly silent. Before her, a quiet wind rippled through the long meadow grass in the clearing.

Then the clouds came, dark and imposing, roiling over the top of the mountains in a wall. Soon the sky was completely covered, a lid placed on a pot. In the center of the clouds was a lighter cloud that seemed to be lit from within. It grew bigger and closer, as if lowering itself to the earth. Black spoors of smoke snaked down in tendrils from the cloud, dropping into the trees. In moments, the smoke became ground-hugging mist that coursed through the tree trunks like soundless, rushing water. Then it seeped into the ground to rest, or to hide.

As quickly as the clouds had come, the sky cleared.

In her dream, she knew the mist stayed for a reason. The purpose, though, was beyond her understanding. When would it emerge, and why? Those were questions she couldn't answer.

SHERIDAN AWOKE WITH a start, and it took a few terrifying moments to realize that the darkness surrounding her was actually her bedroom, and that the breathy windlike stirring she heard was her little sister Lucy, asleep on the bunk beneath her bed.

Sheridan found her glasses where she had propped them on her headboard, and swung her bare feet out from beneath the covers. She dropped to the cold floor with her nightgown ballooning around her.

Parting the curtain, she looked at the night sky. Hard white stars, like blue pinpricks, stared back. There were no clouds, either dark or glowing.

1

IT HAD BEEN a good day of fly-fishing until Joe Pickett and his daughters encountered a massive bull moose that appeared to be grinning at them.

Until then, Joe, Sheridan, and seven-year-old Lucy had spent the entire afternoon working their way upstream on Crazy Woman Creek on a brilliant, early-September day. Maxine, their yellow Labrador, was with them. The tall streamside grass hummed with insects, hoppers mainly, and a high breeze swayed the crowns of the musky lodgepole pine forest.

They fished methodically, overtaking each other in wide loops away from the water, passing silently while the person they were going past cast at a pool or promising riffle. The water was lower than usual—it was a drought year—but the stream was clear and still very cold. Joe was in his late thirties, lean and of average height. His face and the backs of his hands were sunburned from being outside at altitude.

Hopscotching over dry river rocks, Joe had crossed the stream so he could keep a better eye on his girls as they worked the other side with their fly rods. Maxine shadowed Joe, as she always did, fighting her natural instinct to plunge into the water and retrieve fly casts.

Sheridan stood waist deep in brush upstream and was momentarily still, concentrating on tying a new hopper pattern to her tippet. Her glasses glinted in the afternoon sun, so Joe couldn't tell if she was watching him observe her. She wore her new fishing vest (a recent birthday present) over a T-shirt, baggy shorts, and water sandals for wading. A sweat-stained Wyoming Game and Fish Department cap—one of Joe's old ones—was pulled down tightly on her head. Her bare arms and legs were cross-hatched with fresh scratches from thorns and branches she had crashed through to get closer to the water. She was a serious fly-fisher, and a serious girl overall.

But while Sheridan was the fisher, Lucy seemed to be catching most of the fish, much to Sheridan's consternation. Lucy did not share her older sister's passion for fishing. She came because Joe insisted, and because he had promised her a good lunch. She wore a sundress and white sandals, her shiny blond hair tied in a ponytail.

With each fish Lucy caught, Sheridan's glare toward her little sister intensified, and she moved farther upstream away from her. *It's not fair*, Joe knew she was thinking.

"Dad, come here and look at this," Sheridan called, breaking into his rumination. He pulled the slack tight on his rod and looped his line through his fingers before walking up the bank toward her. She was pointing down at something in the water beneath her feet.

It was a dead trout, white belly up, lodged between two exposed stones. The fish bobbed in a natural cul-de-sac dark with pine needles and sheaths of algae that had washed down with the current. He could tell from the wet, vinyl-like sheen on the fish's pale underside and the still-bright twin slashes of red beneath its gills that it hadn't been dead very long.

"That's a nice fish," Sheridan said to Joe. "A cutthroat. How big do you think it is?"

"Thirteen, fourteen inches," Joe replied. "It's a dandy." Instinctively, he reached down for Maxine's collar. He could feel her trembling under her skin through her coat, anxious to retrieve the dead fish.

"What do you think happened to it?" she asked. "Do you think somebody caught it and threw it back after it was dead?"

Joe shrugged, "Don't know." On a previous trip, Joe had instructed Sheridan how to properly release a fish back into the water after he caught it. He had shown her how to cradle it under its belly and lower it slowly into the water so that the natural

current would revive it, and how to let the fish dart away under its own power once it was fit to do so.

She had asked him about the ethics of eating caught fish versus releasing them, and he told her that fish were for eating but that there was no reason to be greedy, and that keeping dead fish in a hot creel all day and throwing them away later because they were ruined was an ethical problem, if not a legal one. He knew this was what she was thinking about when she pointed out the dead fish.

IT WASN'T LONG before Sheridan pointed out another dead fish. It had died more recently than the other one, Joe noted, because it floated on its side, flaunting the rainbow colors that gave the fish its name. It had not yet turned belly-up. This fish was not as large as the first, but still impressive.

Sheridan was righteously indignant.

"Something is killing these fish, and it makes me mad," she said, her eyes flashing. Joe didn't like it either but was impressed by her outrage, although he didn't know whether her anger came from her outdoor ethics or if she was angry because someone was killing fish she felt *she* deserved to catch.

"Can you tell what's killing them?" she asked.

This time, he let Maxine retrieve the rainbow. The Lab unnecessarily launched herself into the water with a splash that soaked both of them, and came back with the trout in her mouth. Joe pried it loose from Maxine's jaws and turned it over in his palm. He could see nothing unusual about the fish.

"This isn't like finding a dead deer or elk, where I can check for bullets," he told Sheridan. "I can't see any wounds or disease on this fish. They may have been overstressed after being caught by someone."

Sheridan huffed with disappointment, and strode upstream. Joe tossed the fish into a stand of willows behind him.

While he waited for Lucy to mosey her way closer, he reached behind him and felt the heavy sag of his .40 Beretta semi-automatic, his service weapon, hidden away in the large back-pocket creel of his fishing vest. He also affirmed that his wallet-badge was there, as well as several strands of Flex-cufs. Although he wasn't working, he was still the game warden, and still charged with enforcing regulations.

That morning, as he packed, he had taken the unusual step of adding another item to his fishing-vest arsenal: bear spray. He strummed his fingers over the large aerosol can through the fabric of his vest. The bear spray was wicked stuff, ten times more powerful than the pepper spray used for disabling humans. A whiff of the spray, even at a distance, brought men to their knees. Joe thought about the series of reports and cryptic e-mails he'd received regarding a rogue 400-pound male grizzly that was causing havoc in north-western Wyoming. For the past month, the bear had damaged cars, campsites, and cabins, but as yet there had been no human-bear encounters. The bear had originally been located near the east entrance of Yellowstone Park through a weakening signal from its radio collar, but he had not yet been sighted. When the "bear guys"—a team of Wyoming Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service bear specialists—tried to cut it off, the bear eluded them and they lost the signal. Joe couldn't recall a runaway bear incident quite like this before. It was like the wilderness version of an escaped convict. He blamed the drought, as the biologists did, and the need for the grizzly to cover new ground in search of something, anything, to eat. It had not been lost on him that the damage reports indicated that the grizzly was moving to the east, through the Shoshone National Forest. If the bear kept up his march, he would enter the Bighorn Mountains, where grizzlies had not roamed for eighty years.

Joe disliked bringing his weapon and badge with him on his day off. He felt oddly ashamed that his daughters were seeing his day-to-day equipment as they caught fish and he cooked them over an open fire for lunch. It was different when he was out in the field, in his red chamois Game and Fish shirt and driving his green pickup, checking hunters and fishers. Now, he just wanted to be Dad.

WORKING THEIR WAY upstream, they stumbled upon another party. Sheridan saw them first and stopped, looking back for Joe. He could see flashes of color through the trees ahead, and he heard a cough.

Joe noticed a strange odor in the air when the wind shifted. The odor was sickly sweet and metallic, and he winced when a particularly strong waft of it blew through.

Making sure Lucy was well behind them, Joe winked at Sheridan as he overtook her, and she fell in behind him as he closed in on the two fishers. He debated whether or not to show his badge before saying hello, and decided against it. Joe noticed the unpleasant odor again. It seemed to get worse as he walked upstream.

As he approached them, he felt Sheridan tug on his sleeve, and he turned and saw her point toward the water. A small brook trout, not more than six inches long, was floating on the top of the water on its side. It wasn't dead yet, and he could see its gills working as it pathetically tried to right itself and swim away.

"The fish killers," Sheridan whispered ominously at the man and woman in front of them, and he nodded to her in agreement.

The man looked to be in his late fifties, and was dressed as if he were a cover model for *Fly Fisherman* magazine. He wore ultralight Gore-tex waders and leather wading boots, a pale blue Coolmax shirt, and a fishing vest with dozens of bulging pockets filled with gear. A wooden net hung down his back from a ring on his collar. A leather-bound journal for documenting the species and size of the fish he caught was on a lanyard on his vest, as was a small digital camera for recording the catch. The man was large and ruddy, with a thick chest. He had a salt-and-pepper mustache and pale, watery eyes. He looked like a hungover CEO on vacation, Joe thought.

Behind and off to the side of the man was a much younger woman with blond hair; long sunburned legs; and a fishing vest so new that the tag from the Bighorn Angler Fly Shop was still attached to the front zipper. She held her rod away from her body with the unease of someone holding a dead snake.

It was obvious, Joe thought, that the man was teaching the woman how to fish. Or, more accurately, the man was showing the woman what a fine fisherman *he* was. Joe

assumed that the couple had stopped at the fly store on their way up the mountain and that the man had outfitted her with the new vest.

The man had been concentrating on dropping a fly into a deep pool but now glared at Joe and Sheridan, clearly annoyed that he had been disturbed.

"Jeff ..." the woman cautioned in a low voice, attempting to get Jeff's attention.

"Good afternoon," Joe said and smiled. "How's fishing?"

Jeff stepped back from the stream in an exaggerated way. His movement wasn't aggressive but clearly designed to show Joe and Sheridan that he wasn't pleased with the interruption and that he planned to resume his cast as soon as possible.

"Thirty-fish day," Jeff said gruffly.

"Twenty-eight," the woman corrected, and Jeff instantly flashed a look at her.

"It's an *expression*," he said as if scolding a child. "Twenty-fish day, thirty-fish day, they're fucking *expressions*. It's what fishermen tell each other if one of them is rude enough to ask."

The woman shrank back and nodded.

Joe didn't like this guy. He knew the type: a fly-fisherman who thought he knew everything and who could afford all of the equipment he read about in the magazines. Often, these men were fairly new to the sport. Too often, these men had never learned about outdoor etiquette, or common courtesy. To them it was all about thirty-fish days.

"Keeping any?" Joe asked, still smiling. He reached into the back pocket of his vest, bringing out his wallet-badge and holding it up so Jeff could understand why Joe was asking the question.

"There's a limit of six on this stream," Joe said. "Mind if I look at what you've kept?"

Jeff snorted and his face hardened.

"So you're the game warden?"

"Yes," Joe said. "And this is my daughter Sheridan."

"And his daughter Lucy," Lucy said, having caught up with them. "What's that smell, Dad?"

"And Lucy," Joe added, looking back at her. She was pinching her nose with her fingers. "So I would appreciate it if you watched your language around them."

Jeff started to say something but caught himself. Then he rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Tell you what," Joe said, looking at the woman—who appeared to be fearing a fight—and Jeff. "How about you show me your licenses and conservation stamps and I'll show you how to properly release a fish so that there aren't any more dead ones?"

The woman immediately began digging in her tight shorts, and Jeff seemed to make up his mind that he didn't really want a fight, either. Still glaring at Joe, he reached behind his back for his wallet.

Joe checked the licenses. Both were perfectly legal. She was from Colorado and had a temporary fishing license. Jeff O'Bannon was local, although Joe couldn't remember ever seeing him before. Joe noted that O'Bannon's address was on Red Cloud Road,

which meant he lived in one of the new \$500,000 ranchettes south of town in the Elkhorn Ranches subdivision. That didn't surprise Joe.

"Do you know what that awful smell is?" Joe asked conversationally as he handed the licenses back.

"It's a dead moose," Jeff O'Bannon said sullenly. "In that meadow up there." He gestured through the trees to the west, vaguely pointing with the peaked extra-long bill of his Orvis fishing cap. "That's one reason why we're fucking leaving."

"Jeff ..." The woman cautioned.

O'Bannon growled at her, "There's no law against the word *fucking*."

Joe felt a rise of anger. "I think, Jeff, that I'll see you again some time out here," Joe said, leaning in close to him. "Given your bad attitude, you'll probably be doing something wrong. I'll arrest you when you do."

O'Bannon started to step toward Joe but the woman held his arm. Joe slipped his hand in the back pocket of his fishing vest and thumbed off the safety bar on the bear spray.

"Aw, to hell with it," O'Bannon said, leaning back. "Let's get out of here, Cindy. He's already ruined my good mood."

Joe watched as Cindy breathed a long sigh of relief and shook her head in bewilderment for Joe's benefit, keeping out of Jeff's line of vision. Joe stepped aside as the man stormed past him, followed by Cindy.

"Bye, girls," she called to Sheridan and Lucy, who watched the two walk away. Jeff led the way, snapping branches and cursing. Cindy tried to keep up.

"Dad, can we leave, too?" Lucy asked. "It stinks here."

"Go ahead and go downstream a little ways and get out of the smell if you want to," Joe said. "I need to check this moose out."

"We're going with you," Lucy honked back, still holding her nose. Joe turned to argue when he noticed that O'Bannon and Cindy hadn't moved very far after all. O'Bannon stood in a clearing, glaring through pine branches at Joe while Cindy tugged at him.

"Okay," Joe said, knowing it was best to keep his girls near him.

*

THE MOOSE WASN'T hard to find, and the sight jarred Joe. A full-grown bull moose lay on its side in the ankle-high grass in the center of the meadow, which was walled on three sides by dark trees that continued in force up the mountain. The dead moose was horribly bloated to nearly twice its normal size, its mottled purple skin stretched nearly to breaking. Two black legs, knobby-kneed and surprisingly long, were suspended over the ground, like a chair that had been tipped over. Its face, half-hidden in the grass, seemed to leer at him with bared long teeth and a single, bulging, wide-open eye that looked like it was primed and ready to fire right out of the socket.

Joe turned on his heels and told his girls to stop so they wouldn't see it. Too late.

Lucy shrieked, and covered her mouth with her hands. Sheridan stared, her eyes wide, her mouth set grimly.

"It's alive!" Lucy cried.

“No it isn’t,” Sheridan countered. “But there’s something wrong with it.”

“Stay put,” Joe said sternly. “I mean that.”

Drawing a bandanna out of his Wranglers, he tied it over his nose and mouth like a highwayman, and approached the bloated carcass. Sheridan was right, Joe thought. There was something wrong with it. And there was something else; he had a fuzzy, slightly dizzy feeling. For a moment, he was light-headed, and thought that perhaps he had moved too quickly or something. He blinked, and when he looked around he saw faint, slow motion sparkling in the air for a moment.

Shaking his head to try and clear it, Joe circled the carcass, never getting closer than a few feet from it. The animal had been mutilated. Its genitals and musk glands had been cut out, and its rectum was cored. Half of its face had been removed, leaving a grinning skull and long, yellowed teeth. He could see where the skin and glands had been cut away, and noted that the incisions were smooth, almost surgical, in their precision. He could not imagine an animal, any animal, leaving wounds like that. Where the skin had been cut away the exposed flesh was dark purple and black, speckled with tiny commas of bright yellow. When he stopped and stared, he realized that the commas were writhing. Maggots. Besides the incisions, he could see no exterior wounds on the carcass.

Turning his head for a big gulp of air, he strode forward, squatted and grasped one of the bony, stiff forelegs. Grunting, he lifted, using the leg as a lever. He shinnied around the obscenely smiling face and massive, inverted palm-frond antlers and pulled, using his legs and back, trying to turn the stiff carcass. For a moment, the sheer weight of the animal stymied him, and he feared losing his footing and falling over it. Worse yet would be if the leg pulled loose from the putrefied shoulder, leaving a long, hairy club in his hands. But with a sickening kissing sound the body detached from the ground and began to roll toward him. He pulled hard on the leg and jumped back as the carcass flopped over in the grass. Gasses burbled inside the moose, sounding like something subterranean. He searched the grass-matted hide for external injuries. Again, he found none.

He expected to see the flattened grass black with congealed blood, as was usually the case when he found animals that had been poached. The entry wound was often hard to see but the exit wound would bleed and drain into the turf, leaving a black-and-red pudding. But there was no blood underneath the moose at all, only more insects, madly scrambling, running from sunlight.

Joe stepped back and looked around. The grass was lush and thick in the meadow, and he noticed, for the first time, that there were no tracks of any kind in it. When he looked back on the slope he had walked up, his own footprints were glaringly obvious in the crushed, dry grass. It appeared that the moose had chosen the center of the meadow to suddenly drop dead. So what could possibly have removed the animal’s genitals, glands, and face? And not left so much as a print?

He pulled the bandanna from his mouth and let it hang around his neck. His necropsy kit was in his pickup, which was a one-hour walk away. Dusk would be

approaching soon, and he had promised Marybeth he would have the girls home in time for dinner and homework. Tomorrow, when he returned, he expected that with the kit and his metal detector he would find a bullet or two in the carcass. Usually, the lead caught up just beneath the hide on the opposite side of where the animal had been shot.

Joe walked back to where Sheridan and Lucy were standing. They had moved back down the hill from the meadow, close enough that they could watch him but far enough away that the smell of the carcass wouldn't make them sick to their stomachs. Jeff and Cindy were nowhere in sight.

As they worked their way down the slope to Crazy Woman Creek, his girls fired questions at him.

"Who killed the moose, Dad?" Lucy asked. "I like moose."

"Me too. And I don't know what killed it."

"Isn't that strange to find an animal just dead like that?" Lucy again.

"Very strange," Joe said. "Unless somebody shot it and left it."

"That's a crime, right? A big one?" Sheridan asked.

Joe nodded. "Wanton destruction of a game animal."

"I hope you find out who did it," Sheridan said, "and take away all of his stuff."

"Yup," Joe agreed, but his mind was racing. Besides the mutilation and the lack of tracks around the animal, something else bothered him that he couldn't put his finger on. But as the three of them walked downstream, he saw a raccoon ahead of them splash through a pool and vanish into a stand of trees. The raccoon had found one of the dead fish that Jeff had "released."

Suddenly, Joe stopped. *That was it*, he thought. The bull moose had been dead for at least several days, lying in the open, and *nothing* had fed on it. The mountains were filled with scavengers—eagles, coyotes, badgers, hawks, ravens, even mice—who were usually the first on the scene of a dead animal. Joe had discovered scores of game animals, which had been lost or left by hunters, by the squawking, feeding magpies that usually marked a kill. But the moose looked untouched, except for the incisions.

As a big fist of cumulous clouds punched across the sun and flattened the shadows and dropped the temperature by a quick ten degrees, Joe heard a snapping sound and turned slowly, looking back toward the meadow where they had found the moose. He could see nothing, but he felt a ripple through the hairs on the back of his neck.

"What is it, Dad?" Sheridan asked.

Joe shook his head, listening.

"I heard it," Lucy said. "It sounded like somebody stepped on a branch or a twig. Or maybe they were eating potato chips."

"Potato chips," Sheridan scoffed. "That's stupid."

"I'm not stupid."

"*Girls.*" Joe admonished them, still trying to listen. But he heard nothing beyond the liquid sound of the flowing breeze through the swaying crowns of the pine trees.

He thought of how, in just a few moments, the mountain setting had changed from warm and welcoming to cold and oddly silent.

2

IT WAS A half-hour before dusk when they arrived at their small, two-story, state-owned home eight miles out of Saddlestring. Joe swung the pickup off Bighorn Road and parked it in front of the detached garage that needed painting. Sheridan and Lucy were out of the passenger door even before he set the brake, rushing across the grass in the front yard into the house to tell their mother what they had seen. Maxine bounded behind them but paused at the door to look back at Joe.

"Go ahead," Joe said, "I'm coming."

Assured, the Labrador bolted into the house.

After putting the rods, vests, and cooler into the garage, Joe walked around the house toward the corral. Toby, their eight-year-old paint gelding, nickered as soon as Joe was in sight, which meant he was hungry. Doc, their new sorrel yearling, nickered as well, following the older horse's lead. Joe shooed them aside as he entered the corral, then fed them two flake sections each of grass hay. He filled the trough and checked the gate on his way out. While he did so, he wondered why Marybeth hadn't fed them earlier, because she usually did.

As he opened the door at the back of the house, Sheridan stormed out of it in a dark mood.

"Did you tell your mom about the moose?" Joe asked her.

"She's busy," Sheridan snapped, "maybe I should have made an appointment."

"Sherry ..." Joe admonished, but Sheridan was out the back gate toward the corral.

He turned and entered the kitchen. Marybeth sat at the kitchen table wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, surrounded by manila files, stacks of paper, facedown open books, a calculator, and a laptop computer. Boxes of files were stacked on either side of her chair, their lids on the floor. She was concentrating on her laptop screen, and barely acknowledged him as he entered the kitchen.

"Hey, babe," he greeted her as he swept her blond hair away from the side of her face and kissed her on the cheek.

"Just a second," she said, tapping on her keyboard.

Joe felt a pang of annoyance. It was obvious that nothing was cooking on the stove, and the oven light was dark. The table was a shambles, and so was Marybeth. It wasn't as if he expected dinner on the table every night. But she had asked him to be home early with the girls, for dinner, and he had lived up to his part of the bargain.

"Okay," she announced and snapped the screen down on her laptop. "Got it."

"Got what?"

"The Logue Country Realty account is finally reconciled," she said. "What a mess that one was."

“Well, good,” he said flatly, opening the refrigerator to see if a covered dish was ready to heat. Nope.

“I don’t know how they stayed in business after they bought it, Joe,” she explained, filing bank statements and canceled checks into folders and envelopes. “The previous owners left them an unbelievable mess. Their cash flow was an absolute mystery for the last twelve quarters.”

“Mmm.”

There weren’t even frozen pizzas in the freezer, he saw. Just some rock-hard packages of deer burger and elk roasts from the previous year, and a box of Popsicles that had been in the freezer as long as Joe could remember.

“I thought we’d go out tonight,” Marybeth said. “Or maybe one of us could run into town to get something and bring it back.”

He was surprised. “We can afford to?”

Marybeth’s smile disappeared. “No, we really can’t,” she sighed. “Not until the end of the month, anyway.”

“We could thaw out that burger in the microwave,” Joe suggested.

“Do you mind grilling out?” she asked.

“That’s fine,” he said evenly.

“Honey .”

Joe held up his hand. “Don’t worry about it. You got caught up in your work. It’s okay.”

For a second, he thought she would tear up. That happened more and more lately. But she didn’t. Instead, she bit her lower lip and looked at him.

“Really,” he said.

AS HE SCRAPED the grate of the barbecue grill in the backyard, Joe battled with himself over his disappointment that there was no dinner planned and his growing worry about Marybeth and their marriage. There was no doubt that the violent death last winter of their foster daughter April, had severely affected Marybeth. Joe had hoped that the dawn of spring would help Marybeth heal but it hadn’t. Spring had only brought the realization that their situation in general was no different than it had been before.

Sometimes, he caught her staring. She would fix on the window, or sometimes on something that seemed to be between the window and her eyes. Her face would look slightly wistful, and her eyes softened. A couple of times he asked her what she was thinking about. When he did, she shook her head as if shaking off a vision, and said, “Nothing.”

He knew their finances troubled her, as they troubled him. There was a statewide budget crunch, and salaries had been frozen. In Joe’s case, this meant he would make \$32,000 a year as far ahead as he could see. The long hours he worked also meant that any kind of extra income was out of the question. The department provided housing and equipment, but recently the house, which had at one time seemed wonderful, felt like a trap.

After April died, Joe and Marybeth had discussed their future. They needed normalcy, they agreed, they needed routine. Faith and hope would return naturally, because they were strong people and they loved each other and, given time, they'd all heal. Joe had promised to look at other job options, or request a change of districts within the state. A change of scenery might help, they agreed. But he had not really researched the job postings recently, because in his heart he loved his job and never wanted to leave it. That reality shrouded him, at times, with secret guilt.

Marybeth was no longer working at the library and the stables, the two part-time jobs she had held. Even combined, they were too low-paying, and involved too much public contact, she told him. She was uncomfortable with library patrons who assessed her and asked her questions about April, and the events that had lead to her death.

But they needed additional income, and in the summer Marybeth had started her own business, setting up accounting, office management, and inventory control for small businesses in Saddlestring. Joe thought it was a perfect choice, with her education, toughness, and organizational skills. So far, her clients included Barrett's Pharmacy, Wolf Mountain Taxidermy, the Saddlestring Burg-O-Pardner, and Logue Country Realty. She was working hard to get established, and the business was close to being a success.

Which made him feel even more guilty that he had been angry with her about dinner.

"TELL ME ABOUT that moose," she asked after dinner, while they washed and rinsed dishes in the sink. Joe was surprised by the question, because Sheridan and Lucy had described the incident in such graphic detail while they were eating that Joe had asked them to stop.

"What about it?"

She smiled slyly. "For the past fifteen minutes, you've been thinking about it."

He flushed. "How do you know that?"

"You mean besides the fact that you've been staring off into space the entire time that we've been doing the dishes? Or that you're drying that glass for the fourth time?" she said, grinning. "You're standing right here but your mind is elsewhere."

"It isn't fair that you do that," he said, "because I can never tell what you're thinking about."

"As it should be," she said, giving him a mischievous hip-check as they stood side-by-side at the sink.

"The girls described it pretty accurately," he said. "Not much I can add to that."

"So why does it bother you?"

He rinsed a plate and slid it into the drying rack, pausing until he could articulate what he had been thinking about. "I've seen a lot of dead animals," he said, looking over his shoulder at her. "And, unfortunately, some dead human beings."

She nodded him on.

"But everything about that scene was, well, different—extremely so."

"Do you mean that you couldn't figure out what made the wounds?"

"That too," he said. "But you just don't find a dead moose in the middle of a meadow like that. There were no tracks; no indication that whoever shot it went to check it out afterward. Even the really bad poachers, the ones who leave the bodies on the ground, usually go check out the target."

"Maybe it was just sick and it died," she said reasonably.

Joe had turned and was leaning back against the sink with the towel still over his forearm.

He said, "Of course animals die of natural causes all the time. But you just never *find* them. You may find some bones if the skeleton hasn't been too scattered by predators, but you just don't happen upon animals that have died of old age. Or if you do, it's damned rare. Dying animals tend to seek out cover where nothing can find them. They don't just keel over in the middle of a meadow like that."

"But you don't know that it wasn't shot, or hit by lightning or something," she said.

"It wasn't lightning. There were no scorch marks. It may have been shot; I'll find that out tomorrow. But my gut tells me I won't find any lead."

"Maybe it was poisoned somehow?" Marybeth asked.

Joe was silent for a moment before answering, reviewing the scene in his head. He was pleased that Marybeth was so wrapped up in what had happened to the moose. She'd been so distracted by her new business that it had been a long time since she'd been interested in anything he'd been doing.

"Again, I think the bull would have sought cover to die. Unless the poison killed him so quick he just dropped, which doesn't sound very likely to me. And those wounds ..."

"You described them as incisions earlier," Marybeth said.

"Yes, they were more like surgery than butchery. No animal I know of makes perfect cuts like that. And the parts that were cut away were removed from the scene, taken away. As if they were trophies of some kind."

Marybeth grimaced. "I'd hate to see *that* trophy collection."

Joe laughed uncomfortably, agreeing with her.

"It's almost as if the moose was dropped from the sky," Marybeth said.

"Aw, jeez," he moaned. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that."

She prodded him hard in the ribs with her finger. "But that's what you were thinking, weren't you, Joe?"

At first he thought about denying it. But she was so damnably keyed into his thoughts that he didn't dare.

"Yup," he said.

"I can't wait to hear what you find out," she said, turning and reaching through the wash water for the plug. "Should I ask my mother what she thinks about it?"

Joe bristled, as Marybeth knew he would, and she laughed to assure him she was kidding. Her mother, the former Missy Vankueren, was soon to marry a local rancher named Bud Longbrake. In addition to getting remarried (she had four ex-husbands), and discussing exactly how Joe had stifled Marybeth's potential, Missy's top passion

was reading books and watching television shows and movies about the paranormal. She loved to speculate about situations and events around Twelve Sleep County—and the world—and ascribe supernatural explanations to them.

“Don’t tell her, please,” Joe begged, exaggerating his please, but not really. “You know how I hate that woo-woo crap.”

“Speaking of woo-woo crap,” Sheridan said as she entered the kitchen from where she’d been eavesdropping, “did I tell you I had that dream again?”

3

THE NEXT MORNING, Monday, Joe hiked up the Crazy Woman Creek drainage with his necropsy kit to discover that the grinning moose was no longer there. The absence of the dead moose in the meadow stopped him outright, and he stood still for a moment, surveying the crushed grass. He was thinking about Sheridan’s dream, which made him uncomfortable. Joe refused to believe in aliens or creeping mist or anything else he couldn’t see or touch. Had there been a time when he believed in monsters and things that went bump in the night? Nope, he thought. He had always been a skeptic. He remembered when neighborhood kids gathered around a Ouija board, and urged him to join them. Instead, he went fishing. When his friends stayed up late at night to watch creature movies, Joe fell asleep. Sheridan was different, though, and always had been. He hoped she’d outgrow the dreams.

SOMETHING HAD DRAGGED, or carried, the carcass away. The trail was obvious; a spoor of flattened grass led across the meadow in a stuttering S-curve toward the northern wall of pine trees. Puzzled, he followed it.

The mature bull moose weighed at least 600 pounds, he guessed. Whatever had moved it had tremendous strength. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see a set of pickup or ATV tracks in the meadow, but they weren’t there. He wondered if it could be the grizzly. As he walked silently across the meadow in the flattened grass track of the moose, he tried to peer ahead to the dark trees and see into them. He listened intently for sounds, and noted the absence of them. There were no chattering squirrels in the trees, or calling jays. Except for the low hum of insects in the grass near his feet and the high, airy flow of a cold fall breeze through the branches, it was deathly silent in the meadow. Again, he felt a chill run up his spine, which raised the hairs on his neck and forearms.

He couldn’t explain the odd feeling he got again from the meadow. It felt as if something was physically pushing against him from all sides. Not hard, but steadily. The crisp fall mountain air tasted thicker than it should have, and when he breathed in, his lungs felt heavy and wet. He sensed a kind of shimmer in the air when he looked at the wall of trees and the granite mountains that pushed up behind them. He didn’t like the feeling at all, and tried to shake it off.

Joe slipped the strap of the necropsy kit over his head so that his hands were free. He drew his semi-automatic weapon and worked the slide, seating a cartridge in the chamber. With his left hand, he unclipped the large can of bear spray from his belt and thumbed off the guard. He cautiously approached the wall of trees, his weapon in his right hand and the spray in his left. All of his senses were tuned to high, and he strained to see, hear, or smell anything that would give him a warning before it was too late.

That's when he saw the bear track in the center of the crushed grass. The huge paw was the size of a pie plate and had pushed down through the mat of grass into dark soil. He could see the heel imprint clearly; it was pressed into the dirt, as were the prints of all five toes. Nearly two inches from the end of the toe marks were sharp punctures in the ground, as if a curved garden rake had been swung overhead and embedded deeply into the earth. The creature that had made the tracks was the rogue grizzly bear, he was sure of it. None of the native black bears could leave a track that large. The odd thing, he thought, was that the track was pointed toward him, and not toward the wall of trees. Why wasn't the track heading away from the meadow?

Then he answered his own question. If the bear was dragging the moose out of the meadow, he would have clamped down on the moose's neck with his teeth and pulled it backward, like a puppy dragging a sock. The fact that the heel print was deeper than the claws indicated that the bear was struggling with the heavy carcass, backing up and digging deep into the earth for traction.

He glanced at the bear spray he carried and then at the .40 Beretta. *Too small*, he thought, *too puny*. Not only would he likely miss because he was such a poor shot with a handgun, but even if he hit his target it would probably do no more than make the bear angry.

He stood, thought, and shrugged, then plunged forward, toward the trees that lined the meadow. There was a hole in the brush where something—the bear?—had already blazed through. Branches had been bent and snapped back and broken. Entering the pool of shadow cast by the wall of pine trees, Joe squinted to see better. The forest was unnaturally dense and cluttered with wicked snarls of dry deadfall. The tree trunks were the thickness of the barrel of a baseball bat and extremely close together. Joe lowered his shoulder and pushed through.

The forest floor was dark, dry, and carpeted thickly with several inches of bronze pine needles. His boots sank with each step, and the earth was springy. The smell inside was a combination of dried pine, vegetative decay, and the sudden strong odor of the dead moose that for some reason Joe had not noticed until now.

As his eyes adjusted to the half-light filtering through the pine boughs, the carcass of the moose seemed to emerge on the forest floor right in front of him. The stench was suddenly overpowering, and Joe stepped back and thumped his shoulder blade against two tree trunks that prevented further flight. Holstering his gun, he held his breath while he dug a thick surgical face mask from the kit, pulled the rubber band over the back of his head, and fitted the mask over his nose and mouth. He smeared Vicks

VapoRub across the front of the mask from a small plastic jar in the kit to further block the smell. Then he approached the carcass and got to work.

The carcass had obviously decomposed even more. Blooms of entrails had burst through several places in the abdomen of the moose, where the hide had been stretched so tightly that it split. Again, he marveled at the surgical precision of the incisions that had been made. He could see no wounds that he had missed the day before, except for the gouged rips in the neck from the teeth of the bear that had dragged it from the meadow. Joe photographed the wounds from several angles using his digital camera. The photos, he thought, didn't convey the dread and fear he felt. They looked clinical, and somehow cleaner than the real thing.

He put on thick rubber gloves and squatted next to the carcass with his kit open. Using dental charts, he noted the size of the premolars as well as their stain and wear and guessed that the bull was at least seven years old and in its prime. Pushing a stainless steel probe through the hide along the spine of the moose between the shoulders, then in the middle of the back, and finally between the haunches, he noted that the body fat of the animal was normal, even a little excessive. Joe thought it was unusual in a drought year that the moose seemed so robust and healthy. Whatever had happened to the moose, it was clear that it hadn't died from either starvation or old age.

He ran a telescopic metal detector over the animal from its tail to the rounded end of its bulbous snout. No metal. If the animal had been shot, the bullet had passed through the body. But there was no exit wound. Conventional high-powered hunting bullets were designed to mushroom inside the body and do horrendous internal damage. But they were engineered to stay within the body somewhere, not to exit. There was the possibility, Joe thought, that the shooter was using specialized armor-piercing type rounds that could pass straight through. But he doubted that scenario. In fact, the more he studied the body, the less he could convince himself that somebody had shot it.

Using a razor, Joe sliced tissue samples from the places on the moose's hindquarters, neck, and head where its hide had been cut away. He dropped the strips of meat into thick paper envelopes to send to the lab in Laramie. Plastic would spoil the samples, and he didn't want his effort to go to waste. He duplicated the procedure with another set of envelopes he would send to another lab.

After he completed his work, he stood above the carcass and stared at it. If anything, the face stripped of its flesh seemed more gruesome in the dark silence of the forest floor. The smell of the decaying body was working its way through the mask, overpowering even the Vicks. Joe looked around, suddenly realizing that he had been so intent on collecting the samples and completing the necropsy that he hadn't thought about the grizzly. Was he out there now, somewhere in the shadows? Would he be coming back?

Why would the bear go to all the effort of dragging the huge corpse into the trees and not feed on it? Moose was highly choice meat, for hunters and for bears. If the bear wasn't hungry, why would he have worked so hard? If the bear intended to eat

the moose later, why hadn't he buried the carcass or covered it with brush as bears usually did?

Joe zipped up his kit and retraced his steps. Nothing about this dead moose made sense. His only hope to solve the puzzle, he thought, was if the lab boys could come up with something from the photos and the samples. But even if the moose died of some strange disease, how would they account for the incisions and the missing skin, glands, and organs?

As he neared the meadow, the light fused yellow, and when he emerged from the forest he had the same feeling a swimmer does as he breaks the surface from below. In the meadow, Joe turned. He listened closely for the sounds of a bear approaching or, for that matter, any sound at all. There was none. But there was still that shimmer in the air, and the closed-in feeling of density.

Maybe, Joe thought, somebody or something is watching me. Maybe that was why he felt so unnatural and out of sorts in the meadow. He swept the forest with his eyes, trying to find something out of the ordinary. A set of eyes, perhaps, or the glint of the lenses from binoculars. He turned slowly in the center of the meadow, not far from where the moose had originally lain. He scanned the three walls of trees, and the creek bed, even the high, slick faces of the mountains. He saw nothing unusual. But he was thoroughly and ashamedly spooked.

Still clutching his weapon and the bear spray, Joe walked across the meadow and dropped down into Crazy Woman Creek. As he walked downstream, he felt the pressure lessen. Eventually, he couldn't feel it at all. The sun seemed warmer and brighter overhead. A raven cawed rudely somewhere on the opposite bank.

IN THE AFTERNOON, Joe sat in his truck on the crest of a sagebrush-covered hilltop in the breaklands east of Saddlestring. Behind him, the terrain arched and transformed into the foothills of the Bighorns, where he had come from. In front of him were miles of blue-gray sagebrush plains cut through with slashes of red ravines. From his vantage point, the breaklands looked like the ocean caught in freeze-frame; wavelike rolls of undulation stopped in time. This was pronghorn antelope country but there were few hunters out. He had identified only two vehicles over the past three hours, distant sparkles of glass and steel over two miles away. Watching through his window-mounted spotting scope, he observed the four-wheel drives move slowly on BLM roads. *Road hunters*, Joe thought. He had heard no shots. After the first weekend of antelope season, hunting activity was minimal in the breaklands. Pronghorns were so plentiful and easy to hunt that serious hunters had harvested their game within hours of the season opening. Those still out were either stubborn trophy hunters looking for the perfect rack, or local meat hunters who felt no sense of urgency.

Joe sat back from the spotting scope and rubbed his eyes. Maxine sighed and rolled over on the passenger seat, still sleeping.

He had stopped in town and mailed the tissue samples of the moose. The packages should arrive at the lab in Laramie and his other source in Montana the next morning. He had called both recipients on his cellphone and left messages asking that the

examinations be expedited. He promised to forward the digital photos of the moose via e-mail that evening, when he got back to his house, so they could see the source of the samples.

From his vantage point, looking out at the plains, he could see forever. He loved this particular time in the fall for many reasons, but especially for how the air and light seemed to sharpen, and everything was in perfect focus. In the summer, waves of rising heat rose from the plains and limited his field of vision. In the winter, moisture in the air or windborne snow did the same thing. This time in the fall the air was crisp and fresh and clear, and the colors from the trees that filled the valleys gave the landscape a festive, celebratory quality. Yet, today, the spectacular view failed to fill him with the same sense of awe that it usually did. He just couldn't stop thinking about the dead bull moose.

Even without the strange feeling he'd had in the meadow—which he now seriously doubted had come from anywhere other than his own imagination—the circumstances of the animal's death made even less sense than they had the day before.

Joe shook his head. He hoped some answers would come from the Wildlife Veterinary Research Services, where he'd sent the samples.

Then something caught his eye—a glint—and he leaned into the spotting scope again and tilted it upward, past the breaks into the private ranch lands miles beyond. Focusing the eyepiece, he simultaneously tightened the mount on the window to steady the telescope.

The glint, it turned out, was not from glass but from water forming around a freshly drilled well. The drilling rig that produced it was surrounded by three large pickup trucks, all the same make, model, and color. Men moved quickly between the pickups and the well, splashing through the growing pool of water. Joe couldn't see them clearly enough to make out their faces, or read the logos on the pickup doors, but he recognized what was going on. He had seen it dozens of times in the past year.

The trucks and rig were drilling for coal-bed methane in the basin. Judging by the rush of water to the surface and the urgency in the men's movements, they had obviously found it once again.

Underground coal seams covered the concentrated natural gas like a blanket, which in the past had made it difficult to retrieve. Joe had read, however, that since the technology had been perfected to extract the gas, 5,000 CBM wells had been drilled in the Powder River Basin. An additional 5,000 to 8,000 wells were planned. Gas was being found everywhere they looked, and locating the underground pockets was now a fairly easy thing for geologists to do. Methane that had once been vented and released into the air during oil exploration as waste was now funneled into pipelines bound for the Midwest, the West Coast, and beyond. The coal-bed methane boom was being called the largest new energy discovery in North America.

In less than two years, Northern Wyoming was unexpectedly awash in the two things that, prior to that, were rare: money and water. Although Joe only understood the details of the boom from what he read and the snippets of conversation he heard from

developers and locals in town, the price of methane gas ranged from seventy-five cents to three dollars per million British thermal unit, or mmbtus, depending on demand. And from what the energy developers were claiming, the underground coal in Twelve Sleep County could hold trillions of mmbtus of methane gas.

The CBM boom had invigorated the economy, and the county population, for the first time in a decade, was increasing. And it was only the beginning.

Although local businesses were certainly benefiting from the CBM boom, the developers, energy companies, and people who owned the mineral rights to the areas where the gas was being developed stood to gain the most. Stories abounded of instant millionaires, as well as of landowners who, after selling off what they thought were worthless mineral rights to their lands years before, could now only stand by while millions of dollars in gas were being pumped from wells on their ranches. Marybeth had told Joe the story of the Overstreet sisters, who owned the Timberline Ranch north of Saddlestring. The ranch was for sale through Logue Country Realty, her favorite client, but there were no buyers. Six hundred CBM wells were planned. Walter Overstreet, the patriarch of the ranch, had sold the mineral rights years ago, before he died. Despite the wells, the Overstreet sisters could be found in line for free lunch every day at the Saddlestring Senior Center.

But the controversial byproduct of CBM development was water. Far underground, water was trapped beneath the coal. Once a drill bit tapped the pocket, water rushed to the surface with great pressure. As the pressure eased, methane followed. Eventually, the water cleared out of the mix, and pure methane was produced. Although water had always been considered the single most precious commodity in the state, the effect of huge releases of underground water on the surface due to CBM wells was still unknown. Some tracts of land that had been parched for generations were now covered with standing water. Various landowners and many environmental groups claimed that CBM wells were depleting the aquifers, transforming the landscape and polluting the rivers with bitter water. The developers and other landowners countered that at last there was finally some water available for stock and wildlife. The battle raged on, although developers were now required to receive approval from state and federal environmental regulators before drilling.

Joe didn't know which side he was on. On the one hand, residents of Saddlestring were practically giddy with optimism for the first time since he had lived there. A new school was being built, the hospital was in the process of renovation, and the small airport was expanding. New restaurants and retail stores were filling the empty downtown buildings that had been boarded up the year before. The nation lusted for clean burning natural gas.

But there was no doubt that the thousands of wells were a blight to the landscape, even though the country they occupied was flat, barren, and stark to begin with. If the CBM wells sucked up so much underground water that water wells went dry or surface land collapsed, that wasn't good, either. And if the water being released to the

surface was as mineral-heavy and tainted as some people claimed, it could poison the rivers and reservoirs, harming both people and wildlife.

Joe shook his head. Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming, was usually considered to be behind the rest of the world in all things modern or progressive. But when it came to this new kind of energy development, it was ahead of everyplace else.

THE BREAKLANDS SEEMED empty of hunters, and before Joe moved to patrol a different area, he scanned the channels on his radio. While he usually listened to the channel reserved for the Game and Fish Departments in Wyoming, which was shared by brand inspectors and state park employees, he liked to check out what was going on in other areas of law enforcement. He listened to a highway patrol officer flirt with the dispatcher 200 miles away from his lonely location south of Jeffrey City, and a local Saddlestring police department request officers to check out a domestic disturbance. Joe had noted more domestic disturbance calls with the influx of CBM workers.

When he switched to the mutual aid channel, used by all agencies to communicate with each other in crises or emergencies, he found it crackling with traffic.

He recognized the first voice as that of Sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum, the longtime sheriff of Twelve Sleep County.

"Come again on that one?" Barnum said to someone. Even hearing his voice set Joe on edge. Over the years, Joe had come to despise Barnum. The feeling went both ways.

"You aren't going to believe this," someone answered, and Joe recognized the voice as that of Barnum's top deputy, Kyle McLanahan. "We've got a dozen dead cows on the Hawkins Ranch. It looks like they've been ... well, *operated* on."

"What do you mean, operated on?" Barnum asked.

"Jeez, it's hard to describe," McLanahan said. "Half their faces are gone. And, uh, their peckers are missing, it looks like."

Joe felt a jolt of familiarity.

"Their *peckers*?" Barnum sounded angry.

"Well, if they had peckers," McLanahan reported. "If they was females, then their female parts have been cut out."

More trophies, Joe thought. He reached down and started his pickup. The Hawkins Ranch was an hour away on bad roads.

4

IN THE TOWN of Saddlestring, behind a battered desk that came with the building, Marybeth Pickett shot her arm out and looked at her wristwatch. She had twenty minutes to finish up and print out the cash-flow spreadsheet she had been working on for Logue Country Realty, meet with the Logues, gather up her computer and files, and pick up her children from school. This is what it was like now, she thought. Her life was on the clock.

She had spent the morning meeting with the office manager of Barrett's Pharmacy going over accounts receivable, then at Wolf Mountain Taxidermy working with the owner to establish a new billing system. Once they wrapped up, Marybeth asked the taxidermist, Matt Sandvick, if he had ever seen an animal brought in with the kind of wounds Joe had found on the dead moose the day before.

"Yup, I have," Sandvick had answered, his eyes widening behind thick lenses.

"Where?"

"On that show that used to be on. *The X-Files*." And Sandvick laughed.

After a quick lunch with her friend Marie Logue, co-owner of Logue Country Realty, Marybeth set up her portable office in a shabby back room at the real estate office and worked under a bare bulb. A small metal electric heater rattled to life whenever the temperature dropped below sixty degrees, and blew out dust-smelling heat through bent orange coils.

Of her three accounts, Marybeth preferred working with the Logues, although the account also presented the most challenges. While Marybeth did her best to straighten out the byzantine finances of the business they had bought into, there was no doubt that the company and the Logues were in trouble. Despite this, she had come to like and admire them and wanted to do what she could to help them make the company survive, including undercharging for her time. She knew they couldn't afford her full rate just yet.

But if Sheridan and Lucy were to progress to college, as they should, it would take two full-time incomes. Joe's salary was barely enough to live on, considering Sheridan's basketball, volleyball, speech and debate interests, and Lucy's piano, dance, and Young Writers' Club. The real estate license would potentially create the cushion they needed for their family. When it came to college for the girls, they would be considered a low-income family, a designation that affected Marybeth deeply. She tried not to blame Joe, because he loved what he did and was good at it. But it didn't pay the bills.

Cam and Marie Logue bought what was then called Ranch Country Realty from its previous owner, a longtime local institution named Wild Bill Dubois. The purchase included the storefront on Main Street sandwiched between the Stockman's Bar and Big Suds Laundromat. With their seven-year-old daughter, Jessica, they had moved from Rapid City the previous winter and leased one of the oldest Victorian homes in town with the goal of restoring it while they lived there. They changed the name of the business to Logue Country Realty and sincerely did their best to establish themselves in the small community. They joined the Presbyterian church, the chamber of commerce, the realty association, the PTO, and gave to the high school activities groups and the United Way. In a sleepy town like Saddlestring, where the population trend until recently was a net loss, the arrival of the energetic, optimistic Logues was a welcome deviation from the norm. Or so Marybeth thought, despite knowing that there would be the usual bitter clucking from the old-timers and third-generation types. These were the longtime residents of Twelve Sleep County who referred to Mayor Ty Stockton—

who had arrived with his parents from Massachusetts as a toddler—as “that guy from Boston.”

Marybeth’s younger daughter, Lucy, and Jessica Logue became fast friends on the first day of school and were joined by a third girl, named Hailey Bond, to round out the trio. Lucy was much more social than her older sister, Sheridan, and the three quickly formed a new ruling triumvirate of the first grade. Lucy and Jessica schemed to have their parents meet each other during school orientation, and Marybeth and Marie struck it off immediately. Marie told her later, over coffee, that she saw in the Picketts a young, growing, struggling family much like their own. Marybeth agreed, welcoming Marie’s vitality and friendship and the fact that they were new to the area and had no preconceptions. They had discussed how similar they were; they had both gone to college the same year with goals of becoming professionals (Marybeth aimed for a law degree and Marie wanted an MBA in public administration). Marie had met Cam, and Marybeth had met Joe, and neither woman had applied for graduate school.

When Cam and Marie Logue approached Marybeth about looking into the accounts they had just bought, Marybeth agreed, even though Wild Bill Dubois had been known for comingling his funds and cooking his books. What she had found was even worse than she had anticipated. The Logues had bought a business that was a rat’s nest of bad deals, expired contracts, and unfiled documents. When she told them what she found, they stared back at her in white-faced horror.

But instead of giving up or suing Wild Bill, who had quietly moved to Yuma, they decided to make the best of it. With their backs against the wall, they made the decision to work hard and turn their business around. Cam became even more prominent, calling on property owners throughout the county, reminding them that he was there if they needed to buy or sell, trying to win their trust.

His hard work had paid off recently in the listing of the Timberline Ranch by the squabbling Overstreet sisters. If Cam were able to sell it, even at the drastically reduced price it was likely to get, his commission would turn the company around.

So, when Cam Logue stuck his face in Marybeth’s office, beaming a high-wattage smile she had never seen before, and asked if she could meet with him and Marie to hear some good news, Marybeth grinned and pushed back in her chair.

“LADIES,” CAM LOGUE announced once he had closed the door to his office, “we’ve got a secret client interested in the Timberline Ranch!”

Marie, who was petite, dark-haired, and attractive in an open-faced way, clapped her hands together. Her eyes shone. Marybeth was very happy for her.

“So who is it?” asked Marie.

Cam laughed. “I just said it was a *secret* client, Marie.”

“I know, I know ...”

Marybeth asked, “How serious is he?”

Cam turned to her. Cam was handsome, with light, wavy hair and sharp, blue eyes. He was ambitious in a way that seemed to encourage others to root for him. At least it worked for Marybeth. Her impression of him was that he was straightforward and

entrepreneurial, if a little combative. He wanted to succeed not only for his business and his family, but also to prove something. Marie had told Marybeth that Cam had grown up as the youngest on a ranch outside of Saddlestring. She said that Cam's parents had doted on Cam's older brother, Eric, literally mortgaging the ranch in order to pay for Eric's medical school so he could become a surgeon. The Logue ranch was absorbed by the Overstreet sisters' Timberline Ranch, and his parents bought a small place in western South Dakota, near the Pine Ridge Reservation. When cattle prices bottomed out, there was no money left over for Cam, who went to Black Hills State (where he met Marie) and later into real estate. Cam's return to Saddlestring was a homecoming of sorts.

Yet if Cam recognized the irony of now selling the property he had grown up on, he didn't indicate it to Marybeth.

"He's serious," he said, "but he's doing due diligence. He's no dummy."

"Due diligence?" Marie asked.

Cam nodded. "He knows all about those CBM wells, and all of the water they discharge. Even though he knows he won't have the mineral rights, he wants to get that water tested to make sure it's okay when it flows down the river. He's afraid if something is wrong with the water the enviros or the downstream users might sue him as the landowner."

"That's smart," Marybeth said.

"He's a pretty smart guy."

Marie sat down in Cam's desk chair. "What if there's something wrong with the water?"

"There's nothing wrong with the water, Marie," Cam said, as if speaking to a child. "The water's fine. It's been tested before they sunk all of those wells, and it's fine. It's as sweet as honey."

"Then why ... ?"

"Marie," Cam's reaction was sharp, "it's complicated. All of the testing that's been done has been piecemeal, before each new set of wells. By different companies at different times in the last couple of years. Our buyer wants water collected from all of those different well sites and tested again to make sure they're okay. To make sure, I don't know, that they haven't hit any bad water since they tested the first time, I guess. But you don't need to worry about it. The water's going to be just fine."

Marybeth thought Cam was a little more prickly than necessary. But she had never seen him this excited before.

"Our ... difficulties may be over soon," Marie said as much to herself as to Cam or Marybeth. Cam beamed at her, then turned his full-force grin on Marybeth. As suddenly as a light-bulb going out, Cam's face fell into a mask of seriousness.

"But we need to keep this absolutely quiet," he said gravely. "It's got to be kept in the strictest professional confidence."

Marybeth nodded. The sale of property of this magnitude would electrify the valley, she knew. Other realtors would try to poach the secret buyer and try to get him to

look at other ranches that might have more appeal or fewer wells. Property owners on the fence about selling may suddenly decide to try the market.

"It'll be hard to keep this a secret," Marie grinned. "But we can do it."

"Marybeth?" Cam asked.

"I'll tell my husband," she said, meeting their eyes. "We don't keep secrets from each other. But it will go no further than that."

When neither of the Logues spoke, Marybeth felt compelled to explain. "He tells me things that go on in his job that need to be kept confidential, and I do that. I've never breached Joe's confidence, and he wouldn't breach mine. Besides," she said, "he doesn't talk much as it is."

Marie snorted a laugh and turned in her chair to Cam. "You remember meeting Joe, don't you? At that back-to-school night? I think the only thing he said all evening when Marybeth introduced us was 'Pleasure.' That's it. One word in three hours."

"Okay then," Cam said, clapping his hands once as if to dispel the hint of suspicion that had entered the room.

Marybeth glanced at her watch.

"Oh my goodness, I've got to go. The girls are out of school."

Marie said, "Feel free to have Lucy come over to our house with Jessica. Hailey Bond is already coming. Those three have a great time together."

"But ."

"Don't worry. I'll bring Lucy home later. Around five or five-thirty, right?"

Marybeth nodded, and left them both in their giddy state.

As she left the office, pulling on her jacket, she noticed a man sitting in the reception area reading a magazine from the stack on the side table. He was lanky and in his sixties, with round, steel-framed glasses.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you need to see somebody?" Marie worked as the receptionist as well as the office manager, and she had obviously not been available.

The man looked up. He wore heavy boots, faded jeans, and a khaki work shirt. On his lap was a thick manila file. He had an experienced and kindly manner.

"I'm here to see Mr. Logue, but don't worry, I didn't have an appointment."

Marie overheard the conversation and entered the room.

"I'll let him know you're here," Marie said. She was bursting with cheerfulness, Marybeth thought, and for good reason.

LUCY PICKETT AND Jessica Logue were waiting at the pickup spot with Sheridan when Marybeth arrived. The playground was empty except for a few students on the swings. Marybeth felt guilty for being late.

Marybeth swung her minivan to the curb and the three girls piled in. Lucy and Jessica tossed their backpacks on the floor and immediately started telling Marybeth about their day in overlapping bursts, while Sheridan settled into the backseat alone and rolled her eyes. Lucy and Jessica were inseparable in a way that Sheridan never had been with another girl. Lucy and Jessica loved to dress up, do each other's hair,

talk on the telephone, and play together. They even looked alike, as much like sisters as Lucy and Sheridan did.

"Jessica, your mom suggested you and Lucy play at your house this afternoon instead of ours," Marybeth said, pulling out into the road. "She'll bring Lucy home later."

"I hope dropping them off won't take too long," Sheridan interjected from the back. "I've got a falconry lesson in a little while."

Marybeth nodded, again feeling guilty that she was late. Sheridan had been learning falconry from Nate Romanowski, a loner and Joe's friend. He lived in a cabin on the bank of the Twelve Sleep River.

"It'll just take a minute," Marybeth said. "I'm sorry I'm running late."

"You seem to be running late a lot these days," Sheridan said under her breath but loud enough that Marybeth heard her. Both Lucy and Jessica immediately stopped talking and waited for what they hoped would be an argument.

"Please don't use that tone with me, Sheridan," Marybeth said evenly, locking eyes with Sheridan in the rearview mirror. "We can discuss this later."

Sheridan broke the gaze and shrugged. Marybeth noticed that Lucy and Jessica had huddled together and shrunk out of view, no doubt trying not to giggle.

THE LOGUE HOME was one of Saddlestring's fading treasures; a classic Victorian, one of the original homes built at the edge of town near the river by an 1890s cattle baron. The faded house was hard to see behind the mature cottonwoods that towered around it. In addition to the old, magnificent house there was wooded acreage and a few outbuildings, including a carriage house. The house had sat vacant for fifteen years, in disrepair, until the Logues bought it last winter. Marie had walked Marybeth through the place recently, apologizing endlessly for its condition. Only two rooms had been modernized so far, the kitchen and a bathroom. The rest looked as it had in the mid-1980s, when the longtime county clerk of Twelve Sleep County died there in his seventy-eighth year. The rumor was that the county clerk used to store records in the house and the buildings and charge the county for rent.

Maybe now, *Marybeth thought as she watched Lucy and Jessica skip away*, Cam and Marie would have the means to accelerate the remodeling on the great old house.

"Mom?" Sheridan said from the backseat. "She's getting bigger. You don't have to wait until she gets in the house before we leave."

"I'm just not used to this yet Sheridan," Marybeth said. "You two have so many things going on these days. I struggle with letting you go."

"Mom, my falconry lesson?"

As Marybeth pulled away and turned left on Centennial Street toward Bighorn Road, her phone chirped. It was Joe, telling her about the call he had overheard concerning mutilated cows. He told her he would likely be late for dinner.

Dinner, Marybeth thought, the guilt rushing back. She had forgotten to plan dinner.

THE HAWKINS RANCH was a checkerboard of private land and state and federal leases spread across the lee side of the foothills, and Joe had to cross through seven barbed-wire fence gates to get to it. Most of the ranch was blanketed with tall sagebrush and scrub oak, buffalo grass and biscuit root, except for several large fingers of heavy timber that reached down from the mountains through saddle-slope draws.

Joe pulled into the ranch yard, a packed-gravel courtyard surrounded by structures. The Hawkins place was an old-line working outfit, unlike many of the hobby ranches that were taking over the state. The largest buildings in the yard were vast metal Quonset huts that served as vehicle sheds, barns, and equipment storage. A maze of wooden-slat corrals bordered the small, white-framed ranch house. There were no adornments of any kind anywhere; nothing to suggest anything other than what the place was—the business center for a large-scale beef-and-hay operation.

Joe turned toward the small house and saw Mrs. Hawkins step out on an unpainted porch and gesture sternly to the mountains. There was no need to stop and visit, Joe thought, and he drove through the middle of the ranch yard until his wheels fell into the long-established ruts of a dirt road that pointed straight toward the timber five miles away. Ahead of him in the ruts were the fresh tread tracks of several vehicles.

APPROACHING THE SCENE, Joe noted that two identical GMC Blazers belonging to the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff's Department, and a light-blue Ford pickup, were parked nose-to-tail on the two-track where the scrub thinned and the pine trees began. To the right of the vehicles were three figures in the middle of what appeared to be a glacial-boulder field.

As Joe closed in, the front of his pickup bucked suddenly and a cascade of maps fell from a clip on the sunshade. Maxine lost her footing on the dashboard and scrambled back to her place on the seat, looking at him for an explanation.

"Rock," he said. "Didn't see it."

The figures turned out to be Deputy Kyle McLanahan, Sheriff Barnum, and a visibly upset Don Hawkins. What Joe had thought were boulders strewn across the ground were actually carcasses of cattle, at least a dozen of them. The sour-sweet smell of death filtered into the cab of the pickup through the vents, and Maxine sat up ramrod straight, her brow wrinkled with concern.

Even from this distance, Joe could see that Barnum was glaring at him. The old man's eyes bored across the brush and through the windshield of the pickup. McLanahan stood to the side of Barnum with a 35-mm camera hanging from his hand, looking from Barnum to Joe's pickup and back to Barnum. Don Hawkins wore a bandanna over his face and paced among the dead cows.

"Stay, girl," Joe told Maxine as he parked to the side of the Sheriff's Department vehicles and swung out of his pickup. He fitted his gray Stetson on his head and skirted the Blazers. The smell of the cows was not as ripe as the smell of the moose had been, and he was grateful for that.

"Who called you out here?" Barnum asked. His deep-set eyes were cold, bordered by blue folds of loose skin. He lowered a cigarette from his lips and jetted twin streams of smoke from his nostrils.

"Heard it on the mutual-aid band."

"This look like a Game and Fish matter to you?"

"I'm not sure what it looks like yet, Sheriff," Joe said, walking among the carcasses, "but I found something similar done to a bull moose on Crazy Woman Creek."

It had been months since Joe had seen Barnum, and that had been fine with Joe. He despised Barnum, knowing the sheriff was as corrupt as he was legendary. There were rumors that Sheriff Barnum was in his last term of office, that he would retire within the next year. The electorate that had supported him for twenty-eight years seemed to be turning on him for the first time. The local weekly newspaper, the *Saddlestring Roundup*, had run a series of editorials in the spring saying outright that it was time for Barnum to go.

Deputy McLanahan said, "Your moose have his pecker cut off?"

Joe turned his head to McLanahan. This guy was just as bad, Joe thought, if not worse. Although the deputy wasn't as smart or calculating as Barnum, he made up for it with his cruelty. He was a loose cannon, and he liked to pull the trigger.

"Yup," Joe said, dropping to his haunches to examine a heifer. "Something took off most of his face, as well as his genitals and musk glands from the back legs."

"I ain't never seen nothing like this," Don Hawkins said, bending over one of the dead cows. "These cows are worth six, seven hundred bucks each. Something or somebody owes me nine thousand bucks, goddamit."

The reason the smell was not as bad, Joe realized, was that the cattle had been dead for at least two weeks. Although still somewhat bloated, the bodies had begun to deflate and collapse in on themselves in fleshy folds. The wounds looked similar to the bull moose's, with some differences. Skin had been removed from most of the heads in precise patches. One heifer's head had been completely denuded of hide, which made it look like a turkey buzzard with its thin neck and red skull. In some cases, tongues and eyes had been removed, and oval patches were missing from shoulders. On the females, their bags had been removed. Half of the cows had missing rectums, showing large dark holes between their flanks.

Joe felt a distinct chill as he walked from body to body. This was like the moose, times twelve. It also meant that whatever had been doing this had been in action for at least two weeks.

"The blood's drained right out of 'em," Hawkins said, shaking his head. "This is crazy."

"Are you sure about that?" Joe asked, looking up at the rancher.

"Look at 'em," Hawkins cried, holding his hands palms out. "You see any blood anywhere? How in the hell can you cut up a damned cow like that and not have any blood on the ground? Do you know how much blood there is in a cow?"

"Nope, I don't," Joe said.

"I don't know either," Hawkins said, flustered. "A shitload for sure."

McLanahan said, "No matter how much there is in a cow, there's none of it on the ground. It's like the blood got sucked right out of them."

"Oh, for Christ's sake ..." Barnum growled, turning his back to McLanahan. "Don't start saying things like *that*."

"So what did it?"

"How in the hell should I know?"

"Maybe some kind of predator?" McLanahan asked. "A bear or a mountain lion or something?"

"There is a bear," Joe said. "A big grizzly. I saw his tracks this morning. But I can't believe a bear could do this."

"That's all I need," Barnum said, his voice rising, "a bunch of mutilated cattle and a goddamned grizzly bear on the loose."

"Not to mention space aliens sucking the blood out of domestic animals in the middle of ranch country," McLanahan said dramatically. "It's happened before, you know."

"Stop that!" Barnum spat. "*I mean it*."

Joe battled a smile and addressed Don Hawkins.

"When did you find these cattle?"

Hawkins was slow to answer, and when he did, it was with hesitation. McLanahan's speculating had rattled him.

"My guy Juan found 'em a-horseback this morning. He called me at the ranch house on his radio."

"Have you been missing these cattle?"

Hawkins nodded. "We moved most of our herd up to Montana where they have some grass. The drought here forced us to move our cows this fall. We knew we had stragglers in the timber, and Juan's been looking for them and herding them down."

"Did you see anything unusual? Hear anything?"

Something washed across Hawkins's face. Joe waited. He could tell that Hawkins seemed a little embarrassed about something.

"This is stupid," Hawkins said. "Juan told me a few days ago he was getting dizzy when he rode up here. He thought it was the elevation or something. I thought it was laziness. It's easier to look for cows on flat ground than in the timber, so I figured he was angling for easier work."

Joe didn't say that he thought he knew the feeling.

"Dizzy?" McLanahan asked. "Like dizzy how?"

"I don't know," Hawkins said, rolling his eyes. "He's always complaining about something."

"Anything else?" Joe asked. "Maybe a couple of weeks ago?"

Hawkins shook his head. "We were delivering cattle north to Montana. We weren't even around."

"In all your years, have you ever seen cattle that looked like this?" Joe asked.

"Nope," Hawkins said, his eyes widening. "I once seen a badger make a den in the belly of a dead cow, but I never seen nothing like this."

Joe said, "Have you heard anything from your neighbors? Have they called about missing cattle?"

Hawkins rubbed his stubbled chin, then gestured north with his hat rim. "That's Bud Longbrake's place, and I haven't heard anything from Bud in a while. We both have a couple of cricks running through that we share in common, and our cows get mixed up in the bottoms sometimes. But like I said, he hasn't called me about anything."

Joe felt a twinge at the mention of Bud Longbrake. Marybeth's mother, Missy, had already moved to his ranch and their wedding was looming.

Hawkins turned his head to the south. "That's the Timberline Ranch that way," he said, and a grin broke across his face. "Do you know the Overstreet sisters?"

McLanahan snorted from ten feet away and shook his head.

"I know of them."

"When they aren't scratching each other's eyes out or in court suing each other over something, they're accusing me or rustlers of making off with some of their cows," Hawkins said. "I bet the sheriff's been out here ten times over the years because one of those crazy Overstreet broads called and said they had cattle missing."

"At least ten," Barnum sighed. "Never found anything, and the sisters can't produce records of any missing stock."

The Timberline Ranch was the one for sale, Joe recalled. No wonder, he thought, if they couldn't keep track of their cattle.

"So whatever they say is less than ... credible," Hawkins said.

"If anybody saw a flying saucer up here it would have been them," McLanahan said. "I'll guarantee you that."

"Shut up, *please*, Kyle," Barnum said.

As Joe listened to the exchange, another question came to him. "Were there any vehicle tracks up here before the sheriff arrived?"

"Not that I could see."

"What are you saying, that we messed up the crime scene?" Barnum asked.

"Not saying that at all."

Even McLanahan glanced over his shoulder at Barnum.

"Well, you better not be," Barnum said defensively. "This is my investigation and no one has requested you here."

"The wounds are similar to my moose," Joe said. "It's likely the same thing. No predation, either, even though all that beef has just been sitting out here in plain sight."

"That bothers me," Hawkins said, shaking his head. "There's just something real wrong with that. We should have knowed those cows were up here. There should have been big flocks of birds feeding on them. That's how we usually find dead cows. And not one of these cattle has been fed on, or scattered."

Joe had received calls from Don Hawkins the previous spring about mountain lions that had killed several calves. Joe had looked for the cats and not found them. When the calls stopped, he knew that Hawkins *had* found them. Nevertheless, the ranch was prime habitat for lions, coyotes, and black bears.

"Just like my moose," Joe said. "Nothing will eat the meat. It makes you wonder why."

"Tell you what," Barnum said as he lit a cigarette and exhaled a blue cloud of smoke, "you worry about your moose and I'll worry about Mr. Hawkins's cows."

"You've got jurisdiction," said Joe.

"You are correct."

"So I guess you're planning to talk with Juan then, as well as Bud Longbrake and the Overstreet sisters?"

"I know how to do my job, Pickett."

Not that you've always done it before, Joe thought but didn't say. But he knew Barnum was practically reading his thoughts.

"I sent tissue samples of the moose to the lab in Laramie," Joe said, not mentioning where else he had sent them. "I asked that they expedite the analysis. When there are some results I'll share them with you. You were going to get these cattle tested, weren't you?"

Barnum's eyes narrowed and he didn't answer.

"Who is *that*?" McLanahan said, pointing down the road at an approaching vehicle.

They waited, watching, as an older pickup bucked and heaved up the washed-out road. Joe recognized her first. He had met her the winter before but couldn't recall her name.

"Reporter," Joe said. "Works for the *Saddlestring Roundup*. She must have been listening in on the scanner."

"Damn it," Barnum said, his face darkening. "I do *not* want this in the newspaper."

"Too late," McLanahan said.

"How in the hell are we going to explain this?" Barnum asked the sky.

Joe wondered the same thing.

6

"WE'RE SUPPOSED TO stay in my room," Jessica Logue told Lucy Pickett and Hailey Bond. "My dad says we need to stay out of those old buildings out back. He says they're unsafe for us to play in."

Lucy and Hailey protested. One of the things the girls loved was exploring the old outbuildings in the thick trees behind the house. It was spooky back there, and dark.

"Can't we play hide-and-seek?" Lucy asked.

"That's what my dad said," Jessica shrugged. "He said he's afraid the buildings might collapse when we're playing in them and he says he doesn't have enough insurance if we get hurt."

"Oooh," Hailey said, widening her eyes. "Maybe the roofs will fall in and crush us. And there will be blood and guts all over, like those gophers that get squished on the highway ..."

"Stop it, Hailey," Jessica said. Hailey, who was dark-haired with big brown eyes, liked to talk about gore. She also liked scaring people. Lucy and Jessica had made her promise to stop hiding in the worst places out back and refusing to answer their calls. Several times, Lucy and Jessica were on the verge of panic when Hailey would suddenly jump out from a pile of lumber or from behind the door of an ancient shed and shout, "Now you die!"

"There's stuff we can do in here," Jessica said, trying to make the best of it.

Yes there is, Lucy thought. Jessica had the best collection of cool old clothes she had ever seen. Both Lucy and Jessica loved to play dress-up in the old clothes, and loved applying makeup from an old makeup case Jessica's mom had given her. Hailey sighed, but went along. Hailey, like Lucy's older sister, Sheridan, seemed to think that the girl things Lucy and Jessica liked were boring. She would rather play hide-and-seek in the woods and scare the other girls. Just like something Sheridan would do.

The box of old clothes was wonderful, and the three girls plowed through it. There were formal ball gowns, high-heeled shoes, tiaras (Jessica's mom had once won the Miss Sunflower beauty contest as a girl in South Dakota), boas, bathrobes, and some men's clothes.

Hailey unfolded a dark green set of surgeon's scrubs with the name LOGUE stenciled over the breast pocket.

"Are these your dad's?" she asked.

"My uncle is a doctor," Jessica said. "They used to be his."

"Is he still a doctor?"

"I think so," Jessica said.

"Hey, this one's pretty!" Lucy squealed, pulling a long, maroon velvet gown from the box. She felt the material and liked the lushness of it. And she liked the white fur trim of the collar. "This would look good on me with those shoes," she said, pointing at a pair of spike heels.

"I want to go outside," Hailey said, pouting. "Do you think you could ask your dad?"

"He's not home yet," Jessica said, fishing a small black hat with a net out of the bundle and putting it on. "I'll ask him when he gets home, though."

*

THE THREE GIRLS stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the mirror over Jessica's dresser, their faces inches from the glass while they applied their makeup. They were dressed up; Hailey in the surgeon's scrubs, Jessica in a white satin dress with fake pearls, Lucy in the velvet dress and spike heels and the Miss Sunflower sash hung across her chest.

Despite their giggling, they could hear an argument coming from downstairs, from the living room at the foot of the stairs.

"What are they fighting about?" Hailey whispered, leaning into mirror to apply the blush to her cheeks.

Jessica shrugged, "I don't know."

"Are you going to ask your dad if we can go outside?"

"When we're done. Lucy, you look beautiful."

Lucy kissed at herself in the mirror, and the other girls laughed. Her lips were bright red with lipstick, and her eyelids were covered in blue shadow.

"Will your mom get mad if I wear her Miss Sunflower banner?"

"I don't think so. And it's called a sash."

Lucy was disconcerted by the loud voices from downstairs. It wasn't like her parents never had an argument—they certainly did. There were times at dinner when she knew there had been a disagreement, by the silence, the lack of small talk, or the extra helping of politeness when one of them asked for the salt. But she hardly even heard them raise their voices to each other, even behind closed doors. Their arguments, whenever they occurred, happened someplace else or when no one else was home. Hearing the voices from downstairs, she thought it was better to argue away from the children.

THEY STOOD AT Jessica's upstairs window, looking, Lucy thought, like pretty hot young women. They had applied perfume—overdone it, actually—and the smell was overpowering. They were watching as two dark, late-model sedans pulled up the driveway and stopped near the front porch.

"Who are those people?" Hailey asked, as both cars stopped and the driver-side doors opened. Two older women emerged from their separate vehicles. Each woman was tall, angular, and wearing a print dress that was out-of-date as well as out of season, Lucy thought. The women looked similar but different. Like sisters, maybe.

"I think their name is Overcast," Jessica said. "Something like that."

"Are they sisters?" Lucy asked.

"Yes."

"So they're not married to anyone?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Look how they pretend the other one isn't there," Hailey said. "Isn't that weird?"

Lucy had noticed. The two women had emerged from their cars, shut the doors, and proceeded to the front door without even acknowledging each other. They were now out of sight below, under the roof of the portico.

"Overstreet," Jessica said. "Now I remember their names. They own a ranch or something."

"Both of them?" Lucy asked. "Without husbands?"

"I think so," Jessica said. "I met them a couple of times but I don't like them."

"Why not?" Lucy asked.

Jessica shuddered. "They're just icky. And they smell bad."

Hailey laughed nervously. "Maybe now is a good time to ask about playing outside."

The three girls looked at each other, knowing Hailey was right. There was no better time to ask parents to do something than when guests distracted them.

LUCY WAS THE second down the stairs, after Jessica. There was a discussion going on between the Overstreet sisters and Jessica's parents.

Jessica's dad said, "Yes, I heard about those cows today."

"And you know we've been losing stock that we can't account for," one of the sisters said.

"What will this do to the sale?" the other sister asked.

"I don't know," Jessica's dad said. "But we may want to consider lowering the price to keep it attractive."

"I knew you would say that."

"We're against that, you know."

"It's just that ..."

"Cam, we have visitors," Jessica's mother said, interrupting him.

Lucy watched as Mr. Logue and the Overstreet sisters paused and looked up toward the stairs.

"My, my," one of the sisters said. "Look at *them*."

Despite their dresses, the women looked hard, Lucy thought. There was no warmth in their stares. One of the sisters had blue eyes and the other green. Their eyes looked like old jewelry.

"They look like little tarts," the other sister said, and received a glare from Jessica's mom.

"What do you girls want?" Jessica's dad asked.

"Can we play outside?" Jessica asked. "In the back?"

"Dressed like *that*?" the older Overstreet sister asked, smiling with her mouth only.

"We can change," Jessica said weakly.

Jessica's dad gestured toward Hailey. "Didn't we agree to throw out those old clothes?" He looked upset, Lucy thought.

"It's okay, girls," Jessica's mom said, standing up, not addressing Mr. Logue's question. "You can go out back."

Mr. Logue shot her a look, but didn't intervene. The three girls fluttered down the stairs and across the foyer and out the back door.

"That worked," Hailey said as soon as the door slammed behind them.

"Did you smell them?" Jessica asked.

"I smelled something," Lucy said. But even though they were outside and could play hide-and-seek, she wished she were home.

7

THE NEXT EVENING, after the dinner dishes were cleared, Joe entered his small office near the mudroom and shut the door. The office was cramped and poorly heated.

It consisted of a metal government-surplus desk, two four-drawer filing cabinets, and bookshelves crammed with books of statutes, biology and range-management texts, the complete John McPhee collection, and spiral notebooks of department directives. A set of antlers from the first five-point buck he had ever shot hung from the wall behind him. Caps, hats, binoculars, and his gray, sweat-stained Stetson covered the tines. As he clicked on his desk lamp and booted up his computer, he glanced at the front page of the weekly *Saddlestring Roundup* that was delivered that morning.

THEY'RE BAAAACK ...

MUTILATED CATTLE DISCOVERED IN COUNTY A BULL MOOSE ANOTHER VICTIM?

The photo on the front page that accompanied the article showed the carcasses on the Hawkins Ranch, with Sheriff Barnum standing in the middle of them. The story contained quotes from Don Hawkins, the sheriff, Deputy McLanahan, and Joe. Although the story was accurate, Joe winced while he read it. He could imagine Barnum doing the same. There was a disagreeable sense of unreality about it, he thought. It was the kind of subject matter he ignored with contempt when he saw something similar on the front of a supermarket tabloid.

At least a dozen cattle and a bull moose have been found recently in the county, bearing mutilations similar to those reported in the mid-1970s, according to Twelve Sleep County Sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum ...

The article summarized the scene at the ranch, describing the dead cattle as "gruesome and unearthly" and calling the mutilations "inexplicable" before jumping to inside pages.

Joe read on:

... In the mid-1970s, a rash of cattle mutilations were reported throughout the Mountain West, primarily in Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. Cattle, as well as sheep and some domestic livestock, were reported dead, with genitals and other organs missing. In most of the documented incidents, skin had been removed from the faces of the victims as well as eyes, tongues, ears, and glands. Blood was reportedly drained from the bodies ...

... Speculation as to the cause of the deaths ranged from government experiments to cults, as well as extraterrestrial visitations. Despite local investigations, no definitive cause was ever determined, although an FBI report issued in 1978 seemed to conclude that the deaths were natural and that the "mutilations" were a result of predation and decomposition. A review of county records revealed that the cattle mutilations seemed to have ceased after the initial reports, and there is no record of additional incidents ...

The reporter had interviewed several area ranchers who had reported cattle mutilations thirty years earlier, as well as the long-retired county coroner who recalled

the cases but couldn't locate his files on them. Joe noted the similarities with a rising feeling of unease. The mutilations indeed sounded similar. The removal of genitals and skin, the bloating, no evidence of predation, the lack of a logical conclusion. Several cattle, it had been reported, were found in what looked like craters of four or five inches in depth, making it appear as though they had been dropped from the sky. One blatant similarity was the precision of the cuts, which seemed to have been made by an extremely sharp and very precise instrument.

... "There is nothing to fear," Sheriff Barnum cautioned. "There could be an easy explanation for this."

When pressed, Barnum declined further comment.

"We don't want the good citizens of this county gathering up their pets and searching the skies for aliens," said Sheriff's Deputy Kyle McLanahan.

Joe smiled despite himself. He bet Barnum just loved that quote.

LAUNCHING HIS E-MAIL program, Joe scanned the incoming messages. Nothing yet from the laboratory in Laramie regarding the samples he had sent them.

One e-mail was from his district supervisor, Trey Crump, in Cody. The subject line said "???" He opened it.

"What in the hell is going on with these cows and a moose?" Crump asked. "And what is it with you and dead cows?"

Joe paused before responding. He ignored Crump's jibe about dead cows. Two years before, an environmental terrorist, his wife, and another man were killed by cows strapped with explosives. Joe had inadvertently been involved in the case. In regard to Crump's initial question, Joe didn't want to speculate.

"It's true," he typed. "Tissue samples have been sent to Laramie for analysis. I'm keeping an eye on any future incidents, especially with the game population."

Joe opened his browser, went to the website for the *Roundup*, and copied the link for the mutilation story to his e-mail, so Trey could read it for himself.

"There is probably an explanation," Joe wrote. "I haven't figured it out yet but I will try."

He wrote that he had found massive bear tracks near the moose. "Could this be our rogue grizzly?"

Then he reread his e-mail, deleted the last line, and sent it.

JUST AS JOE was about to exit his e-mail program, a large file appeared in his inbox, and he waited as it slowly loaded. He recognized the return address as Dave Avery's. Since the time, years before, when samples he had sent for analysis had been "lost" at headquarters, Joe had never regained complete trust in the agency bureaucracy. So sometimes he chose to seek two opinions, one from the lab in Laramie and the other from Dave Avery, an old college roommate, who was now chief wildlife biologist for the Montana Fish and Game Department in Helena. Joe had been best man at Avery's first

two weddings, but had begged off when asked the third time last summer, claiming he might be bad luck.

There was no subject line, and no text, only six JPEG photos attached to the e-mail. Joe leaned back and waited for them to open, annoyed as always at his low-speed connection.

He scrolled down through the photos and felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

The photos were of mutilated cattle in a meadow. He recognized the wounds, the bloated bellies, the madly grinning skulls. Joe wondered how Dave could have gotten a hold of these photos so quickly, but then Joe noticed something.

The sky in the top right corner of the second photo was dark and leaden. In the fourth photo, a skiff of snow could be seen in the foreground. The grass was yellowed, almost gray. These photos had been taken in winter. And they had been taken somewhere else.

Breaking the online connection so he could use the telephone, Joe found Dave Avery's contact details and punched the numbers. His friend answered on the third ring.

"Avery."

"Dave, this is Joe Pickett."

"Joe! How in the hell are you?"

"Fine."

"I thought you'd be calling."

"Yup," Joe said, scrolling again through the photos on the screen. "I'm looking at these shots of mutilated cattle and wondering where they were taken."

"Gee, Joe, ever heard of small talk? Like how am I doing these days, or how is the weather in Helena?"

Joe sighed. "So, Dave, how are you doing? What's the weather like in Helena?"

"They were all taken outside of Conrad, Montana," Avery answered, "last January. Do you know where Conrad is?"

"Nope."

"Conrad and Dupeyer. Pondera County. North-western part of the state. East of Great Falls."

"Okay ..."

"Sixteen of 'em, from July through January of this year," Avery said. "Maybe eight more, but we couldn't be sure because the bodies were too old. So maybe two dozen cattle in all. They were found in groups of four to six, although there were a couple loners. No tracks, no reports of vehicles or lights in the area. Unfortunately, no one ever brought in a fresh one. All of the carcasses were bloated and old."

"Any predation?"

There was a long pause, then "No."

"Was the blood drained out of them?"

"No. It just looks like that. Natural coagulation makes it look like they're bloodless. Once you run some tests you'll find that out."

"Then you got the samples I sent you," Joe said.

"Got 'em at the lab."

Joe waited. He could hear a Chris LeDoux CD playing somewhere in the background, and somebody—he guessed Dave's new wife—singing along.

"And?" Joe finally asked.

"I haven't dug into them yet, Joe, but I know what I'll find."

"What's that?"

"A whole lot of nothing," Avery said. "Well, one thing, I guess, but I'm not sure it's significant. Believe me, we've been analyzing tissue samples up here for nine months. My freezer's full of cow heads and cored rectums in paper bags."

"I hadn't heard a single thing about cattle mutilations up there," Joe confessed.

"I'm not that surprised," Avery said. "Conrad's pretty remote, even in Montana. Besides, they're just *cows*."

Joe smiled at that. He remembered a paper Avery had written in college, proposing that 90 percent of the cattle in the West be removed and replaced with bison. The paper had not been very well received at the University of Wyoming, home of the Wyoming Cowboys.

"Even so," Avery continued, his voice rising with annoyance, "I got calls from kooks all over the place. The newspaper stories ran in the *Great Falls Tribune*, so of course they showed up on the Internet, and crazies from all over who are into this kind of thing took an interest. They're like train buffs, Joe. You never know they're even out there living among us normal people until some rare train comes through town and they rush the tracks."

"What about wildlife?" Joe asked. "I found a bull moose mutilated in the same way."

"Hmmm, no shit?"

"The samples I sent were from the moose."

There was a pause. "I'll take a look tomorrow," Avery said in a serious tone.

"So there weren't any wildlife deaths reported?" Joe asked again. He sensed that Avery had something to say but was holding back.

"Actually, there were a couple of reports, but they weren't very credible."

"Who made them?" Joe asked.

Avery sighed. "Joe, there was a guy up here, a self-described expert in the paranormal. He just showed up out of the blue with a kind of laboratory-on-wheels. It's a retrofitted RV with all kinds of equipment and shit inside. He claimed to represent some foundation somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico that funds him to do research. His name is Cleve Garrett"—Avery spat the name out as if it were a curse word—"and he practically camped on top of me all last summer. He's got all kinds of theories about how these are alien abductions and how I'm engaged in a governmental conspiracy to keep it all quiet. The fucking dweeb. The moron."

"So you don't like him much?" Joe asked facetiously.

"Hah!"

"Is he the one who reported the wildlife deaths?"

Joe heard Avery take a swallow of something before answering. “He claimed there were hundreds of cases of wildlife mutilations. He said they were all over the place—on the sides of highways, in the timber, all over. He said the reason we didn’t know about them was because we never thought to look. He said twenty-five percent of the deer killed on the highway were actually mutilated and dumped, but no one cared to notice. He loves talking to reporters and stirring this stuff up.”

Joe thought about that, his mind racing. How many dead deer, elk, moose, fox, antelope bordered the highways? Hundreds, perhaps thousands. Who *would* think to examine them? They were roadkill.

“He brought in a mule deer carcass once,” Avery said. “And yes, it did look like it had been cut on. But the body was too old to determine anything conclusive. Plus, I didn’t trust the guy not to have done it himself.”

“Is he still up there?” Joe asked.

“You know, I don’t think so,” Avery said. “I haven’t seen him in quite a while. I heard he had a following of like-minded kooks and had taken up with some young girl. He probably took her back to wherever he came from so he could practice alien probes on her or something.”

Joe didn’t know what to ask next. Then he recalled something Avery had said earlier.

“Dave, you said there was something about the tissue samples you looked at?”

“Oh, yeah. But like I said, don’t put too much significance in it.”

“Yes?”

“One thing we found in the cattle that were the freshest—I think they had been dead a week or so—was an above-normal level of a compound called oxindole. Ever heard of it?”

“It sounds vaguely familiar,” Joe said, searching his memory.

“Probably from biology class. Oxindole is a natural chemical that can have a sedative effect. Cattle release it within their own bodies under stress. We found excessive amounts in the tissue samples, especially in the brains and in the eyeballs that hadn’t been removed already.”

“So it probably came from the cow itself?” Joe asked, confused.

“Well, probably, yes,” Avery said. Unconvincingly, Joe thought.

“The older cows, the ones that had been dead longer, did you find oxindole in them?”

“Some. But we think it dissipates with age.”

“So why even mention it?”

“Because there was so damned much of it,” Avery sighed. “Maybe enough to literally sedate the cow, to knock it out. Much more than we know that a cow is capable of producing.”

Joe was silent.

“Look, you’ve got to keep it in perspective,” Avery cautioned. “We don’t know very much about the compound. We don’t know, for example, if maybe it doesn’t become

concentrated, post-mortem, in certain organs, and those were the organs we just happened to test. The compound may intensify due to a traumatic or stressful death, or it could be that the presence of it is triggered by a virus or something. We're still researching it, but quite frankly we aren't getting anywhere. We have real work to do up here, as you know. I've got a breakout of pinkeye in our mountain sheep population right now. So we can't be spending too much time or energy on dead cows, especially since the mutilations seem to have stopped."

"They stopped in Montana, anyway," Joe said.

"Now you've got 'em," Avery said, his voice heavy. "Maybe you'll get my friend Cleve Garrett as well."

Joe grunted. "I'm still a little surprised that this is the first I've heard of it. I'd think those ranchers would be demanding some kind of action."

Avery laughed, which Joe thought was an odd response.

"I don't get it," Joe said, annoyed.

"At first, they wanted to call in the National Guard," Avery said. "A couple of 'em were on the phone to the governor right away. Then they realized how it looked."

"What do you mean?"

"Cattle prices were at record lows at the time. Most of these ranchers barely scrape by as it is. They're one bank payment away from losing their ranches. So they're either trying to sell their spreads for big bucks to Hollywood celebrities, or selling their beef for a few pennies in profit. If word got out that the cattle are dying *unnatural* deaths, those landowners are shit out of luck. When they realized that, they pressured the governor *not* to do anything."

"So, Dave, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What do you think this is? Not a scientific explanation, or your professional opinion. What does your gut tell you?"

Joe heard Avery take another sip of his drink. He heard another Chris LeDoux rodeo song.

"Joe, I don't know what the fuck it is," Avery said, his voice dropping, "but for a while there I was scared as hell."

Joe asked Avery to contact him if he found anything unusual in the tissue samples. They talked for a few moments about game-management issues, and Avery reported what was happening in Montana with whirling disease in the rivers. Joe told Avery about confirmed findings of chronic wasting disease in mule deer in southern Wyoming. They agreed to keep in better touch.

Then Joe cradled the telephone and sat back.

He was still sitting there when Marybeth rapped on the door and opened it. She was in her nightgown; the short, black one he liked.

"Are you coming to bed?" she asked.

Joe looked at his wristwatch, surprised to see that it was 11.30.

"I didn't kiss the girls good night," he said, alarmed.

"What have you been doing in here?"

"Work. I talked to Dave Avery."

Marybeth smiled, rolling her eyes.

"I remember Dave being sober on his wedding day," she said. "I realized I didn't even know him. He was drunk almost all of college."

"He's a good biologist, though," Joe said, "and a good friend."

"What did he say about the moose?"

Joe looked away, then back. "We may have a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Are the horses in the barn or in the corral tonight?" Joe asked.

Marybeth frowned. "They're in the corral, why?"

"I think we need to start putting them in the barn at night," Joe said, standing up and clamping on his hat.

8

SHERIDAN PICKETT STEPPED out of the shadowed gnarl of river-bottom cottonwoods. She looked up and searched the dull, gray sky in silence until she saw what she was looking for. She felt a small shiver of excitement, and dread. They were up there, all right.

As she had been instructed, she went no farther into the clearing. Behind her, on the other side of the thick old trees, was the Twelve Sleep River. The river was placid and low, the water in it clear and nearly still this late in the season. A rusted metal bridge spanned the river but was blocked off to vehicles, because it was old and unsafe. She had walked across it a half hour before, trying not to look down at the gaps between the wood planks where she could see the water. Her footfalls on the bridge seemed unnaturally loud as they crossed. Her breath came in puffs of condensation. It was a cold fall day, and the clouds that had pulled a blind over the wide-open sky looked like they could bring rain or even snow.

She was dressed warmly in jeans and her mother's old, canvas barn coat with the corduroy collar and too-long sleeves. Her dad had insisted that she wear a pullover blaze-orange vest, since it was hunting season, and she did so, even though she felt a little like a human highway cone. A black headband held back her blond hair and had a dual use if she needed to pull it over her ears to keep them warm.

She waited, as she had been told to do. Before her was a clearing bordered by skeletal dark trees. Tall, khaki-colored grass furred the clearing, broken up by solitary sagebrush and a few young river cottonwoods. A lone, deep green pine—a perfect-sized Christmas tree, she thought—added the only real color. The tree was as out of place as she was, she thought. The clearing was eerily still. She felt a little scared.

The night before, she had the dream again. It was the same as before, with the mist pouring across the forest like water released from a small dam. But the dream

continued on. This time, the mist stopped at the forest edge and proceeded no farther. There was something out there that stopped it, made it cautious. A standoff was taking place, but in the dream she couldn't see what opposed the advance of the mist. Whatever it was had a solid presence, and it had traveled a long way to get there to mount a challenge. This time, she didn't tell her dad about the dream.

AFTER NEARLY A year of apprenticeship in falconry, which consisted mainly of the care and feeding of Nate Romanowski's two peregrine falcons, and his almost whispered lectures concerning the philosophy of falconry, this was a special lesson. For the first time, Nate had brought her hunting. Hunting with falcons, Nate had told her, was a whole different thing than the kind of hunting she might be familiar with from her father, the game warden. In this instance the agents of the kill weren't rifles or shotguns, but the birds themselves. Humans were there to flush out the prey like bird dogs, so the falcons could rocket down from the sky and kill what had been scared out into the open. Nate had told her that many times she wouldn't even see the prey she had flushed until the falcon swept down and hit it.

"This is how mankind conceived of an air force," Nate had said. "This is where it all started, the idea of striking targets from the air."

"What are you talking about?" Sheridan had asked.

"Fire from the sky. Hell from the heavens," Nate had said. "This is where it all began."

"Huh?"

THE LESSONS TOOK place after school, unless she had basketball or choir practice or Nate was out of town. Her mom or dad would drive her out to Nate Romanowski's cabin near the river, and Nate took her home afterward and often stayed for dinner. Her mom and dad seemed to have a special relationship with Nate, although they never really talked about it with her. They seemed to trust Nate, or they never would have okayed the lessons. After all, Nate was unmarried and solitary, and Sheridan was twelve. She knew there was something different about Nate, something *serious*. He was not like anybody she had ever met, certainly not like anyone her parents hung around with, like the Logues.

Nevertheless, her dad seemed oddly comfortable with Nate, like they shared some kind of old experience together, while at the same time she saw her father eyeing Nate coolly when he thought no one was looking. It was as if he were trying to decide something. Her mother, on the other hand, made special meals on Fridays, including salads and desserts. While this hadn't meant much at first, it did now, since her mom had become so busy with her new business that regular sit-down dinners had become more infrequent. Sheridan had noticed an expression on her mother's face at times when Nate was at their table. It was a look Sheridan had rarely seen before. It was a kind of a glow, the kind of look her mother sometimes had when she and Dad were going out somewhere—dinner or a movie—at night. The look reminded Sheridan just how attractive her mother was to some men. The expression didn't last long but it made Sheridan uncomfortable and made her want to act out. Sometimes, Sheridan

knew, she acted like a brat at the table when this happened, like picking on Lucy or demanding a second helping of something that was no longer there. She didn't know why she did this, other than to divert attention. But there was something about the way her mom looked at Nate. Maybe that was why her dad acted so differently when Nate was around. There was something adult going on, Sheridan knew, but she wasn't sure what it was. But she didn't want to ask about it, or say anything. She didn't want to give them a reason to question the propriety of the falconry lessons.

Not that the lessons were anything special so far. The first few months it seemed like all she did with the falcons was clean the mews where they lived and help feed them. The feeding was kind of gross, with the way Nate pulled freshly killed rabbits and pigeons apart to give to the birds. She was fascinated by the way the falcons ate—they finished off not only the flesh but the fur, feathers, and bone—but wondered when they would ever actually do some *falconry*. Nate had shown her the tools of the sport, such as leather hoods, jesses (strips of leather attached to their talons so he could hold them upright in his hand without them flying away), and lures made of duck wings or leather, which could be swung in a circle by a string to draw the birds' interest. He had given her old books to read about the ancient sport, mostly written by dead Scotsmen. Some of the books had old black-and-white photos in them. What got Sheridan, though, was that in the old photos the only thing that looked authentic and real were the birds themselves. The falconers in the pictures were from another age. The men (she had yet to see a photo of a woman falconer) wore silly hats with short brims, and baggy knee-length pants, and they were smoking huge, drooping pipes that made her want to laugh out loud. They reminded her of Sherlock Holmes, except fatter. Luckily, Nate looked nothing like that.

She stood dutifully still, as Nate had instructed, and waited for him to break from the opposite treeline as he had said he would. He said he would come out once the birds had been successfully released to the sky and after they had climbed to the right altitude.

IT HAD BEEN six days since the mutilated cattle had been discovered on the Hawkins Ranch, and Sheridan noticed how something that had been a family thing—the dead moose in the meadow—had now become the subject of discussion not only in town but also in school. Her sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Morris, had even asked her to remain in her desk after school so he could ask her about it. Since she had thought his request was related to a history research paper she had practically copied off of the Internet, she had been relieved to find out he was only interested in the moose and the cows.

Sheridan had thought it was cool that her teachers asked her about things like this; things that her dad was in the middle of. She told Mr. Morris about finding the moose, and what the animal looked like. He asked about the cows, and she was coy, as if she knew more than she was telling, which she didn't. She wished she had paid more attention to her mom and dad when they had been discussing it at dinner, but she didn't say anything to Mr. Morris about that.

SHE HEARD THE sharp snap of branches breaking, and looked around. Nate Romanowski emerged from the dense trees on the other side of the opening. Sheridan studied him. Nate's movements were liquid and rangy and had a cautious, feline quality about them, as if he were ready to pounce on something or somebody in an instant if he had to. He was tall, with wide shoulders, and had a long, blond ponytail. His sharp, green eyes engaged hers. She had never encountered a stare like Nate's. He was strange in that when he looked at her, his eyes never wavered. He was so direct. Sometimes, he unnerved her with his stare and she looked away. She had learned that he meant nothing by it. That was just the way he was.

For some reason, he was slowly shaking his head.

"Do you want me to go?" she asked, thinking that perhaps she had done something wrong.

"No."

She noticed that he had tilted his face skyward. She followed and looked up. As she watched, the once-distant black specks were becoming more pronounced. The two peregrines he had released were diving back down.

"Why are they coming down?" Sheridan asked, thinking—hoping—that the birds were diving toward unseen prey.

Nate shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did I do anything wrong?"

Nate looked across the clearing at Sheridan. His voice dropped apologetically. "You didn't do anything wrong. You were perfect."

"Then why are they coming down?"

Nate took another step into the clearing.

Nate said, "I've never seen this happen before."

"You haven't?"

"No," he said so softly that she barely heard him. "I've had them take off when they saw a rabbit or something in a different clearing, or I've had birds fly away forever. But I've never seen peregrines just take themselves out of the hunt altogether."

The falcons dropped as if they were about to strike targets—wings tucked, talons out and balled—but they suddenly flared at treetop level. She could hear the urgent whispering sound as their wings shot out and caught the air to slow them down. Seconds later, both birds flapped noisily and their feet outstretched before descending into the tall grass. She watched as Nate approached them. When he bent and lowered his thick, leather welder's glove, the birds refused to mount it, and stayed hunkered down in the grass.

Nate said, "This is not normal."

"Why don't they come to the fist?" Sheridan asked.

"I don't know," Nate said. "It's like they're afraid to show themselves."

Sheridan walked slowly across the opening, toward where the birds had landed.

"Feel it?" Nate asked, his eyes narrowed. "There's something in the air. Low pressure or something."

Sheridan stopped again. Her heart was beating fast, and she did feel it, although she couldn't describe what it was. It was like pressure being applied from above, from the sky. In a fog, she watched Nate bend over and physically place one of the peregrines on his fist. Usually, they were eager to hop up on it. He straightened up with the falcon on his arm, only to have the bird release its grip and drop to the side. The leather jesses that were tied to its talons were grasped in his fist, and the bird flopped upside down, shrieking and flapping violently. Sheridan felt a puff of air from them as the falcon beat its wings.

"Shit," Nate cursed, lowering the bird to the ground. "He's going to hurt himself."

"Be careful with him."

"I will, and sorry about saying *shit*."

"It's okay."

Nate met her eyes, then slowly looked up at the sky.

Sheridan also looked up, but could see nothing in the clouds. She felt the pressure on her face, a kind of gravity pull on her skin as if she were on a fast ride at the county fair.

"I don't know what to tell you," Nate said, his voice thin. "It's like there is something up there the birds are afraid of. They *refuse* to fly."

9

AN HOUR LATER and twenty miles away, a man named Tuff Montague clucked his tongue to get his horse moving and pointed the gelding north, toward the timber. It was nearly dusk, and Tuff had the blues. He sang "Night Riders' Lament," his favorite cowboy song:

While I was out a-ridin'
The graveyard shift midnight till dawn,
The moon was as bright as a reading light
For a letter from an old friend back home ...

Despite his current profession, which was ranch hand for the Longbrake Ranch, Tuff despised riding horses. He had nothing against them personally, and enjoyed singing and listening to songs about them, but he preferred tooling around in a ranch pickup. Nevertheless, he was a cowboy. A real one. In his mid-fifties, he looked the part, because he *was* the real number. Droopy mustache that curled to jawline, sharp nose, weathered face, sweat-stained Gus McCrae hat, Wranglers that bunched on his boot-tops and stayed up as if by a trick of magic over his nonexistent butt.

He liked to tell people, especially tourists who bought him a whiskey in the Stockman's Bar, that he was the only bonafide cowboy left in the Bighorns that spoke

American. It was sort of true, since most of the ranchers couldn't find cowboys anymore except from Mexico, South America, or wannabes from former East Germany and the Czech Republic. Even when he left the profession, as he often did, he found himself coming back. Between stints at five different ranches in Park, Teton, and Twelve Sleep counties, Tuff had been a satellite-dish salesman, a mechanic, a surveyor's assistant, a cellular-phone customer-service representative, and a mountain man in a chuck-wagon dinner theater in Jackson Hole, where his job, every night, was to ride a horse into the tent where the tourists were, select a "wife" and toss her over his shoulder. This had resulted in a back injury when he stupidly selected a young mother the size of a heifer (she was one of those women who looked slim sitting down but had beer-keg thighs hidden under the table) and he had crashed beneath her weight. The injury had been a stroke of luck, because up until recently he had collected disability payments and didn't have to ride horses or do much of anything except occupy a barstool at the Stockman's. But the damned chuck-wagon dinner show, owned by a large family of Mormons, was disputing his injury. Apparently one of the owners had reported that he had seen him riding a mechanical bull in a saloon in Cody. Which was sort of true also, although Tuff wanted to know what a good Mormon had been doing in a bar in the first place. Until the matter was resolved, he had to once again seek employment.

BUT THAT WAS only part of the reason why Tuff had the blues. Another big contributing factor was that it was Friday night and he was stuck on the ranch and couldn't go into town. Since his DUI arrest the previous week—his third in two years—his driving privileges had been revoked. The only other Longbrake employee, a Mexican national named Eduardo, was laid up in the bunkhouse with a broken leg from falling off a damned horse. Therefore, Tuff had no ride. That, and the fact that Bud Longbrake, the peckerhead, followed the letter of the law and refused to let Tuff use a ranch vehicle even within the ranch itself, where no law enforcement would ever see him. Tuff knew that if Bud Longbrake wanted to make a case about allowing him to drive only on his private roads, Sheriff Barnum and the highway patrol wouldn't object. But Bud Longbrake, who seemed to care a hell of a lot more about the needs and wants of his fiancée, Missy, than the operation of his own place, had not made meeting with the sheriff a priority.

Shit.

Despite his predicament, Tuff smiled to himself. The weekend before had been something. It had almost been worth the DUI on the way home. The barmaid at the Stockman's, Evelyn Wolters, had set up a threesome after the bar closed. Tuff, Evelyn, and Jim Beam in one bed. What a night that had been. He wished he could remember certain parts of it more clearly. It had been at her apartment, a studio over the VFW, within walking distance of the Stockman's. Evelyn had been doing something besides alcohol, but he wasn't sure what. Whatever it was, it was fine by him, because she had been a tigress. She was no looker—his age, skinny legs that were just skinny, not shapely, pendulous breasts that hung down and swung back and forth like oranges in

tube socks—but she had been *wild*. It had been her idea to use the neck of the bottle that way once it was empty.

He had left Evelyn promising to be back in a week, and she had told him she was already looking forward to it. Tuff had said he was, too, but the truth was he was tired and drunk as hell. It would be several days before he had his energy, and his urges, back. He kept wondering if some of the things he recalled she had done—and let him do to her—were more a result of his delirium and fantasy than what had actually taken place. But the more he thought about it, and he thought about it often, the more he convinced himself that the acts had actually happened. It was the first time he had done some of those things since he'd been on shore leave in the navy. And then he had to pay for them. Evelyn, though, seemed to enjoy it. Which made him think: *woo-hoo!*

But now he was literally grounded. He had called and left messages for her at the bar, but she hadn't returned them. No doubt she had heard about the DUI. It had been in the *Saddlestring Roundup*, that one with the cattle mutilations in it. He had hoped that maybe with all of the hullabaloo about the dead cows she had missed the weekly police-blotter. Unfortunately, the police report was usually the only thing in the paper everybody read. And she was probably at the Stockman's now, damn it, targeting another lone drinker. Giving him a couple of whiskeys on the house, like she had done with him. Then, when the bar closed at two, she would grab his hand and a fifth of Jim Beam and take him up the street to her apartment. It should have been him, Tuff thought. He leaned forward in his saddle and hit his horse between his ears so hard that his hand stung. The gelding crow-hopped, but Tuff was prepared for it and had a good hold on the saddle horn. The horse recovered and resumed slow-walking to the dark timber, exhibiting no malice toward its abusive rider. Which was another reason Tuff disliked horses. They were stupid.

*

SO, AFTER A week of herding the cattle down from the mountains into the holding pens near the ranch, they had counted and come up with ten missing cows. Ever since the cattle mutilations had been reported on the Hawkins Place, Bud Longbrake had been acting paranoid. He ordered Tuff and Eduardo to ride the timber and see what they could find or spook out. Eduardo had found six strays the day before, prior to falling off of his horse. Tuff had found none. Bud had put the screws to Tuff, telling him that he wasn't holding up his end.

"I want those cows found, Tuff," Bud had said, leaning over the breakfast table with his palms flat on the surface. "Dead or alive."

Tuff had said, Then go find 'em yourself, you pussy-whipped phony!

No, he hadn't said that. But he had thought that. And someday, when he retold the story in the Stockman's Bar, that was how it would be recalled.

Tuff wished he had more light, but the sun was now behind the mountains. He blamed the horse for delaying him. The gelding had a smooth ride, but was the damned slowest walking horse he had ever ridden. He could have walked up the draw faster his

own self, he thought. And if he could have taken one of the ATVs, he would have been goddamned back by now and watching television in the bunkhouse with Eduardo.

Shit.

Tuff reached back on the saddle and unbuckled a saddlebag that was stiff with age. His fingers closed around the smooth, cool neck of a fifth of Jim Beam. He had his memories of Evelyn Wolters, and this brought them back. He cracked the top and drank straight from the bottle. It was harsh, but tongues of familiar fire spread through his chest and belly. Sometimes, he thought, his memories—and what he could do with them—were almost better than the real thing. But he needed that original foundation before he could embellish them to his liking.

He rode up the mountain slowly. He stared in resentment at the back of the gelding's head, settling on the bony protrusion between the horse's ears. He fired mental curses at the spot, hoping some would soak through into the gelding's brain. Not for the first time, he wondered what a fencing tool would do to the skull of a horse.

HE RODE THE fence line, just like the song. The reins were in his left hand and the bottle was in his right. It was turning into a cold night. There was a hint of moisture in the air—probably brought with the cloud cover—that accentuated the smell of dry, dust-covered sage leading up into sharp pine. He smelled his own breath. Not pretty.

The gelding was breathing hard as he climbed a rocky hill toward a stand of aspen trees. Not that the horse was moving any faster—he had only one speed, which was similar to four-wheel drive low—and Tuff was just about ready to call it a night. With no stars or moon, he would not be able to see whether there were strays on this saddle slope or not. And damned if he would use his flashlight. He wasn't *that* dedicated.

He wished he could find the missing cows, though, to get Bud Longbrake off of his back.

The aspens stood out from the dark timber that climbed up the mountain into the sky. The leaves had turned already, and were in that stage between yellow-red and falling off. The trees soaked up what little light there still was, making the stand look like a tan brushstroke on the huge, dark landscape.

"Whoa."

Tuff stopped the gelding and got his bearings. He slid one boot out of the stirrup so he could twist in the saddle and look around. It was easy to get lost up here, he had learned. But he wasn't. Far below were the crystal-clear blue lights of the ranch yard. Twenty-five miles farther, the lights of the town of Saddlestring shimmered in wavering rows.

He turned back, looking at the aspens. He saw movement in the trees. Or was it a drunken illusion? Tuff wiped his eyes with his sleeve and looked again. This had happened before, him seeing things while he was drinking. But this time there was something authentic about it, something that made his chest clutch. Movement again. Something, or somebody, moved from one tree to another. The form was thicker than the tree trunks, but once hidden it seemed to meld into the darkness. He heard a twig snap, and his horse, who suddenly pricked his ears, confirmed the sound.

He let his breath out slowly. Certainly, it was deer or elk. But game animals didn't hide, they *ran*. Under him, his horse started wuffing, emitting a deep, staccato, coughing sound. He feared that sound—all horsemen feared that sound—because it meant trouble was imminent. His horse, his slow-moving, docile horse, was about to throw off hundreds of years of domesticity and become a wild animal again.

Suddenly, the gelding crow-hopped, nearly unsaddling Tuff. His balance was goofy because of his position and the bourbon.

"What in the *hell* is wrong with you?" he growled, taking an empty swing at the gelding's ear with the flat of his hand.

Unlike before, the horse didn't shrug off his action. In fact, the horse began backpedaling down the slope in a panic.

"Damn you, what's the problem?" he shouted. The gelding was backtracking down the mountain much faster than he had walked up. Tuff tried to turn him, to face him away from whatever had spooked him in the aspens. Sloshing bourbon on his bare hand, Tuff tried to grasp the reins near the bit in the gelding's mouth to jerk him around hard. The bourbon splashed out of the bottle and into the gelding's eye, igniting the horse and making him explode into a wild, tight spin.

Tuff clamped down with his thighs and held on. His hat flew off. He let the bottle drop—not something he wanted to do—and found himself knocked forward in the saddle, hugging the gelding's neck. He had lost the reins, and several things flashed through his mind. With the reins down, the lunatic horse could inadvertently step on them as he spun and jerk both of them to the ground, breaking their necks. He thought of his broken bottle of Jim Beam. He imagined what he must look like, spiraling down a rocky slope in the dark, hugging the neck of a horse. He thought of how unbelievably strong and powerful a horse—a 1,000-pound animal—was when fully charged, like now.

Even as he spun, faster and harder than he had ever spun before, even when he used to rodeo, he wondered what had made the horse spook. Bears could do it, he knew. The smell of a bear in the wrong circumstances could make even a good ranch mount go crazy. *This horse is going to fall*, Tuff thought, *and I'm going to get hurt real bad*.

And then the horse tripped on something, recovered momentarily, then bucked. Tuff was thrown through the air—he could feel the actual moment of release when no part of his body was in contact with the saddle or the horse—and time seemed to literally slow down as he went airborne until it fast-forwarded as he flew face-first into a cold, sharp rock and heard a crunch in his ears like a door slamming shut.

10

JOE WAS up and showered when the telephone rang at 5.45 a.m. With a towel around his waist but still dripping, he padded down the dark hallway toward their bedroom to find Marybeth sitting bolt upright in bed, rubbing her eyes, with the receiver pressed against her ear. From across the room, he recognized the voice on the

other end of the phone as that of Missy Vankueren, Marybeth's mother. He noted the high-pitched urgency in Missy's voice.

"Just a second," Marybeth said to her mother, then clamped her palm over the speaker and looked up with wide eyes. "It's my mother, Joe. They just found one of their hands dead on the ranch."

"Oh, no."

"They called the sheriff, but she's wondering if you can go out there."

"Why me?"

"I didn't ask her," Marybeth said, a hint of annoyance peeking through. "She's very upset. She wants you there, I assume, because you're *family*."

Joe had planned to get an early start. It was Saturday, and archery season was in full swing, and an early deer rifle season was opening in one of the areas in his district. Hunters would be out in force. The death of a ranch hand was the sheriff's responsibility, or the county coroner's.

"She says he's been mutilated, like those cows."

"Tell her I'll be there in half an hour."

NORMALLY, HE WOULD have savored the fall morning as he hurled down the old two-lane state highway toward the turnoff for the Longbrake Ranch, Joe thought. The sun had just broken over the mountains and fused the valley with color. Lowland cottonwoods were bursting with red and yellow, and the moisture sparkled on the grass. It was clear and crisp and cloudless. Mule deer still fed in the meadows and had not yet retreated to their daytime shelter of the trees and draws.

He slowed and turned off the blacktop onto a red dirt road made of crushed and packed gravel, where he passed under a massive log archway. Sun-bleached moose, deer, and elk antlers climbed up the logs and across the top beam. A weathered sign—**Longbrake Ranches, Saddlestring, Wyo.**—hung from heavy chain attached to the beam. There were less than a dozen bullet holes in the sign, Joe noted, which meant that the sign had probably been hung just a year or two before. In Twelve Sleep County, older signs had many more holes in them.

The gravel road paralleled a narrow, meandering spring creek with thick, grassy banks. The fact that deer, coyotes, and ducks didn't flush from the creek as Joe drove told him that he wasn't the first to drive up the road that morning.

He thought: Missy must be wrong.

Although he had no doubt that a ranch hand had been found, Joe had trouble believing the man had been mutilated as well. Missy was inclined to let her imagination run away with her, and was prone to high drama. Joe hoped like hell that this would be the case. If a human was actually killed and mutilated like the moose and the cattle had been, it would be a whole new, and horrific, development.

THE BUILDINGS THAT made up the headquarters of the Longbrake Ranch had an entirely different feel than the spartan and businesslike Hawkins Ranch. The main ranch house was a massive log structure with gabled upper-floor windows and a wide porch railed with knotty pine. It was a monument to the gentleman rancher Bud

Longbrake aspired to be, as it had been the monument to his father and his grandfather before him. Guest cabins were tucked into the trees behind the home, and the bunkhouse which at one time housed a dozen cowboys.

Joe felt a clutch in his stomach as he saw Missy Vankueren push a screened door open and emerge from the house. She waved him over.

Despite the events of the morning, Joe noticed, Missy had managed to do her hair and apply the exquisite makeup that made her look thirty-five instead of her real sixty-one years. Her eyes shone from a porcelain mask featuring sharp, high cheekbones and a full, red mouth. She was slim and neat, and wore a flannel shirt covered with bucking horses, and a suede vest with Shoshone wild roses in beadwork on the lapels. She looked every bit the chic ranch-woman, Joe thought with grudging admiration.

Maxine bounded up in her seat next to Joe and whined to be let out. That Maxine, Joe thought. She liked *everybody*.

Joe told his dog to stay and got out. Missy met him near the front of his pickup. She was obviously distressed.

"The horse Tuff was riding showed up around three in the morning," she began, dispensing with greetings. "Bud looked outside and saw the horse near the corrals, with its saddle hanging upside down. He thought Tuff must have fallen off in the mountains, so he got in his truck and went to look for him. Bud came back down a couple of hours later and said he found Tuff's body up there."

Missy gestured vaguely toward the mountains. The sun had risen enough that a yellow strip banded the snow-dusted tops of the peaks.

"Did Bud say the body had been mutilated?"

Missy paused and her eyes widened almost grotesquely. "*Yes!* He said it was awful."

"Is Bud up there now?"

"Yes, he took the sheriff up there to the scene."

Joe nodded.

"What does this all mean?" Missy asked.

Joe was thinking the same thing. First moose, then cattle, now possibly a man.

"I'm not sure," he said. "If what Bud says is true then we really have a problem on our hands."

"No, not that," Missy shook her head. "I meant in terms of Bud. We're working on plans for the wedding, and I don't want him to be distracted."

Joe looked at her and fought an urge to ask, *Are you really Marybeth's mother?*

Instead, he stepped back from her as if she were radioactive.

"How far is the body?" he asked.

WITH ONE EXCEPTION, the scene was eerily similar to the scene on the Hawkins Ranch. Just below an aspen grove and before the slope darkened with heavy pine, the two Sheriff's Department vehicles were there again, as well as a ranch pickup, no doubt driven by Bud Longbrake. The addition to the group was the lone four-wheel-drive ambulance from the Twelve Sleep County Hospital.

As he approached in his pickup, he could see a small crowd of men bending over something in knee-high sagebrush. Bud Longbrake, in a gray, wide-brimmed Stetson, looked up and waved to Joe. Barnum straightened up and glowered. Deputy McLanahan and two EMTs made up the rest of the group. One of the EMTs, a squat bruiser with a whisp of tawny facial hair, looked pale and distressed. While Joe pulled up next to the Longbrake truck and swung out, he saw the EMT turn quickly and retch into the brush behind him. The other EMT walked over to his colleague and led him away by the arm, apparently for some air.

“Joe,” Longbrake said.

“Bud.”

“Missy call you?”

“Yup.”

“She all right?”

Joe paused for a beat. “Fine,” he said.

Barnum snorted and exchanged glances with McLanahan.

“What do we have?” Joe asked, stepping through the sagebrush. The ground was spongy and soft, except for the football-sized fists of granite that punched through it on the slope.

When he saw what the men were standing over, Joe stopped abruptly. Although he had seen hundreds of harvested game animals as well as the moose and cattle, he was not prepared for what was left of Tuff Montegue. The body lay on its back, legs askew. One arm was thrown out away from the body, as if caught making a sweeping gesture. For a moment, Joe thought that the other arm was missing, but then he realized it was actually broken and pinned beneath the trunk. Tuff was disemboweled; his blue-gray entrails blooming out of a foot-long hole in his abdomen like some kind of sea plant in the coral. His Wranglers had been pulled down to mid-thigh—Tuff had bone-white skin—and his genitals had been cut out, leaving a maroon-and-black oval. Huge chunks of clothing and flesh had been ripped from Tuff’s thighs.

Tuff’s face was gone. It had been removed from his jawbone to his high forehead. All that was left were obscenely grinning teeth, wide-open eyes the size of ping-pong balls, a shiny, white wishbone protrusion where his nose had been, and a mass of drying blood and muscle. There was also the smell; a light but potent stew of sweet-smelling sage, spilled blood, exposed entrails, and the half-digested breakfast of the squat EMT. Joe gagged and tried to swallow.

He turned away, closing his eyes tightly and trying to breathe steadily. He heard Barnum snort behind him.

“Something the matter, Joe?” Barnum asked.

Then, *damn it*, Joe could no longer fight the wave of nausea and he threw up his morning coffee onto the soft ground.

JOE WAS THERE for most of the morning, keeping his distance as the hillside was photographed, measured, and tied off with yellow crime-scene tape wrapped around

hastily driven T-posts. Additional deputies had arrived from Saddlestring, as well as a Wyoming highway patrolman who had heard the chatter on his radio.

Sheriff Barnum seemed more distressed than Joe had ever seen him, barking orders at his underlings and marching up and down the hillside with no apparent intent. Several times, he climbed into his Blazer and slammed the door to work the radio channels.

Bud Longbrake stood near Joe, leaning against the grille of his pickup. Longbrake was a large man, with wide shoulders, silver hair, and thick ears that stuck out almost at right angles from his temples. His face was weathered, his eyes sharp blue, his expression inscrutable. He wore a starched, white cowboy shirt and a silver belt buckle the size of a softball that celebrated an ancient rodeo win. Longbrake watched the procedures carefully but dispassionately, as if trying to guess the conclusions of the investigators before they announced them.

"I ain't never seen a body in that shape before," Longbrake told Joe after nearly an hour of silence.

"Nope."

"I've seen calves hamstrung and gutted by coyotes while they were still alive, and I've seen a damn wolf eat the private parts out of a calf elk while the elk bawled for his mama, but I never seen a man like that."

Joe nodded, agreeing. The EMTs were trying to slide Tuff's body into a body bag without any of his parts detaching. Joe looked away.

"I never knew a bear could do that to a man," Longbrake said.

It took Joe a moment, then he turned toward the rancher.

"*What* did you just say?"

Longbrake shrugged. "I said I never heard of no grizzly making cuts like that."

"Grizzly?"

"Didn't Barnum tell you?"

Joe kept his voice low so he wouldn't be overheard. "The sheriff has told me exactly nothing."

"Oh. Well, when I drove up here this morning in the dark I saw a big-ass grizzly bear feeding on something. Caught him in the headlights from a long way away. He looked up with a big piece of meat in his mouth. When I drove up here I found Tuff."

Joe was perplexed. This explained the horrible chunks of flesh missing from Tuff's legs, and maybe even his disembowelment. But ...

"But how could a grizzly bear do that to his face?" Joe asked.

Longbrake shrugged again. "That's what I was talking about. I've never heard of such a thing. Maybe that bear just peeled it off. You know, like when you're skinning an animal."

Joe shivered thinking about it. For a second he imagined the two-and-a-half-inch teeth of a grizzly bear tearing back human skin, like peeling a banana. He quickly shook off the vision.

Longbrake shook his head, then squinted. "And Jesus, to get your balls bit right off by a bear like that. Poor dumb Tuff. He was probably glad that bear finished him off after he did *that*."

Joe didn't respond. What he had seen of the body, as quick as it had been before he got sick, didn't seem to fit the scenario Longbrake was suggesting. Tuff's face hadn't been chewed off by a bear. It had been *removed*. Joe thought of how clean and straight the cut was. Same with his genitals, Joe thought. They weren't ripped out. They were *cut* out. He felt a second wave of nausea and breathed deeply again, looking away. At least there was no more in his stomach to throw up.

There was a shout a hundred yards up the hillside, and Joe looked up. A deputy waved at Barnum from a spot nearly in the aspen trees. Barnum sighed, tossed his cigarette aside, and started climbing. Joe fell in behind him.

"Excuse me, Bud."

"Sure."

Halfway up the hill, away from the others, Joe noticed that Barnum had stolen a look back at him to see if he was still there. Barnum was slowing down as he climbed, and Joe slowed as well. Not because he was wheezing, like Barnum, but because he didn't want to walk beside the man. It was that bad between them, Joe thought.

"Why are you following me?" Barnum didn't turn around.

"I want to see what your deputy found. Same as you."

Barnum climbed several more steps. When he spoke, his voice was strained with exertion. "I want you to stay the hell away. For once."

Joe had been waiting for that.

"Sorry, Sheriff, I'm involved whether you want me to be or not. That first moose is my responsibility and if Tuff's death is connected then I need all the facts."

"Save your breath," Barnum growled.

"And Bud back there was telling me he saw a grizzly bear this morning."

Barnum stopped suddenly and Joe nearly ran into him. Barnum turned slowly. His face was red. Joe didn't know if it was from the hike, or anger, or both.

"That's right, we've got a grizzly bear up here," Barnum hissed. "*Your* fucking bear. I don't need or want any goddamn bears in my county. I don't want any goddamn wolves, either. But you people keep chasing them here. Now we've got what looks like an outlaw bear killing my citizens. So what are you going to do about that bear, Pickett?"

Joe shook his head, incredulous at Barnum's twisted reasoning. "You don't really think a bear did that, do you?"

"What else? Fucking aliens? That's what my idiot deputy keeps saying."

Joe and Barnum stared at each other, neither speaking. Joe looked into the eyes of the old man, and it reminded him of half a dozen reasons why Barnum couldn't be trusted.

"Just stay the hell away, unless you want to bring me the head of that bear," Barnum said.

Joe paused, not breaking the stare. "I won't be staying away, and I won't be bringing you the head of a bear," he said.

Joe watched the veins on Barnum's temples pulse.

"Then fuck you, Pickett. You're useless." Barnum turned.

Joe followed.

THE DEPUTY WAS straddling a sharp rock that poked out from the ground. The rock was granite, and green in color because of the lichen on it. It was a green except for the spatter of dark blood on its surface.

"Don't touch it," Barnum told his deputy, a man named Reed. Joe liked Reed.

"I haven't," Reed said, clearly miffed that Barnum had felt the need to tell him something so obvious. "As soon as I found it I waved down to you. It sure took you a while to get up here."

"The sheriff and I were visiting," Joe said.

Barnum glared at him.

Deputy Reed said, "The way I figure it—based on the hoof-prints up here—is that this is as far as Tuff got last night. As you can see, the prints stop right here. I figure the horse bolted and Tuff got thrown off, right on this rock."

Tuff's hat was crown down in sagebrush to the left of the rock.

"Then how did he get all the way down there?" Barnum asked.

"Either he walked a ways or something dragged him down there," the deputy said.

"Like a bear," Barnum said.

"Maybe."

"But unlikely," Joe interrupted. "A bear would probably feed on him where he found him, or drag him into the cover up there on the mountain." Joe pointed at the aspens, and both Barnum and the deputy followed his arm. "It wouldn't be likely a bear would drag a body into the open and *then* start feeding on it."

Barnum didn't even try to hide his contempt. "So what do you think happened?"

Joe looked back. "I think the deputy's right. Tuff got thrown right here. My guess is that he somehow got up and started walking toward the lights of the ranch down there. Then something stopped him."

"The bear?" the deputy asked.

"Something," Joe said. "I don't think the bear came along until much later. Maybe just a few minutes before Bud Longbrake showed up this morning."

The deputy nodded, mulling it over. He looked to the sheriff for confirmation.

"That's a goddamned horseshit theory," Barnum scoffed, shaking his head. "The bear did it."

Barnum turned and started to trudge down the hill.

Joe called after him, "Did a bear kill my moose and mutilate it? Did a bear kill and mutilate a dozen cows?"

Barnum waved his hand over his head, dismissing Joe with the gesture.

This time, Joe didn't follow.

"The sheriff wants it to be a bear real bad," the deputy whispered.

Joe grunted.

“Because if it isn’t a bear, we’ve got a very, very bad situation here.”

*

WHEN JOE RETURNED to his truck, the ambulance was pulling away with the body. The deputies remained, scouring the scene. During breaks they drank coffee and speculated on what had happened. Joe overheard the word “aliens” from Deputy McLanahan. Another deputy suggested a satanic cult. A third advanced a theory involving the government.

Joe looked around for Barnum and finally saw the sheriff sitting in his Blazer with the door closed and the windows up. Barnum looked like he was yelling at someone on his radio.

“Did you hear?” Bud Longbrake asked, as Joe passed by him.

“Hear what?”

Longbrake nodded his hat brim toward Barnum’s Blazer.

“They found another body. In Park County, about fifty miles away.”

Joe froze. “Who was it?”

Longbrake raised his palms. “Didn’t get a name. Some older guy. They found him by his cabin.”

“Mutilated?” Joe asked.

“That’s what I hear.”

PART TWO

11

“GENTLEMEN,” COUNTY ATTORNEY Robey Hersig said, “let’s convene the first-ever strategy meeting of the newly formed Northern Wyoming Murder and Mutilations Task Force.”

Sheriff Barnum said, “Jesus, I hate that name.”

It was 10.00 a.m. on Wednesday, four days after Tuff’s body and the body of Stuart Tanner had been found. There were seven people seated around an oval table in the Twelve Sleep County courthouse, in a room usually used for jury deliberations. The door was shut and the shades were pulled.

Joe sat at the far end of the table from Robey Hersig, and for an instant they exchanged glances. Hersig, Joe thought, already looked slightly frustrated and the meeting had barely begun. Hersig and Joe were friends and fly-fishing partners. When the governor said he wanted a representative from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department on the task force, Hersig had fought for Joe’s inclusion, much to Joe’s, Barnum’s, and even the governor’s objections. The governor wanted a biologist on the task force, for forensic and scientific expertise, and Barnum wanted anybody but Joe—just because. Joe had told Hersig he preferred to work on his own, but a call to Joe from his district supervisor Trey Crump made it clear he *would* be the G&F’s representative on the task force.

The task force itself was Governor Budd’s response to calls to his office in Cheyenne from both the statewide news media and business interests in Twelve Sleep and Park Counties, where the murders had taken place. Brian Scott, who did a statewide radio broadcast out of KTWO in Casper, had begun a tongue-in-cheek “Mutilation Moment” update on his morning show, where he breathlessly read the body count of wildlife, cattle, and humans and contrasted it with the lack of response from the governor’s office. With his re-election campaign looming in less than a year, the governor reacted to the pressure quickly, announcing the creation of the task force. He did so after his chief of staff called Robey Hersig and Hersig confessed that the Sheriff’s Department was stymied in their investigation. Knowing Barnum, Joe assumed that the sheriff viewed the formation of the task force as a personal slap in the face.

As Hersig circulated agendas and manila folders, Joe surveyed the room. In addition to Joe, Hersig, Barnum, McLanahan, and the Park County Sheriff Dan Harvey, there were two men from the outside whom Joe had met before: Wyoming Depart-

ment of Criminal Investigation (DCI) agent Bob Brazille and FBI Special Agent Tony Portenson. Seeing Portenson again made Joe's mouth go dry.

While Brazille was affable behind a jowly, alcoholic face, Portenson was dark, pinched, and had close-set eyes and a scar that hitched up his upper lip so that it looked like he was sneering. Portenson had already been seated when Joe entered the room, and had offered no greeting. Instead, he'd stared at Joe as if they shared a conspiracy.

"As you all know, Governor Budd has promised a swift resolution and justice in regard to these crimes," Hersig said by way of introduction. "It's our job to make that happen. I've given you each a file of what we've got so far, and I hope you'll take a moment to review it with me."

Joe had already begun. In the file were copies of the incident reports written by the Sheriff's Department on the Hawkins' cattle as well as on Tuff Montegue's body. His own preliminary necropsy report on the moose was in the file as well, and Joe was a little surprised that Hersig had obtained it from headquarters without mentioning this to him. There were dozens of pages of crime-scene photos that had been printed out in color and black-and-white, as well as maps of Twelve Sleep and Park Counties with circles drawn where the crimes had occurred. A preliminary autopsy report was included from Park County on the body found there, as well as the autopsy report on Tuff Montegue. Both bodies had been shipped to the FBI laboratories in Virginia for further examination. Clippings from both local and national papers on the murders and cattle mutilations were also in the file.

It came as no surprise that the autopsy and necropsy descriptions were very similar, whether of the moose, cattle, or men. Skin had been removed from faces. Tongues, eyes, and all or part of ears had been removed. Udders were removed from female cattle. Genitals were gone, and anuses had been cored out. Cuts were described as "clean and made with surgical precision."

The exception, Joe noted with a start, was in the autopsy report for Tuff Montegue. In his case, the cut on Tuff's face was described as a "notched or serrated mutilation cut similar to serrated cuts near the genitals and anus."

To make sure, Joe thumbed back through the reports. The notes of "serrated cuts" were unique to the Tuff Montegue autopsy. It could just be an aberration, Joe thought, or a mistake. The county coroner did not do many autopsies. He spent more time in his fly shop than the one-room morgue. Joe planned to ask about the discrepancy once the discussion got started.

There was something else. Or, rather, the lack of something else. There was no mention of oxindole, Joe noticed.

"Let's start at the beginning," Hersig said, sliding Joe's report on the moose from the file.

UNDER ROBEY HERSIG'S direction, the task force methodically reviewed the reports in the file. It was decided early on that the aspects of the investigation would be divided up among the principals; Sheriffs Barnum and Harvey would concentrate

on the murders that took place within their counties, Agent Portenson would facilitate communication access between the local authorities and the FBI, Brazille would coordinate with the governor's office, and Joe would follow up on the wildlife mutilations and "anything out of the ordinary." When Joe heard Hersig say that, he winced. Hersig smiled back.

"Reports will be shared with my office, and we will serve as the communications center," Hersig said, looking hard at each person at the table. "Nothing will be withheld from this office. Territory doesn't matter, jurisdiction doesn't matter. We're all on the same team here."

FBI Special Agent Tony Portenson seemed to have an agenda of his own, and Joe couldn't yet determine what it was. Portenson paid cursory attention to Hersig, reviewing the documents in the order Hersig referred to them, but periodically rolling his eyes and staring at the ceiling. Joe wished Portenson wasn't there, because Portenson brought back dark memories of the death of his foster daughter the winter before, as well as the death of a federal-land manager. When Joe looked at Portenson, he imagined that the agent was there to observe *him*, to possibly catch him at something. Joe vowed to be careful. Trouble was, Joe actually liked Portenson.

Sheriff Dan Harvey of Park County didn't seem to agree that the attacks that had happened in Twelve Sleep County had any bearing on *his* interest, which was investigating the death and mutilation of the older man found near his cabin on the same night Tuff Montegue was killed.

Because Joe knew only a few sketchy details about this aspect of the case, he paid special attention to the Park County report. The sixty-four-year-old victim was named Stuart Tanner. He was a married father of three grown children and CEO of a Texas-based water-engineering firm that had contracts in Wyoming doing purity assessments for the state Department of Environmental Quality and the CBM developers. Tanner's family had owned the cabin and mountain property for over thirty years, according to people in Cody who knew him, and Tanner preferred staying at his cabin rather than at a hotel while doing work in the area. He was physically fit and enjoyed long hikes on his property in all kinds of weather. It was presumed that he was on one of his walks when he died, or was killed. His mutilated body was found in a meadow in full view of a remote county road. Someone had seen the body and reported it by calling the Park County 911 emergency number. The preliminary autopsy listed the cause of death as "unknown."

As Hersig moved to the case of Tuff Montegue, Joe interrupted. It was the first time he had spoken.

"Yes, Joe?"

He turned to Sheriff Harvey. "The report doesn't indicate predation of any kind. Did you see any?"

"You mean like coyotes or something eating the body?"

Joe nodded.

Harvey thought, stroked his chin. "I don't recall any," he said. "I wasn't the first on the scene, but my guys didn't mention any animals and the coroner didn't say anything about that, either."

Joe nodded, sat back, and turned his attention back to Hersig.

TONY PORTENSON CLEARED his throat. "Before we go off in too many directions, I've got something here that might give you all a great big headache."

From a briefcase near his chair, Portenson withdrew a thick sheaf of bound documents. Like a card dealer, he slid them across the table to all of the task force members.

Portenson said, "This stuff isn't new, cowboys."

Joe picked up the one-inch-thick binder and read the title: SUMMARY INVESTIGATIVE ANALYSIS OF "CATTLE MUTILATIONS" IN WYOMING, MONTANA, AND NEW MEXICO.

The report was dated 1974.

"I found this when the bureau was asked to assist on this investigation," Portenson said, a little wearily. "Somebody in our office remembered seeing it back in the archives."

Joe flipped through the binder. The report had been typed on a typewriter. There were dark photographs of cattle, much like the newer ones he had just looked at in the file Hersig had assembled. There were pages of necropsy reports, and transcripts of interviews with law enforcement personnel and ranchers.

"Shit," McLanahan said, "this has all happened before."

"Not exactly," Hersig said quickly. Joe guessed that Hersig didn't like the way Portenson had taken over the meeting and surprised him with the reports. "There's no mention of what I've found about wildlife or human mutilations here."

Portenson conceded the point with a shrug, but did it in a way that indicated that it didn't matter.

"So what was the conclusion of the FBI?" Barnum asked. "Or do I have to read this whole goddamned thing?"

Portenson smiled. "A forensic investigative team at Quantico devoted three years to that report. Three years they could have been working on real crimes. But your senators and congressmen out here in the sticks *insisted* that the bureau devote precious time and man-hours to a bunch of dead cows instead."

"And?" Sheriff Harvey prompted.

Portenson sighed theatrically. "Their conclusion was that this cattle-mutilation stuff is a pile of horseshit. Let me read ..." He flipped open the report to a page near the back he had marked with a Post-it. "I quote: 'It was concluded that the mutilations were caused by scavenging birds, pecking away at exposed soft tissues like eye, tongue, rectum, etc. The smoothness of the "incisions"—note the quote marks around that word, fellows—is produced as a result of post-mortem gas production in the cattle's bodies that stretched the tissues ...' "

Portenson looked up from the report and his upper lip hitched into a sneer. "So how did the cattle die?" Joe asked.

To answer, Portenson found another marker in his report and turned the page.

“ ‘The cows examined died of mundane causes, such as eating poisonous plants.’ ”

Joe sat back and rubbed his face with his hands. Birds? That was what the FBI concluded? *Birds*? The report made him angry, as well as Portenson’s delivery of it. There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

Hersig broke it. “I guess I don’t see how a thirty-year-old report and our crimes here—including the deaths of two men—have anything to do with each other.”

Portenson shrugged. “Maybe nothing, I grant you that. But maybe you all need to step back a little and take a deep breath and look at the whole situation from another angle. That’s all I’m saying.”

“What other angle?” Brazille asked.

Portenson slowly looked at each person seated at the table. Joe noticed the brief hardness in Portenson’s eyes when they fell on him.

“Let’s say that the cattle died naturally. Maybe they got a virus, or ate some bad plants. Hell, I don’t know shit about cows. But let’s say that happened. So the cows died. Birds found them and started pecking at the soft stuff, like the report says. It could have happened that way here, gentlemen. After all, the carcasses weren’t really fresh when they were found.

“But in this atmosphere of near hysteria, a cowboy falls off of his horse in one county and an old man dies of a heart attack in another county. That’s a strange coincidence, but that’s maybe all it is: a coincidence. People die. Two men dying in the same night wouldn’t be a very big deal in any American city. No one would even make a connection. Only out here, where the deer and the antelope play and hardly any people live, would it be a big deal.

“So the cowboy gets pecked on a little while he’s on the ground and then he gets mauled by Joe Pickett’s grizzly bear. And the other guy gets found by birds and other critters that start eating on him. So what?”

Portenson stood up and slammed his report shut. “What you may have here, boys, is a whole lot of nothing.”

DURING A BREAK, Joe stood in the hallway with Hersig as the others used the restroom, refilled their coffee cups, or checked their messages. Hersig sagged against the wall near the doorway to the deliberation room. He winced and shook his head slowly.

“Portenson’s report sucked all the air out of the room,” Hersig said morosely.

Joe said evenly, “It’s *not* birds.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Hersig sighed. “Are we jumping to wild conclusions here, like he said?”

Joe shook his head.

“It’s going to be you and me, Joe.”

“I came to the same conclusion,” Joe said.

“*Shit*.” Hersig said, rolling his eyes. He had made no secrets about his own political ambitions. He wanted to be thought of when Governor Budd replaced the soon-to-be-

retiring state attorney general. If the investigation floundered, so would his chances of moving to the capital, Cheyenne.

"I do admire you, Joe," he said. "You don't have much of a dog in this fight, but you seem to be the only guy in that room who wants to figure out what happened. The others are concerned with protecting their turf."

"I wanted to work on my own, anyway," Joe said. "Looks like I'll be doing that."

Hersig smiled. "That wasn't exactly the idea, you know."

"Yup," Joe said. "What does Portenson want?"

Hersig folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "That I can't figure out."

"Me," Joe said. "I think he wants me."

"Think he's got a hard-on for you and Nate Romanowski because of that bad business last winter?"

"Maybe so."

Robey Hersig was the only man who knew enough about the circumstances surrounding the death of Melinda Strickland, a federal-land manager, to legitimately suspect that Joe knew more about it than he let on. But Hersig had never asked Joe anything about the incident, and Hersig's silence in the matter told Joe everything he needed to know about his friend's suspicions. Justice had been done, and Robey asked no questions.

WHEN THEY GOT back to work, Hersig asked the members of the task force for additional theories on the crimes.

He addressed the group. "We know what the FBI concluded thirty years ago, and we can't discount that. But I think we'd be doing a disservice if we didn't consider other possibilities. So fire away, gentlemen. The ideas can be off the wall," Hersig urged. "Nothing is too crazy. Remember, it's just us in this room. Who or what is killing and mutilating wildlife, cattle, and people in our county?"

"*Your* county," Sheriff Harvey corrected, "the wildlife and cattle in my county are just fine, thanks."

Robey stood up, approached a whiteboard, and uncapped a red felt-tip marker. He wrote BIRDS.

"Gentlemen?"

No one spoke. *Great*, Joe thought.

"Maybe it's some kind of cult," McLanahan said finally. "Some kind of satanic cult that gets their jollies by collecting animal and human organs."

Under birds, Hersig wrote CULTS on the board.

"Or just one or two sickos," Sheriff Harvey said. "A couple of lowlifes who like headlines and attention. They started with the moose, then moved on to cows. Then they took a giant step to humans."

Hersig wrote DISTURBED INDIVIDUALS.

"Not that I agree with any of this," McLanahan said, sitting back in his chair and stretching out with his fingers laced behind his head, "but I've heard some things around town. Hell, I've heard 'em in the department."

McLanahan didn't see Barnum shoot a glare at him for that, but Joe did.

"One theory is that it's the government. CIA or somebody like that. The thought is that they're testing new weapons. Maybe practicing some counterterrorism tactics."

"Maybe it's the FBI?" Barnum said, smiling at Portenson.

"Fuck that," Portenson replied sharply. "We've got enough on our plate."

"Another theory I've heard is that it's Arabs," McLanahan said. Joe snorted, and the deputy turned slightly in his chair to scowl at Joe. His voice rose in volume as he spoke. "There was a report of a white van filled with Middle Eastern-looking men in town during the past week, Mr. Pickett. No one knows why they were in town."

Since there was little color in Saddlestring other than Mexican ranch hands, Indians from the reservation who occasionally shopped in town, and only two black citizens, Joe wasn't surprised that a van containing dark-skinned people would result in calls to the sheriff. But still ... *Arabs?* Terrorizing Wyoming? Regardless, Hersig wrote ARABS on the board.

"What about that bear?" Barnum asked, turning to Joe. "Longbrake saw a grizzly and Montegue was chewed up. Maybe we've got a crazy-ass bear on our hands that likes to eat faces and dicks? Maybe years of animal lovers coddling bears has turned one of them into a murderer."

"I think the killer Arab theory makes more sense than that," Joe said.

Barnum angrily slapped the table. "I would like to know why Joe Pickett is on this task force. He's a pain in my ass."

There, Joe thought. It was out.

"Because Governor Budd wanted a Game and Fish representative," Hersig answered coolly. "And if I recall, Joe has been involved in some real big cases in this county."

"Bring it on, Sheriff," Joe said, feeling his neck get hot. "Let's get this on the table right now."

Barnum swiveled in his chair and acted as if he were about to argue but he apparently thought better of it. Instead, he glared at his coffee cup.

To divert this unexpected turn in the discussion back to the subject at hand, Hersig wrote GOVERNMENT AGENTS and GRIZZLY BEAR on the board.

"Maybe a virus of some kind?" Brazille offered. It was the first time he had spoken during the meeting.

"There's one more, and all of you know it," McLanahan said, slowly sitting upright. "But since no one wants to say it, I will."

Hersig was writing even before McLanahan said the word. ALIENS.

"WE'VE EVEN GOT some guy calling the department offering his expertise in extraterrestrials mutilating cattle," McLanahan smiled. "He says he's got experience in the 'field of the paranormal.' "

"Who is it?" Hersig asked.

"Some guy named ..." McLanahan searched his spiral notebook for a moment, "Cleve Garrett."

Joe sat up. That was the name Dave Avery had mentioned. The “expert” who had shown up in Helena.

“Apparently, he’s in town because he heard about the mutilations. He came down from Montana and set up shop at the Riverside RV Park.”

“Have you talked with him?” Hersig asked.

“Are you kidding?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Joe volunteered.

“He’s yours!” McLanahan laughed.

“You get the nutcases,” Hersig said, assigning the job to Joe.

JOE BRIEFED THE room on what he had learned from Dave Avery. He noticed that even Barnum’s eyes got wide when he heard that other mutilations had taken place in Montana the winter before. And he saw Brazille and Barnum write the word “oxindole” in their files as he told them about it.

“We’ll need that in a report, Joe,” Hersig said.

“I’ll write it up.”

Hersig said, “Agent Portenson, can you request that chemical analysis of the blood and tissue be done on the two human victims in Virginia to determine if there is oxindole or anything else unusual in their systems?”

“I’m sure they’ll cover that,” Portenson said. “But yes, I’ll make the request.”

AFTER THE MEETING had finally drawn to a close Joe walked across the parking lot from the county building. He was confused. He needed time to sort out all he had heard today. The puzzle had, in his mind, suddenly mushroomed into something bigger and murkier than it had been before. Portenson’s explanation—if that’s what it was—had unsettled him.

As he approached his pickup, he looked back at the county building. Portenson stood in the doorway with Sheriff Barnum. They were having a heated discussion, but Joe was too far away to hear what it was about. Joe watched as Portenson and Barnum stepped closer to each other, still talking. Suddenly, Portenson turned and pointed at Joe. Barnum’s face turned to Joe as well.

What were they saying? Joe wondered.

Portenson left Barnum in the doorway and made his way across the parking lot.

Joe stepped around the front of his pickup to meet him. He felt a flutter in his stomach as he did. Portenson obviously had something to say.

“The sheriff and I were just agreeing that it would be best if you took a backseat in this investigation,” Portenson said.

Joe didn’t hide his annoyance. “I don’t know what your problem is,” Joe said. “The FBI was exonerated last year. You guys did an investigation of yourselves and determined that you were a bunch of heroes.”

Portenson grimaced. “Officially, yeah. Unofficially, it’s different on the inside with my fellow agents. I’m a fucking leper. Because I helped you and didn’t support my brethren.”

“You did the right thing.”

“As if *that* had anything to do with anything. Tell that to my office, okay? I’m going nowhere fast. I don’t want to be stuck here for the rest of my career. I really don’t.”

“Unless you redeem yourself to get promoted out of here,” Joe said. “Unless you do something big.”

“Like if I figure out how you and your pal Nate Romanowski were involved in the suicide of a federal-land manager.” Portenson said the word “suicide” with dripping contempt.

Joe said nothing. He knew this would always hang over him, always weigh him down. And it should, he thought, it should. He tried to think of something to say.

“Birds?” Joe asked.

“What?”

“Do you really think *birds* are the answer to the mutilations?”

Portenson got close to Joe, his face inches away. Joe could smell coffee and tobacco on his breath.

“It’s as good as any other theory in that room and better than most of them.”

“It wasn’t birds,” Joe said.

12

ON THE OTHER side of town, Marybeth Pickett glanced into her rearview mirror to check on her passengers. Lucy and Jessica Logue were huddled together on the middle bench seat, and Sheridan occupied the rear seat of the van. Sheridan sported an expression that shouted: I AM EXTREMELY BORED!

Lucy and Jessica had once again made plans to play at the Logues’ home after school.

“Why does she have to be so *social*?” Sheridan asked Marybeth.

“I can hear you, you know,” Lucy said over her shoulder to Sheridan. “Maybe it’s because I have good friends.”

“She’ll probably be a *cheerleader*, for goodness sake.”

“That’s because I’ll have something to cheer about and won’t be crabby all the time, like some people.”

Which caused Jessica to giggle.

“Put a gag in it, Lucy.”

“Girls ...” Marybeth cautioned.

Driving down Second Street, Marybeth smiled to herself. Although Sheridan participated in plenty of activities at school and church, she had never felt the need to fill her social calendar beyond that. She didn’t get many calls at home, and rarely made any to classmates. Sheridan’s best friend, Marybeth thought with a gulp, was probably Nate Romanowski.

Marybeth turned into the winding, tree-shrouded driveway out of habit and nearly rear-ended a stopped vehicle. She slammed on her brakes, the van did a quick shimmy,

and they avoided hitting the pickup with a camper in the back of it by less than a foot.

“Cool,” Sheridan said. “Nice maneuver.”

Marybeth blew out a breath and sat back. That had been too close. It was her fault. She had assumed the driveway would be empty the way it always was.

“Everybody okay?”

They all said they were, and then Lucy and Jessica were scrambling for the door handles.

Because the van was designed to automatically lock all the doors when it was in gear, Marybeth had to hit a toggle switch to open them. She hesitated as she reached for the switch to let the girls out.

The camper pickup she had almost slammed into was old, red, dented, and splashed with mud. It listed a bit to the side, as if one of the shocks was bad. The old truck had dirty South Dakota plates.

“Do you have visitors, Jessica?” Marybeth asked, turning in her seat.

Jessica gave up on the door and looked up nodding. “My grandma and my grandpa are here.”

“Well, I’m sure that’s nice for you,” Marybeth said, trying to think if either Cam or Marie had mentioned their company at the office. If they had, she couldn’t remember it. The atmosphere in the office had been tense all week, with lots of closed doors.

“Yeah,” Jessica said without enthusiasm.

“They’re from South Dakota?”

“Um-hmmm.”

“Will they be staying with you very long?”

Marybeth saw Sheridan look up at her with an exasperated expression. She wanted to go home, not listen to her mother pry for information.

“I don’t know.”

“How long have they been here?”

“A week, maybe more.”

Maybe that’s why Cam has been so irritable at work, Marybeth thought. It was bad enough with the mutilations in the news, the stubborn Overstreet sisters causing problems, the poor financial conditions in general for the Logues—and now his parents were visiting. Cam’s dark moods seemed to make a little more sense.

“Lucy, maybe it would be best to skip it tonight if the Logues have company,” Marybeth said.

Both Lucy and Jessica howled in protest.

“You’re sure it’s okay?”

“Yes!” Jessica insisted.

“And you’re sure your mom said she’ll bring Lucy home tonight?”

“YES!”

“Okay, then,” Marybeth said, pushing the toggle to unlock the doors.

Lucy bolted forward and gave Marybeth a quick kiss on the cheek. “See you, Mom.”

Marybeth watched both girls skip around the pickup and toward the house. Sheridan sighed from the back. Marybeth started to put the transmission into reverse, then halted. Something didn't seem right to her. Nothing logical, nothing she could articulate. But when it came to her children, she always let her feelings hold sway, and she did that now.

"Mom? Are we leaving?"

Maybe it was simply because Marie had not said anything to her, Marybeth thought. They shared everything, Marie and Marybeth, things she knew Joe would blanch at if he overheard. They discussed wants, needs, ambitions, sometimes like schoolgirls. Marybeth knew, for instance, that Cam had not been interested in sex since he got the Timberline Ranch listing. This troubled Marie, especially since they had agreed to try to get pregnant again. Marybeth was more guarded with her secrets, although she had poured out her frustration on the disheartening state of the Pickett family finances.

The arrival of a father- and mother-in-law was a big event, Marybeth knew. How could Marie have failed to mention it? Or had Marie said something and Marybeth, in the non-stop rush her life had recently become, simply not heard?

"Okay," Marybeth said, as she began to back out of the driveway. She saw Sheridan slump back into her seat in over-obvious relief. "I just ..."

"... *have trouble letting go*," Sheridan finished for her.

Marybeth backed out of the driveway and started back through town toward the Bighorn Road.

13

THERE'S SOMETHING OUTSIDE I've got to show you that will scare the pants off Hailey Bond," Jessica Logue told Lucy Pickett as they entered the house.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Of *course* it's not okay, Lucy."

They smiled at each other.

Because Jessica's parents weren't yet home from work, Jessica and Lucy dropped their backpacks in the living room and went straight through the house toward the back door. Lucy heard the sound of a television from the darkened family room, and as they passed by she saw the blue glow from the screen.

"Jessica, honey," someone called.

"Hi, Grandma," Jessica said but didn't slow her stride.

"Come in here so we can see you. Who is your friend?"

Jessica stopped abruptly, then turned to Lucy and rolled her eyes. She led Lucy into the dark room.

It took a moment for Lucy's eyes to adjust to the darkness. When she could see, she could make out two people in the gloom. They were lit softly by the light of the television, which reflected in two pairs of old-fashioned, metal-framed eyeglasses.

"Lucy, this is Grandma and Grandpa Logue."

"Hi," Lucy said. Jessica's grandparents were small, thin people. Her grandmother wore an oversized sweatshirt with a heart embroidered across the front of it. Her hair was dull gray and cropped close. Jessica's grandfather looked like something out of an old movie about farmers: flannel shirt buttoned to his chin, wide suspenders, baggy, stained trousers, and heavy work shoes. They were watching a talk show about bad families.

Lucy saw that Jessica's grandmother had a pile of knitting on her lap, and could see the glint from the metal knitting needles. How could she even see what she was doing?

"Why don't you have the lights on?" Lucy asked.

"Why waste electricity?" Jessica's grandmother asked back.

"We don't waste electricity in our family," Jessica's grandfather said with a high twang. "Don't waste water, either."

Lucy didn't know what to say to that.

"We're going to play," Jessica said, and Lucy was grateful to her changing the subject.

"You be careful," Jessica's grandmother cautioned. "Stay close to the house. Nice to meet you, little girl."

"Nice to meet you too," Lucy said.

OUTSIDE, JESSICA WIDENED her eyes and gestured "follow me." They were in the heavy trees behind the house. It was cool and still, and the curled cottonwood leaves crunched beneath their feet. Lucy was glad to be outside, away from Jessica's grandparents.

Lucy thought how old Jessica's grandparents seemed to be, especially compared to Grandmother Missy, who was now out on that ranch. Grandmother Missy seemed years younger. Lucy sometimes wished she was more like a real grandmother, but Jessica's grandparents took being old a little too far, she thought.

They were a long way from the house.

"Jessica ..."

"I know. We'll take a look at it and get right back to the house before my mom and dad get home."

Lucy nodded. What, she wondered, was "it"? She was frightened, but a little thrilled. She reached between the buttons of her jacket with the palm of her hand, to see if she could feel her heart beating. She could.

"Now, whatever you do, don't look up ..." Jessica whispered. Both girls laughed, and it broke the tension for a moment. "*Don't look up*" had become a comic mantra at school ever since the news of the mutilations had come out. Sixth graders, some from Sheridan's class, said it to scare the little kids on the playground. When the kids *did* look up, usually with a fleeting, half-terrified glance, the sixth-graders would lunge forward and either tickle the youngsters or push them backward over a co-conspirator who was on their hands and knees behind them.

THE FUNNIEST THING to have happened so far though was when two boys in their class had started selling foil-covered baseball caps for seven dollars apiece. One of the boys had stolen the caps from his father's collection, and the other had borrowed a large roll of aluminum foil from his own mother.

"Why get mutilated?" They cried out like carnival barkers. "Protect yourself with these babies ... only seven dollars each or two for twelve dollars ..."

"HOW MUCH FARTHER?" Lucy asked. They must be near the edge of the property, she thought. They had never been this far from the house before.

"It's right up here," Jessica said. "Man, wait until the next time Hailey comes over. We'll ditch her right here. It'll serve her right for always trying to scare us."

Nervous, but giggling, they ducked under a low-hanging branch and pushed through tall, dried brush. Lucy froze when she saw the dark building in front of her. She looked it over. It wasn't as large as she initially thought it was. In fact, it was more of a shack. It was old, unpainted, with one window that still had glass in it. The other front windows were boarded up. There was a sagging porch with missing slats where yellowed grass had grown through and died. The roof was uneven, and an old, tin chimney was black with age.

"Wow," Lucy said. "When did you find this?"

"Yesterday," Jessica said.

Lucy looked over at her friend. Jessica smiled and raised her eyebrows expectantly. Lucy wasn't sure she liked this, even a bit.

"You want to look inside?" Jessica asked.

"Maybe we should go back now."

"Don't you want to know what's inside?"

Lucy folded her arms across her coat. "I'm not going inside of that place."

Jessica looked disappointed, but not as disappointed as she could have looked. This made Lucy feel a little better, knowing that Jessica was scared too.

"How about if we just look in the window?" Jessica said.

Lucy weighed the idea. Her first impulse was to go back to the house. But she didn't want to show she was afraid and give Jessica something to tease her about later.

Lucy quickly nodded yes. She chose not to speak, because she was worried her voice would betray her fright.

The two girls walked tentatively to the shack. Lucy could see that the window would be too high to look in without standing on her tiptoes. Jessica was an inch or two taller, maybe tall enough that she could see into the window without extra effort. Lucy wished it wasn't overcast, and thought that everything might feel different if the sun was out.

They approached the window silently. The bottom sill was gray and warped, and Lucy reached up and closed her fingers around it to help her stretch higher. Lucy strained, balanced on the toes of her shoes, and pulled herself up so her nose touched the top of the sill.

There was just enough light inside the building that they could see.

They both suddenly gasped.

What terrified them wasn't the pile of dirty bedding, or the opened food cans and cartons, or the pile of books on the floor. It was the sound of rustling from somewhere in the shadows out of view, and the thump of a footfall as if something was trying to get away.

They ran back to the house, screaming all the way.

14

AFTER THE TASK-FORCE meeting, Joe Pickett drove his pickup through the breaklands into the foothills of the mountains. He pulled off the road, on a steep overlook to eat his lunch—a salami sandwich, and an apple—while surveying the vast valley below. The day was cloudless and cool, the eastern horizon limitless. Below him, several miles away, was a small group of three vehicles and a pop-up camper near the brushy crux of small streams. He glassed them through his spotting scope recognizing a group of antelope hunters he had checked a few days before. They had asked him if he thought they were in danger from the sky. He didn't know how to answer the question then, and he still didn't.

Despite the new task force, Joe still had a job to do. Pronghorn antelope season was open, as was archery season for elk in the high country. Deer season would open in two weeks, and for a short, furiously busy time, all of the big game seasons would be open simultaneously. Joe hoped that the task force would have reached some conclusions by then, or his absence in the field would be noted. Most hunters were dutiful, but the criminal element—the lowlifes who would try to take too many animals or leave the wounded in search of a bigger trophy—would keep close track of his comings and goings.

Portenson's presence and threat that he was going to look deeper into Joe and Nate's roles in the federal-land manager's death last winter wormed through his thoughts. When he saw his reflection in the rear-view mirror, he saw a man with a tense, worried scowl.

Joe got out of his pickup and sat down on the tailgate, flipping open his notebook to his notes from the meeting.

CULTS

DISTURBED INDIVIDUALS

GOVERNMENT AGENTS

GRIZZLY BEAR

ARABS [crossed out] (stupid)

UNKNOWN VIRUS

ALIENS

BIRDS (FBI theory)

1. Tuff Montegue / Twelve Sleep County / Contusions mutilation / Grizzly breakfast / Oxindole?
2. Stuart Tanner / Park County (50 miles away) / No predation / 911 call / Oxindole?
3. Cleve Garrett / Paranormal guy / Riverside RV Park
4. Portenson / Happened before in the 1970s / BIRDS???

He reviewed the theories and shook his head. If there were cults of any kind in the area, they operated in complete and total anonymity, because he hadn't heard anything about them. Obviously, from the lack of reaction at the table, no one else had either.

In his mind, he classified "Government Agents," "Unknown Virus," "Aliens," and "Birds" into the "most improbable" category. It was conceivable that the government might conduct secret experiments on animals with new weapons, but only in a weird *X-Files* kind of way. How did the deaths of Tuff Montegue and Stuart Tanner fit in? He didn't believe the government was murdering and skinning old cowboys to test new weapons.

He conceded that it was remotely possible that a virus of some kind killed the animals and humans, although it made no sense to him that the virus could operate externally as well and cause the kinds of mutilation he had seen.

"Aliens" were a possibility he refused to seriously acknowledge. The word itself produced an instinctive inner scoff. Was he being closed-minded, he wondered, or was he scared to examine the possibilities? He didn't know the answer to that question, but thought that it was likely a combination of both. And, he reasoned, if the cause of the murders and mutilations were alien beings, then there wasn't going to be much the task force, or anybody else, could do about it.

Birds?

"*Birds?*" he said aloud. "How idiotic is *that?*"

Joe wanted to toss aside the "Grizzly Bear" theory as well but couldn't. The fact was that a bear had been present at both the bull moose and Tuff Montegue locations. Joe had seen the tracks in the meadow, and determined that the bear dragged the moose into the trees. The savage wounds on Montegue's torso, aside from the mutilations, were undoubtedly caused by a bear. But it had appeared the bear had shown up only after they were dead. The grizzly had happened by and checked out two bodies already on the ground, Joe thought, choosing not to sample the moose but having no objections to feeding on the old cowboy.

Joe also couldn't discount the bear theory because bears were his responsibility. Because once the grizzly had left its federally protected enclave in Yellowstone, it was now the responsibility of the Game and Fish Department. With responsibility came liability, and if it turned out that the bear was the cause of the crimes, Joe's agency would be blamed. If so, blame would cascade downhill, pooling around Joe Pickett's boots.

If the radio collar on the bear hadn't malfunctioned, the bear biologists tracking it could either clear—or implicate—the bear. As it was, they had no better idea of the bear's location than Joe did.

"Disturbed Individuals" merited more consideration, he thought. He drew a star next to it. The likelihood of a nut—or nuts—with cutting tools was the most likely prospect of all, he thought. Perhaps the bad guy had been practicing on animals for months or years without suspicion. He had started, maybe, with small animals or pets, and perfected his technique. Then he moved up the food chain; an antelope or deer for starters, then a single cow or horse. Without the atmosphere of suspicion that now existed, the lone deaths of single animals would not have aroused any notice. A mutilated carcass that wasn't found immediately—predation or not—wouldn't appear all that different from a natural death if the discovery was a month or so afterward. Maybe, Joe thought, this had been going on for *years* in the area. How many animal bodies had he seen himself over the years on the sides of highways, in ditches, in the landfill? Hundreds, he thought.

But then, for some reason, the animals weren't enough, so the killer moved on to human beings. Not just one, either. He went after two people in one night in a bloody explosion of ... *something*.

Both men were killed in isolated locations accessible by either private dirt roads, in Montegue's case, or remote county roads, in Stuart Tanner's case. Joe wondered how long it would take to drive from one crime location to the other, and guessed an hour and a half without stopping. Which meant, if this theory played out, that the killer was local and knew his way around.

What kind of person is capable of this? Joe wondered, trying to picture a face or eyes. Neither came.

Joe's mind spun with questions.

Was this the same person who had mutilated cattle in the 1970s? If so, why had the killer stopped for over thirty years before beginning again? Had the killer, in the meanwhile, contented himself with the death and mutilation of wildlife, like the bull moose Joe found, or perhaps the cattle mutilations in Montana?

And whoever it was, why had the killer chosen to escalate the horrors to a new level? Since Joe and the task force had virtually no leads of any kind—despite what Barnum might tell the public—what was to stop this person?

JOE LOOKED UP and stared out at the breaklands. The dull headache that had started behind his left ear an hour ago had become a full-fledged skull-pounder. The more he thought about the killings, the worse it got.

This is a job for somebody a hell of a lot smarter than I am, *he thought*.

The sun was still two hours from dropping behind the mountains, but the sagebrush flats and red arroyos were beginning to light up. Pockets of cottonwoods and aspen pulsed with fall hues. He loved this time of the evening on the high plains, when it seemed like the dying sun infused the landscape with every last drop of color and drama before withdrawing the favor.

He shoved his notebook into his pocket, climbed into the cab of his truck, and drove farther up the mountain into the trees, peering out from behind his headache.

JOE CRUISED SLOWLY, with his windows open. As it darkened, he had switched on the sneak lights under his front bumper, illuminating only the road surface directly in front of him. With his headlights off, he was almost invisible to a hunter or another vehicle until he was practically on top of them.

A half mile from the turnoff to Hazelton Road, in the low light of timber dusk, two camouflaged hunters stepped out of the trees onto the road.

When the hunters saw him, he could tell from their body language that he had surprised them. They consulted with each other, heads bent together, as he approached them. He waved, eased the pickup to a stop, clamped his Stetson on, and swung out of the truck. Before he closed his door, he reached in and turned his headlights on full, bathing the hunters in white light. It was a tactic he had learned over countless similar stops; approaching armed men on foot with his headlights behind him.

Joe quickly sized up the men as elk hunters out for the archery season. Their faces were painted in green and black, as were the backs of their hands. Each carried high-tech compound bows with extra arrows attached by side quivers. Their eyes, in the headlights, blinked out from their face paint.

"Are you doing any good?" Joe asked pleasantly, although he'd noted that neither was spotted with blood from a kill.

"It's too damned warm up here," the taller hunter said. "It's too dry for any stealthy movement."

His voice sounded familiar to Joe, although Joe couldn't place it.

"See anything?"

"Cow and a calf this morning," the shorter hunter said. "I missed her, damn it."

The shorter hunter's quiver was missing an arrow, Joe noticed.

"Couldn't find your arrow, I see."

The shorter hunter shook his head. "Nope."

"I hope you didn't wound her," Joe said. Although archery hunting was certainly more sporting to the prey than rifle season, many inexperienced or overexcited hunters often wounded game animals and then lost track of them. He had seen many crippled elk, deer, and antelope in the field with errant arrows stuck in them.

The shorter hunter started to speak.

"I don't think—"

"He missed her clean," the taller one interrupted, annoyance in his voice. "He just fucking missed her, all right?"

Joe was now close enough to see their faces and to recognize the taller hunter through his face paint.

"You again," Joe said to Jeff O'Bannon, the belligerent fisherman he had met before on Crazy Woman Creek with his daughters. "I hope you've learned how to release a fish since then."

O'Bannon's eyes flashed. Joe thought they looked bigger behind the face paint.

"What's this about?" the shorter hunter asked O'Bannon.

"Never mind, Pete," O'Bannon said through clenched teeth.

"Can I please see your licenses and conservation stamps?" Joe asked, still polite.

"You've already seen my stamp," O'Bannon said.

"Yup, but not the elk tag."

O'Bannon rolled his eyes and sighed, clearly annoyed.

While the hunters set their bows aside and dug for their wallets, Joe waited with his thumbs hooked into the front pockets of his Wranglers.

"Have you heard anything lately about those murders?" the short hunter asked, giving Joe his license.

"Like what?" Joe asked, checking it over. Pete was a state resident from Gillette. His license and stamp were okay, so Joe handed it back.

"Have there been any more sightings around here? Any more, you know, *incidents*?"

O'Bannon chuckled when he heard the question.

"Not since last week," Joe said. "I'm sure you heard about that."

"No little green men?" O'Bannon asked, smiling so that his teeth glinted in the headlights.

"Nope, just hunters." Joe said, looking over the license. "You need to sign this," he told O'Bannon, pointing toward the signature line.

"Jesus," O'Bannon sighed, shaking his head "I knew you'd find something to hassle me over."

I told you I would, *Joe thought*.

"I'm glad things are quiet," Pete said. "I almost didn't come over here to go hunting when I read about them murders. Jeff had to work hard to convince me to come with him."

Joe nodded, wondering how many hunters were thinking twice about traveling to his district.

"Jeff said he'd take care of those little green bastards if they showed up."

Joe had started to turn toward his pickup when he stopped.

"Really, how?"

He could see the blood drain from O'Bannon's face, even through the face paint.

"Pete ..." O'Bannon whispered.

"Show him, Jeff," Pete said enthusiastically.

"Show me, Jeff," Joe said, raising his eyebrows.

O'Bannon didn't move. Pete looked at Jeff, and slowly realized what he had done.

"Show me, Jeff," Joe repeated.

"Shit, it's for self-protection only. Self-protection!" O'Bannon said, raising his voice. "When people are getting cut up in the woods by something, it only makes sense!"

"Show me, Jeff."

Sighing, O'Bannon pulled back his camouflage coat to reveal a heavy, stainless-steel revolver in a holster on his hip.

"What's that, a .357 Magnum?" Joe asked.

O'Bannon nodded.

"I used to carry one of those myself," Joe said. "I couldn't hit anything with it. Well, once ..." he let his voice trail off.

"Jeff's won some trophies in open-range pistol shoots," Pete volunteered, trying to ease the situation.

"That's good," Joe said, reaching for the ticket book that he kept in his back pocket, "but it's *archery* season, fellows. *Archery*. Bows and arrows. When you carry a handgun, you're violating regulations as well as the whole spirit of the season."

"I told you it was for self-protection only," O'Bannon said. "I didn't even shoot it!"

"I understand," Joe said, flipping the ticket book open. "And in other circumstances—like if you were somebody else—I would likely issue you a strong verbal warning. But, Jeff, you're special."

Thumbing through his well-worn booklet of regulations, Joe found the page he was looking for and read out loud from the light of the headlights: "Statute 23-2-104(d). No person holding an archery license shall take big game or trophy game animals during a special hunting season while in possession of any type of firearm."

Joe wrote the ticket while O'Bannon glared at his former friend.

"You're also in violation of the concealed-weapons statutes unless you have a valid permit signed by Sheriff Barnum," Joe said. "If I remember correctly, you could be looking at six months or so in jail. Do you have a permit?"

"I'm contesting this," O'Bannon said, snatching the violation sheet from Joe and wadding it into his front pocket. "I'll see you in fucking court!"

"Yes, you will," Joe said. "In the meantime, I'd advise you to stay home for a while. It'll play better with Judge Pennock if you show some remorse, even if you're just faking it."

O'Bannon looked like he was about to have a stroke. His eyes bulged and his jaw was thrust forward. His hands had clenched into meaty fists.

Joe tensed and laid a hand on his gun as a warning. He felt slightly ashamed for taking the frustration of the day out on Jeff O'Bannon. But only slightly.

Pete looked from O'Bannon to Joe, and back to O'Bannon.

"Can I get a ride to town with you?" he asked Joe.

Joe smiled. "Jump in."

AFTER DINNER—TAKEOUT again that Marybeth grabbed from the Burg-O-Pardner on her way home from work—Joe checked his messages. Nothing from the lab on the samples he had sent, nothing from Trey Crump on the bear, nothing from Hersig on any progress in the investigation.

Marybeth came into the office and shut the door behind her.

"Did you notice anything odd at dinner tonight?" she asked.

Joe grimaced. He studied her quickly. No new haircut, her clothes looked familiar. Something else, then.

"When Cam brought Lucy home earlier, she was pretty upset. Cam had asked the girls not to explore the outbuildings at their place, so guess where they went after school?"

"Is she all right?"

Marybeth nodded. "She's fine. She's upset that she got in trouble, though. She said Cam was pretty angry with them and told Jessica she couldn't play with Lucy for a while."

"Nobody hurt, though?"

"No. I told Lucy it was her job to listen to Cam and Marie when she was at their house, and to follow their rules."

Joe nodded.

"You didn't notice that Lucy never said a word during dinner?"

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

"So how *did* your task-force meeting go?"

Joe leaned against his desk and filled her in. She made faces as he described the meeting, and laughed when he told her about McLanahan's theory about Arabs.

"I bet you wish they would have forgotten about you when it came to naming the members of that group," Marybeth said.

"I've got Trey and Hersig to thank for that."

She stood in silence, studying Joe. "Do you think Portenson will be trouble for us?"

Joe nodded. "I'm sure he'll be watching me closely. He also mentioned Nate."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

He shrugged, as if to say *we knew this was possible*.

Anxious to change the subject, he asked about her day.

"Cam's listing more homes and ranches every day. Ranchers are talking to each other and singing his praises. But those mutilations are big news ... No one wants to buy right now. Cam's trying to get them to lower their prices. It's a little tense around the office right now. But if things go well, he asked me if I'd be interested in going full-time, Joe. As a realtor." She beamed.

Inwardly, Joe moaned and guilt washed over him.

"That's great, honey."

"That's not really what you think, is it?" she asked, smiling slightly.

"Of course it is. We need the money."

"Joe, I like the Logues. I admire them. And you know I'd be a hell of a good realtor."

"Yes, you would. You are good at everything you do."

"Damn straight," she said.

He smiled and reached out for her. If only he could provide enough for the family. He silently vowed that as soon as the task force investigation wrapped up, he would start exploring his options in earnest.

"Don't forget that we're having dinner with Mom and Bud Longbrake tomorrow night," Marybeth said, dashing his mood further.

AN OVERNIGHT ENVELOPE lay in the in-box on his desk. When he saw that it was from the forensics laboratory in Laramie, he anxiously ripped it open and pulled out the documents. It was the toxicology report on his moose. He fanned through the pages listing the details of the analysis and found the conclusion in a memo at the end.

The lab had found no unusual substances, and no abnormal levels of natural substances. He scanned the pages for the word “oxindole,” but it simply wasn’t there.

“Damn,” he said, and threw the report on his desk.

SHERIDAN WAS SNORING, but Lucy was still awake when Joe came into their bedroom to kiss them good night. The room was small and there wasn’t much space between the two single beds. He sidled between them and sat down on Lucy’s bed, smoothing her blond hair.

“I heard what happened,” Joe said softly.

Lucy nodded, “Did Mom tell you about that shack we found?”

“No,” Joe said, “she didn’t.”

“Somebody was living out there. We saw where he slept and we thought we heard something. We were so scared, Dad.”

Joe wondered why Marybeth hadn’t told him about this, but figured that probably it wasn’t the issue. He assumed that a transient was using the shack, which alarmed him. Who knew how long ago somebody had been there? The house had been unoccupied for years before the Logues bought it and began restoration. Had Cam called the sheriff? He would need to ask Marybeth.

“You need to stay out of those buildings, Lucy,” he said firmly. “There are strange people in town because of what’s going on. You need to listen to Mr. Logue and to us.”

Lucy nodded, her eyes wide.

AS HE CLIMBED the stairs, he thought: My wife the *realtor*, imagining a photo of her face at the bottom of an advertisement in the *Roundup* real estate section.

15

THE NEXT MORNING, Joe headed out to the Riverside RV Park to pay a visit to Cleve Garrett, self-proclaimed expert in the paranormal. Joe prayed that his mother-in-law would never find out about this. He cringed just thinking about the multitude of woo-woo questions she’d have for him. The RV park was located on the west bank of the river and was surrounded by three acres of heavily wooded and seriously overgrown river cottonwoods.

As Joe nosed his pickup onto the ancient steel bridge, he thought that the RV park looked like the aftermath of a giant garbage can tipped over in the wind. Bits of glass, metal, weathered plywood, and old tires looked like they were caught in the spidery silver trees that had just lost the last of their leaves. On closer inspection, however, he saw that the trash was actually a number of aging mobile homes tucked into alcoves

among the trees. The old tires had been placed on the tops of the mobile homes to keep the roofs from blowing off in the wind.

Under the bridge, he noticed a single fisherman in the water below, and smiled. It was the man known as Not Ike, who since his arrival in Saddlestring, had become the single most dedicated fly-fisherman Joe had ever seen. Not Ike was the “slow” cousin of Ike Easter, the county clerk. Because Ike Easter had been the only black face in Saddlestring for ten years, when his cousin the fly-fisherman moved to town he found himself being called Ike everywhere he went, so he had a sweatshirt printed up that said I’M NOT IKE. But instead of being called by his actual name, which was George, he became known as Not Ike.

Along with a couple of retired local men named Hans and Jack, Not Ike worked the pocket waters near the two bridges that crossed the Twelve Sleep River for trout, and Joe had seen him out there in every kind of weather. Because Not Ike couldn’t yet afford an annual nonresident license, he bought cheaper, three- and five-day temporary licenses, one after the other, as they expired, so he could keep fishing. At least Joe hoped Not Ike was still buying the licenses, and made a mental note to check him out later.

As he reached the other side of the bridge, Joe turned left and passed under a faded hanging sign announcing his entrance to the Riverside Resort and RV Park.

Although once conceived as a “resort,” the Riverside RV Park had declined and amalgamated into a sort of idiosyncratic hybrid. Most of the spaces were occupied by permanent residents; retirees from the lumber mill, service workers for the Eagle Mountain Club, transients, and now CBM crews. A few new model mobile homes with strips of neat landscaped lawn sat next to sagging, dented trailers mounted on cinder blocks, with out-of-plumb wooden storage sheds occupying every foot of the property. From the entrance, the road branched into three lanes, with mobile homes lining both sides of the lanes.

Joe had been to the Riverside two years before, following up on an anonymous poaching tip, so he was somewhat familiar with the layout. He had caught two employees of a highway construction crew skinning pronghorn antelopes hung from trees behind a rented trailer, and he had arrested them both for taking the animals out of season. The RV park had changed very little since then, although due to the influx of CBM workers, it now looked as if most of the spaces were occupied.

He stopped at the first trailer, the one with RESORT MANAGER in sculpted wrought-iron above the gate. The trailer had been there long enough that the silver skin of the unit had oxidized into pewter. A basket of frosted plastic flowers hung from a sun porch near the door.

Leaving his truck idling with Maxine curled and sleeping under the dashboard heater vent, he swung out and clamped on his gray Stetson. It was a cold, still morning, and the park was silent. He zipped his coat up a few inches, and thrust his hands into his coat pockets.

He could smell coffee brewing and bacon frying from inside the manager's office as he approached the door. The doorbell rang, and he stepped back on the porch and waited, wishing the bright morning sun could find him through the trees and warm his back.

The interior door clicked and opened inward, then the manager pushed the screen door open.

"Good morning, Jimbo," Joe said.

Jimbo Francis had been the manager of the Riverside since Joe had moved to the Saddlestring District. He was a big man with a massive belly. His face was as round as a hubcap, with protruding ears and a band of wispy, white cotton under a bald dome that expanded into a full mustache and beard stained with streaks of yellow. Jimbo had once been a government trapper, in charge of eradicating predators in the Bighorns and valleys by shooting, trapping, or poisoning them. When federal funding was withdrawn, he had taken the job of managing the "resort" temporarily, until funding for the program was restored. That was twenty-five years before, and he was still waiting. Jimbo was also a self-proclaimed patron of the arts, and was the chairman of the Saddlestring Library Foundation. He had once told Joe and Marybeth that his passions in life were "reading books and eradicating vermin." Now that he was in his late seventies and his eyes were failing—he had been instrumental in creating the books-on-tape section in the library—both of his passions were waning. As was his sanity, Joe suspected.

"And a good morning to you, Vern Dunnegan!" Jimbo boomed.

"Joe Pickett," Joe corrected. "Vern's been gone for six years. I replaced him." *Vern's in prison where he belongs*, Joe thought but didn't say. No reason to confuse Jimbo further.

"I knew that, I guess," Jimbo said, rubbing his hand through his hair. "Of course I knew that. I don't know what I was thinking. Vern was here so damned long, I guess, that I still think of him. That just goes to show you that a man shouldn't open his door in the morning until he's had his first three cups of coffee. I *knew* Vern was gone."

"Sure you did," Joe said, patting Jimbo on the shoulder.

"Is Marybeth still working at the library?" he asked, as if trying to further prove he was lucid.

"Not anymore, I'm afraid."

"That's too goddamn bad," Jimbo said. "She was a looker."

Joe sighed.

"You need some coffee? You're here pretty early, Joe. I've got breakfast started. Do you want some eggs and bacon?"

"No thanks, Jimbo. I need to check with you on a new renter."

"We call them *guests*."

"Okay. On a new guest. The name is Cleve Garrett."

Jimbo rolled his eyes into his head, as if trying to find his mental rental list. Joe waited for Jimbo's eyes to reappear. When they did, Jimbo said, "It's a cold morning. Do you want to come in?"

"That's okay," Joe said patiently. He remembered the interior of Jimbo's trailer from before. The place was claustrophobic, books crammed among Jimbo's collection of coyote, badger, beaver, and mountain lion skulls, empty eye sockets of dozens of predators looking out over everything. "If you could just tell me what space Cleve Garrett is renting, I'll be off."

"He's got a girl with him," Jimbo said. "Skinny little number."

Joe nodded. He could have simply cruised the lanes, looking for the new RV. But he'd wanted to clear it with Jimbo first. Now he was regretting his choice.

"He's here, then."

"He's here, all right," Jimbo said. "Been a parade of folks through here lately, all asking about 'Cleve Garrett, Cleve Garrett.' They're all starstruck. He's some kind of big expert in the paranormal, I guess. He's giving lectures on it. I plan to attend a couple. Maybe we can get him to speak at the library while he's here."

"Maybe," Joe said, his patience just about gone. "Which space is he in?"

"Lot C-17," Jimbo said finally. "You know, I've seen him before, but I can't figure out where. Maybe on television or something. These mutilations in our community are weighing heavily on my mind. You want a strip of bacon to go?"

CHEWING ON THE bacon, Joe drove down lane C. He tossed the second half of the strip to Maxine.

Cleve Garrett's trailer was obvious before Joe even looked at the lot numbers. It couldn't have been more out of place. Joe fought an urge to laugh out loud, but at the same time he felt an icy electric tingle shoot up his spine. The huge trailer stood out as if it were a spacecraft that had docked in a cemetery. A bulging, extremely expensive, gleaming silver Airstream—the Lexus of trailers—bristled with antennae and small satellite dishes. A device shaped like a tuning fork rotated in the air near the front of the trailer. The Airstream was unhitched, and the modified, dual-wheeled diesel Suburban that had pulled it was parked to the side. Joe stopped his truck briefly behind the Suburban, jotting down the Nevada license plate numbers in his notebook before pulling to the other side of the trailer.

A Formica plate was bolted to the front door. It read:

DR. CLEVE GARRETT

ICONOCLAST SOCIETY

RENO, NEVADA

Joe turned off his motor and shut his door when the Airstream door opened and a smiling, owlsh man stepped out.

"Cleve Garrett?"

"*Dr.* Cleve Garrett," the man corrected, pulling an oversized sweater around him. Garrett was in his late forties, thin, with a limp helmet of hair that gave him a disagreeably youthful appearance. His mouth was wide, with almost non-existent lips,

and it turned down sharply at each corner. His nose was long and aquiline, and his big eyes dominated his face, appearing even larger through thick, round lenses.

“Joe Pickett. I’m the game warden and a member of the task force investigating the mutilations.”

Garrett tilted his head back, as if looking at Joe through his thin nostrils.

“I was wondering when someone was going to show up. I’m a little surprised they sent a game warden.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Joe said, although he wasn’t.

Garrett waved it away. “never mind. Come on in, I’ve been waiting. Everything is ready.”

Joe hesitated. *Everything is ready?* he pondered revealing to Garrett that he had some background on him, and his “work” in Montana, courtesy of dave avery. Joe chose not to say anything yet, to let Garrett do the talking.

“Iconoclast Society?” Joe asked. “what’s that?”

Garrett’s large eyes widened even further, filling the lenses, unnerving Joe.

“Iconoclast,” Garrett said. “Breaker of images. Burster of bubbles. Denouncer. Decrier. Without passion. I’m a scientist, Mr. Pickett.”

Joe said, “oh,” wondering why he had volunteered to hersig to take this part of the investigation.

“Let me show you what you people are up against,” Garrett said.

Stepping into the Airstream was like stepping inside a computer, Joe thought. On three of the four walls were shelf brackets that held stacks of electronic equipment and gauges, monitors, and keyboards. There was the low hum of high-tech equipment and the hushing sound of tiny interior fans. Wires and cables bound by duct tape snaked through the equipment and across the ceiling.

On the back wall of the room was a closed door that obviously led to the rest of the trailer. On either side of the door were stainless steel counters and sinks, littered beakers, and glass tubing. The pegboard walls near the door displayed medical and mechanical tools.

Joe folded himself onto a stool on one side of a small metal table stacked high with files, folders, and printouts. Garrett took the other stool and started arranging the folders in front of him.

“Quite a place,” Joe said, removing his hat and looking around.

“The trailer was modified to be a mobile lab and command center,” Garrett said brusquely, as if he’d explained it a thousand times to others and wanted to get it out of the way quickly so they could move on with things.

“A million and a half dollars worth of the latest hardware, software, and monitoring devices. The lab takes up the front half of the trailer, living quarters take up the back. We’ve got an interior generator, although I prefer to pull into a place like this,” he gestured vaguely toward the outside, referring to the Riverside Park, “so I can plug in. All of our data and findings are synched via satellite to our center in Nevada, where half a dozen other scientists analyze it as well. I can be totally mobile and on the

road within two hours to get to a site. I was here in Saddlestring, for example, within forty-eight hours of the first discovery of the mutilated cattle.”

Joe nodded. “Who pays for all of this?”

“We’re totally, completely private,” Garrett said. “We accept no corporate or government funds at all. Therefore, we’re not compromised. We’re a completely independent center devoted to impartial scientific research into paranormal activities.”

“So,” Joe asked again, “who pays for all of this?”

Garrett showed a hint of annoyance. “Ninety-eight percent of our funding comes from a single source. He’s a highly successful entrepreneur named Marco Weakland. You’ve probably heard of him.”

“I haven’t,” Joe said.

“Among his many ventures, he has a particular interest in paranormal psychology and science. It fascinates him. He uses a very small part of his fortune to fund this project and to employ some of the best alternative scientists in the world. Our job is to get to the scene of unexplained activity and analyze it in pure scientific terms. Mr. Weakland doesn’t trust government conclusions, and frankly we’ve disproved and debunked more phenomena as hoaxes than found actual evidence of paranormal or supernatural activity. And we’ve found completely natural explanations for most of the phenomena we’ve investigated in the three short years we’ve been in operation. Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Weakland sincerely believes in the possibility of alien beings, civilizations, and incursions, as do I. But he wants them proven, scientifically, before he brings them to light. What I don’t quite understand, Mr. Pickett, is why I’m explaining all of this to you when I already went into it in some detail with the Sheriff’s Department.”

Joe had a mental image of Deputy McLanahan listening to Garrett over the telephone while doing the crossword puzzle in the back of the *TV Guide*.

“The deputy communicated very little of your conversation,” Joe said, not liking to make excuses for McLanahan.

“Well,” Garrett said, looking annoyed, “then that explains why I wasn’t asked to participate in your task-force meeting.”

Joe looked at Garrett blankly.

“In fact, if you people were really interested in getting to the bottom of these mutilations and murders, you would appoint me co-chair of the task force.”

“You’d need to talk to the county DA about that,” Joe said. “His name is Robey Hersig.” Joe made a mental note to call Hersig as soon as he could and warn him that Dr. Cleve Garrett would be contacting him.

FOR THIRTY MINUTES, Garrett spoke non-stop and Joe listened. Cleve Garrett showed Joe photographs of mutilated cattle, sheep, horses, and goats that had been taken over the last four decades in the United States and Canada, and throughout South and Central America. Mutilated dairy cattle had been reported in the United Kingdom and Europe in the 1960s, often at the same time alleged crop circles were

discovered. Official explanations for the mutilations were as varied as their geography, but most involved birds, insects, or cults.

The photos and case files—many of them ancient carbon copies and several written in Spanish and Portuguese—piled up on the table in front of them. The last few case files held photos and names of places Joe recognized. Conrad, Montana. Helena, Montana.

“Last winter, mutilated cattle were discovered in Montana,” Garrett said. “Someone up there was familiar with our group and called us. Unfortunately, they called us three weeks too late. By the time I got there, the local yokels had completely tromped all over the crime scenes, and they refused our assistance.”

Joe listened silently, not letting on that he had heard Dave Avery’s side of this story.

“We were able to obtain the heads of several of the cattle, but they were nearly two months old at that point. We shipped them to our facility in Reno for technical analysis.”

Garrett dropped a thick file of necropsy photos on the table. Joe opened the folder to see the skinless head of a cow with the top of its skull cut off. Someone probed a flat metal tool into the cow’s withered brain in a gesture that looked uncomfortably like the act of scooping peanut butter from a jar with a butter knife. Gently closing the folder, Joe felt his morning coffee burble in his stomach.

“What we found were levels of a chemical in the brains and organs in excess of what should be there naturally.”

Joe thought *oxindole*, but said: “What was it?”

Garrett started to answer, pulled back, and said coyly, “I’ll save the results for the task-force meeting.”

“So we’re playing games here?”

“I don’t play games. I just don’t want to show all of my cards until we’re in an official setting and I’ve been given some standing in the task force.”

Joe nodded. “Go on.”

Garrett continued, “Some of the trace chemicals discovered were absolutely unknown to our scientists. You understand? *Unknown!* Poisons or sedatives not of this world were found in the brain tissue of Montana cattle. Not only that, but the incisions had been performed by ultra-high-temperature laser instruments—instruments available only in leading surgical hospitals, not in the field. Certainly, this type of procedure could not have been done in the elements outside of Conrad, Montana.”

Joe was intrigued. He looked up, needing a break from the photos, which, in their quantity alone, were numbing.

“So what did you determine?” Joe asked.

Garrett sighed. “What we determined was that we were too late to do proper on-site analysis. We kept waiting for fresh incidents in Montana, but they never came. We were very disappointed. Our scientists were begging for fresher tissue to study before natural decomposition occurred. But whatever had mutilated the cattle had moved on.”

“Here to Twelve Sleep County,” Joe said.

“YES!” Garrett shouted, nearly upsetting the table. His sudden exclamation sounded like a gunshot in the silent room. “Now we’re right in the middle of it, right where it’s happening. Not only cattle and wildlife, but perhaps, for the first time, *human beings*! This is why I need to be on the task force. Why I need to be involved, and to be kept informed. You people have a resource here,” he thumped his chest, indicating himself, “that you can’t ignore, that you shouldn’t ignore. Look at the equipment in this laboratory. Can you even imagine a more fortuitous circumstance?”

Joe looked up. “I can’t speak for the task force.”

“From what we can determine,” Garrett said, plowing ahead as if Joe hadn’t spoken, “wildlife and livestock mutilations aren’t random at all. What we’re beginning to believe is that the mutilations are ongoing, and perpetual, and have been for at least forty years.”

“You lost me,” Joe said.

“You lost yourself,” Garrett snapped. He had been getting more and more animated as he spoke, and was now highly agitated. His hands flew about as he spoke and his eyes, if possible, had become even wider.

“What we’re saying is that the mutilations are like the worldwide circulation of the flu bug. They never really stop, they just keep moving around the earth. There are blank spots in time—years, in fact—where there are no reported incidents, but that’s because we don’t have information from places like Africa or the Asian continent or Russia. And we certainly don’t have data about the hundreds—or *thousands*—of incidents that are never even discovered or recognized for what they were. Do you know what this means?”

“What’s that?” Joe asked, knowing he sounded doltish.

Garrett rose and leaned forward on the small table. His damp palms stuck to papers and files, puckering them. “It could well be that beings are conducting full-time research on our planet. Whether they’re doing it for genetic or physiological reasons, we don’t know. But they’re digging rather aggressively in our own Petri dish, trying to discover, or confirm, or create something.”

Garrett let his words hang in the air, obviously hoping that Joe would understand their significance

“If they’re here now, we have the best opportunity we’ve ever had of contacting them directly. We can let them know we’re on to their little game, and maybe offer to assist them. Perhaps we can start to build trust, exchange ideas. What is happening out there right now may be one of the most important opportunities to happen in our lifetime!”

Or not, Joe thought.

“What about the human victims? Where do they fit into your theory?” Joe asked.

Garrett stifled a smile. Actually, a mad grin, Joe thought.

“This is where things get interesting,” Garrett said, his voice nearly a whisper. “They’ve obviously stepped up their research in one bold stroke.”

“Why now?” Joe asked. “And why two men, for that matter?”

Garrett shook his head. “That I can’t quite figure out, although I have some ideas on it. One of my ideas you’re not going to want to hear.”

He said it in a way that led Joe to believe that Garrett couldn’t wait to continue. Joe responded by raising his eyebrows.

“At least one of the two men was killed by other means,” Garrett said quickly for maximum impact.

Joe felt his stomach churn. He would have to get out of the trailer soon, he thought.

“What makes you say that?”

Garrett raised his hands, palms up. “From what I understand, the two men were killed at least fifty miles apart on the same night. Both were mutilated in similar fashion to the cattle and wildlife. But one of the men was dragged from the murder scene and fed on by a bear and the other was found in pristine condition.”

Joe nodded.

“Obviously, something is wrong here. One of the primary characteristics of cattle and wildlife mutilations has been the lack of predation. I’ve got hundreds of photos to prove it. But a predator fed on the corpse of one of the murdered men only hours after he was killed. Doesn’t this strike you as odd?”

“Yes,” Joe admitted.

“There’s more, much more.” Garrett said, his hands flying around like doves released from a cage.

“Yes?”

“I’ll save the rest for the task-force meeting.”

Joe noticed something different in the room, smelled something, and turned his head.

The door at the end of the room near the sinks was ajar. He hadn’t heard it open, but the odor he smelled was cigarette smoke.

As he watched, the door pushed open and a woman stepped through it. She was young, pale, and thin, with straight, shoulder-length blond hair parted in the middle. She wore all black—black jeans, Doc Martens boots, long-sleeved turtleneck. Her lips were painted black and her dark blue eyes were bordered by heavy mascara. *She is not beautiful*, Joe thought. *Without the statement in black, she would be unremarkable.*

Garrett turned as well, angry. “Deena, what have I told you about letting smoke in here with my expensive equipment?”

Deena fixed her eyes on Joe, and when she answered she didn’t shift them.

“I’m sorry, Cleve. I heard loud voices, so I ...”

“Please shut the door,” Garrett said sternly. As if talking to a child, Joe thought.

Joe looked back. Her eyes and expression were remarkable in their lack of content. But it seemed as if she were trying to connect with him in some way, for some reason.

“Deena ...” Garrett cautioned.

“Bye,” Deena said in a little-girl voice, and stepped back through the door, closing it.

Joe looked to Garrett for an explanation. Garrett, again, looked agitated. His dramatic monologue had been interrupted.

"Deena's been with me since Montana," Garrett said, his eyes icy. But Joe noticed a flush in his cheeks, as if he were embarrassed to have to explain anything. "She's a hanger-on, I guess you'd call her. My line of work attracts people who are a bit on the edge of the rest of society. I'm doing what I can to help her out with her journey."

"Is she even seventeen?" Joe said coldly.

"She's nineteen!" Garrett hissed. "More than legal age. She knows what she's doing."

Joe simply nodded, then pushed his stool back.

"What, you're leaving?"

"I've heard enough from you for today, I think."

Joe stood, picked up his hat, and turned for the door. Garrett followed.

"I think I know what's happening out there, Mr. Pickett. I'm so close to it I can almost shout it out! But you've got to give me access to the task force and your findings. I need to see the case files, and the investigative notes. And you must make sure I'm notified immediately in the instance of another discovery."

"I gave you Robey's name, right? You'll have to call him for all of that," Joe said over his shoulder as he stepped out of the trailer.

"I need you to vouch for me," Garrett pleaded. "I beg of you, sir!"

Joe opened the door of his pickup, hesitating for a moment. Garrett stood near the front of his Airstream, palms out, pleading.

"I'll talk to them," Joe said. "I need to settle on exactly what I'm going to say."

"That's all I ask," Garrett said, his face lighting up. "That's all I ask."

HE SAW HER in the heavy trees before he made the turn to leave the Riverside Resort and RV Park. It was a glimpse through the passenger window; amidst the tree trunks were her eyes, framed by dark makeup.

Joe checked his rearview mirror. Cleve Garrett had returned to his trailer, and the front window of the Airstream was obscured by overgrown branches that reached down from the side of the lane. Garrett would not be able to see him.

He stopped and got out. "Deena?"

"Yes."

He walked across the gravel lane into the soft mulch on the floor of the tree stand. She leaned against a massive old-growth river cottonwood trunk. She had no coat, and her face was even paler than he recalled from a few moments before. She hugged herself, her long, white fingers with black painted nails gripping opposite shoulders.

He asked, "Were you trying to tell me something back there?"

She searched his face with her eyes, trying to read him.

"I guess so." Her voice trembled. "Maybe ..." Was she cold or scared? he wondered.

Joe stripped his jacket off and fitted it over her shoulders.

"What year were you born, Deena?" he asked. As he suspected, he saw a twitch of confusion as she tried to do the math. Did she know that Garrett had said she was nineteen?

Deena gave up, not even trying to lie. "Please don't send me back to Montana. There's nothing I want to go back to. There's nobody up there who wants me back."

"What did you want to tell me, Deena?"

Joe searched her face, looked her over. Beneath the cover of foundation was a road map of acne scars on both cheeks. A smear of shiny, black lip gloss dropped from the corner of her mouth like a comma.

"I didn't hear very much of what you two were talking about," she said in a voice so weak he strained to hear it, "but I know there's more to Cleve than meets the eye. And there's less, too, I guess." She looked up and smiled hauntingly, as if sharing a secret.

Unfortunately, Joe didn't know what she meant.

"You don't understand, do you?"

"Nope."

She looked furtively over her shoulder in the direction of the Airstream, as if calculating how much time she had.

"Do you have an e-mail address?" she asked Joe.

He nodded.

"I'll e-mail you, then. I don't think we have the time to get into all of it here. I have an e-mail account Cleve doesn't know about."

"Deena, are you being held against your will?" he asked. "Do you need a place to stay?"

She grinned icily and shook her head. "There's no place in the world, in the cosmos, that I'd rather be than right here, right now. I'm no prisoner. Cleve will help make things *happen*, and I want to be here to see it. To experience it. The other stuff doesn't much matter."

"What other stuff? And what will Cleve make happen?"

She shifted away from the trunk she was leaning on, stepping back from Joe.

"I can handle Cleve, don't worry," she said, smiling provocatively. "I can handle most men. It's really not that tough."

Joe started to speak, but she held up her hand. "I've got to go. I'll e-mail you."

He wrote his address on the back of a Wyoming Game and Fish business card and handed it to her.

"Thank you for the coat," she said, before shrugging it off and turning back to the Airstream.

As he pulled it back on, he could smell her inside of his coat. Makeup, cigarette smoke, and something else. Something medical, he thought. Ointment, or lotion, he thought.

When he looked up she was gone.

AS HE CROSSED the bridge, Joe glanced over the railing. Jack, the retired guy, was fishing upstream near a sand spit. Not Ike was still down there, completing a long, looping fly cast into ripples that flowed into a deep pool. There were some big fish in the pool, Joe knew. Twenty-two - to twenty-four-inch browns, three to four pounds,

big enough to be called “hogs” by serious fishermen. Not Ike looked up, saw Joe, and waved. Joe waved back and made another mental note to check out his license. Later, though, after he sorted out what had just happened in the Riverside Resort and RV Park. Later, when he could get back to being a game warden.

16

I BET CAM ten dollars I could get you to say three words tonight,” Marie Logue told Joe between courses that evening at the Longbrake Ranch.

“You lose,” Joe said, deadpan.

Marie at first looked disappointed, even a little shocked, then she shared a glance with Marybeth and both women whooped. Joe smiled.

“He’s been waiting for *years* to use that line,” Marybeth laughed. “You offered the perfect setup. Calvin Coolidge said it first.”

“Good one,” Cam said gruffly from across the table. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“It’s not like you’ve ever had a problem talking,” Marie said through a false smile. “Except to me. Lately, especially.”

Cam rolled his eyes and looked away, dismissing her.

Uh-oh, Joe thought. *They’re not kidding*. He noticed that Marybeth caught it, too. She had mentioned the increasing tension at Logue Country Realty to him recently, saying that despite Cam’s success in listing ranches, homes, and commercial property, nothing was selling.

Dinner at the Longbrake Ranch had become a twice-monthly event since Missy had moved in with Bud. In addition to Joe and Marybeth and the grandchildren, Missy often invited a number of other people, all of them influential: ranchers, business owners, the editor of the *Roundup*, and state senators and representatives. Tonight, however, it was just the Picketts and the Logues. Missy was, Joe grudgingly admitted, an excellent hostess. It was something she was born to do and she thrived at it. The events typically began with drinks beneath the canopy of old cotton-woods out back or in the huge living room when it was cool or windy, then moved to the dining room for dinner and wine, and ended up with the men in Bud’s cavernous study and the women in the living room. Missy moved graciously from guest to guest, asking innocuous questions, showing them the renovations she was supervising in the old ranch house, laughing at their jokes, discussing her wedding plans, urging them to top off their drinks. Her face assumed a luminescence that made her truly beautiful, if one didn’t know any better, Joe thought.

Joe had made half-hearted attempts to get out of the dinners before but hadn’t succeeded. Marybeth felt obligated to attend, she said, and made the case that it was important for their girls to have a good relationship with their grandmother. Joe suspected that Marybeth enjoyed the socializing and discussion, although she claimed

it didn't matter that much to her. Sheridan and Lucy, Joe guessed, leaned more toward his point of view than their mother's. Rarely were there other children at the dinners.

"MAY WE BE excused?" Lucy asked. She sat with Jessica Logue and Sheridan. She was asking on behalf of all three girls.

Marybeth looked to Marie, and both mothers nodded. Lucy and Jessica had not played with each other since they got in trouble and both were transparently pleased that the dinner had brought them together again.

"Should they go outside?" Marybeth asked Joe.

"They'll be within sight," Missy broke in, dismissing her daughter's concern. Then whispered: "Nothing has ever happened out in the *open*, honey."

"Stay close to the house," Marybeth called after them as the three girls thanked Missy for dinner before scrambling away from the table and out the front door.

"We're just going to see the horses," Sheridan called out as the screen door slammed.

AFTER DINNER, TALK turned to the mutilations and the death of Tuff Montegue. Bud Longbrake questioned Cam Logue about the economic effects the crimes had had on the valley, particularly in regard to land values.

"We can only pray it's temporary," Cam said. "But it's reduced land values and home values at least twenty percent, by my guess. Twelve Sleep County is radioactive."

He shook his head. "In one case, I've got a willing seller and a willing buyer, but the buyer has decided now to hold out a little longer for a price reduction. The sellers are battling among themselves whether to reduce the price a little or not. Meanwhile, nothing is happening."

Bud smiled knowingly. "I think I know the ranch you're talking about. Those crazy sisters. They'd be rich if their daddy hadn't sold the mineral rights to the place. Nobody ever used to think that much about it. Everyone figured if there wasn't oil on their land—and there never was—that selling the mineral rights was just free money from suckers. I hear the plan is to put two thousand CBM wells on the land."

Cam nodded vaguely. He obviously felt uncomfortable talking about the specifics of the ranch or the terms. But Bud liked to needle and pry, and was good-natured about it.

"It's been crazy," Marie said, shaking her head.

"Marybeth mentioned that on top of everything else you have company right now," Missy said to Cam and Marie.

Cam laughed and ran his hand through his thick, blond hair.

"Yes, it's not exactly the best time in the world to have my whole family here for a visit."

"It never is," Missy cooed sympathetically. This from the woman who camped out in his house for a month and a half before moving in with Bud Longbrake, Joe thought sourly.

As the talk turned back to more mundane topics, Joe's thoughts drifted away from the table. He kept replaying the morning at the Riverside Park and his conversation with Cleve Garrett. He still could not shake his discomfort. The point Garrett had

made about the differences in the deaths of Tuff Montegue and Stuart Tanner had eaten at him all afternoon. Yet again, nothing seemed to make sense or connect as it should.

“JOE?” MARYBETH SAID, her voice breaking into his thoughts. “Bud is talking to you. Are you going to answer his question?”

Joe looked around and realized that Missy had paused in mid-serve of dessert and was looking at him expectantly. Cam and Marie were silent, waiting for the answer to the question that Joe hadn’t heard. The conversation, which a few moments before had been lively and flowing around him, had died. He could hear the clock tick in the next room. Marybeth looked exasperated, as she often did when he lapsed into what she called “Joe Zone.” It particularly annoyed her when he did it in front of Missy because Marybeth thought it made him look ignorant.

Joe cleared his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What was the question?”

THE THREE GIRLS lined up outside of the corral looking at Bud Longbrake’s horses in the last moments of dusk. They leaned forward and rested their arms on the rails, peering inside at a dozen stout ranch horses. Roberto, a new ranch hand, broke open bales and tossed hay to them over the fence. Sheridan cocked a foot on the bottom rail. She found the *grumm-grumm* sound of horses eating extremely soothing.

Sheridan said, “I heard Grandmother Missy say that Mister Bud brought all of his horses in from the mountains and put them in the corral because of the aliens.”

Lucy looked up at her with wide eyes. “Did she really say ‘aliens’?”

“Yes, she did. I heard her tell Mrs. Logue that.”

“Man, oh, man.”

Behind them, in the ranch yard, the sensor on the light pole hummed and the light clicked on as the sky darkened. Although it really didn’t make sense that it could get colder from one moment to the next simply because the sun dropped behind the mountains, Sheridan gathered her coat closer around her. It had to do with the altitude and the thin air, her dad had told her.

Jessica said, “If we’re going to be out here, maybe we should have bought those aluminum-foil hats those boys were selling in the cafeteria.”

“What are you talking about?” Sheridan said, and Lucy laughed. They told Sheridan about the caps. Then they said they thought it was unfair that their parents had not allowed them to play together after school for the last week because of their visit to the “haunted shack.” Sheridan needed to see it, Lucy said. The shack would scare her, as it did them. Maybe they would see who lived there.

“It’s probably a poor homeless guy,” Sheridan said.

“Or ...” Jessica said, pausing dramatically, “it’s the Mutilator!”

“Jessica!” Lucy exclaimed. “Stop that. You’re acting like Hailey, trying to scare everyone.”

Jessica giggled, and after a short pause, Lucy joined in. Once their giggles had stopped, the two girls changed the subject to a mutual friend’s upcoming birthday party. While they chattered, Sheridan watched the horses in the corral. Something

seemed wrong. She knew from their own horses that once the hay was tossed out they were single-minded about eating for the next few hours until it was gone. It was odd, she thought, that they hadn't settled into their eating routine, but continued to mill about in the corral. They ate for a few minutes, then shuffled restlessly.

"Don't the horses seem nervous?" she asked.

Lucy and Jessica had been in deep conversation about things that had happened in school that day, and how Hailey Bond had gone home sick.

"What about them?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know anything about horses," Jessica said. "Ask me about something I know about, like piano lessons."

Sheridan dropped it. "Girlie girls," she said, dismissing them.

But she was sure that something was wrong in the corral. One of the horses, a dun, broke from the herd and rushed toward the girls, stopping short just in front of them and causing all three to step back momentarily. The dun faced them, his nostrils flared and his eyes showing wild flashes of white. His ears were pinned back. Then just as suddenly, the horse relaxed and bent his head down for a mouthful of hay.

"What did *she* want?" Jessica asked Sheridan.

"He's a he," Sheridan said. "He's a gelding, do you know what *that* means?"

"No."

"Then I won't tell you. But I don't know what he wanted. Horses shouldn't do that when they have dinner to worry about. Something's wrong."

"TUFF COULD BE a pain in the ass," Bud Longbrake said over a snifter of after-dinner brandy in his study, "but no one deserves to die like that."

Cam murmured his agreement and sipped his own drink. Joe had passed on the brandy and poured bourbon into his glass.

All three men were now in the book-lined study.

"Most employees can never be counted on," Bud said. "Loyalty lasts as long as the next paycheck. They all feel like they're owed a damned living, like they're entitled to it. That's why I like hiring guys like Roberto, who know they're getting a hell of a fair shake. But Tuff worked here at least five times over the years. Twice I fired his ass, but the other three times he quit to do something else. He was a surveyor's assistant for a while, then a cellphone customer service rep. Imagine that—a cowboy service rep.

"Then after being a fake mountain man in Jackson Hole for a while, old Tuff was back in this very office with his hat in his hand, begging for his job back. Now he's gone."

Joe had looked up sharply as Bud talked; something had tripped a switch.

"Bud, did you say Tuff worked with a surveyor?"

"Yup. Why?"

"I'm not sure," Joe shrugged. "It's just interesting."

Joe noticed that Cam Logue was looking him over closely, apparently trying to figure something out. He met Cam's eyes, and Cam looked away.

"Tuff did lots of things," Bud said, laughing. "Did I tell you the story he told me about trying to lift some woman at a chuck-wagon dinner theater for tourists? When he was playing a mountain man?"

While Joe listened, he refreshed the ice in his glass from a bucket on Bud's desk. The curtains on the window were open, and it was dark outside. It was getting late. He could use this as a reason to move Marybeth on, he thought. There was school tomorrow, after all.

Outside, he could see his daughters and Jessica Logue in the dim cast of the yard light.

"SOMETHING'S DEFINITELY WEIRD with the horses," Sheridan said to Lucy and Jessica, interrupting their debate over who was the cutest boy in the sixth grade.

It was getting too dark to see individuals in the corral but the herd was a dark, writhing mass. Occasionally, a horse would break loose like the dun had earlier, charge and stop abruptly, and she could see its shape against the opposite rails. But, like the dun that had bluff-charged them, the stray would inevitably return to the herd. The footfalls of the horses were distinct, and muffled in the dirt, as was the sound of them eating.

"Maybe it's the Mutilator," Jessica said.

"Stop it," Lucy said sharply. "I'm not kidding."

"I agree," Sheridan said. "Knock it off."

"I'm sorry," Jessica said in a near whisper.

Then, from the corner of the corral, within the dark herd, a horse screamed.

INSIDE THE HOUSE, Marybeth jumped. "What was *that*?"

"Just the horses," Missy said, wearing her hostess smile and filling coffee cups on a silver tray. "Bud brought them down to the corral."

"Mom," Marybeth asked, "why did he bring them down?" The tone in her voice caused Missy to frown.

"You know," she said, "since Tuff was killed, Bud's been a little nervous about the stock."

Marybeth cursed. "The girls are out there."

Marie covered her mouth with her hand.

Marybeth was halfway to the front door when Joe suddenly strode out of the study and over to her. Cam appeared at the study door with a drink in his hand, watching Joe with concern.

"Did you hear that?" Marybeth asked him.

"I did," he said.

THE DEEP BASS drumming sound of horses' hooves filled the night and reverberated through the ground itself as Joe ran from the porch toward the ranch yard and called aloud. "Sheridan! Lucy! Jessica!"

Grabbing a flashlight from the glove compartment of their van as he passed, Joe thumbed the switch. No light. The batteries were dead, damn it. He thumped the

flashlight against his thigh and a weak light beamed. He hoped the dying batteries held.

Looking up toward the corral, he could see a kind of fluttering across the ground that made his heart jump. The fluttering, though, turned out to be his daughters and Jessica Logue who were running across the ranch yard toward him from the corral with coats, hair, and dresses flying.

Thank you, God, he whispered to himself as they neared.

“Dad! Dad!”

They met him at the same instant that the outside porch lights came on and the front door opened. He could hear a rush of footsteps behind him as Sheridan and Lucy flew into him, hugging him tight. Jessica veered toward the house and buried her face in her mother’s waist.

“Something happened with the horses while we were out there,” Sheridan said, her words rushing out. “They just went crazy and started screaming.”

“It’s okay,” Joe said, rubbing their backs. “You two seem all right.”

“Dad, I’m scared,” Lucy said.

Marybeth came down from the porch and both girls released Joe and went to her. Joe looked up to see Bud Longbrake filling the door, a .30-.30 Winchester rifle in his hands. He was looking toward the corral.

“Do you have a flashlight, Joe?” Bud asked, walking heavily from the porch.

“Yes, a bad one,” Joe said.

“Bring it,” Bud said, passing the van and walking across the ranch yard toward the corral.

Joe nodded, even though he knew Bud couldn’t see him in the dark. He wished he had brought his pickup, with his good flashlight as well as a spotlight, instead of the van. His shotgun—the only weapon he could hit anything with—was nestled behind the coiled springs of his pickup bench seat.

As they approached the corral, which was still exploding with the fury of pounding hooves and the whinnies and guttural grunts of spooked horses, Joe felt rather than heard someone close in next to him. Cam.

“Okay, calm down, goddamit!” Bud shouted to his horses in the corral. Joe lifted his weak beam through the railing. Horses shot through the dim pool of light as they ran and thundered through the corral. He caught flashing glimpses of wild eyes, exposed yellow teeth, heavy, blood-engorged muscles flexing under thin hide, billowing nostrils, flying manes and tails.

Joe, Cam, and Bud climbed the rails and dropped into the soft turf of the corral.

“Take it easy, take it easy,” Bud sang, trying to calm them. They walked shoulder-to-shoulder through the corral. Horses swirled around them. Joe could feel the weight of the animals shaking the ground through his boot soles. A horse ran too close, clipping Cam and spinning him around.

“Shit, he hit me!”

“Are you all right?” Joe asked.

"Fine," Cam said, turning back around and joining Joe and Bud.

Then with a mutual, collective sigh, the horses in the corral stopped running. It was suddenly quiet, except for the labored breathing of the animals who looked at them from shadows in each corner of the corral.

"Finally," Bud said.

Joe could see a few of the horses, who moments before had been in a frenzy, drop their heads to eat hay.

"How strange," Cam said. "Remind me never to get any horses."

Joe smiled at that.

Bud lowered his rifle and whistled. "Whatever got them going is gone now."

"Could have been anything," Joe said, knowing that something as innocuous as a windblown plastic sack could sometimes create a stampede within a herd.

"Probably one horse establishing dominance over another one," Bud said. "Administering a little discipline within the herd. Or maybe a coyote or mountain lion came down from the mountains. Or Joe's damned grizzly bear."

Why is it always my bear, Joe wondered, annoyed.

He moved his light beam across the horses. Most were now eating calmly.

"Okay, fun's over," Bud declared. "Thanks for the help, boys."

Cam chuckled. "I think this is enough action for one evening."

No one said what Joe knew they were all thinking: that somebody, or something, had attacked the herd. *And the girls were right there,* he thought as a shudder rippled through him.

As they turned to go back to the house, Joe shone his light into a tight grouping of four horses drinking from the water trough. He could hear them sipping and sucking in water by the quart. The light bounced from the rippling surface of the water onto the velvety snouts of the animals, and it reflected in their eyes as they drank. As he raised the flash, he saw something.

He felt a blade of ice slice into him.

"Bud."

Joe held the faltering light steady on the second horse from the left, a blue roan. Bud and Cam were starting to climb the railing to get out of the corral.

"BUD."

Bud stopped as he straddled the top rail, and turned back to Joe.

"What is it?"

"Look."

"Oh, Jesus," Bud Longbrake whispered.

Cam said, "My God," his voice cracking.

The horse Joe shined the flashlight on raised its head from the trough. Excess water shone on its thick lips with growing beads of bright red. A thin stream of blood ran from the chin of the animal into the trough, changing the color of the water to pink. The eyes, much larger than they should be, bulged obscenely from the sides of its head. They were lidless.

Most of the roan's face had been cut away, and it hung in a strip from its jawbone, looking like a bloody bib.

ON THEIR WAY home, Joe listened in as Sheridan and Lucy described what they had seen, felt, and heard at the corral. He knew it was important for them to talk it out, even though they had told him everything after the mutilated horse was first discovered.

Bud had been kind enough to put the rifle back in the house until the Picketts were down the road, Joe had observed. When they were gone, the rancher would destroy the injured animal before it bled to death, out of the sight of Missy's grandchildren. Joe appreciated the gesture.

Bud hadn't said whether he planned to call Sheriff Barnum or Hersig before the morning.

"Dad, I just thought of something," Sheridan said from the back.

"What's that?"

"Remember that feeling we had when we found the moose in the meadow?"

"Yes," Joe said cautiously.

"I felt the same thing during my falconry lesson with Nate, when the falcons wouldn't fly."

"Okay."

"Well, this time I didn't feel anything at all. What do you suppose that means?"

Joe drove for a few miles but couldn't come up with an answer.

IN THE DRIVEWAY, he waited outside until Marybeth and his daughters were inside. Then he leaned against the hood of the van and crossed his arms, looking up. The sky was clear and milky with stars. It didn't *look* threatening, but it did appear endless and immensely complicated. There was a sliver of a moon. Over the mountains to the west was the fine chalkline of a jet trail. He saw nothing else up there that shouldn't be there. He didn't know what exactly he was looking for, or what he would do if he saw anything unusual.

This thing was beyond him, he thought.

Unless ...

Marybeth opened the front door and looked out.

"Joe, are you coming in?"

"Yup."

LATER THAT NIGHT, at 3.30 a.m., Joe was jolted awake when Marybeth suddenly sat up in bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She was breathing deeply, trying to calm down.

"I had a bad dream," she said. "I heard that horse screaming again and again."

"Are you sure it was a dream?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Positive."

"Do you want me to check our horses?"

She eased back down into bed. "That's not necessary. I know it was a dream."

He pulled her close and cupped her breast beneath her nightgown. He could feel her heart thumping. He held her until the beating slowed and her breathing flattened out. When she was asleep, he untangled himself from her and slid out of the bed.

Pulling his boots over his bare feet, clamping on his hat, and cinching the belt on his robe, Joe went outside to check the horses. He took his shotgun with him. They were fine, and he sighed in relief.

He was wide awake when he came back into the house. He entered his small office and closed the door, leaning the shotgun against the wall. It was so quiet in the house that he flinched at the noise his computer made as he booted it up.

Opening his e-mail program, he sat back and waited while mail flooded his inbox. Directives and press releases from the Cheyenne headquarters, spam, a message from Trey Crump with the subject line "How's it going?," nothing from Hersig or Dave Avery, nothing from the lab, and a very large file that took a few moments to download.

There was no subject line in the large e-mail. But the return address was "_deenadoomed666@aol.com._"

He clicked on it.

As the e-mail opened, Joe felt his breath stop. "Oh, no," he whispered.

17

R EADY AND WAITING for Joe Pickett ... it said in a stylized color font.

Beneath the header was a digital photo. As he scrolled down, Joe noticed how cold he suddenly felt, and cinched his robe tighter.

The photo was of Deena. She was posed on top of the metal table in the Airstream he had sat at with Garrett that morning. She was nude except for thick-soled Doc Martens boots. She sat on the table with her legs spread open, smiling coyly. She had a light blond wisp of pubic hair, and her vagina was pink and slightly parted. Her breasts were small and her nipples were pierced with silver rings and erect. Her skin was so white it hurt to look at it, except for the tattoos on her inner thighs and upper arms, and the bruises that mottled her ribs and neck. There was a compress bandage the size of a hand on her left shoulder. The bandage looked moist, the skin around it glistening. The ointment he had smelled in his coat, he thought. Across her abdomen was a tattoo that said ABDUCTEE.

"Oh, no," he said again.

She looked so young, so unbearably thin and unhealthy. He was not aroused. He was sickened.

Beneath the photo was another stylized caption.

Strong, tall, and silent, he tries to save her. But she doesn't want saving. She wants him inside of her like an animal. She wants him to know he can do anything to her ...

I'm not that strong, not that tall, not that silent, Joe thought, feeling his face flush.

A second photo. On her hands and knees on the table, her buttocks aimed at the camera, her face peering back at him with a grin.

Whatever he wants, however he wants it, she is agreeable. There is nothing he can do to her that hasn't been done. She likes his hat and wants to wear it ...

Another photo. This time, she is clothed. Standing outside of the Airstream wearing all black except for blood-red lipstick. She's mugging for the camera, head tilted forward, mouth parted, trying for a seductive come-hither look.

He knows where she lives, and he can't stay away. She won't be there forever, he knows. She will be gone soon, permanently out of here. She knows things, and she does things ...

Then, of all things, a graphic of a garish, yellow, smiley face.

Will he write back soon?

JOE SLUMPED IN his chair. The air in his office seemed oddly thin. He could hear the clock ticking in the living room, and Maxine snuffling outside the door to be let in.

What, he wondered, could create a girl like this? What had happened to her that resulted in this? Deena wasn't that much older than Sheridan, but she was so different.

What had caused the horrible bruises, or the wound? Had Cleve Garrett hurt her? Or were the injuries self-inflicted? Joe shook his head. He didn't understand why she had approached him this way. Is this what she thought all men wanted?

He rubbed his face hard with both hands, inadvertently knocking his hat off. His hat. She liked his hat.

"Joe?"

He nearly pitched out of his chair.

"Joe, what are you doing in here?" Marybeth asked, squinting from the light but looking at his computer screen.

He turned in his chair toward her.

"It's not what you think," he said.

"And what is it I think, Joe?" Her voice had a sharp edge.

"That I'm looking at pornography."

"Well?" She jutted her chin toward the screen, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Come here, Marybeth," he said. "Remember that girl with Cleve Garrett I told you about?"

"Sheena something?"

"Deena. Sheena would be the jungle girl."

"Yes, what about her?"

"This is from her. I guess it *is* pornography though. In the very worst kind of way."

Marybeth stood beside Joe and he showed her the message. He watched her face as he scrolled through the e-mail.

"That's disgusting," she said.

"Yup, it is. I don't know what she's thinking."

"She's thinking this will get you hot and bothered, Joe. It's like she's trying to lure you back there in the worst kind of way. Like she's desperate."

Joe nodded, sighed. "It just makes me, I don't know ..."

"It's pathetic, isn't it?" Marybeth agreed. She leaned into Joe and he held her, pressing her hip into his chest.

"You need to stay away from her," Marybeth said. "She's trouble. It looks like she's been severely abused." She paused for a moment, before continuing. "Do you think she took the pictures herself?"

That jolted him. "I assumed she did."

"But what if she didn't, Joe?"

His mind spun. What if Cleve had taken the photos and the whole thing was his idea to lure Joe back out there? To get something on him, to get some leverage Cleve could use to get into the task force? If so, Joe thought, it was despicable to use Deena in this way. Unless, of course, she was in on it as well.

"This is too much right now," Marybeth said, giving his shoulder a goodbye squeeze. "Tonight was bad enough without adding this on top of it. I'll meet you in bed. We need to try and get some sleep."

Joe sat there for a few minutes. He wasn't sure what to do with the e-mail. Should he show Hersig? Call someone? He couldn't help thinking Deena was in trouble, that Garrett was abusing her in terrible ways. Even if she let him—and Joe found that very likely, given her age and situation—that didn't mean she didn't need saving. But what could he do? Rush out to Riverside Park with his shotgun, create the Wyoming version of the seminal scene in *Taxi Driver*?

Finally, he closed down the e-mail program and shut his computer off.

BACK IN BED, Joe stared at the ceiling and waited for the alarm to ring. It took two hours, and he shut it off immediately when it sounded.

Marybeth sighed and turned over toward him, her warm hand finding his chest. He moved to her, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Nate Romanowski. He needed to find Nate and talk to him, get Nate's take on everything.

Joe slipped from the bed. Marybeth stirred.

"You're up early," she murmured.

"I'll make coffee," he said.

"While you were gone last night, did you check the horses?" she asked.

"Yup."

"Are they okay?"

"They're fine."

She opened her eyes. "Joe, are you okay?"

He hesitated. "Dandy," he lied.

The phone rang, jarring them both. Joe grabbed it from the bedstand.

"Joe Pickett."

"You the guy that's on that task force?" It was a man, and he spoke in a rushed, no-nonsense way.

"Yes, I'm on the task force."

"I asked because I called the sheriff, and the dispatcher said the sheriff is out at some ranch investigating a mutilation. A horse this time, she said. Anyway, she suggested I call you. She said you were on the team."

"What can I help you with?"

"Well, it's not as bad as a murder or a mutilation," the man said.

"I'm glad to hear that."

There was a pause. "You ever heard of a crop circle?"

It took Joe by surprise. He said, "I think so."

"Well, I think I've got one out in my pasture. I found it this morning."

18

DAVID THOMPSON, THE rancher who called, had a 200-acre place adjacent to the exclusive Elkhorn Ranches subdivision in the foothills of the Bighorns. Like the Elkhorn tract, Thompson's "ranch" had been carved from the much larger Vee Bar U Ranch once owned by a deceased lawyer Jim Finotta. By Wyoming standards, Thompson's place was not really a ranch, Joe thought as he drove there. It was a nice house with a really big lawn.

Nevertheless, Thompson had clearly paid a good deal of money for the knotty-pine sign that announced BIGHORN VIEW RANCH that Joe passed by. The road curved up and over a sagebrush hill and descended into a green, landscaped pocket where the newly built home had been nestled among pines and young cottonwoods.

On the drive out to Thompson's ranch, Joe tried to recall what he knew of crop circles, and concluded that it wasn't much. He remembered that when he was young, he'd read some kind of "Believe It or Not" book with blurry black-and-white reproductions of aerial photographs in England or Scotland of sites where the grass had been blown flat into perfect O's. There had also been photos of fields where intricately cut designs had supposedly appeared overnight, usually amid reports of cigar-shaped flying objects.

Jeez.

This made him grumpy, and anxious to discount whatever he found as quickly as he could.

Joe pulled into the ranch yard to find David Thompson was waiting. Thompson was a dark, trim man in his early sixties who had supposedly cashed out of a dot-com in Austin months before the company had crashed. With his new fortune, he had purchased a home in Galveston, Texas, for the winter and the Bighorn View Ranch for the summer. He raised and showed miniature horses. Joe didn't like miniature horses. He thought they were silly, in the same way that hairless cats were silly.

Thompson was wearing a crisp canvas barn coat and a cap that said BIGHORN VIEW MINIATURES. He opened the passenger-side door of Joe's truck and Maxine scrambled toward the middle to make room.

"Want me to show you where it is?" Thompson said, swinging into the seat.

"Might as well," Joe said, "since you're already in my truck."

Joe's sarcasm didn't register with Thompson, who appeared flushed with excitement over his discovery.

"Don't you want to ask me when I found it?" Thompson said.

"You told me it was this morning."

"I did?"

"Yup."

"Take that road," Thompson gestured, indicating an old two-track that ascended out of the pocket and over a hill. "I don't use this road very much. My corrals and miniatures are the other way. But when I got up this morning to feed the horses I just had this strange feeling urging me to go down the other road. Like a premonition, you know? Like somebody or something was willing me to take the other road."

Joe nodded.

"It's a lucky thing I found it," said Thompson. "Usually by this late in the fall I've already moved down to Texas. And especially this year, with all of the supernatural crap that's been happening around here, I had plenty of reason to leave early. But I wouldn't leave without my horses, and my goddamned unreliable horse hauler got waylaid up in Alberta somewhere. He should be here any day, and when he comes, brother, I'm out of here. I'll leave the aliens to the locals, baby."

"We thank you for that," Joe said, deadpan.

"I was thinking of selling the place anyway, you know? Moving back and forth to Texas with my minis is getting to be a drag. I might look for somewhere in New Mexico or Arizona, where it doesn't get so damned cold, you know? And where it isn't *spooked*. Problem is I'm not sure I could sell the place for what I've got into it, you know? I hear land prices are in the toilet, thanks to what's going on. I went to list the place at Logue Country Realty and the realtor there said appraisals are coming in at twenty percent lower than what they should be. Fire-sale prices, damn it."

Joe kept quiet. Thompson didn't seem to need a response in order to keep talking.

"When I saw that crop circle I thought to myself, why me? Why now? Why my ranch? But now when I hear that there was another mutilation last night, it all seems to make sense," Thompson said, talking fast. "Do you think it's all related?"

"I don't know," Joe said.

Thompson shot Joe a perturbed look. "Aren't you on the task force?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you intrigued by my discovery, then?"

Joe shrugged. "I don't know yet whether I'm intrigued. I haven't seen it."

"Well, it's just over this hill."

THEY CLEARED THE hill and Joe stopped his truck.

"Voila!" Thompson said, sweeping his hand as if presenting what was behind door number three.

Joe looked. Below them, on a sagebrush flat, was a perfect circle cut into the buffalo grass. Joe estimated that it was eighty feet in circumference. Joe rubbed his jaw, ignoring the look of triumph on David Thompson's face.

"Just like I told you, eh?" Thompson said.

"It's a circle, all right," Joe agreed.

"A *crop* circle."

Joe continued to size up the scene. "Don't you need crops for a crop circle?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

"I was just kidding."

"I," Thompson said slowly, "am less than impressed with your investigative technique, Mr. Pickett. Maybe I should have waited for the sheriff."

Joe arched his eyebrows. "Maybe. But let's go down there for a closer look."

He eased the pickup down the hill and parked it on the left side of the circle. Joe and Thompson climbed out. While Thompson leaned against Joe's pickup, Joe paralleled the ring on the outside, studying it. The ring cut through the buffalo grass turf to bare ground. It did not look singed on the edges, or ripped out. There were no pieces of broken-up turf along the edges. He was reminded of the ring of moisture a sweating, cold drink made on a countertop. He walked a full rotation around it until he was back at the truck.

Thompson looked expectant, his eyebrows raised as if to say, "See? What did I tell you?"

Joe turned, looked again at the circle, squinting.

"When was the last time you used that road we just took?" Joe asked.

"Oh, a few months, I suppose."

"Are you sure? Can you remember the last time you came down here?"

Thompson's eyebrows fell a little. "Why are you asking me this?"

Joe stuffed his hands into his Wranglers and rocked back a bit on his bootheels. "I'm trying to establish how long this thing has been here."

"I told you about that premonition I had ..."

Joe nodded. "But that doesn't mean that because you just found this thing it was made last night. You see, if you look close at the dirt in the ring you can see that it's been weathered. There's old pockmarks from rain in it. This circle has been here quite a while—at least a month, and probably longer than that."

Thompson looked puzzled for a moment, obviously doubting himself, then rebounding, as Joe knew he would.

"What difference does it make if the crop circle was made last night or a month ago? It's still a damned crop circle."

Joe shook his head. "Don't you have caretakers who live here in the winter when you're in Texas?"

"A woman stays here," Thompson said impatiently, trying to figure out where Joe was going. "Heidi Moos. She stays in the guest house and watches over the place."

"I know Heidi," Joe said. She was an attractive, dark-haired woman who had moved to Wyoming from Alabama. "She moved here with her horse a few years ago. She's a horse trainer, right? I mean *real* horses."

Thompson puffed up. "I resent that, mister. Miniatures are real horses."

Joe raised his hand, palm up. "Calm down, that's not what I meant. I should have said 'full-sized' horses. My point is that she's a horse trainer. This is the only flat ground on this side of the hill. It's the best place to set up a portable round pen. You know what a round pen is, right?"

"Of course I do," Thompson said. "I've got one by my corral."

"My guess is that Heidi set up her round pen right here last winter and spring," Joe said, soldiering on. "I've seen how horses running in a controlled circle eventually cut right through the turf like this. I've got a couple of these 'crop circles' next to my own corral, where my wife, Marybeth, works our horses."

Thompson's face was red. "That's how you want to explain it away?"

"Yup."

"You think I'm overreacting? That what we're looking at is where Heidi set up her round pen?"

"Yup."

"Well for Christ's sake," Thompson said, shaking his head. "No wonder you people haven't figured out these mutilations yet, if this is how you work ..."

"Why don't we call Heidi?" Joe said. "And ask her where she set up her round pen?"

Thompson stared, his eyes boring into Joe. He clearly was not a man who was used to being questioned.

JOE THOUGHT ABOUT David Thompson's so-called crop circle—round pen—as he drove down the highway toward the turnoff to Nate Romanowski's house. David Thompson was not stupid, and, despite his faults and his miniature horses, he was a serious man. Yet the atmosphere in Twelve Sleep County was now such that when Thompson saw a ring on the ground he didn't think "round pen," he thought "crop circle."

This thing was warping the mindset of the valley, Joe thought. Football practice was being held indoors. Out-of-state hunters had cancelled \$3,000 trips with local outfitters. A public meeting that was supposed to be held at the Holiday Inn by the Wyoming Business Council had been switched to Cody. Livestock was being housed in barns and loafing sheds. Schoolchildren were wearing aluminum foil over their caps as they walked to school.

Despite the CBM activity, Saddlestring was being squeezed economically. Residents had assumed a siege mentality, of sorts, and tempers flared more quickly. Marybeth had told him of a fistfight in line at the grocery store.

The task force was getting nowhere. There had not even been another meeting, because no one had anything to report.

But for a reason he couldn't quite articulate, Joe thought that there was an answer to what was happening. Whatever the answer was, it was just sitting there, obvious, waiting for Joe or someone to find it. He just hoped it could be discovered before any more animals, or people, died.

19

AS JOB RUMBLED down the rough dirt road that led to Nate Romanowski's stone cabin on the bank of the Twelve Sleep River, he searched the sky for falcons. The sky was empty.

Nate's battered Jeep was parked beside his home, and Joe swung in next to it and turned off his engine. "Stay," he told Maxine, and shut the door. If let out, she would have been drawn straight to the falcon mews, where Nate kept two or three birds, and she would upset them by sniffing around.

Joe knocked on the rough-hewn door, then opened it slightly. It was dark inside, but it smelled of coffee and recently cooked breakfast. Joe called for Nate but got no response. This wasn't unusual, because Nate often went on long treks on foot or horseback in the rough breaklands country surrounding his house. Joe checked the mews, then the corral. No Nate.

Nate Romanowski had a habit of vanishing for weeks at a time. He took clandestine trips to surrounding states—Idaho, mostly—although he sometimes went overseas. Joe and Sheridan fed his birds while he was gone. Nate told Joe little about the purpose of his journeys, and Joe didn't ask. He was involved in things Joe didn't want to know about, and their short history together already had too many skeletons in the closet as it was. Their relationship was unusual, but oddly comfortable, Joe thought. Nate had pledged his loyalty to Joe in exchange for proving his innocence in a murder, and that was that. Joe hadn't asked for the pledge, and was a little surprised and awed that Nate had remained steadfast, even extending his protection to Joe's family. Joe and Marybeth never discussed what they knew about Nate Romanowski—his years with no record when he worked for a mysterious Special Forces operation, the murder of two men sent to find him in Montana, the death of a corrupt FBI agent, and his involvement in Melinda Strickland's suicide the winter before. Sheridan worshipped the man, and was learning falconry from him. Sheriff Barnum, his deputies, Agent Portenson—even Robey Hersig—feared Nate, and were suspicious of Joe's friendship with him. That was okay with Joe.

WITH THE STRANGE things that had been happening in the valley, Joe looked for Nate with a niggling feeling of dread forming in the back of his mind. The image of the defaced horse at the Longbrake Ranch had not yet left him. It bothered him more than anything he had seen, including the remains of Tuff Montegue.

"Nate!" His shout echoed from the deep red wall on the other side of the river. It was still, and the echo returned twice before it faded away.

He thought he heard a faint response, and he stood and listened. The sound had come from the direction of the river.

“Nate, are you down here?” Joe called as he walked. He scanned the near banks and followed the river downstream until it S-curved out of sight, but saw no one. He cocked his head and looked up—something he had never felt the need to do before—and saw nothing unusual in the clear blue sky.

When he looked down he saw it. A thin plastic tube broke the surface of the river in a calm back eddy ten feet from the bank. As he approached the water he could make out a dark form below the water, and long blond hair swirling gently in the current like kelp. Nate was underwater, breathing through the tube.

Joe shook his head and sat down on a large curl of driftwood. He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He noticed that in the hollow of the log was Nate’s massive .454 Casull handgun in its holster, within quick reach if Nate needed it.

“Nate,” Joe said, “do you have a minute?”

Nate tried to talk through the tube. It came out in a nasal gibberish. This was the sound Joe had heard earlier when he called.

“Should I come back?”

After a beat, the water puckered and Nate sat up, breaking the surface. He looked at Joe through strands of wet hair that stuck to his face. Nate was wearing a full-body wet suit that gleamed in the morning sun. He removed the tube with two fingers as if taking a cigarette from his mouth.

“Should I even ask?” Joe said.

Brushing his hair from his face, Nate grinned, fixing Joe with his hard-eyed stare. Nate had angular features with a bladelike nose separating two sharp, lime green eyes.

“It’s amazing what you can hear under the surface,” he said. “I’ve been doing this since the river warmed up. I thought it would be relaxing, but there’s a lot going on under the water. The river looks calm but things are happening in it all the time.”

Joe just nodded.

“It’s like being one with the earth, as stupid as that probably sounds,” Nate said. “When you’re below the surface, you’re out of the air and wind and everything is solid, connected to some degree. That’s why you can hear and sense so much.”

His eyes widened. “I’ve heard river rocks dislodging and rolling down the bed of the river in the current. They sound a little like bowling balls going down a lane. I hear fish whooshing by, going after nymphs. I heard you drive up, get out, and walk around. If I concentrated, I could even hear your footsteps from underneath walking toward the river.”

Joe thought about it. It wasn’t something he would want to do, but this was Nate.

“Pretty cool,” Nate said.

NATE BREWED MORE coffee in his house while Joe told him everything that had happened with the murders and mutilations. Nate listened in silence, but was obviously paying attention. He served two large mugs and sat down across from Joe.

They were on their third cup when Joe finished.

Nate leaned back and laced his fingers together behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, his mouth set. Joe waited.

"I think you're thinking too much like a damned cop," Nate finally said. "You're letting the events steer you. You need to get out of your cop mode and look at everything with a fresh eye, from a completely different angle."

"What angle would that be?" Joe had expected something like this from Nate, although he had hoped for more. Like an answer. Or at least a theory.

"I think you're assuming that everything is connected. That's a logical, coplike approach. But maybe everything isn't connected. Maybe there are a bunch of different things going on, and they just happen to be culminating around us."

"You sound a little like Cleve Garrett," Joe sighed.

Nate's eyebrows shot up. "Just because he's a weirdo doesn't mean he might not be on to something. But from what you told me, I disagree. Cleve Garrett is trying to attribute it all to one thing, aliens or whatever. What I'm saying is that maybe the connections really aren't there. That there are different threads running."

Joe sat up, tingling with recognition. This was what he had been speculating. "From what you've heard, can you pick out any of the threads?"

"Maybe. When was the last time there were credible reports in this area about cattle mutilations?"

"Thirty years ago," Joe said. "In the early and mid-seventies."

"What was going on then?"

"I don't know. Gas lines, recession, Jimmy Carter."

Nate smiled coldly. "But what was going on here, on the land around us?"

Joe thought, and he felt another glimmer of recognition. "Oil and gas development gone wild," he said. "It was the last big energy boom."

"Right," Nate said. "At least until today. It was a little like what we're seeing now, wouldn't you say?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Joe confessed.

"Of course not. You've been thinking like a cop. You need to think bigger, look at everything fresh."

"There are a lot of roughnecks here," Joe said. "They come in from all over the country to work the CBM wells and lay the pipe. The last time there were this many people around was the last time this area had a boom."

Nate said, "Right. I bet that makes you wonder if any of them were here before, doesn't it? Or maybe—and I already know what you'll think of this angle—somebody or something gets mad whenever we start drilling into the ground."

Joe moaned. "That's too screwy, Nate."

"It's fresh thinking, is what it is," Nate countered.

Joe was silent for a moment. "Anything else?"

Nate solemnly shook his head. "I'm worried about the bear. I had a dream about a bear the other night."

"What?"

"In my dream, the bear was sent here for a reason. He has a mission," Nate said, narrowing his eyes and whispering conspiratorially.

Wincing, Joe looked away. What was *this*? First Sheridan had ominous dreams, and now Nate. Was it something in the air? Had the two of them discussed this?

"So what are you saying, Nate?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's just that I have a feeling that the bear plays a central role somehow. Like I said, I dream about this bear."

Joe said nothing. Nate simply thought differently than anyone Joe had ever met. To Nate, anything was possible.

"One other thing," Nate said. "Have you considered the possibility that the two human murders have nothing to do with the cattle and animal mutilations?"

"Actually, yes I have," Joe said.

"Have you pursued it?" Nate asked.

"Barnum and Portenson are in charge of the murders."

"And you trust *them*?"

Joe drained his mug and stood up. His head was spinning.

As he walked out to his pickup, Nate followed. "I've got a special connection with that bear because of the dreams. I would like to meet the bear, get into his head," Nate said. "Will you call me if there are any more sightings?"

Joe said that he would. He didn't even pretend to understand what Nate was talking about.

"Start fresh, is my advice," Nate said as Joe climbed into his truck. "Fuck Barnum and Portenson. They're cops. They either want an easy explanation or they want the whole thing to just go away."

Joe started the engine and Nate leaned into the pickup, filling the open driver's-side window. "Call me if you need some help. Backup, or whatever."

"The last time I did that you cut off a guy's ear and handed it to me," Joe said.

NATE WAS RIGHT about one thing, Joe decided. Although a couple of the things he threw out seemed unlikely—a bear on a mission, for example—what Nate had said about thinking differently made some sense.

Joe plucked his cellphone off of the dashboard and speed-dialed Robey Hersig's office. Hersig was in.

"Robey, Joe."

"Hey, Joe." Hersig sounded tired.

"Anything of note from the task force?"

There was a long sigh. "Your notes from your interview with that Garrett guy have been quite a source of amusement, as you might have guessed."

Joe thought about telling Hersig about the e-mail from Deena, and decided against it for the moment. He hadn't decided how he should reply and he needed to reply, to keep her talking to him. Although he hoped she'd cool it with the digital photos of herself.

"Anything in regard to Tuff or the other guy?" Joe asked.

"Nothing of significance," Hersig said. "I know Barnum and Portenson have been interviewing people who knew them, that sort of thing. Standard procedure. But if either of them have anything, they haven't told me yet. The investigation is stone cold, and although I hate to say it, we're just sitting around waiting for another corpse, or a lucky break. But there's nothing so far. That's why I haven't called a new meeting."

"Robey," Joe said, "given the situation I want to widen my part of the investigation."

"You mean investigate the murders?" Hersig sounded hesitant.

"Yup."

"That'll piss off Barnum, for sure."

"I can live with that."

Hersig chuckled uncomfortably. "I'm not sure I can authorize that, Joe."

"You don't have to. I'm independent. I'm a game warden; they have no authority over what I do or don't do."

"Aw, Joe ..." Then, "What's your angle?"

"I'm not sure I have one. But I can't see how it could hurt to look at the murders from another perspective. Maybe we can compare notes at a task-force meeting and find some discrepancies in our information. That might lead us somewhere."

Hersig didn't reply. In his mind, Joe could see Hersig sitting forward in his chair, elbows on his desk, concern on his face as he thought it through. "All right, all right," he said. "But out of courtesy I'll need to advise Barnum and Portenson."

"Fine."

"And that sound you'll hear will be the explosion when Barnum gets the news," Hersig said.

"Hey, those guys are welcome to go talk to Garrett or zoom around with their sirens on looking at crop circles that aren't crop circles," Joe said. "Maybe they'll figure out something I missed."

"As if they'd do that."

"Well ..."

"Good luck, Joe."

"Thank you," he said, rolling toward town. *Here's where we start to make people angry.*

PART THREE

20

HIS STARTING PLACE would be the site of Tuff Montegue's murder, Joe decided. For reasons he had trouble articulating even to himself, he felt that Tuff's death was the key to cracking things open.

After grabbing a quick lunch at the Burg-O-Pardner on the edge of town, Joe passed through the small downtown toward the bridge over the river. Not Ike was fishing again, looping a fly-line through the air. Joe pulled off the road on the other side of the bridge and got out. Maxine joined him, and he cautioned her to stay close. He had just about broken her habit of wanting to retrieve artificial flies that landed on the water.

Not Ike was a huge man with large, yellowed eyes, a quick smile, and a barrel chest so stout that his fishing vest strained to stay buttoned over the tattered I'M NOT IKE sweatshirt. When he saw Joe, the smile flashed, and he waved. Joe waited at the edge of the river, watching Not Ike's graceful cast play out. Not Ike placed a dry fly perfectly inside the muscle of a current, and mended his line back so the line wouldn't overtake the fly in the water. The dry fly drifted over the top of a dark, still pool. Joe saw a flash beneath the surface of the water, heard the *ploop* sound of the trout taking the fly, and watched the fly-line tighten and rise out of the water to the tip of Not Ike's rod, which bent in the shape of a boomerang.

"I got one!" Not Ike laughed. He had a booming laugh that made Joe smile.

Not Ike retrieved the trout patiently, not horsing it in, and eventually netted it. He held it up for Joe to see, and the sun flashed on the bright rainbow sides of the cut-bow trout—a hybrid of a native cutthroat and rainbow trout—and the beads of water that glistened on the net.

"Three for me!" Not Ike proclaimed.

Not Ike always claimed he had caught three fish, whether the actual number was one or twenty.

"Nice fish," Joe said when Not Ike reached the edge of the riverbank.

"Nice fish, nice fish," Ike repeated, then looked up, his brow furrowing. "What you need? You need to check my license again?"

"You know it," Joe said.

"All right, all right, gimme a minute." Joe watched as Not Ike walked back out a few feet, eased the net into the water, removed the fly, and released the fish. Joe could

see the trout hover for a moment below the surface, then with a powerful twist it shot out of sight. *The man knows how to release a fish, God bless him*, Joe thought.

Not Ike waded noisily toward the shore, still grinning. "Three for me!"

Ike Easter had told Joe that his cousin had once been lucid, if a little mean, and that he had become mixed up with the wrong crowd in Denver. He'd gotten involved in gangs and drugs, and was in the middle of it during the Summer of Violence when he had taken three .22 bullets in the back of his head, was dumped in the Five Points district, and left for dead. When he finally recovered three years later, he was a different man. Easter said Not Ike now had the day-to-day intelligence of a five- or six-year-old boy, and so Easter had agreed to become his legal guardian. Soon after he arrived in Saddlestring, Robey Hersig had taught Not Ike how to fish. Fishing gave Not Ike a purpose, and as far as Joe knew, fishing was what Not Ike *did*. Which was another reason for not coming down too hard on the man for having an improper license.

While Joe checked the license Not Ike handed him, the big man loomed over him with the blank but brilliant smile. The license had expired the week before. "Jeez, what would it take for me to drive you over to Barrett's right now and stand there with you while we bought you an annual fishing license?" Joe asked.

"Ain't got the money for the big one," Not Ike said.

"You say 'big one' like it costs a fortune. It's only fifteen dollars."

"Ain't got fifteen dollars, Joseph." Not Ike was the only person who had ever called Joe "Joseph." Joe didn't know why.

"Look, I'll buy you one," he said. "You don't even need to spend your own money."

Not Ike took this as a personal affront, and scowled. "Don't want your charity, Joseph. Never have, never will."

Joe sighed. He had offered to buy Not Ike a license before, and Not Ike had refused him then also.

"Maybe I should talk to Ike about it."

"Won't do no good," he said, shaking his head as if sharing Joe's frustration. "He knows I won't take charity."

Joe handed the license back. "Well, at least go get a valid temporary one when you can, okay?"

Not Ike nodded. He concentrated on refolding the permit and sliding it into his vest pocket. His big face furrowed as he did it. Not Ike had poor motor-skill coordination, and although his casting was graceful, it took him ten minutes to button up his fly-fishing vest, and longer than that to tie on a new fly. He had all the patience in the world, Joe thought, all the patience that didn't manifest itself in greedy, impatient fishermen like Jeff O'Bannon.

"Yeah, okay," Not Ike said. "You gonna give me a ticket?"

Joe shook his head. "Just get the new permit, okay?"

Not Ike looked up, his face dark with sudden concern. "You found the Ripper yet?"

"No."

Not Ike stepped close to Joe. "I think I seen them in the alley downtown the night before those two men got killed."

"Really."

"I was fishin' a ways upstream, around the corner. I told the sheriff and that deputy. Even the FBI guy."

Joe wasn't sure what to ask. "What did they look like?"

"Wiry. Hairy and wiry. Creepylike. They were up in the alley, in the shadows," Not Ike said and gestured toward downtown Saddlestring, toward the alley behind the buildings on Main Street.

"And there's something else."

"What's that?"

Not Ike leaned in even closer, until his lips were nearly touching Joe's ear, and his voice dropped dramatically. "*I caught three fish that night.*"

TUFF'S DEATH WAS likely caused by massive head injury," the county coroner told Joe when he finally returned Joe's cellphone call. "It was obvious even before we sent the body to the FBI that there was severe head trauma. The wound looked like what a hammer or baseball bat would make, but most likely it was caused by a rock he hit when he was thrown from the horse. We found blood and tissue on a rock up there."

"What about the autopsy?" Joe asked, as he drove. "Anything unusual?"

"Nope. His blood alcohol level was .15, so he was legally drunk. But I don't think there are any laws against that if you're riding a horse."

"But nothing else you found that was odd? Toxicology?"

Joe could hear tinny country music playing in the background in the coroner's office.

"Nothing other than the obvious mutilations and the teeth marks of your grizzly bear."

Joe rolled his eyes. *His* bear again.

"Have you spoken to the coroner in Park County about the other guy?" Joe asked. "Or should I call him?"

"I talked to Frank yesterday," the coroner said. "He's a friend of mine. Basically, he determined the same thing on Mr. Tanner: blunt trauma head injury likely caused the death, although Frank thought it was possible that the blow to the head didn't kill the victim outright. Frank said it was possible the man had a severe concussion, and that they started skinning him before he actually expired."

"Yikes," Joe said, feeling a chill.

"I agree."

"Anything else?"

"Well, Frank's guy didn't have any of the other wounds we saw with Tuff Montegue. The body seemed to be found in the same place it fell, and there was no predation of any kind on it. Your bear didn't make it over to Park County, I guess."

"Right," Joe said absently, but it made him think of something. "Thanks, Jim."

"You bet," the coroner said. "I've been over all of this with Sheriff Barnum and Agent Portenson."

"I know," Joe said, his mind elsewhere.

ON THE OTHER side of town, outside the town limits, Joe pulled off of the highway into the rutted, unpaved parking lot of an after-hours club called the Bear Trap. The Bear Trap was a one-level cinder-block building with bars on the few small windows and a fading MEMBERS ONLY sign on the front door. The place looked like a bunker. There were five vehicles, battered pickups parked at odd angles near the front of the club. The Bear Trap skirted liquor laws by proclaiming itself a private club, and it catered to drinkers who were still thirsty after the bars in Saddlestring closed at 2 A.M. It made the Stockman's Bar in town seem like an upscale establishment. Joe had been to the Bear Trap once before, following up on an anonymous poaching hotline tip that a "member" had been seen taking a pronghorn antelope out of season and that the poacher had retired to the club after field-dressing the animal.

The poacher had been easy to find and arrest, because the still-warm carcass of the antelope was in the back of his pickup under a tarp, blood running in thick strings from beneath the tailgate into the mud, and the man himself was at the bar wearing a shirt matted with blood and clumps of bristly pronghorn hair. The poacher surrendered without a fight, and seemed to look forward to a calm night in jail. The Bear Trap was the kind of a place where a blood-stained shirt didn't really stand out, the bartender had told him later. The bartender's name was Terry Montegue, Tuff's brother.

Joe checked his gun and the pepper spray on his belt before entering. Once he was inside, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The barred windows were shuttered closed, and the only light came from Coors, Bud, and Fat Tire beer signs, a fluorescent backlight over the bar, and an ancient jukebox playing Johnny Horton songs. Joe liked Johnny Horton, but wasn't sure he could ever justify the fact if somebody challenged him to say why.

Four drinkers were crowded together on stools in the middle of the bar, and Terry Montegue hovered over them behind the taps. Joe heard the sound of dice being scooped into a cup, and saw a clumsy flurry as the drinkers stuffed the cash they had been gambling into their coat pockets.

"Nothing to worry about," Terry told the drinkers, looking over them at Joe. "It's just the game warden."

Joe smiled to himself, gave the drinkers a wide berth, and sat on a stool at the end of the bar.

Montegue was tall and bald with a beer belly that hid the buckle on his belt. He had a fleshy, cruel drinker's face, made worse by the scar that cut a white, wormlike path up his cheek, through his eyelid, and into his brow. He wore a too-small short-sleeved shirt that showed off his arm muscles, as well as the rattlesnake-head tattoos on both forearms.

"Can I get you something?" Montegue asked.

Joe looked up at the drinkers, who were trying to look at him without being obvious. They looked like out-of-work ranch hands or CBM roughnecks between crew shifts. Joe guessed the latter, since their pockets were stuffed with cash. He wondered what he would turn up if he called their plates in.

"I thought you had to be a member to drink here?"

Montegue's upper lip arched, and Joe assumed it was a smile. Montegue reached under the bar and tossed a thick pad of perforated cards on the counter. They were blank membership cards, Joe saw.

"Membership costs fifteen bucks a year, or ten with your first drink. You wanna join?"

"Nope," Joe said.

"What, then?"

"Your brother, Tuff. I'm a member of the task force ..."

One of the drinkers snorted down the bar, and turned away. The others stared ahead, not looking at each other or, Joe surmised, they would be forced to laugh.

Joe started again. "I'm investigating the death of your brother, Tuff. I want to ask you a few questions."

Montegue sighed, leaned forward, and placed both of his palms on the bar. He rotated his arms to give Joe the full effect of his triceps. "The sheriff's been here, and some FBI dork. Are you guys just following each other around?"

"Sort of," Joe admitted.

"I bet whoever sucked the blood out of Tuff was bombed for a week," Montegue said. "Look for a drunk alien, is my suggestion."

This produced a big laugh from the drinkers.

"I'm interested in what Tuff had been doing for the last couple of years," Joe said. "I know he was working for Bud Longbrake at the time of his death, but what else was he into?"

Montegue went down the list: ranch hand, school bus driver, roofer, customer service rep, surveyor, and professional mountain man at a Wild West show, until he hurt his back.

"When was he a surveyor?"

"Well, he wasn't actually a surveyor. He was more like a surveyor's peon."

"He was a rodman," one of the eavesdropping drinkers said. "You know, the guy who walks out and holds the rod so the surveyor can shoot it."

"Who did he work for?"

Montegue leaned back and rubbed his chin. "I know he worked a little for the county on the roads, but he also worked for some big outfit based out of Texas that was doing work up here." He turned to the drinkers. "Anybody remember the name of that company Tuff worked for a while? I remember him bragging about it, but I can't remember the name."

"Something Engineering," one of the drinkers said. "Turner Engineering?"

Montegue frowned. "No, that ain't it. Something like that, though. Why does it matter?" he asked Joe.

Joe shrugged. "I'm not sure it does. I was just curious. I'll check around."

"Check away," Montegue said.

"Did Tuff have enemies? Someone who might want to kill him?"

Montegue snorted, "Me, at times. He owed me 850 bucks. He still does, I guess, and I aim to sell a couple of his rifles so we're even."

Joe nodded.

"He had his share of fights, I guess. But he's like all of these assholes. They fight, then they buy each other a drink, then they're butt-buddies for life. I can't think of any serious enemies Tuff had. Anything else you want to ask me?"

"Nothing I can think of," Joe said. "But I might come back."

"Feel free," Montegue said, then thought of something that brought a smile to his face. "In fact, bring your wife. I'll waive the first year of membership if you bring *her*."

"I'll *pay* for your membership if you bring her," one of the drinkers said, and the others laughed.

"Leave my wife out of it," Joe said with enough steel in his voice that Montegue raised his hands in an "I'm just kidding" gesture.

*

AS HE CLIMBED into the Bighorn Mountains and neared Bud Longbrake's Ranch, Joe mulled over a theory that had been floating in the back of his mind. Something about Tuff's death was just a little bit wrong. It almost but not quite fit the pattern.

The wounds on the cattle and wildlife had been reported in gruesome detail in the *Saddlestring Roundup*, Joe thought. What hadn't been reported was the exact kind of cut made in the hides of the cows. A person following the story would have known just enough to make Tuff's murder appear to be like the others, he thought. But the wrong knife or cutting instrument was used. And how could a killer possibly prevent predators from finding the body? While there was something extraordinary in the bodies of the cattle, moose, and Stuart Tanner that apparently prevented predation, Tuff's killer obviously hadn't been able to duplicate whatever it was.

Maybe, Joe thought, Tuff's murder was a copycat and entirely unrelated to the others. Maybe Tuff was killed for reasons wholly different from the other deaths, by someone who saw his opportunity to take advantage of the bizarre happenings to solve a personal problem with Tuff Montegue.

Again, Joe felt that if he could figure out what had happened to Tuff, and who murdered the man, the answers to the other and bigger parts of the puzzle might become more apparent.

"Or maybe not," Joe said aloud to Maxine, his voice rising with frustration. "Maybe all of this crap has been the work of two wiry, hairy, creepylike guys who hang out in an alley in Saddlestring, like Not Ike said."

MARYBETH DROVE LUCY, Jessica, Hailey Bond, and Sheridan to the Logues' home after school, but something felt wrong about it. The three younger girls shared the middle seat in the van, and she could see through the rearview mirror that they were conspiring; they were animated, sneaky, whispering directly into each other's ears, barely containing excitement. Something was going on, Marybeth thought. She could tell by their body language and sparkling eyes, and the way they shot glances at her while they whispered.

She said, "Jessica, are you sure it's okay with your parents that they drive Lucy home?"

Marybeth tried to read Jessica in the mirror. The little girl was good, Marybeth thought. She could lie well.

"Yes, Mrs. Pickett, it's okay," Jessica said, while Lucy and Hailey stopped talking and looked innocently—too innocently—at Marybeth.

"And Sheridan's coming too," Lucy said.

"What?"

Sheridan chimed in, bored, from the backseat, "It's okay, Mom. Really. I'll make sure we're home for dinner."

Now Marybeth knew that something was up. Why would Sheridan want to join Lucy at the Logues? A conspiracy was afoot, no doubt. Sheridan was in on it, which was unusual in itself. Marybeth tried to read Sheridan's face in the mirror while she drove. Sheridan, anticipating the scrutiny, looked casually out the side windows of the van, feigning a sudden interest in the homes along the street.

Marybeth felt a pang; her girls were growing up. They no longer wanted to share all of their secrets with her. It hurt to think that. Maybe if she didn't work so much, Marybeth thought, it would be different. Maybe if she was home when school was out, like she used to be, her girls would confide in her again. Sheridan, especially. Sheridan used to tell Marybeth everything, lay bare her feelings and concerns, bounce things off of her while Marybeth prepared dinner. She didn't do that anymore, because of Marybeth's schedule, her work, her burgeoning new enterprise. Dinner was rushed, something she thawed in the microwave and gave Joe to grill, or takeout. While Marybeth still insisted on a family dinner together, it wasn't the same anymore. Everything was rushed. Dinner was for eating, not catching up and visiting, talking about everyone's day. Dinner now was a fuel stop that preceded homework, showers, and bed. God, she felt guilty.

But when Cam Logue had come into her office earlier in the day, looking surprisingly interesting—she chose that word, rather than others—in a black turtleneck and blazer and blue jeans and cowboy boots, and perched on the corner of her desk with his hair askew in his eyes and an open, hangdog expression on his face, and asked her if she would consider becoming a full partner in the real estate firm, she had had a brief, giddy vision of what it would be like if she succeeded as she knew she was capable of

succeeding. She pictured them moving to a home in Saddlestring with bedrooms for everyone and a stove where all four burners actually worked.

"I've been thinking about this," Cam had said, "and I believe it could be profitable for all of us." He looked at her in a way he had never looked at her before, she thought, as if he were sizing her up for the first time.

"I think it could work, too," she had said. "I could make you a lot of money."

"I don't doubt that for a second," he said, leaning toward her, inches away so she could smell his subtle scent—Joe never used aftershave lotion or cologne—"I think you would be a great asset to the company," he said.

"I know one thing," she told him, as he leaned closer. "I would bust my butt for you."

He had smiled, almost painfully. "Don't bust it, because it's perfect as it is."

Then she knew.

A line had been crossed. Cam was hitting on her, and she felt momentarily flattered. Then it passed. She wanted to be taken seriously as a professional, but now she wondered. Was this whole "get-your-real-estate-license" thing a ruse by Cam to get her into bed?

"Cam," she said, "you are way too close to me, physically, right now. Lean back. And if the reason why you want me to get my license is so something will happen with us, you're so wrong about that it makes my head hurt. Marie is my friend, and don't get me wrong—I think you're an admirable businessman—but if the reason you want me to become involved is what you're hinting at right now, well

Cam had shrunk back while she was talking, and was literally about to fall off of the desk.

"... Joe is my guy. That's it. That's all there is. He may screw up on occasion, and he doesn't make much money, but he's my guy."

She was angry at herself at that moment, because she felt tears well in her eyes, which was the last thing she wanted to have happen. But she continued, narrowing her eyes, "And if you ever, and I mean EVER, even suggest again that there is anything more than a business relationship at all, I'll tell Joe. And then I'll tell Nate Romanowski ..."

When she said the name "Nate Romanowski," Cam visibly flinched.

"... And that will be that," Marybeth concluded.

ALL OF THIS was coursing through Marybeth's thoughts as she wheeled into the Logue home, stopped fast, once again, by the pickup with South Dakota plates in the driveway. It had been moved to the opposite side of the driveway, but the rear of it still jutted out into the path.

"So Jessica, your grandparents are still here?" Marybeth asked, looking into the mirror.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is your mom feeling better? She hasn't been in the office in a couple of days."

"I think so," Jessica said. But it was obvious she was bristling to get out of the car. So was Lucy. And Sheridan was glaring at her.

"Well," Marybeth said, "tell your mom hello from me and tell her I wish her to get well."

"Okay, Mrs. Pickett."

Marybeth turned in her seat, stern. "You girls be home in time for dinner. Stay away from those buildings in the back. And if Marie isn't feeling well enough to bring you home, you call me and I'll come get you, okay?"

Lucy nodded. Sheridan mumbled something, averting her eyes.

"What was that, Sherry?"

"Nothing."

But Marybeth had heard what Sheridan said. *Like you're going to cook dinner*, was what she mumbled.

Stung and hurt, Marybeth watched her girls skip toward the old house. They were leaning into each other, conspiring again. For the second time that day, she felt tears well in her eyes.

22

"SO HOW MUCH farther is it?" Hailey Bond asked boldly, but there was a tremor of false courage in her voice.

"Right up here," Jessica said. "And don't talk so loud. Maybe we'll catch him in the shack."

Sheridan reluctantly followed the three younger girls. She couldn't believe she had let Lucy talk her into this. But Lucy had begged her older sister to accompany them, and Sheridan felt an obligation, and also responsibility for Lucy's well-being. If there was something to this crazy story, Sheridan thought, she wanted to be there for Lucy. It made her uncomfortable to be with the younger girls, with their chattering, and she wondered if she had ever been like that. Probably not.

"It's right up here," Jessica said, stopping and turning, holding her finger to her lips to shush everyone. "From now on, just *whisper*."

"You're trying to scare me," Hailey said aloud.

"Whisper!" Jessica admonished.

Hailey shrugged, trying to act brave.

This is silly, Sheridan thought. Lucy would get it for this later.

But Sheridan noticed Lucy looking at her with a false, frightened smile. Even if it was silly, Lucy was taking it seriously. Sheridan nodded to her, *go on*.

The shack seemed to morph out of the thick timber, as if it were a part of it. The shape of it seemed partly blurred, because it fit in so well with the trees. It was older, smaller, and more decrepit than Sheridan had imagined.

Jessica took a step ahead of the girls and turned, wide-eyed. She gestured toward the open window near the front door of the shack. This was as far as she and Lucy had been before. There was something in the air, maybe just the silence, but it got to Hailey Bond. Hailey shook her head, *no*.

"I'm not going closer," Hailey said in an urgent whisper. "You guys are just trying to scare me."

Sheridan noticed the smirk of satisfaction on Jessica's face. Sheridan hoped that the whole thing wasn't a setup, and that she had been asked along to legitimize it. If that turned out to be the case, Lucy would *really* get it later. But it didn't seem like something she would do. In fact, she had stepped back and was standing next to Sheridan, clutching at her hand.

"Let me look," Sheridan said, shaking off Lucy's hand.

The three younger girls stared at her, their eyes wide.

"Step aside," Sheridan whispered.

The girls parted, and Sheridan strode past them. She tried to walk with confidence, with courage. But she felt her knees weaken as she approached the window. She remembered Lucy saying that she and Jessica had trouble seeing in. For Sheridan, that should be no problem. Her chin was about the same height as the bottom of the windowsill.

She slowed as she neared the window. It was dark inside. She never even considered opening the door and walking in.

She approached the windowsill, stopping a few inches from it. She leaned forward, holding her breath.

There was a sleeping bag on the floor, all right. With nobody in it. There were magazines, papers, empty cans. A small gas stove. Books—hardbacks, thick ones. And, on a square of dark material, what looked like silverware. A lot of silverware.

She didn't exactly lose her nerve, but when she turned around toward the younger girls she saw them running. Hailey was gone, Jessica was disappearing into the timber. Lucy held back, fear on her face, waiting for her older sister.

Sheridan was about to tell her sister there was nothing to worry about when she noticed that Lucy's eyes had shifted from her to the side of the shack. Sheridan followed Lucy's eyes, and felt her own heart whump against her chest.

He was a tall man, thick and dirty. Sheridan saw him in profile as he came from around the shack. He was looking at Lucy. He had long, greasy hair and a wispy beard. His nose was hooked, his mouth pursed, his eyes black and narrow. He wore a heavy, dirty coat. His trousers were baggy.

"Get the HELL out of here!" he snarled at Lucy. "Go away!"

Lucy turned on her heels and ran a few feet, then stopped again. Sheridan knew why. Lucy wouldn't run without her sister.

The man hadn't yet seen Sheridan, who was now hugging the side of the building. Sheridan hoped he wouldn't turn his head and see her.

But he did.

For a second, she looked into his eyes, which were dark and enraged. Maybe a little frightened, she thought later.

“G-g-get OUT OF HERE, YOU l-l-little b-b-bitch!” he screamed. Her eyes slid down the front of him, at his coat. The name “Bob” was stenciled above a breast pocket.

He took a step toward her, and Sheridan ran. She had never run faster, and she overtook Lucy in seconds. She reached back, found the hand of her younger sister, and didn’t let go as they weaved in and out of trees, around untrimmed brush, until they collapsed within sight of the Logue home.

23

AN HOUR AND a half away, after calling Marybeth to tell her that he’d be getting home later than usual, Joe drove up the two-track on the Longbrake Ranch toward the treeline where Tuff Montegue was killed. He wanted to retrace the route, to be there in the same place and at the same time of night that the coroner suggested Tuff was killed.

There was a crisp fall chill in the air. The beginning of dusk had dropped the temperature a quick twenty degrees. The chill, along with the last of the fall colors in the aspen pockets that veined through the dark timber, seemed to heighten his senses. Sounds seemed crisper; his vision extended; even the dry, sharp smell of the sage seemed to have more of a bite. Maybe it was because just prior to darkness the wind usually stopped, and it was the stillness that brought everything out.

He was placing himself right square in the middle of it, using himself as bait. Marybeth wouldn’t approve.

The grass around the murder scene was still flattened by all of the vehicles that had been up there, so it was easy to find. He stopped and killed the engine. Maxine eyed him desperately, her excitement barely contained.

“Yup, we’re going to get out,” he told her, “but you’re sticking close to me.”

With that, she began to tremble. Dogs were so easy to please, Joe thought.

Pulling on his jacket, he swung out of his pickup and drew his twelve-gauge Wingmaster pump shotgun from its scabbard behind the seat, loaded it with double-ought buckshot, and filled a jacket pocket with more shells. He pulled on a pair of thin buckskin gloves, clamped his Stetson on tight, and walked the perimeter of the crime scene. It had been cleaned up, he was glad to note. No cigarette butts or Coke cans in the grass. Maxine worked the area as well, nose to the ground, drinking in the literal cornucopia of smells—wildlife scat, blood, maybe the bear, a dozen Sheriff’s Department people, the ME, the coroner, anything else that clung to the grass.

He turned and faced east, studying the shadowed treeline above him, wondering what it was that Tuff and his horse had seen that caused the problem. Walking very slowly and stopping often, as if he were hunting elk, he moved up the slope. He had learned that moving too quickly dulled too many senses in the wilderness. If his breath-

ing became labored, all he could hear was himself. By walking a hundred yards and then stopping, he could see more, hear more. As the light filtered out, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The sky was brilliant and close with swirls of stars. A quarter moon turned the grass and sagebrush dark blue. Maxine stayed on his heels.

For an hour, he moved slowly up the mountain until the first few of the trees were behind him and the forest loomed in front.

It wasn't so much that Joe could see something in the trees as sense it. It was a hint, a barely perceptible hint, of the pressure he had felt at much greater volume when he found the moose.

Maxine moved up in front of him and set up on point. The hair on her back was raised, and she was sniffing the air.

He reached down and ran his fingers down her neck to calm her, but she was rigid. Her eyes were wild, her ears up and alert. "Stay," he whispered to her. "Stay, girl." She was staring into the dark trees the way she would if they were bird hunting and she had found pheasants in the cover. But he could see nothing.

Suddenly, the dog exploded with purpose. She launched herself into the trees ahead—Joe missed when he grabbed for her collar—and she barked with a manic, deep-throated, hound-like howl that sounded so loud in the stillness that it even scared him. He had never seen his mild-mannered Labrador act so crazy.

"Maxine!" he yelled. No point in proceeding quietly now. "MAXINE! Get back here! MAXINE!"

He glimpsed her in the shadows, her tail and hind legs illuminated by a dull shaft of moonlight. And then she was gone.

He chased her through the trees listening for her barking. It sounded like she had veered left, then right. She sounded so *mean*, he thought. And he thought he heard something else. Footfalls? Somebody running? He couldn't be sure.

He whistled for her, and kept shouting as her barking grew more and more distant. He unholstered his Maglite and bathed the area in front of him with its beam, then sharpened it into focus and shot it up into the trees in the general direction of where she had run. He couldn't pick up her track.

"Oh, no," he moaned aloud. In the seven years he had had his dog, she had never run away from him.

He wondered whether she was stupid enough to have taken off after the grizzly bear.

Her barking was now so faint, he could barely hear it. It came from farther to the right in the forest, much deeper into the timber.

While she was still in earshot, he hoped, he fired two blasts from the shotgun into the sky. The flame from the muzzle strobed orange on the tree trunks near him.

Then he waited. Yelled. Whistled. Fired two more blasts and reloaded the shotgun with shells from his pocket. Nothing. It was now completely silent again.

"Shit, Maxine."

There was no way he could track her in the dark and find her. He couldn't even be sure she was to the right, the way sounds bounced around in the mountains. Very

reluctantly, he began to work his way back the way he had come, stopping periodically hoping to hear her bark. Joe knew that if she managed to emerge from whatever forces had turned her into the hellhound she had become, she would know to return to the pickup. In normal circumstances, he would have given her a day or so before getting worried. But these weren't normal circumstances. He pictured her mutilated body and it made him shudder.

JOE SAT IN his pickup with his windows rolled down and his headlights on. Every few minutes, he honked the horn. Maxine would know the sound, recognize it as him. He scanned the slope and timber, hoping desperately to see her.

It pained him to think that Maxine had possibly charged at something in an effort to save him. Why else would she have become so ferocious, so single-minded? It wasn't for her own sake, he thought. She wasn't the kind of dog to embrace a confrontation or want to fight.

"Damn it all," he said and fought the urge to pound the steering wheel.

He kept looking over at the passenger seat, thinking that's where she should be. He thought that he'd probably spent more hours with Maxine than with Marybeth or the girls. Maxine was a part of him.

He tried not to get maudlin. Leaning on the horn, he let the sound of it express what he felt.

He sat up with a start when something light colored and low to the ground moved just beyond his headlights. Grabbing for the spotlight, he thumbed the switch, the beam bathing the acreage in front of him with white light, seeing something doglike ... only to discover that it was a damned coyote. The coyote stopped for a moment, eyes reflecting red, then moved down the mountain.

Again, Joe cursed. And the curse released something that started in the back of his throat like a hard, hot lump and burst forward, and he sat there in the dark and he cried.

THE CELLPHONE ON the dashboard burred at 10 P.M., and Joe could see from the display that it was Marybeth. He had avoided calling her.

"So, are you coming home tonight?" she asked, an edge of irritation in her voice.

"Yes, I'm just about to leave. I'll be home in forty-five minutes."

She obviously picked up on the tone of his voice, the solemnity: "Joe, are you all right? Is something wrong?"

"Maxine ran away," he said, telling her in as few words as possible what happened. For several moments, neither spoke.

"I don't want to tell the girls," Marybeth said.

"We'll have to."

"Okay, but in the morning. Otherwise, they'll cry all night long."

Joe nodded, knowing she couldn't see the gesture.

"Oh, *Joe*," she said, in a way that made him feel guilty for once again bringing pain into their family.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said.

AS JOE DROVE down the mountain, he kept honking. He wondered if Bud Longbrake could hear him down at the ranch, and figured that he probably could. He called Bud from his cellphone, told him why he was making so much noise, asked Bud to keep an eye out for his dog.

"Your dog?" Bud said, genuine sympathy in his voice. "Damn, I'm sorry, Joe."

"Yeah, me too."

"When my first wife left me I didn't feel nearly as bad as when my dog died."

Joe didn't dare respond to that one.

A QUARTER OF a mile from where he would turn onto the highway, Joe looked into his rear-view mirror and saw something in his taillights.

"YES!" he shouted, and slammed on his brakes.

Maxine was exhausted, her head hung low, her tongue lolled out of the side of her mouth like a fat, red necktie. She literally collapsed in the road.

Joe walked back and picked her up, seventy-five pounds of dog, and buried his face in her coat as he took her to his truck. He saw no obvious wounds on her, although she was shaking. He lay her on her seat, and she looked at him with her deep, brown eyes. Filling a bowl with water from his water bottle he tried to get her to drink, but she was too tired.

As he wheeled on to the highway with giddy relief, he called Marybeth, and she burst into tears at the news. He called Bud, and said not to worry about the dog. After punching off, Joe told Maxine, "Don't ever, ever do that again, or I'll shoot you like the dog you are." He meant the first part but not the second. She didn't hear him because she was sleeping, her head where it always was when he drove, on his lap.

As he pulled into his driveway, he glanced up to see Marybeth at the window pulling the shade aside. The porch light lit up the cab of the truck, and he looked down to see if Maxine was awake. He didn't really want to have to carry her again.

That was when he noticed something wrong. Her coat seemed lighter than it should.

He snapped on the dome light and simply stared. Whatever she had seen or experienced had scared her so badly that her coat was turning *white*.

"Okay," Joe said aloud. "Enough is enough. Now I'm starting to get mad."

SHERIDAN AND LUCY were still up, even though it was past their bedtime, because Marybeth wanted them to tell Joe what had happened earlier on the Logue property. As Joe entered the house and hung his jacket on the rack in the mudroom, he saw two guilty-looking girls in their pajamas standing near the stair landing. Marybeth was behind them in the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Tell him, girls," Marybeth said to them.

Sheridan sighed and took the lead. "Dad, we screwed up this afternoon and we're sorry for it. We went out to that shack on the Logue place ..."

He leaned against the doorframe of his office and listened to Sheridan tell him how they had deceived their mother and how they snuck up to the old shack. She described the contents inside the shack; the bedroll, books, stove, the long line of gleaming silverware on a dark cloth, then the appearance of "Bob" who called her a bitch. Lucy

twisted the bottom of her pajama top in her fingers while her sister spoke, betraying her guilt.

"He called Sherry a *bitch!*" she repeated unnecessarily.

"But he didn't follow you," Joe said, wary.

Both girls shook their heads.

"You're sure?"

Sheridan nodded. "We checked behind us when we were running. I saw him go back into the shack."

Joe asked Marybeth, "Did you call the sheriff?"

"No, I wasn't sure if you would want him involved. We still can, though."

"Cam Logue needs to call Barnum," Joe said. "I don't know why he didn't the first time the girls saw this guy."

"I think he was just some homeless guy," Sheridan said. "I feel bad about bothering him, now. I feel sorry for a grown man who has to live like that."

Marybeth shot Joe a look. She was admonishing him to hold the line, to reinforce the talking to she had given the girls earlier in the evening. She knew Joe well enough that she feared he would soften. She was right, he thought. He tried to keep his expression stern and fixed.

"Girls, it's past your bedtime now," Marybeth said. "Kiss your dad goodnight and get into bed. We'll discuss your punishment later."

Relieved to be done with it, both girls approached Joe. It was then that Sheridan froze, looking around Joe toward the figure in the mudroom. "What's wrong with Maxine?"

"She's exhausted, girls," Joe said. "I thought for a while tonight I lost her."

Sheridan stepped around Joe and turned on the light switch in the mudroom.

"She's white!" she howled.

"What happened to her? Did she fall into some paint?" Lucy asked.

Joe said, "No. I think she got really scared. I've heard of it happening sometimes to animals. They get so scared that their hair turns white."

"Is she okay?" Sheridan asked, bending over the dog and patting her white fur.

"I think so," Joe said. "She's probably just tired from running to catch me."

He watched as both girls nuzzled the sleeping dog, telling Maxine that everything would be okay. Marybeth gave it a few moments before scooting the girls along.

When the girls were in bed, Marybeth turned to Joe. "I can't believe how white she is."

"I've never seen anything like it before," Joe said, slumping into his office chair. "I've never seen a lot of things before that have happened around here."

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

He sighed. "I need to check my messages, see if anything is happening. Then I'll be up."

"Don't be long."

"I won't. I promise."

He called to her before she went upstairs. "Try not to go to sleep right away, I've got some things I want to talk with you about."

"Oh, sure," she said, smiling at him. Her smile took him off guard, and he welcomed it. With her schedule, it had been a while since they had gone to bed together with both of them not too tired.

"Really," he said, grinning back. "It was quite a day. I investigated a crop circle that wasn't a crop circle, met with Nate, then lost our dog."

"Hmmm," she purred, obviously thinking of what to say next. "I had an interesting day as well. Don't be long."

NOTHING FROM ROBEY, nothing from Trey Crump, nothing from anyone. Except another e-mail from _deenadoomed666@aol.com._

"Oh, no," he whispered aloud.

There were no photos this time, only text.

Dear Joe:

I hope you got my last e-mail—didn't hear from you so I wasn't sure :) I hope you liked the pictures... things are getting a little crazy here now so this has to be short. i've got some very important things to tell you that you will want to know. don't know how much longer i'll be able to tell you these things. please come by as soon as you can or at least reply to me. i know a lot more now. i've got to go. He'll be back any minute. Just when you think that things can't get any weirder they get weirder.

Love,

Deena

Joe replied:

Deena:

I'll be by in the morning. I hope you're okay. If you need to talk to me away from him let me know and we can go somewhere. It's important that you stay safe. If you need help now, call 911 or my direct line.

Joe Pickett

*

As he prepared to go to bed, his head swimming once again with the unwanted images she had previously sent him, he saw a glow of light from beneath the closed bathroom door. He stopped and knocked.

"Come in." It was Lucy.

He opened the door wide enough to stick his head in. Lucy was standing at the sink, looking carefully at herself in the bathroom mirror.

"What are you doing, darling?"

Lucy's cheeks flushed red. "I was really scared today, Dad, when that man came out. Sherry said I looked funny. So I was just checking myself."

Joe smiled. "You were checking to see if your hair was turning white?"

"I guess so. That's what Sherry said."

"Don't worry, sweetie. It's still blond."

To Sheridan, as he passed their dark bedroom: "Quit scaring your sister, Sheridan."

"Sorry, Dad," Sheridan said from beneath her covers, where she had no doubt been hiding to muffle her giggles. "She deserved it, is all."

"Good night."

MARYBETH WAS IN bed and she looked as beautiful as he could ever remember. Her blond hair was loose and brushed to the side, fanning across a pillow. Her knees tented the covers, but the quilt was turned down enough that he could see she was wearing the dark-blue silk chemise that drove him crazy. One of the thin straps had fallen over a shoulder.

"Get in here now," she said. "We can talk later."

24

JOB WAS IN a foul mood at breakfast when he heard the sound of an engine and the crunching of gravel outside. He'd been stewing about what Marybeth had just told him about Cam Logue. Although she had handled it well—Marybeth always handled these things well, he thought—the very idea of it infuriated him. She had made Joe promise that he wouldn't do anything; wouldn't go to the office and confront Cam, or urge her to find another job. Chances of finding another job with this kind of promise in Saddlestring, as they both knew, were remote.

"I knew I never really liked him," he told her, buttering his toast.

"Joe," she cautioned him, imploring him with her eyes to let it go. As she did, Sheridan came to the table. She was always first, before Lucy. Lucy took much more time to color-coordinate her outfit and determine what her hair would look like for the day.

"I had that dream again," Sheridan announced. "I'm starting to think I know where it's headed. It's a showdown of some kind."

Joe dropped his knife on the tabletop, looking at her. "A showdown between whom?"

"Good and evil," she said, matter-of-fact.

"Who wins?" he asked.

She shrugged. "The dream hasn't gotten that far along yet."

"Well, let me know," he said cautiously.

"I will," she said, reaching for the jam. "Oh, somebody's outside. They parked next to your truck."

"Did you see who it was?" Joe asked.

"A four-wheel drive with a light-bar on top," she said, filling a bowl with cereal. "Probably Sheriff Barnum."

"Great," he said, pushing away.

"*Joe*," Marybeth cautioned again.

JOE STRODE OUTSIDE feeling as if he were about to enter a boxing ring. He clamped his hat on his head while he walked, and pushed through the front gate harder than he had intended to, making it slam open.

It was Barnum, all right, as well as Agent Portenson. They both sat in a cloud of smoke inside the vehicle. They squinted at him as he approached. Simultaneously, the driver and passenger doors opened, and both men swung out. What a good morning for them to show up, Joe thought sardonically. If only they had Cam Logue with them, he could deal with two problems at once.

"Sorry to disturb your breakfast," Barnum said, his voice more gravelly than usual and his face more gray.

"No, you aren't," Joe said, taking a position on the other side of his truck and leaning his forearms on the hood. He did not trust Barnum, and the early-morning surprise meeting had a confrontational feel about it. If something was going to happen, he wanted his truck between him and Barnum and Portenson. At least until *he* bridged the gap.

"What do you want?" Joe asked. "Why don't you get right to it? I've got a busy day ahead of me."

"You could at least invite us in for a cup of coffee," Barnum said, pretending he was offended.

Portenson snorted, and lit another cigarette.

Joe said to Barnum, "You are not welcome in my house, Sheriff. This is where my family lives. If you need to talk with me all you have to do is call, and I'll meet you anywhere."

"It's also your office, right?" Barnum said, squinting. "Working among all of those girls, it must be tough to get anything done."

"Right," Joe said, looking squarely at Barnum. "Unlike the Sheriff's Department, where things get done but they're usually wrong."

Barnum stood still, but Joe saw the sheriff's jaw muscles twitch. Barnum's flat, blue eyes didn't look away.

"Boys," Portenson said, waving his cigarette in the air. "We are getting nowhere."

"What do you want?" Joe asked again. Barnum finally broke the stare-down. "I mean, that can't be discussed at a task-force meeting?"

"Sheriff," Portenson said, "you want to start?"

"Keep the fuck away from our investigation," Barnum growled. "Just stay the fuck away. You're wasting everyone's time."

Joe smiled bitterly. "I suspected that was what this was about."

“Just worry about your furry animals, and the alien hunter you were assigned by Robey,” Barnum said. “Don’t second-guess us and don’t re-interview all of our leads. There’s nothing you can find that we haven’t already.”

Joe looked to Portenson. The FBI agent seemed to be concentrating on his cigarette, and watching the morning sun hit Battle Mountain. He looked so out of place here, Joe thought. Portenson’s coat was too heavy for the fall, and too outdoor-gear trendy. His slacks and black slip-on shoes belonged beneath a desk in a temperature-controlled office.

“I talked with Robey,” Joe said to both of them. “I told him what I wanted to do. I’m not second-guessing anyone, but I thought that maybe I could find an angle on this whole mess that had been overlooked. You’re welcome to go talk to Cleve Garrett, if you want to. Go ahead and check up on *me*. I don’t care. Maybe you’ll turn up something I missed. We’ve got nothing so far. Not a damned thing. If I can look at the murders with a fresh eye ...”

“You’re a goddamned *game warden!*” Barnum thundered, stepping around the nose of Joe’s truck toward him. “You’re no investigator. You’re only on the task force because the governor needed somebody from your agency.”

Joe watched as Barnum’s face reddened. He had stopped just before he fully came around the truck.

“You should be out finding that bear, or counting fish, or whatever the hell it is you do. Leave the professional work to the professionals!”

“And who would that be?” Joe asked calmly.

“You son of a bitch!” Barnum spat, and Joe squared himself, ready.

This had been brewing for years. He noted that Barnum wore his gun. Joe was unarmed. Fine, Joe thought. He couldn’t imagine Barnum actually shooting him, not in front of an FBI agent, anyway. And it would be against Barnum’s nature to hurt him directly. Barnum was more of a corrupt, behind-the-scenes man.

Nevertheless ...

Because of the rush in Joe’s ears, he didn’t hear the school bus on Bighorn Road until the brakes squealed to a stop and the accordion doors wheezed opened.

“Hello, Sheriff!” the bus driver called out cheerfully. “Hey, Joe!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe saw Portenson roll his eyes heavenward.

The front door of the house opened and Sheridan and Lucy came out. Both girls were pulling on jackets and fumbling with their backpacks and lunch boxes. Marybeth stood in the doorway, watching them skip up the walk. But she was really watching Joe, Barnum, and Agent Portenson, Joe knew.

Sheridan made a point of walking between Joe and Barnum, and stopped long enough in front of Joe to tilt her chin up for a goodbye kiss. Lucy was right behind her.

The men watched as the girls boarded the bus and the doors closed. Both girls took seats near the window and waved as the bus pulled away. Joe waved back. A thin roll of dust bloomed from the tires of the school bus as it labored away.

It was uncomfortably silent. Barnum still stood near Joe's fender, but his hand had dropped away from the butt of his weapon. Marybeth still stood in the open doorway, watching the bus. Portenson leaned back against the sheriff's Blazer, and laughed silently.

"This is over," Portenson said.

"No, it isn't," Barnum said, his voice low. "It's just postponed."

"Anytime, Sheriff," Joe said.

Barnum turned his back on Joe, nodded his head to Marybeth, and walked back to his GMC. He threw himself into the driver's seat with more dexterity than Joe would have guessed, given Barnum's age and health, and slammed his door shut.

"Agent Portenson," Joe said. "How come you're mixed up with *him*?"

Portenson stared at Joe, smiling coldly. "I've got to go."

"It isn't birds, Portenson."

Portenson waved his hand in front of his face, as if shooing away a fly. "Then what is it?"

"It's two things, I think," Joe said, keeping his voice low enough that Barnum wouldn't hear. "I think we've got one set of killers responsible for most of the animals and Stuart Tanner. I think we've got another entirely separate killer who did Tuff Montegue."

Portenson looked pained.

"Whether they're connected or not I don't know," Joe said. "But if nothing else, we've got to figure out one or the other. We can't look at the mutilations as one thing any longer, or we'll never get anywhere."

"We aren't anywhere now," Portenson said.

"No, we aren't. But if we change the focus of the investigation, we might find something out."

Portenson shook his head as if dispelling a bad thought.

"Look, Portenson, I know you're not a bad guy," Joe said. "I know what you did last winter, how you tried to stop the massacre. You blame me for putting you in that position, but you did the right thing. You can do it again."

"Oh, just shut up," Portenson said.

Joe grinned. "I can count on you, can't I?"

"Why do you even care?"

Joe shrugged. "I don't want this kind of thing happening in my mountains, or my district. Not around my family. They've gone through enough in the last few years without worrying about something like this."

Portenson looked genuinely sympathetic. Then something changed in his face.

"I still think you and that Nate Romanowski maniac are guilty of something. I'll find that out one of these days, and I'll bust you both. Then I'll get out of this hellhole I'm in."

Joe nodded. "That's fine. But right now, we've got killers out here who are just about as scary as anything I can think of. You know that."

Portenson lit another cigarette, then tossed it away angrily after one drag. "I'm hoping the whole thing just goes the fuck away," he said. "There haven't been any incidents in a few days, not since that stupid horse got his face ripped off. I just hope the whole thing goes away."

"Maybe it will," Joe said, thinking again of Cleve Garrett's theory. "Or maybe just part of it will. If that happens, we've still got the other part to figure out."

Barnum leaned on the horn, even though Portenson was just feet away from his vehicle.

"What an asshole," Portenson said.

"That's just the half of it," Joe said back.

25

LOT C-17 AT the riverside resort and RV Park was empty.

"Damn it," Joe said, thumping the steering wheel of his pickup with the heel of his hand. He looked over to Maxine, remembered that he had left her home to sleep today, then looked back at the vacated lot.

He wondered when they'd left. How long had the Airstream been gone?

A sick feeling welled up in Joe's stomach. He hoped that Deena was all right. He felt responsible for her, since she had reached out to him even in her pathetic way. If he had acted sooner, had come over to see Deena the morning after the first message, could he have averted something? Had Cleve Garrett discovered their correspondence and hurt her? Or had he simply moved his operation to some other place?

He found Jimbo behind his trailer, raking leaves in his postage-stamp backyard.

"Jimbo, when did Cleve Garrett pull out?" Joe asked the resort manager.

Jimbo froze, then slowly looked up. "What do you mean?"

Joe was confused for a moment. "Don't you know that he's gone? I just came from there. The lot is empty."

Jimbo let the rake fall into the pile of leaves he had made. "Well, what do you know," he said. "He musta' left during the night. He was all paid up, so he doesn't owe me anything. But he at least could have said goodbye so I'd have known I have another space to rent."

"Didn't you hear him go?" Joe asked, incredulous.

Jimbo pointed at his own head. "I don't hear nothing without my hearing aids anymore. I take 'em out to sleep, so I guess he left after I went to bed."

"When was that?"

Jimbo pondered the question. "Let's see, I watched the news, read a little. You ever read *Harry Potter*?"

Joe had, but he didn't want to discuss it.

"I'm hooked," Jimbo said. "I'm on the third one now. I never thought I'd care a good goddamn about a little Brit orphan, but ..."

“Jimbo, what time?”

Jimbo’s face lost enthusiasm, and he thought for a moment. “Must have been after 11.30 or so. I think that’s when I packed it in.”

Deena’s last e-mail to Joe had been sent at 11.15, Joe remembered. In it, she hadn’t said they were leaving. Maybe she hadn’t known yet, he thought, the sick feeling coming back. Maybe Cleve read Joe’s response over Deena’s shoulder, and decided then that they needed to go immediately.

But what difference did it make what time they left? Joe thought. What was significant was the fact that they were gone, and that they felt a need to leave in the middle of the night.

Why?

AS HE CROSSED the Twelve Sleep County line into Park County, Joe called Hersig and told him that Cleve Garrett was gone and mentioned Deena’s e-mail.

“I think we should put out an APB,” Joe said. “Locating their truck and that big Airstream shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Hersig hesitated.

“What?” Joe asked.

“We don’t have any grounds to stop him,” Hersig said. “A man has a right to move his trailer from place to place, Joe.”

“What about Deena?”

“What about her? Can you honestly make a case that you think she’s in danger? Or threatened? From what you told me she hasn’t ever indicated that she’s in trouble. It doesn’t sound like we have anything to go on at all here, Joe.”

Joe held the phone away from his ear and looked at it, scowling at Hersig. Then he pulled it back. “They left right after she sent me an e-mail, like I said. She was going to tell me something this morning that she thought was important. I’m telling you, Cleve Garrett is dirty in some way. Why else would he hightail it out of town so quickly when just the other day he was begging me to get him on the task force? I think he’s going to hurt her, if he hasn’t already.”

“Aw, Joe ...”

“Damn it, Robey, if we find her body somewhere I hope you remember this conversation.”

Hersig sighed, “Okay, I’ll call the highway patrol. But if he’s located, we need more than what you’ve given me to search the trailer or arrest the guy. If she’s with him and looks okay we’ll have to cut him loose with our apologies.”

Joe hoped that if Garrett was stopped the man would give something away that would invite inquiry. At least Joe would know if Deena was with him, and if she was unharmed.

Maybe Barnum had a point, Joe thought, as he slowed his pickup to enter Cody. Maybe Joe didn’t know what he was doing.

PARK COUNTY SHERIFF Dan Harvey had agreed to meet with Joe in his office to go over the case file of Stuart Tanner’s death. Harvey seemed younger and more at

ease than he had been during the task-force meeting, Joe thought. Maybe he was just more comfortable on his own turf.

The sheriff offered coffee, and Joe accepted. They sat in the sheriff's office, which was larger and much neater than Barnum's rathole, Joe observed. There were even books on the bookshelves.

"I asked Deputy Cook to sit in with us, Joe. He received the callout and was the first officer on the scene."

Joe nodded to Cook, who nodded back. Joe thought the deputy seemed capable and serious.

"Anything happening in Twelve Sleep County?" Harvey asked, as a receptionist delivered three Styrofoam cups of see-through coffee.

"Need anything in it?" she asked Joe.

Maybe some coffee beans, Joe thought, but declined her offer.

"Has Robey been in contact with you?" Joe asked.

"Every afternoon."

"Then you know that we haven't made any progress. That paranormal guy Cleve Garrett has disappeared, though. We're looking for him. But nothing of significance has happened yet."

Harvey shrugged. "This is a bad case. I just wish it would go away somehow. There's just no real *evidence* anywhere."

Cook nodded in agreement. "The only good thing about it is that there haven't been any more murders or mutilations in Park County."

"We found a horse," Joe said, grimacing a little.

"I heard. You were there, right?"

Joe nodded.

"You heard that the FBI said there was no toxicology on Mr. Tanner, right?" Harvey said. "Nothing unusual, I mean. He died from a blow to the head, and he would have died from severe exposure anyway. His mutilation occurred post-mortem."

Cook said, "Basically, there's nothing we've found that we haven't already given to Robey Hersig," an edge of jurisdictional integrity creeping into his voice. "So frankly, I'm not sure why you're here."

"I'm just going over things again," Joe said. "Maybe I'm spinning my wheels. I'm not accusing you guys of withholding anything."

"That's good," the sheriff said, sipping his coffee and exchanging a glance with Cook. "Because we're not. Besides, practically everything happened in Twelve Sleep County. Our guy is dead just because the aliens or whatever couldn't see the county line."

Cook laughed at the sheriff's joke, and Joe smiled.

"So who called it in?" Joe asked.

Cook opened his file with a copy of the 911 log. "The call came in at four-thirty two A.M. from an unknown male. The caller didn't identify himself, but he reported a body within sight of county road two-twelve. Dispatch took down the information and called me at home because I'd just gotten off of my shift. Katherine, the night

dispatcher, said it was hard to understand the caller, and she had to ask him to repeat himself a couple of times. Bad connection, I guess.”

Joe was silent for a moment, considering the situation, turning the details over in his head. “Deputy Cook, you said the body was found within sight of the road, but was it parallel to the road, or somewhere on a turn?”

Cook sat back, not sure where this was headed. “It was parallel to the road, in the trees. We found the body in a clearing.”

“You found it pretty easily, then?”

“Yup. The directions from the call-in were good. He told us it was 6.8 miles on the country road from the highway. It was exactly 6.8 miles, all right.”

“So you drove 6.8 miles and then what? Shone your spotlight out to the side?” Joe asked.

Cook bobbed his head. “I picked up the body right where it was supposed to be.”

“So,” Joe asked, rubbing his jaw, “if you hadn’t known the exact location of the body, could you have seen it from the road?”

Cook snorted, “In the daylight, hell yes. It was plainly visible from the road.”

“But it wasn’t daylight,” Joe said, perking up. “It was night. Would your headlights have picked up the body if you were driving down that road?”

Cook hesitated, then: “No. There’s no way I could have seen it off to the side like that in the dark.”

Sheriff Harvey slowly sat up, and leaned forward on his desk. “Shit,” he said. “So how did the guy who called it in see the body? How did he know it was there?”

Joe said, “Yup.”

“I never thought of that,” Cook confessed. “Damn it all. The coroner said Tanner was killed between ten P.M. and two A.M. which means the guy either saw it happen, or he fucking did it.”

“Do you keep a tape of the calls?” Joe asked. His question betrayed his growing excitement.

Harvey’s cheeks flushed. “We do, but the machine wasn’t working that day. I’m sorry about that.”

“The call came in at four-thirty A.M., right? Don’t you think it’s kind of odd that someone was driving around out there at that time of night?” Joe asked.

Harvey shook his head. “Not really. We know that there’s been some drug activity on that road, some meth buys. It’s also a road pretty popular with the high school crowd. They go out there to drink and jump each other’s bones. My guess is that somebody like that called it in.”

“So it was from a cellphone?”

“We assume so.”

“Does your dispatcher have Caller ID?”

Harvey’s eyebrows shot up. “You know, we honestly didn’t think of that. We’ve got it but we never really pursued it because we didn’t put much emphasis on the caller himself. Didn’t seem important. The dispatcher said the guy was really hard to

understand, and she kept having to ask him to repeat himself. It was like he was drunk or drugged, she said."

"I'll check the record," Cook said, standing up. "Be right back."

"Seems like a good guy," Joe said after Cook had left.

"He is," Harvey said, sipping his coffee. "I think he's a little miffed that he didn't have an answer for you."

"I'll tell him not to worry."

While they waited, Joe told Harvey about his encounter with Cleve Garrett and Deena, as well as the crop circles that weren't crop circles. Joe explained that he was currently operating under the theory that the murders and mutilations in Twelve Sleep and Park County were connected, with the exception of Tuff Montegue's death, which didn't fit the pattern. Harvey maintained a steady smile, and nodded from time to time. He was noncommittal overall and Joe suspected that Harvey would rather have the murder that was part of the pattern instead of the exception to it. That way, there would be no special expectations placed on him or his department. When Joe told Harvey about Maxine turning white, Harvey seemed genuinely shocked.

"Cows are one thing," Harvey said. "But you don't fuck with a man's dog."

"Damned right," Joe said.

DEPUTY COOK RETURNED in a few minutes holding a printout. He closed the door behind him and sat down heavily in his chair.

"I don't know if this is helpful or not," he said. "It doesn't make a lot of sense to me anyway."

"You've got a number?" Harvey asked impatiently.

"Yup. But it's not a local number like I thought it would be. The area code is nine-one-o." He looked to Joe and Harvey to see if they recognized it. Both men shook their heads.

"Nine-one-oh," Cook repeated. "I looked it up. The cellphone is from Fayetteville, North Carolina."

"What?" Harvey said, his voice high-pitched. "We've got a guy from North Carolina driving around in the mountains at four-thirty A.M.?"

Joe tried to make sense of it, but couldn't. He wrote the number down in his notebook.

"Maybe he's one of those CBM guys," Cook said. "They're from all over. Is there natural gas in North Carolina? Or a company headquarters there?"

Harvey shrugged. "Arden, you need to follow up on this."

"I'll get on it right now," Cook said. He asked Harvey if he could use two of the other deputies so they could work faster. Harvey agreed.

After Cook left, Harvey turned to Joe and raised his eyebrows. "Maybe we've actually got something here."

"It's a start anyway. Will you call me when you've got a name?" Joe said, handing Harvey his card. "I'll fill Robey in on what we've got so far."

"Which really, when you think of it, isn't very damned much," Harvey said. "But at least I've got my guys running around all excited, instead of sitting there reading the *Pro Rodeo News*."

Joe stood, shook hands, and opened the door. Before he left, he remembered one of the questions he meant to ask when he arrived.

"You said Stuart Tanner owned an outfit called Tanner Engineering?"

Harvey nodded. "Right, based out of Texas, but his family's had a cabin up here for years, and he liked to stay there when his company was working in the area."

"Do you know what Tanner Engineering was working on? Specifically?"

While Harvey shuffled through the file, Joe recalled something from the day before. Tuff Montegue's brother had said Tuff worked for "Turner Engineering." Could it have been Tanner Engineering? Joe felt a twinge.

Harvey looked up after going through the file. "We don't have anything on what he was doing here," he said. "You know, I feel kind of stupid that we haven't really pursued this angle. To be honest, we've been sort of waiting for something to break in Twelve Sleep County."

That sounds about right, *Joe thought*.

"I've got to think about this," Harvey said, as much to himself as to Joe. "If some bad guy killed and mutilated Stuart Tanner, did he also do all of the livestock? And the moose? And the cowboy? It doesn't seem possible to me."

Joe didn't know what to say. But his mind was spinning.

BACK IN HIS pickup heading for Saddlestring, Joe called Marybeth at Logue Country Realty.

"Are things okay today?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, sounding more cheerful than he would have anticipated. "Except Marie is sick again. I haven't seen her in three days. I'm starting to get a little worried about her, Joe. I asked Cam how she was doing, and he said he thought she'd be back in later this week."

"So you talked with Cam, huh?" he asked, feeling a surge of anger.

"Of course I talked with him," Marybeth said, admonishing Joe. "He's my boss. Nothing was said about our conversation yesterday, and I think he's a little ashamed of the whole thing. I'm not worried, Joe."

"You'll call me if something happens again, right?"

"Of course. But I can handle myself. I'm a big girl, and I'm smarter than hell."

"That you are," Joe said although he still felt like smashing his fist into Cam's face.

"But that's not the only reason why you're calling, is it?" she teased.

Man, she knew him well, he thought. "I was wondering if you would have any time to do some research. It can probably be done on the Internet and with a couple of calls."

"Is something happening, Joe?" She sounded intrigued.

"Maybe. But I'm not sure yet."

"I can grab some time over lunch," she said. "What do you need?"

“Do you have a pencil?”

IT WAS LATE afternoon when the town of Saddlestring came into view. From the distance on the highway, it looked insignificant beneath the slumping shoulders of the Bighorn Mountains. Joe could see a few buildings poking out of young trees, the Twelve Sleep River as it serpentine through the valley and through the middle of town, and four shining ribbons of highway that intersected within the tree-choked community.

He had tried to let his mind work during the drive back, to process what he had learned in Cody. He tried to think of what they might be overlooking that was sitting there right in front of them.

This was giving him a headache. But maybe this new information would sort itself out, start to fit into proper places.

Then something occurred to him. It was obvious, if risky. It could move the new track of the investigation forward, or screw it all up forever.

He could simply call the number with the 910 area code, and see who answered. Fayetteville, he said to himself. What is in Fayetteville?

Joe pulled his cellphone from its mount on the dash and was reaching for his notebook to look up the number, when the phone trilled.

“Joe, it’s Trey Crump.”

Joe hadn’t talked to his district supervisor since before the task force was formed, although he had kept him up to date on the progress, or lack of it, via e-mailed reports.

“What’s up?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but I just got a call from the bear guys up in Yellowstone. Apparently, they just picked up a signal on our missing grizzly.”

Joe had a feeling what was coming.

“They tracked him to a location that’s literally in your backyard, so to speak. Just east of the mountains, in the breaklands. He appears to have stopped, because they said the signal is strong and not moving.”

Joe grabbed his notebook from the seat, and flipped to a fresh page.

“Do you have the GPS coordinates?” Joe asked.

“Got ’em. You ready?”

“Sure,” Joe said, scribbling.

AS HE SHOT through Saddlestring and out the other side toward the breaklands, Joe called Nate Romanowski. As usual, he got Nate’s unreliable answering machine.

“We located the bear,” Joe said. “If you get this, you’ll want to get right out to the BLM tract off Dreadnought Road. The bear is supposedly right in the middle of it, about six miles off-road to the north. Look for my truck.”

26

THE BREAKLANDS COUNTRY beyond Dreadnought Road served as a kind of geological shelf before gradually rising to the foothills and then swelling into a sharp

climb to the mountains. At first glance it looked flat and wide open, but in actuality it was deceptive terrain coursed through with deep draws of crumbly, yellow-white earth that created massive islands of grass-covered flats that were attractive to pronghorn antelope, mule deer, and ranchers. Before lamb and wool prices collapsed in the 1980s, the breaklands had been filled with sheep. Joe had seen photos from the forties and fifties on the wall at the Stockman's Bar of sheep herds clipping the grass in the Dreadnought breaklands as far as the photographer could see. There were still a few bands of sheep in the area, tended by Mexican or Basque herders, but nowhere near the amount there had been.

Joe slowed his pickup on Dreadnought Road while watching the GPS unit on his console, and scanned the surrounding area for Nate Romanowski. He was wary of striking off-road as it approached dusk because of the network of arroyos and draws that could cut him off, isolate him, or get him stuck.

Joe didn't find a road, and realized he had gone beyond where he should have turned right. He stopped and studied a well-worn topo map of the area, trying to find if there was another approach—one with roads—to where the bear had been located. There was an old road of some kind that entered the area from the exact opposite direction but he estimated it would take close to an hour to get to it. His only choice, he concluded, was to go off-road.

On the floor of the pickup was a tranquilizer gun in its plastic case. The gun had a pistol grip and shot a single fat dart loaded with a debilitating sedative. The warnings on the box of darts said that the sedative was extremely concentrated, and designed for animals weighing over 400 pounds. The dosage was lethal to humans. Reversing down the empty county road for nearly quarter of a mile, he slowed, cranked the wheel so that the nose of the pickup pointed straight out into the breaklands, punched the four-wheel-drive high switch, and started crawling across the sagebrush in the dusk. His tires crushed breaklands, and the sharp, juniper-like smell perfumed the chilling air. As usual, he kept both windows open so he could see and hear better. As the front tires bucked down and up through a hidden, foot-deep channel, he instinctively reached over with his arm to prevent Maxine from toppling from the seat to the floorboards before remembering Maxine wasn't there.

TWENTY MINUTES AFTER he had left the road, Joe glanced up and saw a pair of bobbing headlights in his rear-view mirror. The vehicle was at least ten minutes behind him, and seemed to be using the same set of tracks that he had cut across the grass and brush.

Who could possibly be following him, or even know where he was? Maybe Nate got his message after all.

While he was watching the mirror instead of where he was going, his left front tire dropped into a huge badger hole and jerked the truck to a stop. The steering wheel spun sharply left as the tire fell and twisted in the hole, and maps, memos, and other paperwork rained on him from where they had been wedged under rubber bands on his visor for safekeeping. The motor died. He picked up all the paper that had fallen

on him and shoved it out of the way between the seats. He looked up and saw lazy dust swirling in his headlights, lit up with the last brilliant half hour of the ballooning sun.

Feeling his chest constrict, he checked his mirror. Because he had stalled out in a small dip in the terrain, he couldn't see the headlights behind him. He turned in his seat, looked through the glass, but couldn't see the vehicle.

Was it Nate? If Joe could see the headlights again, he could be sure. Nate's Jeep had a recognizable grille and set of lights. It looked like an owl's face.

He had a wild thought: what if it wasn't Nate? What if someone had used the same frequency as the bear collar to alert the biologists and lure Joe out here? The frequency itself, though assigned to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was available on the handheld radios favored by most hunters and fishers, even though use of it was discouraged.

Uh-oh, Joe thought. Did he have time to unsheath his shotgun before the vehicle behind him caught up?

Then headlights cleared the wash and Joe instantly recognized the grille of Nate's Jeep. Nate thrust his head out the window.

"Hey, Joe," Nate Romanowski, the driver, said in greeting. "I got your message about the bear and came straight out."

Joe sighed, relaxing. "Have you ever considered calling ahead, Nate? Have you ever thought about calling me on my cellphone or through my dispatcher and telling me that you're planning to find me?" Joe said, his voice rising. "Have you ever thought about that, Nate? Instead of scaring the hell out of me by chasing me across the prairie?"

Nate didn't respond right away, which was his way. Joe noticed that Nate was wearing his side-draw shoulder holster.

"So," Nate said, a smile tugging on his mouth, "where's your bear?"

THEY LEFT NATE'S Jeep in the ditch and, after working Joe's pickup out of the badger hole, Nate and Joe sat side by side on the bench seat in Joe's truck and churned forward through the prairie in the half-light of the last ten minutes of dusk.

"The bear might be out here," Joe said, "but I don't think the bear is the key to the mutilations."

Nate shrugged. "This is one of those instances where reasonable people can disagree."

"Okay," Joe said. "Explain."

Nate chuckled again, which sounded somewhat false.

"Things are happening with the investigation," Nate said. "I can tell by your mood. You're ... *jaunty*, all of a sudden. A little excitable also, I'd say. If you give me the background I'll be able to let you know if I'm still in the ballpark or not. But I've had a few thoughts lately and a few more dreams. I've talked to some Indian friends."

Joe shot Nate a look. He knew Nate had contacts on the reservation. The mutual interest was falconry, which the Shoshone and Arapaho admired.

"So you need to tell me what's going on," Nate said.

Joe checked the GPS unit. They were close. So far, he was pleasantly surprised that they'd paralleled the worst draws in the breaklands, and hadn't been confronted with any ditches that stopped their progress.

"Things are getting interesting," Joe said, and told Nate about his confrontation with Barnum and Portenson, his interview with Montegue, and the meeting with Sheriff Dan Harvey.

"Okay," Nate said, after listening carefully. "There is something here."

"So what is it?" Joe asked.

Nate shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. But something ought to fit with something else. Tanner Engineering may be the place to start. But, Joe ..."

"What?"

"Don't dismiss what I said earlier. About the energy booms and the fact that the murders and mutilations seem to come when the ground is being tapped. Or that the bear may be more than a bear. That bear is here for a reason."

Joe waved Nate away, as if swatting at a fly. "Nate, let's not even go down that road. It's crazy."

Nate clammed up, stung by Joe's attitude. Silence hung heavily in the cab.

"Okay, Nate, I haven't dismissed it completely," Joe said, sorry he'd snapped. "But I still can't see where it connects."

They hit another badger hole, which pitched the pickup like a sailboat in a choppy swell.

Nate said, "It probably doesn't. That's my point. I feel like there are things happening on different levels of reality but all at the same time. We happen to be in the right place at the right time where different levels of conflicts are overlapping."

"What?"

"You should open your mind a little."

"Perhaps."

Both Nate and Joe watched the GPS unit. They knew they were moments away from contact.

"What did you say that area code and telephone number was?" Nate asked, changing the subject. The pickup nose was pointed toward the sky, into a swirl of early-evening stars. When they broke over the rise Joe expected to see the bear. They were that close.

"Nine-one-oh something," Joe said. "Fayetteville, North Carolina. Wherever that is."

Nate laughed. "Here's a guy in the middle of Nowhere, Wyoming, asking where North Carolina is."

"We're just about over the top," Joe said. "Get ready for I don't know what."

"Nine-one-oh," Nate said suddenly. "That's the area code for Fort Bragg. The army base. I spent some time there. Forget Fayetteville, Joe. Think Fort Bragg."

With that, Joe felt another door open. As it did, they topped the hill and looked down on an immense flat basin that was lit up in the moonlight. He saw no bear. But in the center of the basin was a sheep wagon. There was no pickup next to the wagon,

only a few white sheep, their backs absorbing the light blue moonlight. The sheep wagon was prototypical of the models that used to be found all over the Rockies: a compact living space mounted on wheels that could be pulled by a long tongue hitch and stationed amid the herds. It was the nineteenth-century precursor to the RV. There was a single door at the rear of the wagon, and a single window over the bunk-shelf near the front. A wood-stove chimney pipe poked out of the rounded top.

Joe stopped and checked the coordinates.

"This doesn't make any sense," Joe said.

"What?" Nate asked.

"We're here. This is where the bear boys said they caught the grizzly's signal. Right here. But I don't see anything besides the wagon and the sheep."

Nate leaned forward, looking back and forth from the GPS display into the basin. "Unless I'm wrong," he said, "our bear is inside that sheep wagon."

Joe turned his head toward Nate. "This is really strange."

Nate nodded.

"Do you have a lot of bullets for that gun?" Joe asked.

Nate arched his eyebrows. "I do. I just hope I don't have to use them."

Joe stopped the truck twenty yards from the sheep wagon. His headlights bathed the door, which appeared to be slightly ajar. There was no light from inside, and no curl of smoke from the chimney.

Nate spoke softly as Joe armed the tranquilizer gun under the glow of the dome light, twisting off the plastic cap from the needle, checking that the dart was filled with four cc's of Telazol, inserting the dart into the chamber, and snapping the barrel down on the assembly.

Nate said, "I've read where the methods of working with bears is similar in concept to working with raptors. On a much bigger scale, of course, but it's basically the same program of give-and-take, and mutual respect."

Joe checked over the tranquilizer pistol and found the button which engaged the CO₂ cartridge. He pushed the button and heard a short, angry hiss.

"Nate, are you saying you want to *train* the grizzly?" This was incomprehensible to Joe, not to mention illegal.

"Not at all," Nate said emphatically, "I want to get inside his head, see what makes him tick. Find out what he's thinking and why he came here. And who sent him."

Joe looked at Nate, hoping to see a hint of a smile but Nate was dead serious.

JOE'S HEART RACED as he approached the sheep wagon. Their plan was for Joe to go to the left side of the wagon, the side the door would open up to, and for Nate to take the right. Joe had the tranquilizer gun in one fist and his Maglite flashlight in the other. Once in position, Nate was to slip a cord over the handle of the door and ease it open. Joe would shine his light inside. If the bear was in there, he would shoot it point-blank, aiming for a haunch or shoulder. *Don't hit him in the head*, he told himself. If he missed, the dart could bounce right off.

So here he was, he thought, with his little dart gun and no place to run if things went bad. The sheep in the plain hadn't even looked up to note their presence.

Nate was his insurance policy in this situation. Despite his earlier statements, Nate had agreed that if the bear turned on either one of them Nate would fire. From the other side of the sheep wagon, Joe heard the faint *click-click* of Nate's revolver being cocked.

Joe heard no sound from inside the wagon as he stood next to it. No breathing, no rustling. He could smell a dank, musky odor—a bear.

He peered cautiously around the edge of the wagon and saw Nate slip the cord over the door handle. Slowly, the cord tightened and the door began to open. When a rusty hinge creaked, Joe nearly jumped out of his boots.

Then the door was fully open, and Joe pivoted around the side of the wagon and aimed his flashlight inside. The tranquilizer gun was held parallel to the flashlight.

The sheep wagon was empty.

"All clear," Joe croaked, his voice giving away his fear.

Nate wheeled around the door and looked down the sight of his handgun into the wagon.

"The place has been trashed," Nate said, easing the hammer down and holstering the gun.

Inside, in the naked white light of the flashlight, Joe could see that the table was splintered and the old mattress on the bunk was shredded, with rolls of foam blooming from the tears. The insides of the walls were battered.

Joe stepped up on the trailer hitch and shined his flashlight on the old cooking stove. It showed deep scratches from huge claws, as did the cupboards and shelves.

"He's been here, all right," Joe said. "But where is he now?"

Nate shouldered Joe aside and reached down into the gloom. Joe shined his light down to see what he was after. A battered, sun-faded nylon collar hung from the bent-back steel handle of an ancient icebox. Nate pried it loose and held it up.

Joe said, "He must have snagged his collar on that handle, and ripped it off when he pulled out. But what was he even doing here, going inside a sheep wagon? There are plenty of sheep out there to dine on."

He looked closely at the radio collar, surprised how old it looked. The collars Joe had seen had much smaller radio transmitters. This collar looked like an old model. Perhaps the underfunded bear researchers had had to dig into their storage containers to keep up with demand. No wonder it hadn't worked properly, he thought.

JOE DROPPED NATE off at the Jeep.

"Thanks for the adventure," Nate said.

"Are you going to follow me out?" Joe asked, before driving away.

Nate slowly shook his head. "I'm going in the other direction, back to the wagon."

"What?"

Nate shrugged. "That bear is close."

"He doesn't even have his collar anymore, Nate," Joe said. "How are you going to find him?"

Nate was silent for a moment. He seemed utterly calm. "I'm going to stay here and let him come to me. I think he'll come when he realizes I mean no harm."

Joe thought about it for a moment. There was no point in arguing, because it wouldn't do any good. Nate hunted for deer and antelope by staking out a spot and "letting the animals come to him." Joe had scoffed when he heard it the first time. He didn't scoff anymore.

"Don't disturb the crime scene, okay? And don't get hurt."

Nate was quiet for a few seconds. "Remember when you asked why the bear trashed the sheep wagon?"

"Yes."

"Maybe he was looking for somebody," Nate said and smiled wickedly.

AS JOE MADE it back onto the highway, he listened to his radio after he called Trey Crump to let him know about the bear collar. His report had caused a firestorm of recrimination and controversy among the elite bear team. They openly doubted his claim that the collar was an old model. Trey promised to send it to them after he received it from Joe. One of the researchers accused another of using old equipment, and the man accused denied it. An argument started. Joe turned down the volume of the radio to a low roar.

He thought about the sheep wagon, the collar, what Nate had said. He thought about Nate out there in the dark, letting the grizzly come to him. And what had Nate meant about different levels of reality? Joe shook the thought off.

Then he remembered the telephone number.

Why not, he thought. He pulled over to the side of the road and found the number in his notebook. Grabbing his cellphone from the dashboard, he keyed the number, then held it to his ear.

It rang four times, then someone picked up.

"*Nuss-bomb*," a deep voice answered.

"Hello?" Joe said, not understanding.

"Nuss-bomb."

"What? Who is this?"

"NUSS-BOMB!"

"I can't understand you," Joe said, his voice betraying a hint of panic as well as the knowledge that he might have just done something really stupid.

"Nuss. Bomb," the man said patiently.

"Where are you?"

The phone clicked off.

"Damn it!" Joe shouted. What had he done?

He weighed calling again, but decided against it. This might be a matter for the task force. He pulled back on to the road, mentally kicking himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Driving down Bighorn Road to his house, he reconsidered slightly. Why would the man who answered assume he was involved in any kind of investigation? As far as the man on the other end knew, it was a wrong number. Joe hadn't identified himself, or given any indication why he called.

JOE WAS PLEASED to see that Maxine was up and excited to see him when he came in the house. She was still white, though.

Sheridan worked on homework on the kitchen table, while Lucy watched television.

"Where's your mom?" he asked.

Sheridan gestured toward his office. The door was closed, which was unusual, and he opened it.

Marybeth sat behind his desk, the glow of the computer monitor making her features look harsh. But when she raised her face, Joe could see she was troubled.

"You've got some messages on the answering machine," she said. "Why don't you take care of those and then come back in here. We need to talk."

27

THE FIRST TELEPHONE message was from Sheriff Harvey in Park County.

"We tracked the cellphone number down, Joe. It is leased from Cingular Wireless to a guy named L. Robert Eckhardt, RN, whose last known address is Fort Bragg in North Carolina."

Nate was right about that, Joe thought. He wrote the name down on a legal pad.

Harvey continued, "I'm assuming RN stands for registered nurse. We've got calls down there but we couldn't get much cooperation. One guy we talked to was friendly at first, then he put us on hold and came back and wouldn't say jackshit. I got the impression he'd been told to stonewall us. We asked the FBI through Portenson to put some heat on them down there, and we should know more tomorrow. I'll give you a call."

The second message was from Robey Hersig: "The APB is out, Joe, but as of six this evening, there are no reports of Cleve Garrett and his traveling road show."

The third was from Sheriff Barnum. His voice was tight with anger. "Pickett, I got a call from Sheriff Harvey in Park County. He says they may have an angle on somebody, but didn't give much detail." There was a long pause, and Joe pictured Barnum fuming at his desk, trying to keep calm, trying to find the right words to say. Finally, "You need to keep me in the goddamned *loop* here, Mr. Pickett." The telephone was slammed down violently on the other end. Joe saved the messages for later, in case he needed them.

"Done?" Marybeth asked, trying to contain her impatience.

Joe nodded. "Can I grab something to eat first?"

"Sure. There's some cold Wally's Pizza in the refrigerator."

"I haven't eaten since ..."

“Go, Joe.”

He returned with the box and a bottle of beer and sat down across from his desk. Except for some condiments, milk, and something old and green wrapped in plastic, the refrigerator was now officially empty. He tried not to let it get to him.

The look on her face shifted his line of thinking immediately. She looked agitated, yet sad. Maybe a little angry. He hoped it wasn’t aimed at him.

“You wanted me to find out what I could about Tanner Engineering, and how long ago Tuff Montegue worked for them,” Marybeth said, standing up and walking past Joe so she could close the door of his office. “There is a lot of information on them on the Internet. I started with a simple Google search.”

Joe listened, eating cold pizza.

“It was really easy to find,” she said, her eyes widening. She gestured at a stack of paper she had printed out and placed face-down on the edge of the desk. “Tanner Engineering is an environmental research firm that is contracted by the federal government and a lot of energy companies to assist with environmental impact statements. Their specialty is water-testing—and their most recent clients included all of the big firms drilling for coal-bed methane in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming—but mainly Wyoming. Especially in the Powder River Basin and here in Twelve Sleep County.

“Once the company does its testing and produces a certified report signed by the primary engineer, who was Mr. Tanner, then the energy company bundles it with all of their paperwork and submits it to all of the state and federal agencies that approve drilling. Without that seal of approval, there’s no drilling. If the company finds too many minerals—or salt—in the water, it’s a lot harder for the company to get approval to drill. So that certificate is pretty important.”

Joe twisted the cap off the bottle of beer, and drank a quarter of it. It was cold and good.

“I called the company down in Austin and talked to their personnel department,” she said, and her cheeks flushed. “I sort of told them I was related to Tuff Montegue, which I know I shouldn’t have. But I didn’t know if they would help me or not.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Joe said, saluting her with the beer bottle. “Good work.”

Marybeth beamed a quick smile. “And yes, Tuff was employed by them as a contractor in the spring. He was with a survey crew that re-surveyed a property and put the stakes in the ground so that the water-testers could follow up. Tuff worked for them for six weeks.”

She was leading to something, Joe could see.

“And ...” he said.

“When I asked what the property was, the lady in personnel got kind of suspicious. I guess I would, too, but I told her another lie. I told her that Tuff had passed away but that he’d said in the past that the place he was working in meant a lot to him, that he talked about how beautiful it was all the time, so we wanted to spread his ashes there. But we needed to know where exactly he worked.”

“That’s ... inventive,” Joe said, equally impressed and alarmed by her deceit.

Marybeth shot him an uneasy grin. "The whole time I was talking to her, I was afraid Cam or someone would come into my office and ask what I was doing. Luckily, nobody did.

"Anyway, the woman decided to help me out. I guess she believed me, or else she didn't see how helping me could hurt."

"Yes ..."

"Joe, it was the Timberline Ranch."

Joe sat up.

"You're probably wondering who hired Tanner Engineering to do the water survey."

"Yes I am, darling," he said, feeling his interior motor start to run.

She took a deep breath, and her eyes closed briefly. Then she opened them: "Logue Country Realty, on behalf of an unnamed client."

Joe whistled, and sat back heavily in the chair. "So what does this mean?"

"I'm not sure, Joe, but it gives me a really bad feeling. And Joe, that's not all."

"What?"

She turned over the sheaf of papers on the desk, and thumbed through it. "On the Tanner Engineering website I went to the section on executives, and did a search. They had photos of their top management. There he is."

She slipped a page to Joe. He looked at the photo of Stuart Tanner, CEO and founder. In the photo, Tanner looked to be in his mid-sixties, but was lean and fit. His face looked weathered behind rimless glasses. He looked like a serious man. Joe wondered if Marybeth thought Joe would recognize Tanner from somewhere.

"I saw him, Joe. I talked to him," she said. "He was in the office that Monday when the first mutilated cows were discovered. He had a big file with him that he said he needed to deliver to Cam."

"You're sure it was Stuart Tanner?"

Marybeth nodded her head, somewhat reluctantly. "Yes, it was him. Which means Cam knew him, and maybe Marie did, too. That's fine, of course, but what troubles me is that neither of them ever mentioned it to me. Remember when we were talking about the murders at my mother's dinner? The Logues said nothing about knowing Stuart Tanner. Nothing."

"Of course, we weren't talking about Tanner, we were talking about Tuff," Joe said.

Marybeth leaned forward, now so still and tense that she looked like a snapshot. "Joe, you don't think Cam and Marie ..."

Joe was silent, thinking.

"We can't rule anything out," Joe said finally. "But I think it's very, very unlikely they had anything to do with the crimes."

Marybeth let out a long breath of relief, but her eyes still had him fixed in their sights.

"That doesn't mean, though, that he didn't see some opportunity in the situation," Joe said. "That he didn't use the circumstances to advance an agenda of his own."

"I can't see it, Joe. I can't see Marie getting involved in something so awful."

Joe drained his beer and wished he had another in front of him. "Didn't you tell me she hasn't been in the office? That she's been sick? Maybe she can't face you anymore, or can't face the situation she's got herself in."

"I should go to her house," she said. "I should talk with her."

Joe held up his hand. "Maybe so. But I'd like to do some checking around before you do. I'll do it first thing in the morning. This thing still doesn't make much sense."

As he looked at her, tears welled in her eyes, and when she blinked the tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Marybeth ..."

"Damn it," she said. "I liked and trusted them. How could I be so taken in? So blind?"

They both knew the answer to her question.

Joe stood up and went around the desk, and pulled her up and hugged her. She buried her face in his shirt, and he kissed her hair.

ALTHOUGH THEY WERE in bed and it was late, Joe could tell that Marybeth wasn't sleeping, and neither was he. He lay with his hands clasped behind his head on the pillow, and he stared at the ceiling. The half-moon outside striped the bed in pale blue coming in through the blinds.

He tried to set all of the other tracks of the case aside and work through what Marybeth had learned.

He wondered if he had been assuming the wrong thing all along by concentrating on Tuff's death instead of Stuart Tanner's. Even though Tuff's death seemed an aberration, maybe it was *intended* to look that way. To steer anyone looking into the crimes toward Tuff, away from Tanner. Maybe Tanner was the key to both murders, not Tuff. Maybe Tuff was killed to draw attention away from Tanner's death.

But who could be so calculated?

In Joe's experience, conspiracies like this simply didn't work out. People talked too much, made too many mistakes, had too many individual motives to keep a secret for long. The coordination of two deaths fifty miles apart in the same night suggested a level of planning and professionalism that just didn't seem likely, he thought. That was why no one even assumed it. The two murders, in the midst of the animal mutilations, were assumed by everyone—including him—to be part of the overall horror. But if someone used the cattle and wildlife mutilations as cover to murder Tanner in the same method, that suggested an icy, devious calculation. And if the killer was capable of that kind of subterfuge, maybe he took it to another level and went after Tuff for no reason other than to mask his true target.

Could it be Cam Logue?

He couldn't see it, although there had always been something about Cam that hadn't felt right to Joe. Cam seemed overeager, a bit too driven. Although both traits were the qualities of successful people, it seemed to Joe that just under the surface Cam seemed a little ... *desperate*. Whatever drove him was powerful. But could it possibly drive him to murder? Joe didn't think so.

If the report that Tanner had delivered to Cam indicated that the water was bad beneath the surface of the Timberline Ranch, who would be hurt? Cam would, but only to the degree that the ranch likely wouldn't sell and he'd be out of a commission. But Cam had plenty of ranch listings, many larger than the Timberline Ranch.

Cam's secret buyer might be hurt, Joe thought. If the buyer knew that he could never drill, the ranch would be all but worthless. But the buyer wouldn't have had the mineral rights in the first place, since they had been sold off years ago. So why would he care?

Suddenly, Joe felt a spasm in his belly. Realtors didn't work for buyers, Joe thought. *Realtors worked for sellers.* The person—people—who would be hurt by the discovery would be the Overstreet sisters. But could two old, cranky women who hated each other be capable of this? Again, it didn't work, he thought. If the mineral rights didn't go with the property, a bad-water report wouldn't impact the sale to a buyer who wanted a ranch and not a CBM field.

So who was the secret buyer?

Then, as if a dam was breached, more questions poured forward.

Where were Cleve Garrett and Deena?

Who was L. Robert Eckhardt, the owner of the cellphone number, and what was he doing driving forest backroads in Wyoming at 4.30 in the morning?

What in the hell did "*Nuss-Bomb*" mean?

Joe moaned out loud.

"Are you okay, honey?" Marybeth asked sleepily.

"I'm sorry, I was thinking," he said. "I'm giving myself a headache."

"You're giving me one, too," she said.

IT WAS AN hour later, and although Joe hadn't come up with any answers, he had thought through a list of places where he might find them. Carefully, he swung out of the bed, trying not to disturb Marybeth.

"I'm not sleeping," she said. "Don't worry about it."

He looked at the clock next to his pillow. It was 3.48 A.M.

She turned over and snapped on the lamp.

"Joe, if the information I got was so easy to find, why didn't the task force do it earlier?"

"We weren't looking into the backgrounds of the victims," Joe said. "We were searching for aliens and birds, or not doing much at all. We were hoping the whole thing would go away, I think."

"That's ..." she hesitated, then her eyes flashed, "that's *inexcusable*."

Joe nodded, "Yup."

"Aren't you cold standing there in your underwear?"

"I can't sleep. I was going to get up and make a list of things to do in the morning."

She looked at the clock. "It's practically morning now. Why don't you come to bed?"

"Can't," he said. "I'm too edgy. Every time I close my eyes, a million things charge at me and I can't stop any of 'em."

"What if I make it worth your while?" she said and smiled.
He hesitated, but not for long.
WHEN THEY WERE through, Joe rolled over onto his back.
"Sorry," he said. "I couldn't concentrate."
"You did fine," she purred.

28

THE COUNTY CLERK'S office was located in the same building as the courtroom, jail, sheriff's office, and attorney. A man named Stovepipe manned the reception desk and metal detector, and he nodded at Joe and waived him through at 7.45 A.M.

"You're up early this morning," Stovepipe said, lowering the morning edition of the *Saddlestring Roundup*. Joe noted the headline: HERSIG SAYS NO PROGRESS IN MUTILATION DEATHS.

"Still broken?" Joe asked about the metal detector.

Stovepipe nodded. "Don't tell nobody, though."

"I never do. Is Ike in yet?"

"They don't open until eight, but I think I seen him come in earlier."

IKE EASTER'S GLASS-walled office was behind the counter where Twelve Sleep County citizens lined up daily to do business with the three matronly clerks who sat on tall stools and called out "NEXT!" Most of the business transactions involved titles on automobiles and property. This was also the place to get marriage licenses, so the clerks who worked for Ike Easter were among the better informed gossips in the county, and much sought after when they got their hair done.

When Joe opened the door to the main office, all three of the matronly clerks wheeled on their stools and glared at him. It was easily one of the most unwelcome receptions he had ever received, he thought. One of the clerks quickly raised an open palm to him as he entered. "Sir, we're not open for fifteen minutes," she said. "Please take a seat in the hall and ..."

"I'm here to see Ike," Joe said flatly, ignoring her, and went through the batwing doors on the side of the counter.

"Sir ..." The clerk was irritated.

"It's okay, Millie," Ike called out from his office when he saw Joe coming.

"I forgot about your elite Republican Guard," Joe smiled, stopping outside Ike's office and tipping his hat toward Millie. Millie huffed melodramatically. To Ike: "Do you have a few minutes? It's important."

Ike motioned Joe in, and Joe shut the door behind him.

"I'll ignore the Republican Guard comment," Ike said, not unpleasantly, "but they won't. Next time you need a new title for your car, expect delays."

Joe sat in a hardback chair across from Ike. "Unfortunately, it'll be a while before we get a new car."

"All my clerks are county employees," Ike said. "They work eight hours a day and not one minute longer. They take an hour for lunch and get two fifteen-minute breaks. If you woke one of them up in the middle of the night, she could tell you to the hour how long she has until retirement, how many days of sick leave she's got left this fiscal year, and to the penny what her pension will be. Those women keep me in a constant state of absolute fear."

Ike had a smooth, milk-chocolate face and wore large-framed glasses. He had a silver mustache and his receding hair was also going gray. Like his cousin, Not Ike, Ike was quick to smile and had dark, expressive eyes. He had been reading the newspaper as well, and it lay flat on his desk, opened to the page where the NO PROGRESS IN MUTILATION DEATHS front-page story was continued inside.

"Before you ask me whatever it is you're going to ask me, can I say one thing?" Ike said.

"Sure."

"Thank you for being so kind to my cousin, George. I know he gives you fits with all of those temporary licenses and all."

Joe grunted, and looked down.

"I've tried and tried to get him to get a yearly license," Ike said, "but I just can't break through to him. It's very generous of you to ease up on him a bit, Joe. I know you don't have to do that. His life is fly-fishing, and I figure as long as he's fishing he's not getting himself into any other kind of trouble."

"Okay, Ike, gotcha."

"But I do appreciate it, Joe. Both Dorothy and I are grateful."

"Okay, Ike. Enough," Joe said.

"So, what do you want from me so early in the morning?"

Joe looked up. "How do mineral rights work?"

Ike's eyes narrowed, and he paused. "Let me get another cup of coffee. This will take a few minutes."

IKE EASTER USED a legal pad to explain. He started out by writing "OG&M" on the top of the pad.

"When I say 'OG&M,' I'm referring to oil, gas, and mineral rights. They're usually sold for a term on a specific piece of land, or they can be retained by the landowner. If the OG&M are sold, it usually means that the developer pays the landowner a fee for the rights or, in some cases, a percentage of the gross that is derived if the OG&M is exploited."

Joe asked, "Are they like water rights?"

Ike shook his head. "No. Water rights go with the land. That means if you sell your land to somebody, the buyer gets your water rights. You don't keep them and lease them back, and you can't sell them separately to somebody else downstream or upstream.

"OG&M rights, however, can be bought and sold among companies or developers, or eventually returned to the landowner if the terms of the sale run out."

Ike explained how the market for mineral rights in Wyoming peaked in the mid-twentieth century, during the boom years for oil, trona, coal, and uranium. Some landowners made much more from their mineral rights than they ever made from their cattle or sheep.

"Up until recently, we had almost forgotten about all of the intrigue and wheeling and dealing that gets done for mineral rights," Ike said. "I had a clerk here who didn't know what in the hell to do when some land man with a Texas accent walked into the office and wanted to file. But we all got back into the rhythm of it soon enough."

"Because of CBM?" Joe asked.

"Yes, because of CBM. See, no one realized after the last oil bust that natural gas was down there in the kind of quantity it is. Suddenly, all of those fields that everyone thought were played out or useless were valuable again. Quite a few of the ranches had changed hands since their first leases or sales, and some of the new landowners didn't even know that other people owned their OG&M rights. A lot of the squawking we all heard from ranchers bitching about the CBM companies on their land was because those ranchers discovered that the mineral rights had been sold years before."

Joe tried to work it through. "So even if a ranch sells, the mineral rights stay with whoever had them?"

"Right."

"The Timberline Ranch, for example, has six hundred wells planned for it. Those rights are owned by a mineral company, I assume, even though when they bought the rights they had never heard of coal-bed methane?"

"Right."

Joe rubbed his face. He was missing something. The incentive to sell, or buy, or manipulate the land value, wasn't there.

"Why would a company buy mineral rights to a ranch when they didn't know what was in the ground?" Joe asked.

Ike shrugged, "It happened—and happens—all the time, Joe. Companies speculate. They lock up land, betting that somewhere down the road their investment will pay off."

"Can I see the OG&M deed for the Timberline Ranch in the county record books?" Joe asked. "It would be interesting to know who has the mineral rights to the place. My understanding is that old man Overstreet sold the rights a long time ago."

"Of course you can," Ike said. "It's a public record. But it might be a bitch to find right away."

"Isn't it all on computer?"

Ike laughed. "Not hardly, Joe. The most recent stuff is, of course. But anything older than ten years was indexed in deed books. Anything beyond twenty-five years is in the archives, but completely disorganized. There was a flood in the vault back then, and the deed books all got soaked. Because all of those old deeds and patents were typed on parchment paper, somebody emptied the books and put them into files after they dried out. They never were put back into new books in sequential order."

"I'd still like to see it," Joe said.

"May I ask why?" Ike said, lowering his voice.

Joe sighed. "It may be relevant to a sale of the place. Or a murder."

"Really?"

"This is purely speculation on my part, Ike," Joe said. "Please keep this confidential."

Ike got up and opened his door. "Millie, can you please find and pull the OG&M file for the Timberline Ranch? Owned by the Overstreet sisters?"

Millie reluctantly got down from her stool, and gave Joe a look as she walked by.

"Why'd you ask *her*?" Joe said in a whisper.

Ike smiled sympathetically. "She's been assigned to the archives, Joe. She's the only one who can find any of that old stuff. We're in the process of going through all of the old county files—which were kept off-site in file boxes for over fifty years—and bringing them in-house to recreate the old deed index books."

"I heard something about that," Joe said. "How the old county clerk charged the county rent for storage in his own house?"

"Um-hmmm," Ike said, raising his eyebrows. The scandal was one of the reasons Ike Easter was elected county clerk.

"We think we've recovered all of the old records," he said, "but every few months we find another box or two. The old county clerk had them in his basement, in bedrooms, and even in a couple of old locked garages in town."

WHILE THEY WAITED, Ike asked Joe questions about the Murder and Mutilations Task Force, and the story in the newspaper. Joe confirmed that there was very little progress, but said that some things appeared to be emerging, although he couldn't get into them.

"Hold it," Joe said suddenly, looking at Ike.

"What?"

"The old county clerk's residence, where the old records were kept—that's where Cam and Marie Logue live now, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Would Cam and Marie have had access to the boxes?"

Ike thought about it for a moment. "I suppose they would have. The boxes were sealed up with tape, but they weren't locked up or anything. Why do you ask?"

"It's just interesting," Joe said.

FINALLY, MILLIE RETURNED to Ike's office, wiping her hands with a wet towel.

"Those old boxes are filthy," she said, glaring at Joe.

"Did you find the file?" Ike asked, even though she wasn't carrying anything.

She shook her head. "It must be in one of those boxes we've still got in storage. It hasn't been brought up to the filing room yet."

Ike groaned, thanked her, and waited for the door to close.

He told Joe, "We've got twenty or more boxes downstairs in the boiler room that still need to be brought up and gone through."

"How quickly can you do it?"

Ike said, "Are you serious?"

"Yup."

"Joe, I want to help you out and all, but can you at least give me a better reason so I can justify the overtime hours and feel good about it when the elite Republican Guard turns on me?"

Joe leaned forward on Ike's desk. "As I mentioned, I think that the murders have something to do with either the potential sale of the Timberline Ranch or the mineral rights. I think if we know who holds the rights, we might know who ordered—or did—the killings."

Ike swallowed. "Even the cows?" he asked.

"Maybe not the cows, but Tuff Montegue and Stuart Tanner."

"And you feel pretty confident about this?"

Joe sat back and rubbed his face. "Kind of," he confessed.

JOE FOUND ROBEY Hersig in his office reading the *Roundup* and looking very sour.

"Tell me something good, Joe."

Joe sat down and recapped what he knew and suspected. Hersig grew increasingly interested, and began to take notes. When Joe was through, Hersig steepled his fingers and pressed them against the bridge of his nose.

"We don't have enough to arrest anyone yet, or even bring them in for questioning," Hersig said.

"I know."

"So what's your next step?"

"I'm going to go see Cam Logue."

Hersig winced. "It might be too soon."

"Maybe so. But it might break something loose. Or," Joe said, "Cam may blow my whole theory out of the water."

Robey sat for several moments, thinking things through. "What can I do to help?"

"A few things," Joe said. "Intensify the search for Cleve Garrett. We've got to find him and make sure the girl's okay. I can't see him just blowing out of town like he did, after wanting to get so involved with the task force. Then follow up with Sheriff Harvey and Deputy Cook. They've already involved Portenson, so maybe we can find out more about this Eckhardt guy. I don't know how or if Fort Bragg figures in, but Cook said he thought the army was stonewalling him when he called. Maybe if they heard from you, or the governor, we'd get some answers. Oh, and check up with Ike to see if they've located that Timberline Ranch file."

"I can do all of that," Hersig said, writing it down on the pad. "But you're forgetting somebody. What about Barnum?"

"Keep him the hell out of it," Joe said.

"Joe ..."

"It's not just about this thing between Barnum and me," Joe said. "Barnum seems more hostile than usual. He called me at my house and all but warned me off of this thing. I think he's involved in some way, Robey."

Hersig slapped his desktop angrily. "Joe, do you realize what you're saying?"

Joe nodded. "Don't get me wrong. I don't think Barnum had anything to do with the mutilations or the murders. I think he's playing another angle, but I don't know what it is yet. Somehow, I think he's taking advantage of the situation."

Hersig stared at Joe, still upset. "I can't lie to him, Joe. He's the sheriff."

"But you can just sort of withhold information, can't you? Not return his calls? Just for the rest of the day and maybe tomorrow?"

Hersig shook his head. "Do you think we're that close?"

"I think we're close to something," Joe said, standing and clamping on his hat. "I just don't know what it is yet."

Hersig gave a low moan.

As Joe opened the door, Hersig called out to him.

"Give Cam my regards," Hersig said. "And call me the minute you know something."

29

IT FELT ODD, Joe thought, entering the front office of Logue Country Realty. In a few hours, Marybeth would be there.

Marie wasn't at the front desk, as she usually was. In her place was a thin, blond woman who pursed her lips, whom Joe caught reading a supermarket tabloid. She was the only person in Saddlestring, he thought with some relief, who wasn't aware that there was NO PROGRESS IN MUTILATION DEATHS.

"Is Marie still sick?" Joe asked.

"I guess so," the woman said. "All I know is that the temp agency called and asked me to come in again."

"Is Cam here?"

"May I ask your name?"

"Joe Pickett."

The temp hesitated and looked puzzled for a moment, as if she had heard the name but couldn't place it.

"My wife, Marybeth, works here," Joe said.

"Ah," the temp said. "She seems nice."

"She *is* nice," Joe said, impatience creeping in. "But I'm here to see Cam."

The temp looked at her wristwatch. "He usually comes in around nine, I think."

Joe glanced at his own watch. Ten to nine. "I'll wait in his office."

The temp wasn't sure if this was appropriate, but Joe strode by her as if he waited for Cam every day, and she said nothing.

JOE SAT IN a chair across from Cam's desk, and put his hat on the chair next to him. This would be interesting, he thought. He planned to watch Cam carefully as he asked him questions, and listen even more carefully. Joe dug his microrecorder out of his front shirt pocket, checked the cassette, and pushed the record button, then buttoned his pocket. By Wyoming law, the tape would be admissible in court, even if Cam wasn't aware he was being recorded.

Joe surveyed the office. Neat stacks of paper lined the credenza in columns. A large-scale map of Twelve Sleep County covered an entire wall in the room. Cam's realtor and insurance licenses were framed behind his desk, as were large portraits of Marie and Jessica, and several family photos of them all. There was a Twelve Sleep County Chamber of Commerce "Businessperson of the Year" plaque, as well as a photo of a boys' soccer team Cam obviously coached, signed by all of the players. On Cam's desk was a coffee cup that read "World's Greatest Dad." There was a "Volunteer of the Year" award from the United Way. *Jeez*, Joe thought. *What am I doing here?*

Cam entered his office a few moments later, without a hint of trepidation. He asked how Joe was with concerned sincerity, and if he wanted a cup of coffee.

Joe passed on the coffee, but stood and shook Cam's extended hand and returned a half-smile. Joe thought he detected a flash of discomfort in Cam's eyes as he shook Joe's hand, but wouldn't swear to it. Then Joe thought, *If I made a pass at a man's wife and the husband showed up in my office unannounced, I might be more than a little jittery too.*

Cam asked, "What can I do you for, Joe?" in a forced, too-cheerful way, and sat in his big, leather chair across the desk from Joe. "I do have a meeting in twenty minutes, so I hope ..."

"Shouldn't take that long," Joe said. "How's Marie?"

Again, the flash of discomfort, or maybe fear. Then it was gone. "Marie?" Cam said almost absently. Then: "I'm sorry, I guess Marybeth must have told you. Marie's had some kind of a bug for over a week that just won't go away. She has *not* been a happy camper."

"Is there anything we can do?" Joe asked.

Cam seemed to be thinking about it, then he shook his head. "That's a really nice offer, Joe. But she seems to be just about back to normal, now. I wouldn't be surprised if she came back to work this afternoon. Tomorrow for sure, I'll bet."

"Well, good," Joe said. "But don't hesitate to ask. Marybeth thinks the world of Marie."

"Yes, Marie and Marybeth have a great relationship, which is wonderful. Really wonderful," Cam said, agreeing enthusiastically. *Too enthusiastically*, Joe thought. But was Cam's nervousness because of what he had said to Marybeth, or something else?

"Cam, you know about the task force I'm on," Joe said, watching Cam's face carefully. "The investigation isn't going quite as badly as what you might have read in the paper this morning. We're pursuing some new leads."

Cam's eyebrows arced. He was interested.

"One of them involves you."

Cam seemed to freeze in place. Even his breathing stopped. His tanned face drained of color.

"Say again?" Cam asked, his voice a whisper.

"We're pursuing everything, even if it turns out to be a dead end," Joe said. "I'm here to ask you a couple of questions, if you don't mind."

Cam was clearly shaken. Joe tried to interpret it, but couldn't decide if Cam was displaying guilt, or shock.

"I guess I don't mind," Cam said. "Jesus. I can't believe you're even *here*. I can't believe you could even think ..."

"Why did you think I was here?" Joe asked innocently, but the implication was clear. Now you've done it, Joe said to himself. Whatever the Logues and the Picketts had together is now over. Marybeth and Marie. Lucy and Jessica. Maybe even Marybeth's future career. You've done it now, Joe, and there's no going back.

"Gee, I guess I thought maybe it was because Marybeth and I had a misunderstanding a while back," Cam said, looking at his hands and not at Joe. "But I think she thought I meant something I didn't. That was bad enough. But to have you here saying I'm being investigated ..." he trailed off.

Joe sat in silence, letting Cam talk.

"Should I call a lawyer?" Cam asked. "Is it that bad?"

"Only you can answer that," Joe said. Man, he felt cruel.

Cam still didn't meet Joe's eye, but reached for his telephone. Joe noticed that the man's hand was shaking.

"Please cancel my nine-thirty," Cam told the temp, then listened for a moment. "No, I don't want to reschedule it right now." When he replaced the receiver, it rattled in the cradle.

"What do you want to ask me, Joe?"

Joe thought that Cam looked just about as pathetic—or guilty—as anyone he had ever seen. He was either about to nail a killer, or make a horrible, unforgivable mistake.

"Cam, we have a theory that the murders of Tuff Montegue and Stuart Tanner were connected. We think there is a possibility that they were killed because of something they—or one of them—knew about the sale of the Timberline Ranch."

"You're kidding me," Cam said. The flash in his eyes this time was of anger.

Joe plowed on: "I think Stuart Tanner was going to nix the drilling of all of the CBM wells because there was too much salinity in the water. Or maybe he found something else, like silica or something. His report would cost some people a hell of a lot of money. The company that holds the mineral rights would be out millions, and the realtor who didn't get his commission would be out thousands. I think somebody wanted him dead, and saw the opportunity to kill him in the same method as the cattle and the moose."

Joe tried to make his face and eyes go dead. "So who is the secret buyer, Cam?"

Slowly, the color returned to Cam Logue's face, and kept going. Now his face was turning red.

"Joe, I can't believe you just said that to me. You're so goddamned off base." Cam said it with enough passion that Joe nearly flinched.

"You knew Stuart Tanner," Joe said. "You hired him. He delivered the water report to you personally, right in this office. But when the news came out that he died, you said nothing. You didn't report it to the sheriff, or even mention it to me."

"You're right about that," Cam said, his voice back to normal. "You're absolutely right. I got the report, and I knew the guy. I paid Tanner Engineering for his work. And damn it, I didn't say anything because given the current market, the less said about any of this shit the better. Hell, Joe, I can't even sell a ranch with a willing buyer and a willing seller. Everybody's waiting for your stupid task force to make a conclusion, or arrest somebody. But I can see why you're getting nowhere, if this is the best you can do. If all you can come up with is to target a guy who's made a huge commitment to this community."

Cam looked up and shook his head. He was upset, and visibly tried to calm himself. "Joe, there's a couple of things really wrong with your theory, and it pisses me off that you would be going in this direction."

"What's that?" Joe asked.

"First, Tanner Engineering cleared the way for the CBM drilling. The water is fine."

Cam turned quickly in his chair and dug through one of the neat stacks of paper on his credenza. He produced an inch-thick report bound in plastic, and tossed it across the desk. Joe picked it up and thumbed through it until he found the summary page.

"Tanner concluded that there was no excess salinity, or anything else in that water," Cam said. "The water's good, Joe. It's perfect. It's the best damned water in the Twelve Sleep Valley."

Joe read enough to see that Cam was right.

"Second," Cam said, his voice rising, "the secret client is me. And Sheriff Barnum."

Joe was stunned. "*What?*" So this is where Barnum figured in, he thought.

Cam stood quickly, sending his chair to roll back until it thumped against the credenza. He glared down at Joe.

"Barnum's a year away from retirement, and he's got one *hell* of a pension after twenty-five-plus years as sheriff," Cam said. "He planned to borrow against it for a down payment on three hundred and sixty acres of the ranch we'd buy together. He wants to retire on it. But with all of this bullshit going on, the bank's been holding back. It's only temporary, but they're dragging it out. I've always wanted the family ranch back. I grew up there, Joe. It's my dream, Marie's and my dream. We couldn't say anything, even to Marybeth."

"You want it even with all of those CBM wells all over it?" Joe asked.

Cam shrugged. "They won't be there forever. And they're bound by law to clean up when they're gone."

"But that could be thirty years."

Cam smiled, but not warmly. "I'm willing to wait. Land is always a good investment. Especially the land I grew up on and still love."

Joe felt as though he had had the rug, the floor, and the joists pulled out from under him.

"How in the hell are you going to buy it?" Joe asked.

Cam's eyes lit up. "Okay, since you're asking, since you've spent a good deal of the morning trying to fuck up my life, I'll tell you."

Joe winced at that.

"Real estate sales is sizzle, Joe. It's flash and sizzle. If the market is hot, the realtor is hot. Everybody wants to work with a winner, and that's me. Once I listed the Timberline Ranch, the landowners around here figured that if I could get a couple of old crones like the Overstreet sisters to sign, then I must be hot shit indeed. As you know, we now have exclusive listings on just about every available ranch in this part of Northern Wyoming. I did it by hard work, Joe, and by creating the sizzle of a winner."

Joe still felt poleaxed. "You figured a couple of the other ranches would sell first. That you could use the commission money from those other ranches for the down payment on the Timberline Ranch."

Cam opened his eyes in an exaggerated way, as if he were addressing a simpleton. "*Right*, Joe. There's not a single thing wrong with that. Not a single thing."

"But no property is selling, because of the mutilations," Joe said.

"Right again, Joe. Exactly what I've been telling you for a month. Nothing's selling because buyers think this county is spooked."

"Man," Joe said.

But Cam was on a roll. "Do you know who I'm not going to invite to the ranch when I finally own it?"

Joe didn't guess.

"My parents, Joe. Mom and Dad. The people who sold my birthright out from under me so they could devote more time and attention to sending my big brother, Eric, to medical school. You thought I was going to say you and Marybeth, didn't you?"

Joe looked up.

"Well, I probably won't invite you out, either. Not now." Cam's eyes had a fiendish intensity.

Despite feeling bad, feeling stupid, Joe caught a whiff of something in the air from Cam. It was the desperation he had recalled earlier, the over-the-top intensity that seemed a notch or two higher than it needed to be.

"Some day, all of you people are going to regret the way you treated Cam Logue," Cam said, his voice dropping but his face screwed up with rage. "You sit around and come up with some lunatic idea that it must be the new guy in town, it must be the guy who just moved here who's upsetting the sleepy little village by working his ass off and being aggressive."

"It wasn't like that," Joe said lamely.

Cam leaned across his desk, thrusting his face forward. "I know what it's like, Joe. I remember what you people are like, and I don't forget. I remember you all looking down at the ground when we left this place. You wouldn't even say goodbye when I

stood there with my stupid parents as they drove around this town and canceled their utilities, and their post office box, and got the transcripts from my school.”

We didn't even live here then, Joe said to himself but not to Cam. Joe simply watched and listened.

“You people never even thought about me at all, trying to go to a school in South Dakota that was half-Indian and half-white and all fucked up. If anything, you wondered about my brother, the genius, the future doctor who would make my parents so proud. You wanted to be able to tell people you remembered when he was a student here, going to sixth grade when he should have been in third grade, winning all of those science contests. If only you knew ...”

Suddenly, Cam stopped.

“Talking too much,” Cam said, more to himself than to Joe.

He lumped back into his chair, staring at something over Joe’s head, looking drained.

“I’m truly sorry, Cam.”

No response.

“I screwed up,” Joe said. “I came up with a conclusion and tried to find facts that would fit it, instead of the other way around.” Putting his hat on his head, Joe stood up.

Cam still sat there, eerily drained, his concentration elsewhere.

“Cam?”

Joe thought that Cam was somewhere deep inside of himself now. What had he done?

“CAM!”

Thankfully, Cam Logue seemed to snap back to the present. He blinked rapidly, then his eyes settled on Joe.

“I’ll be going,” Joe said.

Cam nodded. “Okay.”

Joe started to turn, then stopped himself. “Do you have any ideas on what’s happening, Cam? With the mutilations and the murders? We obviously don’t even have a clue.”

Cam shook his head wearily.

“We’ve got bears, aliens, all sorts of bad ideas,” Joe said. “Hell, somebody even claims he saw a couple of figures out in the alley behind your office a while back.”

Joe was surprised that Cam’s face blanched again, as it had when he first saw Joe.

“Who said that?” Cam asked.

Joe shrugged. “That’s not important. My point was about all of the crazy theories.”

“Tell me who said it.”

“Cam, I’m sorry, I’ve got to go now. I’m sorry I took up so much of your time.”

Cam stared at Joe and set his mouth.

“I really am sorry about all of this, Cam.”

IN HIS PICKUP, Joe thumped the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. He had been so wrong, he thought.

He called Hersig, who answered anxiously.

"You should take me off the task force," Joe said morosely. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"Dry hole?" Hersig asked.

"Wrong county, even. Not even close."

Hersig sighed. "We're going to have to mend some fences with the business community after this."

"Worse than that, Robey, I've got to tell Marybeth."

JOE FOUND HER in her tiny back office at Barrett's Pharmacy. She looked up expectantly as he came in.

"I was wrong about Cam."

"Tell me."

He did, her face hardening as he spoke.

"Why did you come down on him so tough, Joe?"

He shrugged. "I thought it was the best way. I thought I could shock him into saying something."

"Well, I guess you did that all right."

He shook his head and stared at the tops of his boots. "I feel terrible."

"Don't."

He looked up, puzzled.

"It sounds like a hell of a performance," she said.

"I know, I just thought if I laid it right out ..."

"No," she said, shushing him. "Not by you. By Cam. There's something there, Joe. I just know it. There's no good reason why Cam and Marie wouldn't have told me about getting back the ranch. They know I'd keep it confidential, and what difference would it make anyway? Marie and I shared everything, Joe. We talked about both you and Cam, and we talked about our children and our aspirations. Believe me, if Marie knew about Cam's plan to buy back that ranch, she would have told me about it. When Cam told us together about the 'secret buyer,' he was misleading Marie as well. Why would he go out of his way to do that?"

"So, he's lying to you. Besides, there's nothing wrong with a realtor wanting to buy property. Realtors do it all the time."

Joe felt a wave of relief for a moment.

"But I sabotaged your career."

She smiled. "If I wanted a career, Joe, I'd have it. And I'd be damned good at it. Even now, without the Logues, my small business is chugging along. I just need to keep it small, I know now. More flexible. I've got to think about Sheridan, and Lucy, and you."

"Marybeth, I ..."

"It's just another setback. No one said this would be easy."

Joe felt awful. "I wish I were as tough as you are," he said.

She smiled again, and pinched his cheek. "You're better than tough, Joe. You're good. I'll stick with good."

30

HIS MIND AND emotions on edge, Joe spent the rest of the morning patrolling the breaklands and foothills close to town, checking hunters for licenses. He did his job mechanically, his thoughts elsewhere. The few hunters in the field were clean, and in every camp someone asked him about the mutilations. He found himself getting irritated with the entire subject.

Throughout the morning, he checked messages on his cellphone and home telephone, hoping to hear from Hersig, Ike, or Sheriff Harvey.

He decided to push things along, if for no other reason than to see if anyone pushed back, or panicked. He'd start at the county clerk's.

IKE EASTER, MILLIE, and the two other clerks were assembled around a conference table covered with dozens of old file boxes and stacks of files that smelled of age and dampness when Joe entered the county clerk's office.

If his reception that morning was cold, this time it was something out of the Ice Age. The three clerks and Ike had hard scowls and dirt-smudged clothing.

"There he is," Millie said as Joe let the door wheeze shut behind him.

"Here I am," Joe said, looking at Ike. "Find it?"

Ike looked harried. Joe suspected that Ike had been abused for most of the day by his clerks as they searched the archives.

"Good timing," Ike said to Joe, raising a file into the air. "I've got something for you, but it's kind of a puzzlement."

Joe followed Ike into his office.

"Thanks for your hard work," Joe told the clerks as he passed them. "We really appreciate this."

Millie held his gaze for a moment, then rolled her eyes heavenward.

Ike fell into his chair and pushed the file across the desk to Joe. Joe noted that the tab on the file said "Overstreet" and was followed by the physical coordinates of the tract.

"Take a look," Ike said.

Joe opened the file. Inside was a clean copy of a deed and title originally made out to Mr. Walter Overstreet in 1921. An amendment was added in 1970, when additional acreage—the Logue property—was added to the document. Joe thumbed through the paperwork, then looked up at Ike for some kind of interpretation.

"Everything's there and in perfect order," Ike said. "Except for two things. One, there's no record of the OG&M. It should have been attached to the document. Second, it's a duplicate of the original deed."

Joe shook his head. "What's that mean?"

Ike shrugged. "As far as the OG&M lease goes, that could just be an error. We find plenty of those in these old files. It's not that big of a problem, because I can request a copy from the state easy enough ..."

"How soon?"

Ike looked at his watch, mumbled "they'll kill me," before calling Millie on the intercom and asking her to contact Cheyenne ASAP and have them fax a copy of the lease to the office. Joe didn't even turn around to see what kind of furor Ike's request had set in motion.

"What else?" Joe asked.

"Look at the deed in your hands, Joe."

Joe did. He saw nothing unusual about it. It had been typed, probably with a manual typewriter, on a deed form decades before. He looked at the dates and description and could see no alterations.

"It's a clean copy of the original," Ike said. "It's all pretty and nice. It's not a carbon copy, which is what they used in those days. It's a modern machine copy."

Joe felt a twitch in his scalp. "So somebody made the copy recently."

"That's what it looks like to me. The copy was made while it was still in the archives, for some reason, and the file was put back in the old box. We probably wouldn't have ever even noticed it if we weren't looking for this particular file on this particular day."

Joe looked up. "How many people had access to the archives, then?"

Ike raised his eyebrows. "All of us. The sheriff's deputies who transferred them. The old county clerk, of course. And the new owners of the old county clerk's home, where the files were kept."

"Cam Logue," Joe said. "And the sheriff."

"Maybe," Ike said, "but there's no crime here. There's nothing wrong with making a copy of a deed."

"What about taking the mineral rights lease terms?" Joe asked.

"Also not a crime," Ike said. "Why do you ask?"

*

AS JOE GOT up to leave, he asked Ike to call him on his cellphone as soon as the fax from Cheyenne showed up. Ike followed him to the door.

Joe thanked the clerks again, and one of them actually smiled back.

"Joe, can I ask you a favor?" Ike said.

"Of course."

"It's going to take me a while to get the office cleaned up after all of this." He gestured to the table and the boxes. "I was going to give George a ride home from where he's fishing on the river. Would you mind taking him to the house?"

"Not a problem, Ike. I'm headed that way now."

Ike smiled, and looked over at his shoulder at the clerks, as if assessing the threat before returning to battle.

MARYBETH DIDN'T GO to work at Logue Realty that afternoon, assuming she was no longer employed, and she felt guilty about it. She hated to leave a job unfinished, even if it were for someone like Cam.

When she was through for the day at Barrett's Pharmacy, she used the telephone on the desk to call Logue Country Realty, and she asked for Cam. The temporary receptionist said Cam was out for the rest of the day.

"Is he on his cellphone?" Marybeth asked.

"He didn't say anything about that," the temp said. "He seemed a little mad about something, so I didn't even bring it up."

"Can you please put me through to his voicemail, then?"

After fumbling with the telephone system, the temp figured it out.

Marybeth listened to Cam's recorded greeting, then spoke softly. "Cam, I talked with Joe about what happened and I'm sure we'll both agree that it's best if you find another bookkeeper. I just hope this won't affect the friendship between Lucy and Jessica. I hope we can both be better parents than that."

Marybeth paused. "And I hope Marie and I can still be friends. But you don't need to give this message to her. I'll go see her myself."

She hung up. After all, Marybeth thought, she now had the afternoon off.

MARYBETH BOUGHT A quart of chicken noodle soup from the Burg-O-Pardner and chocolates from Barrett's Pharmacy and drove through downtown to the Logues'. This time, she anticipated the pickup and camper with the South Dakota plates, and swerved around it and parked near the front door. The house, she thought, looked lifeless, even though she knew there were people inside.

Carrying the bag with the soup and the chocolates, she rang the doorbell. She didn't hear it chime hollowly inside the house.

After a minute with no response, she rang it again. It was strange, she thought. She didn't hear rustling inside, or footfalls in response to the bell.

She knocked and waited, then knocked again hard.

Nothing.

Putting the bag down on the front step, she walked around the front of the house to the side. The garage door was closed, so she couldn't see if Marie's car was there. Maybe, Marybeth thought, Marie had taken her father- and mother-in-law somewhere for lunch. But Marie was supposed to be sick.

Maybe Marie was at the doctor's office, Marybeth reasoned, and for a moment her mood lightened. But if Marie went to the doctor, would she have taken her in-laws with her?

Puzzled, Marybeth found an envelope in the glove compartment of her van and scribbled a note to Marie, saying she was sorry she missed her and hoped she was feeling better. She wrote, "Please call me when you can." Marybeth left the note with the soup and chocolates on the front porch.

As she returned to the van, Marybeth took a last look at the house. Upstairs, in the second window to the right, she thought she saw a curtain move.

Marybeth stood stock-still, not breathing, and stared at the window. She felt a chill, despite the warm fall afternoon. But the curtain didn't move again, and she wondered if she had imagined it in the first place.

Then she had another thought: maybe Cam had already talked to Marie, told her what Joe had accused him of. Maybe, she thought with unexpected shame, Marie didn't want any part of Marybeth Pickett anymore.

32

THE WYOMING GAME and Fish department had a successful program where the department leased land from ranchers in exchange for allowing public access for hunters. Joe had negotiated most of the deals in his district the spring before, and it was his responsibility to keep the "walk-in areas" clearly marked. Unfortunately, the brutal winter before had damaged and knocked down a number of the signs, and as he patrolled he was constantly finding them upturned. When he found them, he rewired them to posts from a roll of baling wire in the back of his truck.

He was twisting the wire tight on one when he heard his cellphone ring in his pickup. He leaned inside the cab and plucked the phone from its holder.

It wasn't Hersig, Ike, or Sheriff Harvey. It was Agent Tony Portenson.

"I tried your office but you weren't there," Portenson said as a greeting. He sounded weary, reluctant. "I'd rather this conversation was on a landline so it was more secure."

"You FBI guys are a little paranoid, aren't you?" Joe asked.

"Listen," Portenson said. "We might have something."

"Go ahead. Thanks for getting involved."

"Fuck that," he said. "I just want to get this thing over with so I can go home. Get transferred, maybe. I hope."

"Anyway ..." Joe prompted.

"Anyway, the Park County Sheriff's Office asked me to help them track down this Fort Bragg cellphone guy, as you know. It wasn't easy, and it should have been. This is what we're good at, you know."

Joe listened and watched the shadow of a single cumulous cloud move slowly across the sagebrush saddle in front of him.

"I had to call in the big guns in Washington to put pressure on the army down there to break through the wall at Fort Bragg. They just didn't want to talk. But we found out some interesting things. Just a second here ..."

Joe heard papers being shuffled in the background.

"L. Robert Eckhardt was an army nurse. A real good one, according to his early evaluations. He was a combat guy. He was deployed in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. But he didn't go to Iraq. You want to know why?"

“Yes,” Joe answered impatiently.

“This is why the army didn’t want to talk to us,” Portenson continued. “Eckhardt was suspected of being involved in the ‘surgical mutilation’ of enemy combatants. That’s what it says here, *‘surgical mutilation.’* Some doctor was accused of it, and Eckhardt was his assistant. The whole incident was kept way under the radar, I guess, like a lot of things are in the war. It was an internal army investigation, and there’s no press on it at all. These guys, the doctor and Eckhardt, were pulled out of the Philippines and sent home to Fort Bragg a year and a half ago to face court-martial.”

Joe stared the cloud as he considered the information. “Does the report say what the mutilation consisted of?”

“No. Just ‘surgical mutilation.’ But that’s where we might have a connection. Eckhardt and the doctor went AWOL before trial. They’ve been missing for six months. The army is pissed off about it, and they’re still looking for these guys. They don’t want to go public with it, and neither do we. But when we told them about Eckhardt’s cellphone call reporting the body in the woods they went apeshit. They’re sending a couple of military cops to Wyoming as soon as they can get ’em here.

“Of course, it’s possible that somebody has Eckhardt’s cellphone, but that seems real unlikely. The army guys asked if the caller had a speech impediment, because Eckhardt has one, but I didn’t know what to tell them. Anyway, we’re running down other calls made from that number now, and we’ll see if we can make any sense of them.”

Joe watched the cloud move up the hillside, felt it envelop him as it passed over, sensed the five-degree temperature drop. “The Park County dispatcher had trouble making out what the nine-one-one caller said.”

“That’s interesting,” Portenson said.

Joe’s mind was racing ahead.

“Joe, you still there?” Portenson asked.

“I’m here.”

“We need to have an emergency task-force meeting. I already told Hersig and he’s clearing the decks for seven o’clock tonight.”

Joe didn’t respond.

“Joe, can you hear me?”

“Yup, I’m thinking.” He paused for a moment, then: “Do we have a name on the doctor Eckhardt’s involved with?”

“Hold on ...” Portenson said. Joe could hear him thumbing through the pages again. “... Okay, here it is. His name is Eric Logue, Dr. Eric Logue.”

“*Logue?* Ah, Jesus ...” Joe pushed off the sign he had been leaning against, Eric Logue’s name ricocheting through his head. In his subconscious a series of formerly random bits of information stopped flying around and began to pause, align, and connect. It was as if the tumblers on a lock were falling into place, finally releasing the hasp.

A doctor.

Surgical mutilations.

Cam said his brother was a surgeon.

L. Robert Eckhardt. *Bob*. The name on the army jacket Sheridan said she saw on the transient who had yelled at her.

Bob. Nurse Bob. A speech impediment. The dispatcher telling Harvey that she had trouble understanding the caller.

Nurse Bob: *Nuss Bomb*.

"Joe, you still there? What's going on?" Portenson said.

"Agent Portenson, let me ask you something," Joe said.

"Go ahead."

"If your parents came to visit you at an inconvenient time and you were telling somebody about it, would you say, 'it's not exactly the best time in the world to have my whole family here for a visit'?"

Portenson sighed. "What in the hell does that have ..."

"*The whole family*," Joe said. "Would that be the phrase you would use if your parents were visiting? Wouldn't it make more sense to say *my folks*, or *my parents*?"

"I guess so," Portenson said, sounding perplexed and annoyed.

"Me too," Joe said. "But when Cam Logue was at dinner and the subject came up, he said *the whole family*. Maybe it was just a mistake, but it doesn't sound right. But maybe he really did mean his whole family—including his brother."

"You've fucking lost me," Portenson said. "Who's Cam Logue and why should I care what he said at your little dinner party?"

"Just stay by the telephone for the next few minutes," Joe said. "I've got to make another call."

"What are you ..."

Joe hung up, then hit 'one' on his speed dial. While he waited for Marybeth to pick up, he paced back and forth in front of his pickup.

When she answered, he immediately knew something was wrong by her tone.

"Are you okay?"

She paused. "I've been better."

"Did I do it?" he asked.

"No, Joe. Why do you always think it's you?"

"Because it usually is. Anyway, do you have a second for something urgent?"

"Yes."

"Cam's brother is a doctor, right?"

Marybeth was clearly puzzled by the question. "Yes."

"Where?" Joe asked.

"Do you mean what state? I'm not sure. Marie mentioned a couple of times that he was overseas ..."

"Was he an army doctor?"

She paused again. "Yes, I'm pretty sure that's what she said."

Joe smacked the hood of his pickup with his free hand. "What's his name?"

"Eric. Dr. Eric Logue," Marybeth said. "Why are you asking? What's happening?"

Joe stopped pacing. "I don't have time to explain right now—and I'm not even sure how this all connects yet. But whatever you do, Marybeth, stay away from Cam. I think either he or his brother are somehow mixed up with the mutilations. If you're at the office, pack up and leave now."

She laughed sadly. "You don't need to worry about that, Joe. I'm at home. But I just got back from the Logues' house and no one answered the door."

"Thank God you're all right," Joe said, feeling a little of the pressure that was building vent out.

"I'm worried about Marie, though," Marybeth said. "I don't know where she is ..."

JOE CALLED PORTENSON back: "Does the report give any background information on Eric Logue? Does it say where he grew up?"

"Why does that matter?" Portenson asked, irritated. "I can't find anything here. It may be in the report somewhere but I'll have to look."

"Find out where he grew up," Joe said urgently. "And if they won't give it to you or you can't find it, try to confirm that Dr. Eric Logue was stationed in the same places Eckhardt was."

"I'm not doing jackshit until you tell me what's going on here," Portenson barked. "You've already screwed my career once, Joe—now, what is so important about where Eric Logue grew up?"

"Cam Logue's a realtor in Saddlestring," Joe said. "He grew up here and just moved back to open up a business. I think our Dr. Eric Logue is Cam Logue's brother. I'm not sure how it all connects but there's something here. Look, I'm out in the field now but we've got to talk to Hersig about this immediately—definitely before tonight's task-force meeting. Then I can explain things better to both of you."

"I'll call Robey right now," Portenson said. "Stop whatever game-warden crap you're doing and head back to town so we can go see Robey. And keep your phone on—I'll call you as soon as I talk to him."

*

JOE WAS ROLLING toward town when his cellphone rang.

"Robey's stuck on the phone with the governor," Portenson said without preamble. "The governor called for an update on the task force's progress."

"Do we know how long this is going to take?" Joe said.

"Robey's secretary said she didn't think he'd be off any time soon but she'd 'pencil us in' for five," Portenson said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

Joe looked at his watch—it was almost 3.30. "We need to nail down Eric Logue," he said. "The more information we can bring Robey, the better."

"I already talked to the FBI. We should have something any minute."

"Try to get photos of Eckhardt and Eric Logue, and let me know as soon as you've got something. See if you can find out where Cam Logue is right now as well. If Eric is his brother then we'll need to pick Cam up for questioning immediately."

“Who died and appointed you an FBI agent?” Portenson spat. “I know how to do my job. Just make sure you’re at Robey’s by five—I’ll take care of everything else.”

JOE TOSSED THE phone on to the seat next to him as he drove toward Saddlestring, his anxiety building. He wasn’t quite sure what to do to fill the time before the meeting with Hersig. He considered going to Portenson’s office to wait for the FBI’s information on Eric Logue but Portenson was clearly not in the mood to have Joe hanging over his shoulder. Joe thought about going over to Cam’s office but quickly dismissed that idea. After that morning fiasco, he wouldn’t be surprised if Cam never spoke to him again.

Joe was almost across the bridge that would take him into Saddlestring, debating whether he had enough time to go home and change out of his work clothes, filthy from fixing the signs, when he remembered Ike’s request to pick up Not Ike. He slowed his truck and scanned the river but he could see only one fisherman and he didn’t look like Not Ike.

Joe pulled off the bridge and parked his truck. As he jogged down the riverbank, he recognized the fisherman as Jack, the retired schoolteacher and the only man in town who rivaled Not Ike for fishing hours.

“Hey, Jack, have you seen Not Ike?”

Jack was tying on a streamer fly. The glare of the sun on the water behind him made Joe squint.

“He was down under the bridge until about an hour ago,” Jack said. “He yelled down to me and said he caught three fish.”

Joe smiled.

“He caught a ride somewhere, though,” Jack said. “He hasn’t come back.”

“Do you know who picked him up?”

Jack shook his head. “Didn’t recognize him. But he was driving a big-ass truck and pulling a trailer behind it. Big silver trailer, with some kind of writing on it.”

Joe froze. “Did it say ‘Dr. Cleve Garrett, Iconoclast Society, Reno, Nevada?’ ”

Looking up from his fly, Jack shrugged. “Could have, I’m not sure. But I’ve never seen it around here before. I saw the guy driving though, and I swear I’ve seen *him* before.”

Joe took an involuntary step backward. It made no sense—why was Garrett back in Saddlestring? And why would he stop to give Not Ike a ride somewhere? Then something clicked in his head, a sick pit of worry growing in his stomach.

“You okay, Joe?”

But Joe had turned and was running up the riverbank toward his pickup. As he threw open the pickup door, he called down to Jack, “Which direction were they going?”

Jack pointed to the west, toward the mountains.

Joe jumped into the cab, cranked the wheel, and did a screeching U-turn back onto the bridge, nearly taking out the railing with his bumper.

JOB ACCELERATED ON Bighorn Road, grabbing his radio as he drove. “Cleve Garrett has kidnapped a man named George Easter, aka Not Ike Easter,” Joe shouted into his radio microphone after switching to the mutual aid channel. “Everyone out there watch for a Suburban towing an Airstream trailer ...” he described the vehicle, the trailer, and Not Ike as best he could.

It took a few beats before the radio traffic became fevered, with comments, questions, and location reports coming in through the central dispatcher from Saddlestring police, sheriff’s deputies, and the highway patrol. Everyone wanted to know what was going on, everyone wanted more details. Deputy McLanahan complained that he was just done with his shift and headed for dinner at the Burg-O-Pardner. He asked how to spell “iconoclast.”

Joe’s cellphone rang immediately, as he expected it would.

It was Hersig, and he was distraught. “What in the hell is going on, Joe? What are you doing? Everyone’s in a damned uproar because of something you just broadcast.”

“A man matching the description of Cleve Garrett lured Not Ike out of the river and took him someplace,” Joe said. “He was last seen headed toward the mountains.”

“Cleve Garrett?” Hersig shouted. “CLEVE GARRETT? What about Eric Logue? I got a message from Portenson about him.”

“*I don’t know!*” Joe yelled back angrily. “Maybe it was Garrett all along!”

“Jesus Christ,” Hersig said. “How do we know Not Ike wasn’t just getting a lift to another fishing spot upriver?”

“Because,” Joe said, “things are starting to fall into place, and not in a good way. None of us—especially me—took Garrett seriously, because of all his goofy theories. But the fact is that he was in Montana when the first cattle mutilations were reported. When the cattle were mutilated in Saddlestring, he was here too. No one else we know of was around when and where both sets of crimes were committed—except Cleve Garrett. And Garrett pulled up stakes and vanished, so he was obviously trying to get away fast. I couldn’t figure out why, before, and assumed it had to do with Deena. Now I’m thinking he must have thought we were closing in on him, that I was closing in on him.”

“But if that’s all true, why would Garrett come back to Saddlestring and risk getting caught?” Robey said. “Why grab Not Ike, of all people?”

“Not Ike told us how he’d seen somebody, a couple of men, in an alley behind Logue Realty. He called them ‘*creepylike*.’ Remember from the report?”

“Now I do. I didn’t put any stock in it.”

“Me either, damn it,” Joe said. “But I’m thinking that Not Ike was the only living person who may have actually seen the bad guys. Maybe he could identify them.”

Hersig paused. “Who would know about what he said besides us?”

“Cam Logue would know,” Joe said.

“How in the hell would he know?”

"Because I told him about it in his office."

"Oh no ..."

"That's right," Joe said. "There must be a connection between Cam and Garrett. I don't know what it is yet but it's the only explanation I can think of."

"Not Ike said he saw two people in the alley by Logue Realty—Garrett was one of them and Cam Logue was probably the other. Cam must have called Garrett after I left his office and told him." Joe mentally kicked himself for being so stupid. If something happened to Not Ike because of him, he'd never forgive himself.

"Calm down, Joe," Robey said. "Just stay focused, all right? We don't even know for sure that Cam's involved. Not Ike could have told the same thing to others and probably did. This morning you told me Logue wasn't part of all this, and now suddenly you're convinced he's in cahoots with Garrett?"

"Forget what I said, Robey," Joe said heatedly. "I may be wrong but if I'm not then Not Ike's life is in danger. You've got to send someone out to pick up Cam right away. He may know where Garrett is heading. Hell, for all we know he could be running now, too."

"Who do you want me to send, Joe? Finding Garrett and Not Ike is everyone's number-one priority," Hersig said. "Barnum and his deputies and basically all other law enforcement within twenty miles of Saddlestring are already out looking for Garrett. I'm not going to call one of them and ask that they turn around to go pick up a respected local businessman who may or may not be involved in this whole thing."

Joe gripped the phone so tightly that he thought it would break. "I don't care who you send—call the goddamn highway patrol if you have to. Someone's got to be around. Cam's involved in this one way or the other and we can't risk losing him like we did Garrett."

"I'll see what I can do," Hersig snapped. "But I'm not making any promises."

"Funnel everything through the dispatcher," Joe said. "I'll keep the radio on and report in if there's anything to report." Hersig clicked off without answering.

JOE TRIED TO tie it all together. Garrett's involvement puzzled him. He had been so focused on Cam Logue that he had paid scant attention to Garrett. Deena had provided Joe with a reason to dig more deeply into Garrett's motivations, but Joe hadn't done it in time to stop what was happening now.

Something else clicked in, regarding Cleve Garrett. Garrett was a publicity hound. He wanted the attention in order to advance his crackpot ideas on aliens and conspiracies. But maybe Garrett was darker, more twisted. Maybe Joe's lack of credulity was the motivation for Garrett to step up his crimes?

And where in the hell did Cam Logue fit into all of this? Joe wondered. He had to be part of this. How else could Garrett have known about Joe's conversation with Cam? Garrett had left *before* Joe confronted Cam. Were they in contact?

Despite the bungling of the rest of the task force, Joe had been the closest to the killer all along and he hadn't seen it. There might still be another explanation—he

hoped so—but he doubted it. If this played out the way it seemed to be headed, it was his fault for not preventing another murder. He cringed as he drove.

“Man, oh man, oh man,” *Joe said aloud.*

He grabbed his cellphone from the dash, speed-dialed Nate Romanowski’s number. For once, Nate answered.

“It’s Joe.”

Nate was excited. “Joe, I haven’t talked to you since we found the bear. Well believe it or not ...”

“*Nate!* I really need your help!”

“Go ahead.”

“How fast can you grab your weapon and meet me on Bighorn Road? I’m heading west toward the mountains.”

“Ten minutes.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

AS JOE SCREAMED over the hill, he saw Nate climbing out of his Jeep and pulling on his shoulder holster. Joe slowed to a roll, and Nate swung into the cab of the pickup.

Without actually stopping, Joe eased the pickup back onto the Bighorn Road and the motor roared.

“It’s Cleve Garrett,” Joe said.

“Really?” Nate whistled. “I guess it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise.”

“No,” Joe said sourly. “I guess it shouldn’t be. But I think Cam Logue is involved somehow, maybe others as well.”

While they drove, Nate pulled his weapon, checked the five-shot cylinder, and shoved it back into his shoulder holster.

“Consider yourself deputized,” Joe said, looking over at Nate.

Nate said, “I didn’t know game wardens could deputize anyone.”

Joe shrugged. “We probably can’t. So I’ll deputize you in the name of the Murder and Mutilation Task Force.”

“Cool,” Nate said. “As long as you undeputize me later.”

Joe nodded.

“Remember when I told you about what it was like under the calm surface of the river?” Nate asked, his eyes wide, “how there is a whole different world, with noise and chaos?”

“Nate, what does this have to do with ...”

“Just listen for a minute, Joe,” Nate said. “I’ve come to believe that there are different levels of consciousness and being. There are whole worlds out there with their own different versions of what reality is, and their own sets of natural laws. Sometimes, the laws are broken and things spill over from one level to the next. When that happens, we hope that something from that level is sent to fix the mess or all hell will break loose.”

Joe was speechless. “Nate ...”

"I know," Nate said. "We don't have time for this. But the bear is with me now, at my place. We're communicating."

THE RADIO CRACKLED. It was Wendy, the dispatcher.

"A fisherman just reported seeing a vehicle and trailer matching the description of the suspect's vehicle and trailer at a public-access fishing campground."

Joe and Nate exchanged glances, and Joe snatched the microphone from its cradle.

"This is Joe Pickett, Wendy. There are six public-access campgrounds on the Upper Twelve Sleep River. Can you tell me which one?"

There was a pause, then: "The fisherman says he saw the unit in question at the Pick Pike Bridge campground."

Joe knew which one she was talking about. It was the last public-access fishing location before the start of the national forest. It was small, with four or five spaces, and was located in dense woods. The only facilities there were a pit-toilet outhouse and a fish-cleaning station near the water. Because of the way it was tucked into the heavy timber near the river, it was a good place to hide out. He had ticketed more over-limit fishermen there than any other place on the river, because they assumed no one would see or catch them.

"I'm fifteen minutes away from there," Joe said to Wendy. "Are there any other units in the vicinity?"

"Sheriff Barnum is rolling now," she said.

"That's right," Barnum barked, breaking into the transmission. "Secure the exits and wait for the cavalry."

Secure the exits? Joe looked at Nate. "Sheriff, there's one road into that campground from the Bighorn Road, but there's at least four old two-tracks that go to it from both sides of the river. That makes five exits."

"Then use your best judgment, goddamit," Portenson broke in from another radio. "I'll take it from here, Sheriff. Follow me."

Joe was relieved that Portenson was taking charge.

THEY TOPPED A sagebrush covered hill on a two-track road, and the river and campground were laid out below on the valley floor in front of them. Joe slowed the pickup to assess the layout. The Twelve Sleep River, its surface reflecting dusk gold, rebounded in a loopy sidewise U from a cliff-face upriver before it turned and disappeared from view into thick river cottonwoods. The campground was under the canopy of trees where the river bent.

As Joe had described to Barnum, roads that looked like discarded dark threads through the sagebrush came in and out of the bank of trees, offering multiple entrance and exit points.

If Garrett's truck and trailer were down there in the trees, they couldn't be seen from above. To locate them, they would need to be on the valley floor, in the trees or in the campground itself.

Joe had made the decision not to wait for Portenson and Barnum. If Not Ike was being carved up by Cleve Garrett, Joe wanted to stop it as quickly as he possibly could.

I've already screwed this thing up enough, he thought. I couldn't live with knowing I was sitting on top of a hill while Not Ike was being tortured.

Joe asked Nate, "Are you ready?"

Nate said, "Of course."

AT HOME, MARYBETH was making spaghetti with meat sauce for dinner when the telephone rang. She was greeted with silence on the other end, although she thought she could hear breathing. "Hello?" she said again.

Nothing. Marybeth put the spoon on a plate and was about to hang up when someone said, "Marybeth?"

It took a moment for Marybeth to recognize the caller.

"Marie? Is that you?"

Marie hesitated, then spoke softly. "I got your note. That was very nice of you. But it was too late, too late." Marybeth knew there was something dreadfully wrong by the soft, vacant quality of Marie's voice.

"Marie, are you okay?"

There was a wracking sob, then a beat while Marie seemed to be collecting herself.

"No, I'm *not* okay," Marie said, her voice breaking. "I'm not okay at all. Cam's gone, and I've done something horrible. They took him."

"Who took Cam? Marie, what are you telling me?" She recalled her conversation with Joe, his admonishment to stay away from Cam.

But Marie couldn't answer because she was crying too hard, and she finally barked out "I'll call you back," between wails, and hung up.

Marybeth found herself staring at the stove but not really seeing anything. She realized that she was suddenly trembling.

Where was Joe? He needed to meet her at the Logues' right away.

34

AS THEY LEVELED out on the river valley floor and crossed a small stream before entering the trees, Joe punched off his cellphone and squelched the volume of the radio to a whisper. Both windows were open in the pickup, so he and Nate could get a better sense of the surroundings. Joe drove slowly, keeping the sound of the motor at a minimum. He wanted to enter the campground as quietly as he could.

They passed a brown Forest Service sign nearly obliterated by years of sniping and shotgun blasts that read PICK PIKE campground.

Amongst the trees, it was dark and it smelled damp, with an edge of forest-floor decay. Pale yellow cottonwood leaves blanketed the soft black earth. Small splats of sun pierced through the wide canopy above and formed starbursts on the ground.

Nate gestured toward the two-track in front of them, and mouthed, "Fresh tracks."

Joe nodded. He had seen the tracks as well, noting that they were so new that the peaked impression of the tire treads was still sharp.

Nate had his .454 Casull in his right hand, the muzzle pointed toward the floor. Joe's .40 Beretta was on the seat next to his thigh. Joe's palms were icy with apprehension, his breath was quavery and shallow. He found himself clenching his jaw so tightly that his teeth hurt.

Before turning toward the campsites, the road passed a rusting metal fish-cleaning station near a boat takeout point on the riverbank. They were past it when Joe sniffed the air and eased to a stop. There was a smell that didn't belong, he thought.

He opened his door as quietly as he could, and approached the station. Nate did the same, but walked toward the bank of the river. The fish-cleaning station was old and simple; a flat metal work area perched on angle-iron legs. The cleaning area could be washed clean by a river-water faucet. Usually these things smelled bad, he knew, but the normal odor was of fish guts, fish heads, and entire rotting skeletons if the fisherman filleted the trout and left the rest. The problem with this station was that it didn't smell like that at all, he realized. Instead, there was the pungent odor of ammonia bleach.

Indeed, the metal cleaning counter was scrubbed clean. In the center of the counter was a drain hole. The drain led to an underground pipe that discharged into the river itself.

Either the station had been used by unusually sanitary and obsessive fishermen, he thought, or it had been used for another purpose.

His stomach clenched.

Joe looked up to see Nate gesturing at him furiously to come over to where he stood at the water's edge.

As Joe walked over, he had a sickening premonition of what he might find.

Nate bent down and pointed toward the discharge pipe several inches below the surface of the river. A long white ribbon of some kind had caught on an underwater twig and undulated in the flow. Nate reached into the water and pulled the ribbon free, stretching it across both of his hands so they could look at it.

It was human skin. White human skin. On the bottom of the ribbon was a dark blue stencil of some kind, a series of three consecutive horizontal lines. Through his horror, Joe realized what they were.

"Oh, my God," he whispered. "That's the top of some lettering, *T-E-E*."

He looked up at Nate. "From the word 'ABDUCTEE.' It's from Deena. She had it tattooed across her abdomen. *The son of a bitch skinned her.*"

NOW, JOE WAS angry. Everything he had been feeling previously—frustration, embarrassment, outright fear as they descended into the trees—channeled into rage.

"Let's find him and take him out," he said over his shoulder to Nate as he strode to the pickup. Tilting the bench seat forward, Joe drew his shotgun from its scabbard. It was still loaded with double-ought buckshot shells.

Nate followed. "Joe, calm down."

"I'm calm," Joe said through clenched teeth. He was thinking of Deena, of Not Ike, of Tuff Montegue and Stuart Tanner, of the circus of humiliation and depravity Cleve Garrett had brought into his valley.

"Let's talk about this for a second," Nate said.

Joe racked the pump.

"We need a strategy," Nate said. "So take a breath."

CLEVE GARRETT'S AIRSTREAM trailer was still attached to his pickup and it was pulled into the fifth and last space in the campground. It looked like a big, slick metallic tube in the dark trees. Behind the trailer, through thick stands of willows, the river flowed wide and shallow.

Joe cranked the wheel of his truck to block the road, and turned off the motor. Garrett could not drive out of his site now, and there were too many thick trees all around for him to use an overland escape route.

The blinds were pulled down tight on all of the trailer windows, and Joe wondered if he had been either seen or heard by the occupants inside. Joe and Nate slid out of the cab. As they had planned, Nate pushed his way into the brush and vanished within it to take a position behind cover near the front of Garrett's pickup. This way, Nate could cover Joe as well as see if anyone inside tried to escape out the back of the trailer.

Joe stood behind his pickup, keeping it between him and the trailer. He had switched his radio to PA and the mike cord stretched across the cab and out the open window.

When he assumed Nate was in position, he keyed the mike.

"Cleve Garrett, come out of that trailer now."

He watched the windows carefully, saw one of them near the front shiver as someone looked out.

"IF YOU HAVE ANY WEAPONS, LEAVE THEM INSIDE. OPEN THE DOOR AND COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR, PALMS OUT."

The front window blind shot up. Joe crouched down and raised the stock of the shotgun to his cheek. He put the bead on the front sight to the window. A face appeared, pressed against the glass.

"Joseph?" Not Ike mouthed. "Joseph?" His words were silent on the outside.

Not Ike looked confused but okay, Joe thought with a rush of relief. Garrett probably had a gun at Not Ike's head, shoving the big man's face into the glass.

Not Ike was mouthing something through the glass. Joe could read it: *Creepylike guys, Joseph.*

A louvered pane near Not Ike's head was being cranked open. Joe hoped Nate had a better angle on the window from where he was hidden in the brush. Maybe, Joe thought, Nate would be able to see Garrett inside and fire if Garrett lowered his gun or was distracted.

"Joseph, that's you, isn't it?" Joe could now hear Not Ike.

"It's me," Joe said, talking into the mike so that Garrett would be sure to hear him as well. "Plus about twenty officers more on the way. The trailer is surrounded."

There was a beat and Not Ike's face was pulled from the window. Maybe Garrett would speak now, Joe hoped. Maybe Garrett would try to make a deal.

"Nobody needs to get hurt," Joe said, willing confident gentleness into his voice. "No one needs to get hurt at all. Just leave any weapons inside and come out."

There was movement inside the trailer, and it rocked slightly.

With a metallic click, the door burst open. Joe swung the muzzle of his shotgun to it, saw the door slam against the outside of the trailer, saw the doorframe filled with Not Ike. Garrett was behind Not Ike with his forearm around the big man's throat and a pistol pressed into his ear. Because Garrett was much shorter, all Joe could see of him were his eyes over Not Ike's shoulder.

"We're coming out," Garrett shouted.

Not Ike stepped out of the trailer, Garrett pressed tightly behind him. Not Ike took several steps forward, grinning at Joe as if he didn't fully comprehend what was happening. Joe didn't lower his shotgun. For a brief, electrifying moment, Garrett's and Joe's eyes locked.

"Let him go," Joe said, close enough now not to need the microphone. "Lower the gun and drop it into the dirt."

Garrett looked furtively to his side.

"I don't see anybody else," Garrett said. "Where're your troops?"

"They're out there," Joe lied, thinking: *Nate, where are you?*

Garrett pushed Not Ike forward another few steps toward Joe. The pistol was jammed into Not Ike's ear, tilting his head slightly to the side. Joe could see that the hammer was cocked. Not Ike looked strangely serene, Joe thought. Somehow, it made the situation seem worse.

"We're going to walk right up to you," Garrett said, his voice gaining confidence. "And we're going to take your truck out of here. You are going to lower that shotgun and step aside."

Yes, I was, Joe thought. He had no other choice. Unless ... *Nate?*

Then the door to the trailer filled with someone else, something else, something unspeakably horrible.

It was Cam Logue, with most of his face peeled aside. The front of his shirt was soaked with blood, and his head slumped forward, his arms limp. He was being held up from behind by a big, dark man with a beard, wearing a bloody camouflage jacket.

"*Oh, my God,*" Joe heard himself whisper. Why is Cam here and what have they done to him?

The man behind Cam Logue moved out of the trailer. He appeared to be carrying Cam, keeping him vertical with one arm wrapped tightly around Logue's chest. In the other hand was a scalpel, which was pressed against Logue's throat.

"You din't fo'get about me, did you, Doc?" the man asked Garrett. His speech was garbled and slurred. The man's poor speech and the camo jacket clicked in Joe's mind. It was Nurse Bob, Joe realized.

"Of course not," Garrett said to Nurse Bob, not looking around. To Joe: "It's a messy business, this."

Joe was stunned, unable to process the horrific scene in front of him. Nothing made sense.

BOOM.

The left half of Nurse Bob's head disappeared, blood and pieces of flesh splattering the side of the trailer with a sickening, wet sound, while his body toppled over backward like a felled tree. Cam Logue fell forward, released from the man's grip, landing facedown on the ground.

Instinctively, Joe straightened up and moved to his left behind the truck to get an angle on Garrett. Garrett had wheeled Not Ike around toward the sound of the shot, and Joe could see Garrett clearly now. But Garrett still had the pistol jammed into Not Ike's head.

"*Who did that?*" Garrett screamed, stealing a glance toward Cam's prone body.

"DROP THE WEAPON!" Joe shouted.

But Garrett didn't. Instead, he began backpedaling, pulling Not Ike along with him. Garrett backed up until he was nearly at the trailer again, but veered toward the rear of it. Not Ike was starting to panic now, because he didn't know what was happening.

"Joseph!"

Garrett backed into the reedy brush behind the trailer, and before he was gone the last thing Joe saw were Not Ike's arms flailing.

Then he heard a splash.

JOE AND NATE followed.

"You didn't tell me there would be two of them," Nate said.

"Nobody told me there would be two of them either," Joe muttered. "Or that Cam would be with them."

Nate said nothing.

They found Not Ike in the river, sputtering but unharmed. Cleve Garrett was gone.

"I've got him," Nate said, leaving Joe and Not Ike in the river and wading toward the opposite bank.

35

FOR THE NEXT three hours, as night came and the campground filled with vehicles and men and the crime scene lights went up, Joe Pickett was in a kind of fog. He was lucid enough to recognize that he was in mild shock. He dully recounted the details of what they had found in the campsite to Portenson, Hersig, and Sheriff Barnum. As activity whirled around him, he stayed out of the way, observing things as if he had no connection to any of it.

Hersig came over to Joe at one point and told Joe that they'd found a duffel bag with some personal items in the trailer that confirmed that the man Nate shot was

Robert Eckhardt, the army nurse accused of mutilations who had gone AWOL. The phone number of the cellphone in the man's bag matched the phone number Deputy Cook and Sheriff Harvey had pulled off their Caller ID. Hersig said they were going to run the man's prints through the computer to prove his identification. The extent of his injuries would make a visual ID impossible.

Joe watched as Cam Logue's body was hustled onto a gurney and loaded into an ambulance, followed by Nurse Bob's, and as Barnum put together a team of deputies to cross the river and track down Cleve Garrett.

Remarkably, Deena was still alive. The EMTs brought her out from the back bedroom of the Airstream. She was naked except for the bandages wrapped around her belly and legs and a thin white sheet the EMTs had tucked around her. She was conscious, sleepy-looking, probably drugged, Joe assumed. As they carried her on a stretcher toward ambulance number three, she rolled her head to the side and smiled faintly at Joe.

One of the EMTs, whom Joe recognized from the Tuff Montegue crime scene, told a deputy that Deena had spoken to him when they found her inside.

"She said Garrett was experimenting on her, taking off strips of skin. She said she didn't mind all that much, but she was angry when he screwed up her tattoo. Can you imagine that?"

Deputy Reed came out of the trailer holding a bundle in dark cloth, and someone shined a flashlight on it as the bundle was opened. Steel surgical instruments glinted in the light. Joe recalled Lucy and Sheridan saying something about seeing "silverware" on a cloth in the shack behind the Logues and that the man who chased them away had "Bob" stenciled above the pocket on his jacket. So did the man with half a head who had been zipped up in a body bag an hour before, he thought with a shiver.

"How did this Nurse Bob guy get hooked up with Cleve Garrett?" Hersig was asking Portenson. "Why in the hell did they go after Cam Logue and Not Ike?"

Portenson shrugged and cursed.

"Joe, do you know?" Hersig asked him.

Joe shook his head.

"He's in bad shape," Portenson said, looking at Joe with some sympathy. "I don't think he's ever seen a man's head blown off before."

"Not only that," Hersig said, "but did you see Cam Logue? Jesus, I'm going to have nightmares for years after that."

"You did good," Portenson said to Joe. "You probably saved the lives of two people."

Hersig stood near Joe, shaking his head and staring out into the dark trees. "I'm confused," Hersig said as much to himself as to Joe. "Why was Cam here? How did this Nurse Bob character get involved with Cleve Garrett? Or was he involved with Cam somehow? It wasn't just a coincidence, no way."

Hersig looked at Joe. "So was it Cam all along? Was Cam working with Cleve Garrett? Did he know Nurse Bob through his brother or what? I thought Cam hated his brother?"

Joe barely followed what was being said. He waited for the sound of Nate's gunshot from across the river. The shot never came.

SHORTLY AFTER, NATE appeared beneath one of the spotlights, looking for Joe, causing the deputies who were milling about to stop and stare. Nate certainly had a presence about him, Joe noted.

"I lost his track in the dark," Nate declared to everyone.

"Shit," Barnum cursed. "Did you see my deputies?"

"They're coming in right behind me," Nate said.

Nate searched the crowd, saw Joe standing by his pickup, and started over. Portenson stepped in front of Nate, cutting him off.

"I understand you were the shooter. There may be charges filed, and we'll need a statement from you."

Nate looked at Portenson coldly. "Charges?"

"I deputized him," Joe interrupted.

Portenson shook his head. "What in the hell does that mean?"

Nate shrugged, and stepped around Portenson.

"We still need a statement, mister."

Nate said, "You'll get one. Right now, I'm going to get Joe home. I'll come in to your office tomorrow."

Portenson approached Joe warily. "The identification came through in the middle of all of this. The doctor who escaped was the same Eric Logue who had grown up here. We should have photos of Nurse Bob and Eric Logue on the computer when we get back. Washington is sending them out. But how in the hell everything connects is beyond me right now."

Joe shrugged. His movements were a beat behind his thoughts.

JOE AND NATE left Hersig, Portenson, and Barnum, who were having a discussion about how quickly they could coordinate helicopters and dogs to pursue Cleve Garrett.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?" Nate asked.

"I'm fine."

"I couldn't get an angle on Garrett, or there would have been two bodies back there."

Joe nodded. The images of Cam Logue and Nurse Bob's exploding head played on a continuous loop just beyond the hood of his truck.

"So Cam Logue is dead?" Nate asked, after minutes of silence.

"Yup."

"So I saved a *dead* guy?"

"You didn't know that. Neither did I at the time. That was a hell of a shot."

Nate repeated, "I saved a dead guy."

Joe looked over. "Nate, are you okay?"

"Okay is the wrong word to use after you kill somebody, Joe. I guess I'm ... I don't know what. You could say I have some degree of job satisfaction, I guess."

JOE REMEMBERED HIS cellphone and switched it on as they turned onto the blacktop of the highway.

The display read: YOU HAVE 1 MESSAGE.

Marybeth, thought Joe. She's probably worried as hell.

He punched in the numbers to retrieve the message, and held the phone to his ear. It was Marybeth all right, but her voice was hushed and urgent.

"Joe, where are you? I'm with Marie, at her house. It's a terrible scene, and I'm scared for her. Can you please get here as fast as you can?"

He suddenly floored it, and the engine howled.

"What's going on?" Nate asked.

"I don't know."

36

MARYBBTH'S VAN WAS parked in front of the Logue home on the circular drive, and Joe's headlights swept across it as he pulled in. The van was empty except for a small, blond head in the backseat. Joe's heart raced, fearing it was Lucy or Sheridan.

He braked, leaving the shotgun in the truck, and slid the van door back. The interior light went on and he looked at Jessica Logue, sitting in the center of the middle seat with her hands on her lap. Her face was stained with dried tears.

"Jessica, what are you doing?"

"Mrs. Pickett asked my mom if I could come out here," Jessica said, looking at her hands. "My mom said I could."

"They're inside?"

Jessica nodded.

Joe reached in and patted her shoulder. "Stay here, then. I won't be long." He started to shut the door.

"Mr. Pickett?"

"Yes?"

She looked up at him. "I hope you can help my mom."

"I'll try, honey."

Nate stood in the dark behind him.

"I think you should stay out here," Joe said. "I don't know what the situation is inside. Maybe you can watch through a window, and if things aren't under control, well ..."

"I'll be ready," Nate said. "Is the little girl going to be okay?"

"I'm not sure."

JOE KNOCKED ON the front door, and tried to see through the opaque curtain beside it. There was dim light inside, from a room on the right of the hallway, but he couldn't see Marybeth. He knocked again, and saw a dark form step into the doorway.

"Joe, is that you?" It was Marybeth.

He tightly closed his eyes for an instant—she was all right—then answered her.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"Yes," he lied.

"Is it alright if Joe comes in?" Marybeth asked someone inside the room.

His hand was already turning the knob when she said, "It's okay to come inside, Joe."

He stepped in and shut the door behind him. The hallway was dark. Why didn't Marybeth come to him, he wondered. Was someone threatening her inside?

Jesus, he thought. What if it's Garrett?

He quickly reached for his pistol but stopped when Marybeth, almost imperceptibly, shook her head no. Joe paused and pointed outside and mouthed "Nate." She met his eyes and blinked, indicating that she understood.

His boots sounded loud on the hardwood floor, in the still house, as he walked toward Marybeth. As he neared her, she turned her head inside the room and said, "Marie, Joe's coming in now."

"Okay."

Marybeth stepped back and Joe entered. He took in the scene quickly. The room was dark except for two low-wattage desk lamps. Book-lined shelves covered the opposite wall. A television set and stereo occupied an entertainment center, but both were off.

Marie Logue leaned with her back against an upright piano. She had a glass of red wine in one hand and a semiautomatic pistol in the other. Her eyes looked glazed, her expression blank. There were dried tear tracks down her cheeks, like her daughter's.

Across from Marie, in two overstuffed chairs, sat an old couple. They looked shriveled and flinty, and both peered at Joe from behind metal-rimmed glasses. The man wore suspenders over a white T-shirt, and the woman wore an oversized sweatshirt. The woman's hair looked like curled stainless-steel shavings.

"Joe, I don't believe you've met Marie's mother- and father-in-law before," Marybeth said with a kind of exaggerated calmness that signaled to Joe that the situation was tense. "This is Clancy and Helen Logue."

Joe nodded.

"This is Joe, my husband."

Clancy Logue nodded back, but Helen stared at Joe, apparently sizing him up.

"I was just about to kill them," Marie said from across the room, deadpan. "Marybeth is trying her darndest to talk me out of it."

Joe looked at her.

"I bet I can get you to say three words now," Marie said, her mouth twisting into a bitter grin.

"MARIE, DO YOU mind if I fill Joe in on what we've been discussing?" Marybeth asked, still with remarkable calm.

Marie arched her eyebrows in a "what the hell" look, and took a long drink of her wine. Her eyes shifted from Joe to Clancy and Helen as Marybeth told the story.

"Marie learned last week that Cam has been trying to buy the Overstreet Ranch in secret. That the secret buyer he told us about was Cam himself. Apparently, the only people he told about it were his parents. He told them that he was going to buy back

their old ranch but that they weren't welcome on it. But there was another reason, other than nostalgia, why Cam wanted the ranch. Am I doing okay so far, Marie?"

"Perfect," she said.

"As you know, Joe, the Logue home used to serve as an archive for the old county clerk. Cam liked to go through the old files, to learn about the history of property in the area, he told Marie. But apparently he found the file for the Overstreet Ranch, and discovered that the mineral rights lease signed by their father was for fifty years. That meant that the rights would revert back to the landowner in two more years. The Overstreet sisters didn't know that. They thought the mineral rights were sold forever."

"And Cam would get the royalties on all of that coal-bed methane development," Joe said.

Marie clucked her tongue.

"Were you aware of this scheme?" Joe asked her.

"Well, no. I didn't find out about that part of it until this morning, when he confessed it to me. I was so damned mad at him. You think you know somebody ... I'm ethical, Joe," she pleaded. "Marybeth knows that. That's why I refused to come to work. I would never take advantage of those two old sisters that way. Cam knew it too, which is why he didn't tell me."

And Stuart Tanner knew it, Joe thought. Tanner found it out when he researched the property. Tanner likely had it in the file he delivered to Cam Logue that day.

Marybeth turned back. "Well, Clancy and Helen decided to come and visit Cam. According to Marie, when his parents found out he was going to try to get the ranch back, they wanted to live there, too. No one except Cam knew about the mineral rights yet. Clancy and Helen thought it would be a good place to retire."

"Damned right," Clancy said defiantly. "The boy does something right for once in his life, and he didn't want to share it."

Joe shot a look at Marie. Her eyes were narrowed on Clancy.

"Please," Marybeth said. "Let me tell the story."

Clancy snorted, but sat back.

"Marie was telling me that Cam has a brother, Eric. He's a doctor with the army and he had some really severe problems a couple of years ago, some kind of breakdown. Eric was accused of deliberately hurting some patients ..."

"It wasn't deliberate," Helen broke in.

"Oh, shut up," Marie warned, raising the pistol and looking down it at Helen. Helen clamped her mouth tight, but her eyes smoldered.

"He may have hurt his patients because of his sickness," Marybeth said cautiously, searching for words that wouldn't inflame either party. "Anyway, Eric's friend, a male nurse, came with Clancy and Helen in their truck. You may have seen it parked outside. The camper shell with the locks on the outside of it?"

Joe nodded. *Jesus.*

"That's how they brought Eric's friend here. Under lock and key."

Joe looked at Clancy and Helen now. They didn't look like monsters. They looked like near-indigent retirees.

"Apparently, the nurse got away from Helen and Clancy. He may have been living on the property, in that shack our girls found, but we don't know that for sure yet."

Joe was confused. "Why did you bring him out here?"

Clancy and Helen exchanged glances.

"You might as well talk," Marie told them in a singsong voice. "Or I'll just have to start blasting away."

Helen cleared her throat. "Bob showed up at our house in South Dakota unannounced. He said he was looking for Eric. Our son asked that we bring him here."

"Cam asked that?" Marie said incredulously.

"Not Cam," Helen said. "Eric."

"What?" Marie's face was getting red.

"Marie, please be calm," Marybeth said.

"Eric wanted you to bring that piece of filth to our home?" Marie's voice rose into shrillness. "Where your granddaughter is?"

"Bob's not that bad," Clancy interjected. "Hard to understand him when he talks, though."

"Besides," Helen added, "he stayed out back and never bothered anyone. He just kept to himself."

Maybe you *ought* to shoot them, Joe thought.

"Anyway," Marybeth said, trying to get control of the conversation, "Eric and Bob showed up here today. They took Cam with them."

"Eric was here?" Joe blurted.

Joe knew that something must have shown in his face, because both Marybeth and Marie picked up on it.

"Do you know where Cam is, Joe?" Marie asked.

Joe looked at her.

"Oh, my God, do you know where he is?"

"I'm very sorry," Joe said. "Cam is gone. We were too late to save him. Nurse Bob is dead too. We think he may have participated in killing Cam."

Marie gasped, seemed to hold her breath, then let out a gut-wrenching wail that sent shivers up Joe's forearms. Marybeth stepped back and covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes wide.

In mid-scream, Marie turned and raised the pistol, pointed it at Helen, and before Joe could lunge across the room and grab it, Marie pulled the trigger. The hammer snapped on an empty chamber. Joe grasped the pistol with two hands, and Marie let him take it from her. She ran across the room to Marybeth, who held her.

Letting out a long breath, Joe checked the gun and saw that Marie hadn't racked a shell into the chamber from the magazine. Then he looked at Helen. Her expression hadn't changed from before, when Marie pulled the trigger. Her eyes were dead, black, reptile eyes, masked by the face of an old woman.

"They got Cam?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That's too bad," she said.

"Too bad Marie didn't know how to load a gun," Joe said.

"That's uncalled for," Helen hissed back.

Then Joe froze, and it was as if the room was spinning around him while he stood. On a shelf behind Helen and Clancy were a set of framed photos. The photos were of Cam and Marie's wedding, Jessica, and a couple he assumed was Marie's parents. But there was a single framed picture in the middle that seemed to grow larger and sharper as he stared at it.

The photo was of Helen and Clancy and a much younger Cam. Standing next to Cam, a head taller, was Cleve Garrett.

Joe leaned over Clancy and Helen, snatched the photo from the shelf, and shook it in front of them.

"Why is Cleve Garrett in this picture?" he shouted.

Clancy looked at Joe like Joe was crazy. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about," he said. "That's Eric. Our son Eric. The doctor. *The surgeon.*"

Then Joe recalled Nurse Bob's last words: "*You din't fo'get about me, did you, Doc?*"

37

CLEVE GARRBTT WAS Dr. Eric Logue. Dr. Eric Logue was Cleve Garrett. And despite the search teams, the helicopters, and the dogs, neither was found. The closest they came to him, three days after the shootout, was the discovery of a crude, abandoned lean-to campsite fourteen miles due west from the river. The camp was in the mountains, in a stand of aspen. They found the remains of a small, sheltered campfire and a half-eaten fawn. The investigators determined that the last occupant of the shelter had likely been Garrett/Logue because the fawn's haunches—and face—had been removed. Another trophy.

Following the discovery, the search was intensified. Governor Budd authorized the use of the Wyoming National Guard, and for a week they walked the west face of the Bighorns in concentric circles. No other camp, or track, was found.

Garrett/Logue knew the terrain like someone who had grown up there. Because he had.

THE DAY AFTER Cam Logue's funeral, Marie and Jessica had stopped by the Pickett house on Bighorn Road. According to Ken Siman of Siman's Memorial Chapel, it was the largest funeral in Saddlestring in a decade. Marie was on her way out of town. Marybeth had agreed to let Jessica stay with them until Marie got settled in Denver, which delighted Lucy. Marie told Marybeth they would live in Denver to be near her parents. Cam's life insurance, she said, would take care of her and Jessica

for years. Both women embraced and cried, saying their goodbyes. Joe and Sheridan stood uncomfortably by, trading glances.

"I think it was finding those files," Marie said, looking to Joe as if he had asked her the question. "They brought it all back to him. I think he was trying to get revenge on his past."

Joe nodded. "Is it possible that Eric was trying to help him? By driving land values down so he could buy the ranch back?"

Marie stared at the floor. "No, I don't think so. I don't think he knew Eric was here until that morning. I really don't."

She looked up. "I don't *want* to think that. So I won't."

AS THE DAYS passed into weeks, Joe found himself thinking more about Cam Logue and less about Eric. It hurt to think about Cam. He felt more and more sorry for the man, and how things had gone. Cam was the product of cruel, twisted, unloving parents. Parents who had produced two children; one an outright miscreant and the other an emotional orphan. Despite that, Cam had tried to make something better of himself and his own family. He was a hard worker, and as far as Joe knew, Cam was a good husband and father until the end. Much like Joe himself, whose parents specialized in alcoholism, neglect, and lack of direction, Cam had been driving without a road map. Cam needed Marie for structure as Joe needed Marybeth. Under her guidance, Cam had participated in the community, won awards and accolades, received deserved admiration. His doubts, frustrations, and outright fears were kept well hidden. Unfortunately, Cam had likely not shared his fears with Marie, who might have been able to help him. In the end, he didn't so much betray her as allow deeply imbedded inclinations to re-emerge.

Cam was guilty of greed, of trying too desperately to provide a better place and a better life for his wife and daughter than he'd had growing up. He was not a criminal by nature, or an unchecked, unprincipled entrepreneur. He had succumbed to his desire to make things right, to try and reclaim and rewrite his past. But his past came roaring back, driving a battered old pickup with South Dakota plates.

Joe thought he had glimpsed the true Cam Logue that day in the real estate office when he confronted him. What he had seen wasn't the cocksure businessman, but someone who was unsure and bitter, someone who was deep into a scheme and situation that he never should have pursued.

TREY CRUMP HAD called Joe with startling and disturbing news.

"You're not going to believe this," Trey said. "You were right about that bear collar. It was older than hell, and the bear guys said it had been out of inventory for thirty years. We have no idea how it showed up in that sheep wagon."

Joe digested this, his mind swimming. "It showed up there because it came off the bear, Trey."

"The bear guys say no way, Joe. No way a bear wandered around for thirty years without emitting a signal, and then showed up in your district. The only thing they can figure out is that the sheep-herder must have found it somewhere along the line."

Joe remembered the trashed trailer, remembered the smell of the bear inside of it.

"Not a chance," Joe said, confused.

Trey cleared his throat. "This is where things start to get really weird, Joe. The thing is, the rogue grizzly bear that came out of Yellowstone was killed by some idiot roughneck over by Meeteetse a month ago. That bear never made it to the Bighorns."

"WHAT?"

"The guy shot him, skinned him out, and crushed the radio collar. We never would have known except that the idiot took the hide to a taxidermist in Cody to get a rug made. The taxidermist called me, and the roughneck confessed everything this afternoon. We even found the decomposed body and what was left of the collar."

Joe was stunned.

"There *was* a bear here, Trey. I saw the tracks. I saw what he did to the body of a dead cowboy."

"Must have been another bear, I guess," Trey said unconvincingly.

Joe fought against telling Trey about the bear Nate had been "communicating" with. If he told his supervisor, both Joe and Nate could be faced with federal charges.

The telephone was silent on both ends for two full minutes before they hung up.

Joe stared out his window, confused. A thirty-year-old bear collar? A bear that had vanished off the face of the earth for three decades had suddenly reappeared?

"Nah," Joe said out loud, deliberately shutting off that line of inquiry. God, he needed a beer.

MOMENTS LATER, AS Joe was about to head to the kitchen, Nate called.

Joe said, "You're just the man I want to talk to."

He heard Nate chuckle.

"I just heard some interesting news," Joe said. "They found the missing grizzly. It never got here."

"That *is* interesting," Nate said slyly.

"But we both know there was a bear."

"Yes," Nate said. "I guess we do."

"And I remember there was something you were starting to tell me just before we went out to the campground. We never finished that conversation."

"No, we didn't."

"Maybe we should finish it now," Joe said.

Nate was prone to long silences, and he lapsed into one now. Joe waited him out.

"Hypothetically speaking," Nate said, "if I knew there was a grizzly still around here and told you about it, you would be duty-bound to report the discovery, correct?"

"Correct," Joe said. "Grizzlies are on the endangered species list and they fall under the authority of the department."

"That's what I thought." Another long silence.

"Nate?"

"I've learned so much. Not all of it is comfortable. But in the end, it gives me hope."

"Why is that?"

“There are bigger things than us out there, on other levels. Luckily, they take care of their own.”

“Nate ...”

“All I can say right now is you need to trust me on this, Joe. It’s fascinating, this experience. You’ll be the first to know what happens, I promise.”

Joe sat back, thinking, recalling things Nate had said.

In my dream, the bear was sent for a reason. He has a mission.

That bear may be more than a bear. That bear is here for a reason.

We happen to be in the right place at the right time where conflicts on different levels are overlapping.

You should open your mind a little.

USING FBI RESOURCES, Agent Portenson tracked the path of Eric Logue from his years in the army to his escape in North Carolina to the Riverside RV Park.

Associates in the army confirmed Eric’s downward spiral from exceptionally talented surgeon into madness. He was wealthy as well, having invested in technology stocks early and selling just before the bubble burst. Eric first showed signs of paranoia and obsession with paranormal phenomena while in the Philippines. He had been suspected of drug use, along with Nurse Bob. When his patients began emerging from surgery with wounds and grafts not related to the procedure, he was put under a full-time watch. Then a suspected Filipino enemy combatant with a minor leg injury died from massive blood loss after being operated on by Dr. Logue and an inquiry was launched that resulted in his court-martial.

While in custody, guards reported that Eric claimed he was in contact with aliens and had regular night-time visitations with them. Eric said he had been instructed by his contacts to collect samples for them. The guards suspected that Eric’s delusions were an attempt to get the charges dismissed due to mental incapacity. Then, while being transferred to another facility, Eric escaped.

He had purchased his name in New Orleans, from a man who specialized in new identities. The pickup and trailer came from a dealer in Birmingham. There was no Iconoclast Society, no wealthy benefactor who financed the research. There was only Eric, so filled with messianic self-confidence that he was practically above suspicion.

DEENA HAD BEEN interviewed by Hersig while she recovered in the Twelve Sleep County hospital. Afterward, he’d called Joe and recounted the conversation.

Deena had met “Cleve” in Helena, and she knew nothing of his past and she really didn’t care to hear about it. He had never mentioned having a brother. What she knew was that he had been sent to her at the exact time she needed him most. He knew things that she hoped to learn, and was in contact with other beings on an intimate basis. He was their human conduit. At least that’s what he told her, and she saw no reason not to believe him.

If it really was Cleve who did the mutilations, she said, he was simply following orders.

Yes, she had agreed to let him experiment on her. She saw it as no different than getting tattooed or pierced. She was a little pissed off at him, though, when he cut off the top of her ABDUCTEE tattoo.

And yes, she knew Cleve disposed of her skin at the fish-cleaning station. He had told her that.

She had slept through most of the trouble in the trailer the day of the shoot-out, she said. Cleve had given her some medication for her pain, and it knocked her out. The noises from the front of the trailer were awful, in an otherworldly way, but she had thought at the time that she was dreaming.

Despite everything, she said, she still loved Cleve Garrett. And more important, she still believed in him.

Hersig's voice was shaky as he told Joe the story. When he was through, he said, "I think I need to go take a shower."

SHERIFF BARNUM CLAIMED not to have any idea what Cam had been up to in regard to the CBM rights on the ranch, although he admitted being interested in buying his retirement home there. Joe believed him, but also knew that Barnum had sat by quietly during the course of the investigation, as land values plummeted. He had not revealed his real estate interest to the rest of the task force, and he secretly benefited from the perception that the valley was "spooked." This led Joe and Hersig to speculate that Barnum may have had perverse motivation not to solve the crimes quickly, but they had no solid evidence of that.

Nevertheless, word got out within the community about the land deal that never was, and Barnum's interest in it. There was even talk among the coffee drinkers at the Burg-O-Pardner about launching a recall petition on Sheriff Barnum. As far as Joe knew, the action wasn't followed through. But there was no doubt that Barnum's reputation had taken a beating, and that he would stand little chance in the next election. Not that it mattered much, Barnum declared in the *Roundup*, because he had planned to retire anyway. It had been a good twenty-eight years, he said.

FOR THE TWENTIETH time since the shoot-out, Joe sat lost in thought in his office. All but one big-game hunting season had ended, and winter was on the way. Paperwork was piled up in his in-box, and he'd missed three straight weekly reports to Trey Crump. The mutilations had, of course, stopped. Portenson had gone back to Cheyenne. The Murder and Mutilations Task Force had been disbanded for lack of purpose.

But for Joe, there was unfinished business. The case was still open, and not just because Eric Logue was still at large. There were still too many questions.

Nate Romanowski had all but disappeared. His only communication with Joe was a terse message left on the answering machine: "Joe, I was right. That bear is here for a reason. He's just a vessel, an agent. He'll be here only as long as he has to be."

In the end, as the search for Dr. Eric Logue lost both hope and urgency, the only workable scenario they could give any credence to was this:

Eric had been a boy in the mid-1970s, when the first rash of cattle mutilations in the West was news, so the concept wasn't foreign to him. Perhaps that was when his fascination and obsession with a paranormal answer to the crimes was first implanted.

Eric Logue, in his sickness, had come to believe that his mission was to kill and disfigure living beings and collect trophies. He believed that others were telling him to do it, or he had somehow convinced himself that he was pleasing the owners of these voices through his acts. He used his experience as a surgeon, as well as his tools, to do it. His first disciple in his mission was Nurse Bob, who had problems of his own.

Using his new identity and the cover of the fictitious Iconoclast Society, he returned to the Rocky Mountain West, first to Northern Montana, then to Wyoming. He had a reason to be where the mutilations were discovered, after all. He said he was studying them.

The mutilations in Montana, from Eric's perspective, had gone very well. No one suspected him. What didn't go well, though, was that the officials in charge of the investigation treated him like he was a crank. They didn't take his theories seriously, and didn't welcome his knowledge or advice. There were a few converts, Deena being the primary one, but overall, he was disappointed.

He realized that cattle and wildlife weren't enough. He needed to up the ante. He needed some help, so he asked Nurse Bob to rejoin him in Saddlestring. No one had recognized him from his youth there.

Eric and Nurse Bob started with animals, as they had in Montana. Then, on the single night in Twelve Sleep County, they had split up, with one of them going after Stuart Tanner and the other Tuff Montegue. Eric took Tanner, Nurse Bob took Tuff. This explained why Tanner's death was similar in style to the cattle mutilations. Nurse Bob, who was not as experienced in technique, had done a crude job on Tuff.

Nate's thought was that while Eric stayed with Tanner's body, his presence discouraged predators from moving in. Meanwhile, Nurse Bob left Tuff's body to the bear while he drove to pick up Eric. Once they were together again, Nurse Bob used his cellphone to report Tanner's body.

This is where the scenario began to fall apart, as far as Joe was concerned. There was still no explanation for why Eric came "home" to Saddlestring, or whether there had been any contact with Cam. If not, why had the murders obviously helped Cam's land deal along? Joe couldn't accept coincidence as an explanation.

They must have been in contact, Joe thought. Either Cam had asked Eric to use the cover of the cattle mutilations to kill Stuart Tanner, or Eric had somehow taken it upon himself to help out his brother. Either way, they must have communicated at some point. Otherwise, how would Eric have known to target Tanner?

The method and aftermath of the mutilations themselves, whether animal or human, still didn't produce a logical explanation. How had Eric actually killed the animals and mutilated them without leaving tracks or evidence? What had he done to the bodies to prevent predation?

What explained the feeling in the air Joe experienced when he first found the dead moose?

What scared Maxine so badly that he was now the proud owner of the world's only all-white Labrador?

The last part of the scenario was just as troublesome. What had driven Eric and Nurse Bob to confront Cam in his home, and to kidnap him? Why did they pick up Not Ike? And why had Eric and Nurse Bob killed and mutilated Cam?

And the biggest question of all: *Where was Eric Logue?*

JOE WAS STILL distracted when he and Marybeth cleared the dinner dishes from the table. He had scarcely heard the dinner conversation, with Lucy, Jessica, and Sheridan talking about their day in school.

As he filled the sink with water, Marybeth said, "You're thinking about Eric Logue again, aren't you?"

He looked at her.

"We may just never know, Joe. We've discussed it to death."

"I didn't think it was possible to discuss *anything* to death," he said, taking a jibe at her.

"Very funny."

He washed, she dried.

Lucy and Jessica laughed in the next room at something on television. Joe looked over his shoulder at them. They had changed out of their school clothes. They liked to dress alike, much to Sheridan's consternation. Tonight, they both wore oversized green surgeon's scrubs.

"Why are they wearing those?" Marybeth asked, suddenly alarmed, knowing whom the shirts once came from.

She raised her voice. "Both of you girls go change clothes right now. I thought I told you to get rid of those."

Both girls looked back at Marybeth, obvious guilt on their faces. They had forgotten.

"Sorry, Mom," Lucy said as she skulked to her room.

"Sorry, Mrs. Pickett," Jessica said.

Then it was as if Marybeth's legs went numb, Joe saw, the way she suddenly reached for the door jamb to keep herself steady.

"What?" Joe asked, puzzled.

Marybeth looked at Joe. Her expression was horrifying.

"What?"

"Oh, no," she said, looking pale.

"Marybeth ..."

She turned to him and whispered, "Joe, Marie didn't throw out those scrubs. She let Jessica keep them and wear them."

"So?"

"Think about it, Joe. A woman wouldn't keep something like those scrubs around her house unless she had a reason. Marie had to know they were there. She washed them for Jessica, and folded them up for her, probably dozens of times."

Joe said, "Go on."

"Why would Marie keep those in her house? Clothes that would remind her husband of the brother he hated? Why would she keep a picture of Eric on her mantel? And now that I think about it, you were more surprised that Eric had come to their house after Cam that day than Marie was."

Joe felt a hammer blow square in the middle of his chest. "Marybeth, do you know what you're saying?"

Instead of answering, Marybeth stepped forward to intercept Jessica as she walked toward the bedroom to change. Marybeth dropped to her knees so she could look at Jessica eye-to-eye. She placed her hands gently on the little girl's shoulders.

"Jessica, how long have you had those shirts?"

Jessica stopped and thought. "A while."

"How long?"

Jessica was surprised at Marybeth's tone. "A couple of years, I guess. I don't remember exactly."

"Who gave them to you?"

"Uncle Eric."

Joe watched Jessica carefully. There was fear growing in her eyes.

Marybeth asked, "Jessica, was your uncle Eric at your house a couple of years ago? Before you moved here?"

Her eyes were huge and she was on the verge of tears. But she nodded.

"Your dad and your uncle Eric didn't get along very well, did they?"

"No."

"Your dad even asked you to get rid of those hospital scrubs when he saw you wearing them, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"But your mom said you could keep them, as long as you never wore them around your dad, right?"

Jessica nodded. "I think they're cool to wear."

"I understand."

Jessica looked over Marybeth's shoulder at Joe. Joe knew that Jessica couldn't determine if she was in trouble or not.

"No one's angry with you, Jessica," he told her. "Just answer Marybeth's questions."

Jessica nodded. "My mom said I could keep them as long as I didn't wear them around my dad, and I never did."

Marybeth asked, "Your mom and uncle Eric were good friends, weren't they? They talked a lot on the telephone when your dad wasn't there, right?"

Joe took a deep breath, feeling a shroud of dark horror engulf him.

When Jessica nodded, Joe didn't even want to see Marybeth's reaction. But Marybeth remained calm, at least outwardly.

"Okay, honey," Marybeth said, standing. "You can go change now."

Jessica didn't move.

Joe and Marybeth stared at each other, neither wanting to say anything in front of Jessica. Jessica watched them both, and her eyes filled with tears.

She looked at Marybeth. "My mom's not coming back, is she?"

38

THREE DAYS LATER, Marie Logue was at the New Orleans International Airport, checking in for a flight to Milan, when she was surrounded by a dozen special agents from the local office of the FBI. The name she was using was Barbara Grossman, and she had a Louisiana driver's license and a four-year-old passport to prove it. Unfortunately for Marie Logue, the FBI had, on videotape, the footage of the transaction taking place between Marie and the same man who had sold Eric Logue his Cleve Garrett identity papers.

Portenson was exuberant and cocky when he called Joe and told him what had happened. He said he had thought it through once Joe tipped him off about the relationship between Marie and Eric Logue, and he figured out that Eric had probably told Marie about the location of the identity thief in New Orleans. Portenson figured that Marie would eventually go there herself, for her new documents. Portenson said his colleagues in New Orleans had arrested the identity thief earlier in the week and had made a deal for leniency with him if he would help them set her up, including the placement of video cameras in his office over a bar on Bourbon Street.

"We want to interview her tomorrow, and we'd like you to be here, since you know her," Portenson said.

"I *thought* I knew her," Joe corrected.

"Whatever. We want you there."

"New Orleans?"

"I'll fax you the address for our field office, and we'll make you a reservation at a hotel nearby. If you take the commuter flight that leaves your little podunk airport in two hours, you can connect in Denver. You can be here tonight."

"I don't think I have the budget to ..."

"We're covering your expenses, Joe. I already got approval for it."

JOE PICKETT LANDED in New Orleans at midnight, in a rainstorm of biblical dimensions. His Stetson got soaked through in just the time it took him to climb into a taxi at the airport.

Despite the rain, there were throngs of people moving on the sidewalks downtown. Some carried umbrellas, but most just got wet. He checked in at the Bourbon Orleans Hotel in the French Quarter.

As he stood at the front desk, dripping, the flirty blond clerk found his reservation and said, “Are you really from Wyoming?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever actually met anyone from there before.”

“Now you have,” he said.

THERE WAS A message on the voice mail in his room from Portenson saying to be at the FBI field office on Leon C. Simon Boulevard by 9 A.M.

“We’ll brief you on what we’ve got so far, and then we’ll go in and see her,” he said. “So don’t party too hard on the Quarter tonight.”

Joe called Marybeth to tell her that he had arrived safely, then tried to sleep. He couldn’t. The unfamiliarity of it all—Marie Logue, mutilations, New Orleans—kept him awake.

At two in the morning he put on his wet hat and went outside into the rain. The streets were still crowded with people. He walked down Dauphine Street and then Bourbon, and a reveler from a balcony above him called him “Tex” and threw him a beaded necklace.

IT WAS STILL raining in the morning when he arrived at the FBI field office. The security guard found his name on the computer, gave him a guest badge, and sent him into the back offices.

Portenson was waiting with a bookish woman he introduced as Special Agent Nan Scoon. Scoon had been the leader of the team that arrested Marie at the airport.

Portenson said, “When we brought her in, she had eight thousand in cash on her and records that indicate that she transferred \$1.3 million—the rest of the insurance money—to accounts in the Caymans. *That’s* what she had spent her time doing after she left your place.

“The calls she made to your wife supposedly to check on her daughter were from all over the country. Not one actually came from Denver, where her parents do live. We interviewed them and she never even showed up there.”

Joe whistled. “You did some good work.”

“I know,” Portenson said, “I’m a fuckin’ genius. But the great thing is that we built the case on her while we waited for her to show up here, and last night we dropped it on her like a ton of bricks. First-degree accessory to three murders, child abandonment, conspiracy, racketeering, and fifteen other counts. She was playing it straight at first—she kept insisting she was Barbara Grossman—but we dropped those charges on her like the Mother of All Bombs. And after a little crying jag, she cracked. She gave us a little at first, fishing around for a deal. When she saw she wasn’t going to get one, she started yapping. My guys down there said that by the time she was through, it was like she was bragging about it, all full of herself.”

“So she’s willing to talk?” Joe asked.

“That’s why we brought you down here, cowboy.”

JOE DIDN’T RECOGNIZE her at first when they entered the Spartan interview room. Marie was now blond, and she wore fashionable, black-framed glasses. She had

added a beauty mark to her upper lip. When she saw Joe, her eyes widened behind the lenses.

"Hello, Marie," Joe said, sitting across the table from her. Portenson and Scoon took the other chairs.

Agent Scoon signaled for the tape to roll, and briefed Marie on her rights. As she had done the day before, Marie waived the right to have an attorney present.

"Let's get this over with," she said curtly, looking at Joe.

"So who actually found the file in the basement?" Joe asked.

"*Moi*," she said, and her eyes sparkled. "Cam might have seen it before, but it didn't connect with him the way it connected with me. He was a little slow in that regard. Cam was a fairly weak guy, basically. He looked to me for guidance."

Joe grunted. In retrospect, it didn't surprise him all that much. As he had thought earlier, Cam was driving without a road map. But Marie was the one providing directions.

"Then those mutilations came," she said, "and that's all everyone was talking about. We liked the idea that the land values were sinking, but we worried about whether we could afford the Timberline Ranch anyway. That's when I started pushing Cam so hard to get out there and get more listings. I rode him *hard*, thinking that if even *one* of the ranches sold we would have the down payment on the Timberline."

While she talked, she drew invisible patterns on the tabletop with her index finger.

"That's when poor old Stuart Tanner showed up with his file. We didn't figure that Tanner would research the deed and find the same thing I did. So when Cam told me that we needed to forget about buying the place and move on, I played my hole card."

"You called Eric," Joe said.

"Right. We'd kept in touch for years." She batted her eyes coquettishly. "He's been *smitten* with me, like *forever*. We'd had a relationship years before that Cam never knew about. I moved on but Eric kept a torch. Even when he started getting sick he never lost his feelings for me. He said he'd do anything for me. Then he'd talk like a nut about his obsession with aliens. I let him go on and on about that. So when I called him and asked him for a favor, he came. Eric and his buddy Bob did Tanner and Montegue. Eric did it to please me, which was kind of sweet when you think about it."

Joe felt his stomach curdle, but tried to stay calm and ask his questions.

"Why did they choose Tuff Montegue?"

She shrugged. "He was just *there*, I suppose. But Eric was clever in a devilish kind of way. He told me that they intentionally messed up the job on Montegue. They did it to draw attention away from Tanner, and as you know, it worked. Your task force would have been working the wrong angle on that one until hell froze over, if it weren't for you, Joe."

Joe said nothing. He was thinking. Most of the pieces had finally fallen into place. But there were still problems.

"So Cam didn't know about his brother being there?" Joe asked.

"I think he assumed he was somewhere close. He told me he thought it was just a matter of time before the family was back together, now that his parents were there. He dreaded the prospect."

"Did he know Nurse Bob was living in a shack on your property?"

"I didn't even know that. I thought he was living somewhere out in the woods."

"What about Cam's parents? Did Cam know they were coming? Did you?"

Marie laughed sourly. "That was as big of a surprise for me as it was for Cam when they showed up. I knew about Bob coming, of course, but I had no idea they were bringing him. Old Clancy and Helen really threw a kink into things."

"Did you tell Eric to kill his brother?"

Marie reacted with shock. "Of course not. Of *course* not. I was genuinely shocked when you told me what happened. I just wanted Eric to put a little spine into Cam, because Cam was wavering on me."

"Why was he wavering?"

"You spooked him," Marie said, smiling at Joe. "That meeting you had with him shook him up. When he found out you were checking out the deeds at the county clerk's, he told me we needed to forget the whole damned thing. But I had no intention of giving up."

Joe was chilled by her. She was so matter-of-fact, and actually a little charming. Poor Cam, Joe thought. He'd married a manipulator.

"I never saw it," Joe confessed. "I never even considered you."

"You weren't the only one," she said.

"I kept wondering why they went after Not Ike," Joe said, "but now I know. It's because I told Cam that Not Ike said he had seen somebody in the alley behind the real estate office. When Cam told you the story, you panicked and called Eric."

She leaned forward and fixed Joe with her eyes. "I don't panic," she said.

"Do you know where Eric is?"

"Absolutely not," she said adamantly. "I swear it. I haven't been in contact with him since that morning. I hope you find him, and I hope he hangs or whatever they do to killers in Wyoming. Joe," she said, tilting her head to the side, "he killed my husband, remember? As far as I know, he's still out there."

"You mean in Wyoming?"

"As far as I know," she repeated. Then she looked to Agent Scoon, as if she was exasperated with Joe.

"Don't you think I'd give him up in a heartbeat if I knew where he was? Eric's location is the only thing I'd have to make a deal with. You people have me on so many charges, at least if I knew something I'd be able to, you know, negotiate a little."

It did make sense, Joe conceded to himself. *Damn it.*

"So it was all about money," Joe said sadly. "All about getting the CBM leases."

She turned on him. "*Of course*, Joe. Why would there be any more to it? You've got these rubes all over the state becoming instant millionaires, just because they own

mineral rights. It's not like they earned their money by being virtuous, or working hard. Why not Cam and me?

"What did you expect? That we were going to just bump along all of our lives living paycheck to paycheck like you and Marybeth?"

That stung, and he blinked.

"Cam was okay with that kind of existence, but I never was," she said. "When it's raining money, you can either put on your raincoat or get the buckets out. You better think about it too, Joe. You've got your family to think about. Marybeth wants more, Joe. She deserves more. Don't think we haven't talked about it, either."

Joe sat in silence, staring at her.

"Stop staring," she snapped.

"Never once have you asked about your daughter," he said. "Not once have you even mentioned her."

Marie smiled. "That's because I know she's in good hands."

THEY LEFT MARIE in the interview room. Joe and Portenson stood in the hall, shaking their heads at each other.

"Couple of things," Joe said. "If Marie called Eric to come and get Stuart Tanner, then Eric could not have done the cattle mutilations."

Portenson moaned. "Why don't we forget about the dead cows for now."

"Because I can't." Joe didn't bring up the moose.

"Jesus Christ."

"It means that somebody or something else mutilated the animals," Joe said. "It had nothing to do with Eric, or Marie. She used the mutilations for cover to do in Tanner. But she didn't have anything to do with them in the first place."

Portenson sounded almost physically pained. "Joe ..."

"Don't tell me it was birds, Portenson."

After a long silence, Portenson said, "Okay, I won't. But I don't see where it matters anymore. The mutilations have gone away. We'll never find out who did it, and frankly, since we've got Marie, I really don't care anymore. We'll find Eric. It's just a matter of time."

"One more thing," Joe said. "Jessica Logue."

"Oh, man ..."

"Are her grandparents okay? The ones in Denver? Can they take her?"

"This isn't my department."

"I know. But you talked to them. Do they seem like normal human beings? Not like Clancy and Helen? Or Marie?"

"They seem normal."

"Are you sure?"

"I didn't give them a psychological test, or anything. Come on, Joe ..."

"I'm serious." Joe said, raising his voice. "It's important. We've seen too many people screwed up by bad parents. I can't let Jessica go there unless I'm sure she'll be okay. If it's not, we've got to find a normal uncle and aunt. There's got to be somebody."

Portenson sighed, "Okay, okay. I'll make your case. We'll send some people over there, and do some checking. But please understand that this isn't what the FBI does ..."

Joe thanked him before he could recant.

ON THE PLANE back, Joe sat in his seat and furiously rubbed his face with his hands. He hadn't seen it, hadn't suspected. And even though one part of the investigation was concluded, there was still more. The whole sordid case left a bad taste in his mouth. It always came down to the family, he thought.

MARYBETH LISTENED AS Joe recounted the interview, watching him. She shook her head sadly.

"It's not your fault," he said. "She fooled everyone."

Marybeth came over and sat on Joe's lap. Her eyes were moist. "We talked about everything, Joe. She told me about her dreams. I told her about mine. Now I find out that her dreams were things she made up for my sake. I feel horribly duped, and angry."

He held her. "Sometimes, darling, we see what we want to see. Remember Wacey Hedeman?"

Wacey had been Joe's closest friend until he betrayed Joe. Five years before, Wacey had shot Marybeth and threatened Sheridan. It still hurt when Joe thought about it. Wacey had twenty more years to go at the Wyoming State Penitentiary in Rawlins.

"Thank you for trying to find the best family for Jessica," Marybeth said softly. "I wish we could keep her, I really do. But after what happened to April, I just can't make the commitment."

Joe nodded. "I knew that. It's okay."

They sat like that for a half an hour, each with their own rumination, holding each other.

Eric Logue is still out there, *he thought*, and so is whatever mutilated the cattle.

She thought, We're back to where we started.

39

WINTER STORM CLOUDS were nosing over the top of the Bighorn Mountains and the air was cold and lifeless when Nate Romanowski pulled on his jacket to check his falcons in the mews. Joe Pickett was bringing Sheridan out later that morning, for her first falconry apprenticeship lesson in a while. Nate's special project had concluded, more or less successfully, and it was time to fly his birds again. It had been too long, nearly two months.

On mornings like this, in the quiet of an impending storm, sounds carried farther. It would be a good morning to submerge himself in the river and listen, Nate thought. But the water was getting too cold for that. He needed a winter wet suit.

From inside the mews, he heard his peregrine squeal and flap his wings wildly, and Nate stopped before opening the door. He had put a leather hood on the bird the night before, specifically to keep the falcon calm. Something had alarmed the bird. There was something wrong ...

The blow to his head came from above, from the roof of the mews. He hadn't thought to look up.

NATE KNEW WHAT was happening, he knew why it was happening, but there was nothing he could do about it. His limbs wouldn't respond and he couldn't even open his eyes. The heavy blow had temporarily paralyzed him, disconnected his brain from his body. He lay on his back in the dirt near the door of the mews.

Even worse, someone was on top of him, pinning him down.

He felt the deep slice of a blade behind his ear, felt it draw down across his jaw, the sound like a liquid swish, then a jarring scrape of metal on bone that sent a shock throughout his nervous system. It reminded him of how amplified things sounded when he was underwater. He felt the air on exposed tissue as the flesh on his face was pulled aside, and it felt cold.

Eric Logue.

SHERIDAN HAD BEEN searching the sky for falcons and lazily eating a banana for breakfast as they drove to Nate Romanowski's stone cabin on the bank of the river, when she lowered her gaze and saw the two forms on the ground near the mews.

"Dad, what's *that*?"

Joe took it in quickly, saw it for what it was, yelled, "Hold on tight!" and jammed the accelerator into the floor.

Through the windshield, Joe saw Eric look up at the sound of the approaching pickup. Eric was wild looking and filthy, with shredded clothing, a scraggly beard, and stiff, tumbleweed hair. He was on top of Nate's prone body with his knees on either side of Nate's head. Joe saw blood and Nate's lifeless, pale hand flung out to the side of him.

As Joe bore down on the mews, Eric stood up, looked quickly at his unfinished business on the ground, then turned and started running toward the river, loping toward it like some kind of heavy-limbed animal.

Sheridan braced herself on the dashboard of the truck, her eyes wide, as Joe drove by Nate and pursued Eric. The distance between Joe, Eric, and the river closed at once, and Joe saw Eric shoot a panicked glance back over his shoulder seconds before Joe hit him.

The collision dented the grille and buckled the hood of the pickup, and sent Eric flying toward the river where he hit the water with an ungainly, flailing splash. Joe slammed on his brakes, and the pickup fishtailed and stopped at the water's edge.

Joe and Sheridan scrambled out, with Maxine bounding behind them.

"Jeez, Dad ..." Sheridan said, her face white. "I mean ... *wow*."

Joe concentrated on the surface of the river. The water was dark and deep, the surface blemished only by ringlets that spread from the center of the violent splash.

Eric had sunk like a rock, but Joe wasn't sure he had hit Eric hard enough to kill him outright. He wished Sheridan hadn't been there to see it.

NATE WAS BREATHING and his eyes were open when Joe and Sheridan got to him. The cut on the side of his face was deep, and bleeding profusely, and a flap of his skin was folded back and raw. Joe knelt and put it back, seeing that Eric had been interrupted before he could sever any arteries or do fatal damage.

"Ouch," Nate said weakly.

"Stay down," Joe said, still shaky. "Don't sit up. I'm calling the EMTs right now."

Sheridan stripped off her hooded sweatshirt and dropped to her knees to compress the cloth against his wound.

Joe ran back to his truck and keyed the mike.

He completed the call and was told to expect the ambulance within twenty minutes.

"That's a hell of a long time," Joe said angrily.

"They're on their way," Wendy the dispatcher snapped back. "You are quite a ways out of town, you know."

He looked back toward the mews. He could see Nate and Sheridan talking to each other. Nate was going to be okay, Joe thought, although he would have quite a scar on his face.

For the first time since they'd arrived, Joe took a deep breath. He realized that his hands were shaking and his mouth was dry.

He looked at the river, at its deceptive, muscular stillness. On the other side of the river, a high red rock face was dotted with tenacious clumps of sage. Then down river, where the channel began a slow bend away from him, he saw Eric Logue dragging himself out of the water on the other bank.

Eric pulled himself into a clump of willows, got to his hands and knees, and crawled out of sight into a small red rock fissure.

"STAY WITH HIM until the EMTs get here," Joe told Sheridan, checking his loads and racking the pump on his shotgun. He had given her his first-aid kit so she could use a sterile compress, as her sweatshirt was now heavy with Nate's blood. "You're doing a good job, honey."

Sheridan looked up, concerned. "Where are you going?"

"Downriver."

Nate was watching him warily. He started to sit up.

"Nate, stay down," Joe said.

"Joe, you should know something. We've been waiting for Eric Logue to show up. We knew he would."

Joe hesitated.

"They're both vessels," Nate said. "Eric Logue and the bear. It's not even their fight, but you have to let it play out. It has to end here."

Joe looked at him, then at Sheridan.

"The next time you have a dream about bad things coming," Joe said to his daughter, "I'll listen."

She nodded, her eyes wide.

"It's about time," Nate said.

A QUARTER OF a mile beyond where Joe had seen Eric emerge from the river, there was an old footbridge that had been built by a Hungarian hard rock miner named Scottie Balyo in the 1930s. Scottie had used the bridge to work a secret seam of gold somewhere in the foothills. The bridge was no longer safe, due to rotten and missing slats, but Joe labored his way across it by straddling the planks themselves and keeping his boots on the outside rails. The frame sagged and moaned as he went across, but it held. On the other side, he stepped down into soft, wet sand.

He kept to the sand as he crept downriver, walking as quietly as he could. As he neared the willows he had seen Eric crawl into, he turned and scrambled up the loose wall of the bank so he could see the fissure from above.

Never again, Joe thought, would he discount a dream Sheridan had. Like Nate, she was connected to this thing in a way that was real, if incomprehensible. Perhaps it was intuitiveness born of her age, that pre-teen angst that allowed her to tap into events that were occurring on another level, as Nate had described. Sheridan had seen the evil coming, and tracked it.

With Nate, it was his preternatural animal sense; his interaction with the natural world around him, that drew him to the bear. Joe couldn't explain either circumstance, and didn't want to. But it was there, had been there, and if nothing else he would now open his mind, if only a little, to accept it.

The fissure was narrow where Eric had entered it, but it widened into a brush-choked draw. The floor of the draw was dry now, in the winter, but in the spring it served as a funnel for snowmelt from the mountains into the river. The soft sand was churned up down there—Eric's track. Joe couldn't yet see him, but he couldn't imagine that Eric had gotten very far.

Joe heard him before he saw him; a low, sad moan from farther up the draw.

"Cleve?" Joe called. "Dr. Eric Logue?"

The moaning stopped.

"Joe Pickett," Joe called. "I'm going to arrest you."

"You're going to kill me!"

Joe dropped into the draw. "Maybe so," Joe said.

When he found him, Joe was surprised to see that Eric had managed to stand up, using the help of an emerged root on the side of the draw as a handhold. He was bent forward, obviously in great pain. His head was slightly lowered, but his eyes locked on Joe as he approached. A thread of bloody saliva strung from his lips to the sand.

Joe kept his shotgun pointed at Eric's chest. Joe was a notoriously bad shot, but he figured even he couldn't miss with a shotgun at this distance.

Eric still held the scalpel in his right fist, which rested on his thigh, but he didn't threaten Joe with it. It was almost as if he had forgotten it was there.

"I'm really busted up inside, man," Eric groaned, never taking his eyes off of Joe. "I'm not gonna make it."

"Probably not," Joe said.

Eric coughed, and the cough must have seared through him, because his legs almost buckled. "It hurts so bad," he groaned. He coughed again, then spit a piece of what looked like bright red sponge into the sand between his feet. Lung, Joe knew, having seen the spoor of lung-shot big-game animals many times before. Eric's ribs had probably broken and then speared his lungs when the pickup hit him.

"Think you can walk across that bridge?" Joe asked.

Eric just stared at him. Then: "Why don't you just shoot me? It's okay."

Joe squinted, trying to determine if Eric was playing games with him.

"Pull the trigger, you coward," Eric said.

"Why?"

Eric coughed again, then righted himself. "I'm really sick, man. And they're through with me."

Joe felt his scalp twitch. "Who is through with you?"

Eric tried to gesture skyward, but his arm wouldn't work. "They are. I thought there would be some kind of payoff, but they just used me. No one told me the other side would send something after me."

Behind Eric was a dark wall of Rocky Mountain junipers. Joe thought he saw movement in the lower branches, but decided it must have been the cold wind. The wind did strange things in draws like this.

"Tell me," Joe said. "We know about Stuart Tanner and Tuff Montegue. But why did you kill your brother?"

Eric's face twisted painfully. "It was Bob. Bob did that. I guess Cam tried to get away, and Bob whacked him on the head. Then Bob figured he'd mutilate him to make it look like the others. I wasn't in the room when it happened."

"You were carving up Deena in the other room at the time, I guess," Joe said.

"Who cares about any of this?" Eric said. "You got me. So shoot, you bastard. Give me some peace. Or I'll come over there and start cutting on you."

"What made Tuff Montegue's horse throw him?"

Eric twitched. "Bob said it was just dumb luck. Bob said he must have spooked the horse as he moved from tree to tree."

"Why the animals?" Joe asked, gripping the shotgun tighter. "Why did you mutilate the animals?"

Eric shook his head. "I didn't hurt any animals. Except for that stupid horse on that ranch, and I messed that up."

"What?" Joe asked, perplexed.

"I know who did it, though," Eric said, coughing. His eyes shined. He took a clumsy step toward Joe now, and raised the scalpel. "*They* did it."

Again, Joe saw a shiver in the junipers. This time, he knew it wasn't the wind. It was something huge, something big-bodied.

"They're gone now," Eric said, wincing but still lurching forward. "But they'll be back. And if you think *I'm* scary ..."

The grizzly bear, the one Joe had once been chasing, the one Nate had made his obsession, blasted out of the junipers and hit Eric Logue in the back with such primal force and fury that it left Joe gasping for breath. The bear had waited, and Eric Logue had finally come.

Joe watched as the grizzly dragged Eric's wildly thrashing body into the shadows.

SHERIDAN STILL DREAMED vividly, and one dream in particular stayed with her, subtly growing in meaning until she would later look back on it as the end of something. In that dream, one of many that took place the night after Eric Logue attacked Nate Romanowski, the roiling black clouds were back. This time, though, the tendrils of smoke or mist leached from the ground and low brush and rose upward, as if being withdrawn. The black horse-head snouts of the thunderheads rolled back, eventually clearing the top of the Bighorn Mountain, leaving big, blue sky.

She believed there had been a battle. The battle took place in plain sight, in front of everyone, but few could see or sense it. She wanted to believe that the battle was between good forces, with the bear as the agent, and evil, embodied by some other kind of beings who had recruited Eric Logue and Nurse Bob. Perhaps the good forces had engaged her dad and Nate as temporary foot soldiers as well. But she would never know that.

It was remarkable to Sheridan how little the incidents—the cattle, wildlife, and human mutilations—were talked about. It was as if everyone in the Twelve Sleep Valley collectively wished that nothing had happened. But they had. Men had died. Maxine would forever be changed from seeing something that had scared her white. A family, the Logues, was destroyed.

Even when the e-mail came to her father from someone named Deena, who had written to him from somewhere in South America where more mutilations had subsequently occurred, her father didn't want to discuss it. Sheridan wouldn't have even known about the e-mail if she hadn't heard Nate try and broach the subject with her dad.

"Too many holes in the earth," Nate had said. "Maybe something was released into the atmosphere that drew in a force like putrid meat draws in flies."

Her dad had said, "Or maybe not," in that dismissive way he had, and changed the subject. When Nate tried to steer him back, her dad told Nate, "I don't want to talk about something we'll never have the knowledge to understand." Then: "Nate, I *hate* woo-woo crap."

Nate said, "I know you do," and smiled, the edges of his new scar twisting his mouth slightly.

She was with her dad later that fall when he slowed his pickup on the bridge to call out to Not Ike Easter, who was fishing in the river. Not Ike hollered back, laughing. Sheridan asked her dad what Not Ike had said.

"He said he's caught three fish." Then he smiled as if he were content, as if things had finally returned to normal.

Out Of Range

[Dedication]

To the game wardens of Wyoming...
and Laurie, always

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Acknowledgements
- PART ONE
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
- PART TWO
 - Chapter 8
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
- PART THREE
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
 - Chapter 18

- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25

- PART FOUR

- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32

- PART FIVE

- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39

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PART ONE

Our distance from the source of our food enables us to be superficially more comfortable, and distinctly more ignorant.

Gary Snyder,

The Practice of the Wild: Essays

Moving the keelboat and pirogues upriver required a tremendous effort from each man; consequently they ate prodigiously. In comparison with beef, the venison and elk were lean, even at this season. Each soldier consumed up to nine pounds of meat per day, along with whatever fruit the area afforded and some cornmeal, and still felt hungry.

Stephen E. Ambrose,

Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis,

Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West

1

BEFORE GOING OUTSIDE to his pickup for his gun, the Wyoming game warden cooked and ate four and a half pounds of meat.

He'd begun his meal with pronghorn antelope steaks, butterflied, floured, and browned in olive oil. Then an elk chop, pan-fried with salt and pepper, adding minced garlic to the cast-iron skillet. His first drink, sipped while he was cooking the antelope, was a glass of Yukon Jack and water on the rocks. By the time he broiled a half dozen mourning dove breasts, he no longer bothered with the ice or the water. As he sat down late in the evening with an elk tenderloin so rare that blood pooled around it on his plate, he no longer used the glass, but drank straight from the bottle.

He ate no vegetables; unless one counted the sautéed onions he had slathered on a grass-fed Hereford beef T-bone, or the minced garlic. Just meat.

He needed air, and stood up.

His mind swam, the room rotated, his heavy boots clunked across the floor. He paused at the jamb, using it to brace himself upright. He stared at a flyspeck on the wall, tried to will the quadruple images he was seeing down to a more manageable two.

Finally, he opened the door. It was dark except for a blue streetlight on the northern corner of the block. A full moon lit up the crags of the mountains, casting them in dim bluegray. The chill of the fall was already a guest. He stumbled down the broken

sidewalk toward his truck. As he approached, his pickup seemed to swell and deflate, as if it were breathing.

"Something smells good inside," a voice said. It startled the game warden, and he squinted toward it, trying to concentrate, to hear it over the mild roar in his ears. A neighbor wearing a tam on his head was walking a poodle down the middle of the street.

"Meat," Will Jensen said abruptly, almost shouting. It was sometimes hard these days to hear his own voice above the roar.

"See you," the neighbor called as he walked down the street. "*Bon appétit!*"

These people here, *Will thought*. A goddamned poodle and a tam.

HIS .44 MAGNUM, his bear gun, was on the truck's bench seat where he had left it. Will drew it out of the holster. Holding it loosely in his right hand, he turned back for the house, tripped over his own boots, and fell in the gravel. A red finger of alarm probed into his brain, concern about accidentally discharging the weapon in his fall. Then he snorted a laugh, thinking, *Who cares?*

HE DIDN'T KNOW how much later it was when he stirred awake. He was still sitting at the table, but had passed out face forward into his plate. Crisp grouse skin stuck to his cheek, and he pawed at it clumsily until it fluttered to the floor.

Angry, he swept the table clear with his arm. Grease smeared across the Formica. The dirty plate cracked in half when it hit the wall.

Where was his .44?

He found it on his bed, where he had tossed it earlier. Along with the weapon, he grabbed a framed photo of his family from the bedside table. He took them both back into the kitchen.

Forlorn was a word he had come to like in recent months. It was a word that sounded like what it described. "*Forlorn*," he said aloud to himself, "*I feel forlorn. I am a forlorn man.*" Something about the word soothed him, because it defined him, made him admit what he was.

What in the hell was wrong with him? Why did he feel this way, after so many years of balancing on the beam?

The roar in his ears was now so faint that it reminded him of a soft breeze in the treetops. His eyes filled with unexpected, stinging tears, and he drank a long pull from the bottle. He cocked the .44, watched the cylinder rotate. He opened his mouth and pressed the muzzle against the top of his palate. There was a burning, acrid taste. When was the last time he cleaned it?

Why did that matter now?

He stared at the photo he'd propped up on the table. It swam. He closed his eyes so tightly that he saw orange fireworks on the inside of his eyelids. He tried to concentrate on the .44 in his fist and the muzzle in his mouth. His stomach was on fire; he tried to fight the urge to get violently sick. He tasted the bitter whiskey a second time.

Concentrate...

2

THE WEDDING OF Bud Longbrake and Missy Vankueren took place at noon, on a sun-filled Saturday in September, on the front lawn of the Longbrake Ranch, twenty miles from town. Everyone was there.

The governor and his wife, most of the state senate, where Bud served as majority leader, the state's lone congressman, and what seemed like half of Saddlestring filled 250 metal folding chairs and spilled over into the lawn. Both U.S. senators had sent their regrets. The crisp blue shoulders of the Bighorn Mountains framed the wedding party. The day smelled of just-cut grass and wood smoke from the barbecue pit behind the house, where a prime Longbrake steer and a 4-H pig were roasting. It was a still, windless morning. A single cloud grazed lazily along the peaks. The only sounds were from car doors slamming as more guests arrived, pulling into the shorn hay meadow that served as a parking lot in the back, and occasional mewls from cattle in a distant holding corral.

Joe Pickett sat in the second row. He wore a jacket and tie, dark slacks, and polished black cowboy boots. He was in his late-thirties, lean, medium height. His thirteen-year-old daughter, Sheridan, sat next to him in a new blue dress. She shone brightly, he thought; long blond hair still streaked with summer highlights, a touch of pink lipstick, open, attractive face, eyes that took in everything. She watched intently as her mother, Marybeth, and eight-year-old sister, Lucy, took part in the ceremony. Lucy was the flower girl, wearing white taffeta. Marybeth, the matron of honor, stood on a riser next to Dale Longbrake and the rest of the wedding party. The men wore black western-cut tuxedos and black Stetsons.

Joe and his wife exchanged glances, and he could tell from her eyes that she was exasperated. Her mother, Missy Vankueren, was an experienced wedding planner, having been the featured bride in three previous ceremonies. Missy had been designing the event for over a year with the intensity and precision of a general implementing a major ground offensive, Joe thought, and she had enlisted a reluctant Marybeth as her second lieutenant. Endless discussions and phone calls had finally resulted in this day, which Marybeth had come to refer to as "Operation Massive Ranch Wedding."

Joe nodded toward the mountains and whispered to Sheridan, "See that cloud?"

Sheridan looked. "Yes."

"I would wager that by Wedding Five, Missy will have figured out how to get rid of it."

"*Dad!*" she whispered fiercely. But the corners of her mouth tugged with a conspiratorial grin. He winked at her, and she rolled her eyes, turning back to the wedding that was about to begin.

There was a growing murmur as the bride appeared, on cue, beneath an arch of pink and white flowers. Joe and Sheridan rose to their feet with the rest of the crowd. Applause rippled from the front to the back as Missy appeared, glowing, wide-eyed, looking demurely at the throng she had turned out.

"I can't believe that's my grandmother," Sheridan said to Joe. "She looks ..."

"Stunning," Joe said, finishing the sentence for her. Missy looked thirty, not sixty-three, he thought. She was a slim brunette, her face and hair perfect, her eyes glistening in a too-large head that always looked great in photos. She held a bouquet of pink and white flowers against her shimmering plum dress.

Joe heard Bud Longbrake say, in a reverent tone of appreciation he usually reserved for great cutting horses or seed bulls: "*There's* my girl."

THE RECEPTION WAS held behind the huge log home, under hundred-year-old cottonwoods. A swing band from Billings played on a stage, and couples spun on a hardwood floor that had been moved to the ranch just for the occasion from a vacated mid-forties dance hall in Winchester. The floor was unique in that it was mounted on carriage springs and had been used for Saturday night dances when big bands used to stop over in Wyoming en route to real paying gigs on the east or west coasts.

Joe ushered Sheridan through the reception line, shaking hands. Bud Longbrake slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Welcome to the family."

I've got a family, *Joe thought.*

Missy reached for Joe, and pulled his head down next to hers. He felt the bouquet she still clutched crush into his hair. "Never thought I'd pull this one off, did you?" she whispered.

Surprised, he pulled away. She grinned slyly at him, and despite himself, he grinned back. She was a substantial adversary, he thought. He'd hate to meet her in a dark alley.

"Congratulations," he said. "Bud is a fine man."

"Oh, I think I got the best of the deal," Bud said, wrapping his arm around Missy's slim waist.

"You did," she said, flashing her wide smile.

And her name is already on the ranch deed, *Joe thought.* She owns half of everything we see as far as we can see it. She pulled it off, all right.

Marybeth was next, and had been carefully watching the exchange that took place a moment before.

"You look wonderful," he said.

Thank God it's over, she mouthed. He nodded back, agreeing with her.

"Welcome to the family," Bud was telling Sheridan.

Joe shot him a look.

"JOE, ARE YOU sure she said *that*?" Marybeth asked later, as they sat at a table under the trees with their plates of appetizers. Joe had waited for Sheridan and Lucy to find their friends before he told Marybeth about her mother.

"I'm quoting."

Marybeth shook her head, looking hard at Joe to see if he was joking. She obviously determined he wasn't. "She's something else, isn't she?"

"Always has been," Joe said. "What I can't figure out is how you survived."

Marybeth smiled and patted his hand. "Neither can I, at times."

Joe sipped from a bottle of beer that had been offered to him from a stock tank full of ice.

"You two have a very strange relationship," Marybeth said, looking across the lawn at her mother.

"I didn't think we had one at all."

Missy had never made a secret of the fact that she felt Marybeth had married beneath herself. Instead of the doctor, real estate magnate, or U.S. senator Marybeth should have chosen, Missy thought, her most promising daughter wound up with Joe Pickett, a Wyoming game warden with a salary that maxed out at \$36,000 a year. Marybeth's career as a corporate lawyer or a politician's wife, in Missy's view, had been unfulfilled. Rather, Marybeth stayed with Joe as he moved from place to place in their early years together, before Joe was named game warden to the Saddlestring District. Then Sheridan came along, followed by Lucy, and in Missy's eyes it was all but over for her daughter. Because of incidents relating to Joe Pickett and his job, Marybeth had been injured and could have no more children. Then a foster daughter had been lost. It was frustrating for Missy, Joe thought. There she was, providing a living example of how to keep trading up—casting off husbands in exchange for newer, wealthier, and shinier models—and her daughter just didn't get it. Missy literally tried to show Marybeth how it could be done by marrying Bud Longbrake right in front of her, Joe thought.

Joe and Missy both knew that Marybeth still had fire, intelligence, beauty, and ambition. She also had a growing melancholy, which she tried hard to overcome.

"Look at Bud's kids," Marybeth said, nodding toward a table set as far away from the others as possible while still being in the shade. "They just don't look happy. Don't stare at them, though."

Joe shifted in his chair. Bud had a son and a daughter from his previous marriage. The son, Bud Jr., had flown in for the wedding from Missoula, where he was a street musician and a professional student at UM. Bud Jr. wore billowy cargo shorts, leather sandals, a T-shirt, and a sour expression. Missy had told Joe and Marybeth that although Bud Jr. had never wanted anything to do with the ranch while growing up, he was content to wait things out, wait for Bud to pass along or sell the ranch. Even after taxes, Bud Jr. stood to gain a huge inheritance. It was the same with Sally, Bud's daughter. Thrice married (like her new stepmother, who had just surpassed her in the race), Sally lived in Portland, Oregon, and was currently between husbands. Sally was attractive in a wounded, bohemian way, Joe thought. He had heard she was an artist, specializing in wrought iron.

Joe turned back. "No, they don't look happy."

"They don't like it that Bud made Missy co-signatory on all of this," Marybeth said, waving her hand to indicate literally all they could see. "Bud Jr. got hammered at the dress rehearsal last night and shouted some things at his father before he passed out in the bushes. Sally was there last night for about a half an hour, before she disappeared with one of Bud's ranch hands."

"Welcome to the family," Joe said to his wife.

THE NEW TWELVE Sleep County sheriff, Kyle McLanahan, stood in front of Joe and Marybeth in the food line. The piquant smell of barbecued pork and beef hung heavy in the light mountain air.

"Kyle," Joe said, nodding.

"Joe. Marybeth. Congratulations are in order, I guess."

"I guess," Joe said.

"Same to you," Marybeth said coolly. "I haven't seen you since the election."

McLanahan nodded, hitched up his pants. Looked toward the mountains. Squinted. "We've got a lot of work to do."

"Yup," Joe said.

Kyle McLanahan had been the longtime chief deputy for local legend O. R. "Bud" Barnum, who had been sheriff for twenty-eight years. Barnum had owned the county in a sense, having a hand in just about every aspect of it. His downfall came over the past six years, as his reputation eroded, then rotted and tumbled in on itself. That Barnum's decline coincided with Joe's arrival in Saddlestring was no coincidence. The Outfitter Murders, mishandled by Barnum, had begun the slide. Barnum's shadowy involvement with the Stockman's Trust continued it. The exsheriff's complicity with Melinda Strickland in her raid on the Sovereign compound started the local gossip that Barnum had lost his commitment to the community and was looking out only for himself. The sheriff's deception during the cattle mutilations had turned the weekly Saddlestring *Roundup* against him. Joe had been in the middle of everything, one way or another. Seeing the writing on the wall (and in the newspaper), Barnum withdrew from the running two weeks before the election. Instead, McLanahan had stepped into the race, as had Deputy Mike Reed. In Joe's opinion, Reed was an honest cop and McLanahan was McLanahan—volatile, thick-headed, a throwback to the Barnum style of politics and corruption. McLanahan won 80 percent of the vote.

"Have you been listening to your radio this morning?" Sheriff McLanahan asked Joe. "I saw your truck in the parking lot."

Joe shook his head. "I'm off duty."

Because Marybeth and Lucy were in the wedding, they had left the Picketts' small state-owned home early that morning in Marybeth's van. Joe had brought Sheridan in his green Ford Game and Fish pickup after breakfast, but he hadn't turned on his radio during the drive.

"Then you haven't heard that they found a game warden dead over in Jackson," McLanahan said.

Joe felt a shiver run through him. "*What?*"

SHERIDAN HAD QUICKLY become bored with Lucy and her friends in the play area that had been put up far enough away from the reception that the children wouldn't bother the adults. The placement had Missy's stamp all over it, Sheridan thought. A swing set had been erected, as well as smaller-sized tables and chairs complete with plastic tea sets.

She wandered away from the play area and the reception into the makeshift parking lot. It was tough being thirteen. Too old to play, too young to be considered one of the adults. Her parents were fine, she thought, they never treated her with disrespect, although her mother was starting to bug her in ways she couldn't yet say. In a situation like this, with adults all around, she was patronized. She climbed into her dad's pickup truck and looked at herself in the rearview mirror. At least she finally had contact lenses and didn't look so much like a geek, she thought.

Absently, she clicked on the radio. It was set to the channel reserved for game wardens and brand inspectors. She sometimes liked to listen to the interplay between the men and the dispatchers, usually women, at the headquarters in Cheyenne. There was a surprising amount of activity on the radio for a Saturday morning in early September.

"THE JACKSON GAME warden," McLanahan said, following Joe and Marybeth to their table. "Found him dead this morning in his house."

"Murdered?" Joe asked. He felt Marybeth tense up.

"Naw. Ate his own gun."

Marybeth gasped.

"Forty-four Magnum," McLanahan said. "Not much left of his head, is what I hear."

Joe was out of his chair and three inches from McLanahan's face. He hissed, "That'll be enough with the details right now in front of my wife."

McLanahan feigned hurt and surprise. "Sorry, Joe. I thought you'd want to know."

The new sheriff turned and left, heading for his table on the other side of the yard.

"Joe, was he talking about Will Jensen?" Marybeth asked.

"No," Joe said, confused. "It couldn't have been. He must have his information about half-right, as usual."

Marybeth shook her head. "I remember when we met Will and Susan. Remember their kids? Sheridan and their son tore around their house while you and Will talked at their kitchen table."

It made no sense to Joe. Jensen was a rock, a larger-than-life man who was considered one of the best there ever was within the department. Will Jensen was what game wardens wanted to be, the kind of man Joe aspired to be.

"I remember thinking," Marybeth continued, looking up at Joe, "I remember thinking how much they were like *us*."

Joe sat back down, shaken. "Let's hold off on this until we find out what the situation really is. Remember, all the information we've got at this point is from Deputy McLanahan."

"*Sheriff* McLanahan," Marybeth corrected gently.

Joe looked up, saw Sheridan running toward them from the cars, her blue dress flapping.

"All I know is that Will Jensen did not commit suicide," Joe said bluntly. "That's not possible."

"Joe ..."

“Dad!” Sheridan gushed, stopping in front of them, breathing hard from her run. “Guess what I just heard on the radio?”

3

THE DRIVE BACK to their home from the wedding took place in the soft light of pre-dusk that deepened the greens of the meadows and blazed the muffin-shaped haystacks with bronze, as if they were lit from within. The ranch country rolled toward the mountains like swells in the ocean, shadows darkening in the folds of the terrain. Joe had noticed the soft bite of approaching fall, and now he could see that a few cottonwoods in the river valley were beginning to turn.

Sheridan was silent and sleepy in the passenger seat. Marybeth followed Joe in her van, giving him plenty of distance on the dirt road so that the dust his pickup kicked up would settle back down.

“It’s pretty,” Sheridan said. “This *should* be my favorite time of year.”

“It’s the best time, I think.”

“Maybe someday I’ll agree with you,” she said. “But I’ve got the blues.”

Joe knew what Sheridan meant. His daughter had begun junior high the week before, which meant a new school, a new schedule, and many more students. Her load of homework had tripled from the year before. And she was trying out for the volleyball team. Because Lucy and Sheridan now had different school schedules, Marybeth spent much more time driving them from place to place, delivering them or picking them up after school or activities. Joe had been taking Sheridan to school, and she put on a brave face for him, but he knew she was nervous and emotional about the change.

Joe loved the fall, even though it meant that big-game hunting seasons would soon be under way and he’d be in the field checking licenses and hunters from before sunrise until well after dark for nearly two and a half months. It was his busiest time as a game warden, and often exhausting. But, as always, he would throw himself into it, establish his rhythm. And, as always, he would find himself a little disappointed when it was over and fall surrendered to winter. He loved working hard, being outside, feeling his senses tingle as he approached a hunting camp not knowing who or what to expect. For two months, nearly every single human he encountered would be armed. These were men who lived their lives solely for the reward in the fall of their one-week or two-week hunt. They wanted to drink hard, eat like soldiers after a year-long march, hunt a pronghorn antelope, mule deer, elk, or moose, and burn out all of the primal energy and desire that they’d stored up during the previous year of humiliation and frustration. Sometimes, he encountered men in the field who didn’t want to meet a game warden that day. That’s when things got interesting.

Now, though, Joe was tired; he had eaten and drunk too much, even danced a few dances with Marybeth, Sheridan, and Lucy. Missy, flushed with wine, had dragged him from their table to the springy dance floor. As it turned out, it was her next-

to-last dance before she joined Bud in his black Suburban and headed for the tiny Saddlestring airport. The newly-weds would take the seventeen-passenger commuter plane to Denver, then fly to Italy for their honeymoon. They would be gone for ten days. Bud would be back in time for the fall roundup when they moved their cattle from the mountain grass to the valley floor.

But as he drove, Joe could not stop thinking about Will Jensen, wondering what the circumstances could have been that made him kill himself. It didn't make sense to him. Will had been tough, levelheaded. Devoted to his family and his job. Or at least that's what Joe had thought.

THE PICKETTS LIVED in a small two-story house eight miles from Saddlestring on the Bighorn Road. The house was owned by the state, and had been their home for six years. It sat back from the road behind a recently painted white fence. There was a detached garage that housed Joe's snowmobile and the family van, and a loafing shed and corral in back for their two horses. The Saddlestring District was considered a "two-horse" district, meaning that the department budgeted for at least two horses, tack, and feed. From the front yard, the southern face of Wolf Mountain dominated the view. Between the house and the mountain, the East Fork of the Twelve Sleep River serpentine through a willow-choked meadow toward the main river and town.

As Joe entered the house, he glanced through the open door of his tiny office near the mudroom and saw that the message light was blinking on his answering machine. At this time of the year, Joe got a lot of calls. Hunters, fishers, ranchers, outfitters, and citizens called any time of the day or night. Most assumed Joe worked out of an office in some kind of Game and Fish Department building. The reality was that his office was a tiny room in his own house. Marybeth and Sheridan served as unpaid receptionists and assistants, and even Lucy answered the phone or the door at times. In a state and community where men greeted each other on the street during the fall by asking, "Got your elk yet?" the game warden played a prominent role.

He sat down at his desk and loosened his tie, watching as Marybeth and Lucy passed by his open door. Both were carrying huge bouquets of flowers from the wedding that Missy had insisted they take with them. Joe's office filled with the scent of flowers.

There were three messages. The first one was from Herman Klein, a rancher on the other side of Wolf Mountain. Klein reported that the elk were already moving down out of the timber and eating his hay. Since he had requested more elk fence be constructed around his stacks the previous year, he was hoping that contract crews would be out soon, before winter. Joe cursed and made a note on his pad to call his fence contractor in the morning and follow up with Herman Klein. One of the few responsibilities that had become easier for Joe since he started was that he no longer had to construct elk fence himself, but could contract locally for it. Unfortunately, the local contractor was unreliable.

The second call was strange. Joe could hear a man's labored breathing and faint, tinny music in the background, but no words were spoken. It went on like that until the time allotted for the message ran out. Joe looked at the telephone handset with

puzzlement, then erased the message. It was the third such call in the past month. That was too many calls to assume a mistake or a misdial. But there was nothing he could do about it.

The last message was from Trey Crump, Joe's supervisor in Cody.

"Joe, it's Trey. I assume you've heard by now that Will Jensen took his own life over in Jackson."

Joe sat up in his chair. Now it was absolutely confirmed.

"We still don't know all of the details yet," Trey continued, sounding weary and sad, "but the ME in Teton County ruled out any foul play. The method of death was obvious, I guess."

There was a long pause. Then: "The Teton District isn't a district we can allow to be vacant for even a few days. The elk season opens up at the end of next week, two weeks before yours does. There's way too much action over there, and too much crap going on to leave it go."

Joe's heart jumped. The year before, he had put in a request to be considered for a new district. Twelve Sleep County seemed like a slowly closing vise. Too much had happened there. Although Joe still loved the Bighorns, and his district, he knew that in order to advance within the department he might have to move. If nothing else, he and Marybeth had discussed relocating to a place with more opportunities.

"The director called me this morning and asked me for a recommendation for a temporary game warden. I recommended you," Trey said, laughing tiredly. "I thought he was going to shit right there. But I told him there are only two men I could recommend for an area as hot as Teton. One of them is you. The other, God bless him, was Will."

Joe looked up. Marybeth leaned against the doorjamb, trying to read his expression.

Trey said, "I already talked to Phil Kiner in Laramie. He's got a trainee with him so he can break loose and come up to Twelve Sleep in a couple of weeks for the deer and elk openers. He trained up there when he first started out, so he knows the country in a general way. He's not you, but he'll get along okay. But I'd like to ask you to get over to Jackson as soon as you can. Can you do it? Call me as soon as possible, let me know."

Joe cradled the phone.

"Was that Trey?" Marybeth asked.

"Yup."

"Is it true about Will Jensen?"

"It's true."

She shook her head. "I just can't understand it."

Joe shrugged at her in a "what can I say?" gesture.

"Did he ask you to transfer?"

Joe tried to read her face. It was impassive, but her eyes sparkled and gave her away. She was intrigued.

"Temporarily."

"Are you going to do it?"

"What do *you* think about that?"

"When would you start?"

"I'd leave Monday. The elk opener is next week."

"In two days?"

She folded her arms, eyes locked with Joe.

SHERIDAN HAD CHANGED into a sweatshirt and jeans and brought her world history assignment into the living room so she could spread it out on the coffee table. She noticed that her mother's back filled the office door, and by her posture Sheridan could tell that her parents were having a serious discussion. Sheridan had assigned levels to her parents' discussions, and shared them with Lucy.

Level One was simply banter, but sometimes with an edge. During Level One, her parents moved freely around the house, talking as if Sheridan and Lucy couldn't hear them or didn't exist. Level Two was when her father was in his office and her mother blocked the door. They could still be overheard, but they didn't necessarily want to be.

Sheridan watched as her mother stepped into the office and shut the door behind her. As she did, Lucy came down the hall still wearing her flower girl's dress. That was a difference between Sheridan and Lucy: Sheridan couldn't wait to change when she got home.

"We're at Level Three," Sheridan whispered to Lucy.

"What about?"

"Something about Jackson," Sheridan said, still whispering. "I didn't get it all."

"I'D BE MORE excited if I could go with you," Marybeth said. "But with school just starting, and all of the shuttling I need to do with the girls, I can't." not to mention Marybeth's still-fledgling office management business, Joe thought. Marybeth did the accounting and inventory management for the local pharmacy, a new art gallery, and Wolf Mountain Taxidermy.

"Maybe I can call Trey and pass on it," Joe said.

"Don't you dare," she said quickly. "This could be an opportunity. And obviously, Trey thinks highly enough of you to offer you this."

"I don't know how long it will last, or if it'll lead to anything."

"And we don't know that it won't," she said. "Jackson Hole is about as high profile as you can get in this state."

Joe knew that Will Jensen had shunned a high profile, but it came with the territory. The department sometimes sent press clippings out when game wardens made the news or were featured in local press. There were twice as many stories about Will Jensen than any other employee.

"Jackson is different," Joe said lamely. "It's a whole different animal than Sadlestring."

Marybeth walked over and sat on his desk. "Are you saying you don't want to do it?"

"No, I'm not saying that. But now isn't a very good time to leave you and the girls, even if it's for a couple of weeks."

She laughed. There was an edge of bitterness in the laugh that bothered him. "Joe, once hunting season starts, we don't even see you anyway. It's not like you're around to ..."

"Do my share?" he finished for her, feeling his face get hot.

"That's not what I was going to say."

Joe was stung. "For the last two years, I made just about every one of Sheridan's games," he said. "I went to Lucy's Christmas play last year."

Marybeth smiled, showing she didn't want to argue. "And you missed everything else," she said gently. "Teacher conferences, Lucy's choir, back-to-school night, Sheridan's play, the school carnival ..."

"Only in September and October," he said defensively.

"And November," Marybeth said. "But Joe, my point is that you'll be gone anyway. So if you're gone here or you're gone there, it won't burden us very much. We're three strong women, you know."

His neck still burned. Being a good father and husband meant everything to him. He sincerely tried to make up for his absences in the other months, and had started taking Sheridan on patrol with him when he could to make up for the time he was away. He planned to do the same with Lucy as she got older.

"Trey said Phil Kiner can come up in a couple of weeks to fill in," Joe said grumpily. "So you won't need to worry about that."

"We'll still get the phone calls, though," she said. "And the drunken hunters who stop by. And a mad rancher every once in a while. That's just the way it is."

"Man ..."

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "There's no doubt that we're best when we're working as partners, Joe. No doubt. Things are still a little ... fragile around here."

He turned his head away, but stroked her thigh, listening.

"But if we're ever going to provide better for our girls, we've got to be willing to take some risks. If this leads to a better job or a better salary for you, it's something we need to do."

"You'll be okay, then?"

She smiled down at him. "For a while, sure. I just hope it doesn't drag on too long. If it does, you'll have to come get us and take us with you."

"You think you'd like Jackson?"

Marybeth shrugged. "I don't know. It's got better restaurants. There's definitely more to do. But I'm not sure I'd want to raise our kids there."

"I'm not sure either," he said.

"But you can scout it out for us while you're there. You can check out the schools, the atmosphere. Then let me know what you think."

He shook his head. "That's a decision we'd make together, like everything else."

"That's what I mean about being better as partners," she said.

"I'll call Trey and tell him I'm in," Joe said.

OUTSIDE THE DOOR, Sheridan and Lucy exchanged glances.

"The kids from Jackson are the snottiest kids in the state," Sheridan whispered. "When we play them we try to destroy them, but we never do. You should see their bus. It's the best bus there is."

"But don't they have skiing?" Lucy asked, wide-eyed. "And a Ripley's Believe-It-or-not! museum?"

The door opened suddenly, filled with their dad.

"Show's over, girls," he said. "Don't you have home-work?"

HE WENT OUT to feed the horses. A single pole lamp threw ghostly blue-white light across the corral. The horses, Toby the paint and young sorrel Doc, nickered when they saw him coming, knowing it was time for food. Joe tossed them hay and watched them eat, a foot on the rail. The profile of Wolf Mountain was black against a dark sky smeared with stars.

He would miss Wolf Mountain, he thought. And Crazy Woman Creek. And the view he got from his favorite break-lands perch, where he could see the curvature of the earth.

He rubbed his eyes. He was getting ahead of himself here, he thought. It was much too soon to start thinking about things like that. There was plenty to do before he left for Jackson.

As he walked back to the house, he thought about the second call. The one where a man simply breathed until the message ran out. It was likely a crank, or a mistake. But since Joe identified himself on the voicemail, the man had to know whom he was calling. Joe's number was in the slim Twelve Sleep County telephone book. The caller could be anyone: a hunter Joe had cited, a rancher he had tangled with, even a state or federal employee Joe had been on the opposite side of a land use issue with. Whomever, it was likely someone harmless.

But if he was going to be out of town for a couple of weeks, Joe didn't want to chance anything when it came to Marybeth and his daughters. He'd need to ask for some help.

4

AFTER CHURCH ON Sunday, Joe and Marybeth planned to spend the rest of the afternoon getting him packed so he could leave early Monday. For some reason, both assumed that it would take much longer than it actually did. Joe found himself feeling oddly disappointed that they had completed their task within an hour. He had a duffel bag of red uniform shirts and blue Wranglers, underwear, his Filson vest, coats, heavy parka, and boots. All of the gear he would need was already in his pickup, the place he spent most of his day anyway. Joe roamed the house and the barn, trying to find

things he couldn't do without while he was in Jackson. There was little. He topped off the duffel with a few books he'd not yet read, and a small framed family photo from his desktop that he wished was more recent.

ABSENTLY LISTENING TO a broadcast of the first week of NFL football on the radio, Joe drove down the two-lane highway that paralleled the river en route to Nate Romanowski's place and did a mental inventory of items in his truck.

His standard-issue weaponry consisted of the .308 carbine secured under the bench seat, a .270 Winchester rifle in the gun rack behind his head, and his 12-gauge Remington Wingmaster shotgun that was wedged into the coil springs behind his seat. He also had a .22 pistol with cracker shells that was used for spooking elk out of hay meadows.

In a locked metal box in the bed of his pickup were tire chains, tow ropes, tools, an evidence kit, a necropsy kit, emergency food and blankets, blood-spatter and bullet-caliber guides and charts, flares, and a rucksack for foot patrolling. Taped to the lid of the box was a new addition: Joe's Last Will and Testament. He had written it out the night before. Not even Marybeth knew about it yet. He wondered idly if Will Jensen had thought to draw one up.

NATE ROMANOWSKI LIVED in a small stone house on the banks of the Twelve Sleep River, six miles off the highway. Romanowski was a falconer with three birds—a peregrine, a red tail, and a fledgling prairie falcon—in his mews. But when Joe drove onto his property, Nate was saddling a buffalo. Joe noticed that Nate was sporting two black eyes, and that his nose was swollen like a bulb.

A few months before, Nate had told Joe about his new-found fascination with bison. It had sprung from reading an article in an old newspaper he had dug out of a crack in the walls of his home. The article was a first-person account from a correspondent who had just returned from the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo after witnessing an event called "Women's Buffalo Riding." Apparently, women contestants mounted wild bison and were turned loose in an arena to see who could stay on the longest. There was a grainy photo of a cowgirl in a dress and baggy pantaloons astride a massive bull. In the photo, though, the bull looked docile. This account fascinated Nate, he said, because he had never thought a human could ride a buffalo around. Then he asked himself, *Why not me?* The idea quickly became an obsession. Sheridan, who received falconry lessons from Nate on Friday afternoons, had mentioned to Joe that Nate had bought a buffalo from a rancher near Clearmont. And here it was.

Joe parked his pickup beside Nate's battered Jeep and got out. The afternoon was clear and warm, and Joe could hear the hushed liquid flow of the river.

"I couldn't use a regular saddle," Nate said by way of a greeting. "The cinches were two to three feet too short. So I had to make my own cinches in order to make this work."

Romanowski had appeared in Saddlestring three years before. He was tall, rangy, and rawboned, with long blond hair tied back in a ponytail. He had a hawk's beak nose and piercing, stone-cold blue eyes. Most of the people in the county feared him, and several had seriously questioned the basis of Joe's friendship with a man who openly

carried a .454 Casull, an extremely powerful handgun. Nate had come from Montana, leaving a set of suspicious circumstances involving the deaths of two federal agents, and Joe had almost inadvertently proved Nate's innocence for another murder. Upon his release from prison, Nate had pledged his loyalty to Joe and the Pickett family, and had not wavered in his blind commitment. There were rumors involving Nate's background that included years in covert operations for a secret branch of the defense department. While he didn't know the specifics, Joe knew this to be true. He also knew that Nate was capable of precision violence, and well connected to questionable people and groups throughout the country and the world. Joe had no clear explanation as to Nate's means of support. All he knew was that he sometimes vanished for weeks (always calling ahead to cancel Sheridan's falconry lesson) and that he sometimes cautioned Joe about coming out to his place at certain times when, Joe guessed, certain visitors were there. It was something they never talked about, although a few times Nate had offered tidbits. Joe didn't want to hear them.

The buffalo stood in the center of a newly constructed four-rail corral. The corral was built solidly, but the east side of it was pitched out a little, most likely from the buffalo leaning against it or trying to push his head through. Joe wondered if the corral would contain the animal if it really wanted out.

Joe draped his arms over the top post and set a boot on the bottom rail. He was impressed, as always, by the sheer size and presence of a buffalo. The bison was a giant brownblack wedge, front-loaded with heavily muscled shoulders and a woolly, blunt head. Bison, he knew, were pure frontwheel-drive creatures, with the ability to accelerate to forty miles per hour from a standing start. Conical pointed horns curled back from its skull. Marble-black eyes glowed from beneath thick, dirty curls.

Nate tightened the cinch and the buffalo flinched. Joe prepared for a violent explosion, and he found himself stepping back involuntarily. The buffalo turned his head and stared at Nate.

"This is as far as I got last week," Nate said, looking over.

"What happened to you?"

Nate touched his eye. "He didn't like the saddle at first."

"But he does now?"

Nate shrugged. "Not really. But he finally understands what I'm up to, and he seems resigned to the fact. I've tried to persuade him it will be fun."

Joe nodded. Nate communicated with animals on a base level, in a wholly mysterious way. He didn't train them, or break them, but using cues and gestures he somehow connected with them. It was a methodology learned from working with falcons, who, after all, had the option (rarely acted upon) to simply fly away anytime they were released to the sky.

"Your saddle is in the back of your truck," Nate said, sliding a halter ever so slowly over the head of the buffalo. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Jackson," Joe said. "The game warden there committed suicide. They've assigned me there, temporarily."

Nate looked up, obviously trying to read Joe's face.

"What?" Joe asked.

Nate said, "Things are different in Jackson. I've got some acquaintances over there. I've spent some time there myself."

Joe waited for the rest, but it didn't come.

"Do you have a point?" Joe asked.

He shrugged. "My point is things are different in Jackson."

"Thanks for that," Joe said, leaning on the fence.

For the next few minutes, Nate calmed the big bull, running his hands over him, speaking nonsense soothingly. Joe could see the buffalo relax, which was confirmed by a long sigh. He could smell the bison's grassy, hot breath. Nate gracefully launched himself up on the saddle.

"This is the first time he's let me on," Nate said quietly.

"He seems to be okay with it," Joe said, although they could both see the buffalo's ears twitch nervously. "Does he buck?"

"See my face?" Nate said. "Yes, he can buck."

Joe waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Nate just sat there.

"Now I've got to get him to move and turn," Nate said. "It'll take some time."

Joe had a vision of Nate Romanowski, wearing his shoulder holster, riding the buffalo through the streets of Saddlestring in the anemic Fourth of July parade. The thought made him snort.

"HOW MANY OF these calls have you received?" Nate asked later, over coffee in his stone house. The buffalo had been unsaddled and turned out to pasture.

"Three in the last month."

"Could it just be a misdial?"

Joe nodded. "Sure. But how likely is that?"

"Can't you get somebody to trace the call? Or get Caller ID?"

"I ordered it this morning. The next time there's a call, we should be able to figure out who it is. Then maybe we'll know why."

"I'll check in with Marybeth while you're gone," Nate said.

"I'd appreciate that. Things get a little wild at times during hunting season. She's more than capable of handling anything, as you know, but it makes me feel better to know you'll keep an eye out."

"A deal is a deal," Nate said.

Joe wanted to say more. To remind Nate that the "deal" about protecting Joe and his family was one Nate had come up with, something Joe never proposed or really accepted. Being allies with a man like Nate made Joe uncomfortable at times because it went against his instincts. Nate was a strange man, a frightening man. But at times like these, he needed a guy like Nate, who was always a man of his word and didn't care about appearances, constraints, or even the law.

"Thanks for the coffee," Joe said, standing.

"Don't go crazy over in Jackson," Nate cautioned.

"This from a man who is trying to ride a buffalo around." Joe smiled.

"If you need help, call me."

Joe stopped at the door and looked back. "And vice versa."

THAT NIGHT, JOE sat at his desk and made a list of ongoing projects and the status of each to e-mail to Phil Kiner in Laramie. Maxine sat curled at his feet, knowing, like dogs always knew, that she would be abandoned soon and making him feel as guilty as possible for it by staring at him with her big brown eyes. The whole evening had been that way.

It had started at dinner with a melancholy pot roast and vegetables that Sheridan thought were undercooked. Joe recognized her attitude for what it was: she was at an age where if she was angry with her father or mad at the world in general she took it out on her mother, who was the disciplinarian in the family. Lucy's way of showing her disapproval for his leaving was to ignore him and pretend he wasn't there, which to Joe was even worse.

He looked over his long e-mail message. He knew he would forget things, and there was no way he could provide the background necessary on specific hunters Phil may have a problem with, or the idiosyncrasies of individual land-owners. It was strange, Joe thought, not knowing for sure if he was coming back to his district.

5

A TRAVELER GOING from east to west over the Bighorn Mountains has three choices of routes: U.S. 16 through Ten Sleep Canyon and Worland, U.S. 14 descending through Shell Canyon and Greybull, and U.S. 14-A, via the Medicine Wheel Passage and on to Lovell. Joe chose 14-A not only for the challenge of its switchbacks but for the view he would get when he broke over the top of the range and saw the vista of the Bighorn Basin laid out flat, brown, and endless. He chewed gum to help his ears pop as they clouded with elevation, and looked over frequently to check on Maxine, his Labrador, who he'd left at home until he could scope out his new district. Fine, gritty snow peppered his windshield at the ten-thousand-foot summit, the snow appearing from a virtually cloudless light blue sky.

His feelings were decidedly mixed. The memory of the morning with his young family stayed with him. Sheridan and Lucy had been dressed for school and scrambling along the countertop in the kitchen, assembling their lunches. Marybeth was preparing for a day of bookkeeping at the pharmacy. She wore khaki slacks and a sweater, her blond hair cut shorter than she had ever worn it. He liked it but still wasn't used to it. Joe had stood stupidly near the mudroom entrance, watching them. Their goodbyes had been a little frantic because they could all hear the school bus lumbering down Bighorn Road. After the girls were on the bus and the doors were shut, Joe and Marybeth walked to his pickup, which was fully packed and ready to go.

"Call me often," she had said.

“As often as I can,” he said, kissing her.

“In fact, call me when you get there. So I know you made it all right.”

The scene was less than dramatic. So why did he feel that something seminal had happened? Why did he feel both guilty *and* elated?

AS HE DESCENDED the western slope, the snow vanished as suddenly as it had appeared and the temperature began to rise quickly. By the time he hit the flats, heat was shimmering on the old asphalt highway and roses were growing in boxes in downtown Lovell, which he left in his rearview mirror.

A squawk from his radio interrupted Joe’s thoughts. He picked up the handset. It was dispatch calling with a message from Trey. The meeting place that morning would need to be changed. There was a bear problem.

TREY CRUMP WAS waiting for Joe in his pickup, which was parked in the trees at the culmination of a rugged two-track road, four miles from Dead Indian Pass. After Joe pulled up next to Trey’s pickup, his supervisor got out of his truck and climbed in with Joe. Joe grasped the big man’s hand.

Trey looked larger than he really was, with a squarish block of a head, a thick mustache going gray, and heavy jowls. A big belly strained against his uniform shirt. He was a terse man in aura and appearance, but his deep-set, compassionate eyes gave him away as the romantic he really was. Joe liked and admired Trey, but he rarely saw him in person. Trey wore badge number 4, meaning he had the fourth highest seniority within the division. Joe had recently received his new badge, moving from 52 to 44. Since there were only fifty-five full-fledged game wardens—and thirty-five trainees not yet assigned a district—Joe was proud of his new badge number. With Will Jensen’s death, Joe would now be badge number 43. He felt more than a pang of guilt for even thinking about that.

Trey apologized for not meeting Joe for breakfast at the Irma Hotel in Cody, but said he had received a 5 A.M. callout for a problem grizzly bear that had been breaking into cabins in the Sunlight Basin. The suspect bear was named Number 304, and he was well known in the area. That morning, the 450-pound grizzly had pushed down a steel-reinforced door, entered a cabin and dismantled it, ripping the cabinets from the wall and tossing a cast-iron stove from the kitchen into a bedroom.

“This is a bad situation,” Trey said, his voice deep and filled with gravel. “I could use your help.”

Joe could see the roofs of some of the cabins below in the heavy timber, and a culvert bear trap set up in a sun-drenched meadow. The trap was designed on wheels so it could be pulled behind a vehicle to the problem area and baited with a road-killed deer or antelope. When the bear entered the metal opening and tugged on the bait, a heavy steel door crashed down and locked. The trap, with the angry bear in it, could then be hitched to a pickup and driven away to a remote location, where the bear would be released. Either that, or euthanized on the spot if the Interagency Grizzly Bear Management Team pronounced a death sentence on the animal.

Joe grimaced. He had had enough of grizzly bears the year before, when a runaway from Yellowstone had beelined for the Bighorns. He'd seen firsthand what an animal like that could do to a man.

"We're overwhelmed with bears right now," Trey said with a heavy sigh. "Three different call-ins came in just this morning. That's why I'm alone here—my bear guys are off on the other calls. They wanted to stay here to help me with 304 because we all kind of like the guy, and we hate to see him go."

For the first time, Joe noticed that Trey's scoped rifle was out and lying across the hood of his supervisor's truck on a pair of old coveralls.

"You've got to kill him, then?" Joe asked.

"That was our recommendation to the Feds," Trey said with resignation. "This is the fourth time 304's damaged property in the basin. No matter how far we take him away, he finds his way back. He's got no fear of humans anymore."

From a scanner in Trey's pickup, Joe could hear a low and steady pulsing tone. He knew from experience that the radio collar was transmitting the tone on 304. The bear was still in the area. They would sit and wait for it.

Joe scanned the ridges and slopes of the mountain basin, looking for movement. He saw none.

Trey said, "The sad thing is that 304 lived in these mountains for six or seven years without incident. One of the cabin owners left dog food out on his porch. 304 learned that he liked dog food and kept coming back. Pretty soon, the bear figured out that if he busted *into* the cabin he could find all kinds of things to eat. But it started with the dog food, and you know what they say."

"A fed bear is a dead bear," Joe said.

"Yes, goddamnit."

NIGHT CAME. THE sliver of moon was a surgical white slice in the sky. Joe and Trey sat silently in the cab of the pickup, listening to each other's breathing.

"Sorry to start out your trip like this," Trey said. "I bet you want to get over there."

"Not a problem."

"Joe, I've got to ask you something."

Joe grunted.

"After that incident last year, are you okay to work with me to get this bear?"

Joe turned to Trey and found his supervisor studying him. "I'm fine with it."

"Are you sure? Because if you aren't ..."

"I said I'm *fine* with it, Trey."

Trey eventually moved from Joe's pickup to his own so he could sleep. Joe looked at his cellphone to see if he had a signal so he could call Marybeth and tell her about the change in plans. There was no signal. Instead, he checked in with dispatch and asked the dispatcher to advise Marybeth and the station in Jackson that he would be late arriving.

He tried to sleep. Cold crept into the cab from the doors and windows. The pulsing tone of the bear's collar served as a heartbeat for the stakeout.

At 2.30 there was a metallic *clang* from the dark meadow below. Joe sat up with a start, banging his head against the steering wheel. He looked over and saw that Trey had heard it too, and had turned on his dome light and unrolled his window.

As Joe opened his door, there was a roar from below that not only ripped through the silence but also seemed to roll through the earth itself.

"Sounds like we got him," Trey said. There was no joy in his voice.

Joe felt a shiver that raised the hair on his forearms and the back of his neck.

6

EVEN BEFORE THE headlights painted the inside of the culvert trap, Joe could smell the grizzly. The odor was heavy and musky, what a wet dog might smell like if it was twice the size of an NFL linebacker.

"Jesus Christ," Trey said when they could see the bear huddled at the back of the trap, his eyes blinking against the artificial light. "He's even bigger than the last time I saw him."

"Is it 304?" Joe's voice was weak, as if the presence of the bear had sucked something out of him. The bear filled the back of the trap; his huge head hung low, his nose moist and black. A stream of pink-colored saliva hung like a beaded ruby necklace from his mouth to the half-devoured roadkill on the floor of the trap. The bear was frightened, and breathing hard, which made the trap rock slightly back and forth.

"Yup, it's him."

On the seat between them was a tranquilizer gun loaded with a Telazol-filled dart. Once the bear was down, Trey had told Joe, they would need to confirm 304's ear tag and inject the animal with a lethal dose of euthasol to kill it.

Joe drove close to the steel gate on the trap and turned the wheels slightly, giving Trey a good shot at the bear.

"I hate this," Trey said, cocking the tranquilizer gun and aiming it out the window. "I hate this with all of my heart."

The gun popped and Joe saw a flash of the dart through his headlights as it flew into the back of the trap. Joe couldn't see where the dart hit within the thick fur of the grizzly, but he heard the bear grunt.

"Hit it?" Joe asked.

"I'm pretty sure I did."

"How long before he's down for the count?"

"Five minutes."

They waited ten. Joe couldn't tell if the bear was sleeping or not. He could still see eyes reflecting the light, still see the stream of saliva.

Trey said, "I think we're okay now," and slid out of the truck with his shotgun loaded with slugs and a kit containing the lethal dose of euthasol. Joe exited the driver's side with his weapon, and the two game wardens approached the front of the trap. Joe

could hear the bear breathing, and the odor was very strong, mixed with the smell of blood from the roadkill. They snapped on their flashlights. Trey shone his on the locking mechanism of the trapdoor, while Joe trained his on the bear.

What Joe saw scared him to death. The grizzly not only blinked at the light, but turned his head to avoid it.

"Trey ..." Joe whispered urgently.

"*Shit!*" Trey hollered, wheeling around. "*The gate didn't lock!*"

The grizzly bear roared and charged the front of the trap with such speed and force that the unlocked gate blew wide open, the steel grate clanging up and over the top of the culvert. Joe had never seen an animal so big move so fast, and he knew that if the bear chose him as a target there was nothing he could do about it. He found himself backing up toward the truck while raising his shotgun and he felt more than saw Trey blindly fire toward the huge brown blur as the bear ran toward the dark timber.

304 crow-hopped the instant Trey's shotgun went off as if kicked from behind, then kept going. Joe aimed at the streaking form, saw it, lost it, and didn't pull the trigger.

For a moment, they both stood and listened to the bear crash through the timber with the sound and subtlety of a meteorite. Joe was surprised he could hear anything over the sound of his own whumping heartbeat.

IT TOOK NEARLY twenty minutes for Trey and Joe to calm down and assess the situation. Joe was glad it was dark so that Trey wouldn't see his hands shaking.

He held the shotgun close to him, listening for the possible warning sounds of the bear doubling back on them, while Trey examined the trapdoor to try to figure out why it didn't work.

"I don't know what went wrong," Trey said morosely, pulling himself clumsily back to his feet and snatching his shotgun from where he had leaned it against the trap, "but it looks like I might have hit that bear. There's a splash of blood out here on the grass."

They followed the bear's churned-up trail through the meadow to where it entered the trees. There were flecks of blood on blades of grass and fallen leaves. Joe felt his heart sink.

"We've got a wounded grizzly and there's nothing more dangerous than that," Trey said, his voice heavy. "We've got to hunt him down."

Trey called dispatch and gave the dispatcher their coordinates. "We'll stay out here until we find him. Please call my wife and Marybeth Pickett in Saddlestring and tell 'em what the situation is. Oh—and call Jackson Hole. Tell 'em Joe Pickett is going to be a little late for his new job."

FOR THE NEXT three days they drove the primitive back roads, pulling Trey's horses in a trailer, tracking the wounded bear. They found where he had fed on a rotting moose carcass, and picked up his track where he had crossed a stream. The bear had tried to break into another cabin—they could see deep gouges on the front door and the shutters as well as a gout of blood on the porch. Joe found it remarkable and sickening how much blood this bear had lost, and both he and Trey kept expecting

to find the bear's body any minute. Joe admired the big bear nearly as much as he feared it. He would have liked to simply let it go and die in peace, if there was a guarantee that the bear would die.

The tension in the situation, and between Joe and Trey, thickened. Trey admonished himself for taking a wild shot that wounded the bear, and Joe felt that Trey was blaming *him* for not firing. Joe blamed himself as well, and replayed the bear escape over and over in his mind as he rode. He wasn't convinced that he had frozen, but he sure hadn't shot the bear. Things had happened so quickly that he hadn't had a sure shot. Had he?

ON THE SECOND afternoon, they lost the signal. They drove to the highest hill they could get to and parked. The only thing they could do, Trey said, was hope the bear wandered back into range of the receiver.

"We might as well get right to it while we're waiting," Trey said, his tone even more rock bottom than usual. "We've got a hell of a mess in Jackson, Joe. I want you to know what you're getting yourself into."

Joe nodded.

Trey made a pained face. "I'm getting more than a little concerned that some of my game wardens are letting the pressure get to them. I wish I knew how I could help them deal with it. But I don't."

Joe asked, "What do you mean?" But he knew. In the past year, a game warden at a game check station in the Wind River mountains had gotten into an argument with his son, shot him, then turned the pistol on himself. No one knew what the argument was about. Another game warden in southern Wyoming, assigned to a huge, virtually uninhabited district, simply vanished from the state. He was later found in New Mexico at the end of a three-week bender. He would tell anyone who would listen to him that the locals had been out to get him, that he had run for his own life. A departmental investigation could find no evidence of his charges, and he was dismissed.

Unlike any other law enforcement personnel Joe was aware of, game wardens were literally autonomous. They ran their own districts in their own way. Monthly reports to district supervisors like Trey were required, but because supervisors had districts of their own to contend with, they rarely micromanaged game wardens in the field. This was one of the many aspects of his job that Joe valued. It was about trust, and competence, and doing the right thing. But this kind of autonomy brought a secret lonely hell to some men, and ravaged them.

"It's not like there never was any pressure, back in the old days when I started," Trey said. "We had poaching rings, hardheaded landowners, plenty of violent knuckleheads to deal with. But we didn't have the political stuff as much."

"Is that what you think happened with Will?" Joe asked. "He let it get to him?"

Trey nodded. "I'm not sure, of course. He never really said that, except for the occasional bitching that we all do. But Jackson is such a hot spot for that kind of thing. The most extreme are there, it seems. Hunters versus animal-rights types. Developers versus environmentalists. Rich versus poor. Out-of-state landowners versus local rubes.

Bear-baiting poachers versus happy hikers. Shit, and it's not just local, either. It's national and international. I'm afraid he thought that just about everyone wanted a piece of him, or had a gripe with how he did his job. He never told me that, but all you have to do is read the papers to see what he was in the middle of.

"Jackson is unique, Joe," Trey continued. "Everything there is ramped up. All of the different issues are hotter. Jackson is Wyoming's very own California, for better and worse. Things that happen there will eventually influence the rest of the state and beyond. Everybody knows that. It's why the big wars start there. Whoever wins those wars knows that no one else will fight as hard anywhere else. It's the front line."

Joe let Trey go on, knowing how rarely the man went on. Joe had been chosen as Trey's confidant, and he accepted his role with little comment.

Trey looked up and locked eyes with Joe. "Will Jensen, in the end, must have been a very troubled soul. I ache for the guy."

Joe said, "I've got to say that the last man I would have guessed to do this was Will."

Trey nodded. "Me too. He was a goddamned rock for years. But something happened to him over the last six months. I don't know what it was."

Trey slumped forward for a moment, silent, then got out of the truck for a while and scoped the trees and meadow for a sign of the grizzly. The late afternoon sun cast shadows in the timber. Joe watched him, turning over in his mind what Trey had just told him.

"I wish 304 would come out where we can see him," Trey said, getting back in.

"About Will," Joe prompted. "The last six months."

Trey slumped against his seat. "Like I said, something happened to him. He didn't send in most of his reports, for one thing. The one or two I got were sloppy as hell. He got arrested for DWUI, twice at least. I think there may have been other incidents where the local cops let him off. I even heard something about him getting physically removed from some big-shot party when he tried to start a fight."

"Will?" Joe asked, shocked.

"Will. And I just found out his wife and kids moved out on him."

"Susan left him?"

Divorce was rampant within the families of game wardens, Joe knew, worse than for police officers. It went back to the nature of the job, the remote, state-owned homes, the single-mindedness most game wardens brought to their jobs (Joe included), and growing outside pressure. Plus, when he first became a game warden, Joe had quickly learned that some women liked men in a uniform. He had always resisted them. But he knew he wasn't perfect. Will Jensen, though, had been *close* to perfect. That's why he'd been assigned to Jackson.

Trey said, "I kick myself now, because I should have seen it coming. I should have gotten my fat ass over the mountains and talked with him. Maybe I could have helped him."

"Don't beat yourself up," Joe said. "Will obviously didn't ask you for any help."

"Would you?" Trey shot back.

Joe didn't think very long on the question. "Probably not."

Trey nodded triumphantly. "Of course you wouldn't. None of my guys would. Nobody talks about what's going on in their heads."

Joe noted that Trey, even in his concern, couldn't say the word *feelings*.

"But something happened to Will during the last six months," Joe said. "That's pretty fast, when you consider it."

Trey agreed. "I think so too. Unless he just bottled everything up and then it blew."

AS THE SUN notched between two peaks, Trey unfolded a map on the seat between them. There was still no signal from the bear.

"There are two districts out of Jackson," Trey said, pointing with a stubby finger. "South Jackson, which extends down through the Hoback Mountains and curls up like an 'L.' The North Jackson District, Will's old district, the one you'll be covering, extends from town all the way up to Yellowstone Park and over to the Continental Divide."

Trey stopped his finger on the staccato line indicating the Divide. "Right here, at Two Ocean Pass."

Joe did the math. The North Jackson district was 1,885 square miles, most of it spectacular, roadless mountain wilderness.

"The biggest area in the district is accessible only by horseback," Trey said. "It's considered the most remote area in the continental U.S. This is where the elk come down out of Yellowstone on their natural migration routes, and also where the outfitters have established camps. There's a state cabin up there owned by the department that you can base out of. You'll have thirty-seven outfitters to look after, and some of them are the crustiest guys you'll ever meet. Some of them are the most honorable men you'll ever run across. We have problems there with bear and elk baiting, salting mainly. I'm sure Will kept some files on them. You've heard of Smoke Van Horn?"

"Sure," Joe said. Van Horn was the loudest, most cantankerous outfitter in Wyoming. Newspapers sometimes referred to him as the Lion of the Tetons. Van Horn had theories about game management, trophy hunting, and how the state and federal government were screwing up his wilderness through wrong-headed policies thought up and administered by incompetent bureaucrats. He loved to show up at public meetings and take over, accusing the department or any other authority present of mismanagement and gross neglect. He had even self-published a tome called *How the Pricks Deny Me a Living*. He also claimed to be the most successful outfitter in the state, with a success ratio exceeding 98 percent.

"This is Smoke's country," Trey said ominously. "As well as the headquarters for animal-rights activists, wolf lovers, big-shot developers, politicians, movie stars, all kinds of riffraff."

Joe listened and nodded.

"The thing about the district is how big everything is," Trey said. "The elk herds are larger than anything you've ever run across in the Bighorns. There are fourteen

thousand elk between Yellowstone and Jackson. Instead of the herds of forty or fifty that you're used to, you may get in the middle of herds up to three hundred. So you're going to encounter more hunters concentrated along the migration routes than you've probably ever seen before. There are also more grizzly bears, wolves, and mountain lions than anywhere else."

Joe nodded. He could feel his excitement building, as well as his trepidation.

"Remember one thing," Trey said. "Before you ride into those outfitter camps, stop and retie your packs on your horses. Make sure the hitches are perfect. You know how to tie a diamond hitch?"

Joe said he did.

"That's one way they measure you right off. If you've got good animals, and if the horses are packed tight with beautiful hitches, they'll think you know what the hell you're doing, even if you don't. You've got to gain their respect early on."

Joe was inwardly pleased that he had brought a well-worn copy of Joe Back's *Horses, Hitches and Rocky Trails*, the Bible of horse packing.

Trey said, "There's some new thing going on there too, something called 'the Good Meat Movement.' Will laughed about it at first. He thought it was just another Jackson thing."

"The Good Meat Movement?" Joe asked.

Trey waved his hand to dismiss the notion. "Something about rich people wanting to get back to basics, to be there when their food is raised, killed, and packaged."

"Really?" Joe said. "That sounds like hunting."

Trey chuckled. "It's not hunting, Joe. The way Will described it to me, it's more like personally getting to know the animal you're about to slaughter and have ground up into burger. So you can feel his pain, or something. Shit, I don't know."

"I TOLD YOU there was an objection to you going over there to fill in," Trey said almost casually, while Joe dug into packs in the back of his truck for jerky and granola—their dinner that night.

"From who? The governor?"

Trey smiled. Joe had once arrested the governor for fishing without a license. The governor had never forgotten it, and had been vindictive.

"Two more months," Trey said, grinning. "Two more months and that guy is out of there."

Governor Budd was term-limited. He had all but left the state, lobbying for a new job in Washington with the administration. So far, he hadn't received one. His unpopularity, even within his own party, had apparently preceded him.

"Some people are even predicting that the Democrat will win," Trey said. "So prepare for hell to freeze over."

"I'd be lying if I didn't say I'll be glad he's gone," Joe said. "Or that I didn't appreciate how you've stood by me all these years."

Trey waved Joe off and leaned against the grille of his green truck, gnawing on a piece of jerky. After he had washed it down with water, he had more to say. "Joe, I want

you to find out what happened to Will. Now, you can't do a full-fledged investigation. The sheriff and the police department are already doing that, or have completed it by now."

Joe had assumed this was coming. He had hoped it would be.

"But I need to know what happened. What drove him to kill himself?"

"Do you think it was murder?"

Trey shook his head. "Nothing I've heard indicates it was anything other than suicide. What I want to know is what was so damned bad that Will felt the only way he could handle it was to shove a gun in his mouth."

"I'll find out what I can."

"Report back to me. Even if you can't figure anything out. We may never know what was in that man's head." Trey sighed. "If we can find out something, maybe I can help the next guy. I don't know. But when you've got a man who seems perfectly suited for the job, with a beautiful wife and great kids, and something like this happens, well ..."

"It doesn't make sense," Joe said.

Joe felt Trey's eyes on him. He could tell what Trey was thinking. The description of Will Jensen that Trey had laid out could also be used to describe Joe Pickett.

THE RECEIVER CHIRPED. Joe and Trey looked at each other. The bear had come back. Trey said they should saddle up his horses and go after it.

The signal was strong as night came, and they camped near a stream. It was strong throughout the night and in the morning. Bear number 304 was working his way back to the cabins. Trey predicted they would be on him by noon. They weren't.

IT WAS LATE afternoon when the signal strength on Trey's portable scanner went "all-bars" and both horses began to snort and dance, smelling the bear. The sun had just dropped behind the mountains. The fall colors were muted in shadow, and it had gotten colder.

Joe looked up and could see the ridge where they had originally parked, and thought it remarkable that the bear had led them back where the chase had begun. He had heard that bears often did that when injured, choosing familiar terrain over unfamiliar. Or maybe 304 was hungry again.

When he got a now-recognizable whiff of the bear, he found himself clutching up, and could feel his limbs stiffen. He dismounted and led his horse to a tree where he could tie him up. Trey did the same.

Trey walked over to Joe and whispered, "We need to stay within sight and range of each other. If he goes for one of us, the other one has to shoot. If it's up to you, Joe, aim in back of his front shoulder for a heart or lung shot. Don't shoot him in the head. I've heard of slugs bouncing right off."

Joe nodded, didn't meet Trey's eyes.

"You okay, Joe?"

"Fine."

Trey lifted the receiver, slowly sweeping it in front of him until he found where the signal was strongest. Joe looked up, following Trey's arm. A dense pocket of aspen

stood alone on a saddle slope of low gray sagebrush. The bear was too big to hide in the brush, so it had to be in the aspen grove. As if reading his thoughts, Trey gestured toward the trees.

Joe jacked a shell into the chamber of his shotgun and quickly loaded a replacement into the magazine. He put his thumb on the safety as he walked, ready to flip it off and shoot.

They approached the pocket of aspen. Joe could hear a slight cold wind ripple through the crown of branches, sending a few yellow leaves skittering down. He could also hear the signal from the receiver. Before plunging into the grove, he looked over at Trey. Trey mouthed, "Ready?" and Joe tipped his hat brim.

THE SMELL OF the bear was strong in the grove, hanging like smoke about three feet above the ground. It was dusk. Joe wished they had entered the aspen at least a half hour before, when there was more light. He promised himself that if they didn't find the bear within ten minutes he would call to Trey and they would pull out and wait for morning.

Even though Trey had been twenty yards away when they entered the aspen, Joe couldn't see or hear him now in the dense trees.

Joe noticed a nuance in the smell of the bear—the metallic odor of blood. He walked slowly, breathed deeply and as quietly as possible. He didn't want the sound of his own exertion to fill his ears and make him miss something.

He felt it before he saw it, and spun to his left, his boot heel digging into the soft black ground beneath the fallen leaves.

The grizzly sat on his haunches, looking at him from ten feet away. Joe saw the silver-tipped brown fur, some of it matted with black blood, saw the bear's chest heave painfully as he breathed. Joe stared into the eyes of the bear, and the bear didn't blink. The bear's eyes were black and hard, without malice.

Joe raised the shotgun and thumbed off the safety. He put the front bead of the muzzle on 304's chest, right on his heart. And he didn't fire.

Even when the bear false-charged and popped his teeth together in warning, Joe didn't pull the trigger.

But Trey Crump did, the explosion sounding like the whole aspen grove went up. 304 flinched as if stung by a bee, and roared, his mouth fully open so Joe could see the inch-long teeth and pink tongue. Trey fired again and the bear toppled forward, dead before he hit the ground.

As they rode toward their vehicles in the dark, dragging the carcass of the grizzly behind them, Trey asked, "Why didn't you shoot, Joe?"

Joe didn't want to answer, and didn't.

Because he was looking me straight in the eye, that's why. Because I found out I can't kill a bear when he is looking me straight in the eye.

THAT NIGHT, THEY ate big steaks and drank beer after beer at a guest lodge in the foothills of the mountains. Old-timers at the bar had heard the story and sent

over rounds of drinks for the game wardens. They, like Trey, admired old 304. But the bear had to go. A fed bear was a dead bear.

Joe left Trey at the bar and found a payphone outside. It was cold as he shoved quarters in, and he could see his breath as he said, "Hello, darling," to Marybeth.

"Where are you?" she asked. Even colder.

He leaned back and looked at the sign out near the highway. "Someplace called the T-Bar."

"In Jackson?"

"No," he said. "By Cody."

"*Cody*. Joe, why are you there? Why aren't you in Jackson? Why didn't you call like you said you would?"

Joe said, "Didn't you get the second message from dispatch?"

"What message?"

He told her the whole story, but he could tell by her tone she was still furious with him. As he told her how scared he had been when he walked up on the grizzly, she said, "Sheridan has been an absolute beast I can't even talk to that girl anymore."

Joe paused. "Marybeth, are you listening?"

"For three days I've been worried about you. Do you know what that's like?"

"No," Joe said, looking out at the highway. "I guess I don't."

He didn't know if he was angry, guilt-stricken, or both.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow," he said, and hung up the phone.

Trey was watching him as he reclaimed his stool at the bar. "Everything okay?"

"Marybeth didn't get the second dispatch message. She didn't know where I've been."

"Uh-oh." Trey shook his head. "I wonder if my missus got it?"

"You better call her," Joe said.

"So I can look as miserable as you?" Trey said. "I think I'll have another beer."

THE NEXT MORNING, as he crossed the Shoshone River out of Cody, Joe felt ashamed of himself. He had not slept well in his motel room, despite a few too many beers. He tried to reassess where he was in time and place in regard to his new assignment. He was four days behind schedule, and he had not yet had a chance to really talk everything over with Marybeth, without distractions. He had frozen when he should have fired. He convinced himself that if the bear had gone after Trey, he would have reacted well and started blasting. Of course he would have, he thought. He had pulled his weapon and fired in anger before. Once, he had hit a man from a long distance, but he hadn't known it at the time. But he had never faced someone, or something like a bear, looking him straight in the eye.

LATER, HE FELT the shroud lifting. The guilt he had felt earlier about leaving Marybeth and the girls was still there, but the challenge of what he was about to face surged hot and steady. He already missed his family, but the residue of the telephone call with Marybeth remained. It had not been a good conversation.

Sure, she had a right to be worried and angry. But he had wanted to talk with her, tell her how tough it had been to go face-to-face with that bear, and what he had done. Instead, it had all been about her. She made him feel guilty. She always made him feel guilty. He knew the last five years had been tough on her. She'd gone through more than anyone deserved. But would there ever be a time when he didn't have to walk around on eggshells? When she didn't seem to blame him for what their life had become?

He was being unfair. Despite everything, he loved her. Without her he would spin off the planet. He needed her to ground him.

But he looked forward to the change. He looked forward to his new district.

Had the pressures in Saddlestring, and in the house, really gotten to him to this degree, he wondered, that the prospect of riding up alone on armed men in a hunting camp seemed like a boy's holiday? He tried to shake that thought out of his head. He tried to make an argument that it was good to have a mission, good to have a tough assignment. It was good to be trusted by Trey, to have been chosen out of the other fifty-five game wardens for the hottest, most high-profile district.

As he drove up the canyon, he watched the signal on his cellphone recede to nothing, followed by a digital no service prompt.

Here we go, *he thought*. Here we go.

7

EVEN THOUGH HE should have been prepared for them, even though he had seen them dozens of times in photos, paintings, movies, on postage stamps, and in person, Joe still felt his heart skip a beat when the timber opened up on the road south of Yellowstone Park and the Tetons filled up the late afternoon vista. Mount Moran in particular, with its comma-shaped glacier of snow, burned bright in the cloudless sky. The dark, rounded shoulders of the Bighorns, *his* mountains, had been replaced by the glittering silver-white Tetons, which thrust upward like razor-edged sabers trying to slice open the sky. He felt like he was switching his comfortable horizon with a new, dazzling, high-tech model.

He wondered if he would ever get used to seeing those mountains without feeling a flutter in his stomach each time he looked. It was hard, Joe thought, not to be intimidated by the Tetons. There were no other mountains like them in the world; so new, sharp, and lethal that foothills hadn't yet had the courage to approach them. He wondered if Will Jensen had ever gotten used to them. How could something that dramatic ever really provide the comfort of familiar scenery?

*

TRAFFIC SOUTH TO Jackson through Grand Teton National Park was heavy, and Joe became part of a long parade of vehicles. The highway was choked with huge recreational vehicles helmed by older drivers who apparently thought the fifty-five-

mile-per-hour speed limit was a challenge they wouldn't dare confront. He settled in, unable to pass because the exodus of tourist traffic in the oncoming lane was just as dense. Driving cautiously, he knew that the sighting of a moose, elk, or bear from the highway would instantly cause visitors to hit their brakes and, without pulling over to the shoulder, pour out of their vehicles with cameras and camcorders. On his left the ground rose in a gentle swell toward the Gros Ventre Mountains. On the raised flats, barely visible from the road, were old dude ranches. The movie *Shane* had been filmed on one of them, Joe remembered. It was the only movie he and his father had ever agreed on, maybe the only *thing* they had ever agreed on. Then he realized something that both scared and exhilarated him: *This was his new district*. As far as he could see in every direction, from the Tetons to the west, Gros Ventres to the east, Yellowstone Park to the north, to the town of Jackson ahead of him to the south, was his new responsibility.

Jackson was just a couple of hundred miles from Saddlestring, Joe thought, but it was a world apart.

THE BIG NEW two-story state building had a parking lot in front for visitors and a private lot in back for employees of various agencies. Joe cruised through the staff lot, looking for a parking space, but they all appeared to be designated. The only open one he saw was marked for W. JENSEN. Even though there wasn't anywhere else available behind the building, he chose not to use it. Not yet. Instead, he wheeled around the front, parked between two RVs, and entered the building through the double doors.

In the lobby, tourists stood and rifled through a rack of brochures offering horseback rides, an aerial tram ride to the top of the Tetons, chuck wagon cookouts, white-water rafting, and other excursions, as well as accommodations.

A dark-skinned, wizened woman with coal-black hair peered over her gold-framed glasses at him as he approached her counter carrying his battered briefcase and day-pack. He nodded his hat brim to her, and she nodded back.

"Joe Pickett," he said.

She stood. She was not much taller standing than she had been sitting down. "Mary Seels. We expected you five days ago."

"Hello, Mary. I was helping my supervisor with a bear. You should have gotten word from dispatch that I'd be late."

She assessed him. He thought he saw a slight smile on her mouth, as if she were hiding her amusement. "I've heard about you."

He nodded again, not taking the bait, not saying, *What have you heard?* But he thought he already had her figured out, simply by the way she looked at him, with the same dispassionate sharpness of one of Nate's falcons, and by the way she projected her innate territoriality. Mary was the one who ran the place, he thought. She appraised him as if he had walked into the building hat in hand looking for the last bed in town, and she had the power to give it to him or turn him away.

"Will said you were a good guy," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I thought quite a bit of Will."

"If Will says you're a good guy, you're a good guy," she said, more to herself than to Joe. "I suppose you want to use his office?"

Inwardly, Joe cringed. He had not parked in Will's space because he felt he was encroaching.

"How many offices are in this building?" he asked.

She ticked her head from side to side like a metronome as she silently counted. "Twenty-some. We've got biologists, habitat specialists, fisheries guys, and communications people. Plus a library and a conference room. There's a corral out back. Will's four horses are kept there."

"Twenty offices," Joe repeated. "In my district I work out of my house. In a space about as big as your counter here."

"That's interesting," she said, her tone dismissive. "I hope you don't get lost here."

"Me too," he said.

There were a few beats of silence as Joe and Mary looked at each other.

"Are you going to move in or not?" she asked finally.

"Any empty rooms?"

"A couple. But they have the lousiest furniture, if they have furniture at all. People raid the empty offices for what they want all the time. You'll need a desk, won't you? A computer that works?" She was still testing him. "You know you want Will's office, so just take it."

He started to protest, but thought better of it. "Okay, ma'am."

"You can call me Mary," she said, again with that ghost of a smile, "but if you call me ma' am you'll get a hell of a lot better service around here."

He smiled at her.

"The office is upstairs," she said, and sat down to answer a ringing phone. "All of his files and records are up there. I'm sure you'll want to look at them."

"Yup."

Joe gathered his briefcase and pack from her counter and began to climb the wide stairs to the second floor. Mounted elk, deer, and bighorn sheep heads watched his progress with glass-eyed indifference, as if they'd seen the likes of *him* before.

"Hey, Joe Pickett," Mary called out from her desk.

He stopped on the top step and turned to her.

She lowered the phone and cupped her hand over the receiver. "You might have a call here in a minute. Someone is saying there are some people pitching a tent out in the middle of the elk refuge. You might have to go check that out and kick them off."

He hesitated. "Okay ..."

"And you have several messages from your wife. She didn't sound very happy." Mary smiled for the first time. It was a smile of pity.

"She didn't get the dispatch message either," he said.

"Welcome to Jackson Hole," she said.

WILL JENSEN'S NAMEPLATE was still in a fake brass slider next to the third door on the left. Joe hesitated, looking up and down the hallway, then cautiously

opened the unlocked door and let it swing slowly inward. The mini-blinds covering the window were closed but bled laddered light. He waited a few beats before stepping inside. He couldn't help feeling voyeuristic, and a little ghoulish. Joe didn't want to be seen entering, didn't want anyone saying later that he had just barged into Will's old office like he owned the place. He reached inside the doorway, found the switch, and turned on the lights.

Joe's first impression was that Will had left the office planning to return to it. Papers fanned across the desk. An open can of Mountain Dew was on a coaster. A ball-point pen, cap off and to the side, sat on the top of a large, thin spiral notebook. The fan on Will's computer hummed, indicating that it was sleeping and not turned off.

Joe stepped inside, leaving the door open, and dumped his briefcase and day-pack in the chair opposite the desk.

Overall, the room was spartan, the office of someone who rarely used it or couldn't get away from it fast enough. That fit with what Joe knew of Will and most of the other game wardens. Their actual workplace was outside, not inside. They used their desks with hesitation and profound regret, spending only as much time there as absolutely necessary between bouts in the field.

A cheap bookcase was a quarter filled with departmental memo binders and statute books. A retro Winchester Ammunition calendar was pushpinned into the wall. There were no personal photos, no drawings from his children. The only adornment was a framed, faded photo hanging on the wall, cocked slightly to the left, of the elk refuge in winter. Joe instinctively knew that Mary, or maybe Will's wife—but not Will—had put it there.

The left wall was dominated by a large-scale Forest Service map of the North Jackson district. Pins with tiny paper flags numbered one through thirty-seven indicated where the licensed outfitter camps were located. The camps followed river drainages in a march toward Yellowstone.

Joe sat in Will's chair, still reluctant to settle in. The chair was uncomfortable, and was much older than the building itself. Joe wondered if one of the other employees had swapped out a chair at the news of Will's demise. He brushed the pen aside and looked at the spiral notebook. The red cover had a large "#10" written on the outside in black marker. Inside were entries scribbled in a tiny, cribbed block print.

10/02—0600. Rosie's / Box Creek / front country.

MI 567B Blk GMC / Rosie's / Call / Okay per Disp.

PA 983 Silver Ford 3/4 / HT / Rosie's / Call / Okay per Disp.

WY 2-4BX Green Yukon / Rosie's / Call / Antlerless. Citation issued.

1700—Turpin. 6b, 2s, 2 Wtbucks. Okay ...

Joe quickly figured out Will's shorthand code. It was similar to the notes he kept in his own field notebooks. In translation, the notes said that on October 2 at 6 A.M., Will

was patrolling Rosie's Ridge and the Box Creek front country in his pickup, checking on elk hunters. While he didn't see the hunters themselves, who had most likely left their vehicles and set up somewhere in the vast country to look for elk, Will noted their parked vehicles—a black GMC from Michigan, a silver Ford three-quarter-ton pickup with Pennsylvania plates, and a green Yukon with Wyoming plates. Will had called in each of the plates to dispatch and requested a cross-reference computer check to determine the name of the hunter and whether or not that hunter had obtained a permit from the department to hunt elk in the area. While the out-of-state hunters checked out ("Okay per Dispatch"), the Wyoming hunter had a license that only allowed him to hunt antlerless elk, which meant his particular season didn't open up for two more weeks. Will had located the Wyoming hunter, confirmed that he had violated regulations, and issued a citation.

Later in the afternoon, at 5 P.M., Will had patrolled through the Turpin Meadow campground at about the time that the first backcountry hunters were returning to their camps. The hunters had harvested six bull elk, two spike elk (yearling bulls), and two whitetail buck deer. All the kills had been clean and legal by properly licensed hunters, because no warnings or citations were noted.

Joe closed the notebook and sat back. The notes, once deciphered, presented a detailed account of his movements and actions. Using the notebook, citation book, and call-in record, a determined investigator could easily document what he did all day. Joe found that reassuring in his circumstances, since nearly everyone he encountered in the field was armed. The only game wardens who did mind, Joe knew, were the few with extracurricular activities like drinking while on duty or visiting lonely wives.

He reopened notebook #10 and scanned it. Since it was not yet October 2, it was from a previous year. On the last page with writing on it, in tiny script, he found where Will had written down the date of the year before. There were twenty or so fresh pages at the end of the notebook with no notes on them. Joe flipped back to page one, saw that the first entry was 01/02. So Will used a single spiral notebook for a given year.

He pushed back his chair and opened the desk drawers. They were remarkably empty, again the sign of a man who rarely used his office. But in the bottom left drawer he found a stack of new and used spirals exactly like the one on the desktop. Joe pulled them out and fanned them across the desk. The used notebooks were numbered 1 through 9, and were ragged and swollen with wear. The tenth he had already looked at. There were four unused notebooks, all clean and tightly bound. In the bottom of the drawer was a balled-up sheet of thin plastic, the original wrapper for the sheaf. Joe unwrapped the plastic and unfolded the paper band that had held the notebooks together. On the band it said there were fifteen to the package.

Which meant that the spiral for the current year was missing. Or in Will's pickup (where Joe kept his) or in Will's home. Joe opened his briefcase and slid all the notebooks into it. He would read them when he had the time, probably in the evening. What else would he have to do? He was determined to find #11.

JOE NEEDED TO call Marybeth and smooth things over. But as he reached for the phone, he felt more than heard the presence of someone in the doorway, and he looked up with a start.

"Are you here for the funeral tomorrow?" a man asked in place of a greeting.

Joe pushed back awkwardly from the desk because one of the rollers on the chair was damaged, and stumbled when he stood up. The man in the doorway was tall and thin with light blue eyes, sandy hair, and a pallor that came from working indoors in an office. He wore a tweed jacket over a turtleneck, and Wrangler jeans so new they were still stiff. The trendy hiking boots that poked out from his jeans looked like they had been taken out of the box only a few hours before.

Joe introduced himself and held out his hand. The man shook it languidly, and pulled his hand away quickly.

"Should I know you?" Joe asked.

"I would think so," the man said. "I'm Assistant Director Randy Pope. From headquarters in Cheyenne. You were supposed to be here Monday night."

Joe certainly recognized the name, even though he had never met Pope personally. Randy Pope was in charge of fiscal matters for the agency. Most of the memos that crossed Joe's desk concerning procedure, the wage and salary freeze, the abuse of overtime and comp time, the unaccountability of game wardens in the field, had been issued by Randy Pope.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Pope," Joe said, trying to sound friendly. "I'm late because I was helping Trey Crump out with a problem bear."

"The director is out of the state at a conference," Pope said, disregarding Joe's explanation. "He asked me to come to the funeral on behalf of the agency."

That explains your getup, *Joe thought*. This is how you think people dress in Jackson.

"You probably know I'm here to fill in," Joe said, feeling the need to explain why he was behind the desk in Will Jensen's old office.

Pope shifted his eyes from Joe to something over and to the right of Joe's head. "I heard about that," he said flatly. Clearly, Joe thought, Pope didn't approve of the arrangement. "We expected you earlier this week."

Joe patiently explained the hunt for the bear, saying he didn't know if the dispatcher forgot to forward the message or whoever got it didn't inform the office. Pope didn't seem to accept the excuse.

Joe had heard through Trey and others that Randy Pope desperately wanted to be named the next director. The current director was rumored to be short for the world, thanks to the pending gubernatorial election, and an opening would be likely. Directors were chosen at the discretion of the governor and the Game and Fish Commission, and historically had come from within the department, from the ranks of game wardens or biologists. To Joe's knowledge, there'd never been a director who came from the administrative side of the agency, the side that issued memos. Yet it was said that Pope had done his best to ingratiate himself with both gubernatorial candidates, as

well as with the legislators who oversaw the department. He positioned himself as a man who was both within and without; a fiscally responsible insider who would curb rampant financial abuses as well as rein in the cowboys in the field. Joe had no doubt he was considered one of the cowboys.

Pope said, "Joe, do you realize what kind of trouble our agency is in these days?"

The question was out of left field, Joe thought. He shook his head.

"We're running deficits, bleeding red. We're being asked to take on more and more responsibilities by the state and the Feds, but our income streams are drying up."

This was no secret to Joe. Salaries had been capped and positions cut statewide.

"There are fewer hunters out there every year, Joe. It's no longer socially acceptable in many parts of the country to be a hunter. That means fewer hunting licenses are being purchased every year, which means less money for the agency to manage wildlife and everything else that has been thrown to us by the Feds—wolves, grizzly bears, endangered species ... you name it. The only way to keep our division healthy is to practice sound fiscal management and good public relations. You never know when we'll have to go to the legislature for money."

"I'm aware of that," Joe said, not knowing where this was going.

"Are you?" Pope asked sharply.

"Yes."

Pope sighed. "I see everything, Joe. I'm the one who has to sign off on all of our expenses."

"Right."

"You don't know what I'm getting at, do you, Joe?"

"Nope," Joe said. But now he did.

"In the past six years, we've replaced two pickup trucks, a horse, and a snowmobile for you. Total losses, all of them. That's the worst damage record in the state."

Joe felt anger start to rise.

Pope continued, the cadence of his words speeding up until he was literally biting them off. "You arrested the governor. You got in the middle of a vital endangered-species issue. You pissed off one of the governor's biggest contributors—who later got killed in your presence. Let's see ... what else?" Pope pretended to be pondering, then answered his own question. "That Sovereign thing up in the mountains, that was next. We are *still* working on repairing our relationship with the Forest Service over that one."

Joe crossed his arms and waited for him to finish.

"Last year you *hit* a guy with your third pickup, right?" Pope said. "You smashed in the grille and bent the frame. What did that cost?"

"A few thousand," Joe said.

"The actual cost was six thousand, seven hundred," Pope spit out.

"I've also lost two service weapons," Joe said. "One got burned up in a fire, and the other got blown up by a cow. Don't forget those."

That stopped Pope for a minute, threw him off balance. He recovered quickly and went on. "Now we've got a game warden who got boozed up and blows his head off. He's not our first casualty lately. An outsider, or a legislator, might just think we're an agency out of control."

Joe's ears burned, and anger swelled in his chest. He tried to stay calm. Joe said, "You're out of line, Pope. I don't know what happened with Will Jensen yet, but you need to watch what you say. Will was never out of control. He devoted his life to the department, and maybe that's what finally got to him. Maybe the pressure you and your kind put on him finally made him break. He lost his family, Pope, but he kept working for you."

Pope started to argue but Joe raised his hand to silence him.

"That guy I hit with my truck deserved to be hit," Joe said. "He was in the act of mutilating someone, and that was the only way to stop him. Everything you mentioned was justified. It was all investigated, and I received no reprimands from my supervisor or anyone else who mattered."

Pope's eyes bulged. "But can't you see how it looks? I'm trying to keep our costs down and improve our image. I'm trying to help this agency *survive*. You are *not* helping me very much."

Bitter silence hung in the air between them. Joe fought the urge to spin Randy Pope around and kick him out of the office, right in the seat of his brand-new jeans.

Joe said, "I don't figure it's my job to make you look good, Assistant Director Pope. I think I've got a higher calling than that."

Pope glared at Joe. His face was flushed, and Joe could see little blue veins like earthworms pulse at his temples.

"So," Pope said, sarcastically, "*you have a higher calling*. But you're in Jackson Hole now, Joe. If you fuck up here, everybody will know it. You've got to be more respectful here. That starts with showing up on time."

"You know what?" Joe said. "I'm already getting tired of hearing that."

"And if you screw up, you're gone. Count on it," Pope said. "If we do another round of budget cuts, you'll be the first to go if I have any say in it."

Pope spun on his heels and was gone down the dark hallway.

"See you at the funeral," Joe called out to him. Then he rubbed his eyes furiously. Will's funeral, yes. But maybe the beginning of his own career's funeral, he thought.

WHEN HIS TELEPHONE rang it took a few moments to figure out which button to push to answer it. Finally, he stabbed a lighted button and raised the receiver.

"Joe, this is Mary."

"Hi, Mary."

"That situation I told you about? With the people pitching a camp in the middle of the elk refuge?"

"Yes."

"It's been confirmed."

"I'll be right down."

AS HE PASSED the counter with his day-pack and briefcase, Mary called out after him. "Your dispatch code is 'Jackson GF60,' Joe."

He paused at the door. "Okay, ma'am."

She smiled at him, warmly this time. "That's good. I like that."

He strode into the parking lot to his truck, stopped, turned, and went back into the lobby. Mary looked up.

"How do I find the road to get into the refuge?" he asked.

She pointed due north and gave him directions to the access.

PART TWO

It must be admitted that the existence of carnivorous animals does pose one problem for the ethics of Animal Liberation, and that is whether we should do anything about it.

Peter Singer,
Animal Liberation

What we eat depends on where we live and how we have come to look at ourselves.
Jim Harrison,
The Raw and the Cooked

8

INSTEAD OF ELK on the National Elk Refuge, Joe could see a half dozen trumpeter swans near a marsh, looking like pure white flares against the rust-colored reeds on Flat Creek. In the distance in front of him on the sagebrush plateau, three mangy coyotes fed on something dead. Beyond the coyotes were two tiny dome tents strategically placed in view of the north-south highway into town. He approached the tents from the north, driving slowly over a worn two-track that wound through the flat of the 25,000-acre refuge. The coyotes scattered and loped away, then stopped and posed, waiting for him to pass so they could return to whatever it was they were eating. The late afternoon sun was an hour from dropping behind the Tetons, but already shadows from the peaks were creeping across the valley floor. In the winter, the area would be transformed, as the heavy snows in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks forced the herds south to the refuge, where they were fed alfalfa pellets to survive. The National Elk Refuge historically held between 7,500 and 11,000 elk, with thousands more fleeing to other refuges less well known.

As Joe drove across the field, he kept thinking about his confrontation with Randy Pope, and he knew there was unfinished business with him. Pope would be watching him like a hawk, waiting for him to screw up. Knowing his own personal history, he would. And there was something else troubling him, making him feel on edge, that he couldn't yet place. Something about Will Jensen's office. An impression that was beginning to form just before Pope walked in and blew it all away. What was it?

THERE WAS NO vehicle by the tents, but Joe could see a car parked about a mile and a half away on the other side of the eight-foot elk fence near the highway. The campers, for whatever reason, had obviously scaled the fence and walked in. With

all of the campsites in the national forests and parks, Joe wondered why they had chosen the wide, treeless flat in sight of the highway and within earshot of the sizzling traffic. There was also some kind of construction project going on near the tents. Two people—men—were digging post-holes in the ground. Near them was a long flat object, some kind of sign.

When a slim blond woman emerged from one of the tents and stood facing his pickup with her arms crossed in front of her and a defiant, determined look on her face, he realized why they were there. It wasn't a campsite—it was a statement.

Always cognizant of the risks of barging into the middle of someone's camp—even an illegal camp—Joe stopped his truck thirty yards away and shut off the motor. He swung out, clamped on his hat, and called, "Nice afternoon, isn't it?" Joe had long ago learned that the first words out of his mouth often set the tone for an encounter. Since he was nearly always outnumbered and generally outgunned, he preferred a friendly, conciliatory introduction. But he had a few other tricks as well. Never walk right up to someone as if squaring off. Always be a little to the side, so they have to turn a little to talk with you. Keep moving laterally without being obvious, so no one gets behind you. Maintain enough distance so that no one can reach out and grab you.

The two men digging the post-holes stopped their work, which Joe sensed they didn't really mind doing. Both were in their twenties, one thin and wiry, the other soft and fat. The soft, fat man had dark circles of sweat under the arms of his sweatshirt and his forehead was beaded with moisture. The wiry man wore tiny round glasses and was pale from exertion. They both looked to the woman to speak for them after Joe's greeting.

"I've never seen you around here before," she said in a clear voice, "but I'm glad you like our weather."

"I'd guess that when the shadows from the mountains come over, it'll drop twenty degrees."

"Maybe thirty," she said.

"Hope you can stay warm," he said, looking at the tents. They were lightweight hiking models. He glimpsed a crumpled sleeping bag through one of the openings. He saw no sign of firearms.

He walked within a few feet of her and to the side and tilted his hat back on his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets; another deliberate, non-threatening gesture. He could see her relax, almost instinctively. She was not unattractive, he thought, despite her complete lack of makeup and unkempt long straight hair, not so much parted as shoved out of the way of her face. She had delicate features and sharp cheekbones. She wore a fleece pullover, faded jeans, and hiking boots.

"You must be the new guy," she said, looking him over. "Are you here to replace Will Jensen?"

"At least for a while," Joe said, and introduced himself. He reached out to shake her hand, which meant that she had to uncross her arms.

"My name is Pi Stevenson," she said, almost demurely.

"Pleased to meet you," Joe said, and introduced himself to the post-hole diggers. The slim man was named Ray and the fat man Birdy.

After meeting Birdy, Joe turned and looked at the sign that was lying flat on the ground, nailed to two long posts.

" 'Jackson Hole Meat Farm,' " he said aloud. Under the huge block letters was a smaller line that read ANIMAL LIBERATION NETWORK. Then he looked up at Pi. "What does that mean?"

The defiance he had seen earlier returned to her eyes. "That's what this refuge is, a meat farm. It's a place where you feed and fatten wild creatures so that humans can slaughter them and eat their flesh in the name of *so-called sport*." She spit out the last two words.

As if hearing an unspoken command from Pi, Ray and Birdy lifted the sign and dropped the posts into the holes in the ground. The sign was now visible from the highway. Joe looked up and saw an RV slow, then pull off to the shoulder so the driver could read it.

"This Animal Liberation Network," Joe asked, "is that your outfit?"

"It's all of us," Pi said, indicating Ray and Birdy as well. "We're just a small part of a much bigger movement."

"Can Ray and Birdy talk?" Joe asked innocently.

Pi flared a little. "Of course they can. But I'm our spokesperson."

"I bet you get lonely in Wyoming," Joe said.

"Yes," she said, emphatically. "This may be the most barbaric place there is. You can't even walk into a restaurant without being surrounded by the severed heads of beautiful animals."

"Then why are you here?" Joe asked.

She crossed her arms again. "Because the best place to make a statement about injustice is where the injustice is taking place, isn't it? Someone's got to be strong and brave."

Birdy interjected, "Pi's famous. She's the toughest, most compassionate person in the movement."

"I see that," Joe said.

"Thanks, Birdy," Pi said, rewarding him by sending him a sweet smile. Birdy flushed.

"So you're putting the sign here so that people coming into or out of Jackson will see it from the highway?" Joe asked, nodding at the line of cars that had now pulled to the shoulder to look at them. "To raise awareness of your issue?"

"That's correct," she said. "The two newspapers and the wire service guy interviewed me this afternoon, so we should get some play there."

"Hmmm," Joe said, noncommittally.

"You're a flesh-eater, aren't you?" she asked Joe. "I bet you're convinced that humans are on one level of being and animals are beneath them. That animals are on this earth to serve us at our pleasure, to be our 'pets' when we want them to be and our food when we want to murder them and eat them."

Joe thought about it. “Yup, pretty much,” he said. “I’ve heard it said that the definition of a Wyoming vegetarian is someone who eats meat only once a day.”

He couldn’t get her to warm up.

“You have so much to learn,” she said. “But I don’t hate you because you’re ignorant. Have you ever heard the saying ‘An insect is a cat is a dog is a boy’?”

“Nope,” Joe said, a little disappointed that she hadn’t even cracked a smile at his joke.

“It means we’re all interconnected. We’re *all* life. There aren’t degrees of life, there is only life. Eating beef or elk is the same as eating a child. There’s no difference. It’s all just meat.”

Joe winced.

“Americans, on average, eat fifty-one pounds of chicken every year, fifteen pounds of turkey, sixty-three pounds of beef, forty-five pounds of pork,” she said. She was getting into it, stepping toward Joe, gesturing with her hands in chopping motions. “Then there’s lamb—lamb!—and veal. Out here these people eat even more red meat than that, like deer and the elk that will be fed and fattened at the place we’re standing. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see all of those creatures every day, instead of murdering them for their flesh?” She talked as if she were quoting, Joe thought.

He didn’t want to get into the debate, but he had a question. “Isn’t it different for a man to hunt his own food than to buy it wrapped in cellophane in a grocery store? And what about these elk? Would it be better if they starved to death in the winter? There isn’t enough natural habitat for them anymore. They’d die by the thousands if we didn’t feed them.”

Pi had obviously heard this argument many times before and didn’t hesitate. “As for your first question, meat is meat. As I said, an insect is a cat is a dog is a boy. As for your second, we never should have gotten to this stage in the first place. If we weren’t raising the elk for slaughter, and feeding them, we wouldn’t have this problem.”

Joe nodded. “But we *do* have this problem. We can’t solve it now by just saying we shouldn’t have it, can we?”

“Touché,” she said, smiling. “You have a point, if a weak one. But I’ve accomplished what I set out to do here.”

“Which is?”

“To get you thinking.”

Joe smiled back.

“So, are you going to arrest us?” she asked.

“Did Will arrest you?”

“Many times. Once he arrested me up on Rosie’s Ridge, in the middle of an elk camp. I dressed up like an elk with these cute little fake antlers”—she raised her hands and wiggled her fingers over her head to simulate cute little antlers—“and walked around the hunters going, ‘Who killed my beautiful wife? Who shot my son? Who shot my baby daughter in the guts?’ ”

“It was so cool,” Birdy added. “She had those bastards up there howling.”

Joe stifled a grin. The way she told the story was kind of funny. "Yup, I bet they were."

"I went a little too far with that one," Pi said. "It was too much too soon. The Wyoming legislature passed an anti-hunter harassment law after that, and Will was really angry with me. He said I wouldn't be accomplishing anything if I got myself shot, although I disagreed at the time. The movement *needs* a martyr. But I was too strident, I admit it. I even threatened Will, just so you know. I wrote letters to the editor about him, and put a picture of him on our website with a slash through it. I went a little overboard. He was just doing his job. So now we've scaled things back a bit. We need to work in incremental steps, to raise awareness."

"Which is what you're doing here," Joe said.

"Correct."

Joe shrugged. "Okay," he said, and started to walk to his pickup.

"Hey," Pi called out. "Aren't you going to arrest us?"

Joe stopped, looked over his shoulder, said, "No."

"But we're breaking the law," she said. Joe saw Birdy exchange glances with Ray. As Joe had figured from seeing the light camping tents and the three-season sleeping bags, the campers weren't really prepared or equipped to stay long. They wanted to be arrested in order to get more media attention. The shadow of the Tetons had already crept over the refuge, and it would freeze during the night.

Pi looked desperate. "You're not just going to leave us out here, are you?"

"Yes."

"There are some real extreme hunter-types in town," Birdy offered. "You ever heard of Smoke Van Horn? He's crazy. He's probably heard of our sign out here. What if Smoke and his pals come after us tonight?"

"I'm sure Pi here can reason with them," Joe said with a grin.

Birdy looked at Pi. Ray looked at Birdy. Pi glared at Joe.

"You're a bastard," she said.

"That was harsh," Joe said, still smiling.

"Pi ..." Birdy started to say.

"Why don't you throw the sign in the back of my truck," Joe said, "and kick some dirt in those holes. I'll help you pack up and I'll give you a ride to your car so you don't have to hike."

Pi set her mouth, furious.

"Pi ..." It was Birdy again.

"You *are* a bastard," she said again.

PI SAT IN the cab of the pickup, fuming, while Joe drove across the refuge toward the highway. Birdy and Ray were in the back, in the open, huddled near the rear window in light jackets. The sign and the camping gear were piled into the bed of the pickup. It was dusk, and Joe could smell the sweet, sharp smell of sagebrush that was crushed beneath his tires. He reached forward and turned on his headlights.

"It's an interesting subject, animal rights," Joe said.

"It's more than a *subject* for some of us," Pi answered.

Joe ignored her tone. "I'm around animals all day long. Sometimes I wonder what those animals are thinking, if they're capable of thinking."

"You do?" This surprised her.

"How could you not?" he asked.

She seemed to be trying to decide if she wanted to engage him, or be angry and refuse to talk to him.

"In the end, it's all about meat," she said.

"What?"

"It's about meat. What we eat is what defines us. People are starting to wake up to that, even here."

Joe said nothing.

"Have you heard of Beargrass Village?" she asked, the words dripping with venom.

"Nope."

She looked over at him. "It's a whole planned community, and I hate it. For a few million, people can live in what they call a planned environment where meat is raised and slaughtered for their pleasure. They call it the Good Meat Movement."

Joe remembered what Trey had said about it. "I heard something about it recently. Is it a serious thing?"

"No, it's just a veneer," she said. "It's a way for rich people to feel good about themselves. That's what this valley is about, you know—rich people feeling good about themselves, and dominating the land and creatures that they feel are beneath them."

"Bitter," Joe said.

Pi snorted. "Yeah. You fucking bet I'm bitter. I'm bitter about a lot of things."

Like factory farms, she said. She quoted verbatim from a book she was reading, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, by Matthew Scully:

"'When a quarter million birds are stuffed into a single shed, unable even to flap their wings, when more than a million pigs inhabit a single farm, never once stepping into the light of day, when every year tens of millions of creatures go to their death without knowing the least measure of human kindness, it is time to question old assumptions, to ask what we are doing and what spirit drives us.' "

Then she asked, as they approached her car, "What spirit drives you, Joe?"

He was glad the ride was just about over and he didn't have to answer that question.

"We're here," he said.

HE HELPED THEM load their car. It was completely dark now, with a stark white moon. Their breaths billowed in the cold. Birdy started the motor in order to get the heater running. Ray sat in back, amid their packs and tents. Pi opened the passenger door to climb in.

Joe said, "Pi, can I ask you something?"

"What? It's cold, you know."

"You told me you really went after Will Jensen."

She nodded. "It wasn't just once either."

"But later, you realized that you needed to tone down your act, and you forgave him because you realized he was just doing his job, right? That in a way he was trying to protect you from yourself."

She looked at Joe suspiciously. "Yes."

"Did you ever tell him?"

Her eyes widened. She hesitated. Then: "No."

"I was just wondering about that," Joe said, "since his funeral is tomorrow."

"Pi, are you coming in or not?" It was Ray, finally speaking. "You're letting out all of the heat."

Pi shot him a withering look and closed the door.

"You think I should go to his funeral?"

"It's not my place to say that," Joe said.

"I'll give it some thought," she said.

JOE TOLD HER good night and got in his truck and thought of Mary's "Welcome to Jackson Hole" greeting, seeing it for the double meaning she likely intended.

As he swung onto the highway, he was struck by the realization that he had no idea where he was going to sleep that night. It was too late to ask anyone at the office who had the keys to the statehouse, since they'd no doubt gone home for the weekend. Regardless, he wasn't sure he would be allowed to stay there yet anyway, since it was a crime scene. Which meant he'd have to try to find a cheap motel to stay in.

And he still needed to talk to Marybeth.

9

AS JOE DROVE back toward Jackson, a Porsche Boxster convertible passed him like a shot, the blond-haired woman driver slicing in front of him to avoid an oncoming RV as Joe tapped his brakes to let her in. She shot a "Ta-ta!" type wave in appreciation and passed the next car in line. The Porsche had Teton County plates, so she was a local. A local maniac, Joe thought, watching her weave through traffic ahead. As the lights of town appeared, his stomach grumbled. He hadn't eaten all day.

JOE SAT ALONE in a raucous Mexican restaurant filled with tourists and locals out on Friday night. He blanched at the prices on the menu, knowing that the meal would exceed his state per diem. But because it was already late and he was starved, he didn't rise and leave. Instead, he ordered a Jim Beam and water from the helpful waiter who had introduced himself as "Adrian from Connecticut."

He smiled when he found himself contemplating bean burritos and rice.

"The vegetarian plate?" Adrian asked, swooping in from somewhere behind him.

Joe shook his head. "Nope. I'm a flesh-eater."

"Oh my," Adrian said, crumpling up his nose.

Joe ordered another drink during dinner while he cleaned his plate and jotted down details from the ALN call-out in his notebook.

As he finished and leaned back, full and feeling the effects of the bourbon on an empty stomach, Adrian arrived with another drink.

"I didn't order this," Joe said.

"Compliments of the Ennises," the waiter said with a flourish. "They're at the bar."

Joe leaned to the side so he could see between the tables. The bar was in an adjoining room, darker than the dining room, through a rounded, Spanish-style doorway. A couple sat on stools with their backs to the opening. As he looked at them, they swiveled around.

The man was short, compact, with a stern, wide-open face and short silver hair. He wore a jacket over well-tailored clothing. He looked like the kind of man who charged through a room, head bowed, shoulders hunched, expecting everyone to get the hell out of the way. The woman was ivory pale, with piercing dark eyes and full, dark-lipsticked lips. She was well dressed, in a thick turtleneck sweater with a black skirt, black hose, and black high-heeled shoes with straps over her ankles. Because she rested her feet on the bottom rail of the stool, he could see the pale orbs of her knees where the hose tightened against them in the darkness. Her thick hair was haloed from a neon beer sign. Joe raised the new drink and mouthed, "Thank you."

The man nodded back, businesslike. She smiled, slightly, and turned back to the bar. Then something happened that surprised Joe. She looked back over her shoulder at him, directly at him, full-on at him, and brushed aside a thick bolt of auburn hair, before turning away again. He felt a stirring inside.

"Who are they?" Joe asked Adrian from Connecticut the next time he came by.

Adrian made an exaggerated step back. "You don't know Don and Stella Ennis? My goodness."

"I'm new here."

"Then you need to meet them," Adrian said. "I don't even know where to begin."

AFTER PAYING THE tab, which exceeded his per diem by eight dollars and made him feel guilty, Joe went into the bar. Don and Stella Ennis were no longer on their stools. He checked the booths at the side of the room, wanting to thank them but reluctant to disturb their late dinner. He couldn't find them.

Joe asked the bartender, "Did the Ennises leave?"

The bartender, like Adrian, widened his eyes when he heard the name. "Are you the new game warden?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Ennis left you this." He pushed a fresh drink across the bar and handed Joe a business card. It read:

DON ENNIS

Developer, Beargrass Village

Joe flipped the card over and found a handwritten message.

"Welcome to town," it said. "I worked with Will. I'll be in touch."

Joe took a sip of the drink, then pocketed the card and went outside. The night air, crisp and sharp, washed over him as he walked to his truck. He couldn't stop thinking about what had just happened. Had she really been looking at him that way? Had he really been looking back?

Yes, he thought, on both counts.

He needed to call Marybeth, but wanted his head to clear first. And he couldn't bring himself to call her while the image of Stella still lingered so clearly in his mind.

BEFORE FINDING A motel, Joe used a street map ripped from a telephone book to locate Will Jensen's home. It was on one of the old, narrow tree-lined streets near the base of Snow King Mountain, in a neighborhood created forty years before Jackson became the resort it was. Joe remembered the house vaguely from his single visit, and he parked his pickup on the street and looked at it in its dark stillness. Will's truck was still in the driveway. A massive old cottonwood, leaves already turned and crisp, obscured half the roof. The windows were black squares, dead like the eyes of the head mounts in the office building.

Joe reluctantly climbed out of his truck and crossed the street. He tried to open Will's truck door but found it locked. He peered inside, could see nothing in the darkness. The only light was a faint blue vapor light on the corner and the hard stars and scythe of the moon. The keys for the truck, he assumed, would be somewhere in the office building, or with the sheriff, and he would get them tomorrow. Joe walked up the cracked cement walk, crunching dead leaves that were curled together like fists. Three red strips of crime-scene tape sealed the door to the jamb. A letter from the Teton County sheriff was taped inside the screen door, warning visitors that the house was sealed pending the investigation.

What would it be like to live in a house where the previous occupant had shot himself in the head? Joe shivered and tried to shake off the thought.

HE FOUND A cheap motel that honored state rates and checked in. The bedspread was green and thin, there was a single thin plastic cup and a bar of soap on the sink, and the television was locked to a stand and mounted to the wall so no one could take it. The tiny desk was just big enough to hold his briefcase.

Sitting on the bed, he put the spiral notebooks in front of him. He would start with #1 tonight, maybe get through #2. Tomorrow, he would begin the search for #11, Will's last notebook.

But first he needed to call home. He looked at his watch. It was 11.30, an hour past when they usually went to bed. He debated whether to possibly wake her, simply to tell her he had made it. Then he pictured Marybeth up and awake, maybe reading, upset he hadn't called, possibly worried that something had happened.

He picked up the telephone. The line was dead. The receptionist, a sleepy woman with bloodshot eyes, must have forgotten to turn on his phone when he checked in. Should he rouse her? He decided not to. He pulled out his cellphone from his day-pack, then punched the speed dial button. Marybeth answered in four rings.

"Joe?" He could tell she wasn't happy. She sounded tired, and there was an icy edge to her voice. "You were supposed to call when you got there."

"I didn't get a chance," he said. His speech was slurred, as much from exhaustion as the bourbon. "I was too busy getting reamed by the assistant director and then I got called out."

"It's nearly midnight."

"I know," he said lamely.

"Why didn't you call this afternoon, then?"

"I told you. I hit the ground running over here."

"I just fell asleep. What are you doing up?"

"I just got in."

His cellphone chirped. It was about to run out of battery power, and he needed to recharge it, he told her.

"You sound like you've been drinking, Joe. And why are you calling me on your cellphone?"

"I tried to call from my motel, but the phone wouldn't work."

"Where are you staying?"

Joe looked up. What was the name of it? Jesus ... One of those old western television series names.

"You don't *know*?"

"The Rifleman," he said finally, feeling stupid.

"Okay ..." There was an edge of suspicion in her voice, and Joe didn't like it.

"Marybeth, I couldn't call earlier, all right? I'm sorry. There's a lot going on here and I got wrapped up in it. I'll call tomorrow and we can catch up, okay?"

"I'm wide awake now, Joe," her voice hostile.

His cellphone blinked off. He cursed and stared at it as if that would make it come back on. The charger was in his truck, and he started to get up, but stopped at the door. He wasn't exactly sure where he'd put it, and looking for it would take a while. He was tired, and resentful of her again. What was she accusing him of? Didn't she know he had a job to do? Why was it necessary to pile on the guilt? He got lonely, just like she did. All he wanted was for her to say she loved him, she missed him, and that everything was going to be fine.

He sighed. He'd call tomorrow, when he had some time, when he'd gathered his thoughts. Maybe before the funeral.

He picked up notebook #1 and began to read. Soon, the writing began to swim off the page.

JOE AWOKE TO the sound of gunshots. He sat up quickly, disoriented for a moment. He glanced around, remembering where he was, surprised that he was still dressed and the bedside lamp was on. The opened notebook was on his lap.

No, it wasn't a gun. It was something on the other side of the motel room wall. Joe stood, rubbing his eyes. He looked at his watch: 4.45 A.M. He heard rustling in the next room, then another bang. The sound was coming through his closet. He opened

the closet door, where he'd hung his uniform shirt and jacket on hangers that couldn't be removed from the rod.

He sighed, knowing now what had happened. Someone in the next room was packing up their clothing from the closet. Because the hangers couldn't be taken off the rod, as each piece was removed the rod swung back and banged into the wall.

Cheap motels, Joe thought. State-rate motels. Marybeth probably imagined him in someplace much finer. Maybe he should call her now and tell her how great it was.

He shook his head, ashamed at his thoughts, while he gathered up the notebooks and papers on the bed and stowed them neatly in his briefcase. He brushed his teeth, folded his clothes, turned off the light, and crawled into bed.

That's when something about Will's office hit him. Will Jensen was a meticulous man, from what Joe knew about him. His notes were precise, detailed, well reasoned. His office was spare and utilitarian, without a single frill or anything personal in it. Will was known for his even temper, his calmness. He was probably like Joe, who even when flustered or bad-tempered couldn't just forget about something and move on until everything was neat and in order. It didn't fit that Will, contemplating his own suicide, would rise from his desk in his office with papers scattered and a half-drunk can of Mountain Dew on his desk, his computer still on, and go home and end it all. Wouldn't Will have at least cleaned up a little, knowing what he was going to do?

10

ON FRIDAY MORNING, ex-Twelve Sleep County Sheriff O.R. "Bud" Barnum was seated at his usual place in the Stockman's Bar when he saw the stranger. The tall man stepped inside, let the door wheeze shut behind him, and stood there without moving, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness inside. It was eleven in the morning. Barnum didn't know the man, which in itself meant something. Barnum knew everybody.

Rarely did someone simply happen by Saddlestring, Barnum knew. The town was too out-of-the-way. It wasn't conveniently en route to anywhere. The ex-sheriff had studied strangers coming into his town for over thirty years. He could usually size them up quickly. They tended to fall into categories: outdoorsmen, roughnecks, tourists, ranch hands looking for work, junior sales representatives stuck with a bad, far-flung territory. This man wasn't any of those. Something about him, the way he moved and the fact that he seemed supremely comfortable in his own skin, Barnum thought, was menacing.

The tall man was in his late fifties or early sixties, with a shock of gray hair and a chiseled face. He was slim with broad shoulders, and Barnum noted how the stranger's dark brown leather coat stretched across his back as he found a stool and sat down. The man had a flat belly, which to Barnum was a physical characteristic he mistrusted. Cop, Barnum thought, or military. He had that ramrod-straight, no-nonsense air about him. Barnum wondered if the tall man felt the same thing about *him* sitting there. Barnum

knew *he* looked like a cop, and always had. His mother once told him he looked like a cop when he was born. She said that even as a baby he had those suspicious, penetrating eyes, and the jowly, hangdog face that seemed to say, in cynical resignation, “*Now what?*”

Barnum had been reading the *Saddlestring Roundup* and drinking coffee. He hated both the local newspaper and the bitter coffee, but this is what he did now that he was retired. It was part of his routine. He still began each morning at the Burg-O-Pardner, as he had when he was sheriff, drinking coffee, catching up on local news and gossip, and eating rolls with the other local “morning men.” The morning men at the Burg-O-Pardner were the men who owned most of Saddlestring and much of the county. Most were retired now as well, but still had local business interests. Guy Allen owned the Burg-O-Pardner and had the majority share of the Stockman’s. Just that morning, Guy had been talking about the weather in Arizona, how pleasant it was. He’d be leaving soon, going to his home there, as winter moved into Wyoming. So would half of the other morning men. Barnum, who still lived full-time in Saddlestring and probably always would, got quiet during discussions of Arizona weather. Any chance he’d had of buying a winter place somewhere warm had disappeared when a bad land investment the previous year had taken his pension, and the ensuing scandal had cost him his job and his reputation. All that was left of his career was a solid gold Parker pen his deputies had chipped in for. The pen was inscribed: TO SHERIFF BARNUM FOR 28 YEARS OF SVC. “SVC” meant “service,” McLanahan had explained, but the inscriber ran out of room on the pen.

He was acutely aware of how differently the morning conversations flowed since he was no longer sheriff. The men used to listen to him, to defer, to stop talking when he spoke. They would nod their heads sympathetically when he complained. Now he could see them glancing at one another while he spoke, waiting for him to finish. Sometimes, the mayor would cut him off and launch into a new topic. He was just another retired old bastard, taking up their time. The kind of old fart Barnum used to glare at until the interloper would pick up his coffee cup and go away.

When the morning men broke up around 9.30, Barnum walked down the main street and set up shop here, in the Stockman’s, where he would remain most of the day and some of the night. If people needed to talk to him, they knew where he would be. If someone came into the place before he got there and took his seat, which was the farthest stool at the corner of the bar where the counter wrapped toward the wall, the bartender would shoo the customer away when Barnum walked in. *That’s Sheriff Barnum’s office*, the bartender would say.

Barnum didn’t stare at the tall man who had come into the bar. Instead, he shot occasional glances at him over the top of the half-glasses he needed to wear to read the paper. The tall man ordered coffee, and as he sipped it he looked around the place, taking in the ancient knotty pine and mirrored back bar, the mounted big-game heads that stared blankly down at him, the black-and-white rodeo photos that covered the wall behind him. The Stockman’s was a long, narrow chute of a room with the

bar taking up over half of it and some booths and a pool table at the back near the restrooms. A jukebox played Johnny Cash's "Don't Take Your Gun to Town."

As the bartender refilled the stranger's mug, the man asked him something in a muted voice. Barnum couldn't hear the exchange over the song on the jukebox. Then the tall man stood and nodded at Barnum. Barnum nodded back.

"Cute little town you've got here," the tall man said, making his way toward the bathroom.

"It doesn't look like a place that can eat you up and spit you out, does it?" Barnum asked.

The tall man hesitated a step, looked curiously at Barnum, then continued.

As the restroom door shut, Barnum slid off his stool, walked the length of the bar, and stepped outside. The cold sunshine blinded him momentarily, and he raised his arm to block out the sun. The tall man's late-model SUV was parked diagonally in front of the bar. Barnum circled it quickly, noting the Virginia plates, the mud on the panels probably from back roads, the fact that the back seat was folded down to accommodate duffel bags, hard-sided equipment boxes, and a stainless steel rifle case as long as the SUV floor. He walked back into the bar and assumed his seat.

Barnum raised a finger to the bartender, a half-blind former rodeo team coach named Buck Timberman. Buck had been a big-time bullrider but had retired after a bull stepped on his head and crushed it, resulting in brain damage. He still wore his national finals belt buckles, though, rotating them so he wore a different one each day of the week. Barnum liked Timberman because Buck was staunchly loyal, even stupidly loyal, and he still referred to Barnum as "Sheriff."

"Changeover time," Barnum said, thrusting his coffee cup forward.

"It's only eleven-thirty," Timberman said, looking at his wristwatch. "You've got a half hour before noon."

"So it's one-thirty Eastern," Barnum growled, "which means we've wasted an hour and a half of drinking time."

Timberman frowned while he drew a beer and poured a shot. "Why Eastern time?"

"Our new friend here is used to Eastern," Barnum said. "didn't you notice how he said 'here'? He said '*here*' like JFK. He's from Boston or someplace, but he's got Virginia plates and a lot of outdoor gear in his rig. Judging by the dirt on that car, I'm guessing he didn't fly and rent, he drove out all the way."

"I ain't seen him in here before," Timberman said, taking the coffee cup and replacing it with the draft and the shot.

"Nope," Barnum said. "He was asking you something a minute ago. What was it?"

Timberman looked over Barnum's shoulder to make sure the tall man wasn't coming back yet. "He's got an interest in falconry. He asked me if I knew of anybody around here who might have birds available. He also asked me if we have a range where he can sight in his hunting rifle. And he wanted to know where the bathroom is."

WHEN THE TALL man returned he found a shot of bourbon and a glass of beer next to his coffee cup. He looked toward Timberman, who pointed to the ex-sheriff.

"Cheers," Barnum said, raising his shot glass and sipping the top off.

"Thanks are in order," the man said to Barnum, tentatively raising his whiskey, "but it's pretty early in the day."

Barnum said, "It's never too early to treat a visitor to some cowboy hospitality."

The tall man sipped half of his shot, winced, and chased it with a long pull from the beer, never taking his piercing brown eyes off Barnum.

"Who says I'm visiting?" the tall man asked.

Barnum tipped his head toward Timberman. "Buck here said you were asking about falcons."

"So much for the famed confidentiality of the bartending profession," the tall man said evenly. In his peripheral vision, Barnum could see Timberman suddenly look down at his shoes and shuffle away.

"I asked him," Barnum said. "What he told me will be treated with confidence."

The tall man's eyes narrowed. "And who are you, exactly?"

"I used to be the sheriff here," Barnum said.

"To a lot of us," Timberman interjected, "he'll always be our sheriff."

Barnum humbly nodded his thanks to Timberman.

The tall man seemed to be thinking things over, Barnum observed, trying to decide if he was going to say more or take his leave.

"I might be able to help you out," Barnum said.

The tall man turned to Timberman, and the bartender said, "You ought to ask the sheriff."

While the tall man pondered, Barnum closed his newspaper, folded it, and put his reading glasses and gold pen in his shirt pocket.

"Let me ask you this," Barnum said. "Are you looking for a falcon, or are you looking for a particular falconer?"

The tall man's face revealed nothing. "I don't believe we've actually met."

"Bud Barnum. You?"

"Randan Bello."

"Welcome to Saddlestring, Mr. Bello."

Bello picked up his shot and beer, walked down the length of the bar and sat down on a stool next to Barnum. Timberman watched, then went to the far end of the bar to wash glasses that were already clean.

"I'm looking for a falconer," Bello said, speaking low and looking at his reflection in the back bar mirror and not directly at Barnum.

"I know of a guy," Barnum said to Bello's face in the mirror. "He's got a place by himself on the river. Carries a .454 Casull. Is that him?"

Bello sipped his beer. "Could be."

Barnum described Nate Romanowski, and let a half-smile form on his mouth. "If he's the one, he's been a thorn in my side since he showed up in my county. Romanowski and a game warden named Joe Pickett. I've got no use for either one of them."

Bello turned on his stool and Barnum felt the man's eyes bore into the side of his head.

"So you can help me," Bello said.

At the end of the bar, Timberman made a loud fuss over cleaning some ashtrays.

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do," Barnum said, surprised that his bitterness betrayed him.

"I see."

Barnum said, "I understand you're looking for a place to sight in. There's a nice range west of town with bench rests. I could make a call."

"Let me buy the next round," Bello said.

11

IN JACKSON, THE funeral service for Will Jensen was being held in a log chapel built to look much older and more rustic than it actually was. Joe sat in the next to last row wearing the same jacket and tie he had worn for the wedding of Bud Longbrake and Missy Vankueren. His clothes were wrinkled from his suitcase. He had arrived a half hour early, to observe the mourners as they arrived, after calling home to find no one was there. There was a dull pain behind his eyes from the bourbon the night before and a practically sleepless night. It was cold in the chapel, and he welcomed the throaty rumble of a furnace from behind a closed door near the altar, indicating that someone had turned up the thermostat.

A brass urn sat squarely on a stand atop a red tapestry in front of the podium. *Damn*, Joe thought, *there wasn't much left of Will, just his ashes in the urn and a framed photo of him in his red game warden uniform.* In the photo, Will was saddling one of his horses and turning to the photographer with a loopy smile on his face. Who knew what was so funny at the time? Joe wondered. On the other side of the urn was a framed photo of the Jensen family—Will, Susan, his two sons wearing ill-fitting jackets and ties. The photo looked to be a few years old to Joe because the boys appeared to be the same age they had been when he saw them in the Jensen house for the first and only time. In the photo, the family looked stiff but happy. All those ties made Will, and the boys, uncomfortable, he guessed.

JOE HAD SPENT the morning in the office, reading through the first three spiral notebooks and halfway through the fourth. Patterns were emerging. During the deep winter, in January when the notebooks all began, Will spent a good deal of time in the office, writing up reports on often-controversial policy issues that he was required to comment on, and visiting with local ranchers, outfitters, and the Feds. Spring was consumed with more reports and comments, but also preparations for the summer and fall, working with his horses, repairing tack and equipment, signing off on outfitter camp locations, and making recommendations for season lengths and harvests. During the summer months, he was out in the field nearly every day, checking licenses of

fishermen on the rivers and lakes, doing trend counts of deer, elk, and moose, or horse-packing into the backcountry to check his remote cabin and repair winter damage. Fall, as Joe suspected, was a whirlwind of activity once the hunting seasons started and opener after opener arrived. The pattern in the fall was the lack of a pattern, and at first Joe thought Will was flying by the seat of his pants, dashing from place to place. Will patrolled the front country and backcountry seemingly at random, covering his district in a way that seemed haphazard. One day he would be in the south-eastern quadrant in his pickup, the next he would be on horseback in the north-western corner—where he might be gone for days. But then Joe saw the logic in it, and admired the way Will worked.

The only way a single game warden could be effective in nearly nineteen hundred miles of rough country was to be as unpredictable as possible, to keep his movements erratic. If he patrolled in a systematic way, sweeping from north to south or methodically along the river bottoms, the poachers and violators could anticipate his location and change their plans to avoid him. But by moving from here to there, front country to backcountry, changing his itinerary and location, they would never know when and where he might show up. Joe had no doubt the hunters and fishers—and especially the professional outfitters—shared information about Will's whereabouts. If they didn't know when he'd be patrolling the outfitter camps, and from what direction, they'd have to be ready for him at all times, meaning proper licenses, good camp maintenance, and adherence to rules and regulations.

Joe had experienced the "familiarity" of hunters and fishers before, and had learned to be friendly but closed-mouthed about his intentions. Over a beer at the Stockman's Bar or with his family at a restaurant or function in Saddlestring, someone occasionally sidled up to him in all apparent innocence and asked him about his day—where he'd been, if he'd seen game, where he might be going tomorrow. Although the questions were often just conversation, sometimes they were more than that.

He'd learned not to say anything.

JOE TURNED IN his pew when he heard the door open behind him and a murmur of voices. Susan Jensen arrived at the chapel with her two boys and three older people, two women and a man. The older man, no doubt their grandfather, ushered the two young boys ahead of him and down the aisle. Will's boys were small versions of their father, Joe thought. Stolid, serious, all-boy. The younger one took a swipe at the older one when the older boy crowded him, and the embarrassed grandfather leaned forward to gently chastise him.

Susan looked to be much older than Joe remembered; her face was pinched, pale, and drawn. She had short-cropped brown hair, blue eyes, and was well dressed in a professional-looking suit. Joe stood, and she looked up and saw him. A series of emotions passed over her face in that instant: recognition, gratitude, then something else. *Revulsion*, Joe thought.

"I'm real sorry, Susan," he said, moving down the aisle toward her.

"Thank you for coming, Joe," she said. Her eyes were blank, but her mouth twitched. Joe guessed she was cried out. "It's good of you to come."

He didn't want to admit he was there to take over Will's district. He wanted her to think he was in Jackson on his own accord.

"Are other game wardens here?" she asked, looking quickly around the empty chapel.

"The assistant director will be coming," Joe said, wishing it was the director, or someone other than Randy Pope.

"Okay," she said vacantly. He could tell she was disappointed, but resigned to it. There was a lot going on in her mind, he thought. If Will had been killed as the result of an accident or at the hands of another while on duty, the chapel would have been filled with red shirts. But that was not the case.

"Are you coming to the reception later?" she asked.

He hadn't thought about it. "Yes," he answered.

"Good." Then: "Is your wife here? Marybeth?"

"She couldn't make it," he said. "School, too many things going on."

"I know how that goes," Susan said, her eyes already wandering from Joe. "The single-parent household."

Joe tried not to cringe.

"Maybe I'll see you at the reception," she said, extending her hand. He took it. It was icy cold.

JOE HAD JUST sat back down, still reeling from the look of distaste that had passed over Susan Jensen's face, when the back door banged open and a rough man's voice said, "Damnit."

Joe turned to see a man closing the door with exaggerated gentleness. Then the man wheeled and entered the chapel, blinking at its darkness.

The man was big, barrel-chested, thick-legged, a wedge shape from his broad shoulders in a sheepskin coat to the points of his lace-up high-heeled cowboy boots. He wore a stained and battered gray felt hat, which he immediately removed to reveal a steel-gray shock of uncombed hair. His bronze eyes burned under wild toothbrush eyebrows, and he squinted into the room like a man who squints a lot, looking for distant movement on mountainsides and saddle slopes. He was a man of the outdoors, judging by his leathery face and hands and thick clothing.

"Didn't mean to throw the door open like that," he mumbled to no one in particular.

And Joe stood to say hello to Smoke Van Horn.

Smoke pumped Joe's hand once, hard, and let go.

"You're the new guy, huh?" Smoke said, too loudly for the occasion, Joe thought. He could sense Susan Jensen and her boys turning to see what the commotion was about.

"Yes, sir," Joe replied softly, attempting to provide an example to Smoke to lower his voice.

"Hope we get along," Smoke said, just as loudly as before. "Me and Will had some issues. But he learned to get along with me. For a while, at least." Smoke barked a laugh at that.

In the notebooks he had read that morning, Smoke Van Horn's name had come up several times. Smoke had been accused of salting by another outfitter as well as by a National Park ranger. Salting involved hiding salt blocks to draw elk to where his paying clients could kill them. Will had written that he'd asked Smoke about salting, and although Smoke hadn't really denied it, he hadn't admitted it either.

"Dared me to locate the salt station," Will had written in his notebook. "Couldn't find it. Suspect it's somewhere on Clear Creek."

"I'll be seeing you around, I'm sure," Joe said softly.

"No shit." Smoke laughed again. "You'll be sick of me, I'd guess. I have strong opinions."

But let's not hear them now, *Joe thought*.

Smoke looked to the front of the chapel, saw the urn and the photos.

"For Christ's sake," Smoke said, "they put him in a *jar*."

"It's an urn," Joe said, glancing toward Will's boys, who were now watching Smoke and no doubt hearing him. "And Smoke, please keep your voice down."

Smoke eyed Joe intently, narrowing his eyes. "Already telling me what to do?" Smoke said menacingly, but at least his voice was lower.

"Will's family is up front."

Smoke began to speak. Then, in an action Joe guessed was unusual, the outfitter didn't say anything for a moment. He leaned forward, and Joe could smell horses on his coat.

"Will was too damned tough and determined to kill himself like that," Smoke said to Joe, his voice low. "I spent many an hour with him in the backcountry. We rarely agreed on anything, but I suspect he thought I was right more than he would let on. But he wasn't, you know, troubled. Except for the last few months, when the son of a bitch wanted to ruin me."

Joe leaned closer to the outfitter. He asked quietly, "You don't think he killed himself?"

"No fucking way," Smoke said, his voice loud again. "Sorry, boys," he said toward the front of the chapel.

"I'd like to talk with you later," Joe said. More people were starting to arrive, and Smoke was oblivious to them. He was blocking the aisle.

"That's why I come," Smoke told Joe. "When a man sets out to ruin me, I take a real personal interest in him. So I had to make sure he really was dead. I didn't expect to see him in a jar. Or an urn, or whatever the hell it is."

"Later," Joe said firmly, finding his seat.

Smoke Van Horn ambled down the aisle, somehow exuding a presence that was bigger than his huge physical self. Joe guessed that when Smoke picked an aisle, the rest of it would remain empty as the mourners arrived to find seats.

He guessed correctly.

JOE KNEW VERY few of the mourners, and most looked like locals. The majority sought out Susan and her boys, and either hugged her, waved sadly to her, or, in some cases, simply stood and shook their heads, commiserating.

Randy Pope chose Joe's aisle, but sat three seats away. That was fine with Joe.

Pi Stevenson came in with Birdy. She had combed her hair and looked almost businesslike in a casual suit. When she saw Joe she smiled at him, and he nodded back.

He looked over his shoulder to see the Teton County sheriff and two deputies, who sat in the last row, behind Joe. They wore their uniforms, hats on their laps. Even though the service had started, Joe twisted in his seat and shook their hands, introducing himself. Joe assumed they had been the investigating officers at the Jensen home, since the sheriff, not the town police, had placed the notice on the door there. The sheriff, named Tassell, according to his badge, did not greet Joe warmly. Tassell was handsome, in a distant, preppy kind of way, Joe thought. He had longish hair and a gunfighter's mustache that drooped over both corners of his mouth. He was young and fit, his shirt and trousers crisp. He probably looked very good in campaign posters. He was the antithesis of Sheriff Barnum in Twelve Sleep County the way Jackson was the antithesis of Saddlestring.

"Can I talk with you after the service?" Joe whispered.

Tassell stared at Joe for several beats, then said, "Sure, if you have to."

Joe turned back around. Because he seemed to be the opposite of either Barnum or the brand-new Sheriff McLanahan, Joe had assumed Tassell would be more approachable. A phrase he'd overheard Sheridan tell Lucy floated through his mind—"When you assume you make an ass out of 'u' and me." He smiled wryly.

The reverend took his place behind the altar and said, "We will sorely miss Will Jensen ..."

JOE HADN'T SEEN Stella Ennis come into the chapel, but when he glanced over during the service she was there. She had slipped in alone and now sat two rows ahead of Joe on the opposite side of the aisle. When he leaned forward, he could see her more clearly.

She was younger than he had thought the night before. She was also more beautiful, and he studied her profile—a strong jaw, pert nose, thick lips painted a darker color than last night, smooth, firm cheeks, slightly almond-shaped eyes under thick auburn bangs. She looked straight ahead, at the altar. As Joe watched, her shoulders began to tremble. She bowed her head forward so that her hair obscured her face. She stayed like that for several moments, and when she looked over at him, her eyes were glistening with tears.

Their eyes locked for a moment Joe could only describe as electric. In her eyes he thought he saw sadness, confusion, and, strangely, pity. Then, as if she realized she was transmitting her feelings, she looked away from him quickly, breaking it off.

Why, Joe wondered, was Stella Ennis at the funeral? And why was she crying?

12

DO YOU NOTICE the same thing I notice about the food here?" Pi Stevenson asked Joe at the reception, which was held in a small meeting room at a chain hotel near the funeral home.

He hadn't realized she was behind him in line. "What?" Joe said.

"No meat," she said, raising her eyebrows with a sense of triumph.

Joe looked at the table and then at his small paper plate. Crackers, cheese cubes, celery, carrots, dip.

"I hadn't noticed."

"These are the things I pick up on," she said. "There's cheese, though. So this isn't a vegan spread."

Joe *hmmmm*'d, and took a small paper cup filled with red punch. He sipped it, disliked it, and looked for a place to put it aside.

"I heard a rumor that before Will killed himself, he gorged on meat," Pi whispered to Joe. "That's probably why they don't have it here. Did you hear that rumor?"

"No."

"That's what I heard," she said again.

"I heard it too," Birdy said, eavesdropping.

Joe had no idea how to respond, or if he even wanted to. Pi and Birdy seemed to be drawing some kind of connection between what Will ate and what he later did.

At the far end of the room, Susan Jensen was surrounded by well-wishers. Joe waited for the crowd to part in order to have a word with her. Her boys were with their grand-parents, trying to stand in one place and behave properly. But they were boys, and they were fidgeting.

Joe noted that Smoke hadn't come to the reception, and neither had Stella Ennis. Sheriff Tassell was there, however, with his deputies, who were loading up their plates for the third time.

When he looked back, Birdy was offering him a business card: WILDWATER PHOTOGRAPHY. His full name was Trenton "Birdy" Richards.

"I help him out at the shop," Pi said, pointing at the card.

"I appreciate how you treated us yesterday," Birdy said. "It was, like, civil. So if you're ever on the river, like, if your family is with you or something, and you want a nice shot of you in the whitewater, just let me know. I'll give you, like, a deal."

Joe pocketed the card. "You stand on the bank and take pictures of rafters?"

Birdy snorted. "I used to do that, like, when I first got started. Not anymore. I've got a full-auto setup now. Photocells on the rafts signal the camera, and I just download the digital images every afternoon. The pictures are ready when the rafters get off the water."

"Interesting," Joe said, making conversation.

"Pretty slick, is what it is," Birdy said, pleased with himself.

"Excuse me," Joe said, seeing the sheriff and taking leave of Pi and Birdy.

*

SHERIFF TASSELL LOOKED up as Joe approached, but continued to eat a cracker with a cheese cube. His animus was palpable. Joe assumed that Tassell was being territorial, like every county sheriff Joe had ever met, but he forged ahead anyway.

"I'd like to be able to get into the Game and Fish house later today if I could," Joe said. He pointedly did not say *Will Jensen's house*. "I couldn't find any keys at the office. I assume you're done inside."

Tassell didn't look directly at Joe, but continued to chew. "I don't know what you might hope to find in there that we haven't already looked at."

"I'm not sure you understand," Joe said, his voice patient. "That's where I'm expected to stay while I'm here. The department doesn't have the budget to put me up in a hotel while their house sits empty."

Hotel rooms in Jackson were by far the most expensive in the state, Joe knew. He was keenly aware that he had already overspent his per diem and the overage would need to come out of the family budget, stretched as it was.

Tassell met Joe's eyes for a moment, then looked away again. "I figured you were checking up on us."

Well, Joe thought, that too.

"I'll visit with my team and make sure they're through," Tassell said with no enthusiasm. "I need to run it by the ME also. I think he got the place all cleaned up, but I'm not sure about that. A .44 Magnum going through soft tissue makes a hell of a mess on the ceiling and walls."

Joe said quietly, "I'll bet it does."

"I think his personal effects have been pretty much cleaned out and given to the wife," Tassell looked toward Susan Jensen. "Just a bunch of boxes. Clothes and stuff like that."

Joe wondered if he should ask to see them at some point.

"Do you know if there were any spiral notebooks in there?" Joe asked.

Tassell shrugged. "I don't remember any, but I didn't personally pack up everything or really look it over myself."

Yes, Joe would need to look inside the boxes. "Do you have his truck keys at your office? His truck's locked up."

"I believe we do," Tassell said woodenly.

"Can I—"

Tassell cut Joe off with a hard glare. "Look, I'm busy this afternoon. I can't just drop everything and cater to you. I've got a diversity training workshop scheduled for my officers that I've got to be at, and we need to meet with the Secret Service to set up the security for the vice president, who's coming in two weeks. I'll get to this stuff when I get to it."

Joe stepped close to Tassell, looked right at him. "Sheriff, we seem to have started off on the wrong foot, and I'm not sure why. But I'd rather work with you than against you. All I'm asking for is keys to the statehouse and truck."

Tassell didn't step back. "Bud Barnum was a legend among sheriffs in this state. He was old school, and I can't really call him a friend, but sheriffs tend to stick together."

Now Joe understood. "What happened with Barnum was his own doing," Joe said. "He can blame everyone else, but Barnum did himself in."

"That's not his version."

"I'm not surprised," Joe said.

"In his version, he doesn't blame everyone else. He blames *you*."

Barnum had cut a wide swath across northern Wyoming, *Joe thought*.

"I can't help that," Joe said.

"He says you get into the middle of things you should leave alone. That you press too damned hard into areas where things are best left to the professionals."

"Do you think that's why I'm here?" Joe asked.

"Aren't you?" Tassell asked back.

"I'm here to fill in during hunting season, and then I'm sure I'll be sent back home. I'm curious about Will, I admit that. It doesn't make sense to me that things were so bad that he took his own life."

That seemed to mollify Tassell slightly. He said, "Will may not have been all you seem to think he was, Joe."

Joe cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"Will started losing it over the past six months or so. Even before the wife took the kids and moved out on him. He was becoming a public embarrassment, and we don't like embarrassments here in Jackson."

"What do you mean?" Joe felt a coldness growing inside.

"He was arrested twice for driving drunk. That was after a half dozen warnings. He spent a night in my jail when he was so blitzed he couldn't even get out of his own truck. He was arrested again just a couple of weeks ago for threatening one of our local business leaders."

"Will?" Joe asked, incredulous.

"Will. I arrested him myself out at the ski resort, where he was having the argument. Bet you didn't know *that*?"

"No," Joe said, "I didn't know that." He doubted that Trey did either, or he would have told Joe.

"Will just kept getting worse. I could see it coming." Tassell gestured toward the room. "And so could anybody who knew him. He was in a death spiral and it was only a matter of time."

"The ME concluded that Will's death was suicide," Tassell said. "There's no doubt about it at all, if that's what you were thinking. He got drunk, ate dinner, and shot himself at his table. Simple as that. There was a photo of his family on the table, which was probably the last thing he looked at. His fingerprints were the only prints on the gun."

"Is it true that all he ate was meat that night?"

Tassell looked at Joe quizzically. "Where did you hear *that*?"

"Just a rumor."

"Yeah, it's true. He cooked himself up quite a bunch of meat that night. All of the frying pans were dirty, and there was meat still on his plate when he died. It smelled pretty good in there, actually. But so what?"

"I'm not sure," Joe said.

"It's not that unusual, is it?" Tassell asked. "Hell, I do it myself. I ask the wife about once a month for what we call 'the Meat Bucket' dinner. Steak, pork, elk sausages. Maybe a piece of bread. She doesn't like it—she's a health-freak type—but she cooks it up."

"There wasn't an autopsy?"

Tassell shook his head. "No need. The cause of death was clear-cut. We don't do autopsies in Teton County when the cause of death is obvious. We have to watch our budget too."

Of course—so you can afford diversity training workshops, Joe thought but didn't say. He wondered how many murders there had been on Sheriff Tassell's watch. Joe couldn't recall hearing of any recently in Teton County.

As if reading Joe's mind, Tassell went on, "We lose a couple of people a year here, but not because of crime. A tourist or two may drown in the whitewater, or a skier might crash into a tree, or a ski bum will overdose on a slick new designer drug. But just because we don't have major crime doesn't mean we're not trained to handle it. This is a tight little community, and there are important people here with lots of money and influence. They don't like things happening that take place in bad country and western songs, you know? Those things should be left to the rest of the state. And they don't like bad news, either, because this is their special playground."

Joe watched Tassell carefully. What exactly was he getting at?

"This place is special," Tassell said. "We've got the highest per capita income than any county in the U.S., because of all the millionaires and billionaires. There are people here who don't think they need to play by the rules. And you know what," the sheriff said, arching his eyebrows, "they *don't*. They don't like a sloppy suicide happening in their town. Neither do I."

"I'm confused," Joe said.

Tassell looked away. "What's done is done. I don't want it dredged up again."

"You think I'm going to do that?"

"Maybe. That's what Barnum said you'd do."

Joe paused before responding. Tassell was obviously warning him off, but was it because there was something to hide or simply because a further inquiry would look bad and attract unwanted attention? Joe guessed the latter.

"Don't worry," Joe said. "It doesn't seem like you've got anything to fear from me."

"Let's hope not," Tassell said with finality. "Let's hope not."

Then he excused himself, saying, "I want another hit of that cheese."

"About those keys," Joe said.

"Come by the office around five," Tassell said. "We should be done with our workshop by then."

*

JOE WATCHED AS Randy Pope gave Susan Jensen a long hug. Joe thought Pope held the clench three beats too long, moving it into the category of inappropriate behavior. Susan didn't appear to be hugging back.

Finally, Pope said something sincere to her and took his leave. As he passed Joe, Pope looked up.

"On behalf of the department, right?" Joe said.

"Don't you have work to do?" Pope snapped, his face flushing pink.

SUSAN JENSEN WORKED her way through a group of well-wishers and walked purposefully up to Joe and said, "May I have a few minutes, please?"

"Of course," he said, following her through the room and into the hallway.

"I need a drink," she told him, as if apologizing.

Joe didn't need one, but didn't say so. The lounge was at the end of the hall, and Susan looked inside before going in.

"All clear," she said. She took a seat on a stool at the empty bar and ordered a glass of white wine. Joe liked her, and had from their first meeting. She was ebullient, smart, and a little caustic. Like Marybeth, Susan Jensen was a go-getter.

"Just tonic for me," Joe said to the bartender, who was young, fit, and sunburned—the Jackson look.

"You're not drinking, that's good," Susan said.

"Not today, anyway."

She waited for the explanation.

"I had a couple of extras last night," he said.

"Will used to be reasonable like that," she said. "He'd have a few drinks and then he'd go for weeks without one. It wouldn't even occur to him. But then he changed."

"Susan, I'm sorry," Joe said.

"Everybody is," she said, sipping, an edge creeping into her voice. "Everybody in that room is very sorry. We never had so many friends in Jackson who thought so well of us."

Joe didn't know how to respond.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have said that. It's catty. A few people have shown the boys and me real kindness. Some anonymous person even paid for the costs of cremation, which helped us out a lot. Will's life insurance policy won't pay because of what happened. I have a new job, but still, I've got to think about the boys, how I'm going to pay for them to go to college."

Joe hadn't thought of the fact that suicide was exempted in most life insurance policies. He felt a stab of anger, wondered how Will could have been so selfish.

"Joe, when you leave a man you want him to regret it. You want him to sit and stew and feel lousy for driving you away. Then maybe, you want him to get his act

together and come crawling back on his knees. You don't want him to kill himself and leave you with *that*."

"I understand."

"I hope you do," she said. "If Marybeth ever leaves you, go crawling back to her like a whipped puppy. don't internalize it, and brood about it, and think there's no way out."

He nodded. He wasn't sure why she was giving him this advice. She drained her glass, ordered another.

"I need fortification to go back into that room," she said.

He had so many questions for her. "Where will you go?"

"The kids and I live in Casper," she said. "We moved there four months ago. I've got a job at the newspaper, and we live with my parents. I started selling ads, and recently moved up to marketing director. It's a hard job, but I'm very good at it. We're making more income now than we ever did."

Joe thought of the parallels with his own family, Marybeth's new business, the obvious conclusion that it would likely prosper if either Joe took a different job or the family moved out of Saddlestring. He asked, "How are the boys handling the move, and now this?"

"Terribly," she said, matter-of-factly. "Will was a god to them. You can guess what it's like. You have girls, right?"

"Yes."

"Imagine if you had boys. If every day they watched you strap on your gun after breakfast and put on your hat and go out into the mountains to catch bad guys and protect the herds." She said "protect the herds" in a well-practiced way, and Joe guessed it had been some kind of joke between Susan and Will. "They worshipped him," she said. "They still do. They didn't see him like I did those last terrible months, when I'd come visit from Casper and we'd try to reconcile. Something definitely changed with him. A couple of times he would roar around the house, stumbling and cursing me. He never used to do that. His mood swings got absolutely crazy and unpredictable. He'd be manic one day and sullen the next. I didn't know him anymore, and he scared me. If the boys saw or heard him like that, I don't know what they'd think of him now."

Joe winced as she talked. He had thought about saying that it might not be all that different with his girls, but he refrained. He didn't want to have that kind of discussion.

"Susan, what happened to him?"

She shrugged. "That's the big question, isn't it?" Her eyebrows arched. "He said a few times that the pressure was building, that he was being squeezed alive. But that wasn't unusual. Things have always been like that here, you'll see. Will had a gift for dealing with it, though. At least he did at one time. He just went into his cave."

"His cave?"

She took a long drink. "That's what we used to call it. It was a mental cave he could sit in and depressurize after a bad day. He'd sit and stare at the television, or out the window. Sometimes he took the dog for a walk, or messed with his horses. It

didn't matter what he did, because even though he was there, he really wasn't there, you know?"

"I do," he said. "When I feel like that, Marybeth and the girls say I've gone into 'Joe Zone'."

She smiled sympathetically. "He used to come back from backcountry patrols feeling pretty good, though," she said. "He said they cleared his mind and gave him his good perspective back."

Joe understood that.

"I took the job in Casper to give Will the option of getting out of this pressure cooker. I thought he'd follow me to be with the boys. I even found a couple of opportunities for him there, but he never took them. He stayed here and things got worse."

Joe shook his head, trying to think what he would do in the same situation, if Marybeth said she'd had it with his absences and threatened to move away. He'd follow her, wouldn't he? When he realized he was missing some of what she said, he apologized and asked her to repeat it.

Susan said, "I said he didn't give a lot of thought to the fact that while he was away for nights on end sleeping under the stars or whatever he did, he was completely out of contact with the outside world. He liked that, I guess. But he had a family here in town who never heard from him. I worried so much about him out there, Joe, that I would cry myself to sleep. Then I'd hate him. But I always got over it when he came back. When I saw you at the funeral, that was what I thought of."

"But things changed with Will?"

"Did they ever," she said, tapping the rim of her glass to signal the bartender for a refill. "Especially after we left. It was like his cave door closed shut and locked him out. He couldn't find any relief, so the pressure just kept building. Of course, he never said anything to me or asked for help. Not Will." Susan didn't even try to keep the anger out of her voice.

"What caused the biggest problems?"

"Are you asking me because you want to know about Will, or because you want to know what you're going to be dealing with here? Joe, I know you're here to replace him. I'm still in the loop."

He flushed, sorry he hadn't said it earlier. "Both, I guess."

She thought that over for a moment. "Will thought—and he was right—that it seemed like things were coming at him from all sides. The animal liberation people were after him. I was surprised to see that Pi woman here, considering that she literally put a contract out on him on her website. Then there was Smoke Van Horn and his bunch, the old-timers. They rode Will hard, tried to get him fired a few times. Smoke always showed up at the public hearings and ripped Will as well as the state and the Feds. Smoke was hard on Will, and I hate him for that. Oh," Susan said, smiling bitterly, "then there's the developers. They come from other places and they want to do here what they did wherever they made their millions. It drove them crazy that

somebody like Will, who made less money than what their cars probably cost, could stall their projects by writing an opinion that would affect their plans.”

Joe interrupted. “Are you talking about Don Ennis?” he asked, thinking about the business card in his pocket.

Susan’s face tightened. “Don Ennis. Do you know him?”

“I sort of met him last night. He sent over a drink.”

“Don and Stella Ennis,” Susan said, more to herself than to Joe, as if recalling something unpleasant.

Joe recalled Tassell’s comments about breaking up an argument at the ski resort. He would need to follow up with Tassell to see if the other party was Don Ennis.

Susan’s eyes burned into Joe, and her voice dropped as if someone might overhear her. “Joe, all I can tell you is to watch out for that man. He gets what he wants, and he doesn’t care who gets hurt.”

Joe blinked at her sudden intensity.

“As for Stella,” she said, “she’s playing a game that only she understands. She might be the most dangerous of them all.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Susan sat back, drained her glass. “I’m not sure what I mean. I just got this vibration from her. A dark kind of feeling. I think she’s a predator. And Will,” she said, drinking again although her glass was empty, “Will thought I was wrong about her. He thought I was jealous. And you know what? I probably was.”

Joe felt that he needed to defend Stella. Did Susan see her crying during the funeral? Were those tears of a predator? But he didn’t want to go there with Susan, not now. He changed the subject.

He asked, “What was he working on most recently?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that,” she said. “The boys and I had been gone for months. Even when we were together, he didn’t talk about the specifics of his projects much. He tried to leave all of that at his office, or in his truck, or wherever. The only way I knew about the big things—like ALN, Smoke, or Ennis’s Beargrass Village—was because sometimes he’d mention them in passing or I’d hear about it from someone or read about it in the newspaper.”

“Susan, where did he keep his files? His notebooks?” He realized he sounded like he was grilling her. “Sorry for my tone.”

“It’s okay,” she said, patting his hand. “I’m not sure about the files. I think at the office. He brought his notebook into the house some nights—he was always scribbling in those notebooks—but he never left papers or files around the house.”

“Do you mind if I look through the boxes of what he left?”

“Feel free, Joe. I’m not sure what I’m going to do with them anyway. They probably belong to the state.”

Suddenly, Susan turned her wrist and looked at her watch. If her glass hadn’t been empty, Joe noticed, she would have spilled wine on her lap. “I need to get back to the boys and the, um, mourners.”

"Thank you for your time, Susan. I really appreciate it."

Again, she patted his hand.

She slid down from the stool, a little shakily. Joe steadied her by holding her forearm until she was standing. She put the glass down and smoothed her skirt. She started to say goodbye and then stopped. "Joe, with all of your questions I nearly forgot why I needed to talk to you in the first place."

She said, "A year ago, just as Will was starting to lose his bearings and six months before I left him, he took me out to dinner. It was a fairly nice evening, even though we couldn't afford it. Everything here just costs so much. Anyway, out of the blue, he said that when he died he wanted his remains scattered in a specific place. When I look back on that now, I think he knew something was going to happen."

She had her legs back and was walking out of the lounge, Joe following.

"Two Ocean Pass, that's the place," she said. "It's somewhere up in the wilderness area, where he patrolled. He described it pretty thoroughly, for Will."

She stopped in the hallway and turned to face Joe. He could hear the fog of conversation coming from the reception room, where no doubt mourners were waiting for the widow.

"He said a creek comes down from the mountains. I think he called it Two Ocean Creek. Anyway, the stream flows south through a big meadow and splits at a lone spruce tree. It's exactly on the Continental Divide. One part of the stream flows to the Atlantic and the other to the Pacific. He said it was the most beautiful meadow he had ever seen. He wants his ashes scattered there, by the tree."

Joe now grasped what she was asking.

"I'll never get up there," she said. "I don't even want to try. But it's in your new district, and you can probably find it."

"I'll do it," Joe said. "I'm honored." He knew vaguely of the location from the map on the office wall. "Do you want me to do anything else?"

She shook her head. "That's more than enough, Joe. I'll give you my number in Casper, if you don't mind calling me when it's done."

THE URN LOOKED like an extra large beer stein. Joe carried it to his pickup, thinking how light it was, wondering guiltily what the ashes looked like (brown, gray, or white?). On the street, a jacked-up Grand Am filled with teenagers slowed, and a window rolled down and an unformed simian face jutted out, asking, "Dude, where's the party?"

13

AT 4.45 P.M., Joe entered the office of the Teton County Sheriff's department and told the receptionist he was there to meet with Sheriff Tassell. The receptionist said the sheriff was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. Behind her he could see a

hallway with several closed doors, and he could hear the hum of voices from behind one of them.

Joe was annoyed. "When will he be free?"

"He didn't say."

"Did he leave me a message? Or a set of keys?"

"And you are ... ?" she asked archly.

He told her.

"No, there's nothing for you here."

Joe considered waiting, and looked around the small reception area. There were two chairs, and one of them was filled with a sinewy man wearing khakis, a polo shirt, a jacket, and light hiking boots. Not local, Joe thought, but buttoned-up and urban, attempting to appear casual and outdoorsy. The man looked straight back at Joe, as if daring him to take the seat next to him.

"Are you waiting for the sheriff too?" Joe asked.

"Could be," the man said. There was something coiled up about him, Joe thought. Then he noticed the earpiece, and the thin wire that curled from it into the man's collar.

"Are you Secret Service?" Joe asked, remembering Tassell's other meeting about the vice president's visit.

"Could be," the man said again. "I think the sheriff will be in there awhile."

Joe was being dismissed. He glanced at the receptionist, who was suddenly busy reading a magazine and wouldn't look back.

"When you see the sheriff," Joe told the receptionist, "please ask him to call me." He wrote down his cellphone number on a business card and handed it to her. "Tell him if he doesn't call me, I'll need to bother him at home later."

She took Joe's card without comment.

The Secret Service agent watched him coolly, but turned away as if to say, "You're dismissed."

HE DROVE OUT of town to the north and parked in a pullout overlooking the river. The urn with Will Jensen's ashes sat on the passenger seat where Maxine should have been, the seat belt securing it. The urn gave him a feeling of macabre unease.

The Tetons, backlit from the setting sun, were black saw-teeth against the purpling sky. On the Snake River, through the gold aspen, Joe could see a blue rubber raft floating down filled with tourists bundled up in life vests. The guide who manned the oars pointed upriver for his guests, and Joe followed his gesture. A large bald eagle's nest, the size of a small car, it seemed, occupied an old-growth cottonwood treetop. With his binoculars, Joe could see two fledgling eagles in the nest. The mother duckwalked around the rim of the nest, looking down at her young ones. He could see their hooked beaks opening and closing, pink inside their mouths.

Which made Joe think of Nate's falcons. Which made him think of Saddlestring. Which made him think that he better call home. He plucked his phone from the cradle and hit the speed dial.

After five rings, Lucy answered.

"May I speak with your mom?" he asked, after Lucy had told him a long story about the substitute teacher she had that day, a man who said he really wanted to be friends with the kids in her class and asked them to call him "Mr. kenny."

"She's not here," Lucy said.

"Well," Joe asked, after a beat, "where is she?"

"She had to take Sheridan to the hospital."

He suddenly sat up. "What?"

"Somebody poked her in the eye during volleyball practice."

So that's where she was when he called earlier—at Sheridan's practice. Jeez. "How badly is she hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Lucy," Joe said, trying to speak softly, "tell me what happened."

Joe could hear the television in the background. Lucy watched a string of cartoons every night before dinner, and he recognized the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants.

"I'm not sure," Lucy said, distracted. "Sherry called Mom a while ago and said she needed to come pick her up from practice."

"So it was Sheridan who called, not a coach or a doctor?" Joe felt mild relief, assuming Sheridan couldn't have been too badly injured if she had used the telephone.

"I think it was Sheridan."

"Lucy."

"Mom just told me they'd be back for dinner. That's all I know."

Joe shook his head. There was no reason to be angry with Lucy, or to admonish her. It had probably been a frantic call, and Marybeth had likely rushed out of the house. He would try her cellphone.

"Okay, sweetie," Joe said. "Tell your mother I'll call back soon."

"Dad," Lucy said, "I miss you."

Lucy liked to twist the knife, Joe thought.

"I miss you too. I love you."

"Love you ..."

Joe speed-dialed Marybeth's cellphone, but was switched to her voice mail. In her haste, he assumed, Marybeth hadn't turned it on, or was out of range. There were several dead spots between their house and Saddlestring along Bighorn Road. He left a message, sat back, replaced his phone, and stared with frustration at the river. When he looked back at the phone he noticed that the LED display on his cell read: you have 1 message. Joe checked it; it was from Sheriff Tassell.

"The meeting's running late," he said wearily, "and then I've got a dinner. Meet me at the statehouse at ten tonight. I'll bring the keys."

Joe sighed.

The tourist boat passed in and out of view, obscured by trees and brush. The occupants of the boat were on vacation, Joe thought. They got to see an eagle's nest,

and they'd go to a nice dinner after their trip and retire to their hotel rooms. Real life was suspended for them.

He looked at the Tetons, at the raft, at the urn, and thought, *They aren't the only ones.*

AS JOE DROVE toward town he rounded a blind corner and hit the brakes. The Boxster that had passed him the night before was stopped, blocking the right-hand lane, twin spools of black rubber on the road where the car had braked and swerved. Instinctively, he reached out with his right hand to keep a dog or a child—neither of whom was there—from flying forward into the dash and windshield. His front bumper stopped inches from the back of the Boxster.

He swung out of the cab and walked around the Porsche with his flashlight, but he didn't need it. The headlights of the car illuminated the scene. It was ugly. A large doe mule deer lay in the road, blood pooling around her head. The Boxster's hood was buckled, the windshield a spider's web of cracks from the impact. A woman sat in the ditch, cradling a fawn in her arms. The fawn was small, spindly, its back covered with spots. Not more than six weeks old, Joe thought. It made him angry.

"Are you okay?" Joe asked, not really caring. He tried to keep his voice level.

The woman looked up. Her eyes reflected in the headlights. She had broad cheekbones and a drawn, skeletal quality to her face.

"I'm fine, but that poor deer and her fawn ran right out in front of me," the woman said. "I tried to stop but I couldn't."

Joe shone his flashlight on the crumpled hood of the car. "That's a lot of damage," Joe said. "How fast were you going?"

"I don't know," she said. "The speed limit, I think."

"No way," Joe said, looking at the damage, remembering how she tore around him the night before.

"Is the mother dead?" the woman asked.

Joe knelt down. There was shallow breathing from the doe, and her eyes stared into his. But he could tell from the unevenness of her fur over her rib cage that her ribs had been crushed. The blood that poured out of her mouth and nose was bright red and foamy, meaning her lungs were pierced by bone or cartilage.

"She's not dead yet," Joe said.

"Is she suffering?" the woman asked.

Joe looked up, squinted. "What do *you* think?"

The woman said nothing.

He heard an oncoming car slow in the other lane and pull over. A door opened and slammed. When he looked up, he could see the shapely silhouette of a woman in the headlights.

Joe stood and grasped the doe's front ankles below the joints and started to drag her off the road into the ditch. Her legs kicked involuntarily as he pulled, and she nearly kicked out of his hands. Stella Ennis, the other driver, appeared beside him and grasped the doe's rear feet. Joe looked over to see glistening tears in her eyes. But

her face was determined. They got the deer off the pavement and into the grass in the ditch. Then he drew his Beretta.

"Don't kill her!" the Boxster woman pleaded. "Please don't ..."

"Please turn away," Joe said softly. Stella turned, her hands to her face.

Joe shot the deer in the head. The shot cracked loud, and bounced back and forth against the wall of trees on either side of the road. The body gurgled, then sighed.

"My God," the woman with the fawn said. "That was horrible. What's wrong with you?"

Joe holstered his pistol and stepped back on the road. "Let me see the fawn."

"No!"

"Move your hands and let me see the fawn."

"Mr. Pickett ..." It was Stella. Her tone was cautionary.

Slowly, the woman released the fawn, her face a mask of horror. The fawn reacted as if suddenly shot through with electricity, and it scrambled and kicked free of the woman. It stood on thin, stilt-like legs, obviously not knowing what to do. Then it collapsed in a heap.

"What did you do to it?" the woman cried. "Did you scare it to death?"

Joe wasn't sure what had happened to the fawn until he got down on his knees and looked at it. The other side of the fawn's head was crushed in from the impact of the car. When he shone his flashlight on the woman he could see dark blood on her shirt where she had cradled it.

Joe dragged the fawn to its mother. It weighed practically nothing.

Then he turned on the woman. "There are deer all over this road. Every single night. You should know that."

"It wasn't my fault," the woman protested, starting to rise. "The deer jumped out in front of me."

"No," Joe said, a hard edge in his voice. "You were going too goddamned fast. In all my years, I've never hit a deer, much less two of them."

"I *said* it wasn't my fault." The woman was angry now. Joe flashed back to Pope's admonition about being respectful, putting on a good face for the department. Then he looked again at the dead deer.

"These animals aren't here just to make scenery pretty for you. They're real and you killed them," Joe said. "Lady, you're a guest here."

The woman buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, *my*," Stella Ennis said with admiration, and he saw the white of her teeth.

"Thank you for your help," Joe said to Stella, starting to reach out with his hand but catching himself because of the blood on it. Despite that, she reached for him and squeezed his fingers. There was blood on her hands also.

"Call me Stella," she said.

Something inside him went *ZING*.

MARYBETH PICKETT HAD just finished feeding the horses when she heard the telephone ringing from inside the house. It was already cool and dark, and she was running two hours late for dinner because of their trip to the hospital. She ran from the corral toward the house and entered through the back door.

"I hope it's Dad," Sheridan said from where she was doing homework at the kitchen table. Lucy had told them he called and would call back. The kitchen smelled of onion, tomato, and garlic. A frozen pizza was warming in the oven, something Marybeth regretted. They were eating too much of that kind of stuff with Joe gone, she thought.

The sight of Sheridan's bandaged eye jarred Marybeth, even though she had seen the square of gauze applied by the doctor just hours before. It was likely not serious, the doctor had said. It wouldn't have been anything at all except that an opposing player's fingernail had scratched her cornea. The injury had occurred during a skirmish for a ball, Sheridan had told them. Nobody called it, players went for it, Sheridan got to it, and somebody reached around her from behind and raked her across the eyes. Officially, it was considered an accident.

"I hope it's him too," Marybeth said to Sheridan, snatching the receiver from the wall.

Silence.

"Joe?"

She could hear labored breathing and something else—muffled conversation?—in the background.

"Joe, are you on your cell? Can you hear me?"

"I want to talk with him," Sheridan said from the table.

Marybeth covered the telephone with her hand and shook her head at Sheridan, indicating, *It's not him*.

Then she remembered the Caller ID unit that had just been installed, that she had forgotten to look at before answering. The number had a 720 area code, which was unfamiliar.

"Who is this?"

An intake of breath, as if the caller was gathering his thoughts to speak. But he didn't.

"I'm hanging up," Marybeth said, and she did. "*Damnit.*"

The caller's telephone number vanished from the screen. She retrieved it from the backup and wrote the number down on the first thing she could find, the margin of the front page of the *Saddlestring Roundup*.

"Who was that?" Sheridan asked.

"Wrong number."

"Then why did you write it down?"

Caught, Marybeth looked up. "In case he calls again."

"I heard you and Dad talking about someone calling us and not saying anything. Was that him?"

"I have no idea," Marybeth said, her voice more shrill than she would have chosen.

Sheridan glared at her mother. It didn't matter if one eye was obscured, the glare was the same. "You don't have to treat me like I'm an idiot, Mom. I'm thirteen. Do you realize how old that is?"

Marybeth braced for another argument. They were occurring with more frequency these days. "Sheridan," Marybeth said, already regretting her words, "do *you* realize how young that is?"

Sheridan slammed her pen down on her paper. "You treat me like I'm Lucy's age," she said. "I'm not. You forget how much I've gone through in my life."

"Oh, stop it."

"No," Sheridan said, her cheeks blooming red, "I won't stop it. If someone is calling our house and we might be in danger, I want to know about it. Don't keep me in the dark like a baby."

Marybeth took a breath, counted to three. "I don't know that to be a fact," she said. "We have no idea who is calling, or why. We don't know if it means anything at all."

Sheridan continued to glare. Lucy walked into the room, turning her head from her mother to her sister, as if watching a tennis volley.

"Was it so hard to tell me that?" Sheridan asked.

"Tell her what?" Lucy asked. "Was that Dad?"

Sheridan told Lucy, "Never mind."

"No," Marybeth said, "it wasn't your dad."

"When is he going to call?"

"I don't know," Marybeth said, an edge of frustration in her voice.

"He'll call," Sheridan said, picking up her pen and going back to her homework.

Don't be so smug, Marybeth thought, looking at her older daughter, for a moment resenting her and her absolute certainty, and just as quickly forgiving her.

Marybeth picked up the newspaper with the telephone number on it and headed for Joe's office. As she passed by the table, Marybeth mussed Sheridan's hair affectionately. Sheridan turned her head away sharply, as if her mother's touch offended her.

"Sheridan ..."

"I'm trying to do my homework here, okay?" Sheridan snapped.

Let it go, Marybeth told herself. *Let it go*.

She put the newspaper on the stack of unopened mail for Joe. She intended to read him the return addresses on the envelopes when he called, to see if any of the letters were important and should be forwarded to him in Jackson. And she wanted to ask him if the phone number was familiar. That is, if and when he called.

SHERIFF TASSELL WAS late arriving at the statehouse. Joe had spent the time having an unsatisfying conversation with Marybeth, his cell signal fading and coming back, hearing snippets of sentences and asking her to repeat them.

“So Sheridan’s okay?”

“Seems to be,” Marybeth said. “It’s her attitude that needs an adjustment ...”

There was more, but Joe didn’t get it.

“So Sheridan’s eye is fine?”

“Joe, I just told you ...” Lost it again.

He got out of his truck and walked down the sidewalk, pirouetting occasionally, trying to find a steady, strong signal.

“... another call where the caller didn’t say anything ...”

“What?”

“It was from area code seven-two-oh. Do you ...”

“Seven-two-oh?”

“... she asked me about it, wondering if it was anything we needed to be concerned about ...”

“Marybeth, stop,” Joe said, frustrated. “Wait until I get into the house. I can use the phone inside. I’ll call you from there and we can talk, okay?”

“... they miss you, Joe ...”

“Did you hear me?”

Suddenly the connection was good. “Hear what? Why are you snapping at me?”

“I’m not snapping,” Joe said, looking up at the streetlight. “My signal’s going in and out. I’m only hearing parts of what you say.”

“... maybe you should call back tomorrow so you can talk with the girls ...”

“I will. Now, Marybeth ...”

The signal vanished.

Joe sighed, punched off the call as Tassell’s Teton County Sheriff’s Jeep Cherokee cruised down the street and pulled in behind Joe’s truck.

“SORRY I’M LATE,” Tassell said, swinging out of the Cherokee. Before the interior lights shut off when the door closed, Joe saw a woman he assumed was Tassell’s wife in the passenger seat, and at least two children in the back seat.

“You wouldn’t believe how many social obligations there are here,” Tassell said over his shoulder to Joe as he walked up the path to the front door, spinning a set of keys around his index finger. “Seems like we’re obligated most nights.”

Joe grunted.

Tassell said, “Tonight was the annual fund-raiser at the wildlife art museum. As sheriff, I have to go to these things. It’s noticed when I’m not there.”

“You could have left me the keys at your office.”

Tassell stopped at the front door, fumbling in the dark with the keys and the lock. “I wanted to check this place out first.”

“Why?”

Tassell turned, but Joe couldn't see his face in the dark.

“I want to make sure they cleaned up.”

Joe hoped so too, but didn't say anything. He heard the zip of the key going in, and Tassell pushed open the door, the tape seals breaking open with a kissing sound. Tassell searched for a light switch, then both the porch light and the interior lights went on. Joe blinked and followed him in.

“It's clean enough, I think,” Tassell said, surveying the room.

Joe stepped around Tassell. The home was no bigger than his own in Saddlestring. They stood in the dining room, with the kitchen appliances lining the wall near the door. The only nice thing, Joe noticed, was a fairly modern refrigerator with a water tap and icemaker on one of the doors. The table where Will shot himself was in the center of the room, with two chairs on either end of it. The cheap paneled walls were bare of adornments with the exception of a stopped clock. The ceiling was a dingy off-white and in need of paint. The overhead light threw out mottled light due to at least one burned-out bulb and the shadowed remains of dead miller moths gathered in the frosted glass fixture. The room smelled of strong disinfectant.

Tassell walked to the head of the table, turned, and gestured to the ceiling. “That's where the bullet went,” he said, pointing at a nickel-sized hole a few inches from where the paneling started. “I would have thought they'd plug that up, but I guess not.”

Joe looked at the ceiling. He could see dried arcing wipe marks reflecting in the light, where the blood had been washed off. The paneling on the east wall also looked freshly scrubbed.

“This room was a mess,” Tassell said. “A .44 Magnum does a lot of damage to flesh and bone. The damned gun kicked so hard it drove the front sight of the muzzle up into his palate.” He demonstrated by jabbing his finger up into his mouth, pointing behind his front teeth.

He handed Joe the key ring. “His pickup keys are on that too.”

“Thanks.”

“What can I say? It's a shitty house but I guess it's your new home,” Tassell said. “Well, I've got my kids in the car. I need to get them home.”

“I'll probably be calling you with a few questions in regard to Will's suicide.”

Tassell hesitated at the door. “That's not necessary.”

FOR THE NEXT hour, Joe moved in. He stripped the bed and threw his sleeping bag on top of the mattress and hung his clothes in the closet, which was empty except for a pair of battered Sorel Pac boots. Stacking Will's boxes along a bare wall in the living room, Joe thought the house had the same feel that Will's office did, as if he had no compulsion to make it his own. He guessed that when Susan left she took everything, and that Will was fine with that.

Where to put the urn? No place seemed appropriate. Joe walked through the house, holding it in front of him with both hands. If there was protocol for this sort of dilemma, he didn't know it, so he left it on the table for the time being.

Joe was pleased to find that the telephone had a dial tone and the television worked. He found an all-sports channel and left it on, mainly to provide background noise in the empty house. Between the girls, Marybeth, and Maxine, there was always noise in his house, and the complete silence was uncomfortable to him.

It was after midnight when Joe went out to Will's truck and unlocked it to look for the notebook. The cab was a rat's nest of equipment, maps, clothing, and paperwork. It looked like Joe's own truck. Unlike the house or his office, this was where Will had really lived and worked. It felt as though he had just stepped out and locked up for the night; there was a sense of unfinished business inside, just like Will's desk at the building. Will hadn't even sealed up a bag of sunflower seeds that sat open on the console. Joe searched the cab thoroughly, even shoving his hand between the seats, where he found a half-empty pint of vodka. But no notebook.

As he searched the truck, his mind kept returning to his earlier encounter with Stella Ennis. He could still feel the *ZING* that had shot through him when he'd grasped her hand, although it had now receded into a warm, lingering buzz. That particular thing, that electric shock, had happened to him only twice before in his life. The first time was in the eighth grade, when Jo Ellen Meese whispered to him what time she changed into her nightgown and that her bedroom window was unlocked. The second time was when he saw Marybeth, in the middle of a group of girls, hurrying to class on a snowy day at the University of Wyoming. Marybeth had looked back, their eyes locked, and he knew she was the one.

Both experiences had resulted in something profound; his first time and, he thought, his true love.

Now it had happened with a married woman with blood on her hands on the side of a two-lane highway.

BACK INSIDE THE house, Joe walked through all the rooms. In addition to the master bedroom, there was a small bedroom with a set of box springs and no mattress. Despite the work of the cleaners, he could see crayon marks on the floor. This was the boys' room, he guessed. Across the hallway was a bathroom with a shower/tub, a stained toilet, and an empty medicine cabinet. They hadn't even left a towel. The utility room was empty and looked like it had been empty for months. Susan must have taken the washer and dryer, Joe assumed, and Will never got them replaced. The floor of the utility room was covered with dust and mouse droppings.

The refrigerator was empty except for an open box of baking soda in the back and a single can of beer. Joe popped the top of the beer and took a long drink. It was sour, and he gagged and spit it into the sink. He filled a lone plastic drinking glass from the cupboard with water from the refrigerator tap and tried to wash the taste out of his mouth.

The only real proof that Will Jensen had lived and died in the house, other than the old pair of boots and the hole in the ceiling, was in the freezer. The cleaners must have forgotten about it, Joe thought.

The freezer was still filled with packages of meat.

AT 3.30 A.M., Joe suddenly awoke and wasn't sure where he was. His head spinning, he reached out for a lamp on his bedside table at home but, catching air, lost his balance, tumbled out of bed, taking his sleeping bag with him, and landed hard on the floor, crying, "*Jesus!*" The thump his knees made was loud, like a muffled shot, and it reverberated through the empty house, causing what he at first thought was the sound of a bird spooking and flushing somewhere in the dark.

He wasn't sure how long he remained motionless on the floor on his hands and knees, his head hanging, trying to focus his mind. Had he hit his head in the fall? he wondered. He didn't remember doing so. But he practically swooned as he sat back on the floor, dizziness returning. Slumping to the side, he slid out of the bag and lay on the floor, his bare skin on cold wood, his eyes open, until he finally started to get his bearings.

Joe stood up shakily, padded to the doorjamb and hit the light switch beside it. The bedroom flooded with harsh light. He stood there, naked, rubbing his eyes but not able to clear the cobwebs from his vision.

Still not entirely lucid, he looked around the room and remembered where he was. His sleeping bag was a tangle on the floor, his pillow on the mattress but puckered with sweat. Had he dreamed about flushing a bird? Where had *that* come from?

As he pulled on his Wranglers and a T-shirt, he recalled the sound. It had a rapid, thumping cadence, like a pheasant breaking wildly from the brush. Or, he thought, feeling the hair prick up on his arms, like the sound of someone running away.

Joe looked around, trying to recall where he had put his weapon before going to bed. He slipped his .40 Beretta out of its holster and tiptoed down the hallway. Methodically, he checked out each room, opening closet doors, peering around corners, but the house was empty, the doors bolted, the windows locked. His head was still feeling thick and fuzzy, as if a terrific bout of the flu was coming on.

Assured that he was alone, Joe sat in a chair at the table and put his Beretta on the tabletop. He rubbed his eyes and face, debating whether he should try to wake up fully or go back to sleep. He felt somewhere in the middle of both.

Maybe it was simple exhaustion, he thought. He hadn't slept well for almost a week. He was out of his home territory, out of his routine. He missed Marybeth and his daughters. He let his head flop back and found himself staring at the bullet hole in the ceiling.

"This is where Will sat," Joe said aloud, "right here in this chair."

He glanced involuntarily at the Beretta on the table, then at the urn, instantly recognizing the action for all of the cinematic melodrama it held. He stood and shook his head, trying to shake the fog away. Maybe it was that sour beer, or the heavy odor of disinfectant in the house that was making him feel so strange.

Joe unlocked the front door and stood barefoot on the porch. A light frost the color of the moon sparkled on the grass. He filled his lungs with needles of icy air and felt better. His head began to clear. He stood on the porch and breathed until he started to shiver from the cold, then went back inside. He was beginning to remove his clothing

and crawl back into the sleeping bag when he thought of something. Pulling on his boots and grabbing his flashlight from his day-pack and the Beretta from the table, Joe went through the utility room and unbolted the back door and stepped out into the tiny backyard. The umbrella-like canopy of cottonwoods closed off the sky. He snapped on his flashlight and panned it across the grass until the beam stopped at the cluster of footprints in the frost beneath his bedroom window and the indents made by boots, widely spaced, where the man he had startled by falling out of bed had run away.

PART THREE

You stare through the plastic at the red smear of meat in the supermarket. What's this it says there? *Mighty Good? Taste? Quality, Premium, and Government Inspected?* Soon enough, the blood is on your hands. It's inescapable.

Thomas McGuane,
An Outside Chance

We cannot pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has been sadly neglected ... if I were to live in a wilderness, I should become ... a fisher and hunter in earnest.

Henry David Thoreau,
Walden

16

THE TOWN OF Jackson was dark and still in the predawn of Sunday morning. Joe was groggy. He had been unable to sleep after being woken up and falling out of bed, and had spent the rest of the early morning hours going through Will's boxes, searching in vain for the missing notebook or anything else that would give him a better idea of what happened. He dressed, showered, and drove downtown, his thoughts sluggish and opaque. As his head cleared slightly, he realized he was hungry. He found a restaurant called the Sportsman's Café that would open at 5.30 A.M., according to the sign on the door, so for the next half hour he walked around the town square, his boots clumping on the frosted wooden sidewalks, his breath condensating in translucent white puffs. He studied the elk antler arches at the corners of the square, the antlers themselves turning white with age.

The stores facing the square were designer clothes shops, specialty outlets, art galleries, fly-fishing stores, The Million Dollar Cowboy Bar, which boasted saddles instead of bar stools, and restaurants that would explode his state per diem like a charge of C-4. He stopped briefly at Wildwater Photography, the business Birdy owned, and looked at the displays in the window. There were photos of happily screaming families bound up in life vests, smashing through rolls of whitewater, and another display of action shots of individual skiers. All of the subjects, Joe thought, looked like they were having the time of their lives.

He wished he were. He could not account for the slight residue of fog that still hung in his brain and hoped it was simply a combination of lack of sleep, hunger, and

simple disorientation. Somehow, though, it felt like more than that. He tried not to let it alarm him. There hadn't been enough time to adjust, and he couldn't wallow in his loneliness. A game warden was dead, and Trey had given him an assignment. But first what he really needed was a big breakfast.

HE ENTERED THE restaurant as soon as the proprietor unlocked the door and opened it. The man stood to the side to let Joe in and said, "Usual table, Will?"

"I'm not Will," Joe said.

The proprietor was short and thick with a bristly salt-and-pepper beard, a potato-shaped nose, and a toothpick in his mouth. He wore a stained apron over a Henley shirt and held a coffee mug. He looked dumbfounded.

"Of course you aren't," the man said after a long moment, his face flushing. "I don't know you at all."

"Joe Pickett. I'm the new guy."

"Ed," the man said, putting his coffee on an empty table so he could shake Joe's hand. "I own this place, at least for now."

Joe shook Ed's hand and chose a table by a steamed-over window near the batwing kitchen door. "I'm really hungry, Ed."

"Then you'll want the Sportsman's Special," he said. "Country fried steak with gravy, three eggs, hash browns, toast. How do you like your meat and eggs?"

"Medium rare and over-easy," Joe said. "And coffee."

"Of course."

Joe sat and unbuttoned his green Game and Fish jacket, sipped ice water and coffee, and listened as Ed cooked and filled the silence with the angry sound of sizzling food. A radio in the kitchen played scratchy country music. The Sportsman's Café seemed out of place among the art galleries and specialty shops Joe had looked into earlier. The inside was steamy and dark, with the wall nearest the restrooms covered with flyers for local horse sales and team penning events. A feed store calendar was tacked up behind the counter. The heads of elk, deer, antelope, and a pre-Endangered Species Act grizzly bear stared out from the walls. The menu, printed on a single laminated page, consisted of traditional American big breakfast fare—eggs, pancakes, waffles, patty sausages.

Joe looked up from the menu as Ed came by to refill his coffee. "You won't find any blintzes on it," the older man said, "or anything with sprouts. There's nothing on that menu with hollandaise or béarnaise sauce either. The only sauce I make is God's own sauce—gravy."

"Gotcha." Joe smiled in solidarity.

After Joe had downed a cup and a half of strong coffee, Ed brought out the platter. Joe ate with barely controlled aggression, and sat back only after swiping the plate clean with toast. There was nothing special about the food, except that it was perfect, Joe thought.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Ed said as he brought the coffeepot and the bill to the table. "Will Jensen used to be the first guy in the door about three days a week. I saw the cowboy hat and the jacket, and, well ..."

Joe smiled. "I understand."

Ed arched his eyebrows. "You even chose his table."

At first, that disturbed Joe. Then he thought about it, and it made sense. The table he'd chosen was nearest the kitchen, so he would know who was behind him and also be able to see who entered the restaurant. Through the window, he could note the license plates of the vehicles that arrived in the sliver of a parking lot, and would be able to check vehicles that were likely hunting rigs. That Joe had chosen the table without thinking about it seemed natural, as it probably had for Will. Still, though ...

"Will was a big fan of the Sportsman's Special," Ed said, beaming. "He even took his eggs and meat the same way."

"I'll be darned," Joe said, with a pang of disquietude.

"There will be quite a few hunters in here any minute," Ed said. "We're the only place open this early."

Joe looked at the bill. Breakfast cost more than it would have in Saddlestring, but it wasn't as expensive as he'd feared.

"You said something about owning this place for now," Joe asked. "What did you mean by that?"

Ed made change from a bulging pocket on his apron. "The lot is worth five times what the business is worth because I'm close to the square and I've been here a long time. I'm proud to say we've fed thousands of hunters and fishermen over the years—men who want big breakfasts. But the offers have been coming for the last ten years, the price is right. Some guy from Seattle wants to open up an Indonesian restaurant in Jackson, and he likes the location."

"Indonesian?" Joe asked. "Where's a guy going to get breakfast?"

Ed shrugged. "Don't know. Besides, this place doesn't fit anymore, and neither do I."

WHEN JOE STEPPED out of the Sportsman's Café, he saw Smoke Van Horn coming up the wooden sidewalk with three other men. It was obvious to Joe from the look of them—heavy winter coats, crisp jeans, massive high-tech boots, an odd assortment of headgear—that they were Smoke's hunting clients.

"It's the FNG!" Smoke boomed, forging ahead of his customers and extending his bear-like hand to Joe. "How're you doing this great morning?"

"Fine, Smoke."

One of Smoke's clients, a tall man with a thin mustache and a three-day growth of beard he must have started before he left home, asked, "FNG?"

Joe knew what was coming.

"Fucking new guy." Smoke laughed. "Meet my *compadres*, Joe. Everybody's from Georgia."

Smoke introduced the three men to Joe and they all took turns crushing his hand.

"Go on inside and grab a table," Smoke told them. "I'll be right behind you after I talk to the game warden. In fact, I brung you something."

Smoke dug into his coat and handed Joe a copy of the book he had written, *How the Pricks Deny Me a Living*.

"It's signed," Smoke said.

Joe flipped to the title page. Smoke had inscribed "Don't be a prick" in childish longhand, followed by his signature. Joe had to smile. Then he looked up at the hunters, asking, "Everybody's got licenses and wildlife stamps, right?"

The men looked guiltily at one another for an instant.

"Of course they do," Smoke said.

"Let's make sure," Joe said, keeping his tone light. He stood by until all of the hunters had dug into their wallets and showed Joe their licenses and stamps while Smoke glowered. Joe knew that the hunters would likely spend \$5,000 to \$6,000 each with Smoke, maybe more for the opportunity to get a trophy elk with the famous outfitter. There would be dozens of other clients arriving throughout the season.

"Thanks, gentlemen," Joe said. "The Sportsman's Special comes recommended."

After the three hunters had gone inside, Smoke turned to Joe. "What kind of outfit do you think I'm running?"

"From what I've heard, you run the most efficient hunting operation in terms of success ratio in this valley," Joe said.

"So why are you checking my clients' licenses like I'm some kind of peckerwood?"

Joe buttoned up his jacket against the cold, which had dropped the temperature a few degrees as dawn broke. "So they know I can," Joe said, "and so you know I will."

Smoke shook his head. "We're not going to have trouble working together, are we?"

"I hope not," Joe said. "But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that there are quite a few notes in Will Jensen's records about you. He thought you might be salting to bring in all of those big elk for your shooters."

Smoke's face darkened. He stepped close to Joe, towering over him.

"Will never proved a goddamned thing and you know it," he said, his voice low. "D'you think salting is what accounts for my success?"

"I didn't say that."

"Do you have any fucking idea what you're saying?" Smoke growled. "You just got here."

"Yup," Joe said, "but I didn't just fall off the cattle truck. We'll get along fine as long as you operate as clean and legal as you say you do." He glanced down, saw that Smoke's fists were balled.

"In that case, mister," Smoke said, "you've got nothing to worry about."

"That's good," Joe said, reaching out, waiting for Smoke to unclench his fist and shake his hand, which he did, although with more force than was necessary.

"I'll be seeing you around," Joe said pleasantly. "Thank you for the book."

"Read it, you'll learn something," Smoke said. "So when are you headed up?" meaning into the backcountry, where his camp was located.

"Don't know," Joe said. "I've got a lot of business to attend to here first."

I like that answer, Smoke seemed to say with his eyes. His face softened. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you get oriented to this country. Nobody, and I mean nobody, knows it better than I do. I've been over every inch of these mountains, and been in the middle of everything. I know where the bodies are buried, if you know what I mean."

Joe nodded, smiled.

"Don't be fooled by all the rich bastards who live here now," Smoke said. "This is still the wildest fucking place in the Lower Forty-eight."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," Joe said.

"For once, everybody's right."

"Have a good breakfast, Smoke," Joe said as he tipped his hat and walked away.

AT HIS PICKUP, Joe thought about what Smoke had asked him. They had just played out a bout of "*Where Will the Game Warden Be?*" Joe had been sincere regarding his plans. But now that Smoke had tipped his hand, questioning him about when he'd go into the backcountry, seeming pleased to hear it wouldn't be soon, Joe made up his mind to get himself into the mountains and the elk camps as quickly as he could.

BEFORE GOING TO the office, Joe stopped by his temporary home. He skirted through the bushes at the side of the house, found an old gate, and went into the backyard. The early morning sun had melted the frost, and even the grass, which he hoped would still be trampled, had recovered. There was no longer any hard evidence that someone had stood outside his window at three in the morning, or had run away.

He checked his watch. At home, the girls would be scrambling to finish their breakfast before church. He wondered if Marybeth had made them pancakes like he normally did on Sundays. He wished he were there with them.

JOE SPENT THE afternoon driving around his new district with a map on his lap, learning where the main roads were and noting landmarks. He received no calls. As it darkened, he returned to his house with a bag of hamburgers and a six-pack of beer. He called home and was transferred immediately to voice mail. He guessed that either Sheridan or Lucy was online, probably doing homework. He left a message that he was okay, and that he would call tomorrow.

17

MARY SEELS WAS settling into her reception desk with a cup of coffee when Joe arrived at the office building Monday morning.

"You got some messages over the weekend," she said, handing him five pink slips. He glanced through them. Don Ennis, Pete Illoway, Marybeth, Don Ennis, Don Ennis.

"Who is Pete Illoway?" Joe asked.

"You've not heard of him?"

"No."

"I've heard him referred to as the Guru of Good Meat," Mary said, her face revealing nothing. "He's some kind of eating consultant."

"Eating consultant?"

Mary sighed. "We've got pet psychologists. So an eating consultant shouldn't be that surprising."

"I guess not," Joe said. Then: "I didn't see you at the funeral."

Mary began to answer, then stopped and simply looked at him.

"I'm sorry ..." he said.

She waved him off. "I should have been there. I put in for the time off. I just couldn't make myself go."

Joe didn't understand. He felt she wanted to say more.

Before continuing, Mary looked around the room and up the stairs to make sure no one could overhear her. "I guess I want to remember Will the way he was, not what he turned into."

"Do you mean in the last six months? Susan told me about that."

Mary lowered her voice. "Will Jensen was such a *good* man. He was great to work for, and I thought a lot of him personally. But I really resented covering for him when he didn't show up, or when he missed meetings, or when he didn't respond to calls. It was like he became a different man in the end, one I didn't like." She looked around again and turned back to Joe. "I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have said that at all."

"It's okay."

"You remind me of Will, the way he was."

Joe flushed. "I take that as a compliment."

"It is a compliment."

"This is going to sound odd, but did Will ever mention any trouble he was having with people trespassing at his place?"

Mary said quizzically, "Why do you ask?"

Joe told her about waking up in the night and the foot-prints he found.

"In the last few months, Will said a lot of things, usually in grumbles," she said. "He said he was having trouble sleeping, and he showed up—when he showed up—looking like something the cat drug in. I remember him saying once that he couldn't sleep because somebody was thumping on the wall, but he thought it was teenagers or maybe somebody he arrested who wanted to harass him, you know?"

"Mary," Joe said, "you've obviously thought quite a bit about what happened. If you were to name what—or who—drove him over the edge, what would it be?"

Her eyes flashed. "I think I've said too much already."

"You've got a theory, though?"

She angrily shook her head, as if tossing the conversation aside, sat down at her desk, said, "I've got work to do here."

As Joe climbed the stairs, he looked down at Mary at her reception desk. She was furiously arranging her things in front of her.

You know something you're not telling me, *Joe thought*.

AT HIS DESK, Joe looked at his watch, then dialed home. Marybeth picked up on the second ring.

"At last," Joe said.

"Not really," she said, strain in her voice. "The school just called. The bus driver didn't show up for work, so I need to take the girls to school. Then I've got to get to Barrett's right after that to defend their books against some IRS auditor who showed up without any warning."

"This has been difficult," he said, wanting to tell her about the funeral, the urn, the strange feeling in his head that was finally dissipating, the man outside his window the night before. Wanting to hear about Sheridan's injured eye, the silent 720 call.

"Can't you call tonight? The girls would love to talk to you," she said.

"Okay. What about you?"

"Oh, Joe, of course I want to talk with you. That is, if you're sober and the line isn't cutting in and out."

He winced at that. "That was a little strong, don't you think?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. But the girls are waiting in the car and I've really got to go now," she said. "Call tonight."

"I will." He hung up, a dark mood forming.

PETE ILLOWAY WASN'T in when Joe returned the call. The message said:

"Hi, you've reached the desk of Pete Illoway of the Good Meat Foundation. I'm either on the other line or away from my desk, helping people connect with their natural environment for the good of all the species on the planet. Please leave a message ..."

"Sheesh," Joe said, and hung up.

DON ENNIS WAS in, and answered the phone with the brusqueness of a man who had important things to do quickly, Joe thought.

"I called you three times yesterday," Ennis said.

"I was out," Joe said, trying not to sound defensive.

"Jensen was out a lot too. You're not like he was, are you?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Never mind," Ennis said. "I'm sure by now you've run across Will Jensen's file on Beargrass Village, right?"

Joe turned and opened the file drawer, thumbing through the tabs. "I'm looking," he said.

Ennis sighed impatiently. "It's probably a thick one. When you find it you should read it over. I'm sure there are some errors of judgment you'll want to correct."

Joe saw *Beargrass* written in Will's cribbed hand on the tab of a folder. He withdrew it from the drawer and placed it on the desk blotter.

"Okay, Mr. Ennis," Joe said, "I found the file. Can you tell me what this is about?"

Another sigh. "I'm a developer, you know that because you've got my card from the other night, right?"

"Yes," Joe said. "Thank you for the—"

"A developer develops," Ennis said, cutting Joe off. "That's what I do, Mr. Pickett. I've invested millions of dollars of my own money and have millions more lined up to develop Beargrass Village here in Jackson Hole. It's a planned community unlike anything anyone out here has ever done or seen. The concept is brilliant. Forty percent of the home sites have already been committed, and we're ready to start building."

"Yes," Joe said, now understanding why Ennis had been so anxious to get in touch with him.

"Look, I believe in doing things on the up-and-up. I don't like games. I didn't become who I am by fucking around with people. Let me ask you something straight out, Mr. Pickett: Are you one of those people who is against any development?"

"No, I'm not," Joe answered truthfully.

"You're not one of those limp-wristed greenies who oppose anything new?"

"No."

"Okay, then. We can talk."

"You start," Joe said.

"The ground can't be broken until all of the permits are in place and all the state and federal bureaucrats sign off on it. Everybody has at this point, except for one."

"Let me guess," Joe said.

"That's right," Ennis said, his voice rising. "Will Jensen was *concerned* about bear and moose habitat. He was *concerned* that Beargrass Village would be built in the middle of a free-ranging wildlife corridor." Ennis said the word *concerned* with dripping sarcasm, Joe thought. "I tried to explain to him that this project was *about* wildlife, *about* animals, and if anything, it would enhance the habitat for the moose and the bears. I tried to *show* him, personally, but he stood me up for two meetings and when he finally did show up he was belligerent. He physically attacked me. I had to call the sheriff and have him arrested."

So you're the one, *Joe thought*.

"I'm sorry to hear that happened," he said. "No representative of our department should have done that."

Ennis paused, then: "Well, I guess I'm glad you're sorry. But it doesn't change the fact that I'm nearly a year behind in construction. Some of the delays were the fault of the Forest Service, but this last one was because of a single drunken, incompetent *game warden* who personally cost me a lot of money and inconvenienced more than a few very important people.

"This is a big deal," Ennis said bluntly, "do you understand that? I've gone to the top and I want this resolved yesterday."

The top meant the governor, Joe thought.

“The vice president of the United States will be in my house for a reception in two weeks. He’s considering building a house in Beargrass after he’s out of office. Do you want me to tell him he can’t because the local game warden won’t sign off on it?”

Oh, Joe thought, that *top*. “So what do you want from me?”

“I need to know how soon you can get out here,” Ennis said. “I’ll call my experts and have them assembled. They can answer any questions you’ve got, and show you how we plan to address the situation with the bears and the moose. We’ll show you our strategic plan to create the first planned Good Meat community in the country. I think you’ll leave here impressed as hell, and you’ll give the go-ahead to the project so we can get started. Finally.”

“Did you say ‘Good Meat community’?”

“That’s what I said.”

Joe recalled what Trey had told him about the practice, as well as Pi Stevenson’s condemnation of it.

“Well?” Ennis asked.

“Well, what?”

“How soon can you get out here for a tour?”

Joe did a quick calculation. His intention, as of that morning, had been to get into the backcountry to check on the outfitter camps as quickly as possible. He also wanted to visit the medical examiner who had been on the scene of Will Jensen’s suicide. Given the urgency of Don Ennis’s request, Joe also wanted to try to address it as soon as possible. Despite Ennis’s manner, it seemed to Joe that Ennis had a legitimate complaint.

“How about this afternoon?” Joe said.

“Hot damn,” Ennis cried, “finally somebody I can work with.”

Maybe, Joe thought.

18

TO MEET WITH Don Ennis and the principals of Beargrass Village, Joe used the map provided in a glossy four-color brochure entitled *The World’s First Sustainable Good Meat Community* he had found in the file. He drove his pickup on the highway toward Teton Pass, past the old-fashioned haystacks that existed purely for scenic effect in the land-trust meadows, past the gated communities with scores of million-dollar homes almost hidden in the timber that were referred to as “starter castles” by the locals. He thought about what he had read in the file that Will Jensen had assembled.

The concept of Beargrass Village had been launched with a complicated land swap between Ennis, his partners and the U.S. Forest Service: 7,500 acres of timberland across the border in Idaho for 7,500 acres in the county. The file contained schematics and land plats, letters of support from federal agencies including the Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The letters showed the tremendous political clout

Ennis had behind him. There were opinions written by staff people within his own office: biologists, fisheries experts, and the liaison for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Management Team. Joe read enough to know that the staff letters pointed out potential problems with Beargrass Village, but didn't propose outright opposition to the plan. Only the grizzly expert admitted grave concerns, but the letter was written in a kind of bureaucratic "cover your ass" language that would exempt the expert from blame no matter what happened in the end. In the margin of the bear report, Will had scribbled, *This is a big problem.*

What it boiled down to, Joe saw, was just as Ennis had said on the telephone: The final approval of the project from a wildlife management standpoint would depend on the opinion of the local game warden. Will, for whatever reasons, had withheld his final written opinion and impeded the process. Now it was up to Joe.

No wonder Will drank too much, Joe thought, smiling bitterly.

THE HEADQUARTERS FOR Beargrass Village was a dark, modern, low-slung building built of unpeeled logs and native stone. It was set into the side of a wooded rise so naturally that it would be possible for someone not aware of its existence to drive right past the building, which Joe almost did. Fortunately, he noticed a wink of sunlight off the windshield of a black Lexus SUV in a wood-shrouded parking lot, and turned his pickup toward it. Three other late-model SUVs were in the lot. He knew he had found the right place when he saw Don Ennis emerge through a sliding glass door and wave.

"Welcome to Beargrass," Ennis boomed. Joe waved back.

Carrying the file, Joe entered and heard the door slide shut behind him. Several men sat at an enormous table in the room. A PowerPoint projector was on a stand, fan humming. Easels were positioned in each corner of the room, as well as a huge diorama of the planned development.

"Funny thing is," Joe said, surveying the room and meeting the eyes of the men at the table, "there is no beargrass in Wyoming. There's beargrass in Montana, in the north-west corner. But I guess you like the name."

Ennis blinked uncomfortably, then glared at Joe.

"That's trivial," he said in a way intended to end the discussion.

"Probably is," Joe agreed.

The three men at the table all stood to shake Joe's hand and introduce themselves. Jim Johnson was the contractor, a bearish man with a full beard, a barrel chest, and callused hands. Shane Suhn was younger, stylish and fit, and said he was Don Ennis's chief of staff.

Joe asked, "Chief of staff?"

Suhn's face hardened and paled. "Personal secretary, then," he said.

"Pete Illoway," the third man said in a melodious tone. "Pleased to meet you."

"I've heard of you," Joe said, seeing that his comment made Illoway smile with the glow of recognition. Illoway had sunburned, chiseled movie-star features and longish blond hair that curled over the collar of his Patagonia fishing shirt. He exuded health,

contentment, and well-being, Joe thought. Illoway carried himself in a way that suggested he was used to being stared at and admired.

"So you know of the Good Meat Movement," Illoway said. "That's a good start."

"I know a little," Joe said, "not much."

"Have a seat, gentlemen," Ennis said, charging toward the table in the head-down way he charged toward everything. "Let's show Mr. Pickett our plan and have some lunch."

Shane Suhn dimmed the lights and handed the projector remote to Ennis. Ennis waited until Joe was seated, then stood directly behind him, pointed the remote at the projector, and triggered the first image. Ennis stood so close that Joe could smell his cologne and feel his body heat.

THE PRESENTATION TOOK twenty minutes and was dazzling in its professionalism, Joe thought. The logo for Beargrass Village, the stylized lettering set against stalks of tawny beargrass, appeared in the lower left corner of every slide and burned into his subconscious.

The concept was for 120 homes, each with ten to twenty private acres. The homes would be situated concentrically throughout the property, built with native materials within a restored landscape, much like the headquarters itself. There would be no telltale signs of construction, reseeding, commercial landscaping; it would look as if the homes emerged from the earth itself with no assistance from human beings. No home could be seen from another home. Beyond the private acres the land was common to all.

"The commons will be just as wild as it is now," Ennis said, forwarding through photos of bears, deer, moose, and grouse, "and available to all. Beargrass residents can hike on it, camp on it, hunt on it if they want to."

That got Joe's attention.

"Don't worry," Ennis said impatiently, as if he had been anticipating Joe's reaction, "everything will be by the book, in accordance with state law. Hunting licenses, all of that crap. But here's the kicker," he said, advancing the presentation quickly through drawings of barns, corrals, and a pasture so green it burned Joe's eyes.

"This is where the stock is born, raised, and eventually slaughtered. Each resident will contract for a number of animals—pigs, chickens, goats, sheep, cattle—to be cared for by the staff. The stock animals will receive the best of care and will be rotated on our pastures. They'll be raised holistically, organically, with no growth hormones, chemicals, or processed feed. If the residents want to get involved, they can. I suspect most of them will want to be a part of that."

On cue, Pete Illoway stood up and Ennis handed him the remote in a well-practiced way.

"Time for lunch," Illoway said.

The lights came up and a double door opened behind the screen. Joe could see a white-clad waiter and waitress, both Hispanic, push serving carts through the gloom. A platter filled with sizzling meats and colorful vegetables was placed in front of him.

Joe said, "Wow."

"Make sure to sample everything," Illoway said, sitting down to his own platter and rattling his silverware.

Joe cut off slices of each kind of meat. The beef was tougher than he expected, but it exploded with flavor. The pork burst with sharp juices. The chicken tasted slightly wild, with a tang of pine nuts.

"What do you think?" Illoway asked, knowing the answer.

"Everything is fantastic," Joe said.

"Have you ever had beef or chicken that tasted like that?"

"Beef, yes," Joe said, explaining that his family purchased beef in quarters or halves direct from Bill Stafford's ranch outside Saddlestring when they could afford to do so. "Chicken, no."

Illoway nodded. "Not many people have the experience you have with beef, so they're blown away by this. And very few contemporary Americans know what a chicken can taste like that's been raised naturally, with a free-range lifestyle with no hormones or chemicals introduced."

"Here we go with the lecture," Ennis sighed. Joe smiled at that.

Illoway cut another piece of beef and stabbed it with his fork, then pointed the fork toward Joe. "Modern Americans have almost totally lost touch with the natural world," he said. "They don't know where their food comes from. They think their meat comes from a Styrofoam package wrapped with plastic or from the kitchen of a restaurant. This has been one of the most fundamental and harmful shifts that has ever taken place in our culture. The connection between our food source and ourselves has been lost, and we're not the better for it."

"Think about it, Joe," Illoway continued. "For centuries, human beings have interacted with their source of food. We herded animals, cared for them, bred them to be stronger and better suited for the world. Or we hunted them in their own environment, and therefore had to learn about them and appreciate them. In turn, we learned from our animals that there is a circle of life, interconnectivity with nature and our environment. This was hard-wired into our souls, this synchronicity of coexistence. We depended on our animals to provide us with nourishment and health; they depended on us for shelter and protection."

"Enlightened people are becoming aware of how unethical, how *soulless*, our farms and ranches have become—if you can even call them farms and ranches." Illoway paused dramatically. "They're really just meat factories, where animals are packed together, force-fed and filled with growth hormones, then killed without ever living a natural life. Chickens have their beaks snipped off so they can't hurt each other. Cattle are crammed into stalls and fattened. Modern hog farms are worse than any concentration camp ever even conceived by man." To illustrate his point, Illoway advanced through a series of grotesque black-and-white photos of hogs festering with sores, beakless chickens, rivers of black blood coursing through troughs at a cattle slaughterhouse. At last, Joe thought, the photos ran out and the screen was filled with pure blue.

Illoway jabbed the piece of meat into his mouth and reached into a folder in front of him, producing the *World's First Sustainable Good Meat Community* brochure Joe had seen earlier. He slid it across the table. Joe nearly missed it, thinking how odd it was that Illoway was capable of eating after showing those pictures.

"This explains the philosophy of Beargrass Village in detail," Illoway said. "I really urge you to read it. I've also got two books and a website."

Joe put the brochure in his file.

"The idea here," Illoway said, "is to create an environment where families can regain their connection to the natural world, to the food they eat. They'll be able to participate in the birthing of the animals, the care of the animals, even the eventual slaughter of the animals. We'll have our own organic slaughterhouse on-site with viewing windows."

Joe winced.

"I know it sounds crazy," Ennis said, noting Joe's reaction, "but these people do this. I saw it in upstate New York a few years ago. Some friends of mine—wealthy Manhattanites who had gone the vegan route for a while until they were too lethargic to stand, then did all kinds of stupid diets and eating programs—took me to a farm in Connecticut. They called it a 'pure meat farm.' You know, all of the animals were raised in a pasture, eating natural stuff, even the goddamned chickens were running around. It was like something out of the eighteen eighties up there. And these friends of mine were just ecstatic. They named the cows they were going to have slaughtered, and got all emotional when they were killed and butchered, but they told me that for the first time in their lives they were connected to the real world. So I looked into it, and met Pete here, who started the whole idea. This was about the time of the first mad cow scare in the U.S. So I hired him as my consultant and brought him out here to help us plan the village."

"I do seminars in California and New York," Illoway said. "Hundreds of people pay eight hundred dollars each to come hear about Good Meat and come with me to visit our farms."

"And now you have a place for them to live," Joe said.

"Right!" Ennis cried. "We've created the first of its kind. now I want to *build* it. All that stands in my way is you, frankly. So I hope to hell you're friendly, and not like that goddamned Will Jensen."

Several moments passed. Joe felt the eyes of Illoway, Ennis, and Suhn on him, waiting for his reaction.

"I looked at Will's file," Joe said. "The problem he seemed to have with the development has to do with the fact that by fencing it off you would shut down the traditional migration routes of grizzlies and moose."

Ennis snorted. "That's ridiculous. I already told you that. We want bears and moose in our village."

"But what about the fences?" Joe asked. "It seems to me, looking at your map, that you'd force the wildlife to cross the highway to get to winter ground."

Don Ennis glared at Joe, his eyes bulging.

"The fence does two things," Illoway interjected in his reasonable way. "One, it obviously protects the privacy of the residents. Two, it assures us that our population of stock and wildlife remains pure from disease and poaching. You should care that the wildlife and stock here is as genetically pure as possible."

Joe said, "I'm well aware of the problem with brucellosis in the elk." It was a fact that most of the wild elk coming down from Yellowstone had the disease. Brucellosis was suspected of being passed from wildlife to domestic cattle and causing the cows to abort their fetuses. "But what you're talking about sounds to me like a game farm, and those are illegal in Wyoming."

"It's *not* a game farm," Illoway said, while Ennis moaned. "It's a Good Meat community."

"Let me study the file," Joe said, "and read all of the comments."

"Here we go again," Ennis hissed.

Joe wanted to reassure Ennis, but demurred. Like the name of Beargrass Village itself, there was a falseness to the whole concept, a structure being built on a poor foundation. He didn't *want* to think that. Joe admired many of Illoway's beliefs. He felt an urge to sign off on Beargrass and get it behind him. But he couldn't.

"Sometimes," Illoway intoned, "we need to look past inane regulations toward the greater philosophical good. We need to step outside petty rules and see things for what they really are."

"Yup." Joe nodded. "I'm willing to do that. And I've got to say that I agree with things that bring people closer to the real world. But we're also talking about homes being built in a natural wildlife migration route."

"Jesus Christ!" Ennis said, slamming the table with the flat of his hand. "I thought you said you weren't against development."

"I'm *not*," Joe said. "I just want to make sure I make a decision I can live with later. So I want to study the file, go over all the materials carefully, and maybe ask some questions."

Illoway seemed to relax slightly, but Ennis did not.

"How much money do you make?" Ennis asked bluntly.

"Not much," Joe said, feeling his cheeks burn.

"I didn't think so," he said. "I've done some checking."

Was he going to offer him a bribe? Joe wondered.

Ennis said firmly, "I will *not* let my project go under because of some state flunky who makes thirty-two thousand a year. That's just not going to happen."

"Now, Don," Illoway cautioned, "I think Mr. Pickett here will be fair and reasonable."

I can see why Will punched you, Joe thought, narrowing his eyes at Don Ennis.

"Let's hope that's the case," Ennis said. Then, to Joe: "How soon can you make your decision?"

"Give me a couple of weeks."

Ennis clenched his jaw and looked away. "Two weeks? Two fucking weeks?"

"Two weeks won't kill us," Jim Johnson, the contractor, said from across the table, speaking for the first time since the meeting started. "We've waited this long already."

Ennis shot Johnson a look that made the contractor blanch. Illoway chose not to say anything.

"I've got a lot to read here," Joe said, patting the file. "I'll want to talk with some of the experts who wrote opinions, and probably ride some of the perimeter of the property where those migration routes supposedly are."

"Two weeks—no longer than that," Ennis said, turning to Joe in barely controlled fury. "And if you decide against us ..."

"*Don*," a woman's voice came clearly from the other side of the room. Joe turned his head to see Stella Ennis, who had apparently entered a few minutes before. Her tone was cautionary, not harsh.

Then Joe looked back and saw something pass over Don Ennis's face as he looked up and saw his wife—a shadow that washed over him as quickly as it came. It was a look of pure, naked, contemptuous hatred.

19

"I APOLOGIZE FOR Don," Stella told Joe as she walked him across the parking lot toward his pickup after the meeting had ended and he left Don, Illoway, Suhn, and Johnson at the table. "He gets so forceful at times he doesn't realize how he's coming across to people who don't know him."

"No need to apologize," Joe said, still a little stunned by his glimpse into Don's soul. He wondered if Stella had seen it, if she was used to her husband looking at her like that. He searched for something to say, feeling a bit flustered by Stella's presence.

"Thank you again for your help the other night," Joe said.

"You already thanked me."

She was wearing an oxblood turtleneck sweater and black slacks. The color of the sweater made her lips look even more striking than he remembered, like overripe fruit. She walked with a dancer's grace, as if her shoes didn't really touch the ground.

"Don's just not happy when he's not doing something really big," Stella explained, a little sadly. "I thought we were moving out here to retire, to ride horses and go rafting. I love to go whitewater rafting."

"This is a good place for it," Joe said, trying to make conversation, knowing how lame his response sounded.

"Please don't patronize me."

"Sorry." Joe felt his ears begin to burn.

Stella smiled slightly, and a little sadly. "The deal was that when Don sold his companies in New York and Pennsylvania, we would buy out here and really *live*. It was a choice between going to Aspen, Steamboat Springs, Sun Valley, Santa Fe, or here. We both liked the Tetons, so Wyoming was the winner. Your governor was one

of the first people don met, and we are among his biggest contributors. Don probably told you that.”

“He left that part out,” Joe said.

“I’m surprised. He usually leads with it.”

“He told me about the vice president, though.”

“Ah,” she said. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this. It’s odd; it seems comfortable to talk to you. It’s like I’ve known you.”

Joe stopped at his pickup. The easy familiarity of their conversation had him flummoxed, and slightly alarmed. He felt comfortable with her, as if they had history together.

“Don’s just frustrated,” she said.

“Yup, I understand that.”

Stella’s black Lincoln Navigator was parked on the other side of Joe’s pickup.

Joe said, “What I’m not sure I understand is the way he looked at you when you spoke up.” He couldn’t believe he said it, and felt immediately that he shouldn’t have.

Stella paused, looked at Joe quizzically. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“For a second there,” Joe said, treading into water he wasn’t sure he belonged in, “he looked like some kind of *reptile*.”

She smiled at Joe, a dazzle of white teeth framed by those lips. Her smile triggered something in him, and he knew he reacted to it.

“What?” she asked.

“It’s kind of ridiculous,” he said. “I just thought of something I hadn’t thought of in a long time. In college there was this song I really liked called ‘Stella’s Smile.’ ”

“It was about me,” she said.

“Really?”

“What, do you think I’ve spent my life married to Don Ennis? I’m just his most recent. I had a life, you know. I was in the music business in L.A. Everybody in my crowd was in the business when I was in high school. I met the lead singer and he wrote that song.”

“Really?”

“Yes, *really*,” she said, a little exasperated. “Some people went to college, some of us went on the road. Some of us grew up real fast, Joe.”

He stared at her.

“The lead singer originally called it ‘Stella’s Lips,’ but luckily his manager talked him out of that, thank God.”

“I’ve never met anyone who had a song written about them,” Joe said.

“Now you have,” she said dismissively. But he thought she was pleased that he knew. “I have a question for you. You said Don looked like a reptile. do you use animal metaphors often when describing people?” She looked straight at him, with boldness, as she had in the restaurant when he first saw her.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Joe said, “but I guess I do.”

"Someone else I knew did that," she said, and her recollection brought out an almost imperceptible flinch in her eyes. "I think it's kind of charming."

Joe grunted, wondering but not asking if she was referring to Will.

"What kind of animal would Pete Illoway be?"

Joe thought about it for a moment. "A wolf."

She laughed, apparently delighted. "Jim Johnson?"

"Bear."

Joe knew what was coming next.

"What animal would you say would describe *me*?"

He felt his face flush. "Can I get back to you on that?" he asked.

She smiled at him knowingly. "But will you?"

He hesitated. He liked being with her, liked watching her talk. She was an exotic species, charming and attractive, yet dangerous somehow. He was drawn to her, despite himself. He said, "I'm bound to see you again. This isn't that big a place."

"I've found it's as big or as small as you want it to be," she said. "Jackson is unique that way."

Joe reshuffled the files in his hands.

"You don't need to do that," she said. "I saw your ring last night. You saw mine. Is your wife here with you?"

"No, she's not," Joe said, "but she might as well be."

"Good answer," she said. Stella Ennis lowered her eyes and her lips tugged into a mischievous smile. It was as if she didn't quite know where to put them, Joe thought. "Stella's Lips."

"I had better be going."

"Yes, you had better be going," she said, agreeing with him.

Joe swung into the cab of his pickup, and when he looked back she was still there, beside his truck, looking like she wanted to say something else. He rolled the window down.

"Have you found the file on me in Will Jensen's desk?" she asked.

"File?"

"I assume there's a file." She nodded. "I had to sign a release form with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in order to go on ride-alongs. You know, agreeing not to sue the state in case a horse bucked me off or a bear bit my leg."

"You went out with Will?" Joe asked, his tone more urgent than he wanted it to be.

"Not my choice of words exactly," she said. "I accompanied him on a few elk trend counts, and once to check an outfitter camp. I absolutely loved it."

If possible, Joe felt even more flushed than he had a moment before.

"I loved the realness of it," she said. "The rawness and the danger. I'm a junkie for authenticity, if there is such a term."

Joe swallowed, looked at her. "I saw you at the funeral."

She nodded.

"You knew Will pretty well, then? Were you and Will ..."

"Yes, Joe," she said. "We were."

He tried to picture Will and Stella together. He could only picture Stella. He felt a surprising rush of jealousy.

She crossed her arms defensively. "I admired him. He was *real*. I thought he had a quiet honesty and dignity about him, unlike most of the species. He was straightforward and unpretentious. People mistook his earnestness for lack of intelligence, which was a tragedy. I respected him very much. You remind me of him."

Joe wasn't sure he bought it, but she seemed sincere. "Even though your husband didn't respect him?" he asked, deliberately not addressing the last part of her statement.

"Believe it or not, we don't think alike," she said, "much to Don's chagrin. Actually, he prefers it if I don't think at all, except to think about how much I admire him."

Joe was on thin ice and tried to think of a way off it.

"Do you have any idea why Will chose to kill himself?"

She stared at Joe for a long time, pursing her lips. He found himself staring at them, again.

"Maybe he didn't like what he'd become," she said vaguely.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning," she said, "that I'll need to decide what I should share with you and what I shouldn't."

"I'd like to know," Joe said.

"You had better be going," she said again, and displayed a little wave.

Joe fumbled in his breast pocket for a business card and handed one to her. She took it and slipped it into the pocket of her slacks in one quick movement, as if she didn't want anyone to see. Joe glanced toward the building. Don was standing at the sliding glass door watching them.

Joe looked back at Stella, wondered if she'd seen Don watching them, if she cared.

"You felt it too?" she said. "When we met."

He knew exactly what she meant, but feigned confusion. She smiled. "I thought so."

HE DROVE OUT of the lot into the sun-dappled trees. At the moment before the road curled into the timber, he chanced a look in his rear-view mirror. She was at her car, opening the door, but looking back at him.

"MARYBETH!" HE HEARD himself shout into his cellphone. "Joe, why are you calling now?" She sounded annoyed, her voice a loud whisper. "I'm in the middle of the audit at Barrett's I told you about. So unless this is an emergency, I can't talk."

Was it? he asked himself. *Yes!* "No, no emergency."

"Then call tonight, like we agreed."

"Okay."

"Joe, are you all right?"

"Dandy," he said, feeling as if he were telling a lie.

BUD BARNUM WAS starting to get impatient. It had been a week since Randan Bello had come into the Stockman's, and Barnum was starting to wonder if Bello was consciously avoiding him. He knew the tall man hadn't moved on. Tubby Reeves, who managed the rifle range for the county, told Barnum that he had watched Bello put over a hundred rounds through each of his rifles the day before, and said they were nice rifles too. Bello shot long distance, peppering target after target with tight patterns at four hundred yards, the most distant standard available at the range. Reeves said Bello had three handguns as well: a heavy-caliber revolver, a mid-range semi-automatic with a fourteen-shot clip, and a little .25 caliber he wore in an ankle holster.

"More coffee?" Timberman asked, walking the length of the bar with the pot.

"Nearly changeover time," Barnum said, putting his hand over the top of his cup.

"Changeover time is getting earlier every day, it seems," Timberman mumbled.

Barnum said, "Thanks for sharing your opinion on that."

BELLO HAD CHECKED into the Holiday Inn at the edge of town and not moved since. The receptionist, a blocky woman named Sharon, had once let Barnum bed her, and she still had feelings for the retired sheriff. She was willing to tell Barnum what he wanted to know. According to Sharon, Bello was out of his room early every day and didn't return until dark. He was a good guest, she said, an "easy keeper." Meaning he was quiet, didn't use many towels, kept his room neat, and put two dollars on the dresser for the maid, which was Sharon most days. He had paid cash a week in advance but told her he may be staying up to three weeks. When he left in the morning he took his rifle cases, as well as a briefcase and a heavy duffel bag. The only things he left in his room were his clothes and a few books on falconry.

Barnum had a good idea where Randan Bello went when he wasn't at the range practicing. Bello was scouting, like the hunter he was.

Earlier, during coffee with the morning men, Barnum had almost said something. The mayor had been droning on about the possible annexation of some land near the river, Guy Allen was saying that the temperature in Yuma was in the nineties, a rancher was bitching about how cattle prices had dropped because another mad cow had been found in Alberta. The conversation was the same as the day before, and the day before that. Barnum had felt the urge to lean forward, get their attention, and say, "*There's going to be a killing.*" But he restrained himself, thinking that instead of announcing it now, he would tell them later, after it had happened, that he had suspected it all along. Telling the story slowly would have more impact, he thought. He'd explain how he'd pieced it together but was powerless to stop it because the citizens of Twelve Sleep County, in their infinite wisdom, had voted him out of office and replaced him with a preening nitwit.

MARY SEELS LOOKED up from her reception desk Tuesday morning as Joe entered the lobby carrying his briefcase and the Good Meat files. She said sternly, "You should be parking in the back, in Will's old spot. There's no need to use visitor parking. You're not a visitor."

"Okay," he said sheepishly, mounting the stairs to his office. At the top of the landing he stopped and looked down at her. She was hunched over paperwork, bent forward as if struggling under the weight of armor. He wanted to ask her about what she'd started to tell him the day before.

"Mary ..."

"Not *now*," she growled.

He sat at his desk and looked around the office. He felt much better today. He had finally talked to Marybeth. He had slept through the night for the first time in three nights—except for that dream involving Stella Ennis that excited and shamed him when he replayed it in his mind.

Will's notebooks were still stacked on the desktop, and he rifled through them, not sure what he was looking for. There was unopened mail in the inbox. The huge topo map dominated the wall, seeming to lean on him, the outfitter camp pushpins looking like an unclasped beaded necklace. *I need to get up there*, he told himself. But there were other matters at hand. He rubbed his face and eyes, thought, *Where in the hell do I start?*

But all he could think of, as he stared at the notebooks, the files, the map on the wall, was Stella Ennis and that dream. He could see why someone would write a song about her. He was attracted to her, no doubt. *Entranced* would be a better word. A dark shroud of guilt, like a thunderhead, had begun to nose over the mountains.

He needed to divert his thoughts and concentrate on something that was appropriate to the situation.

Thankfully, there *was* something else that rankled him. Something Sheriff Tassell had said, a throwaway line at the time that had struck Joe as slightly off. He'd forgotten about it, but it resurfaced after he had talked through the situation with Marybeth the night before.

He called the sheriff's office and got Tassell.

"Who was the medical examiner called to Will Jensen's house?"

He heard Tassell sigh. "I'm in the middle of another meeting with the Secret Service right now. Can I call you back later?"

"No," Joe said abruptly. "All I want is the name. It's a real simple question."

"Your tone is inappropriate," Tassell said.

"It probably is," Joe said. "But all I need is the name."

"What is the problem?" Tassell asked.

"There may not be one at all," Joe said. Then: "I thought you were in a meeting. That you didn't have time for this?"

"I don't have time," Tassell said. "But—"

"Sheriff, it's public information. I just wanted to save some time instead of looking it up."

Tassell sighed again. "Shane Graves. Dr. Shane Graves. He lives between here and Pinedale. We share him with Sublette County on account of neither of us needs him much."

"Thank you."

"Joe," Tassell said, "keep me informed if you find anything."

"I will," Joe said, thinking, *Was that so damned hard?*

DR. GRAVES WAS at his ranch, and told Joe that the files and photographs were there also. Graves sounded refined, cultured, aristocratic, and not at all what Joe had expected.

"If I drive down, can I look at the report?" Joe asked.

Graves hesitated. "I'm busy all day, and I was kind of planning on spending the evening with my companion tonight. Is this an urgent request?"

"Yes," Joe said, figuring that anything that would take his mind off Stella Ennis and back to Will's suicide was urgent. "I've got to get up into the backcountry as soon as possible, and I'd like to wrap up as much as I can here before I go."

"Okay, then," Graves said unenthusiastically. "You can come tonight around six. I'll give you directions."

Joe wrote them down.

"I'll see you tonight, then," Joe said.

"You didn't say anything. I'm surprised," Graves said coyly.

"About what?"

"About my name. Graves. Most people comment on the fact that I'm the medical examiner and my name is Graves."

"I'm not that clever," Joe said. He was glad he hadn't said anything—he had assumed Graves was talking about his use of the word *companion*.

*

JOE SPENT THE afternoon in the corrals, learning the personalities of Will Jensen's packhorses. There were two he really liked, a black gelding and a buckskin mare who reminded him of a horse he used to have. Both seemed calm and tough, and neither balked when he saddled them or put on the boxy saddle panniers that, when filled, would carry his gear. The horses looked well fed and in good shape. They would have to be, he thought, for where he would be taking them.

THERE WERE FREQUENT delays along the highway south of Jackson, as Joe drove his pickup and followed a school bus dropping off children at the mouths of rural lanes. While stopped, he surveyed the homes splayed out across the floodplain valley below him, and was struck by the overall neatness. He was reminded that because Jackson was bordered on all sides by mountainous federal land, the valley itself was like a glittering island in a sea of ten-thousand-foot waves.

The bus made the turn at Hoback Canyon toward Pinedale, and Joe sighed and looked at his wristwatch. He would be late to Dr. Graves's.

Hoback Canyon, in the high copper wattage of dusk, pulsed with such color and raw physicality that it almost hurt to look at it. The road paralleled the curving Hoback River.

At a straightaway, Joe looked in his rear-view mirror. The school bus was holding up a long procession of vehicles. He noted that most of the drivers were talking on cellphones or drumming their fingers impatiently on the steering wheels of their SUVs.

As the children from the bus trudged down their roads wearing backpacks and hemp necklaces and bracelets, he thought of Sheridan and Lucy, and of Marybeth. Would Sheridan, with her teenage angst and strong opinions, fare well here? He couldn't imagine it, just as he had trouble imagining them all staying in Saddlestring. *Would Marybeth like it?* he wondered.

Joe mulled over the possibility of Marybeth and Stella Ennis in the same town. Jackson, he thought with a sharp stab of guilt, wasn't big enough for both of them.

22

MARYBETH PICKETT WAS boiling water and measuring uncooked strands of spaghetti for three when there was a heavy knock on the front door.

"Would you get that?" she asked Sheridan, who was working at the kitchen table.

"I'm doing my homework," her daughter said.

"Sheridan ..."

"Okay, okay," Sheridan said with a put-upon sigh, pushing back her chair.

During hunting season, it wasn't unusual for people to come to their house at odd hours. Normally, if Joe wasn't there to take care of the problem, he could be reached by cellphone or radio and would come home. In the eight days he had been gone, Marybeth had felt blessed that things had been quiet. Since Joe had left she had known it wouldn't last. To top it off, there had been a message on the phone earlier from Phil kiner in Laramie, who was being sent north to oversee Joe's district temporarily, saying he was delayed because he had to testify in court and wasn't sure when he'd make it.

Sheridan came back into the kitchen. "There's a man at the door who says he's here to turn himself in to the game warden."

"Oh, great," Marybeth said, setting the pasta on the counter and reducing the heat under the water.

"I think he's drunk," Sheridan whispered.

"Wonderful."

Marybeth gathered herself for a moment, then strode through the kitchen, Sheridan on her heels.

"I've got your back, Mom," Sheridan said in a low voice.

A large man wearing bloody camouflage clothing filled the doorway of the mudroom. His face was perfectly round, with flushed cherubic cheeks and glassy eyes.

"Joe isn't in," Marybeth said. "What can I help you with?"

"As I told the little lady, I'm here to turn myself in," he slurred.

Marybeth could smell whiskey on him from a few feet away.

"I was shooting at a buck but I hit a fawn somehow," the man said, choosing each word deliberately and over-enunciating. "I brung down the fawn to hand it over and to accept my citation."

"You brought it here?"

"Yes."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know," the man said, his eyes glistening. "Whatever you do with dead fawns."

Marybeth looked to Sheridan, who shrugged.

"I'm afraid I can't take it," Marybeth said. "My husband is ... not back until later." She almost said Joe was out of town, but they'd agreed before he left not to give out that information.

"Oh." The hunter seemed perplexed, and angry. "I didn't have to do this, you know. I could have just left it up there and not said a damned word."

"I realize that," Marybeth said. "You did the right thing. I just don't have any way of helping you."

"That's a hell of a note. A man tries to do the right thing and he gets turned away."

Marybeth thought she recognized in the hunter the potential for him to quickly escalate from drunk and maudlin to drunk and enraged. She didn't want that to happen, and didn't want him in her house. She was grateful when Maxine padded in from the kitchen. Sheridan reached down and grasped the dog's collar.

"If you left your number, I could have Joe get in touch with you," Marybeth said. She figured she'd give the information to him that night when he called to pass along to dispatch. Now, though, she wanted the man out of her house. The hunter was so drunk, Marybeth doubted he'd remember any of what she told him.

The hunter's eyes were now hard and dark. He glared at her and she involuntarily stepped back into Sheridan. Maxine growled and strained on her collar. The inherent danger of the situation weighed on her, and she thought of safety and the safety of her children. If he took a step forward, she vowed, she would instruct Sheridan to let Maxine go and dial 911 while she went for the can of pepper spray in her purse.

But the man mumbled something, turned clumsily, and went out the door.

Marybeth and Sheridan stood still for a moment, watching the screen door wheeze shut.

"Whew," Sheridan said.

They heard a thump in the front lawn, then a truck start up and roar away toward Saddlestring.

Marybeth turned on the porch light and looked outside. There was a large bundle of some kind on the grass. Retrieving a flashlight from Joe's office, she went outside

and found the dead fawn. It had been gut shot, and its tiny speckled body was splayed out in unnatural angles.

"That's sick," Sheridan said, joining her in the yard. "That poor little thing. You should have at least gotten his license plate number. That's what Dad would have done."

"I really don't need your help after the fact," Marybeth snapped back, still on edge.

"Fine," Sheridan said, spinning angrily on her heel and going into the house.

Marybeth called after her, "Sheridan, make sure to keep Lucy in the house."

Her daughter stopped in the doorway. "I'll be sure to send her right out."

"Sheridan ..."

BACK IN THE kitchen, Sheridan watched her mom use the wall phone to place two calls. One, she assumed, was to the house her dad was staying in. There was clearly no answer.

"Try his cell," Sheridan said from the table.

"I did. He's either got it turned off or he's out of range."

"Call dispatch."

Her mom shot her a look, then turned back to the phone. "I'm calling Nate."

"Are we going to eat dinner at some point?" Sheridan asked, not looking up from her homework. She knew her mother would call Nate. She'd known it for a year.

NATE ROMANOWSKI ARRIVED at 9.00, tossed the fawn into the back seat of his Jeep, and came to the door.

"I can't let him see me like this!" Sheridan said, running from the family room in her pajamas. Marybeth was amused.

"Thank you so much, Nate," she said at the door.

"Not a problem. I'm good with dead bodies."

"I hope you're making a joke."

Nate shrugged. "Sort of."

"Have you eaten? We have some spaghetti left."

His silence told her he was hungry, and she invited him in.

"Mind if I wash up first?" he asked.

"Bathroom's down the hall," she said, walking to the kitchen to retrieve the covered bowl of spaghetti out of the refrigerator and put it in the microwave to heat. She set about making him garlic bread as well.

From down the hall she heard Nate say, "Hi, Sheridan," followed by Sheridan's "*Eeek!*" and the slamming of her bedroom door.

Nate was still smiling from the exchange when he came to the table. "I appreciate this," he said. "I'm getting pretty sick and tired of my own cooking. I used to have some imagination in the kitchen, but now I seem stuck in a broiled meat rut. Oooh, and garlic bread too."

She sat at the other end of the table and tried not to watch him eat. It still struck her how interesting he was to look at, with his sharp angles and fluid movements.

Despite his size and ranginess, he looked coiled up, like he could strike out quickly at any time. There was something about him that reminded her of a large cat.

"Did you get the name of the guy who left the deer?" Nate asked between mouthfuls.

"No, and I didn't get his license plate either."

"I could track him down if you want me to."

"How would you go about doing that?" she asked.

He flashed his sly grin. "You said he was a fat guy. He probably hasn't washed the blood out of his truck. I would guess he's an out-of-stater or you'd know him. Saddlestring only has a few places to stay."

"Mmmmm."

"So do you want me to find him?"

"No," she said. "I'm just glad he's gone."

He nodded and ate.

"No one's ever liked my spaghetti so much."

"Sorry, am I eating like a pig?"

"No. I'm glad you like it."

He cleaned out the bowl, then wiped his plate with the last piece of garlic bread. "So, how's Joe doing over in Jackson?"

Marybeth sighed. "He seems harried. We've had trouble communicating."

Nate looked up sharply.

She felt her neck get red. "I mean he calls when I can't talk, or I call and the connection is bad. That's what I mean."

AT THE FRONT door, Nate thanked Marybeth again for the meal.

"It's the least I could do," she said, "since I'm such a lousy game warden."

He smiled uncomfortably, she thought.

"Where are you taking the deer? Are you going to bury it?"

Nate shook his head. "Some of it's going to feed my birds," he said. "The rest I'll dispose of in a place I found out in the breaklands."

"Way out there?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if deciding whether to let her in on a secret. Then: "It's a nasty thermal spring. I found it last winter. There's natural sulfuric acid in the water. I tossed a road-killed antelope in it and the meat was gone within a week and the bones were dissolved in a month."

"Does Joe know about it?" she asked.

Nate nodded. "I showed it to him. He tried to figure out where it came from, to see if it was somehow connected to the underground thermal activity by Thermopolis or in Yellowstone Park."

"Sounds like Joe."

Nate grinned. "Tell him I said hello."

"I will," she said, "if I ever talk with him."

Nate looked at her, puzzled, then turned and went to his Jeep. Marybeth closed the door and leaned back against it, glad that Sheridan hadn't heard the exchange, and ashamed for thinking that.

AN HOUR LATER, Marybeth answered the telephone on the first ring.

"Joe?"

"No, it's your mother," Missy said. "We're back from our honeymoon. Sorry to disappoint you."

"No, it's not that—"

"Italy was just so wonderful. The people are warm, the food is out of this world."

"We had spaghetti tonight," Marybeth said morosely, and immediately regretted saying it.

"Not like the spaghetti in Italy," her mother said. "Oh, you'll need to bring the girls over. We've gifts for everyone. Even Joe."

Marybeth told her mother that Joe was in Jackson, and had been gone for over a week.

"My third husband and I used to have a condo there," Missy said. "I lost use of it after the divorce."

"I remember," Marybeth said, not seeing the point, other than to instinctively top anything her daughter said.

"I bet you're getting lonely," Missy said. "I know what it's like to be abandoned. You always need to know, Marybeth, that you can bring the children and stay here with them if you want to. There's room for everybody and you're always welcome. Keep in mind that this is my ranch now too."

After she hung up, Marybeth saw she had missed a call. For a moment her heart leaped. But when she listened to the message, there was only breathing. Caller ID said it came from area code 720.

SHE FELT VAGUELY unsettled as she cleaned up the kitchen after her daughters were in bed. Why hadn't Joe called? Anger at him was overshadowing her concern. This was getting to be a habit.

Then, as if there were a breach in her mental dam, several unpleasant thoughts began to trickle forth, followed by a steady stream of them, then a torrent. She was *really* angry with Joe. Sure, she'd encouraged him to take the opportunity, but while she was back home struggling with Sheridan's attitude and dealing with a dead deer in the front yard, he was at a resort community. She could imagine him eating out, seeing new things, meeting new and interesting people. His days were so rich and full that he couldn't make the time or arrangements to call her. And here she was, in their crappy little house outside their crappy little town. He had left her stuck in the life that was about him, not her, not *them*. He had left her to balance her business, the family, his responsibilities, and the checkbook. She had once been a promising pre-law student. Now, she was Joe Pickett's facilitator, his unpaid assistant. She was stuck in a particular time and place while the world, like a ship on the horizon, moved on without her. Soon, she thought, it would be too far away to ever meet up with again.

Talking with her mother hadn't helped. Not a bit.

Maybe she should just follow the example of her mother, she thought, who discarded men and traded up. Look where her mother was now. *There's room for everybody*, she had said. *Keep in mind that this is my ranch now too*. And what did Marybeth have? Besides her daughters, of course? She looked around. Even her own house was owned by the state of Wyoming.

Marybeth found herself staring at her reflection in the microwave oven door. Her expression was angry, and desperate. And guilty.

Joe was doing his best. He always did his best. But she couldn't help wondering when Nate would come back and have dinner again.

23

DR. SHANE GRAVES'S place was huge and rambling, built into the side of a sagebrush-covered hill three miles from the highway. In the night, it looked like a ship at sea with all lights blazing. Joe could see no other lights in any direction. He drove up a crushed stone driveway and stopped adjacent to the front door.

Graves, tall and thin with a shock of white hair and hollowed, pockmarked cheeks, opened the door before Joe knocked. Graves wore a long velour robe, socks, and beaded moccasins. He introduced himself and offered his hand. Joe suppressed a flinch at the touch of Graves's cool, long, smooth fingers. "My office is down this hallway," Graves said, leading Joe inside. "The Jensen file is on the desk as well as a box of evidence. Please don't remove any of the items from the Ziploc bags without asking my permission."

Joe followed the ME down the dark hallway, but not before stealing a glance into a well-appointed great room where soft music swelled and low-wattage lamps created a warm, subdued glow. A man about Graves's age sat on a couch in the great room. He looked to be a working cowboy—worn Wranglers, scuffed boots, long-sleeved canvas shirt, long-brimmed hat grasped in his hands—but he didn't acknowledge Joe. The cowboy sat with a forward-leaning posture with his eyes fixed on something high on the wall that suggested to Joe that the man thought that if he remained still he couldn't be seen. The cowboy, Joe guessed, was Graves's companion for the evening.

Once in his office, Graves snapped on a bank of harsh lights and gestured toward the desk. "Maybe if you told me specifically what you're looking for I could save you some time." The office was in stark contrast to the dimly lit great room in its clinical whiteness.

"I'm not exactly sure what I'm looking for yet," Joe said, hedging, his eyes still adjusting to the brightness of the room. "I'd like to read over the reports first and then see if I have any questions. Is that all right?"

"You told me on the phone it was urgent," Graves said impatiently.

Caught, Joe felt himself flush. "Sorry. It's something Sheriff Tassell told me the other night. He said that when Will shot himself, the kick of the gun drove the front sight into the top of his mouth."

Graves nodded. "Yes, it knocked out the victim's front two teeth as well. A handgun of that caliber has an enormous kick to it when it's fired."

"Is the weapon Will used in there?" Joe asked, pointing to the box.

Graves crossed in front of Joe and pulled out a large plastic bag and handed it to Joe. The .44 Magnum was huge and heavy, with a ten-inch barrel. Graves fingered the sharp front sight through the plastic with his long, white fingers. "You can see how it could happen," he said. Joe noticed that the blade of the front sight was rust-colored with dried blood.

"Yes," Joe said, hesitating. "Do you mind if I look through the files?"

"I'm not sure what your intention is here, and I hope you're not just fishing," Graves sighed. "Please don't take all night, Mr. Pickett. As you can see, I have a guest."

Joe nodded.

"There are some photos in the file that might be disturbing to you," Graves said. "I want to warn you—they're very graphic."

"I understand."

"Everybody always says that," Graves said, his smile revealing crooked beige teeth, "until they actually look at them."

JOE HEARD GRAVES pad back down the hallway, and heard the music increase in volume. Graves didn't want conversation from the great room to be overheard, Joe guessed. He opened the file and read the report. It was as Tassell had described. The only item that Joe wondered about were the notes saying that no toxicology report or autopsy was recommended.

Even though he thought he was prepared, the photos shocked Joe, just as Graves had warned. Will was slumped back in the hardback chair, his long legs splayed out underneath the table. His neck was white and exposed, his bloodied chin tilted up. Both arms hung straight down. The .44 Magnum was on the floor near his right hand. In the background, the entire kitchen wall and what could be seen of the ceiling were spattered with blood, brains, bits of white bone, and hair. Joe felt an urge to get sick, and looked around the office for water to drink. He found a paper cup near the sink and filled it, noticing that his hand was trembling.

Taking a deep breath he retuned to the desk and forced himself to look at the other photos. Will's body had been photographed from all angles. A particularly disturbing photograph was taken from behind Will, where the back of his skull was shot away. In another, a close-up of Will's mouth clearly showed the wound in the palate caused by the front sight, the two front teeth hanging from the upper gum by thin strings.

"God help me get through this," Joe whispered to himself.

HE WAITED UNTIL he was sure he wouldn't get sick before he went to find the medical examiner. He purposely clumped his boots on the tile louder than necessary as he walked down the dark hallway to the great room, making sure he could be heard.

Graves was turned toward the cowboy on the couch, large crystal goblets of red wine on the table in front of them. Again, the cowboy wouldn't look at Joe.

"Dr. Graves, may I ask you a few questions?"

Graves looked annoyed. Then he sighed, stood, and followed Joe back into the office.

"WHY WASN'T THERE a toxicology report or an autopsy?" Joe asked.

Graves cinched his robe tight before answering. "There simply wasn't any reason for it," he said. "It was obvious that the cause of death was a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. We don't do autopsies as a matter of course unless we have a reason. We know he didn't die of a heart attack, Mr. Pickett. We're like any other medical examiner's office in the country in that respect."

"So we don't know if Will was drunk, or sick?"

Graves shook his head. "No."

"Is there any way to find that out now?"

The ME looked at Joe quizzically. "I'm sure there isn't, since the body was cremated. What are you driving at?"

"I want to know why he did it," Joe said.

Graves sighed. "Look, I'm sympathetic. But my job isn't to try to determine *why* a victim takes his life. My job is to determine *how* it happened, and give my professional opinion as to cause of death. You seem to be looking for something I just can't help you with."

Joe rubbed his jaw and thought about it. He had watched Graves carefully as he spoke, looking for a false note, but hadn't seen or heard one.

"Now, if you've looked at everything you wanted to look at ..." Graves said, not needing to finish his sentence.

"Right," Joe said, getting his jacket.

Graves was standing at the office door waiting to show Joe out into the hallway when Joe suddenly stopped and picked up the gun in the bag.

"You can't take that," Graves said.

"I don't want it," Joe said, smiling. "I couldn't hit anything with it, anyway. But a question just occurred to me."

Graves arched his eyebrows.

Joe sat back down in the chair and grasped the handgrip through the plastic. He extended his arm, pointed the revolver at the wall, then bent his elbow and wrist and turned the gun back toward himself so the muzzle of the revolver was a few inches from his face.

"Mr. Pickett, what are you doing?" Graves cautioned, stepping back into the hallway and peering around the doorjamb. "That gun is still loaded."

Joe said, "Look how long the barrel is on this gun. I can barely reach my mouth with it like this, the barrel is so long. This is also a heavy weapon, and it's real uncomfortable to hold it this way. When you go to fire a gun of this caliber, you really need to brace yourself and lock your arms when you fire, or it'll kick right out of your hand. From this position, if I pulled the trigger the bullet would go through the base

of my skull straight into the wall behind me and the gun would probably flip out of my hand across the room.”

“Yes ... but the bullet was lodged in the ceiling.”

“Right,” Joe said. “That’s what puzzles me.”

Graves said nothing.

“But if I turn it like this”—Joe brought his arm down against his chest and turned the gun upside down and aimed upward—“it would be much easier.” He bent his head forward as if to sip from a straw, and the muzzle touched his lips through the thin sheet of plastic. “See what I mean?”

“Yes, I see your point,” Graves said. “But I’d be more comfortable if you put the gun down on the desk.”

Joe ignored the ME’s request. “If I pulled the trigger with the gun in this position, the bullet would go straight up through my brain into the ceiling. It’s braced well enough against me that my body would absorb the kick, and the gun would probably drop away to the floor.”

“Yes.”

“But as you can see, the front sight is pointed down in this position, toward my lower lip, not my upper palate.”

Graves nodded.

Joe looked up. “So how is it that Will killed himself with this gun using such an awkward, uncomfortable position like I showed you a minute ago? Or that the bullet was lodged in the ceiling, not the wall? And why is it that the gun fired with such force that it cut his mouth and knocked his teeth out, but then fell to the floor beside him and wasn’t thrown clear across the table?”

He put the gun down and Dr. Graves stepped back into the room.

“I don’t think I can answer those questions,” the ME said.

“Neither can I,” Joe admitted.

“So what are you driving at?”

“Was the gun dusted for prints?”

“Yes. You can see there is still some powder residue on it. Will’s fingerprints, and only his fingerprints, were all over the barrel and the cylinder.”

Joe examined the gun and saw the powder gathered in folds of the plastic. “What about the handgrip and the trigger?”

Graves cleared his throat. “We found no fingerprints on either.”

“At all?”

The ME nodded.

“So the gun had been wiped clean?”

“I didn’t say that,” Graves said. “The surface of the trigger itself is grooved, so it wouldn’t hold a print. The handgrip is checkered wood, which isn’t a good surface for lifting latents.”

“But it *could* have been wiped clean?”

"It's possible," Graves said. "But there's no way to prove it. I wouldn't testify that the gun had been wiped clean."

Joe sat back. "Are these questions enough to reclassify this case as a possible homicide?"

The doctor set his jaw. "No, no. I think I need more than that. But let me give it some thought."

24

JOE WAS AT his desk early Wednesday morning after breakfast at the Sportsman's Café, and again there was something wrong with his head. He had not slept through the night because when he closed his eyes the ceiling spun and random images hurtled down at him: the crime-scene photos, the bear's eyes as they locked on him and he froze, Stella Ennis with parted lips and a flash of teeth. Now, he couldn't seem to concentrate on the paperwork in front of him. Lines on the topo map blurred into one another, and the list of outfitter names, camps, and locations bled together into a blob. Not even four cups of coffee could cut through the fog.

It was an hour before the office opened. He had arrived well before, when it was still dark out, because he couldn't sleep. After looking at his face in the mirror in the office bathroom—he swore there was something wrong with his eyes—he watched the sun paint the Tetons electric pink. It was otherworldly, and matched his mood.

Joe had torn the office apart looking everywhere for the missing notebook. There was nothing behind the file cabinets, and nothing had slipped between the hanging files. He had removed the desk drawers and looked inside the desk, finding only a gum wrapper. It was clean beneath the desk blotter, and there was nothing taped up behind the map or bulletin board.

When he had arrived that morning there was an envelope on his desk with his name on it in elegant script. Since there was no stamp or postmark, it had apparently been hand-delivered. He pulled out a large card and reread it. It was an invitation to a reception on Saturday night for the vice president of the United States, at the home of Don and Stella Ennis in Beargrass Village. *Jeez*, Joe thought, *the vice president!*

On the bottom of the invitation, beneath the RSVP, was written: If you wear your red uniform shirt I'll know you want to talk. If you don't, I'll leave you alone. But you ARE coming. It was signed "S."

Stella.

Joe imagined Marybeth's reaction when he told her about the party. It would be hard to convince her he wasn't having the time of his life without her.

LATER, HE CHECKED his wristwatch, trying to anticipate when Marybeth might wake up at home. He hadn't called the night before because when he returned from Dr. Graves's it was after midnight. Dead tired, his dinner was a can of spaghetti and a

bourbon and water. He wanted to tell her what he had learned about the crime scene and find out her impressions. She often thought of angles he hadn't considered.

Then he wanted to talk to Mary, maybe get her to tell him something about Will Jensen before taking the horses north to the trailhead to begin a four- or five-day pack trip into the wilderness to check the outfitter camps. He had not forgotten about Smoke Van Horn, who seemed to have a professional interest in when Joe would hit the backcountry. Joe had not announced his intentions to anyone, and would tell only Mary and Marybeth, and go.

If there was anything that might clear his head, it was several days alone in the mountains. He intended to use the days not only to do his duty at the camps, but to think through what he had learned about Will Jensen's death since arriving in Jackson.

Because I sure can't focus on anything here, he thought. He considered seeing a doctor, but didn't know one in Jackson and wasn't sure how much his insurance would cover. If he continued to have nights like the one he had just had, he vowed, he would get a checkup when he got back.

AS JOE REACHED for the phone to call his wife, it rang. Sheriff Tassell sounded angry and told Joe that he was calling from his car and hadn't even made it into the office yet. Joe was annoyed as well, having another call to Marybeth aborted before it had begun.

"Graves said you think somebody might have killed Will Jensen," Tassell said.

"I was speculating—"

"Damnit, this is exactly what I was warned about you," Tassell said. "You agreed to keep me informed."

"I didn't get in last night until after midnight," Joe said. "did you want me to call you then?"

"Why not?" Tassell asked. "Graves sure as hell did."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said we ought to consider hiring a big-name forensics expert to look at the photos."

"So he thinks there's something there?" Joe asked, a little surprised. He had assumed, incorrectly, that Graves was as anxious to put the death behind him as Tassell seemed to be.

"He's not sure," Tassell said. "But he made that suggestion. Dumped it in my lap, actually. Of course, the cost for that kind of expert wouldn't come out of *his* budget."

Joe grinned sourly. "So that's what this is about, huh? Maybe the state DCI would—"

"I don't want the state involved, coming in here after the fact," Tassell said impatiently. "Not based on a couple of photos and the fact that you thought the gun was uncomfortable to hold in a certain position. Jesus, why would a guy so strung out that he wanted to commit suicide even care if he was *uncomfortable* at the last second of his life?"

"It just doesn't fit," Joe said.

"Is that a reason to raise the issue? unless we've got more than that, I can't spend our money for a high-priced outside expert."

"Don't you want to be sure?" Joe asked.

Tassell said, "Don't put that on me, Joe. You're as bad as Graves."

"You're the sheriff," Joe said. "It's your decision."

Tassell moaned and cursed. "Okay, I'll give it some thought. Those photos aren't going anywhere. Maybe once we get the VP out of town and I know where our budget is—"

"Why wait?" Joe asked.

"Because," Tassell shouted before hanging up, "that's what I do."

HE HAD JUST rolled the maps into tubes for his trip and cleared his inbox when Mary Seels appeared at his office door and said, "Joe, your truck is on fire."

THE ONLY THINGS he was able to save were the panniers he had packed in the back of his truck the night before. The cab and engine were engulfed in flames, loud, crackling, angry flames so loud he almost didn't hear the two biologists screaming at him from second-story windows in the building, "*GET AWAY FROM THAT BEFORE IT EXPLODES!*"

Which he did and it did, with a ground-shaking *WHUMP*, as he stood near the corrals with the scorched panniers at his feet. A huge black roll of smoke mushroomed from his pickup and hung in the air at roof level. The morning smelled of burning gasoline, oil, plastic, and melting rubber. His truck was a hot black shell by the time the fire department arrived. When the firemen turned their hoses on it the metal steamed and sizzled and the wet clouds of condensation rolled across the parking lot and made him gag as he attempted to duck beneath them.

AS JOE CIRCLED the truck, marveling that the only thing that looked intact was the gear shift knob, Assistant director Randy Pope showed up.

"How did this happen?" Pope asked, touching the metal of the window frame and snapping his hand back from the heat.

"I have no idea," Joe said. "I drove it to work this morning, parked it, and it caught on fire."

"Were you in it at the time?"

Joe shook his head. "I was at my desk."

No one had seen the truck catch fire. The few employees who were in the office had been in the lounge area, celebrating the birthday of one of the biologists. No one had been in the parking lot, and the lot couldn't be seen from the street in front.

"Did you smell anything burning when you drove it last?" Pope asked. "Did the gauges tell you anything? Were you overheating? Brand-new twenty-nine-thousand-dollar vehicles just don't catch on fire."

"No," Joe said, "nothing." But he thought how disoriented he had felt that morning, how dizzy he had been. Maybe some wiring was bad and he hadn't noticed it?

Pope stopped and shook his head. "Let's see," he asked rhetorically, "isn't this your *third* department vehicle that's a total loss?"

"I didn't do anything," Joe said, aware of how weak that sounded. "It just caught on fire somehow and burned up."

"When was the last time it was in for maintenance?"

Joe tried to remember. "When I got the bodywork done on it after I damaged the frame." He added, "I think. The maintenance log got burned up too."

Pope looked at Joe with condescension. "Three vehicles in five years is some kind of record, I believe."

Joe tried to remain calm. "Maybe someone torched it."

"Think so?" Pope asked. "Who have you made angry enough to do that? You haven't even been here a week."

Joe thought, Pi Stevenson, Smoke Van Horn, the society woman who killed the deer, Don Ennis ... maybe even Sheriff Tassell. But he said, "I don't know."

FROM HIS OFFICE window, Joe watched the tow truck hook up his burned vehicle and take it away. He felt profoundly unhappy, verging on pathetic, he thought. He didn't have his family, his house, his horses, his dog. Now he'd lost his truck, along with his cellphone, weapons, and records. Plus, he still felt strange.

"How are you doing, Joe?"

He turned. Mary Seels stood at his door.

"Come in," he said. "I'm just waiting for them to bust in and take my clothes and my manhood."

She didn't laugh, but held up a key ring. "These are spare keys to Will Jensen's vehicle," she said. "There's no reason why you shouldn't use his old truck. It's perfectly fine, as far as I know."

Joe grimaced. The irony was inescapable. "I have a dead man's job, a dead man's house, the dead man's problems, and I've been mistaken for a dead man," he told her. "And now I have a dead man's pickup truck." He left out that he also had the dead man's ashes in an urn in the panniers he had saved.

She didn't respond.

He took the keys and thanked her, but she didn't leave, just lingered near the door. This time, he decided not to push her. After a few beats, she stepped back into his office and eased the door shut behind her.

"Joe, about a week before he died, Will said something to me."

Joe sat down.

"He was in pretty bad shape when he came into the office that morning," she said. "I thought he was hungover, and frankly, I wasn't very kind to him. Now, when I look back on it, I think he was sick, or really depressed."

"I gave him kind of a hard look, I guess, when I gave him his messages. He just stood there. He looked so lonely, but at the time I didn't feel sorry for him."

Mary stopped and took a breath, kneading her hands together, looking around the room as if she suspected someone might be listening. "Will said he thought they were out to get him, and they were closing in. He said he thought there was only one person he could trust in this valley. I thought at the moment he said it he meant me."

"He didn't?" Joe asked.

"No," she said, "he said someone else. That really hurt me, Joe. I know it's emotional, and irrational, but it really hurt me. I'd been covering for him for so long ..."

"So who was it?" Joe asked.

Mary's face hardened. "He said the only person he trusted was Stella Ennis."

IT WAS LATE afternoon before Joe set off for the trailhead in Will Jensen's pickup, the horse trailer hooked up behind. The interior of the truck was so similar to his own that when he realized he had not called Marybeth, he reached for the cellphone that wasn't there.

He cursed. He *had* to reach her before he rode north, into country where he would be inaccessible. He stopped at a pay phone on the side of the highway, but it was out of order. Finally, he called the dispatcher over his radio and asked her to patch him through to his home number. He hoped Marybeth would be there, and maybe he could speak to Sheridan and Lucy since school was over. God, he missed them.

His wife answered, and the sound of her voice lifted his spirits.

"Marybeth, I'm glad I caught you."

"It's about time, Joe. I was starting to think you'd run off on me."

"Honey," he said, wondering how many game wardens, dispatchers, brand inspectors, and citizens with scanners were listening to every word, "I've been patched through on the radio. So this isn't a private call."

"Oh," she said, obviously disappointed. "Why didn't you call me on the cell? Or from your office?"

"My cellphone burned up. In fact, my whole truck burned up."

Silence.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but my truck caught on fire this morning in the parking lot. I'm calling from Will's old pickup."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine. Don't worry about anything. Look, I'm going to be out of touch for three or four days. I wanted to check in with you before I go."

Her hesitation told him everything he needed to know.

"Three or four days?"

"At least," he said. "I'm sorry."

He was in a bind, he thought. He didn't want to tell her where he was going in case someone who knew Smoke Van Horn, or Smoke himself, was monitoring the radio traffic. He wished he could explain himself fully to her to alleviate her concern and lessen her anger.

When she finally replied, she sounded cold, businesslike: "Joe, when you get back and to a phone, we need to talk."

"I know. I'm looking forward to it."

"That's nice, I guess."

"Marybeth—"

"A man threw a dead fawn on our lawn last night. Oh, and we keep getting those calls."

His heart sank. He had hoped to hear that things were going surprisingly well. "I hope you called Nate," Joe said.

"Yes. He helped us out with the fawn."

"Good—"

"But there are still the calls. And Joe, we need to talk again about one of our daughters."

"Sheridan?"

"I thought you said this wasn't a private call," Marybeth snapped.

"It isn't, I'm sorry. Is she okay?"

"She's fine, but we're having some difficulties."

"Marybeth—"

"Joe, this isn't working. This call, I mean. I don't like talking with you this way. So just make sure to call me the minute you can, okay? If you can spare the time."

He heard the phone slam down and felt needles of ice shoot into his heart.

AT THE SAME time, not far from the Twelve Sleep River, Nate Romanowski released his red-tailed hawk and peregrine falcon to the sky. He stood back and watched them search until they found a thermal current, then climbed into the sky in wide circles. It was a clear, cloudless fall afternoon. As the birds rose, he walked away from his home into the field of sagebrush.

He walked noisily, tromping through the brush and occasionally crushing it under his boots. His noise and activity would alarm any hidden prey in the field, and startle them into flight. Nate functioned as a human bird dog for his falcons.

The peregrine released first, and dropped through the cobalt sky like a rock being dropped. He could hear it slice through the air, wings tucked, talons balled into fists. Nate hadn't seen the cottontail rabbit, but no matter. His bird had. The collision on the ground was a muted thunderclap amid a puff of dust and rabbit fur.

The red tail continued to circle, surveying the ground, while Nate walked. He passed the peregrine, who was cracking the bones of the rabbit and eating it whole. Ten minutes later, there was a flurry in the sagebrush a few feet in front of him, and a full-sized jackrabbit launched into the open and ran toward the far ridge in the direction of the road. He watched it go, marveling, as always, at the long lopey stride of the creature that produced the optical illusion of being three times larger than it actually was. He felt as much as saw the red tail target the jackrabbit and start its stoop. Nate stopped, watched the rabbit streak toward the ridge and go over it out of sight while the hawk shot downward in a perfectly murderous nexus.

Suddenly, the red tail flared, halting its descent, and altered its path. The bird clumsily flapped its wings, climbing again. Had the rabbit escaped? No, Nate decided. Jackrabbits didn't hide in holes, and it couldn't have simply disappeared. Something, he thought, had spooked the red tail. Something on the other side of the ridge.

Or somebody on the other side of the ridge.

FOR EX-SHERIFF BUD Barnum, the morning started out on a bad note when Stovepipe, the man behind the counter at the city/county building, asked him to walk through the metal detector.

"You've got to be shitting me," Barnum growled.

"I ain't," Stovepipe said. "In order to enter the sheriff's office you've got to go through the machine and get a pass. The sheriff says no exceptions."

"Does it even work?" Barnum asked, knowing that the metal detector was often broken when he was the sheriff.

"It does now."

"This is bullshit."

Stovepipe shrugged in response.

"I *hired* you, Stovepipe."

"And I appreciate that, Bud, I truly do."

Barnum glared. Stovepipe had always called him "Sheriff," not "Bud." As he stepped through the machine, the alarm sounded. Shaking his head, Stovepipe motioned for him to step back.

Barnum angrily did so, then emptied his pockets, took off his belt, and dropped his gold pen into a plastic bowl. This time, he made it through.

"I'll need to keep this stuff until you come back," Stovepipe said, handing Barnum a yellow pass.

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"My pants ..." Barnum said, feeling his neck get hot.

Stovepipe said, "I got string, if you need it." Barnum recognized the lengths of twine—they were what they gave prisoners in their cells so they couldn't hang themselves with their belts.

Stovepipe looked into the plastic bowl. "Hey, I remember chipping in on this pen for you. That's a nice one, all right. Looks like they ran out a room for the words though, the way they spelled 'service.' "

"Keep your fucking hands off it," Barnum said, turning toward the hallway and gripping the top of his pants so they wouldn't fall down around his ankles.

HE EXPECTED TO see Wendy at the reception desk. Instead, a matronly, dark-haired woman looked up.

"May I help you?"

"Where's Wendy?"

"She's been reassigned. May I help you?"

"Reassigned where? Who are *you*?" He was surprised he hadn't heard of the move, and hurt that McLanahan hadn't bothered to consult him about it.

The receptionist cocked her head in annoyance. "Back to dispatch, I believe. Now, should I know you?"

Deputy Reed had apparently heard the exchange because he poked his head over the top of his cubicle and said, "Donna, this is Sheriff Barnum."

"*Oh*," she said. Barnum caught the shadow of revulsion that passed over her face, and he was shocked by it.

"I'm here to see McLanahan," Barnum said, unable to bring himself to say *Sheriff* McLanahan.

Donna quickly looked down at a sheet in front of her for his name.

"I don't have an appointment," Barnum said, adding, "I shouldn't need one." He looked to Reed, expecting to see him smiling or nodding, but Reed had sunk back down behind his cubicle.

Donna picked up her phone, pushed the intercom button, and announced to McLanahan that "Mr. Bud Barnum" was here to see him.

"No," donna said into the phone, avoiding Barnum's eyes and lowering her voice, "he just came in."

"Fuck it," Barnum spat, and strode through the batwing doors at the side of the reception desk. As he passed Reed he looked over, but Reed pretended not to see him. A new deputy—Barnum couldn't recall his name—watched him cross the office with contempt on his face. Barnum entered his old office and closed the door hard behind him.

McLanahan looked up and gestured toward a chair on the other side of his desk. *My* old desk, Barnum thought.

"So, what brings you here, Bud?"

Barnum sat down, grateful to be able to let loose his grip on the top of his pants.

"I was thinking about reporting something to you," Barnum said in his most gravel-filled voice, "but after the way I've been treated since I walked into this building, I'm starting to wonder why I'm wasting my time."

McLanahan smiled coldly, his eyes on his old boss. "We take security a lot more seriously than we used to around here, Bud. We don't have a choice about that."

"That son of a bitch Stovepipe took my *belt*."

"Sorry, but I told him no exceptions."

"Even for me?"

McLanahan raised his palms in a "what can I say?" gesture.

"Why'd you replace Wendy?" Barnum asked. "I promoted her to that desk job."

"Things change, Bud," McLanahan said, running his fingers through his thick hair. "As sheriff, I need to make hard decisions."

"Was it a hard decision to get your hair permed?"

McLanahan sat forward and narrowed his eyes. "Bud, I'm trying to be civil here ..."

"What's that cost, anyway? Thirty bucks? Forty? You could just get your head wet and go stand in the wind for the same effect."

McLanahan looked away. "I'm kind of busy right now. Is there a point to any of this?"

Barnum sat silently, seething. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got.

"I groomed you for this job," Barnum said. "I overlooked your fuck-ups and taught you everything you know. Now that you've got the job, you've forgotten who got you here. What about some respect? A little acknowledgment?"

McLanahan finally turned his head back around and met his eyes. "Your exit wasn't exactly pretty. A lot of stuff came out. You're lucky I didn't pursue it after I got elected."

Barnum felt something inside him pop.

"What do you mean, *pursue it*?" he shouted.

"Bud, lower your voice or I'll have you thrown out of here," McLanahan cautioned.

"You'll have me ... *what*?" Barnum hissed, scrambling to his feet. "I can't believe your disloyalty, you little prick."

The sheriff glared back, his face tight with anger. Barnum decided to try a different approach. "Look, McLanahan—"

"That's Sheriff McLanahan. Now get out."

Barnum's rage returned to a boil. He looked down to see that his hands were trembling. How easy it would be to dive over the desk and sink his fingers into McLanahan's windpipe, he thought.

"I'm leaving," Barnum said, his voice a whisper. "I came here to do something good, to tip you off about something. But it seems you know it all now. You don't need *my* help."

"If you came in to report a crime, sit down out there with Deputy Reed and give him the information. You know how the procedure works," McLanahan said evenly.

Barnum turned and walked out, feeling the eyes of Reed, the new deputy, and Donna on him.

Just let it happen, *he thought*. Just let the killing take place. Let McLanahan and his department of clowns try to figure it out. Maybe next time they'll show me a little more respect.

BACK ON HIS stool at the Stockman's, Barnum was still shaking. His anger had turned into self-pity. When Timberman walked down the length of the bar with a carafe of coffee, Barnum gestured toward a bottle of Jim Beam on the back bar and said, "Double shot, Beam and water."

When Timberman stopped and looked at his wristwatch, Barnum said, "And don't screw around. This isn't the only bar in town."

PART FOUR

In many places, human hunters have taken over the predator's ecological role.

Michael Pollan,

"The Unnatural Idea of Animal Rights,"

The New York Times Magazine,

November 10, 2002

Grub first, then ethics.

Bertolt Brecht, 1898–1956

26

THE SUN WAS setting and the moon was rising and both anchored opposite ends of the cloudless sky when Joe turned his saddle horse and packhorse from the spine of the Continental Divide into what was unmistakably Two Ocean Pass. It was still and cold as he rode into the meadow, the only sounds the muffled footfalls of his animals in the thick, matted grass.

He reined to a stop and simply looked around. It was as Susan Jensen had described it, he thought, only more so. He could see why Will had chosen this place. Two Ocean Creek flowed narrow and clean through the meadow and split at a lone spruce. One channel flowed east, toward the Atlantic, the other west, toward the Pacific. Over the lip of the pass was the vast Yellowstone drainage and the Thorofare, the wildest and most remote wilderness in the Lower 48. The vastness was stunning: a rough carpet of dark trees and startling blue mountains as far as he could see in every direction. Surrounding him were landmarks he identified from his map: Box Creek, Mount Randolph, Mount Leidy, Terrace Mountain, Jackson Peak. Joy Peak was called that because it looked like a nipple. To the south, the crystal blades of the Tetons sliced up at the sky.

It had taken an entire day of steady riding to get there, and the light was fading. He had ridden through two snow squalls, a half dozen streams, and a surprise encounter with a skinny black bear who had not heard him ride up because she was so intent on extracting every last grub from a rotten log. The bear had thankfully run away, crashing loudly through the timber. Joe was pleased that his horses showed no fear and were, in fact, calmer than he was when it happened. The sight of the bear had reminded him to load his shotgun with slugs. The butt of the shotgun was now within quick reach in the saddle scabbard. Will may have preferred his .44 Magnum, but Joe

felt much more comfortable with the shotgun. His bear spray was clipped on a lanyard that hung from his neck.

He embraced the wilderness around him as he would his daughters and welcomed the real danger and beauty it presented. He felt alive, and alert, in contrast to how he'd felt since his arrival in Jackson. He could not completely remove himself from that world, but he tried to put it on a back burner to be dealt with later. Yet it refused to go away.

There was Beargrass Village, and Don Ennis. Joe had no doubt, having reread Will Jensen's files and notations, that Will had planned to eventually turn down the project. Joe's own conclusions were the same, unless some new information came to light or Ennis agreed to radically alter his plans. Ennis must have known how Will was leaning, just as he must know how Joe would interpret the same data. Beargrass Village was not an inevitability carved out of the mountains by the sheer will of Don Ennis and his investors. It had major problems, and both Will and Joe recognized them. Whether Don Ennis would accept Joe's analysis remained to be seen. Joe doubted it, based on his meeting with the developer. A battle loomed. How far would Don Ennis go to win it?

And then there was Stella. At the thought of her, Joe felt himself slump a bit in the saddle. Stella was an enigma, although she showed no waffling in regard to what she said she was after. While she said she was looking for authenticity, she had chosen the life of pretense—married to a man who possibly hated her and living with him in the resort town of Jackson Hole. He wondered what kept her there and why she had chosen Will. Had it been merely an attraction for a man in uniform? Joe didn't think so. It was more, much more. Almost as if she had passively accepted being categorized by others because of her beauty and circumstances (whatever they had been) and was only now realizing she could change them. When Will died, she found his replacement in Joe Pickett, or so it seemed.

Why did she stay in his thoughts? Was the danger she offered as attractive to him as her manner and beauty? Susan Jensen had called her a predator. *Maybe she was*, Joe thought. So why didn't he mind being prey?

He couldn't answer the questions, and wasn't sure he wanted to. Instead, he shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts away. Concentrating on the terrain and the sky, he breathed the cool mountain air as deeply as he could. He listened to the breath of wind in the treetops, the footfalls of his horses and the warm squeak of leather on leather from his saddle.

AFTER PICKETING THE horses in the meadow and setting up camp for the night, Joe dug the funeral urn out of a pannier and carried it down the slope to the creek. He'd been thinking about how to do this, and hadn't come to a decision. Should the ashes be scattered on the ground, in the water, or in the wind? He chose the wind, shaking the ashes out gently, watching as the last shaft of sun lit up the gray-white powder before it settled in the grass.

"Rest in peace, Will. I mean that."

He couldn't think of anything else to say.

BY MID-MORNING THE next day, Joe had visited four outfitter camps and was working his way north toward the state cabin. Before riding into the camps, he had followed Trey's advice and straightened up the diamond hitches on his packhorse. The camps were clean and the outfitters pleasant and professional. There was a guide for every two hunters, licenses and permits were valid, and food was hung up away from the camps, as per regulations. The outfitters seemed pleased to meet him, and offered him meals and coffee. They were free with information about where they thought the elk were, the locations of other camps, and the quirks of other outfitters. Like most taciturn outdoorsmen, who barely spoke in town, the outfitters couldn't stop talking. All agreed that snow was needed to get the herds moving south toward them.

"Have you run across Smoke yet?" was the most common question. It was asked with combinations of amusement, condemnation, and awe.

AS JOE RODE out of his sixth camp of the day, he noticed how much his head had cleared from the day before. Whether it was the air, the elevation, or the isolation, he didn't know. But he felt normal again, without the fog that seemed to have moved into his brain since his arrival in Jackson. Maybe he'd just needed to get into the mountains, be alone, do good work.

The possibility that Will's death hadn't been a suicide never really left him, though. Neither did his feeling of being disconnected from Marybeth and his family. He thought how Marybeth and the girls, especially Sheridan, would love this, and he wished somehow they could be with him.

AT THE RATE he was going, he thought he could make it to the state cabin by late afternoon. His plan was to stay at the cabin for at least two nights and check out the rest of the outfitter camps in the Yellowstone drainage from there. When the trail split, he absentmindedly neck-reined his horse to take the right fork, and was two miles from the main trail when he realized his mistake. The path had faded into a narrow game trail as it switchbacked up through the trees. The timber was too thick to turn his horses around—especially the wide load of the packhorse—so he continued to climb in search of a clearing. The incline got worse as he climbed, the horses laboring with the pitch. He leaned forward in the saddle, waiting for a break in the dark timber to signal that he'd reached the top.

When the trees finally thinned and the sky broke through, he stopped the horses on a small grassy shelf to let them rest. While they did, he took his map and walked to the top of the rise to figure out where he was. He noted the mountain landmarks he'd identified earlier. With his fingertip, he traced his location to the state cabin and found he had inadvertently taken a shortcut. If he continued down the other side of the mountain he could ride up Clear Creek drainage and approach the cabin from the side, shaving off at least eight miles and making up for the time he'd wasted on the wrong trail. The route would be rugged, as there wasn't an established horse trail, but his horses had shown they were more than up to the task.

Climbing back into the saddle, he flinched with familiar pain in his knees caused by riding for a day and a half, and headed northwest.

It was above the drainage, while he was still hidden in the timber, when he looked down and saw a man doing something he shouldn't be doing.

AT FIRST, JOE couldn't figure out what he was seeing. He had dismounted and tied up his horses out of sight in a thick stand of aspen, and was watching the man in the meadow through his binoculars. His digital camera with the zoom lens was at the foot of the boulder he peered over.

The man was over five hundred yards away, moving around in a pocket clearing on the other side of Clear Creek. He was walking around in a circle, stopping at intervals to kick at the ground. There was something long and thin on his shoulder—a rifle, maybe. No, Joe saw as he focused in, it was a shovel. The man was big and lumbering, but he moved gracefully. His back was to Joe and he had yet to turn and show his face. As the man continued his circle and moved into shadow, Joe swung his binoculars toward the trees on the side of the clearing. Three sorrel horses stood motionless by the trunks of pine trees. One horse was saddled, the other two carried panniers that appeared to be empty. Joe surmised that the man had packed something up the drainage in the panniers and buried his cargo in the clearing.

Then the man stepped from the shadows into the sun, removed his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve. Joe focused his binoculars on the face of Smoke Van Horn.

Smoke was wearing a flannel shirt, a fleece vest, jeans, and a gun belt with a long-barreled revolver. He looked up and down the drainage, then swung his eyes to the trees where Joe was hiding. Joe slunk down behind the boulder so Smoke wouldn't see the glint of his lenses and unpacked his camera. He wondered if Smoke felt he was being watched, knowing how prescient that feeling could be.

Rising again, Joe took five quick shots of Smoke as he took a last look at the sky, turned with his shovel, and lumbered back toward his horses. Joe gave Smoke twenty minutes to ride away before he emerged from behind the rock.

THE CLEARING WAS trampled down not only by Smoke's boots, but by what looked like hundreds of elk tracks. Elk pellets as fresh as the night before stood in clumps throughout the grass.

Joe photographed the clearing, the tracks, and the nine fresh mounds of dirt in a sloppy circle in the clearing. He knew what he would find when he kicked the dirt clear on the mounds, and he found it: fifty-pound salt blocks. Violators had learned in the past few years not to place the salt aboveground, where it was obvious from a distance. If they buried it out of view with a thin cover of loose dirt, the elk would find it easily but the blocks would be almost impossible to spot without literally being on top of them.

The toughest thing about arresting an outfitter who was baiting elk with salt was catching him doing it. The outfitter could always claim that it wasn't he who placed the blocks out. Even if the outfitter was caught with salt blocks in his panniers, he could claim they were for his horses. No, in order to arrest someone for illegal salting,

or what the regulations called “hunting near an attractant,” he would literally have to be caught in the act of putting the salt down. Just to be sure he’d gotten it all, Joe reviewed the photos on the screen display on the back of his camera. They were long shots, several not in sharp focus. But there was no doubt that the man with the shovel was Smoke, and what he was burying were salt blocks. Although Joe had blundered into the situation by taking a wrong trail, Smoke had been caught red-handed.

Will Jensen had suspected Smoke of salting for four years, but could never nail him for it.

“Now you can *really* rest in peace,” Joe said aloud.

He looked at his wristwatch, then at the sky. There were three hours of daylight left, and he figured it would take two to get to the state cabin. Smoke’s arrest in his elk camp would need to wait until tomorrow.

THE STATE CABIN was older, smaller, and more beat-up than Joe had imagined it would be. The setting was nice, though, and the cabin had a small front porch that looked out over a meadow and a small lake that had been named, without much imagination, State Lake.

In the last half hour of dusk, he corralled the horses, dragged the panniers into the one-room cabin, unshuttered the two cracked windows, and got a fire going in the ancient woodstove. He worked quickly, his goal to enjoy a light bourbon on the front porch as the sun set. He was delayed when he had to sweep mouse excrement off the floor and counter, and clear a bird’s nest from the top of the chimney pipe. By the time he poured warm bourbon from his flask into his metal camp cup, the sun had sunk into State Lake.

While steak sizzled and potatoes fried in cast-iron skillets, Joe sipped and took measure of the cabin. The logs it had been built with were grayed and cracking with age, and they needed re-chinking. Rusted spikes driven into the logs served as coat and equipment hangers. A calendar from 1963 had never been replaced. The bed was an old metal-framed single, with a thin mattress, gray with age and dirt. He flipped through a puckered journal that listed the cabin’s visitors and occupants for the last twenty years. He recognized the names of game wardens and biologists, and saw where Trey Crump had signed in fifteen years before. The last page and a half of entries were all by Will Jensen. Joe was surprised to see that the last entry by Will was made just three weeks before.

Somehow, in the sequence of events that led to Will’s death, he had missed the fact that the ex-game warden had used the state cabin. In fact, he had been up there for the week preceding his death.

Joe looked at the last signature. Although it looked like Will’s writing—Joe had seen so much of Will’s cribbed style that he felt he was an expert on it—the name was written in a shaky, uncertain hand. There were loops in the letters where there normally weren’t loops, and the pen had crossed over the lines. And something else, something so tiny that Joe had to lift the journal to the propane lamp to see it. At first, he thought that Will, for some reason, had jotted a period after his name, as

if making some kind of statement. But it wasn't a punctuation mark, it was a single, tiny letter: "S." He recognized the scrawl from the invitation he had held in his hand two days before.

Joe lowered the journal. *Stella had come up here with him?* How dare she? How dare he? Despite himself, he looked over his shoulder at the bed and imagined her in it. He was jealous of Will, and ashamed of himself.

Then something occurred to him, and he quickly walked across the cabin and flipped up the old mattress. There it was: Will's last notebook.

And something else. A nicker of a horse outside the cabin, followed by a deep, throat-clearing cough.

"Hey, FNG! Something smells mighty good in there! And I brung along a bottle!"

Joe's stomach clutched and his mouth went dry as he recognized Smoke's voice. He tossed the notebook back under the mattress and turned toward the door, noting that his shotgun was within quick reach in the corner. He wondered if Smoke had seen him coming down from Clear Creek and was there now to make sure Joe wouldn't be able to ever tell anyone.

27

SHERIDAN HAD OVERHEARD the plan her mother and Nate made regarding the 720 phone calls to their house. Despite the fact that it seemed like a good plan, she wasn't very happy about it. In fact, she wasn't very happy about anything at the moment.

For the third time that week, Nate was eating dinner with them. Sheridan noticed the first night that her mother had used the nice plates from the pantry, the ones they usually used only on holidays or when they had special company. The playful way her mother and Nate talked with each other, adult-to-adult, bothered her. And she noticed—boy did she notice—how attentive her mother was when it came to Nate, asking questions and saying things like: "Would you like some more? I seem to have made too much," and, "I've never seen anyone enjoy my cooking so much."

Maybe, Sheridan thought, if her mom cooked like that when her dad was home, and used the nice plates, her dad would enjoy it as much. When she had told her mother that earlier, before Nate arrived, she received a withering look.

Sheridan had first noticed the friendship between Nate and her mother the year before and at the time couldn't process what bothered her about it so much. Now she knew. Her mother was mildly flirting, and Nate didn't mind. Because of her feelings for them both, and for her father, Sheridan's only way of dealing with it at the time, and now, was to be angry with her mother, to create disorder. This was becoming easier to do all the time.

"Nate is here to help us," her mother had said. "The least we can do is give him dinner."

"He hasn't had time for a falconry lesson for two weeks," Sheridan countered, "but he sure has time to come over here."

Sheridan couldn't believe what she felt—jealous of her own mother. But there was more to it than that. What about her dad?

Lucy was oblivious to it all, which also angered Sheridan. Her sister made things worse by asking, "Is Nate coming over tonight?"

After dinner, Nate and her mother waited for a call from 720, and Sheridan thought it was a pretense. Nate didn't *need* to sit in the living room after dinner drinking coffee for his plan to work.

NATE HAD FOUND out that area code 720 was from denver. When her mother said they didn't know anyone in Denver, Nate replied that he didn't think the calls were coming from there.

"I'm pretty sure it's the number from a calling card," Nate said. "The company that distributes it is based in Aurora, Colorado, which is a suburb of Denver. I think the calls are being made locally by someone disguising his identity by using a third-party number. I have an idea where the calls might be coming from, but I can't prove anything unless I catch him in the act."

"What do you want me to do?" her mother had asked.

"Next time he calls, keep him on the line. Don't hang up on him. Talk to him instead, ask him questions. I think that's what he wants, to get you upset. But while you've got him on the line, call me immediately on your cellphone so I know we've got him live and I'll know if he hangs up or not. That way, I can check out my theory."

"Where do you think he's calling from?"

Nate shrugged. "Didn't you say you can hear some background noises sometimes? People talking, even some music?"

"Yes."

"There are only a few public places open that late at night," Nate said. "So I'm thinking it's a bar or a restaurant."

"I see. Who do you think it is?"

"It's just a guess," Nate said. "I don't want to say anything until I confirm it."

"Just make him stop," her mom said. "Every time the phone rings I think it's Joe. And I don't want to miss Joe's call because this idiot is on the line."

Nate nodded, and sipped his coffee.

"Don't hurt him, Nate."

"Never," Nate said, in a tone meant to be disbelieved.

WHEN THE PHONE rang an hour later and her mother said, "Seven-two-oh," to Nate, he was out the door and in his Jeep before she picked up the receiver.

Sheridan watched as her mother opened her cellphone and speed-dialed Nate's number while asking, "Why do you keep calling me? Is there something you want? Why won't you talk to me?"

TEN MINUTES LATER, Bud Barnum looked up in time to see the old-fashioned accordion doors crash in and a huge pair of hands reach into the phone booth and grab his collar.

“Hey!”

Nate Romanowski jerked the receiver from his hand and asked, “Marybeth?”

When he heard an answer, Romanowski let the phone drop and was on Barnum like an animal.

“Help me!” Barnum cried out to the patrons seated at stools at the Stockman’s Bar, but no one stepped forward. Even Timberman, who had a sawed-off shotgun and a tape-wrapped pool cue under the bar, froze where he stood.

Romanowski pulled the ex-sheriff close and spoke quietly from an inch away: “From now on, you will leave that family the fuck alone.”

Barnum tried to reply but found himself being violently pulled along, Romanowski’s hands still on his collar, aimed for the bar. A few drinkers had the presence of mind to grab their mugs and step away, but most didn’t, and when Romanowski launched him onto the bar face-first and pulled him down the length of it, beer splashed into his mouth and whiskey stung his eyes.

Romanowski didn’t let go until he had wiped the bar clean with Barnum and sent him hurtling off the other end, where he crashed in a heap with a sound like wet laundry being thrown on the floor.

Barnum lay there, trying to get his breath back, wiping at the sting in his eyes, when he felt more than saw Romanowski lean over him, again inches away. He felt his lips pried open by thick, callused fingers, and he cried out sharply when pain shot through his mouth and his cupped tongue filled with hot blood.

He sagged sideways, not moving, and opened his eyes to see Romanowski toss cash on the bar and announce he was buying the house a round.

Romanowski pointed a finger at Timberman: “If you ever see Barnum head for the telephone booth again, warn him off. He likes to intimidate families. He uses a calling card so they can’t tell who’s harassing them.”

With that, Romanowski gave Barnum a look of icy contempt and walked out of the Stockman’s.

After they were sure he was gone, several of Barnum’s old friends helped him to his feet. They hadn’t helped when he needed it, he thought. They had frozen and watched. He tried to say, “*Get your hands off me, you fuckers,*” but his voice slurred and blood spattered from his mouth.

“Bud, you’ve got to get that thing out,” one of the men said, reaching toward Barnum’s mouth.

The ex-sheriff turned angrily away and reached up, feeling drops of blood spatter hot on his hand.

Tears filled his eyes as he pried the calling card out from between his front teeth, where Romanowski had shoved it up well into his gum. Removing the plastic card

resulted in a fresh torrent of blood. His friends stepped away, even as Timberman approached with a bar rag.

"Stay away from me!" Barnum roared, spattering them all. He was well aware of how quickly this story would travel through Twelve Sleep County.

SHERIDAN COULD TELL from the way her mom's face went white that she could hear what was happening on the other end of the line.

"What did you expect?" Sheridan asked.

"I said not to hurt him," her mother said. "It sounded like Sheriff Barnum."

Sheridan weighed that and nodded. "He hates us, all right."

Her mother slowly hung up the phone. "I can't believe I live in a place where people hate us."

"It's because of what Dad does," Sheridan said.

"Then maybe he should do something else!" her mother said angrily.

Sheridan turned her back on her mother and went into her bedroom and slammed the door. She was still awake when she heard the sound of Nate's Jeep pull up outside.

If she filled her backpack with clothes and started walking, she wondered, how far could she get before the sun came up?

BARNUM KNOCKED HEAVILY on the door. With the other hand, he held a bar rag soaked with blood to his mouth. The front of his shirt was covered with it. Even the underside of his hat brim was flecked.

He saw a band of light appear beneath the door and the peephole darken for a moment, then heard the bolt being thrown.

Randan Bello stood wrapped in a towel, his eyes in slits. "What in the hell happened to you?" he asked.

"Never mind that," Barnum croaked. "I know what you're doing in Saddlestring, and I'm here to help."

Bello stepped back away from the door and examined Barnum from his bloodstained boots to his hat.

"Come in, Sheriff," Bello said.

OUTSIDE THE MOTEL, Nate Romanowski cruised through the parking lot in his Jeep with his headlights off. His .454 Casull lay unholstered on the passenger seat.

Hunters, mainly. Plates from Colorado, Michigan, Pennsylvania. Hunting states. Except for the SUV Barnum had parked next to, the one with the Virginia plates. Interesting.

Nate slowed to a crawl but didn't tap his brakes so his brake lights wouldn't flare. He leaned across the passenger seat and looked up at the windows that were lit. He saw a man with a profile that looked familiar—someone from a long time ago—approach the window and reach out with both hands for fistfuls of curtain. But before the man pulled the curtains closed, Nate saw the silhouette of Bud Barnum's crushed cowboy hat over his shoulder.

Nate thought of his red tail flaring two days before.

Instinctively, he rubbed the handgrip of his weapon with his thumb.

SMOKE VAN HORN was a huge man who seemed to fill up the cabin when he entered the room, accompanied by the smell of woodsmoke, grease, horses, and leather that hung in his oversized sheepskin coat. His face was massive and naturally thrust forward, like a fist.

"Nice night out there," Smoke said to Joe. "We need some snow, though, to get the elk moving."

He let his coat slide off his shoulders, then tossed it on the bed across the room as if he'd done it a hundred times before. Perhaps he had, Joe thought. Under the coat, Smoke wore the same clothes Joe had seen him in that afternoon in the meadow, as well as the holster and .44 Magnum.

"I was just scouting the territory when I saw the light from your cabin," Smoke said in a too-loud voice, "so I thought I better check it out. I've thrown more than a few backpacker types out of your place before, you know. A couple of years ago some hunters moved in before Will got up here, and I sent them packing too. I figure this place is paid for by my tax money and license fees, so I don't want nobody trashing it."

"I appreciate that," Joe said, as he dished steak and potatoes onto his plate. "Can I offer you some?"

"I filled my belly with pemmican while I was riding," Smoke said, shaking his head, "but that sure smells good."

Joe filled a second plate and sat it on the table in front of the outfitter. He tried not to turn his back on Smoke at any point, but to stay in front of him. The outfitter exuded an aura of pure physicality and danger, even though he had not yet said or done anything that could be considered threatening. Joe watched as Smoke withdrew a collapsible camp cup from a shirt pocket, shook it out, and filled half of it with Wild Turkey from a bottle he had brought in with him.

"Want some?" Smoke asked, already pouring it into Joe's tin cup.

"Thanks," Joe said, adding water from a canteen.

"That's ruining two good drinks," Smoke said, raising his cup, a wide smile cracking the fist. "Here's to fall in Wyoming and two good men."

While they ate, Smoke noticed Joe looking at the .44 Magnum.

"Something wrong?" Smoke asked through a mouthful.

"Do you ever take that off?"

"Nope."

"Have you ever considered carrying bear spray?"

"Nope."

"Have you ever had to use it?"

"Yup," Smoke said. "This steak needs something. You got any ketchup or hot sauce?"

SMOKE SURPRISED JOE by gathering up the dishes and dumping them in an old plastic tub that he'd filled with hot water from a pot on the stove. Joe said, "You don't have to do that."

"Camp law," Smoke said, not turning his head. "You cooked, so I clean. Have another snort. And give me a re-ride on mine, will you?"

Joe picked up the bottle and began to pour it into his cup, then thought better of it. He refilled Smoke, and put the bottle back down with a thump so Smoke would think Joe had taken some. Instead, Joe added more water to his cup.

"I've got to admit," Smoke said, washing a plate with his back still to Joe, "you are more wily than I gave you credit for when I met you outside of the Sportsman's. You must have known at the time you'd be coming up here into the backcountry, but you didn't give it away."

Joe didn't respond.

"That was an old trick of Will's too. He liked to keep everyone guessing. Shit, if I was the game warden, I'd probably do the same damn thing. This is a lot of country for just one man, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"You ever seen anything like this before?"

"My district is in the Bighorns," Joe said. "We've got some rough country."

"Nothing like this," Smoke said, turning and taking a long drink, "nothing like this." He banged the empty cup down. "How 'bout another re-ride?"

"It's your whiskey," Joe said, pouring again.

Smoke cleaned the last of the plates and suspended the skillet over the soapy water. "Do you wash your cast iron, or keep it seasoned?"

"Seasoned, I guess," Joe said.

"Good man," Smoke said, wiping out the skillet hard with paper towels. "Not many folks know anymore how much good taste and character you lose in your food when you wash the damn skillet every night with soap. Cast iron is meant to be seasoned."

Smoke sat down at the table when he was through, the drying towel still draped over his arm. "I suppose I ought to think about getting back to my hunters pretty soon," he said. "They'll be wondering if a bear got me."

Joe felt a tightening in his chest. It didn't feel right to let Smoke go back happily to his camp, only to arrest him in the morning.

"Something wrong?" Smoke asked, studying Joe's face.

"Let's have a nightcap," Joe said, putting off his decision.

"Nightcap, hell," Smoke said, pouring generously again, "let's tie one on."

"THIS IS MY thirty-second year up here," Smoke said wistfully. "I love it as much as my first."

Joe nodded.

"Things have changed, though. I see it in Jackson all the time. But I never thought I'd see it up here, and it pisses me off."

Smoke shifted and leaned across the table, his face thrust at Joe. Joe stanching an impulse to jump back.

"I'm a third-generation outfitter," Smoke said. "I got the same camp my dad and my grandpa used. A couple of years ago I sat down during a blizzard when we couldn't hunt and I figured out that we've probably brought twenty-five hundred dead elk through that camp over the years. That's a hell of a lot of meat. I also figured out that over the years we've probably contributed over a half a million in license fees, and we've spent about four million in the county to keep our business running. I'm the best there is at what I do, so I feel pretty damned good about it, overall. I get to show these out-of-staters there is still some wildness left in this world, and that they'd better show some goddamned respect for it. I've been known to send a whiner or two home, even at a financial loss to me, if that son of a bitch don't respect what we've got up here."

"Twenty-five hundred elk is a lot of elk," Joe said.

Smoke weighed Joe's comment for a minute, his eyes narrowing, then decided it was neutral, not critical.

"It is," Smoke continued, "but in the big scheme of things, it's not enough. Because of federal policies, we've got too goddamn many elk up here to sustain a healthy herd. There's no good reason to have ten thousand elk come down to be fed on the refuge, like pets. They're weak as a herd, and they spread diseases among themselves. The herd needs to be culled. It's a goddamned meat farm, except that shooting them for meat is looked down on."

Joe smiled. "You sound a little like Pi Stevenson."

"Damnit!" Smoke shouted, thumping the table with his hand and making the cups jump. "don't get me started on *her*. Her stupid solution is to let the herds grow until they all starve to death in front of our eyes. Then listen to her bitch."

"I can imagine," Joe said.

Suddenly, Smoke broke out into a grin. "I used to have these kinds of discussions with Will Jensen all the time, right at this table. You're a lot like him."

"You're not the first to say that."

"It's a compliment," Smoke said. "I liked the hell out of old Will, even though he wanted to arrest me and throw my big wide butt in jail. He would have, you know. But I respected him, he was a man of his word. Too bad he went nuts in the end."

"Were there people who hated him enough to kill him?" Joe asked abruptly.

The question didn't faze Smoke. "A few, I suppose. Your friend Pi Stevenson supposedly made some threats. I probably did too, when I was drinking. He made me pretty mad a couple of times."

"But in the end you got along?"

"In the end he was crazy," Smoke said. "Taking up with that Ennis woman the way he did. He even brought her up here one time, which told me he was forgetting who he was and where he was at. I consider this a cathedral, and he violated it. It got worse with the fights he got into, and then getting arrested himself ..."

Joe watched Smoke closely.

"Before all of that, though, we coexisted pretty damned well, I'd say. We gave each other a wide berth. I think he even admired me, in a way, although he never actually said it. I'm one of the few who doesn't mind the bear population increasing or the wolves the Feds released on us," Smoke said. "They're a part of all of this. We need 'em to get the herd sizes down to a level that makes some kind of sense. But I have arguments with the way those animals are portrayed by some folks, like they're on a higher plane than us humans. It's pretty damned simple, really. The Feds—and people like Pi Stevenson—don't love the wolves and bears as much as they hate people. They're winning the game, it seems to me. That pisses me off too."

Joe found himself warming to Smoke, enjoying his company and his passion. Smoke was like a lot of the people he knew in Twelve Sleep County. He wondered, though, at what point Smoke's rage turned into violence. Joe admonished himself not to become complacent with this man.

"You know about that meat town they're trying to build outside of Jackson?" Smoke asked, his face wide with incredulity.

"Beargrass Village," Joe said. "I know about it."

"Not only is there no beargrass in Wyoming," Smoke said, his face flushing red, "but the whole fucking idea is to create an artificial environment for raising pure meat for millionaires! Jesus! They think that's real, somehow. It ain't real. This"—Smoke sat back, pointed toward the window—" *this* is real. It's just messy, and it's complicated, but it's real. Why'n the *hell* don't they experience this?"

Joe shrugged. Smoke was getting more animated as he talked, and louder. Joe saw the flashes of eloquent rage Smoke was known for, the rhetoric he used at public meetings to dominate discussions and make himself the scourge of agency officials.

"I'd like to bring a couple of those Beargrass jokers up here and let 'em shoot an elk, gut it, and hang it up in the trees. 'This is how we get meat,' I'd say."

Joe conspicuously looked at his watch, trying to signal an end to the evening. It was late and he was tired. Smoke ignored him.

"When I tell people what I'm telling you, they laugh at me," Smoke said. "They didn't used to, but they do now. They act like I'm something out of another century, some kind of throwback. I am, I guess."

Smoke drained his cup and poured another before Joe could object.

"I'm a goddamned arachnidism," Smoke said.

"You're a *spider*?" Joe asked, knowing Smoke meant *anachronism*.

"I don't mind being feared or hated," Smoke said, lowering his head, "but I *hate* to be fuckin' laughed at."

Smoke's silence was striking after all of his loud talk.

"I'm sorry," Joe said.

"About what?" Smoke finally asked, his voice soft for the first time since he had arrived at the cabin.

"For the spider joke," Joe said. "I knew what you meant."

Smoke almost imperceptibly nodded his woolly head.

"You know I saw you today, putting those salt blocks down," Joe said.

Joe thought he sensed a sudden, cold calmness in Smoke's demeanor. Maybe it was the way he was gripping his cup.

"I thought somebody was watching me," Smoke said.

"I've got pictures of it."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Joe glanced quickly at the shotgun in the corner. Two steps, and he could grab it.

"I was thinking of riding into your camp and arresting you tomorrow," Joe said. "But I don't think either one of us wants me to do that in front of your hunters and guides."

Smoke sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping. "No, I wouldn't want that."

"We could do it tonight," Joe said. "It's not like I was planning to drag you in chains into Jackson. I'll write you up, give you the citation, and we'd go to court eventually."

Smoke shook his head. "That'd mean my outfitter's license and my reputation, Joe. You might as well shoot me on the spot."

Joe couldn't argue with the first part. "Smoke, you knew what you were doing."

"Yes," the outfitter said, a spark in his eyes, "I knew it. But I bet you didn't know who else used salt in that same meadow for years."

"I'm confused."

"You sure as hell are," Smoke said, again leaning forward, the color returning to his cheeks. "Your own Game and Fish Department. For twenty years, they put salt blocks out to lure the elk out of Yellowstone so they could be shot. For years before that, the Forest Service did it. At the time, it was considered good management."

"Really?"

"Really. It wasn't until a few years ago, when some crusaders like Pi Stevenson decided it was unfair, did salting become a crime."

Joe said nothing.

"You want me to take you out tomorrow on horseback and show you all the salt sets in this wilderness? Not only the ones put there by outfitters, but natural salt licks in the ground? Elk need salt. It's good for them. Salt blocks don't attract any game that isn't already there. All salt does is help group them up in one place, so a dude can get a clean shot and cut down the odds of wounding an elk and losing track of it in the timber. Besides, what if a hunter shoots an elk that just showed up at a natural salt lick? What about that?"

"That's different," Joe said. "Putting salt blocks out isn't natural."

Smoke's cup exploded with a pop from his tightened grip. Joe felt drops of Wild Turkey hit his face. Smoke's voice rose as he talked. "Neither is feeding hay to ten thousand goddamned elk so tourists can look at 'em on the elk refuge, Joe! Neither is letting the herd explode in numbers in Yellowstone because there are no natural predators left, or introducing a species of gray wolf in the state that never actually lived here. Neither is building a goddamned private village so rich people can raise their own 'pure' food that's the result of hundreds of years of genetic engineering!"

Joe pushed his chair back and stood up. The shotgun was within reach. "I'll make a deal with you, Smoke. If you destroy the salt sets and give me your word you'll never do it again, we'll pretend this conversation never happened."

Tracing his finger through the spilled whiskey on the table, Smoke said, "I can't do that, Joe."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think what I did is wrong. It's all a big game, just like everything these days. It's a big game set up to get rid of people like me."

"Then I need to write out the citation," Joe said, his voice wavering.

"I ain't going to quit my way of life, Joe," Smoke said, looking up. "not because of a set of rules that don't make biological or scientific sense. I won't let you take my life away from me."

"I gave you a choice I shouldn't have given you," Joe said.

"And I appreciate that," Smoke said. "Don't think I don't. It shows you're the fair man I thought you were, just like Will. But my decision is made."

Joe felt his heartbeat in his ears as he pulled his citation book out of his panniers and wrote out a ticket. In his peripheral vision, he was aware of both Smoke's position at the table—slumping back, both hands on the table where he could see them—and the shotgun propped up in the corner.

"I'll trust your word if you say you'll get rid of that salt set."

"I know that, Joe. I appreciate your trust. But it ain't going to happen."

Shaking his head, Joe tore out the ticket and handed it to Smoke. Smoke took it, slowly wadded it up into a ball, and dropped it on the table into the pool of whiskey.

"That won't change anything," Joe said, feeling sudden malevolence emanate from Smoke's person the way the odor of horses and woodsmoke had earlier.

"I ain't going to let you do this," Smoke said, rising almost sadly from the table. "I got no place to go."

Joe said, "It doesn't have to be this way, Smoke."

"Yeah, it does."

Joe stood with the back of his hand brushing against the barrel of the shotgun while Smoke retrieved his coat, gathered the bottle, and lumbered out the door without another word.

HE BREWED COFFEE to help him stay awake and read through the pages of the last spiral notebook. The door was bolted shut, and a heavy gun case was pushed against it. The shutters were closed so no one outside could look in and see him. The horses had been moved closer and picketed at the front and back of the cabin so Joe could hear if they sensed someone approaching. The shotgun, still loaded with slugs, was on the table where he read. He could not recall ever being as scared. When a squirrel suddenly chattered from a tree outside, Joe was up with the shotgun pointed at the door, his heart thumping.

Even the things he read in the notebook, as terrifying and revealing as they were, could not make him tear his mind away from the threat of Smoke outside. Will's

notebook was a journal of the madness that had engulfed him. The ex-game warden's writing changed from cribbed, guarded comments to large block letters, with sections underlined so violently that the paper had ripped. Then the handwriting changed again, to outright loopy. The content changed from reports and observations to Will's innermost thoughts and fears. What scared Joe was imagining Will, a man as guarded and reserved as anyone he had known, turn into something else. The last entry was from three weeks before:

They're getting to me somehow. They're inside my head and inside my body. They know where I'm going and they track my movements. I know it sounds crazy, and it IS crazy. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think so. They figured out a way to screw me up.

And there was more.

29

A HALF HOUR before the sun broke over the eastern mountains, while the mist still hung tight to State Lake, Joe heard the black gelding snort in alarm. From somewhere in the shadowed trees where the trail tunneled through, an approaching horse called back. Joe's eyes shot open in his sleeping bag, and despite the cold, it was as if an electric current had jolted him awake.

He had bedded down on a ground cloth in the tall grass behind a gnarled stand of ancient pine trees. Somewhere around three in the morning, after rereading the spiral note-book and coming to surprising conclusions, he felt he could no longer stay in the cabin and wait. He felt trapped in there, with no way of knowing if Smoke was coming back for him and, if so, from which direction. So he had stoked up the stove so that smoke would curl out of the chimney pipe as if the cabin were occupied, and dragged his sleeping bag and the ground cloth out into the night. He slept in his clothing with the shotgun parallel to his legs.

Sitting up, he could see the front door of the cabin through the tree trunks. The black gelding, his ears straight up, looked down the trail in the direction where the approaching horse had responded. It was colder than he had anticipated as he unzipped his sleeping bag, the cold numbing his hands and face. He rolled out of the bag, hearing the frozen grass crunch beneath him. He rose to his knees and stayed hidden behind brush while peering down the trail in the same direction the gelding was looking.

Smoke, who had obviously dismounted, appeared out of the shadows on foot. His big blocky form was unmistakable. Clouds of condensation billowed around his head, then snapped away into the air. Joe thought it was remarkable that a man so large could walk so quietly.

It took ten minutes for Smoke to position himself in front of the door of the cabin. The outfitter had approached as if he were hunting—taking a few slow steps, stopping

to look around, sniff the air, and listen. Joe was frozen on his knees, the icy metal of the shotgun stinging his hands.

Smoke held his big revolver in one hand and the bottle of Wild Turkey in the other. Joe could see less than a half-inch of the liquid sloshing in the bottle as the man moved. There was a clumsiness about him, his movements slow and deliberate. Joe tried to remember how much whiskey had been left the night before—a half-bottle at least.

“Joe Pickett, you in there?” Smoke hollered at the door. “Come out, sir. Let’s settle this.” To Joe, it sounded like “*Lesh settle thish.*” Smoke was blind drunk.

Joe rose to his feet, hoping his knees wouldn’t pop from the cold and alert Smoke. He shouldered the shotgun and stepped quietly through the brush and trees until he was less than twenty feet behind the outfitter.

He racked the pump of the shotgun. “Drop your weapon and turn around, Smoke.” Joe’s voice sounded stronger than he thought it would. He fought a trembling in his chest muscles that wasn’t from the cold.

Smoke snorted as if amused, and his shoulders listed as he turned his big head slightly. “Didn’t expect you to be there,” he slurred. “I expected you’d be all nice and warm in your cabin.”

“Drop the gun, Smoke.”

Smoke turned a little more. The gun remained at his side. “Didn’t I hear that somebody took a gun off of you once? An outfitter?”

Joe was thinking the same thing, but he didn’t answer. That had happened five years before, but would always stay with him.

“Drop it and we’ll talk. My offer still stands.”

“Oh, the offer,” Smoke said. “I’m not taking it. I tole you that.”

Clumsily, Smoke turned and the quick movement seemed to make him swoon. He staggered, regained his balance, set his feet, and looked through bloodshot eyes at Joe.

“That was a good trick, hiding in the grass.”

“I expected you to come back,” Joe said. “I didn’t want things to get western.”

Smoke nodded slowly, as if Joe had delivered a complicated theory and it took him a moment to digest it.

“But they will,” Smoke said.

“They don’t have to.”

“This is the way I go out,” Smoke said, as much to himself as to Joe. “In a blaze of glory. What do you think I could do if my license was taken away from me? If I lost my grandpa’s elk camp?”

“There are plenty of things to do,” Joe said.

“Then why aren’t *you* doin’ ’em?” he asked, and smiled. “Instead, you’re sleeping in the cold with a damned shotgun.”

“Smoke—”

“It ends here,” Smoke said, squinting. “I just got to figure out which one of you to shoot.” The muzzle of the revolver started to rise, and Joe could see its gaping mouth.

“Don’t do that,” Joe said. “Come on ...”

The pistol fell back. Smoke grinned. "What, can't you shoot a fella who's looking you in the eye?"

Joe thought about the bear, how he had frozen. How Trey had fired because Joe couldn't. This was different, though, he thought. Smoke wasn't really going to go through with this. *Hell*, Joe thought, *I like Smoke*.

"There you are," Smoke growled. "I got a fix on you now."

Casually, Smoke raised the gun again and fired. The explosion was ear-shattering, and despite the sudden red-hot roar of pain in his side and the ringing echoing in his head, Joe could hear dry pine needles rain down on the grass.

"Got you," Smoke said, letting the gun down slowly from where it had kicked over his head until it settled again at eye level. His watery eyes were swimming. "Why ain't you fallin'?"

Joe peered down the barrel of his shotgun and shot Smoke square in the middle of his chest. He racked in another slug as Smoke stumbled back a few feet, a confused look on his face. He could see a wisp of smoke rising from a hole the size of a quarter in the outfitter's sheepskin coat.

Joe watched the gun, which had dropped back to Smoke's side, start to rise again.

"Don't make me ..." Joe said.

The gun rose unsteadily but purposefully, and Joe shot him again in the chest. This time, the outfitter dropped straight down as if he were a puppet with his strings clipped. His gun fell to the ground on one side, the whiskey bottle on the other.

"Oh, my God," Joe said, running to Smoke and falling to his knees. The outfitter was breathing shallowly in quick breaths, his eyes fluttering, his face horribly contorted.

Smoke said, "It really hurts, it really hurts, it really hurts ..."

Beneath him, a pool of dark blood flooded through the grass, steaming in the cold with a sharp metallic smell.

"It really hurts, it really hurts, it really hurts ..."

Setting his shotgun aside, Joe found one of Smoke's big callused hands and squeezed it. There was no pressure back. The outfitter coughed a wet, hacking cough and a dollop of blood shot out through one of the holes in his coat, spattering Joe's sleeve.

"Smoke?"

"It really hurts, it really hurts, it really hurts ..."

Joe looked up toward the cabin, wondering stupidly if there was a first-aid kit inside. But the outfitter had taken two twelve-gauge slugs in his chest. There was no way anyone could fix him now, or save him.

"Smoke, can you hear me?"

It really hurts, it really hurts, it really hurts ...

With a rattle that sounded exactly like a playing card in a bicycle spoke, Smoke seized up and his hand clenched back and his last blood-smelling copper breath wheezed out of his chest like a bellows.

JOE STAYED MOTIONLESS, his eyes closed tight, until the sun broke over the mountains moments later and he felt the sudden warmth on his back. Letting Smoke's

hand drop, he stood and his head reeled, and he nearly fell on top of the body. His side screamed at him, and his right arm was shaking uncontrollably. For the first time, he looked down. Blood had soaked through his three layers of clothing and glinted darkly in the morning sun. He took a sharp breath through gritted teeth, hoping the pain would stop searing him, but it didn't. He needed something to put the fire out.

Blindly lurching through the trees, almost tripping over his sleeping bag, he made it to the rocky edge of the lake and pitched forward into the icy water.

As the water numbed him and pink curlicues of blood swirled to the surface from where the bullet had creased his ribs and inner arm, he thought, *I've shot and killed a man, and it was awful.*

30

LEADING TWO HORSES, Joe Pickett rode south out of the Thorofare, on the trail to Turpin Meadows, in what became a kind of trek of lamentation. Smoke's body was wrapped in the ground cloth Joe had slept on the previous night, and it was roped over the back of the outfitter's own sorrel, the third horse in the string. Joe led his procession through camp after camp along the trail, too injured and tired to fully engage the guides and hunters who wanted to hear the whole story. The only men whom he told were the hunters from Georgia in Smoke's camp, with their hired guides looking on. The guides stared at the canvas bundle on the back of their boss's horse.

"We wondered where he went this morning," Smoke's lead guide had said, shaking his head sadly. "I always knew that hot head of his was bound to get him into trouble."

There was no anger, no accusations aimed at Joe from Smoke's men, which surprised him. What he saw was stoic sadness. And overt selfishness: "We can still hunt, can't we?" one of the hunters asked.

"I don't see why not," the guide said, with just a hint of disgust.

"I'm sorry and all," the hunter said, looking to the other hunters for support, "but some of us paid real good money for this."

"I know," the guide said, eyeing his clients and spitting a long brown stream of tobacco juice between his boots. Then, to Joe: "Sometimes I wish I'da never gone into the service industry."

BEFORE SETTING OUT that morning, Joe had patched himself up. The crease from Smoke's bullet had split the skin on his side and sliced a three-inch gash on the inside of his right arm. The bleeding from his side was profuse. He had lost more blood than he realized, which made him lightheaded. He grimaced while he pinched the wound together, catching a glimpse of a white rib, which had also been nicked. There was a roll of gauze in the cabin but no medical tape to hold it to his side, so he used silver duct tape instead. He was a fan of duct tape, once telling Marybeth that it was one of the five greatest inventions of modern history. Painfully, he pulled on a fresh shirt over the dressing and tossed the heavy, wet one into the cookstove to burn.

THE NEWS PRECEDED him as he rode. Outfitters communicated with one another in a combination of ways—face-to-face meetings, radio calls, and satellite phones, known as the “outfitter telephone line.” Normally, the “line” was used to pass along word that the elk were moving, or that a guide had been bucked off his horse and was injured, or that a hunter was sick or disillusioned and needed a ride back to the trailhead. In this case, the news was that the new game warden had shot and killed the most infamous among them, Smoke Van Horn, the Lion of the Tetons, in a gunfight.

As Joe rode south, they anticipated him in each camp. In one of the camps he had checked on the day before, both the guides and their clients stood silently on the side of the trail with their cameras, and Joe heard the whispery clicks of shutters as he rode by.

A hunter dressed in head-to-toe camo gear said, “It’s like something out of the Old West!”

JOE WAS SLUMPING in his saddle, fighting shock and the exhaustion that came from it, when he reached the edge of Turpin Meadows at dusk. The Tetons were backlit by the setting sun, their profiles sharp and black against a bruise-purple sky.

As he led the horses toward the campground, he saw emergency vehicles, ambulances, and sheriff’s department SUVs in the lot, and people milling around. Apparently, Joe thought, one of the outfitters had been able to get the news to Jackson.

When they spotted him coming, he watched the small crowd stop what they were doing and turn toward him as one, some raising binoculars. One of the sheriff’s men unnecessarily whooped his siren for a moment, to signal Joe to come in.

“YOU’LL NEED TO turn over all of your weapons,” Sheriff Tassell told Joe as he helped him down from his horse. “We’ll get you to the hospital and then I’ll need a statement from you.”

Joe nodded grimly and dismounted. He could feel the scab of the wound in his side crack open under the dressing.

“How bad are you hurt?” Tassell asked.

“Not too bad,” Joe said. “I need some stitches, I think. Lost some blood.”

“You need the ambulance to take you in?” Tassell asked.

“No.”

Tassell turned to his deputies and gestured toward the third horse. “Untie the body and put it in the ambulance,” he told them. “Tell the driver to go straight to Dr. Graves’s.”

Joe walked slowly toward his pickup.

“You’re not driving yourself,” the sheriff called after him, exasperated. “What in the hell are you thinking?”

Randy Pope stepped out from the small crowd. He wore crisp jeans, new boots, a snap-button shirt, and a denim jacket.

“I talked to Trey Crump,” Pope said. “He said to tell you you’re on administrative leave until the investigation of the shooting is concluded. As you know, it’s routine procedure.”

Joe nodded. "I figured that would happen." Looking Pope over, he said, "Looks like you've been to the western-wear store."

He ignored Joe's comment. "He said to tell you to give him a call as soon as you could."

"I planned to," Joe said.

Pope stepped in close. "So was it a gunfight, like they say?"

"It was more like assisted suicide," Joe said glumly. "Smoke fired first."

"Then you shot him?"

Joe nodded, too tired to speak.

Pope sighed and looked toward the darkening sky. Stars were beginning to poke through like needle pricks in dark fabric. "I need to work overtime just to keep up with the paperwork you generate," he complained.

TASSELL TURNED HIS SUV over to a deputy and drove Joe's pickup, while Joe slouched in the passenger seat.

They were on the blacktop when the sheriff said, "This is Will Jensen's truck, isn't it?"

Joe nodded. "Mine burned up."

The sheriff shook his head. "I heard about that. Things tend to happen around you, don't they? Just like Barnum said they would."

Joe didn't respond.

"Will tried for years to build a case on Smoke, and in the three days you're up there you *kill* the guy."

"It wasn't like that," Joe said, but didn't want to explain. He was thinking about the contents of the last spiral notebook. How it was all coming together. How ugly it had been for Will at the end.

THEY DROVE IN silence until Joe could see the lights of Jackson in the distance. It seemed as if he had lived there forever, not just a few days. The ambulance was stopped on the highway in front of them so that a long column of tourists on horseback could cross the highway en route to their guest ranch for the night. Tassell stopped directly behind it, the headlights of the pickup shining into the ambulance and illuminating the body wrapped in the ground tarp.

"There goes my budget for medical examinations for the fiscal year," Tassell sighed.

AFTER AN EXAMINATION, a blood test, twenty stitches in his side and eight in his arm, Joe was remanded to the hospital for a night of observation. He was given sedatives by a doctor whose name tag identified him as "Dr. Thompson," who also wore a Day-Glo button that read "SKI BUM." The sedative was starting to dull the pain and bring him down. Before he went to sleep, he reached for the telephone at the side of his bed.

"Marybeth," Joe said, thrilled at hearing the sound of her voice, "I just killed the only man in Jackson Hole I really understood."

AS HE DRESSED the next morning, Joe tried to recall the conversation he'd had the night before with Marybeth, and snippets came floating back. It had been difficult to concentrate with the drugs kicking in, and the only thing that kept him awake during the conversation was the tone of her voice, which was urgent and somehow melancholy at the same time, as if she wanted to be angry with him but the circumstances prevented it. At the time, it was important for him to hear her voice, to touch base, to re-establish something. He needed her to be his anchor, to reel him back home from where he was. But she had other concerns. Sheridan was being difficult, having attitude problems, and life between Marybeth and her oldest daughter was getting tougher. "It's a mother and daughter deal," Marybeth said, as if Joe would understand that. In response, he offered to talk with Sheridan—they had a special rapport, he thought—but Marybeth said their daughter was already in bed.

He vividly remembered her telling him that Barnum was the 720 caller, the "720" being from a calling card, and that Nate had caught the ex-sheriff in the act in the Stockman's Bar. The news of Barnum's humiliation had swept through town, she said, and the old ex-sheriff was lying low, nowhere to be found. Joe cautioned his wife to watch out for Barnum.

"He blames me for his bad luck," Joe said.

"Don't worry," she said, "Nate is around."

"That's good."

"Yes," she said, after a long pause, which led him to wonder. Then: "It is good, isn't it?"

It seemed there was something else she wanted to say but didn't.

She had offered to leave the girls with her mother and come to Jackson right away to see him, but he told her not to.

"I'm more tired than hurt," he said, fixing his eyes on a blank television screen to keep them from closing, "and there's a lot I need to do in the next couple of days. Remember that missing notebook I told you about?"

He could not remember how their conversation had concluded. What had he told her? Had he outlined his suspicions? If he had, he couldn't remember her response. The details weren't there, but what stayed with him as he dressed was a recollection of vague misconnection, as if they had been talking past each other, telling each other different stories, each with a point that the other didn't, or couldn't, grasp.

"SO YOU'VE DECIDED you're fine and you'll release yourself from the hospital?" Dr. Thompson said. "usually a doctor does that. Namely me."

Joe was standing with his back to the door, cinching up his belt. He turned to see Dr. Thompson holding a clipboard chart and leaning against the doorjamb. "I needed a good night's sleep more than anything," Joe said.

"I don't disagree with your prognosis, given your, um, condition."

Joe was confused.

"Let me look at your wound and get it re-dressed," Thompson said. "Then we should probably have a little talk. You need to start taking better care of yourself, Mr. Pickett."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Joe said. "Am I sick?" He thought of how he had felt since arriving in Jackson, the foggy mental state, the sleeplessness, his lack of ability to concentrate. He steeled himself for bad news.

Thompson looked at Joe with amusement in his eyes, as if signaling him they could drop the pretense.

"Look, I'm a doctor, not a cop," Thompson said. "The blood test we took last night is confidential information. No one can find out what's on it. But you seem like a nice enough guy, and you have law enforcement responsibilities, and you carry lots of guns around with you. So you need to be aware of the side effects of your, um, indulgences."

"My *what*?"

"First, take off your shirt and let me look at that wound."

STELLA ENNIS WAS waiting for him in the hospital lobby, and the sight of her stopped him cold. She looked up at him over the top of a Jackson Hole newspaper.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Not as good as I thought, apparently." His voice was shaky from the discussion he'd had with Dr. Thompson.

"You look pretty good," she said, smiling.

"You do too."

She laughed, throwing her head back. "You should have seen me ten years and fifteen pounds ago. I would have blown you away."

She wore a black turtleneck sweater with silver and gold threads running through the fabric, and gray slacks. Her thick auburn hair brushed her shoulders. She shook the newspaper with exaggerated force.

"Did you know you're a celebrity?" she asked.

"No."

"How about I buy you breakfast?"

"Okay."

"We need to talk."

"Yes," Joe said, "we do."

THE MORNING WAS crisp and bright, the sun not yet well enough established to have burned the frost off windshields and lawns. They walked along a slick wooden sidewalk to a restaurant near the hospital that was crowded. The place specialized in baked goods and had a sign out front that read 'GET YOUR BUNS IN HERE'.

"I used to love this place," Stella said, taking him by the hand and leading him past it, "but I'm a little too familiar in there and it isn't as good as it used to be. Let's go to the Sportsman's Café."

"That's my favorite," Joe said.

"I know," she said, rolling her eyes. "It was Will's favorite too."

ED SEATED THEM in the back booth near the kitchen door, and Joe ordered the Sportsman's Special. Stella smiled knowingly at the order.

"I know," Joe said. "Will's choice too."

"It's spooky," she said, ordering coffee and a bagel.

Joe looked at her across the table, and she looked straight back. Her name had come up so many times since he'd met her. He'd thought about her, even dreamed about her. The fact that he hadn't told Marybeth about her said more than he cared to think about. When Stella looked back at him he had the impression he'd been on her mind as well, but he wasn't sure in what context. It was as if they'd been circling each other for days, each looking for an opening.

"You start," she said.

He sipped his coffee, burning his tongue. "It's been a long time since I've had breakfast with a woman other than my wife," he said.

She smiled. "I believe that. Do you want to leave?"

It took him a moment to respond. "No."

"I don't want you to leave either."

He took another sip, looking at her over the top of his cup, trying to convince himself that what he was doing was part of his investigation.

"You've never met a woman like me," she said softly. He watched her lips, saw a flash of white teeth when she spoke.

"You're right."

"Don't worry," she said, cutting the words off, as if she'd planned to say more.

"I found Will's last notebook," he said.

"In the state cabin?"

He nodded.

"I looked for it afterward," she said wistfully, breaking their gaze. "I'd hoped he brought it down with him. Where was it—under the mattress?"

"Yes. I saw your initial in the guest book. I recognized it from the invitation you sent."

She smiled, and her eyes filmed over, as if remembering something that touched her. It wasn't guilt, he thought.

"I wanted to leave some kind of record," she said. "In case something happened to me. Or to both of us. You know that outfitter Smoke Van Horn? The one you shot? He saw us together up there. He didn't approve."

"I know."

"He was the least of our worries, though. He didn't realize I was trying to save Will."

"Were you?"

"Obviously I didn't do a very good job of it."

Joe started to speak when Ed slid a big platter in front of him and handed Stella her bagel on a plate.

"These are on the house," Ed said. "Enjoy!"

Joe looked up. "What's the occasion?"

"This is my last day of business here," Ed said, his eyes betraying his beaming mouth-only smile. "Jackson has plumb outgrown me."

"Damn," Joe said.

"I'd have done the same for Smoke," Ed said. "He was a good customer too".

"See that up there on the shelf?" Ed gestured to a garishly painted ceramic lion's head. "That was in honor of Smoke, the Lion of the Tetons. Some of his hunters presented it to him at breakfast once, and he forgot it when he left. I put it up there and it's been there ever since. He always said he wanted it back, but he never took it with him."

Joe could feel Stella's eyes on him, watching his reaction.

"It's a shame," Ed said.

"You mean Smoke? Or your last day of business?" Joe asked.

Ed turned back toward the kitchen. "Both, I guess," he said over his shoulder.

JOE AND STELLA talked long after the dishes were cleared. He had drunk so much coffee he felt jittery. She asked him about what had happened at the cabin, and he recounted it all. She seemed fascinated by the story, but focused in on what he was thinking at the time, and how he felt after, not the details of the shooting. He was again taken by how comfortable he was with her, how easy she was to talk with. He wondered if Will had felt the same way. Then he answered his own question: of course he did. He'd said as much in his notebook.

"I DON'T KNOW what to say," Joe said. "I'm talked out."

"I think you do," she said. "You're just scared of the words."

He looked up at her.

"Just because you love someone doesn't mean you can't care for another just as much. It's about context. It doesn't have to be an either/or situation. You can have both."

Joe felt his eyes grow wide, and squinted them back. He felt the *ZING*.

"I don't know," he stammered.

"I'm safe," she said, leaning across the table toward him. "You will never meet a woman as safe as I am. I have no agenda, and I don't want either of us to get hurt. But I want to be with you, Joe, if only for a little while. As long as it's real, and as honest as we can make it."

"What about Don?" Joe asked, not even believing he had asked.

"Don't ruin the mood," she said abruptly. "Don thinks of me as part of *him*. And since Don is obsessed with the very idea and concept of Don Ennis, well ..."

Ed appeared with the pot of coffee. Joe didn't know whether to embrace him or send him away.

"WHAT IS IT you're trying to find out here?" he asked, looking out the window.

She was quiet for a few moments. Then: "I told you. I'm looking for authenticity. Genteel authenticity. All my life I've been surrounded by people who pose, who play a role. For the first twenty-five years of my life, I didn't know the difference between actors and the real people they based their performances on. I'm sick of the interpretation. I want to go to the source."

"And you think you'll find it here?"

She laughed, tossed her head back. "Not in Jackson, no. But yes, I think I'll find it out here. I think I'm getting real close right now."

Joe felt his face get hot. He wondered what kind of authenticity Stella thought she could find in a married man. How could it be authentic if lying was integral to the relationship? But he couldn't say it.

"We're the last people left in here," Joe said, looking around. "I should get going."

"And do *what*?"

He thought about it. "I've got some things I need to check out."

She narrowed her eyes, trying to read him.

"Look," he said, "I'm not sure why I trust you, but I do. Maybe it's because Will did. You've got to answer a question."

He saw a flash of fear in her dark eyes. What did she think he was going to ask?

"When you went up to the state cabin with Will, did he seem to get better? His mental state, I mean?"

"At first, yes," she said. Was that relief he noticed in her face? "The first day up there he said he felt like himself again. He loved Two Ocean Pass, and said he wouldn't mind spending the rest of his days there."

"He is," Joe said, "but go on."

She hesitated a moment before continuing. "By the second day, though, he was in bad shape again. He'd have terrible headaches, and he couldn't eat. His hands shook. I tried to help him, you know, keep him distracted. But he was too far gone. He was really depressed when we rode back down. That was a week before, you know ..."

Joe nodded, thinking.

"What?" she asked.

"This morning Dr. Thompson gave me a little lecture about taking care of myself. He said I had drugs in my system."

Stella looked at Joe, puzzled.

"He said it was barbiturates. He said even though I'd taken the stuff days before, there were still traces in my blood. He asked me about Valium and Xanax, and warned me that both have some serious side effects."

She listened intently, watching him, something going on behind her eyes.

"Stella, I've never taken drugs in my life. Somehow, they were introduced. It must have happened before I went up into the Thorofare. I haven't really felt normal since I got here, so now I'm guessing this has been going on for a while."

"I don't understand," she said.

"I think the same thing happened to Will. Maybe somebody got to him, figured out a way to drug him. He was under a lot of pressure, and if he didn't know he was being drugged it would have made it worse for him, made him think he was going crazy. It was just a matter of time before he did something horrible."

She looked stricken, her face drained of color. She knew something, but he didn't know what.

"You're coming to our party tonight, aren't you?" she asked suddenly.

Joe sat back. "I hadn't thought of it. I forgot about it, to be honest with you. I never RSVP'd."

"You need to come," she said, reaching across the table and grasping his hand.

"Why? It doesn't seem like the kind of thing I'm good at."

"It's important to me that you come," she said, her eyes burning into his. "It's *essential*. I'll make sure you're on the guest list. The Secret Service wants a guest list by noon."

"Stella ..."

"What you just told me opens everything up," she said. "It's like a light just went on. But I need to think about it, and make sure I'm on the right track."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Come tonight," she said, grabbing her jacket and sliding out of the booth. "Everything will come together tonight. We'll have everybody we need in one room."

He didn't know what to make of that. He wanted to believe she was on his side, on Will's side. That she was going to help solve the puzzle of Will's death, but in her own way.

She seemed to confirm it when she strode around the table and bent down and kissed him full on the mouth. Her lips were warm and soft, and he could still taste them as she walked out of the Sportsman's Café without looking back.

It took a moment for Joe to get his wits back and stand up. When he did, he saw Ed looking at him over the top of the batwing doors.

"Don't say it," Joe said. Dark thunderheads of guilt had already begun rolling across his sky.

"Just like Will," Ed said anyway.

32

AT LEAST ONCE a day he takes his birds out," Bello said, while driving. "He lets them fly around and he puts food out for them or holds it in his hand. The birds drop out of the sky to eat it."

"He's training the birds to hunt with him," Barnum said. "It's called stooping."

"I don't care what it's called," Bello said testily. "I just care that he does it once a day, usually in the afternoon."

The ex-sheriff felt a rise of anger but said nothing. Bello shouldn't talk like that to him, he thought. He was getting sick of the lack of respect people showed him, Bello included.

"Like I told you," Bello said, swinging his SUV off the state highway onto the two-track that led to the stone house and the river, "before we actually get to his place the road goes up over a rise. It's about three hundred yards from the house. He can't see a vehicle approaching until it comes over the top. When I was scouting him, that's where I put the sandbags, up there on that rise behind some sagebrush. He never looked in

my direction. The sandbags are about a hundred yards apart, so we'll have sight lines from two angles."

"What if he hears us coming?" Barnum asked. "The noise of a car carries a long way out here."

"That's why we walk the last mile to the rise," Bello said tersely. "I'm guessing your old legs can handle that."

"Fuck you, Bello," Barnum said, not fighting his anger this time.

Bello laughed dryly. "That's the spirit, Sheriff."

Their rifles were between them on the seats, muzzles down. Bello's .300 Winchester Mag had a satin finish and an oversized Leupold scope. Barnum's old .270 looked like a hillbilly gun beside it, Bello said when he saw it.

"Forty elk and a drunken Mexican with a shovel would disagree," Barnum shot back.

BELLO HAD TOLD him the story almost casually the night before, as they sat on opposite sides of Bello's room at the Holiday Inn. Both had cocktails in hand that Barnum had mixed.

Nate Romanowski had been known by a code name, the Falcon, and was one of the best the agency had, Bello said. He was out of the country for years at a time. But like others who were too tightly wound and too independent, Romanowski had started to choose which orders to follow and which ones to disregard. When he was called back to headquarters, it took three months for him to show up, and he clashed immediately with the new director. The Falcon quit loudly, in agency terms, intimating he would talk if they tried to stop him. "You've never seen paranoia like the paranoia we had in our outfit," Bello said, showing his teeth.

Two operatives, one a friend of Randan Bello and the other his son-in-law, were sent to find the Falcon and assure themselves, and the agency, that he had no intention of talking after all. The operatives took annual leave to do it, so the agency couldn't be accused of official covert activity within the country. Their last dispatch was from northern Montana, via e-mail, reporting that they had heard about a loner who fit the profile of the Falcon. The suspect was a falconer who drove an old Jeep and packed a .454 Casull from Freedom Arms in Wyoming. The next day, the bodies of the operatives were discovered by a passing motorist, who reported the accident to the Montana State Patrol.

"Romanowski killed them both?" Barnum asked. "Why didn't we hear anything about it?"

Bello drained his glass and held it out for a refill.

"The inquiry concluded that the engine on their vehicle quit on a switchback road and they lost control and rolled eight times. Both were crushed."

Barnum looked over his shoulder as he poured. "You're pretty sure he did it though." It was a statement, not a question.

"Sure enough that the day after I retired I headed out here to Wyoming," Bello said. "My daughter has never remarried."

"Kids?"

"Nope. I've got no grandkids."

Barnum thought of his own grandchildren, teenage dark-skinned delinquents on the reservation he had never even met. No great loss, he thought.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Barnum asked, finally.

"Because you asked," Bello said, drinking and looking out the window. "And you offered to help."

BARNUM HADN'T BELIEVED him at the time—Bello's explanation just hadn't sounded right. Nevertheless, he had gone along, because he had reasons of his own.

Bello pulled off the two-track more than a mile from the rise and turned off the engine. Climbing out, he pocketed the keys, slung the .300 over his shoulder, and buckled on a large fanny pack. Barnum followed suit, sliding his .270 out of the truck. He loaded it with 150 grain shells and worked the bolt.

"Are you ready?" Bello asked in a low voice.

Barnum nodded, and they shut the car doors softly. There was a slight breeze coming from the direction of the river, which was good because it made it even more unlikely that their car had been heard.

Bello walked around the SUV and handed Barnum a small Motorola Talkabout set to channel four.

"Keep the volume all the way down," Bello said. "If you need to talk to me about something, hit the chirp key and then turn the volume up a quarter of the way. But I hope we don't need to talk."

Barnum clipped the radio to his shirt pocket.

"Remember the plan?" Bello asked.

"No, I forgot it," Barnum said gruffly, being sarcastic.

Bello's eyes bored into the ex-sheriff. "Strange time for jokes."

"When we have a visual," Barnum said, using the same words Bello had used earlier, "we signal each other by waving our hands, palms out. Then we both sight him in and when you give the signal, a double chirp from the radio, we fire at the same time so we increase our chances of knocking him down for good."

"Aim for his chest," Bello said, interrupting, "with the crosshairs on the middle of the widest part of him. Forget about taking a head shot at this distance."

"When he's down," Barnum continued, stepping on Bello's words, "we wait an hour, keeping the body in the scope and checking for movement. If we don't see any, you'll go down and drag him into the river. I'll stay back and keep watch down the road."

Bello listened intently, his eyes on Barnum, making sure the ex-sheriff had everything correct. Barnum didn't like being looked at that way, and didn't make a secret of it in his rehearsed delivery.

"Okay, then," Bello said, turning and walking down the middle of the two-track. Barnum followed.

There were problems with Bello's plan, Barnum thought. He'd reviewed it the night before, turning it over again and again, and finally figured out what was wrong with it: He was being set up. When Bello double chirped and Barnum fired, Bello would

deliberately miss, so the only slug to be found in Romanowski's body would be the .270 round. Everyone knew Barnum hunted with a .270, and a ballistics check would tie the slug to the rifle.

Barnum was well known as a drinker and a talker, and the whole town was aware of his humiliation at the Stockman's. If Romanowski's body was found, and it would no doubt wash up somewhere downriver, Barnum would be a suspect.

By then, Bello would be long gone.

Of course, Barnum would implicate Bello. But, Barnum had realized, what did he really know about the man from Virginia? Was his name even Randan Bello? Barnum had never seen an ID. Was he even from Virginia, or were those stolen or counterfeit plates on his car? The man had been meticulous since arriving about leaving no records by paying for everything with cash. He had spilled everything out to Barnum so easily about the agency, and his son-in-law, and his intentions. Bello didn't seem like the kind of man to expose himself that way. The only reason he had done so, Barnum concluded, was because he saw in the ex-sheriff a way to pin the murder on someone else.

But that wasn't going to happen, Barnum said to himself while he walked. When that double chirp came, the ex-sheriff was going to swing his rifle around and shoot Bello in the head.

That would give the morning men at the Burg-O-Pardner something to talk about.

"I went to the sheriff with my concerns," Barnum would say, widening his hound-dog eyes, looking at each community leader in turn, "but he practically threw me out of his office. So I had to take care of things myself."

"Sounds like we need a new sheriff," someone would say, *should* say, perhaps the mayor. And they would all look to him.

"I don't know, fellows," Barnum would say humbly. "I was just getting used to being retired."

BELLO STOPPED AND gestured at the sky. Barnum squinted, seeing the black speck of a falcon streaking across a pillowy cumulous cloud.

"His birds are out, which means he's in the open," Bello whispered over his shoulder, his back to Barnum. "This will work perfectly."

"Yup," the ex-sheriff said absently, seeing something in his peripheral vision. He turned, and learned he could actually see a bullet coming when it was aimed straight at his head from a quarter of a mile away, even before he could hear the shot.

PART FIVE

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise.

Aldo Leopold,
A Sand County Almanac

33

THEY'RE GETTING TO me somehow, *Will Jensen wrote on the last page of his notebook.* They're inside my head and inside my body. They know where I'm going and they track my movements. I know it sounds crazy, and it IS crazy. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think so. They figured out a way to screw me up.

Joe sat at the table in the statehouse and reread the last few pages of the notebook again. He wished Will had been more specific.

Who were "they"? What did he mean "they" were inside his head? If Will was right, how could "they" track his movements, as he claimed?

Then he read the next passage, the one that had chilled him in the cabin:

There is something so wrong with me. I'm not alone anymore. There is somebody inside my head. I've lost everything and my mind is next to go. Maybe it already has. I do things as if someone else were doing them. I watch myself say and do things, I know it's my body, but it isn't me. Dear God, will you help me? Will anyone? Nobody else will except Stella.

*

JOE'S EYES LEFT the page and settled on an envelope on the table, the invitation to Don and Stella Ennis's party. Stella was the only person Will trusted. She was the connection. Was she close enough to Will in the end to report his movements? And how, exactly, could she facilitate "them" getting into his head, as he wrote?

Joe couldn't make himself believe it was Stella, not after the way she had looked at him across the table. No one, he thought, could fake that kind of concern in her eyes, act *that* well. She had been on Will's side in his struggle; he had trusted her. But during breakfast, when Joe had mentioned the traces of drugs the doctor said were in his system, she reacted unpredictably. The information clearly triggered something in her mind. But he knew one thing—he had to make a decision about Stella that had nothing to do with Will. And he had to do it tonight.

Joe rubbed his eyes. His head was full of questions about Will, but as of yet, he had no answers. He felt tired and frustrated and mainly just wished he had a beer. Forgetting about his stitches, he pushed back from the table and felt a sharp stab of pain. As the day wore on, his wound hurt more. Dr. Thompson had given him a prescription for Tylenol 3 to dull the pain, and he decided to take one.

As he filled a glass from the tap on the refrigerator, he looked absently out the window at Will Jensen's old pickup in the driveway. Along the sidewalk, a neighbor wearing a tam was walking his dog, glancing furtively toward the house the way nosy neighbors do.

Suddenly, Joe froze, the tablet on his tongue, the water glass an inch from his lips, several thoughts hitting him at once.

Traces of drugs.

Will's pickup.

The intruder in his yard that night, clunking against the house.

He knew how they had done it.

And how they were doing it to *him*.

He lowered the glass, spit out the tablet, and opened the front door. The neighbor looked up, his eyes widening for a moment, then his face broke out into a relieved smile.

The neighbor said, "Goodness, for a second there I thought you were—"

"I *know*," Joe said.

Puzzled, the man continued down the sidewalk.

Joe threw open the pickup door and shone a flashlight into the entrails of colored wires under the dashboard. It took a moment before he found what he was looking for. Even as he touched it with the tips of his fingers, he was chilled how they had pulled it off.

He climbed out of the truck shaking his head.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?" Joe yelled to the neighbor, who was halfway down the block.

"Me?" the neighbor asked, pulling on his dog to turn it.

Joe waited until the man came back. "You've lived here for a long time, right? You knew Will Jensen?"

"Yes," the man said cautiously.

"Do you walk your dog every night?" Joe asked.

The man nodded. "As long as the weather doesn't keep us in."

Joe's mind was spinning. "Were you walking your dog the night Will Jensen died?"

THERE WERE SECRET Service agents in addition to armed security guards checking invitations at the front gate of the Ennis home. Joe waited behind a black Lexus SUV until it was cleared to proceed, wishing he'd washed the pickup before coming.

A security guard shone a flashlight into Joe's face and asked him to remove his driver's license from his wallet.

"I know you," the guard said, seeing his name. "You're the guy who shot Smoke Van Horn."

Joe nodded and looked away. A Secret Service agent stepped from behind the guard and walked around the front of the truck to the passenger side and opened the door. The agent was lean and young, with an earpiece and cord that snaked down into his jacket. "Are there weapons in this truck?" he asked, looking around inside.

"Standard issue," Joe said, pointing out the carbine under the seat, the shotgun in the gunrack, the cracker shell pistol in the glove box. He was glad he'd left his holster and weapon in the statehouse.

"This is a problem," the agent said, stepping back and speaking into a microphone in his sleeve.

Joe waited, and several cars pulled up behind him.

Finally, the agent climbed into the cab with Joe and shut the door. "Sorry for the inconvenience, but the vice president will be here soon. We'll need to park you away from the premises," he said. "I'll walk you to the front door, and I'll need your keys while you're inside. When you're ready to go tonight, just tell one of my colleagues and I'll meet you at the front door and walk you back to your truck."

THE ENNIS HOME was spacious, with high ceilings, marble floors, and walls of windows that framed views of the Tetons. The furniture was made of stripped and varnished lodgepole pine, the style favored locally, and a massive elk antler chandelier with hundreds of small lights hung from a faux-logging chain. The home was crowded with guests bunched around portable bars, waiting for bartenders in tuxedos to pour their drinks. Joe scanned the crowd in the front room for anyone he might know, and saw no one familiar. Everyone, he noticed, looked exceedingly healthy and fit. The men wore open collars and jackets with expensive jeans or khakis, and the women wore cocktail dresses or ultra-hip outdoor casual clothes. He felt out of place, as he normally did. The feeling was made worse when guests gestured toward him and nodded to one another and he realized he was, in fact, being talked about.

A tall man with silver hair and a dark tan—Pete Illoway, the Good Meat guru—broke out of one of the knots of people and strode across the floor with his hand held out to Joe in a showy way. Cautiously, Joe took his hand, wondering what he wanted, while Illoway leaned into him.

"Good work up in those mountains, Mr. Pickett," Illoway said, pumping Joe's hand. "Smoke Van Horn will *not* be missed. He was an anachronism, and the valley had passed him by."

Joe said nothing, not accepting the praise nor refuting it, thinking about when Smoke had called himself an “arachnidism.”

“May I buy you a drink, sir?” Illoway asked.

“That’s okay, I can get it myself,” Joe said.

Illoway smiled paternalistically, then signaled a bartender and pointed to Joe.

“Bourbon and water, please,” he said.

Don Ennis strode purposefully into the room, parting the crowd, saw Joe, and stopped as if he’d hit an invisible wall. Ennis looked at Joe coolly for a moment, then broke into a stage grin and walked over just as Joe’s drink arrived.

“Glad you could make it, Mr. Pickett,” Ennis said. “I know Stella will be pleased.”

Joe wondered what he meant by that.

“Everyone’s talking about the incident up in the Thorofare,” Ennis said. “You’ve become quite the celebrity.”

“Was it really a gunfight like in the movies?” Illoway asked eagerly.

Joe shook his head. “Not really. It was pretty bad,” he said, the image coming back of Smoke’s vacant eyes, the way he chanted, *It really hurts, it really hurts, it really hurts*.

“Well done,” Ennis said smartly.

“I said it was bad,” Joe snapped back. “It isn’t something I’m proud of or something you two should be so damned pleased about.”

“But it couldn’t have happened to a better guy,” Illoway said, raising his glass as if he hadn’t heard a word Joe said. “He was an absolute asshole, if you’ll pardon my French. Totally against Beargrass Village, and very vocal about it in public meetings. He was Old World, not New World, if you know what I mean.”

“Speaking of,” Ennis interrupted. “Have you come to a decision on your recommendation? I know we’ve still got a few days, but ...”

Joe had been waiting for this. What he wasn’t expecting was to find out Illoway and Ennis thought Joe had done them a huge favor by shooting Smoke.

“I still haven’t filed my recommendation,” Joe said evenly, “but I’m going to recommend that the concept not go forward unless you install some gates or bridges so the wildlife can migrate. We can’t have a situation where the game is forced to cross the highway to get to lower ground. That would be dangerous to drivers and to the herds.”

Something dark and cold passed over Ennis’s face, as if Joe had double-crossed him. It was the same expression Joe had briefly seen when Stella entered the meeting room the week before.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Ennis said in a tight whisper. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope,” Joe said. “It’s the same recommendation Will Jensen was going to make, as you know. I found his last notebook where he came to that conclusion.”

Illoway reached for Ennis’s arm, but Ennis pulled away, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"Don ..." Illoway cautioned Ennis. "Now is not the time." Turning to Joe, Illoway said, "You know, if native species are allowed into the village they could infect our pure meat stock through interaction. I'm sure you're aware of that."

Joe shrugged. "Sure, it's possible. But I don't think you can have a perfectly controlled environment in the middle of wild country. A wise man once told me that real nature is complicated and messy." He enjoyed saying that, but tried not to smile.

"Who was that?" Illoway asked; he looked offended by the thought.

"Smoke Van Horn," Joe said, "the night before I shot him."

"I thought you were smarter than Jensen," Ennis spat. "He was nothing but a philandering drug addict. He was an insect compared to the size and scope of this project."

Joe looked at Ennis and took a sip of his drink. "How do you know he took drugs?"

Ennis looked like he was about to explode. Joe wanted to see it happen, see what the man said and did when he was enraged. Only the entrance of the vice president and his wife averted the concussion. Ennis turned away to greet the man, but before he did he looked over his shoulder and said, "We're not through here."

"No, we're not," Joe said evenly. "You and I have a lot to discuss."

Illoway looked at Joe and shook his head sadly. "What are you trying to do here? And what did you mean when you said we knew what Will Jensen's decision was going to be?"

"Oh," Joe said, his voice calmer and more measured than he felt. "I think you know the answer to that."

HE FOUND STELLA in the living room, with her back to the bar, sipping from a tall glass. She was well dressed in a crisp white billowy shirt, a short black skirt, and knee-high black boots. For some reason, he assumed her toe-nails were painted red. She seemed amused by the sight of him, amused by the evening in general. He noticed that she giggled out loud when one of the trophy wives, who was straining for a look at the vice president in the other room, accidentally dropped a cracker covered with some kind of soft white cheese on the leg of her cream-colored pantsuit.

"I'm glad you came," she said when he joined her.

"Your husband isn't," Joe said.

"What was going on in there? It looked like you were trying to bait him."

"I was," Joe said.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Joe smiled. "I never do. I just bump around sometimes until I hit something."

She finished her drink and handed the glass to the bartender. "Another gin and tonic, please. And what would you like?"

"I have a drink."

"Then have another." She turned around. "Ed, will you please get my friend a bourbon and water?"

Ed looked up. He was taller than Joe, his broad face impassive, his eyes challenging. Joe had obviously broken up a story Ed was telling Stella before the pantsuit incident, and he resented it.

"Ed once skied down the face of the Grand," she told Joe, her eyes widening. "Only twelve people have ever done it."

"Eleven," Ed corrected.

"Ed makes a dozen," she said, and Joe realized she was poking fun at the bartender, but Ed didn't get it. Instead, he puffed out his chest while he poured, straining the buttons on his shirt.

"That's pretty impressive," Joe said, but his mind was still on Don and Pete Illoway, how close he'd come to getting Ennis to blurt something.

She added, "He's got pictures he'll show you. He showed them to me within five minutes of meeting him."

Now you're pushing it, Joe thought. But Ed was easily flattered. He made the drink and handed it to her. "Here you go, Mrs. Ennis."

"And don't forget the bourbon and water for Joe here," she said.

"Yeah," Ed grunted.

Joe and Stella exchanged glances. She was repressing a smile. Gesturing toward the sliding glass doors, she asked, "Have you ever seen the sun set on the Tetons?"

"Oh," Joe mused, "about a dozen times so far."

"Hmpf."

"But I need some air. Thanks for the drink, Ed," Joe said, leading Stella toward the sliding glass doors.

"Make sure he didn't spit in it," she laughed. "Ed's sweet on me."

"Aren't we all?"

"It's my gift to boys," she said, smiling, flirting, but shooting a look at Joe that had just a little bit of fear in it.

THE DECK WAS clear of guests because they were all in the great room meeting the vice president. Joe and Stella walked to the corner of the deck, out of the light. Joe followed the trail of her scent through the thin outdoor sweet smell of sage and pine.

"It's a little cold," she said, putting her drink on the railing and hugging herself with her arms. "Don't you want to meet the vice president?"

"Maybe later," Joe said.

"We're going whitewater rafting tomorrow," Stella said. "It will probably be the last time we're able to do it this year before the snow starts flying. The original plan was to take the VP as our guest so Don could sell him on the idea of buying a place in Beargrass, but the Secret Service saw the stretch of river this afternoon and all of the places somebody could shoot at him—not to mention the class four rapids—and put a kibosh on the whole idea. Would you like to come with us instead?"

"That's a nice offer," Joe said, "but I'll pass."

"You should come along anyway. It's the last trip of the year. And maybe the last time for me for a long time," she said ominously.

"What do you mean?"

He could see her eyes glisten in the light of the stars. "Don's about to replace me for a newer model," she said. "I can just tell. The other day he looked at me across the

table and said, 'Did you know you have some gray hairs?' He said it in the same tone he uses when he looks at the odometer and says, 'Ninety thousand miles.' That means we'll have a new car within the week.

"He doesn't have her in the wings yet," she said, "but it won't take him long. Don always wants the best, and, well, I'm getting up there in years. His trophy isn't so shiny anymore. I always knew it would happen. That's why he had the prenup, after all. I knew it would be a short ride. But I was determined that it would be a short, *fun* ride. With lots of white-water rafting."

Joe looked away, into the darkness of the trees beyond the deck. He could see very little, but he felt something inside him, a kind of warm surge. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Who else can I tell?" she asked. "Ed? Pete Illoway? One of the trophy wives in there? My mother would just say, 'I warned you about him.' "

"But you never left him," Joe said. "Instead, you had a fling with Will Jensen. I think maybe you like all of this"—he gestured to the house—"a little more than you want to admit."

"That's cruel, Joe," she said in a flat voice.

"Yeah," he said, "it is. But I'm not in a very charitable mood right now. I'm missing my wife and my family more than I can tell you. I can't wait to get back to them. Marybeth is my best friend. When I'm with you, I feel like I'm cheating on her. And I hate feeling that way. I'm no substitute for Will, Stella. That's just one of the things I've figured out tonight."

Joe stood in silence, not wanting to look at her. He knew she was crying, and it bothered him. But he couldn't embrace her, not yet.

"Stella?"

She roughly wiped away the tears on her cheeks and looked up at him.

"Why did you murder Will Jensen?"

"Oh, God," she said, as if he'd slapped her. Her eyes were wide now. She looked scared.

"I know it was you," he said. "I knew it was someone, by the way the gun was fired. Then tonight, before I came out here, I figured out that Will had been drugged, and how it was done. I didn't know it was you who killed him until I talked to some old guy walking his dog. He said he saw you enter Will's house that night after he talked to Will. The neighbor didn't hear the shot, but when he looked out on the street after midnight, your car was gone."

She hugged herself tighter and rocked a little. The surge he had felt inside earlier got hotter. His arms and chest were tingling, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate. Something was happening to him.

"Don't hate me, Joe," she said finally. "I loved that man. I loved the fact that he was real, that he was ordinary. He was a good man, like you."

Joe's legs were getting weak. He leaned against the railing so he wouldn't sway.

"I didn't know they were drugging him. I didn't know until this morning, when you told me at breakfast that the doctor found traces of drugs in you. Then I did some checking with my doctor. He said that drugs like Valium and Xanax can make someone who is already depressed turn suicidal, especially if the victim doesn't know he's being drugged. The doctor told me someone else had been asking about the effects of these drugs earlier in the year—my husband. Don wanted to know what they would do to a person. Don told the doctor he suspected an employee, but obviously he had another purpose in mind. All I knew was that Will was getting worse, and acting out. He was humiliating himself. People were starting to make fun of him. He lost his family and he was about to lose his job, and it broke my heart. He was such a good man.

"When we were up at the state cabin," she said, "he was normal again for a day. He felt guilty being there with me, but he was normal. I thought I had broken through to him. Then he started to shake and get sick. I now know he was suffering withdrawal from the drugs, but he didn't know that and neither did I."

Joe felt hot fingers reach up through his neck, pictured his brain being gripped like a softball. He tried to focus on Stella's words, but they kept slipping out of his grasp.

"When I found him that night he was in terrible shape," she said, sniffing back tears. "His gun was on the table and he couldn't even move. He had thrown up on himself. I guess he thought if he ate all that meat he would flush something out of his system, but it didn't work. My heart was aching for him. He told me I was the only person he loved, but he couldn't take it anymore. I begged him to let me take him to the hospital, but he wouldn't go. He was pathetic, this fine, decent man. This man so unlike the men I had always known."

Joe grabbed the railing with both hands to steady himself, looking out into the darkness. His eyes burned, Stella's words suddenly loud, pounding against his head.

"Twice, he tried to put the gun in his mouth, but he was too far gone. I was crying hysterically, but I got the gun from him and I told him I loved him and I did it for him," she said, the words coming out in a rush. "If I'd known the reason he was in that condition was because my husband ... that Don was shoving Will out of his way and getting back at me at the same time ..."

She looked away from Joe and gasped. Groggily, Joe turned to see what she saw. He now knew that he had been drugged, that Ed, or the bartender before Ed, or Pete Illoway, had slipped something into his drinks. There was a roaring in his ears, and he couldn't focus on what Stella was saying or on the figures who now stood at the sliding glass door. He heard Don Ennis say, "Stella!" very sharply and saw the vice president, who was next to Ennis, look from Don to Stella to Joe, his reticence causing the Secret Service agents surrounding him to shoulder their way through the door onto the deck.

Joe launched himself forward, nearly falling, and hit Don Ennis square in the nose with a looping roundhouse right, snapping the developer's head back against the sliding door, which shattered, cascading glass onto the carpet inside and the deck outside. Just as quickly, Joe was tackled and over-whelmed. The last thing he saw was the redwood of the deck, winking with shards of glass, rushing up to meet him.

TWO HUNDRED AND fifty miles away, under the same stars and slice of moon, an SUV with Virginia plates was aimed at the lip of a remote canyon called Savage Run. The driver, who had coaxed it up there over some of the roughest country he had ever seen, eased the gearshift into drive and stepped out as the vehicle rolled forward, picked up speed, and vanished over the edge. It took four full seconds for the sound of the crash to reach the top.

35

A HARSH SHAFT of sun from a skylight burned red through his eyelids, and Joe awoke covered in sweat with a screaming headache on a metal-framed cot in the Teton County jail. He turned his head to the side, away from the light, and the movement created a wash of nausea that rose in him. He staggered to the metal toilet in the corner of the cell, threw up, and leaned against the cold cinderblock wall, breathing deeply. His mouth tasted like he'd been sucking on pennies.

"Morning, sunshine," a Secret Service agent said, standing outside his cell. Joe recognized him as the one he had first seen in the sheriff's office.

Joe looked at his wrist, but saw a pale oval of skin where his watch should have been.

"What time is it?" he croaked, noticing they had also taken his belt, boots, and everything in his pockets.

"Noon."

"Man," Joe said, "my head is killing me."

"You took a few lumps," the agent said. "By the way, you popped your stitches last night so the doctor sewed you up again."

Joe raised his arm and saw the dried bloodstains on his clothes, then raised his shirt and looked at the new bandages. There was no mirror in the cell, but when he rubbed his unshaven face he felt several cuts and bruises, and his bottom lip was swollen and sore. *Boy*, he thought, *if Marybeth could see me now, she'd be so proud.*

"I'm Agent Cameron," the man said, "and you, my friend, are in a shitload of trouble."

Joe looked over at Cameron, the words setting him back.

"What do you have against the vice president?" Cameron asked bluntly.

"Jeez ..." Joe moaned, "I've got nothing against him."

"Then why'd you go after him that way?"

"I didn't go after him," Joe said. "I went after Don Ennis."

Cameron shifted, peering at Joe through the bars.

"Yeah," Cameron said, "that's what we thought. But Mr. Ennis tried to make the case that you were attacking the VP and he stepped in front of him to protect him from you."

Joe said, "You were there, weren't you? You know it didn't happen that way."

"We wouldn't have let it happen that way," Cameron said. "But maybe you were swinging for the VP and hit the wrong guy?"

"I hit who I was trying to hit," Joe said.

Cameron showed a slight smile. "Yeah, it was obvious you were after him and not the VP. I was just testing you. But Mr. Ennis seems to call a lot of the shots around here, and I think he would like you to stay in this jail cell a lot longer."

Joe reached up with both hands and smoothed his hair back. There were lumps on his scalp too, and he winced. "Have I been charged with something? Can I talk with the sheriff?" Joe asked.

"I don't think the sheriff is back yet," Cameron said. "He had to leave early this morning because there was some kind of accident on the river. Apparently, someone drowned in the whitewater."

Joe almost didn't make the connection, but when he did he said, "Oh, God."

"They're looking for her body downriver, I guess," Cameron said.

Joe closed his eyes tight and slid to the floor.

"Was she worth punching her husband and landing in jail?" Cameron asked.

Yes, *Joe thought*, yes she was.

JOE SAT AT a conference table in the sheriff's office with Randy Pope, Trey Crump, and Tassell. His hands were handcuffed and on the table in front of him. The skin on his knuckles, where he had hit Don Ennis, was peeled back and scabbed over.

Trey was seated next to Joe. "I came over as soon as I heard. Mr. Pope called me last night."

"Does Marybeth know?" Joe asked. "I haven't been allowed to make a call."

Trey raised his eyebrows sympathetically. "I called her this morning."

Joe looked down. He could not imagine what Marybeth must be thinking. "How did she take it?"

"Not well," Trey said, "but I told her we'd figure a way out of this."

He leaned into Joe. "I heard about what happened with Smoke Van Horn. I know you're not pleased about what you had to do, but I'm damned proud of you, Joe. After that bear, you had me worried."

"Me too," Joe confessed.

Tassell cleared his throat. He looked wrung out and angry. "I'd like to remind everyone here that Mr. Pickett is under arrest for assault, so I'd appreciate you not having side conversations. Letting him out of the cell to talk with you is a courtesy."

"Thank you," Joe told Tassell. He looked at Trey, said, "Thanks for telling Marybeth that, but I *did* hit the guy. My only regret is that I didn't shoot him—"

"Joe," Trey cautioned, interrupting, "watch what you say here."

Joe was struck by the wisdom of that and went silent.

"We might have a way to get you out of this," Pope said.

Joe turned to him. Pope sat on the other side of the table with Tassell.

"I talked with Don Ennis an hour ago at the hospital," Pope said. "He was very distraught, as you can guess. The poor guy lost his wife this morning. But he did say he'd consider dropping the charges if we would transfer you out of here."

"Was he in the boat when it happened?" Joe asked.

Pope looked back, confused. "What difference does that make? Didn't you hear me? He said he'd consider dropping the charges."

"Who was in the boat?"

Pope angrily slapped the table and addressed Joe's supervisor. "Trey, we have a terrible situation here, as you know. We could have one of our game wardens charged with aggravated assault—the second employee in this same district to get arrested. If that happens, it will look like the governor has completely lost control of this agency. I risk my reputation to get this guy out of it, and he doesn't seem to care!"

Trey sighed heavily and leaned toward Joe. "Joe, what's going on? We could both lose our jobs over this."

"His wife drowns but he has the presence of mind to negotiate my transfer?" Joe asked. "Does that sound like a grieving widower to you?"

"Shock affects people in different ways," Pope said weakly, again talking to Trey as if he couldn't deal with Joe. "Don Ennis has a direct line to the governor, Trey. He's not somebody we can fuck around with anymore. We let you give Will Jensen a long leash, and then Joe here. Things couldn't have gone worse under your watch. Now we've got to think of *our* survival, and I'm talking about the whole agency."

"What did you offer him?" Joe asked Pope. "Did you tell him we'd approve Beargrass Village?"

Pope flushed red but didn't answer.

"You did," Joe said.

"I'm trying to keep you out of jail!" Pope shouted. "Why can't you get that?"

Joe stood up, and he noticed that both Trey and Tassell pushed back from the table in case they needed to restrain him.

"Don Ennis caused Will Jensen to break," Joe said. "He started to do the same to me. He probably killed his wife this morning. And you"—he pointed awkwardly across the table with his handcuffs at Pope—"just gave him what he wanted all along."

The room was silent, until Pope asked, "Can you prove a single thing you're saying?"

Joe hesitated. "Some of it," he said. "But you'll need to give me the rest of the day to nail it all down."

Trey looked from Pope to Tassell. "Let's give Joe a chance here. Is that all right with you, Sheriff?"

"I don't think I like where this is headed," Sheriff Tassell said, shaking his head. "I don't think I like it at all."

*

ON THE WAY to the statehouse in Tassell's Cherokee, the sheriff kept shaking his head. "We lose a couple of people every year on the river," he said. "Unlike homicides, it isn't that unusual." He had told Joe, Pope, and Trey that while going through the

rapids, Stella apparently lost her grip on the rope and was thrown from the boat. Don Ennis said she must have been tugged underneath his raft because they didn't see her again. Teams were searching for the body, but they hadn't found it yet.

"We've had situations where the body isn't found for weeks," Tassell said, "sometimes even longer. If it gets pinned under the water against rocks, we just have to wait. One guy wasn't found for over a year. His body washed all the way down to Palisades Reservoir and an ice fisherman found him when he was drilling a hole in the ice."

"Who else was in the boat?" Joe asked again.

"Don, of course," Tassell said, "Pete Illoway, and some guy named Shane Suhn, who works for Ennis. They all corroborated the story."

"How do we know she was in the boat?"

"Some other rafters saw her when they launched," Tassell said.

"Where did it happen?" Joe asked. "Where on the river?"

"At the start of the worst stretch of whitewater," Tassell said. "That's where most of the drownings take place. People get used to nice easy rapids, and then they hit the hard stuff and they aren't prepared for it."

Tassell leaned across the table to look at Joe. "You've seen all those Snake River rafting pictures around town? That's where they're taken, because the rollers are so big."

Joe thought about the photos he had seen in the window of Wildwater Photography.

"She wasn't inexperienced," Joe said. "She'd been on that stretch of the river many times."

"But why would Don kill his wife?" Tassell asked.

"She discovered something about him," Joe said. "And he was planning to dump her."

Trey turned in his seat, hanging an arm over the back of it, narrowing his eyes at Joe. "How well did you know her, anyway?"

"Well enough," Joe said.

"I thought you were going to say 'not well enough.' " Pope grinned.

Joe glared at him, and Pope looked away.

AT THE STATEHOUSE, Joe showed them how the piece of siding on the back of the house could be removed. They watched as he took it off and peeled back a layer of pink insulation, revealing a line of copper tubing and a metal screw top fitting that had been soldered onto the tube.

"This line connects directly from the well in the basement to the drinking water outlet on the refrigerator inside," Joe said. "It was the surest way they could drug Will. They couldn't put it in his food, because he ate out a lot and rarely cooked, except for that last night. But if they could connect it to his drinking water"—Joe fingered the valve where a bottle of liquefied narcotic could be connected by a fitting with a dispensing valve on it—"they knew it would get him." He showed them how the valve could be adjusted to dispense a quantity of the drug into the line. It was still set at one-quarter open, enough to affect Joe but not disable him.

"Christ," Tassell said, looking over the mechanism.

"The first night I was in the house I heard somebody out here," Joe said. "I heard a clunking sound, probably after they hooked up the bottle and fumbled with putting the siding back up. But I didn't figure this out until yesterday. Once I knew it was drugs, things started to make sense."

"So they didn't actually murder him," Trey said. "They created a scenario where he would either get fired, get arrested, or do himself in."

"Right," Joe said. "He was under a lot of strain after his wife left, and that's when they installed it. And they also knew that after she left he'd be in worse shape, and more vulnerable. Ennis knew Will was going to veto Beargrass Village, and the only way the project could go forward was if Will was gone and discredited. Will couldn't figure out what was happening to him—you can read it in his journals. The drugs just made things worse to the point that he couldn't see another way out of it." Joe had made the decision not to tell them what he knew about Stella's part in it. He didn't see the point, now that she was gone and Will's death had been ruled a suicide.

"But we don't know who rigged this up," Pope said. "You're speculating here."

"I am," Joe said. "But who besides Don Ennis had the means to do something like this? Who gained from Will going off the deep end?"

"You've got a point," Trey said.

"Another thing," Joe said. "Susan Jensen told me that Will's cremation was paid for by some anonymous person. She thought it was someone who liked Will, or the family. I'll bet if we check the crematorium we'll find out the check came from Ennis, or Beargrass Village, or one of his other companies."

"Why would he do that?" Pope asked.

"In case someone wanted to dig up the body and do an autopsy later," Joe said. "To prevent the discovery of drugs in Will's system."

Tassell rubbed his face with his hands and moaned.

"Let me show you something else," Joe said, leading them around the house to the driveway.

JOE EXPLAINED THAT he had located the transmitter in Will's pickup the previous afternoon, before he went to the party at the Ennises'. After searching the wheel wells, bumpers, and motor, he found it mounted under the dashboard within a spider's web of wiring. Will's line about *They know where I'm going and they track my movements* made him think of the truck.

"They knew where he went, what he said, what he told people over his radio," Joe said. "Since game wardens spend more time in their vehicles than they do anywhere else, it was like tapping his office."

Trey nodded, leaning into the cab to look under the dashboard. "If we check the frequency on that transmitter and match it to a receiver, we've found who was listening in."

"I'd guess the receiver is in a room at Beargrass," Joe said. "That's how they knew what decision he was going to make on Beargrass Village. They listened to him talk to biologists and others about the migration problems a fence would cause."

"So that's why they torched your truck," Tassell said, still with a pained expression on his face. It was as if Joe's discoveries were causing him escalating physical pain. "It was easier to do that than run the risk of getting caught putting another transmitter in *your* vehicle. They knew you'd just take Will's truck instead, and you did."

Joe stood back and let the men hash out theories and make connections. Trey bought what Joe had shown them; Pope was intrigued but wary because if Joe was right he would look foolish for his agreement with Ennis, and Tassell was pained by the prospect of confronting one of the most powerful and willful men in Teton County. While Joe listened, he saw the neighbor in the tam come out of his house with his dog. He had kept Stella out of it so far, figuring it was the least he could do. Even though he knew she was dead, the fact hadn't really sunk in yet.

"Let's go back to the station," Joe said, interrupting. "I've got an idea how we might be able to get Ennis to admit he murdered his wife."

Pope and Tassell looked at Joe with incredulity.

They were in the Cherokee before the neighbor made it down the block, for which Joe was grateful. That man, he had learned the day before, was a talker.

36

PI STEVENSON WAS in the process of flipping the open sign to closed in the window of Wildwater Photography when Joe rapped on the door. She started to point to the sign, then recognized him and unlocked the bolt.

"What happened to *you*?" she asked, recoiling from the bruises and lumps on his face.

"Is Birdy here?" Joe asked, not wanting to take the time to explain.

"He's in the back," she said. "Would you like to come in?"

"I've got some colleagues with me," Joe said. He saw her look over his shoulder at the sheriff's SUV, which was parked against the curb.

"Am I in trouble again?" she asked.

"Not that I know of," Joe said, stepping inside and signaling Tassell and Trey to follow. The studio was small, the walls filled with action shots of skiers and rafters and a few obligatory Tetons at daybreak. A long front counter divided the public area from a small office and a curtained darkroom. A red light was on above the darkroom entrance, and Joe assumed that's where Birdy was.

"What do you want?" she asked. "We were just about to close up for the day."

Joe looked straight at her. "How would you like to contribute to a real bad day for Don Ennis and Beargrass Village?"

Her eyes lit up, and she beamed. Then, with determination, she turned and shouted over her shoulder, "Birdy!"

"YOU'VE GOT TO be real careful here," Joe told Pi and Birdy. "You can't lie, and you can't insinuate anything at all, even if he presses you, or wants to negotiate over the phone. Do you understand me?"

Pi nodded, trying to contain her enthusiasm. She was both giddy and nervous at the same time. For his part, Birdy seemed pleased to have Pi so happy with him for agreeing to go along with Joe's idea.

"I'll be on the phone in the office," Tassell warned, looking from Pi and Birdy to Joe. "If anything you say comes across as even a hint of extortion or entrapment, I'm pulling the plug on this. We'll have the call recorded, and it has got to be clean enough to stand up in court if we need it."

The store's office was crowded. One of Tassell's deputies had brought in the owner of the local Radio Shack, who was opening up boxes containing a tape recorder and an 8mm video camera. Randy Pope was at the Game and Fish building, calling the agency director and the governor to let them know what was happening. Joe wondered why Pope had been so anxious to leave, but was pleased the man wasn't there.

"What if he acts like he doesn't know what we're talking about?" Birdy asked.

"That's fine," Joe said. "That means he's either innocent or he's buying time to deal with you later. My guess, though, is he'll want to take care of things right away. He won't really believe you have anything, but he's too impulsive not to make sure. He's a man of action. If that's the case, we want him to come here. We don't want a meeting set up anywhere else. You've got to be careful not to tip him off in some way. If that happens, we've lost our opportunity."

Over his shoulder, Tassell asked his deputy if the telephone tap was working, and the deputy said it was. The owner of Radio Shack looked excited to be able to play a part in the operation, Joe thought.

"What about the video camera? Where are we going to put that?" Tassell asked.

The man from Radio Shack and the deputy looked around the room theatrically for a good location.

"How about on the shelf behind the counter with all the other cameras? We can put a piece of tape over the red light so they won't know it's on," Trey said, pointing over Tassell's head. Birdy had a display of old and new cameras that he used for photographing skiers and rafters.

"That makes sense," Tassell said, rolling his eyes at the obviousness of it.

"Give us a minute," the Radio Shack owner said. "I want to test everything."

While they waited, Joe went over things again with Pi and Birdy.

"And to think this was all about meat," Pi said triumphantly. "Flesh-eaters lose their moral bearings when confronted with the possibility of not getting what they want, which is more flesh. Or in this case, better flesh."

Joe was confused for a moment, and could feel Tassell staring at him. He motioned Joe into the office and shut the door.

"She's a loose cannon," Tassell said. "She'll screw this up and we'll get hung out to dry for entrapment."

"Can you think of another way?" Joe asked.

Tassell hesitated. "No."

Joe opened the door and went back to the counter, Pi and Birdy looking at him expectantly.

"Are we still on?" Birdy asked.

"We're on," Joe said.

"Let's get this son of a bitch," Pi said, her eyes dancing.

Joe sat down, filled with sudden doubt. It had taken him over an hour to convince Tassell to try this, and the sheriff had reluctantly agreed, but only after talking with the county attorney. Tassell was concerned that Pi and Birdy's animal rights agenda was so vehement that they would do or say *anything* to implicate their target. Every word that was said, every inference, would be recorded on audio- and videotape to be scrutinized by lawyers and judges in what could be a hostile court. Looking at the glee in Pi's face, Joe wasn't so sure the sheriff wasn't right.

JOE SAT AT the counter across from Pi and Birdy while Pi arranged the speaker-phone in front of them. His assignment was to coach them through the phone call if necessary, and to warn them if they got into dangerous territory. Joe handed her the business card he had received a couple of weeks before, the one that read: "Welcome to town. I worked with Will. I'll be in touch."

As she punched the buttons, Joe turned to Tassell, his deputy, the Radio Shack owner, and Trey, and placed his finger to his lips. They all nodded back.

After three rings, a receptionist answered, "Beargrass Village."

"May I speak to Don Ennis, please?" Pi said.

"Who may I ask is calling?"

"Pi Stevenson and Birdy Richards," she said, looking up at Joe and smiling. "It's extremely important."

"Hold, please." There was a click and the silence was filled with soft classical music.

Joe turned and raised his eyebrows at the Radio Shack owner and the deputy, who both wore headphones. Both men turned thumbs up. The recording equipment was working.

"Come on the line, you bastard," Pi said, curling her lip.

Joe shushed her.

"He's an asshole," she said. "What if he doesn't take our call?"

Joe shrugged and gestured toward the phone. He didn't want to get into a discussion with her that could be overheard if the receptionist suddenly came back on the line.

"He's probably sitting in his lounge chair eating raw flesh," Pi said, and Birdy giggled.

Joe looked at them both with exasperation.

But when the receptionist picked up, Pi was all business.

"Mr. Ennis suffered a traumatic event today and he's resting," the receptionist said. "May I please take your name, number, and a message so he can call you back?"

Joe saw a spark in Pi's eyes as she said, "I suggest you wake him up. This call concerns the traumatic event. Again, it's extremely important that we talk to him."

Uh-oh, Joe thought, trying to catch her eye. *Don't go any further with it.*

The receptionist hesitated. Joe could almost see her trying to figure out what to do.

"This is something Mr. Ennis will want to hear himself," Pi said. When she finally looked up, Joe motioned to her to back off. She smiled and dismissed Joe with a "don't worry" look.

"Please hold," the receptionist said, and the music came back.

Tassell had crossed the room and was hovering behind Joe.

"I know," Joe whispered to him. His stomach was knotting up, and Pi said frivolously, "I think we've got the hook in the bastard's mouth. Now he'll know what fish feel like."

"Pi—" Joe started to say, when the music stopped suddenly.

"This is Don Ennis." His voice was a harsh, no-nonsense baritone. "This is not a good time to call. What's so goddamned important?"

Pi mimed the act of reeling in a fish while she spoke: "Mr. Ennis, this is Pi Stevenson—"

"Is there somebody there with you?" Ennis interrupted. "I thought I heard another voice."

Joe thought, *Shit*.

"Yes, there is," Pi said smoothly, and Joe felt his scalp crawl. "I'm here with Birdy Richards. He's the owner of Wildwater Photography, and I work for him."

Joe let out a long, silent sigh.

"I thought you were that animal-rights kook."

"One and the same, Mr. Ennis, but that's not why I called."

"What is it, then? I told you this was a bad time."

"Well, we thought you would want to know," she said.

"Know what?"

Birdy leaned forward toward the phone. "Mr. Ennis, this is Birdy Richards. Do you know what we do here at Wildwater Photography?"

"No, and I really don't care."

Birdy glanced at Joe, hurt. Joe gestured for him to go on.

"We've got cameras placed on the banks of the Snake River," Birdy said. "Where the rapids are. We take pictures of the rafters when they come through the whitewater. The rafters usually don't even know it, because they're having too much fun or they're too scared to look for the cameras. Then, at the take-out spots, we pass out flyers saying the rafters can buy photos of themselves shooting the rapids if they come into town to my shop. We have proof sheets ready by the time they get here that they can look at, and I sell the shots either as prints or I can put them on a disk. About five

to seven percent of the rafters decide they want pictures made of their Snake River experience.”

As Birdy talked, Joe began to relax. Birdy had made his sales pitch often enough that he sounded comfortable. Joe could imagine Ennis’s mind racing with the possibilities of what he was being told.

“Of course,” Pi interjected, “that means ninety-five percent of the photos aren’t sold to anyone. Sometimes, they turn out to be the most interesting shots taken.”

Stop there, Joe gestured to her.

“What the fuck?” Ennis said. “What are you telling me exactly?”

“Just that we get a lot of pictures we don’t quite know what to do with,” Birdy said.

Pi leaned forward, and Joe mouthed, *No!* She sat back, pouting.

“So,” Ennis said, his voice hushed, “are you telling me your cameras shot all of the rafters on the river today?”

Birdy looked at Joe, fear in his eyes. He obviously didn’t know how to answer the question, how to parse his words so he wasn’t lying. The fact was, Birdy’s cameras shot only rafts for companies that enrolled in his program and agreed to tape photocells on their rafts that would signal the remote cameras to work. All the other rafts, including the Ennis raft, would have passed by unnoticed.

“Mr. Ennis,” Pi said, while Joe cringed in anticipation, “what we’re saying is that we got a lot of pictures we just hate to see go to waste. Some real prize-winners.”

Okay, Joe thought, signaling her. That was vague enough.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” Ennis growled.

“We thought you’d find that interesting,” Pi said, beaming at Joe and yanking an imaginary hangman’s noose above her head.

“Would you consider possibly selling the photos you took today?” Ennis asked.

“Sell them?” Pi said innocently.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Ennis said. “Quit fucking around. I want to look at them, and maybe I could buy some of them. I want you to bring them to me.”

Tassell’s deputy sneezed in the back of the room.

Ennis went silent.

Joe covered his face with his hands.

“Who was that?” Ennis asked.

Birdy looked stricken. His wide forehead was beaded with sweat. Pi, for the first time, looked scared.

Then Joe mouthed, *The dog*.

“Just the dog,” Pi said to the phone.

“The dog?”

“Pi feeds the dog a vegan diet,” Birdy said, running with it. “He doesn’t get enough protein so he catches a lot of colds. I keep telling her that dogs need to eat meat, even if people don’t.”

“Dogs can survive perfectly well without meat,” Pi said heatedly, meaning it. “They can get their protein from soy and other natural products.”

"Jesus, you people," Ennis said disgustedly.

Again, Joe relaxed.

"Mr. Ennis," Birdy said, "we can't bring the pictures there. They're here on the computer. But if you want to, you can come look at them at the shop."

Again, silence. Joe guessed Ennis was deliberating what to do.

"Has anyone else seen the photos?" Ennis asked.

"No, sir."

"Does anyone else know about the photos?"

"Not yet, sir," Birdy said, hanging the *yet* out there.

"Sit tight. What's the address?" Ennis barked. "I'll be there in thirty minutes."

WHEN THE CALL was concluded, Birdy flopped forward into his arms as if completely spent, and Pi pumped her fist in the air and screamed, "Yes!"

Joe turned and looked at the sneezing deputy, who was beet red. Then to Pi and Birdy: "Great job."

37

RANDY POPE ARRIVED at the photography shop as the sheriff and his deputy were hiding their vehicles on adjacent streets. Pi and Birdy stood around nervously near the counter, waiting for Don Ennis to arrive. Joe and Trey Crump were behind the curtain in the darkroom, and Trey motioned to Pope to join them so he couldn't be seen if Ennis drove by and looked through the front window.

"The director doesn't like it," Pope said, as Joe slid the curtain closed behind him. "He's ordering you to pull the plug on this before we all wind up in court for entrapment."

Joe was thankful for the darkness because the look he gave Pope could have resulted in a charge of insubordination.

"We're too far along for that," Trey said in defense. "We can't stop anything now. Ennis is on his way."

"Didn't you hear me?" Pope asked. "I said the director doesn't want us involved with this. He thinks the governor may have already heard from Ennis about Joe assaulting him. It looks like a vendetta by the agency against one of the governor's biggest supporters."

"It's *my* vendetta," Joe said, "against a guy who caused the death of a game warden as well as his own wife."

Pope turned on Joe, prodding him in the chest. "You shouldn't even be here. You're officially suspended for the shooting. You're so far over the line I can't even see you. And you can forget about taking over this district."

"Touch me again with that finger," Joe said, "and I'll break it off."

Trey shouldered his way between them, and Joe stepped back, trying to calm down. Despite the darkness of the room, he saw orange spangles flash in his vision and knew he was seconds away from lashing out at Pope.

"Randy," Trey said in a calming voice, "Ennis all but admitted he killed her. He's coming here to try to buy the pictures so he can't be implicated. Everything is on tape, and even Tassell thinks it's clean and legal."

"But there aren't any pictures," Pope said. "The poor guy probably thinks he's being framed by those nuts out there, and he doesn't know what to do."

Beyond the curtain, Joe heard Tassell, his deputy, and the owner of Radio Shack enter the shop and assemble behind the closed office door. The stage was now set for Ennis.

"You weren't here," Trey said. "They never told Ennis they had pictures of him murdering his wife. Ennis just assumed they did, and he's coming here. Once he's in the shop, he'll say something that incriminates him. Then the sheriff will arrest him. If he doesn't incriminate himself, he walks away."

"I don't like it," Pope said. "And the director *ordered* us to back off."

"He can order whatever he likes," Trey said with an edge Joe had rarely heard. "He's out in two months, and we'll have a new governor. Maybe we'll even get someone who cares more about arresting a murderer than kissing up to his contributors."

Joe heard Pope spin away and start for the curtain to leave.

"Stay here," Trey said, and Joe could see the faint outline of Trey reaching up and grabbing the assistant director by the arm. Pope stopped.

"When this is over," Pope hissed, "and Don Ennis walks out of here, I'm going to suspend your asses."

"I'm already suspended," Joe whispered. "Are you going to double suspend me?"

Pope started to talk when a bell tinkled out in the shop and someone pushed the door open with enough force that it banged against the wall.

Joe leaned toward the curtain and cocked his head so he could hear what was going on. He hoped the video camera on the shelf was working, and that Tassell was watching on the monitor.

Joe heard the shuffling of several sets of feet, thinking Don had brought support. The bell tinkled again as the door shut, and there was the sound of the lock being thrown.

"You're Pi Stevenson?" It was Ennis.

"Yes, I am." She didn't sound as nervous as Joe felt.

"What was your name again?"

"Birdy Richards."

"What the hell kind of name is 'Birdy'? Jesus, you people."

"Don, let's just get what we came for." Joe recognized the voice of Pete Illoway.

Ennis: "Right. First, have any copies been made?"

Birdy: "No. No copies."

Ennis: "Is anything still in the cameras on the river?"

Birdy: "no. They've all been downloaded to the computer."

Ennis: "Then I'll pay you for the computer. Shane, grab that thing and we can go."

Shane Suhn, Joe recalled, Ennis's chief of staff.

Suhn: "That's just the monitor, Don. That won't help us. You don't know anything about computers."

Ennis: "Then take whatever the fuck it is that has the pictures on it, Shane."

Birdy: "Hold it. I never said you could have my computer. I need to make a living."

Pi: "Damn right. And what are you going to pay us? We aren't just going to give you Birdy's equipment and you go home. Maybe we should just call the sheriff after all."

Ennis: "You shut the fuck up, lady. You're playing in the big leagues, and you don't even know it."

Illoway: "Don ..."

Pi: "You don't have any intention of paying us, do you? You're going to do something to us so we don't talk."

Ennis: "Tell me what you saw in the photos."

Pi: "Not until you tell us what you're planning to do."

Ennis: "Shane, remember what we discussed on the drive over?"

Suhn: "You want me to do it here? Now? If somebody looked in the window they could see us."

Ennis: "I don't give a shit. She won't shut up."

Illoway: "Look, how much do you want for the computer? Give us a number."

Ennis: "You're spending my money, Illoway."

Illoway: "Give us a number."

Suhn: "Maybe we ought to see the pictures first. Maybe there's nothing on them. Maybe it's just a bunch of us having a fun time on the river, and somebody falls in. That won't prove anything."

There was a long silence. Joe was tempted to inch the curtain back to see what was taking place.

Illoway: "Shane's right, Don. The photos may not prove a thing."

Ennis: "Fire up that computer and let's have a look at them."

Birdy said, "It's on," and Joe could feel the terror in his voice.

When would Tassell decide he had heard enough, Joe wondered, and come out? How far would Tassell let Pi and Birdy go, searching for photos that didn't exist on the computer?

Ennis: "Where are the photos?"

Birdy: "Give me a minute. The computer was sleeping and it'll take a second to boot up."

Ennis: "What's that?"

Birdy: "It's asking for my password."

Ennis: "Hurry up, goddamnit."

Then Pi spoke. Her voice was strong, challenging. "What are you guys thinking?" she asked. "Are you thinking that you can't see when Don here cuts the straps of her life vest? Or that you can't see it when he shoves her out of the boat just as you enter the whitewater? Or that you can't see when he hits her with his oar to keep her from crawling back in the boat?"

Ennis: "I never hit her with my fucking oar!"

Now, *Joe thought*. Tassell needs to come out now.

Pi: "Maybe it was Pete Illoway, the eating consultant, who was whacking at her with his oar. I'm not sure."

Illoway: "We're fucked, Don."

Suhn: "Okay, you two, step away from the counter."

"There's no need for *guns* here," Pi said frantically, shouting out the word *guns*. "We can work something out. Really, we can."

Ennis: "It's too fucking late for that, girlye."

Joe was about to rip the curtain aside and hurl himself into the shop when he heard the office door open and Tassell say, "*HANDS ON THE COUNTER! All of you! NOW!*"

Joe didn't have a weapon, so he stepped aside so Trey could push through the curtain with his Beretta drawn. Joe saw Ennis look up, his face pinched and white. Illoway was looking at the door. Shane Suhn had a semiautomatic pistol pointed at Pi.

"Drop that," Tassell hollered at Suhn, who quickly lowered the weapon and dropped it with a clunk on the floor.

"I thought you were never going to come out," Pi said angrily.

"Keep your hands in view on top of the counter," Tassell said.

"Including us?" Birdy asked.

"Step away from them," Tassell said, and Birdy and Pi scrambled out of the way.

"You set us up, you bastard," Ennis said finally, glaring at Tassell. Ennis had two black eyes and white tape across his nose. Joe had done more damage the night before than he realized. When Ennis saw Joe, the developer's eyes narrowed further.

"You," was all he said.

Tassell announced that all three were under arrest for the murder of Stella Ennis.

"Don't forget Will Jensen," Trey said.

"That comes later," Tassell said.

Illoway, Joe thought, looked like he was about to cry. Instead, he screwed up his face, glanced for a moment at Ennis, and said, "Don did it."

Ennis turned on Illoway. "You fuck—"

"We didn't even know he planned to throw her out of the boat until he did it," Illoway said. "Maybe Shane did, but I didn't."

Suhn acted like he'd been slapped. "I didn't know about Stella," he said. "But I can tell you all you want to know about the game warden."

Joe felt a release inside, and exchanged glances with Trey.

Ennis was livid. "Jesus, you guys. Just shut up! Where's your loyalty?"

"My loyalty is to the Good Meat Movement," Illoway said. "That's more important than one developer."

"I'll get us out of this," Ennis said. "*Just shut up!*"

"Get yourself out of it," Suhn said. "You don't pay me enough to go to prison for you."

Ennis was red and trembling with rage. He fixed on Pi, who didn't even try to contain her glee. "Those fucking pictures," he said.

"What pictures?" Pi grinned.

38

JOE WAITED FOR Mary to conclude a telephone conversation while he stood at the front counter holding a box with his possessions in it. When she hung up and looked up at him, he extended his hand.

"Thank you for everything, Mary," he said. "You made me feel welcome here."

She blushed as she briefly shook his hand, then looked away.

"I just got off the phone with Susan Jensen," Joe said. "I was a little surprised by her reaction."

"How much did you tell her?" Mary asked.

Joe thought about his answer. "I told her that Don Ennis had been drugging her husband, which led to his death. And I told her I scattered Will's ashes on Two Ocean Pass. She didn't seem as relieved as I thought she'd be."

"Nothing about Stella?" she asked. Joe wondered about Mary's exact meaning for a second, then decided Mary didn't know about Will's last seconds.

Joe shook his head. "That didn't seem necessary. Stella didn't enter the picture until after Susan had left with the boys anyway."

Mary arched her eyebrows in a way that told Joe he was wrong about that. But she didn't pursue it.

"You probably heard that Don Ennis hired Marcus Hand as his defense lawyer," Mary said. Hand was a flamboyant attorney who lived in Jackson and was nationally famous for freeing guilty clients.

"I heard."

"Hand's already claiming it was entrapment," Mary said. "And that Pete Illoway and Shane Suhn are lying to keep themselves out of jail. If they don't find Stella's body soon, he'll claim Ennis didn't even murder her."

Joe nodded. He could only imagine how the recorded words and images from the studio would be twisted and reinterpreted for a jury. He tried not to think of what Stella's body would look like when it was finally found. The image made him shiver. The condition of her body would likely be beyond any possibility of providing evidence

that she had been injured before drowning, and Hand would no doubt make an issue of that.

Tassell's men had found a receiver in Shane Suhn's office at Beargrass Village that was tuned to the transmitter in Will's truck, as well as cassette tapes of Jensen's radio communications. They also brought back the developer's telephone log, which Joe got a look at. The most interesting thing on the log was a call to Ennis immediately following Pi and Birdy's call. It was from Randy Pope, urging Ennis to contact him immediately. Luckily, Ennis had already left for Wildwater Photography and hadn't been warned off.

"Don Ennis will be out on the street within a year, is my prediction," Mary said.

Joe shrugged in a "what can you do?" gesture.

"But it looks like there won't be any Beargrass Village," she said, her expression of relief revealing, for the first time, what she thought of the project. "Not with Pete Illoway pulling out of it. Without his blessing, it would be just another million-dollar housing development, and Jackson has enough of those."

Joe wasn't sure what to say next. He picked up his box. "I rented a car until they replace my pickup," he said. "The county attorney will need Will's truck for evidence at the trial."

She looked up. "Will you be coming back?"

"Do you mean for the trial, or for good?"

"For good."

He looked away. "I don't know where I'll be," he said, thinking of Pope's threats, knowing his career probably hinged on who was elected governor. "I'm still suspended."

"I hope you come back," Mary said, a softness around her eyes Joe found touching. "I think you're a good man."

Not as good as you think, Joe thought but didn't say.

"Right now, I need to get home," he said, and carried his box out the door.

IT FELT STRANGE to be in a compact rental car instead of a high-profile pickup, he thought, as the National Elk Refuge passed by his window. It felt like he was sitting on the pavement as he drove, and when he looked in his rearview mirror he saw the grilles and headlights of vehicles behind him, not the drivers.

While he drove, Joe reviewed what had taken place in Jackson. He had been instrumental in bringing down a multimillionaire and stopping a Good Meat development, and in the process had partially avenged a game warden's reputation. He had also killed a man he had no ill feelings toward. Now, Joe was returning to Saddlestring under suspension, with a cloud of guilt still hovering over him in regard to his feelings for Stella, in a compact car with a motor already struggling with the ascent into the mountains. But he couldn't wait to get home. It felt like he'd been gone a year.

The sight of the gleaming white Tetons in his rearview mirror did nothing for him. Neither did the thought of Don Ennis skirting the charges due to the machinations of a celebrity lawyer.

When Joe first met Sheriff Tassell following Will Jensen's funeral, the sheriff had said, "There are people here who don't think they need to play by the rules." Later, Smoke Van Horn had called it all a big game. Both, Joe thought, were right.

He pictured Marybeth, Sheridan, and Lucy. How little he had thought of them recently, how his life and struggles had been his alone. How he had almost strayed. He pulled over to let the little engine cool down and put his head in his hands.

Joe couldn't remember ever having felt so small.

39

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON when Joe turned off Bighorn Road. The sight of his home filled him with joy and trepidation, Lucy's bike in the yard, Toby nickering to him from the corral, dried leaves in the grass that needed raking. Unfortunately, his mother-in-law's SUV was in the driveway next to Marybeth's van.

He climbed out of the rental car and stretched, not used to being cramped up like that for hours. Maxine didn't recognize him until he got out—she was looking for his pickup—and came bounding outside through the screen door.

"Dad!" Lucy yelled from her window. It was one of the best things he had ever heard. Marybeth appeared smiling at the front door, looking blond, fit, and beautiful. They embraced just inside the front gate, Lucy now running out to see him.

"Joe," Marybeth said, "why didn't you call ahead?"

"My cellphone burned up in the fire," he said.

"Your face," she said, running her palms over his features, "it's bruised. You need to tell me everything that's happened."

Joe looked up, saw Missy in the doorway. He thought her smile was not genuine.

"Later," he said.

"We have steaks in the freezer I can thaw," Marybeth said. "I want to cook you a big dinner."

Joe smiled.

MISSY STAYED FOR dinner, much to Joe's chagrin. She told him about Italy, about the food and the style of clothes they wore there, about the service in first class. Joe wanted to burst, there was so much to tell Marybeth. And so much he wanted to hear.

Sheridan sat sullenly at the table, and Joe felt the tension between her and Marybeth, even if neither said anything.

At one point, while Missy was describing Venice, Sheridan looked up and said, "I'm glad you're home, Dad."

"I am too," he said.

She made an "it's been rough" eye roll, then bent her head back to her plate. Joe saw that Marybeth had watched the exchange carefully, and he wondered what was to come later, after Missy left.

There was something about Marybeth, he thought. She seemed extremely pleased to see him, but over-conciliatory and a little guarded. If she wasn't angry with him, he decided, it was something else. Something had come between them, and he couldn't guess what. His suspension, the fact that he had killed a man? His arrest? All of the above? Or maybe, he thought, it had been their distance. In fifteen years of marriage, they had never been apart for so long. Again, the cloud of guilt that was Stella washed over him. He decided not to tell her. Now was not the time. He didn't know if there ever would be a time. And he wouldn't ask her what was wrong, what it was that made her seem different, defensive, even guilty. He would eat steak and keep his mouth shut.

AFTER THEY CLEARED the dinner dishes off the table, Joe went down the hallway toward the bathroom and glanced into Sheridan's room. It was different, and it took him a moment to figure out what had changed.

"Where are your falconry posters?" he asked her. Over the past three years, Sheridan had filled a wall with depictions of falcons and hawks of North America, as well as *National Geographic* wildlife shots of falcons in flight and going for a kill. They had been replaced by photos of rodeo cowboys and rock musicians cut out of magazines. He looked at her bookshelf and saw that the books on falconry that Nate had given her were gone.

Sheridan looked up from her homework. "I guess I've got new interests."

"That came about pretty quickly," he said.

"Dad," Sheridan said, "Nate is gone. Didn't Mom tell you that?"

"No."

"I guess I'm not all that surprised," Sheridan said. Joe continued down the hallway, puzzled.

MARYBETH AND MISSY were having coffee at the table when Joe came into the dining room.

"What's this about Nate?" he asked, interrupting Missy, who was talking about Venetian glass.

The look on Marybeth's face struck Joe. There was some fear in it, as well as caution. "He's been gone for three days," she said.

"That's not so unusual," Joe said, thinking of Nate's long absences.

"This time, his phone is disconnected," Marybeth said.

Joe still didn't understand the gravity behind Marybeth's meaning.

"Joe," she said, "he seems to have vanished the same night Sheriff Barnum disappeared."

"And good riddance to that man," Missy chimed in.

Now, Joe got it.

IT WAS LATE in the evening when he returned to the house. Missy was finally gone, and Marybeth had fallen asleep on the couch with the television on. Joe hung up his jacket in the mudroom and gently woke her.

"Did you find him?" she asked, rubbing her eyes and stretching. Stretching provocatively, Joe thought.

He shook his head. "The bison's gone," Joe said. "His mews is empty, and the house is locked down tight. His Jeep is gone too."

"Joe, do you think—"

"No," he said, sitting down beside her. "He's somewhere. But it sure seems strange that he wouldn't let you know he was going since he agreed to watch over things here."

Something passed over her face that he couldn't read, something he wasn't sure he wanted to find out more about.

They sat in silence for a moment, and she said, "I'm so glad you're home."

He nodded. "Me too."

"What are we going to do, Joe?" she asked.

"That's a big question. You mean with my job?"

"That," she said, and didn't finish her thought.

"It depends on who gets elected governor," Joe said. "Trey thinks a lot depends on the election, and who is appointed director of the agency."

"I've heard Randy Pope's name mentioned."

Joe sighed. "Me too."

She seemed to want to tell him something, he thought, but she remained silent.

THEY OPENED A bottle of wine left over from Missy's wedding and took it to bed with them. They made love voraciously the first time, tenderly the second. What struck him was how different she felt at the outset, and familiar she became.

He watched her wash her face at the sink beneath the mirror, and studied her as she climbed back into bed with him.

"Don't ever leave for so long again, Joe," she said, snuggling up to him.

"I won't," he said. Then: "We've got to work on some things, don't we?"

He felt her tense up, then gradually relax. "Yes, we do."

THE NEXT WEEK, Joe said, "Remember when you told me about that fawn in the yard?" Marybeth was next to him on the couch, and he reached over and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"Yes."

"You said Nate picked up the body and took it away."

She nodded.

"To that sulfuric mineral springs he showed me, right?"

"Yes."

"I went there today," Joe said. "I had a hell of a time getting there in that stupid little car, but I got close enough I could walk in."

Her eyes grew wide as she listened.

"I saw the remains of the fawn," he said. "Only part of the skull was left, and a few thigh bones. The rest will dissolve within a few weeks. But those weren't the only bones in the spring."

"Oh, no," she said, covering her mouth with her hand.

"The bodies of two men were in there too," he said. "Most of their flesh had been eaten away, but I could tell they were men by the size. There were two skulls, each with big holes in the forehead."

She brought up her other hand and peered at him over her fingertips.

"And I found this near the spring," Joe said, fishing in his breast pocket. He handed it to her. It was a pen, the gold nearly eaten off. But the words to SHERIFF BARNUM FOR 28 YEARS OF SVC could still be seen on the barrel.

Marybeth looked at Joe hard. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to report it," Joe said, fully aware of the implications of that. "But I'm going to do it anonymously."

THREE DAYS LATER, after receiving the call from Trey Crump telling him that the shooting of Smoke had been investigated and Joe was cleared, he finally went into his home office. Joe had been consciously avoiding it since glancing at his desk the first day home and confirming his fear about mounds of paperwork. Now, he sat in his chair, looked at the pile of envelopes and parcels, and didn't know where to begin. He sorted through the mail, putting it roughly into piles relating to the agency, letters from hunters and fishers, and general mail. There was one small envelope he didn't know how to classify. It was addressed to J. Pickett and had no return address. The postage mark on it said LAGUARDIA AIRPORT—NEW YORK CITY. It was postmarked two days before.

Nate? he thought.

He slit open the envelope, pulled out a single card. It read:

Good work, my hero. I'm glad I'm such a good swimmer.

While I'm pretty certain I'd at last found what I've been looking for, you are home now. And since I'd never dream of interfering, at least not uninvited, my search must continue, though at least now I have a solid reference.

I respect family very much. I bet you didn't know that.

Someday, though, I may change my mind.

And you might change yours.

It was signed with that single, familiar "S."

In Plain Sight

[Dedication]

For Molly Jo...
and Laurie, always

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Acknowledgements
- April
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
- May
 - Chapter 8
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
- June
 - Chapter 18

- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30

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APRIL

Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go by any rules. They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal because there's not enough material.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

The great plain drinks the blood of Christian men and is satisfied.

O. E. Rölvaag,
Giants in the Earth

1. Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming

WHEN RANCH OWNER Opal Scarlett vanished, no one mourned except her three grown sons, Arlen, Hank, and Wyatt, who expressed their loss by getting into a fight with shovels.

Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett almost didn't hear the call on his radio when it came over the mutual-aid channel. He was driving west on Bighorn Road, having picked up his fourteen-year-old daughter, Sheridan, and her best friend, Julie, after track practice to take them home. Sheridan and Julie were talking a mile a minute, gesticulating, making his dog, Maxine, flinch with their flying arms as they talked. Julie lived on the Thunderhead Ranch, which was much farther out of town than the Picketts' home.

Joe caught snippets of their conversation while he drove, his attention on his radio, the wounded hum of the engine and the dancing gauges on the dash. Joe didn't yet trust the truck, a vehicle recently assigned to him. The check-engine light would flash on and off, and occasionally there was a knocking sound under the hood that sounded like popcorn popping. The truck had been issued to him as revenge by his cost-conscious superiors, after his last vehicle had burned up in a fire in Jackson Hole. Even though the suspension was shot, the truck did have a CD player, a rarity in state vehicles, and the sound track for the ride home had been a CD Sheridan had made for him. It was titled "Get with it, Dad" in a black felt marker. She'd given it to him two days before after breakfast, saying, "You need to listen to this new music so you don't seem so clueless. It may help." Things were changing in his family. His girls were getting older. Joe was not only under the thumb of his superiors but was apparently becoming

clueless too. His red uniform shirt with the pronghorn antelope Game and Fish patch on the shoulder and his green Filson vest were caked with mud from changing a tire on the mountain earlier in the day.

"I think Jarrod Haynes likes you," Julie said to Sheridan.

"Get out! Why do you say that? You're crazy."

"Didn't you see him watching us practice?" Julie asked. "He stayed after the boys were done and watched us run."

"I saw him," Sheridan said. "But why do you think he likes *me*?"

" 'Cause he didn't take his eyes off of you the whole time, that's why. Even when he got a call on his cell, he stood there and watched you while he talked. He's hot for you, Sherry."

"I wish *I* had a cellphone," Sheridan said.

Joe tuned out. He didn't want to hear about a boy targeting his daughter. It made him uncomfortable. And the cellphone conversation made him tired. He and Marybeth had said Sheridan wouldn't get one until she was sixteen, but that didn't stop his daughter from coming up with reasons why she needed one now.

In the particularly intense way of teenage girls, Sheridan and Julie were inseparable. Julie was tall, lithe, tanned, blond, blue-eyed, and budding. Sheridan was a shorter version of Julie, but with her mother's startling green eyes. The two had ridden the school bus together for years and Sheridan had hated Julie, said she was bossy and arrogant and acted like royalty. Then something happened, and the two girls could barely be apart from each other. Three-hour phone calls between them weren't unusual at night.

"I just don't know what to think about that," Sheridan said.

"You'll be the envy of everyone if you go with him," Julie said.

"He doesn't seem very smart."

Julie laughed and rolled her eyes. "Who cares?" she said. "He's fricking awesome."

Joe cringed, wishing he had missed that.

He had spent the morning patrolling the brushy foothills where the spring wild turkey season was still open, although there appeared to be no turkey hunters about. It was his first foray into the timbered south-western saddle slopes since winter. The snow was receding up the mountain, leaving hard-packed grainy drifts in arroyos and cuts. The retreating snow also revealed the aftermath of the small battles and tragedies no one had witnessed that had taken place over the winter—six mule deer that had died of starvation in a wooded hollow; a cow and calf elk that had broken through the ice on a pond and frozen in place; pronghorn antelope caught in the barbed wire of a fence, their emaciated bodies draping over the wire like rugs hanging to dry. But there were signs of renewal as well, as thick light-green shoots bristled through dead matted grass near stream sides, and fat, pregnant does stared at his passing pickup from shadowed groves.

April was the slowest month of the year in the field for a game warden, especially in a place with a fleeting spring. It was the fifth year of a drought. The hottest issue he

had to contend with was what to do with the four elk that had shown up in the town of Saddlestring and seemed to have no plans to leave. While mule deer were common in the parks and gardens, elk were not. Joe had chased the four animals—two bulls, a cow, and a calf—from the city park several times by firing .22 blanks into the air. But they kept coming back. The animals had become such a fixture in the park they were now referred to as the “Town Elk,” and locals were feeding them, which kept them hanging about while providing empty nourishment that would eventually make them sick and kill them. Joe was loath to destroy the elk, but thought he may not have a choice if they stuck around.

The changes in his agency had begun with the election of a new governor. On the day after the election, Joe had received a four-word message from his supervisor, Trey Crump, that read: “Hell has frozen over,” meaning a Democrat had been elected. His name was Spencer Rulon. Within a week, the agency director resigned before being fired, and a bitter campaign was waged for a replacement. Joe, and most of the game wardens, actively supported an “Anybody but Randy Pope” ticket, since Pope had risen to prominence within the agency from the administrative side (rather than the law-enforcement or biology side) and made no bones about wanting to rid the state of personnel he felt were too independent, who had “gone native,” or were considered uncontrollable cowboys—men like Joe Pickett. Joe’s clash with Pope the year before in Jackson had resulted in a simmering feud that was heating up, as Joe’s report of Pope’s betrayal made the rounds within the agency, despite Pope’s efforts to stop it.

Governor Rulon was a big man with a big face and a big gut, an unruly shock of silver-flecked brown hair, a quick sloppy smile, and endlessly darting eyes. In the previous year’s election, Rulon had beaten the Republican challenger by twenty points, despite the fact that his opponent had been handpicked by term-limited Governor Budd. This in a state that was 70 percent Republican. Rulon grew up on a ranch near Casper, the grandson of a U.S. senator. He played linebacker for the Wyoming Cowboys, got a law degree, made a fortune in private practice suing federal agencies, then was elected county prosecutor. Loud and profane, Rulon campaigned for governor by crisscrossing the state endlessly in his own pickup and buying rounds for the house in every bar from Yoder to Wright, and challenging anyone who didn’t plan to vote for him to an armwrestling, sports-trivia, or shooting contest. The word most used to describe the new governor seemed to be “energetic.” He could turn from a good old boy pounding beers and slapping backs into an orator capable of delivering the twelve-minute closing argument by Spencer Tracy in *Inherit the Wind* from memory. His favorite breakfast was reportedly biscuits and sausage gravy and a glass of Pinot Noir. Like Wyoming itself, Joe thought, Rulon didn’t mind leading with his rough exterior and later surprising—and mildly troubling—the onlooker with a kind of eccentric depth.

He was also, according to more and more state employees who had to deal with their new boss, crazy as a tick.

But he was profoundly popular with the voters. Unlike his predecessor, Rulon re-assigned his bodyguards to the Highway Patrol, fired his driver, and insisted that his name and phone number be listed in the telephone book. He eliminated the gatekeepers who had been employed to restrict access to his office and put up a sign that said GOV RULON'S OFFICE—BARGE RIGHT IN, which was heeded by an endless stream of visitors.

One of Rulon's first decisions was to choose a new Game and Fish director. The Board of Commissioners lined up a slate of three candidates—Pope included. The governor's first choice was a longtime game warden from Medicine Bow, who died of a heart attack within a week of the announcement. The second candidate withdrew his name from consideration when news of an old sexual harassment suit hit the press. Which left Randy Pope, who gladly assumed the role, even declaring to a reporter that "fate and destiny both stepped forward" to enable his promotion. That had been two months ago.

Trey Crump said he saw the writing on the wall and took early retirement rather than submit to Pope's new directives for supervisors. Without Trey, who had also been Joe's champion within the state bureaucracy, Joe now had been ordered to report directly to Pope. Instead of weekly reports, Pope wanted *daily* dispatches. It was Pope who had nixed Joe's request for a new pickup and instead had sent one with 150,000 miles on it, bald tires, and a motor that was unreliable.

Joe had been around long enough to know exactly what was happening. Pope could not appear to have a public vendetta against Joe, especially because Joe's star had risen over the past few years in certain quarters.

But Pope was a master of the bureaucratic Death of a Thousand Cuts, the slow, steady, petty, and maddening procedure—misplaced requests, unreturned phone calls, lost insurance and reimbursement claims, blizzards of busywork—designed to drive an employee out of a state or federal agency. And with Pope, Joe knew it was personal.

"DAD!"

Joe realized Sheridan was talking to him. "What?"

"How can he tune out like that?" Julie asked Sheridan, as if Joe weren't in the cab.

"I don't know. It's amazing, isn't it?" Then: "Dad, are we going to stop and feed Nate's birds? I want to show Julie the falcons."

"I already fed them today," he said.

"Darn."

Joe slowed and turned onto a dirt road from the highway beneath a massive elk-antler arch with a sign hanging from chains that read:

THUNDERHEAD RANCHES, EST. 1883.

THE SCARLETTS

OPAL

ARLEN

HANK

WYATT

Julie said, "My grandma says someday my name is going to be on that sign."

"Cool," Sheridan replied.

Joe had heard Julie say that before.

EVEN THOUGH JOE had seen the Thunderhead Ranch in bits and pieces over the years, he was still amazed by its magnificence. There were those, he knew, who would drive the scores of old two-tracks on the ranch and look around and see miles and miles of short grass, sagebrush, and rolling hills and compare the place poorly with much more spectacular alpine country. Sure, the river bottom was lush and the foothills rose in a steady march toward the Bighorns and were dotted with trees, but the place wouldn't pop visually for some because it was just so open, so big, so sprawling. But that was the thing. Because of the river, because of the confluence of at least five significant creeks that coursed through the property and poured into the Twelve Sleep River, because of the optimum diversification of landscape within a thousand square miles, and the vast meadows of thick, nutrient-enriched grass, the Thunderhead was the perfect cattle ranch. Joe had once heard a longtime rancher and resident of the county, Herbert Klein, say that if aliens landed and demanded to see a dog he would show them a Labrador, and if they demanded to see a ranch, he would skip his own and show them the Thunderhead.

It was also an ideal ranch for wildlife, which posed an opportunity for Hank, who ran an exclusive hunting business, and a problem for Joe Pickett.

"Look," Sheridan said, sitting up.

A herd of pronghorn antelope, a liquid flow of brown and white, streamed over a knoll ahead of them and to the right, raising dust and heading for a collision with the pickup.

"They don't see us yet," Joe said, marveling, as always, at the graceful but raw speed of the antelope, the second-fastest mammal on earth.

When the lead animals noticed the green Wyoming Game and Fish pickup, they didn't stop or panic but simply turned ninety degrees, not breaking stride, their stream bending away from the road. Joe noted how Sheridan sucked in her breath in absolute awe as the herd drew parallel with the pickup—the bucks, does, and fawns glancing over at her—and then the entire herd accelerated and veered back toward the knoll they had appeared from.

"Wow," she said. "

'Wow' is right," Joe agreed.

"Antelope bore me," Julie said. "There are so many of them."

For a moment he had been concerned that the lead antelope was going to barrel into the passenger door, something that occasionally happened when a pronghorn wasn't paying attention to where he was going. That was all he needed, Joe thought sourly, another damaged pickup Pope could carp about.

That's when the call came over the mutual-aid channel.

Joe said, "Would you two please be quiet for a minute?"

While the entire county was sheriff's department jurisdiction, game wardens and highway patrolmen were called on for backup for rural emergencies.

Sheridan hushed. Julie did too, but with attitude, crossing her arms in front of her chest and clamping her mouth tight. Joe turned up the volume on the radio. Wendy, the dispatcher, had not turned off her microphone. In the background, there was an anxious voice.

"Excuse me, where are you calling from?" Wendy asked the caller.

"I'm on a cellphone. I'm sitting in my car on the side of the highway. You won't believe it."

"Can you describe the situation, sir?"

The cellphone signal ebbed with static, but Joe could clearly hear the caller say, "There are three men in cowboy hats swinging at each other with shovels in the middle of the prairie. I can see them hitting each other out there. It's a bloody mess."

Wendy said, "Can you give me your location, sir?"

The caller read off a mile marker on State Highway 130. Joe frowned. The Bighorn Road they had just driven on was also Highway 130. The mile marker was just two miles from where they had turned onto the ranch.

"That would be Thunderhead Ranch then, sir?" Wendy asked the caller.

"I guess."

Joe shot a look toward Julie. She had heard and her face was frozen, her eyes wide.

"That's just over the hill," she said.

Joe had a decision to make. He could drive the remaining five miles to the ranch headquarters, where Julie lived, or take a fork in the road that would deliver him, as well as Sheridan and Julie, to the likely location of an assault in progress.

"I'm taking you home," Joe said, accelerating.

"No!" Julie cried. "What if it's someone I know? We've got to stop them."

Joe slowed, his mind racing. He felt it necessary to respond, but did not want to put the girls in danger. "You sure?"

"Yes! What if it's my dad? Or one of my uncles?"

He nodded, did a three-point turn, and took the fork. He snatched the mic from its cradle. "This is GF forty-three. I'm about five to ten minutes from the scene."

Wendy said, "You're literally there on the ranch?"

"Affirmative."

There was a beat of silence. "I don't know whether Sheriff McLanahan is going to like that."

Joe and the sheriff did not get along.

Joe snorted. "Ask him if he wants me to stand down."

"You ask him," Wendy said, completely breaking protocol.

*

AS THEY POWERED up the two-track, Joe could see that Sheridan and Julie had huddled together.

"Can you keep a secret?" Julie whispered, loud enough for Joe to hear.

"Of course I can," Sheridan said. "You know that. We're best friends."

Julie nodded seriously, as if making up her mind.

"You can't tell your parents," Julie said, nodding at Joe.

Sheridan hesitated before answering. "I swear."

"Swear to God?" Julie asked.

"Come on, Julie. I said I promise."

"Tighten your seat belts, girls," Joe cautioned. "This is going to be bumpy."

The scene before them, as they topped the hill, silenced Julie and whatever she was going to tell Sheridan. Below them, on the flat, there were three pickups, each parked haphazardly in the sagebrush, doors wide open. Inside the ring of trucks, three men circled each other warily, raising puffs of dust, an occasional wide swing with a shovel flashing the late afternoon sun.

Out on the highway, two sheriff's department SUVs and a highway patrolman turned from the highway onto an access road, their lights flashing. One of the SUVs burped on his siren.

"Jesus Christ," McLanahan said over the radio, as the vehicles converged on the fight. "It's a rodeo out here. There's blood pourin' outta 'em ..."

"Yee-haw," the highway patrolman said sardonically.

Joe thought the scene in front of him was epic in implication, and ridiculous at the same time. Three adults, two of them practically legends in their own right, so blinded by their fight that they didn't seem to know that a short string of law-enforcement vehicles was approaching.

And not just any adults, but Arlen, Hank, and Wyatt Scarlett, the scions of the most prominent ranch family in the Twelve Sleep Valley. It was as if the figures on Mount Rushmore were headbutting one another.

It was darkly fascinating seeing the three of them out there, Joe thought. He was reminded that, in a situation like this, he would always be an outsider looking in. Despite his time in Twelve Sleep County, he would never feel quite a part of this scenario, which was rooted so deeply in the valley. The tendrils of the Scarlett family ranch and of the Scarletts themselves reached too deeply, intertwined with too many other people and families, to ever completely sort out. Their interaction with the people and history of the area was multilayered, nuanced, too complicated to ever fully understand. The Scarletts were colorful, ruthless, independent, and eccentric. If newcomers to the area displayed even half of the strange behavior of the Scarletts, Joe was sure they'd have been run out of the state—or shunned to the point of cruelty. But the Scarletts were local, they were founders, they were benefactors and philanthropists—despite their eccentricities. It was almost as if longtime residents of the area had declared, in unison, "Yes, they're crazy. But they're *our* lunatics, and we won't have anyone insulting them or judging them harshly who hasn't lived here long enough to understand."

Arlen was the oldest brother, and the best liked. He was tall with broad shoulders and a mane of silver-white wavy hair that made him look like the state senate majority floor leader he was. He had a heavy, thrusting jaw and the bulbous, spiderwebbed nose

of a drinker. His clear blue eyes looked out from under bushy eyebrows that were black as smears of grease, and he had a soothing, sonorous voice that turned the reading of a diner menu into a performance. Arlen had the gift of remembering names and offspring, and could instantly continue a conversation with a constituent that had been cut off months before.

Hank, the middle brother, was smaller than Arlen. He was thin and wiry with a sharp-featured blade-like face, and wore a sweat-stained gray Stetson clamped tight on his head. Joe had never seen Hank without the hat, and had no idea if he had hair underneath it. He remembered Vern Dunnegan, the former game warden in the district, warning Joe to stay away from Hank unless he absolutely had the goods on him. "Hank Scarlett is the toughest man I've ever met," Vern had said, "the scariest too."

Hank had a way of looking coiled up when he stood still, the way a Brahma bull was calm just before the chute gate opened. Hank was an extremely successful big-game guide and outfitter, with operations in Wyoming, Alaska, and Kenya. His clients were millionaires, and he was suspected of using less-than-ethical means to assure kills of trophy animals. Hank had been on Joe's radar screen even before Joe was assigned the Saddlestring District, and Hank knew it. All the game wardens knew of Hank. But Joe had never found hard evidence of any wrongdoing. Hank's legend was burnished by rumors and stories, such as when Hank single-handedly packed a 200 pound mountain sheep twelve miles across the Wind River Mountains in a blinding snowstorm. Or Hank crash-landing a bush plane with mechanical problems into the middle of a frozen Alaskan lake, rescuing two clients, amputating the leg of one of them while they waited for help. And Hank dropping from a tree onto the back of a record bull moose and riding it a quarter of a mile before reaching forward and slitting its throat.

Wyatt was the biggest but the youngest. His face was cherubic, without the sharp angles his brothers' had. Everything about Wyatt was soft and round, his cheeks, his nose, the extra flesh around his soft brown eyes. He was in his early thirties. When people within the community talked about the historic Scarlett Ranch, or the battling Scarlett brothers, it was understood they were referring to Arlen and Hank. It was as if Wyatt didn't exist, as if he was as much an embarrassment to the community as he was, no doubt, to the family itself. Joe knew very little about Wyatt, and what he had heard wasn't good. When Wyatt Scarlett was brought up, it was often in hushed tones.

Joe was close enough now that he could see Arlen clearly. Arlen was bleeding from a cut on the side of his head, and he shot a glance over his shoulder at the approaching vehicles. Which gave an opening to Hank, the middle brother, to swing and hit the back of Arlen's head with the flat of his shovel like a pumpkin on a post.

Julie screamed and covered her face with her hands.

Joe realized what he was thrusting her into and slammed on his brakes. "Julie, I'm going to take you home ..."

“No!” she sobbed. “Just make them stop! Make them stop before my dad and my uncles kill each other.”

Joe and Sheridan exchanged glances. Sheridan had turned white. She shook her head, not knowing what to say.

Joe blew out a breath and continued on.

ARLEN WENT DOWN from the blow as the convoy fanned out in the sagebrush and surrounded the brothers. Joe hit his brakes and opened his door, keeping it between him and the Scarletts. As he dug his shotgun out and racked the pump, he heard McLanahan whoop a blast from his siren and say, in his new cowboy-slang cadence, “DROP THE SHOVELS, MEN, AND STEP BACK FROM EACH OTHER WITH YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD. EXCEPT YOU, ARLEN. YOU STAY DOWN.”

The officers spilled out of their vehicles, brandishing weapons. The warning seemed to have no effect on Hank, who was standing over Arlen and raising his shovel above his head with two hands as if about to strike it down on his brother the way a gardener beheads a snake.

Joe thought Arlen was a dead man, but Wyatt suddenly drove his shoulder into Hank and sent him sprawling, the shovel flying end-over-end through the air.

“Go!” McLanahan shouted at his men. “Go round ’em up now!”

“Stay here,” Joe said to Julie and Sheridan. His daughter cradled Julie in her arms. Julie sobbed, her head down.

Joe, holding his shotgun pointed above the fray, stepped around his truck and saw three deputies including Deputy Mike Reed rush the three prone Scarlett Brothers. Reed was the only deputy Joe considered sane and professional. The others were recent hires by McLanahan and were, to a man, large, mulish, quick with their fists, and just as quick to look away if an altercation involved someone who was a friend of the Sheriff’s Department—or, more specifically, McLanahan himself.

Arlen simply rolled to his stomach and put his hands behind his back to be cuffed, saying, “Take it easy, boys, take it easy, I’m cooperating ...”

Wyatt, after watching Arlen, did the same, although he looked confused.

It took all three deputies to subdue Hank, who continued to curse and kick and swing at them, one blow connecting solidly with Deputy Reed’s mouth, which instantly bloomed with bright-red blood. Finally, after a pepper spray blast to his eyes, Hank curled up in the dirt and the deputies managed to cuff his hands behind him and bind his cowboy boots together with Flex-Cufs.

AFTER TWO YEARS as county sheriff, McLanahan still seemed to be somewhat unfinished, which is why he had apparently decided in recent months to assume a new role, that of “local character.” After trying on and discarding several personas—squinty-eyed gunfighter, law-enforcement technocrat, glad-handing politician—McLanahan had decided to aspire to the mantle of “good old boy,” a stereotype that had served his predecessor Bud Barnum well for twenty-four years. In the past six months, McLanahan had begun to slow his speech pattern and pepper his pronouncements and observations with arcane westernisms. He’d even managed to make his face go

slack. His sheriff's crisp gray Stetson had been replaced by a floppy black cowboy hat and his khaki department jacket for a bulky Carhartt ranch coat. Rather than drive the newest sheriff's department vehicle, McLanahan opted for an old county pickup with rust spots on the panels. He bought a Blue Heeler puppy to occupy the passenger seat, and had begun to refer to his seven-acre parcel of land outside the city limits as his "ranch."

McLanahan squatted down in the middle of the triangle of handcuffed brothers and asked, "Can one of you tell me just what in the hell this is all about?"

Joe listened.

"Mama's gone," Hank said, his voice hard. "And that son-of-a-bitch there"—he nodded toward Arlen—"thinks he's going to get the ranch."

McLanahan said, "What do you mean she's gone? Like she's on a vacation or something?"

Hank didn't take his eyes off of Arlen. "Like that son-of-a-bitch killed her and hid the body," he said.

"What?" McLanahan said.

There was a high, unearthly wail, an airy squeal that seemed to come down from the mountains. The sound made the hairs on Joe's neck stand up. It was Wyatt. The big man was crying.

Joe looked over his shoulder at his pickup truck, to see if Julie had heard. Luckily, the windows were up and she was still being held by Sheridan.

"Mind if I stand up now?" Arlen asked the sheriff.

McLanahan thought it over, nodded his assent, and told Deputy Reed to help Arlen up but to keep him away from Hank.

Joe squatted down a few feet from Wyatt.

"Are you okay?" Joe asked. "Are you hurt?"

Wyatt just continued to sob, his head between his knees, his back heaving, tears spattering the ground between his boots. Joe asked again. Wyatt reached up with his cuffed hands and smeared his tears across his dirty face.

"Where's my mom?" Wyatt asked, his words mushy. Joe noticed Wyatt had missing teeth. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "She can't be far."

"But Hank says she's gone."

Joe said, "I'm sure we'll find her."

Wyatt's eyes flared, and for a second Joe thought the man would strike out at him.

"Where's my mom?" *Wyatt howled.*

"Pickett!" McLanahan yelled, "What are you doing over there?"

Joe stood uneasily, searching Wyatt's upturned, tragic face for a clue to his behavior. "Making sure Wyatt's okay," Joe said.

"He's not," McLanahan said, and one of the deputies laughed. "Trust me on that one."

Joe looked at Arlen, and Hank. Both brothers were turned toward Wyatt, but neither said anything. They simply stared at their younger brother as if they were observing an embarrassing stranger.

Joe walked over to Deputy Reed, who was holding a bandanna to his split lip.

"What do you think the deal is with Opal?" Joe asked, out of earshot of the Scarlett brothers.

"Don't know," Reed said. "But I do know that old woman's just too goddamned mean to die."

WHILE SHERIFF MCLANAHAN interviewed each of the brothers quietly and individually, Joe concluded that he was no longer needed and, by inadvertently bringing Julie, he had done more harm than good.

"I've got Julie Scarlett, Arlen's daughter, in my truck," Joe told Reed. "I don't want her to see any more. I think I need to get her home to her mother." Joe gestured toward Arlen.

"You mean Hank?" Reed asked.

"No," Joe said. "I mean her dad, Arlen."

Reed squinted. "Arlen isn't her dad."

Joe wasn't sure what to say. He had dropped Julie off before at the big ranch house where she lived with Arlen, her mother, and Opal. As far as Joe knew, Hank lived alone in a hunting lodge on the other side of the ranch.

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

Reed shrugged. "When it comes to the Scarletts, nothing is as it seems. Julie and her mother moved out of Hank's place years ago, but from what I understand, Hank is her dad."

Joe wondered if Sheridan knew this, if Julie had told her. Or if Reed was mistaken.

"Either way," Joe said, "I think I should get her home."

Reed nodded. "If you see Opal, give us a call."

"I will. Do you really think she's missing?"

Reed scoffed. "Do you really think those men would be out here beating each other with shovels if she was back home baking cookies? The whole damned county has been scared of the day when Opal passed on and those three would start fighting for the ranch. Now it looks like that day has come."

As Joe turned toward his truck, he heard McLanahan shout at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the ranch," Joe said over his shoulder. "It looks like you've got things handled here."

"It's okay," Reed told his boss. "He's got Hank's little girl with him."

"I'll need your statement," McLanahan said. "It sounds like you were one of the last people to see Opal alive."

Joe turned, surprised. He had talked to Opal the day before about charging fishermen access fees. One of the brothers must have told McLanahan that.

"When do you need the statement?"

“Tonight.”

Joe thought of Marybeth’s last words to him that morning. She asked him to be home on time because she was cooking dinner and wanted to have the whole family there for a change. With her business thriving, that was a rarity. He had promised he would be home.

“Can it be tomorrow morning?” Joe asked.

The sheriff’s face darkened. “No, it can’t. We’ve got to jump all over this one, and what you’ve got to tell us may help.”

Joe looked up. He saw that Julie’s head was up, her eyes on her uncles and father. He wanted to get her away from there, and quickly.

“Tonight,” McLanahan called after him.

“Tonight,” Joe said, walking away.

He opened the door to his truck and said, “I’m so sorry you saw this, Julie.”

She cried, “Please, just take me home.”

2

ON THE MORNING Opal Scarlett vanished, a mud-streaked green late-model SUV with Georgia plates pulled off I-80 at exit 214 and into the parking lot of Rip Griffin’s Truck Stop outside Rawlins, Wyoming. The driver left the car running while he climbed out, stretched, and dug through his army duffel in the back seat for a clean shirt. He had been driving all night and all morning, stopping only to fill the tank and buy pork rinds, bottled water, and cashews. The floor of the car was littered with the wrappers.

As he walked across the parking lot toward the store, he breathed in deeply and looked around him. It was high and desolate, this country, as if the prairie had been pushed from below the earth way up in the air. He thought of seeing the sign just an hour ago that read CONTINENTAL DIVIDE, thinking, *That’s it?* Not a single damned tree. The smell in the air was of diesel fumes from the trucks lined up on the far side of the lot and something sweet that he guessed was sagebrush. Even with the interstate highway humming behind him, there was an immense blanket of quiet off the road. The air was light and thin, and the terrain wide open as far as he could see. He felt exposed, like everybody who could see him would know why he was there, what he was up to. He thought of the herds of pronghorn antelope he had seen in the distance as the sun came up. Hundreds of them out there, red-brown and white, glowing when the sun hit them and lit them up. Unlike the animals he was used to at home who survived by hiding in the dark timber and the swamp, and moved only at night, these antelope stood out there in the wide-open plains, bold as you please, using the openness and long-range visibility as a defense measure. If you could see them, he thought, they could see you. Hide in plain sight, that was the way out here. He would learn something from that.

In the bathroom, he stripped off his greasy sweatshirt, balled it up, and tossed it in a garbage can. He filled the sink with water, splashed his face and rubbed it under his arms, across his chest, and dried off with paper towels. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, liking what he saw. Liking it a lot.

His blue eyes burned back from shadowed sockets. There were hollows under his sharp cheekbones, and his three-day growth of beard added an edge to his gaunt features that had once been described by the wife of his last hunting client as “haunted.” He didn’t know if that was good or bad, but he didn’t forget the word. He tilted his chin up and surveyed his pectorals, and liked the clean definition of them, and the blue, green, and red tattoo of a striking water moccasin that stretched from one nipple to the other. The way the head of the snake turned out with an open mouth and dead black eyes always gave him a little thrill. It scared some women, another thing that was all right with him.

He pulled the rubber band out of his long brown hair, combed it back with his fingers, and then snapped it back on. With his hair pulled back so tight, it looked as though he wore a skull cap, and his eyes appeared even more piercing. He liked that too.

Teeth bared into a half grin, he made his eyes go dead. This was his most fearsome look. He had showed it to the lady who said he seemed haunted, and it had the desired effect. She was terrified, her eyes so wide they looked about to pop out, her mouth forming a perfect little hole. That felt good, to have that kind of power over a rich, stupid lady who shouldn’t have been in his hunting camp in the first place.

The bathroom door wheezed open and a trucker came in. He was big through the shoulders but had a fleshy face and a big belly. When the trucker saw him standing there at the sink he started to say something smart-ass, something like “Doing a little primping, eh?” or “Did you forget your hair spray?” but when their eyes met in the mirror it was as if the fat man suddenly choked on a piece of meat. All the man did was nod, turn away, and pass behind him for the shelter of a stall.

He winked at himself in the mirror, pleased with the effect he had on a man outweighing him by at least ninety pounds, then pulled his new shirt on and walked out of the bathroom.

As he passed the counter, which was stacked with displays for all-natural amphetamines and cigarette lighters in the shape of cell phones and hand grenades, he asked the bored, washed-out clerk, “Is this the right road to get to the Wyoming State Pen?”

“The *pay-un*?” the clerk said, mocking his accent. He was so surprised by her insolence that he didn’t know what to say. His first instinct was to reach over the box of beef jerky and pull her tongue out by the roots.

“Yeah,” she continued, either too empty-headed or jaded to care about how he felt, “this is the exit. Just get back on the road and go over the hill and you’ll see it.” She gestured vaguely over her head, to the south. “You visiting or checking in?”

Again, she insulted him! He could feel the rush of blood to his face, feel his fists involuntarily clench. If only she knew what he was capable of, he thought. If only that clerk knew about what had happened to that hunter and his wife back in Mississippi, she wouldn't be doing this. That couple should never have left Atlanta to go hunting in their green SUV.

THE SIGHT OF the prison complex, a bunch of low-slung gray buildings sprawled across a sagebrush-choked valley, cooled him down a little. As he passed the sign that read NO TRESPASSING: ALL VEHICLES AND INDIVIDUALS ARE SUBJECT TO SEARCH BEYOND THIS POINT, his mind focused again, his anger venting out like the *kack-kack-kack* of a pressure cooker releasing steam, the reason for his arrival coming back into prominence.

Not that he didn't think about that woman behind the counter, how he could come back later and wait for her in the employee parking lot so that he could break her face—and that mouth!—open with an iron bar. But he had work to do, information to get, and it had been long in planning. He couldn't let her insolence set him back, add an unnecessary complication. That clerk would never know how close she had come to ... what? He wasn't sure. He would have just let his rage take over, seen where it took him. One thing he was sure of: she was the luckiest woman in Rawlins, Wyoming. Too bad she didn't know it.

The prison was close to the interstate, but a high rocky ridge separated the two. Every day, thousands of travelers took that interstate going either east or west, and few if any of them knew how close they were to a maximum-security prison just over the hill, a place filled with murderers, rapists, kidnappers, and other scum of the earth. He had known plenty of ex-cons. Some he'd grown up with, some he'd hired, some he'd gone drink for drink with at a bar. In fact, technically, he was an ex-con, although he didn't feel like one. Five years in his state pen down South for aggravated assault. He'd spent most of his time observing the makeup of the general population. To a man, they were stupid. Even the ones with some intelligence had a stupid blind spot that later tripped them up. They *deserved* to go to prison. They didn't think, they just did. They were nature's mistakes, human bowel movements. Prison was too good for most of them. And he'd told a couple of them that right to their faces, because he didn't care what they thought of him.

He cruised through the parking lot, looking at the cars. Half of the registrations were from Wyoming, the rest from all over. He saw a flash of brake lights from a yellow ten-year-old Ford pickup with a camper shell and Wyoming plates. The truck had just pulled in. He parked the SUV two rows behind it. While he waited, he emptied all the metal from his pockets into a dirty sock and put it in the glove compartment. The occupants of the truck, an older man wearing red suspenders and a pear-shaped woman with tight gray curls, finally got out to go inside. They were no doubt the parents or grandparents of some stupid convict, and in a way it was kind of a sweet, sad thing to see. Were they wondering what they could have done differently? Did they

ask themselves where they had gone wrong, to turn out a son like this, a human bowel movement? *But*, he said to himself, *at least they have family*.

He took a quick look in the mirror, smiled at his reflection, and followed. The old couple walked so slowly he overtook them at the entrance to the building. The man flinched a bit when he darted in front of them and grabbed the handle to the door.

The old man snorted, said, "What in the ... ?"

But instead of rushing inside, the man who had driven all night opened the door for them, stepped aside, and said, "Let me get this here heavy door for you."

The woman looked from her husband to the man, and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure."

WHILE HE WAITED for the old couple to check in at a desk inside the waiting room, he read the notices on the bulletin board. The room was clean and light, built of cinder block painted pale lime green. The check-in desk was on one side of the room and a row of lockers was on the other.

The couple gave their names while the woman in uniform behind the desk found them in her notebook.

The guard handed them a key and told them to remove all metal objects and to put everything in one of the lockers before going through the metal detector.

In order to visit, *a sign posted on the bulletin board said*, visitors shall be MODESTLY DRESSED to be permitted inside. The following will not be allowed: bare midriffs, see-through blouses or shirts, sleeveless shirts, shorts, tube tops, halter tops, extremely tight or revealing clothing, dresses or skirts above the knee, sexually revealing attire ...

He glanced over at the old couple while they emptied their pockets. The woman seemed flustered. She clucked at her husband, asking him whether he thought her thick old nurse's shoes would be okay. The old man shrugged. She wore a billowy print dress that did little to disguise her bulk. Thick, mottled ankles stuck out below the hem of the dress and looked stuffed into the shoes. *Nothing sexually revealing there*, he thought, and smiled.

... Visitors must wear undergarments; children under the age of ten may wear shorts and sleeveless shirts. No rubber slippers or flip-flops will be allowed.

It took the couple three tries to get through the metal detector. First, the old man had to remove his suspenders because of the metal clips. The second time, the woman had to confess that the bra she wore to hold up her massive breasts contained wire. Then, the man had to remove his work boots because of the hobnails in the heels. Finally, the guards allowed the old couple through provided the suspenders be put away in the locker.

He watched the old man close his locker door and noted the number: 16.

He approached the check-in desk, smiling.

"You are ... ?" the guard asked.

He said his name.

"Give me your ID so I can hold on to it here."

He handed his driver's license to her. She looked at it and matched up the photo.

"That's quite a name," she said, and the corners of her mouth curled up a fraction. Was she amused? Contemptuous? Flirty? He couldn't decide.

He said, "It never bothered me none."

"All the way from Mississippi. And you're here to see ..." She paused, following her finger across the page, then said it.

"That's right."

She handed him a key to locker number 31, and gave him a speech about metal objects she had memorized. He'd heard it before down South.

"All I got with me is this," he said, digging in his pocket for a can of Copenhagen chewing tobacco. "I want to give it to him."

She took the Copenhagen from him and screwed the top off. The strong smell of powdered black tobacco filled the room. He felt his stomach muscles clench, but he tried to keep his face expressionless. He could not smell anything other than tobacco, and he doubted she could either. So far, so good.

"I guess that will be okay," she said, handing it back.

"Oh," he said, smiling his warmest smile and letting his eyes drip on her a little, "and I ain't wearin' any underwear."

This produced an amused shake of her head. "That's just for women visitors," she said.

"I shoulda figured that out," he said. "You live around here?" He'd be willing to take her home, even though she was a little too heavy and plain in the face. Or at least he'd take her out to his car. She had a nice full mouth.

"Of course I do," she said, sitting back in her chair, looking at him closely, making a decision. She voted no, he could see it happen. Maybe it was his beard. "Where do you think I'd live if I work for the Department of Corrections in Rawlins? Hawaii? Now please proceed through the metal detector."

HE PLACED THE locker key in a plastic basket and showed the two guards at the metal detector the can of Copenhagen.

"She said it was okay," he said, gesturing to the waiting room.

"She did, huh?" a guard wearing horn-rimmed glasses said, taking the can and opening it. Unlike the woman, the guard stuck his bare finger into it and swirled it around.

"What are you looking for?" he asked. "You're getting your germs in it."

The guard looked up, not sympathetic. "People try to smuggle things in here all the time," he said. "How do we know you didn't mix something in here?"

He felt his neck get hot. "But she said it was okay. It's a gift."

"Nope," the guard said. "Leave it here. You can get it on your way out." The guard replaced the top, and wiped his finger on his uniform pants.

Go wash your hands ... Don't put your finger in your mouth, *he wanted to warn. But all he said was, "Oh, come on ..."*

The guard shook his head no. It was final.

"For Christ sake," he said. His plan was already going a little awry. But he had a backup.

"Keep Him out of it," the guard said. "Do you want to go inside or not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave it here and go get in the van."

He nodded, figured he'd better shut up. As he went down the hallway where another guard was waiting at an open door, he heard a metal clunk as the tobacco was tossed inside a metal waste can. He let out a breath and walked ahead. A van was outside.

He settled into the first seat behind the driver. He was the only visitor in the van. The driver climbed in after him, turned on the motor, shut the door, and did a slow U-turn. He looked outside the window at the bare, rocky hills. There were wisps of clouds in a high blue sky and nothing, absolutely nothing, else. Except some antelope, up there on the hillside. Hiding in plain sight.

IT WAS A mile from the Administration Building to the prison. The driver said, "First time?"

"Yep."

"You want to know what you're looking at?"

He really didn't care, but to be friendly, he said, "Sure."

"That's the ITU," the driver said, nodding in the direction of a boxy gray building behind a fence topped with razor wire. "Intensive Treatment Unit. Ultra-rehab. That's where the drug addicts get sent when they arrive. Or if an inmate needs extensive psychological treatment."

"That's probably a lot of them, I'd guess," he said.

"You're right about that. This is a state-of-the-art prison," the driver continued, saying it in a way that suggested he had repeated it a hundred times, like a tour guide at a theme park. "It's a city unto itself. Everything is on premises, cooking, laundry, hospital, everything. It would continue to function if the rest of the world didn't, at least for a while. We have six hundred and eighty inmates in A, B, C, and E buildings, or pods. The inmates are segregated based on their crimes and their behavior, and you can tell their status by the shirts they wear. Yellow means newbie, or rookie. Blue shirts and red shirts are general population. Orange means watch out, that man is in trouble or he's dangerous. White means death row.

"The whole place is watched twenty-four-seven by two hundred cameras that are everywhere. I mean it, everywhere. There are also motion sensors everywhere, and I mean everywhere. No one moves in this place that somebody isn't watching him.

"That includes visitors," the driver said, looking at him in his mirror to make sure he had heard him.

"It's slow today for visitors. Summer weekends, we get more than a hundred people. The average day is fifty. Are you meeting your inmate in the contact or noncontact area?"

He wasn't sure. "Noncontact, I think."

“Who is it?”

He told him.

The driver nodded. “Yeah. Noncontact. He’s in for murder, right?”

He said yes. Multiple homicide. Death row. He’d be wearing white.

“He doesn’t get many visitors,” the driver said, leaving it at that.

HE STOOD IN another waiting area. He wished the driver hadn’t told him about the cameras, even though he should have known. If he’d felt exposed standing in a parking lot, he really felt exposed here. He’d been told the conversation he was about to have wouldn’t be recorded. But how could he be sure of that? He’d have to keep his comments obscure, the way he had in his letters to the inmate. Get things across without actually saying them.

Beyond the waiting room, through three-quarter-inch glass, was the big visiting room with tables and chairs in it. A guard, a woman, sat at a desk in the corner, doing paperwork. On the desk was the biggest box of sanitizing wipes he had ever seen. He grimaced, thinking about what it was she had to wipe up out there, what kinds of fluids oozed out of these people, this scum. There was a table with an urn of coffee and columns of white Styrofoam cups. Bright plastic toys were stacked in a corner. A television was on with a game show on it. *Jesus, the place is almost cheery*, he thought. It reminded him of a modern high school without windows.

A guard came into the room with a clipboard.

“You’re John Wayne Keeley?”

“Yessir.”

“You’re here to see Wacey Hedeman?”

“Yessir.”

“Follow me.”

SEVEN YEARS BEFORE, Wacey Hedeman had gone crazy. Until it happened, he had been a game warden working for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in northern Wyoming, near the Bighorn Mountains. He had a good reputation and was well liked; a former champion rodeo bull rider in the PRCA, star of the university rodeo team, state champion wrestler before that. He was gregarious, ambitious, and cut a wide swath. He was, in practically everyone’s opinion, paid the highest compliment a Wyomingite paid another: He was thought “a good guy.”

But that was before he got the urge to run for Twelve Sleep County sheriff. He had needed money and influence to win, and he hooked up with former supervisor and mentor Vern Dunnegan, who had reappeared in the area as an advance landman for a natural-gas pipeline. Dunnegan could deliver the office to Wacey because he had the goods on the current sheriff, if Wacey would clear the way and anyone in it for the pipeline project. The situation spiraled downward into places no one anticipated and in the end, Wacey murdered four men and shot a pregnant woman before he was stopped.

Keeley had been told some of the story, and had looked up the rest. Wacey Hedeman had been sentenced to die by lethal injection, but he was still waiting for it to happen.

His partner in crime, Vern Dunnegan, was serving out his sentence in the same prison, but in the general population, not maximum security.

KEELEY WAS TAKEN through a door labeled noncontact visits and down a narrow hallway. The guard opened another door and Keeley went into a narrow cubicle with a desk, a stool bolted to the floor, a foot-wide counter, and a thick piece of glass that revealed a setup on the other side that was similar. A half-inch slot was cut in the glass near the counter, enough room to pass papers through. A black phone was mounted on the wall.

He sat down, straddling the stool, his palms flat on the counter, his nose just a few inches from the glass.

The door in the other room opened, and Wacey Hedeman stepped in and looked at him.

Hedeman was smaller than he thought he would be, Keeley thought. The old newspaper photos he had seen of Hedeman made him look taller, and more than a little dashing. His drooping gunfighter mustache was still there, though, but streaked with some gray. He had a bantam rooster kind of cockiness to his step, and the way he looked at Keeley from beneath his eyebrows ... he looked like someone you wouldn't want to mess with. One of Wacey's sleeves flopped around as he moved. *That's right*, Keeley thought, *his arm got shot off. Idiot.*

The guard behind Wacey Hedeman said, "I'll be right outside"—Keeley could read his soundless words through the glass by watching his mouth—and Hedeman nodded but didn't look back at him. The guard withdrew and the door closed. Wacey sat down. Their faces were no more than eighteen inches apart, through the glass. They reached for the handsets simultaneously.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me," Keeley said.

"Did you bring me what you said you would?"

Keeley raised his eyebrows. "They wouldn't let me bring it through security. I tried, though. The first lady let me but the guy at the metal detector took it."

Wacey's face started to turn red. He glared at Keeley through the glass, and lowered the handset from his face. Keeley thought for a second that Wacey might just stand up, turn around, and demand to be let out.

"I'm sorry," Keeley said.

Wacey just stared at him.

"Don't fuck with me," Wacey said, after bringing the phone back to his face. "Do you know how much I crave that stuff in here? Do you have any fucking idea?"

"No."

"Some of these guys have it," Wacey said, nodding toward the inmates with visiting families in the open room. "How is it they get it and I don't? Why is it okay to smoke but not okay to chew? It pisses me off. This is Wyoming. A man ought to be allowed to chew here."

Maybe because you're on death row? Keeley thought but didn't say. "I don't know. It don't seem too fair. I'm sorry."

"Quit saying that," Wacey said, his eyes on Keeley. "You sound like one sorry son-of-a-bitch."

Keeley felt his always-present anger flare up, and fought to stanch it. He would let this man humiliate him if it would get him the information he needed. Who cared if a stupid con treated him badly? It wasn't as if he'd ever see the guy again.

"Let's start over," Keeley said. "Thanks for seeing me, putting me on your visit list."

Wacey rolled his eyes and his mouth tightened. "Yeah. I had to bump twenty visitors to the bottom of the list just to get you in. And you didn't even bring me what I wanted."

"I said I was sorry. I tried. Maybe I can send you a roll of it."

Wacey scoffed. "Everything gets searched. The guards would take it and use it themselves."

While he talked, Keeley dropped one hand under the counter and unzipped his fly. He found what he was looking for, and raised it up so Wacey could see it. It was a can of Copenhagen, all right, but much thinner than a normal plastic can, with a plastic lid that wasn't picked up by the metal detector.

"This is how they give out samples as you probably know," Keeley said. "At rodeos and county fairs and such. It's about a quarter the size of a real can. I picked it up last summer, and used it as my backup in case they took the real one, even though you said it'd get through. It's better than nothing, I guess."

Wacey's eyes were focused on the can of tobacco. "Give it to me."

Now Keeley felt in control. "I will. But I got a couple of questions for you first. That's why I'm here."

Keeley could see Wacey lick his lips, then raise his eyes back up, then back to the can. He was like a drug addict, Keeley thought. He *needed* the Copenhagen. But how could he need it so much if he'd gone six years without it? Then he remembered: Convicts are stupid. Even Wacey Hedeman.

Wacey looked up, eager to talk. Keeley thought, *Pathetic*.

Keeley said, "I think you know why I'm here. I got a big interest in you. See, my brother moved out here to Wyoming eight years ago. He was an outfitter up in Twelve Sleep County. Name of Ote. You remember him?"

Wacey seemed interested now. "I remember."

Keeley watched Wacey's eyes for a hint of guilt or remorse. Nothing.

"He got killed," Keeley said.

Wacey just nodded.

"He used to send me letters. That's when I first heard your name. And the name of the other game warden. You remember him, don't you?"

Again, the nod. Keeley knew Wacey was wondering where this was going, since it had been Wacey who shot his brother in an elk-hunting camp. Keeley proceeded as if he weren't aware of that fact.

"What I'm interested in is this other game warden."

Wacey swallowed, said, "What about him?"

"You don't like him much, do you?"

"He was the one put me in here," Wacey said. "So no, I'm not real *fond* of him." He spat out the word *fond*.

"You hear about what happened a couple of years ago up in that same country?" Keeley said. "A big confrontation where some good people got burned up in the snow? A woman and her little girl?"

"I heard."

"She was my sister-in-law, and her child, God bless them. They was also Keeleys," he said. "They was the last Keeleys, 'cept for me. And you know what?"

Wacey hesitated. Then, finally, "What?"

"That same damned game warden was involved in that too. Can you imagine? The same guy involved with the end of our family name."

Wacey stared at him through the glass. "That wouldn't be the end of it," he said. "You got the same last name. Whyn't you just go out there and make a bunch more? Isn't that what you people do in the South?"

Now the anger did flare up. Keeley lashed out and thumped the glass with the heel of his hand. Wacey sat back in reaction, even though there was no way Keeley could have broken through.

The door behind Wacey Hedeman opened and the guard leaned his head in. "Knock off the noise," the guard said, and Keeley could hear him through the handset.

"You don't understand," Keeley said, after the guard had left. Wacey looked back, wary. It was obvious he hadn't expected that blow to the glass.

"Don't understand what?"

"Just shut up, and answer a couple of questions. I drove all the way here for this, and I don't need your mouth. I drove through Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska to meet you, Mr. Wacey. I don't need to hear your shit-for-brains views of my people, or my name."

Wacey swallowed again, shot a glance at the miniature can of Copenhagen.

"Tell me about him," Keeley said. "Tell me what makes him tick. Tell me how to get under his skin."

Wacey seemed to weigh the question, his head nodding almost imperceptibly. Then: "He's not going to look or act the way you might expect. In fact, when you meet him, I predict that you'll feel ... underwhelmed. That's his trick, and I don't even know if he realizes it." Wacey paused for a moment. "I take that back—I think he does. But that doesn't mean he acts any different."

"What are you talking about?"

"He likes being underestimated. He doesn't have any problem with playing the fool. But just because he isn't saying anything doesn't mean he's stupid. It means he's listening."

Keeley nodded, go on.

"The worst thing about him, or the best, depending on how you look at it, is that when he thinks he's right, there isn't anybody that can change his mind. The son-of-

a-bitch might even act like he's going along with you, but deep down, he's already set his course. And nothing, I mean fucking *nothing*, will get him out of it. He's a man who thinks he's looking at everything for the very first time, like no one else has ever looked at it before so he's got to figure it out for himself. You know what I mean? There's some real arrogance there, but he'd never admit that.

"Once you set the hook in him," Wacey said, "he won't shake it out. Even if he knows you set it. He'll see it through to the bitter end, no matter what happens. Just realize that. Once you start with him, you better be prepared to hang on."

AFTER ANOTHER TWENTY minutes of talking, Keeley slipped the can of tobacco through the slot, and Wacey grabbed it before it was all the way through. Keeley watched Wacey twist off the top and plunge his nose almost into the black tobacco and breathe in deeply, his eyes closed. Without another word, he put the lid back on and stuffed the can in his pocket, then reached up and hung up his phone. His part of the conversation was over.

Keeley couldn't detect the chew in his side of the room, but he tried to imagine it. He also tried to imagine the other odor, the one that was overpowered by the tobacco. The smell of almonds.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Wacey said soundlessly.

Keeley smiled through the glass. Wacey didn't smile back, but stood and knocked on the door so the guard would let him out.

*

AS HE RODE in the van back to the Administration Building, John Wayne Keeley thought over what Wacey had told him.

"Good visit?" the driver asked.

"Good enough," Keeley said.

WHEN HE PASSED back through the security area, he fished the large can of Copenhagen he had brought out of the garbage can, and slid it back in his pocket. The guard saw him, and winked. *They didn't care a whit what you took out of the place,* Keeley thought, *only what you brought in.*

At the desk he retrieved his driver's license from a guard who had replaced the woman. He quickly cleaned his wallet and keys out of the locker, while noting that number 16 was locked. The old couple were still inside, visiting.

IN THE PARKING lot, he wiped down all the surfaces in the SUV with a soft cloth, then removed his duffel bag from the back seat and the sock of valuables from the glove compartment. He carried them across the pavement to the old yellow Ford pickup and tossed the duffel into the back beneath the camper shell.

As he guessed, the cab of the truck was unlocked. He opened the door and tripped the hood latch. After a glance toward the Administration Building to make sure no one was coming, he leaned under the hood. It took less than a minute to locate the red coil wire, strip it, run half of it to the positive side of the battery coil and tie it off, and trigger the starter solenoid. The engine roared to life. These old Fords were easy to hot-wire, and he'd had plenty of practice on his own when some dumb-shit camp

cook lost the keys. That's why he'd targeted the truck right off, rather than any of the other vehicles in the lot that were nicer. He slammed the hood shut and slid behind the wheel. The steering wheel unlocked as he jimmied the locking pin on the column with the flat screwdriver blade on his knife. Easy.

He peered over the dashboard to make sure no one had watched him. No one had.

John Wayne Keeley backed up and drove out of the parking lot, up the service road, beneath the no trespassing sign. He steered with his left hand while he threw the old couple's belongings out the passenger window: a thermos, some women's magazines, sunglasses, cassette tapes of polka hits. Before he took the entrance ramp to the interstate, he pulled the can of Copenhagen out of his pocket, the one of two he had laced generously with potassium cyanide stolen from a jewelry store in Kansas, and tossed it out the window.

That was the difference, once again, between those stupid convicts in there and John Wayne Keeley out here. If one of those jokers had broken into a jewelry-restoration shop he would have walked right past the chemicals used to refurbish diamonds and gold—cyanide—and straight to the jewelry itself. And then he'd have had a bunch of worn trinkets to try and fence. Not John Wayne Keeley. Not J.W., as he liked to be called. Keeley stopped when he found the cyanide in a locked drawer of the little workroom. And he only took as much of the white powder as he needed, before reshelving the bottle. The proprietors would know they'd been broken into, of course, but would be flummoxed by their good fortune that the thieves had stolen nothing of value. They probably wouldn't even notice the small amount of missing chemical.

He tried to imagine what was happening back there at the prison right now. Had Wacey filled his mouth with the Copenhagen right outside the door? Or had he tried to sneak it back to his cell, where he could smell and savor the tobacco, out of view of the two hundred cameras? Either way, it would kill within minutes of ingestion. Keeley remembered a hunting client, a forensic pathologist from Texas, telling him how it worked. The victim looks flushed, then has a seizure, like he's had a heart attack. He collapses, fighting for breath. His skin turns pink, and the blood inside his veins has turned cherry red. Bright pink foam might burble out of his nose, looking like something ... festive. Then, *Sayonara!*

"Have a good chew, Wacey!" he hollered. "That was for Ote!"

And he was thinking that he really hadn't learned all that much from Wacey, because he already knew what he wanted to do to Joe Pickett—hit him where he lived. Make him hurt. Take him down. Make that son-of-a-bitch game warden find out what it's like to feel lonely, worthless, unable to protect his own.

3

AT THE TWELVE Sleep County sheriff's office, the Scarlett brothers sat in molded-plastic chairs, with an empty chair between each of them, across from the sheriff who

was at his desk. Arlen was on one end of the line, Hank on the other, Wyatt in the middle. All three were still cuffed. Wyatt's and Hank's hands were bound behind their backs but Arlen had his cuffed in front, so he could dab his head wound with a cloth. Deputies stood close to the brothers. Joe had found them like this when he arrived, and was surprised emotions had cooled down enough that McLanahan had chosen to put them all into the same room. Joe sat on the edge of McLanahan's desk, a gesture sure to annoy the sheriff. *Fine*, Joe thought. Arlen had apparently persuaded the sheriff to forgo the hospital for the time being, and he held a bloody cloth to the side of his swollen head. His eyes were alert, Joe thought, and his expression was mildly amused.

Robey Hersig, the county attorney, had been called away from dinner with his family to come to the sheriff's office and interview the brothers.

"You asked what happened," Arlen said to Robey. "I'll tell you. As you know, the legislature broke for the session Tuesday morning. I stayed in Cheyenne that night to pack, and drove back to the ranch. Two nights ago, I had a nice supper with my mother and Wyatt at the Holiday Inn here in town, and we went back to the ranch."

"They got good prime rib," Wyatt interjected, then looked back at his big hands in his lap.

"Yes, well," Arlen said, looking at Wyatt with an expression that wasn't quite sympathy, wasn't quite annoyance, but a kind of uncomfortable acceptance. "Anyway, we were home that night around ten, which is late for Mother. She's an early riser. The game warden can attest to that," he said, nodding at Joe.

Robey looked to Joe for an explanation of why he had been brought into the conversation.

"I saw her early yesterday morning when I floated the river," Joe said. "I guess it was about seven." But he wasn't sure why Arlen had thrown it to him, other than to make the point, yet again, that Joe might have been the last person to see her.

"And why were you there, Mr. Game Warden?" McLanahan asked from behind his desk.

Joe bristled at the way McLanahan asked, knowing there was sarcasm in the question.

"Fishing access," Joe said, and left it at that.

"How did she appear when you had your conversation with her about ... fishing access?" McLanahan asked.

"She was fine," Joe said, "her normal self."

"Did you two have a dustup?" the sheriff asked.

"No more than usual."

Joe was grateful when Arlen jumped back in. "As I said, she's an early riser. Yesterday, we had a nice breakfast in the house, Mother, Wyatt, my niece Julie, and me."

At the mention of Julie's name, Hank suddenly sat up. His mouth was now pulled back into an ugly grimace. Joe noted that Arlen had confirmed what Reed had told him about Julie being Hank's daughter.

"Yes, Julie," Arlen said, aware of his brother's reaction but pretending, Joe thought, not to notice it. "Such a sweet, sweet girl. She's developed a real interest in political science and history, and she's a good student. We talked about the legislature, how laws are made, how the system works. Things she never would have learned at home if she'd stayed with her father ..."

At that, Hank twitched, and his neck and face got darker. His eyes were boring into Arlen now, as Arlen continued in a pleasant voice that was somehow grating.

"This morning, Mother wasn't around, which was highly unusual. Nevertheless I assumed she'd gone to town so I made breakfast for Julie and myself and then took her out to the main road in my pickup so she could catch the bus to school. Then I went back to the main house, to my office on the third floor, and remained there all day catching up on correspondence and paperwork. You'd be amazed how many things pile up while I'm away at the session.

"I remember hearing a bit of a discussion outside near the bank of the river. I heard raised voices, one of them being Mother's."

Joe leaned forward, asked, "Who was the other?"

McLanahan cleared his throat, a signal to Joe that he'd intruded on the interview.

Arlen shrugged. "A local fishing guide. I'm not sure I know his name. They were having an argument about trespass fees. This wasn't that unusual, really. It happened all the time. In the end, Mother always got them to pay up."

"Then"—Arlen furrowed his brow, trying to recall some-thing—"I believe it was about three when Wyatt pounded on the door. It was three, wasn't it?" Arlen asked Wyatt.

Wyatt shrugged.

"It was three," Arlen said. As he spoke, his voice lapsed into a bit of a singsong. Joe thought the cadence of Arlen's speech was another way to get at his brother Hank. It was probably a way of speaking that had been established long ago *specifically* because it enraged Hank, who hardly talked at all. "Wyatt said our brother Hank called in a rage. Apparently Hank had been to the house and couldn't find Mother, or her car. And, Hank being Hank—who isn't really supposed to be on our side of the ranch in the first place—immediately came to the conclusion that Mother met with foul play ..." Joe watched, amazed, as Hank's face turned almost purple and a vein in his throat swelled to look like a writhing baby snake. "... and of course if there was foul play involved, then in my brother's twisted mind, that meant I must somehow be involved with it. My brother needs professional help in the most serious way, which is obvious to all who meet him, and especially to those of us forced to, um, *coexist* with him. So, Hank being Hank, he assumed the worst and was ready to act out his own western movie. That's pretty much what Hank told you, isn't it, Wyatt?"

Wyatt didn't look up, but said reluctantly, "Pretty much. Not all the movie stuff, though."

Arlen chuckled in a condescending way Joe found irritating. "In an effort to stave off another violent confrontation, of which there have been many over the years, I decided

to drive over to Hank's side of the ranch and try to calm down the situation. Wyatt decided to follow me in his truck. I spotted Hank just across his side of the line ..."

"Hold it," Robey said, raising his hand. "You've made a couple of references to 'his side of the ranch' and 'our side of the ranch.' And now you say there's a line. What's that about?"

Arlen smiled paternalistically at Robey, as if graciously offering an explanation that should have been well known by all. "In order to keep the peace, Mother decided a few years ago that we should live on opposite sides of the ranch. Hank built a fine hunting lodge on the east side, and the rest of the family remains on the original homestead on the west side. There's an old fence line that more or less cuts the ranch in two, and we'd all come to understand that it wasn't to be crossed. Nothing legal, just an understanding until Hank decided to lock all of the gates. Julie and her mother moved down to live with us. I have adopted Julie as my own. Unofficially, of course, and much to Hank's dismay. He would rather they both stay up there on his side, pining for him while he takes clients to Kenya to hunt for months on end. But Julie needs some stability."

"Thanks," Robey said. "Go on."

"I saw Hank's truck tearing across the ranch toward our side at the same time we were trying to find him. I pulled over and waved him down, so we could talk. After all, Wyatt and I are just as concerned about where Mother might be as Hank is. I thought, for once, we could put the animosity aside and try to work together and figure out where she was."

Joe was struck by how Hank and Arlen used the word "Mother" when they spoke. Men their age should say, "My mom," "my mother" or "our mother," or "our mom," it seemed.

"So I got out of the truck and went to talk to Hank. Wyatt came up behind us. But alas"—Arlen paused, and again took the rag away from his head—"instead of talking, Hank grabbed his irrigation shovel and started swinging. I grabbed mine in self-defense. I guess that's when you were called."

Arlen stopped speaking, and winced, as if a sudden jolt of pain had coursed through his head. Either that, or a conspicuous play for sympathy, Joe thought.

"Is that how it happened, Wyatt?" Robey asked.

Wyatt slowly nodded his head, but refused to look up.

"Hank, you agree?" Robey asked warily.

Instead of answering, Hank sighed and stood up, a movement so swift and unexpected given his previous stillness that the deputy beside him didn't reach out. Joe slid off the desk, ready to step between Hank and Arlen if necessary.

"It's pretty accurate," Hank said, his voice tight. "I ain't gonna dispute what he said about the fight. I think he left out the part about what he did to Mother, and where he hid her."

Hank turned to Arlen, who was still seated. Arlen looked back calmly, knowing, Joe thought, he had already done as much damage as he could do. Wyatt took that

moment to look up, see what was happening, and drop his head again, as if figuring that if he didn't watch it nothing could happen.

Hank couldn't raise his hand to point since it was cuffed behind him, so he set his shoulders in a way that seemed to point at Arlen's face. Hank said, "And I don't want to hear another fucking word about Julie coming out of your mouth."

Arlen arched his eyebrows. "Why? Because she's come over to my side? Just like her mother?"

That did it. Hank emitted a guttural, anguished sound and hurled himself at Arlen, head down, closing the space between them so quickly that neither the deputy nor Joe could stop it.

Hank headbutted Arlen square in the face, and the force of his body took them both backward, smashing into the filing cabinets. Framed photos fell from the wall and broke on the floor. Both deputies pulled at Hank's bound arms and shirt collar, but his thrashing legs tripped Reed and the officer fell heavily on the pile. Joe and the other deputy grabbed Hank's ankles and pulled him away, facedown along the floor, leaving a smear of blood on the linoleum.

"You got no idea what he's capable of!" Hank shouted.

Arlen's face was covered with blood from his broken nose, and he shouted: "THROW THAT ANIMAL IN A CAGE!"

Joe breathed deeply after the scuffle and watched the deputies carrying Hank through the door to a cell. While Robey helped Arlen to his feet, he looked at Wyatt, who had not moved. Wyatt sat still, his head hung low, his huge body settled into the cupped seat of the molded-plastic chair. As Joe watched, Wyatt reached up and covered his head with his huge hands, lacing his thick fingers through his hair.

Joe saw where the Flex-Cufs had bitten into Wyatt's fleshy wrists, and what remained of the cuffs on the floor under the chair where Wyatt had snapped them off during the fight. Joe had never encountered a man strong enough to snap cuffs before. Next to the shredded cuffs, Joe saw a splat of moisture. Then another. He realized Wyatt was shaking, his big shoulders heaving up and down as he sobbed.

TWO HOURS LATER, after Joe had finished giving his deposition to Robey concerning his recent encounter with Opal Scarlett, Deputy Reed stuck his head into the office.

"I thought you guys would want to know we've sent a couple of cars out to pick up a fishing guide named Tommy Wayman," Reed said, glancing at his notepad. "His wife, Nancy, called it in. They had a fight and Nancy said Tommy told her he would do the same thing to her that he did to Opal Scarlett if she didn't shut up."

After a beat, Joe said, "Which was ...?"

"Throw her in the river like fish guts," Reed said, looking at his pad to emphasize that he was quoting.

SO IT WAS Tommy Wayman, Joe thought. Tommy was a longtime local, a throw-back, given to white snap-button shirts and stretch Wranglers. He ran three boats and two rafts on the Twelve Sleep River, his business doing well despite the fact that

Tommy would much rather fish himself than tend to detail. The guided operation was flourishing now, though, due to MBP Management, Marybeth's company.

Wayman had the oldest fishing service in the valley, and was the first to change from live bait to flies, flat-bottomed jon boats to beautiful McKenzie-style drift boats, the first to preach catch-and-release instead of killing and taking caught fish. It had been a nod to progress and a realization that the resource was unique but limited. Joe encouraged Tommy and urged other guides to change their methods while he managed the river for quantity and quality of trout instead of meat in the water.

Tommy had contended with Opal Scarlett for years. Maybe he had finally snapped.

4

IT WAS AFTER ten when Joe drove toward his home on Bighorn Road. Maxine was asleep on the passenger seat, tucked in on herself, her deep breathing punctuated by occasional yips as she dreamed of what? Chasing rabbits? Watching men beat each other with irrigation shovels?

The night was remarkably dark, the moon a thin white razor slash in the sky, the stars hard and cold. There were no pole lamps this far out of town, and it was one of those nights that seemed to suck the illumination out of the stars, rather than transmit the light, leaving pinpricks.

He had called Marybeth to tell her he'd be late.

"Sheridan told me what happened," Marybeth said. "Julie, that poor girl. I wish she hadn't seen her father and uncle fighting like that."

Joe said, "My fault."

Marybeth was silent, which meant she agreed with him that he'd screwed up. But at least she didn't say it. For the past six months, since Joe returned from his assignment in Jackson, Marybeth had been unerringly patient with him, as if she were overcompensating for something that had happened while he was gone. While he wasn't sure what that was, he knew it involved Nate Romanowski. He didn't ask because he trusted her judgment more than his own and, frankly, he liked how things were going between them. Plus, he had a secret of his own—his surprising attraction to a married woman in Jackson. Nothing had happened, but it could have, which was nearly as bad. So things had been rocky for a while, like all marriages, he supposed, but the storm had passed over them without fatal damage. Now they were on smooth water again, which he preferred. He saw no good reason to dredge up past feelings with probing questions. She didn't either. Life was good in general, as it should be, he thought. Except for his job, his boss, and now Opal Scarlett's disappearance.

IN SPRING THE animals came out, so he was cautious as he drove. The deer, rabbits, badgers, elk, and occasional mountain lions were on the move, re-establishing their hierarchy and territory, having babies, kicking up their heels after a long winter. Joe imagined them puzzling over new human and natural developments on the

land, processing the changes, and moving forward with slight instinctive variations. He slowed when two bright blue lights winked just beyond the arc of his headlights, and he stopped the truck while a badger, her belly fat quivering while she scuttled, crossed the two-lane blacktop. Her young one, which was sleek and shiny, froze in the roadway for a moment and displayed its attitude with a teeth-rattling display of juvenile aggression as it rocked from side to side, then followed her. Both vanished into the darkness of the barrow pit beside the road.

He was always grateful for the drive home, because it allowed him to wind down, to sort out the events of the day, to try to put them in a mental drawer for later.

Joe was still buzzing from what had happened at the sheriff's office with the Scarlett brothers. Although the rift between them—especially Arlen and Hank—was the stuff of local fable, he had not seen it for himself in its fury.

TOMMY WAYMAN HAD been brought to the county building as Joe left. Before starting his truck, Joe watched as Wayman was pulled out of the car and steered toward the door by two sheriff's deputies. Curiosity got the best of him, and Joe went back inside to hear what Tommy had to say.

Someone had tipped off the *Saddlestring Roundup*, and a reporter (who, to Joe, looked all of seventeen years old) had arrived with a digital camera. The flash popped and lit Tommy's face in stark relief, freezing an image of tiny eyes set in a face of deep tan from spending so many hours on the river, and a bulbous red nose from drinking so many beers *while* spending so many hours on the river.

Tommy looked scared, Joe thought, as if he were ready to flinch from blows that could come from anywhere. Joe could see a bandage on Tommy's neck. The adhesive strip holding on the gauze had pulled loose to reveal a wound that looked, at first, as if someone had tried to slit Tommy's throat from ear to ear.

"What happened to your neck?" Joe asked.

"Opal Scarlett," Tommy said. "Joe, she should have been stopped a long time ago." His voice slurred with alcohol. Since his hands were cuffed behind him and he couldn't point, Tommy raised his chin to indicate the wound across his throat. "This time, she just about cut my head off."

Before he could say more, the deputies took him into the building to be processed.

Joe had watched Tommy's thin back until the guide was taken into the building. Joe followed, pieces falling into place.

JOE HAD FIRST met Opal Scarlett three years before as a result of a complaint by the very same Tommy Wayman. Wayman had come to Joe's office at his house and claimed Opal was blocking access to the river and charging fees for his boats to float through her ranch.

"She's been doing it for years," Wayman said, sitting down in the single chair across from Joe's desk.

Joe said, "You're kidding me, right?"

Wyoming law was long established and well known: it was perfectly legal for anyone to float in a boat through private land as long as the boaters didn't stop and get out

or pull the boat up to shore and trespass. The land belonged to the landowner but the water belonged to the public. While it was perfectly fine for a landowner to charge a fee for access to the river over private ground, it was illegal to charge for simply floating through private land.

“The rumor is that she collects enough money from float fees—as she calls ’em—to buy a new Cadillac at the end of every summer,” Tommy Wayman had said while cracking the top off a bottle of beer he had pulled from his fishing vest. “She’s been collecting money for years, but nobody turns her in because, well, she’s Opal Scarlett.”

Wayman told Joe that Opal collected her fee by standing on the bank near her house and calling to passing boats. Since Opal was white haired and tiny, most boatmen assumed there was something wrong when they heard her cries and beelined to help the old woman. When the boats pulled to shore, she pointed out to the passengers of the boat that they were now technically on her land and subject to fines or arrest. She would let it go, however, if the passengers paid a fee of \$5 per person. Later, the fee was raised to \$10, then \$15, then \$20. Word got around among fishermen to ignore Opal Scarlett when she hollered, no matter what she said.

Which led to more escalated measures on Opal’s part, and for a few years she got the attention of passing boats by firing a shotgun blast into the air and making it clear they were next if they didn’t pay up. That worked, Wayman said, for a while.

In order to avoid the embarrassment of paying fees in front of their customers, the outfitters and guides had learned to pay Opal up front and therefore pass through her ranch without trouble. Wayman told Joe he had done that for years, but Opal was getting forgetful and half the time couldn’t recall that he’d prepaid, so she would stand on the bank, shooting her shotgun in the air, demanding her tribute.

Joe noted at the time that Wayman had not brought the situation to his attention until it was literally out of control, only when Wayman was forced to double-pay Opal.

That was when Wayman first told Joe that Opal had threatened to string razor-sharp piano wire across the river, neck-high.

“If she does that she’s likely to kill somebody,” Wayman said. “She thinks everybody on the river is trying to shaft her by not paying the fee, even though most of us already coughed up. If she strings that wire, somebody’s going to get seriously hurt.”

After his meeting with Wayman, Joe drove out to the Thunderhead Ranch, feeling that his case against Opal Scarlett was remarkably cut and dried. It was his initial experience with the Scarlett mystique, his first real look into how deep the family roots were in the county and how something as straightforward and simple as river access turned out not to be that at all.

He found Opal working alone in her magnificent vegetable garden on the southern side of the massive stone ranch house where she lived. As he parked his pickup in the ranch yard and walked toward her, she leaned on her hoe and sized him up with a kind of interested, professional detachment that resided somewhere between a friendly greeting and a trespass warning. The set of her face seemed to say, “I’ve been dealing with *your* kind for sixty-odd years and have yet to be surprised.”

She had opened with, “So you’re the game warden who arrested the governor for fishing without a license?”

Joe nodded, already on the defensive.

She was small, trim, and wiry, dressed in a kind of casual western outdoor elegance that seemed reserved for people like her—faded jeans, Ariat boots, silver ranger set buckle, an open canvas barn jacket over a plaid shirt, silk scarf. Opal was a remarkably self-assured woman who had no qualms about charging a fee to boaters who passed through her ranch, and who seemed to make it clear without saying that she had thus far tolerated him being there in the county but there was a limit to her time and patience. She explained to Joe how her father-in-law and grandfather had established the ranch. Over the years, they had graciously maintained the flow of the river even though it was their right to divert as much of it as they pleased to irrigate their land, since they had the very first water right. By maintaining the flow over the years, she told Joe, the family had not only assured a supply of drinking water to the town of Saddlestring, but had preserved the natural ecology of the valley and also allowed for an extensive guided trout-fishing economy that would have otherwise not existed.

“In a way,” she said through a tight smile, “if it weren’t for us, you wouldn’t be here, and neither would Mr. Tommy Wayman.”

Without a hint of remorse, she led Joe down to the bank of the river and described the “tollgate” she wished to build in the future. She started by pointing across the river at an immense cottonwood.

“I want to tie a wire off over there on the trunk of that tree, and stretch it all the way over to my side. I’ll attach my end to a big lever I can work by myself, so I can raise and lower the wire as necessary,” she said, demonstrating how she would pull on the imaginary handle.

“What if you kill somebody?” Joe asked, incredulously.

She dismissed his concerns with a wave of her hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll tie orange flagging to the wire so all the floaters can see it plain as day. My objective is to collect my fee, not to decapitate my customers.”

“But you can’t do that, Mrs. Scarlett. It’s a public waterway.”

She turned from her imaginary tollgate, her eyes freezing him to his spot. “It’s a public waterway, Mr. Pickett,” she said, “because my family has allowed it to be so. The water in that river could just as easily be diverted, by me, to irrigate my ranch and turn this place into a Louisiana bayou and my home into Venice with all the beautiful canals. But I have chosen not to do that, to instead collect a small fee in exchange for providing free drinking water and recreation to you and several thousand other residents of our sleepy little valley.

“This arrangement,” she continued, her unblinking eyes still on him, “has worked very well for three generations. Water in exchange for proper respect. I understand from others that you have a tendency to want to go your own way to some degree. I admire that in a man, generally. But I’d suggest this isn’t the best battle to choose to fight when there are other more worthy ones out there.”

Joe felt he'd been flayed by a rawhide whip. All he could think of to say in response was, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Scarlett."

So when Joe saw the wound on Tommy Wayman's neck that evening, he was pretty sure he knew what had happened out on the river.

TOMMY WAYMAN CONFESSED that he had, in fact, tossed Opal in the river that morning. He said it happened like this:

He was scouting the Twelve Sleep River in his flatbottomed Hyde drift boat, his first trip on the water since winter. After winter, there were always new hazards, new bends, new currents on the wild river to scout out. And it was a great time to fish for himself, before the spring runoff began and raised and muddied the river, before clients started to book, before he had to mess with the hassle of hiring guides and office help.

It was an unseasonably warm day and there was a mayfly hatch on. Tommy said he was alone on the river, and never saw another boat. The trout were hitting his flies so hard they were mutilating them, and he was hauling the fish in and releasing them in a steadied fury. It was an angler's wet dream, he said, the kind of day that reminded him of why he loved to fish, why he loved the river.

He was putting on a dry fly and a dropper, concentrating on tying the tippet knots, as he floated through the Thunderhead Ranch. He never saw the silvery band of wire stretched across the river until it sliced through his leader and caught him under his chin, lifting him briefly off his boat seat. He felt the wire bite into his flesh and saw blood fleck down the front of his shirt, but was able to reach up and grab the wire with his hands before the momentum of the boat carried him forward even farther and cut his throat wide open. After plucking the wire out and ducking under it, Tommy grabbed the oars and took the boat to shore. Just as Opal Scarlett came out of her house, drying her hands on a towel.

"Damn you, Opal!" he shouted, hurtling out of the boat once he reached the shore. "You just about cut my head off with your damned wire!"

Opal just stood there regarding him with what he called the look of ownership. "Like she was disappointed in the behavior of a hired hand—or a slave." Finally, she told Tommy if he had paid his river fee up front this year, as he knew he should have, he could have avoided the problem.

"There is no such thing as a river fee!" Tommy yelled.

"There is on my ranch," Opal said, arching her eyebrows.

And with that, he rushed her, grabbed her by the collar with one hand and by the belt with the other, and swung her through the air and into the river.

"Damn, she was light," Tommy said. "Like there wasn't really anything to her, just clothes and a scowl. It was like tossing my nieces and nephews around the pool or something. She didn't even struggle. I think that was the last thing she expected, to be thrown into the river like that."

Tommy said he watched her floating away in the river. She was treading water, and howling at him saying, "Next time, Tommy Wayman, you'll have to pay me a hundred dollars a trip!"

“Nuts to you, Opal,” he called after her. He said he watched her bob in the river, heard her curse at him, until she was carried around a bend 200 yards from where he stood. He never once thought she didn’t simply swim to shore, he said later. He never even considered that she had drowned. That part of the river was too shallow and slow. And she was too mean to die, he said, which was something Joe had also heard from Reed.

No, Tommy said, he never saw her climb out on shore after he got back in his boat and floated downriver.

No, he never saw her body wedged in debris or trapped under the surface by an undertow. Besides, he said, in April the river was barely moving. The dangerous currents would come later, when the snow started to melt and the speed and volume of the river would increase two to three times.

No, he didn’t feel any need to turn himself in at the time because, well, Opal deserved to be thrown in the river.

“I’m surprised that river didn’t spit her right out,” Tommy said to Joe and Robey.

Proud of his feat, he’d immediately bragged about it to his wife, Nancy, not knowing that she had spent the entire day at home fuming over photos she had found: Tommy with his arms around attractive female clients and one shot in particular—a group of flight attendants in the boat who bared their breasts to the camera with Tommy at the oars—grinning like an idiot. She was angry enough that after he fell asleep in his lounge chair with a beer, she called the sheriff’s office and reported what Tommy had said. Nancy felt horrible about it now, though, since at the time she had no idea that Opal was missing.

So what had happened to Opal Scarlett’s body? Or had Opal simply climbed out, had an epiphany of some kind, gotten in her Caddy, and driven away?

*

JOE PARKED IN front of the garage, stirred Maxine awake, and entered the house through the mudroom.

The Picketts lived in a small state-owned two-story house eight miles out of Saddlestring. Joe was thankful for darkness, so he wouldn’t have to see how tired the place was looking, how it appeared to sag at the roofline, how the window frames and doors were out of plumb. It sat back from the road behind a white fence that once again needed painting. There was a detached garage filled with Joe’s snowmobile, gear, and supposedly the van, but the vehicle space was now occupied by his upturned drift boat needing repair. Behind the house was a loafing shed and corral for their two horses, Toby and Doc.

The house was quiet and everyone was in bed. He left his battered briefcase on the desk in his home office off the mudroom. He left his blinking message light and unopened mail for later.

Joe thought of how things had changed for them in the past year. Marybeth’s business, MBP Management, had taken off. She now managed eight Saddlestring companies, doing their accounting, inventory management, employee scheduling, federal

and state compliance. The owners had gratefully ceded control to her, and told their colleagues at morning coffee at the Burg-O-Pardner how much easier their lives had become since hiring her. She had filled a void none of them knew existed when she showed up with her laptop, spreadsheets, and no-nonsense practicality. She even had affiliate offices in Sheridan and Cody, manned by women much like herself who were mothers who knew what time management and prioritization really meant and could walk into a small business, dissect it, and make it run like, well, a *business*. Her income to the family now exceeded what Joe brought in as a state employee for the Game and Fish Department. The money helped.

College funds for Sheridan and Lucy had been opened. All four burners worked on the stove. They had a new minivan, and a television that revealed, for the first time, that most actors' faces were not actually shades of green.

They had discussed the fact that MBP Management had quickly reached the point in business where Marybeth would need to make the choice to maintain what she had or expand. Maintenance, Marybeth explained, was the first step to stagnation, something she saw all the time with the businesses she managed. But expansion—hiring employees, finding bigger office space, changing her role from hands-on consultant to full-time executive of the business itself—was not what she thought she wanted to do. She enjoyed working with her clients, and expanding would mean more time away from the family and additional strain on the marriage. It was a difficult decision that faced them, she said, and one they needed to make together. Joe just wanted her to be happy, and said he'd support her in whatever she chose to do.

Before going upstairs to bed with his wife, Joe tiptoed into Lucy's room and kissed her good night (she rolled over and said "um"), then rapped lightly on Sheridan's door because he saw a band of light underneath it.

"Come in," she said.

Joe stuck his head inside. Sheridan was reading in bed, wearing her glasses instead of her contacts. She smiled at her father, but then arched her eyebrows in a "do you need something?" way.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Fine. I feel sorry for Julie, though."

Joe said, "Me too. I feel terrible about taking her out there. I hope she'll be okay."

Sheridan nodded.

"Has she ever told you about the situation out there?" Joe asked. "What the deal is with her father and her uncles?"

Sheridan shook her head. "I don't think she really knows what is going on. I thought she'd call tonight, but she didn't."

Joe told Sheridan how the fight continued in the sheriff's office, and that Tommy Wayman confessed to throwing Opal in the river.

"That's just crazy," she said.

"I'm curious about the Scarlett brothers," Joe said. "How well do you know them? Does Julie talk about them much?"

Sheridan looked suspicious. "Some," she said. "And I've met them all. Her dad, Hank. Uncle Arlen and Uncle Wyatt."

"What do you think of them?"

"Dad, I don't feel comfortable being your spy. Julie is my best friend."

Joe held up his hand. "Okay, not now. I understand. But I'll probably want to talk with you about them later, okay?"

Sheridan said, "Good night, Dad."

MARYBETH WAS ASLEEP in bed with her table lamp on and a book opened on her chest. She was breathing deeply, so Joe tried not to wake her as he padded across the room. He changed out of his red uniform shirt and Wranglers and pulled on old University of Wyoming Cowboys sweats. Before he went back downstairs, he marked the page and closed Marybeth's book, putting it aside. He hesitated as he reached to shut off her lamp, and took a moment to look at her. In sleep, her face was soft and relaxed, and there was the hint of a smile on her mouth. She was a beautiful woman, better than he deserved. She'd been so busy lately that she was dead tired at night. It had been over two weeks since they'd made love, and Joe scratched tonight off his list as well.

He missed the time they used to have together, before her company took off and before the girls required non-stop shuttling among school, home, and activities. And with his schedule and the problems at work, he knew he wasn't helping the situation much.

Joe brushed her cheek lightly with the tips of his fingers, shut off the light, and went back down to his office.

He had never enjoyed the paperwork associated with his job, but considered it necessary—unlike some of Wyoming's other fifty-four game wardens, who complained about it constantly. He viewed the memos, reports, requests for opinion, and general correspondence as the price he paid to spend the majority of his working day out in the field in his pickup, astride one of his horses, in his boat, or on his snowmobile. Joe Pickett still loved his job with a "pinch me" kind of passion that had yet to go away. He reveled in his 1500 square-mile district that included haunting and savage breaklands, river lowlands, timbered ridges and treeless vistas, and landscape so big and wide that there were places where he parked his truck and perched where he could see the curvature of the earth.

He even used to get pleasure from writing his weekly reports, coming up with a well-turned phrase or making an argument that could persuade higher-ups. But things had changed, and he now dreaded entering his own office.

Joe listened to his telephone messages. There was a complaint from a local rancher about a vehicle driving around on his land at night, possibly a poacher. The next message was from Special Agent Tony Portenson of the FBI, asking Joe to call him. Portenson was heading up the investigation into the murder of ex-sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum and another still-unknown male. Both of their badly deteriorated bodies had been found in a natural spring the year before. Joe had reported the crime. The prime

suspect in the murders was Nate Romanowski, the falconer whom Joe and the rest of his family had befriended years before. Nate had vanished before the bodies had been discovered, and Portenson was trying to track him down. The agent called Joe every month or so to find out if Joe had heard from Nate, which he hadn't. Joe felt no need to tell Portenson that he and Sheridan still went to Nate's place to feed his falcons, and that they would continue to do so until Nate returned or the birds flew away for good.

JOE YAWNED WITH exhaustion as he tapped out a terse recounting of his long day to send to Randy Pope at headquarters in Cheyenne. Pope read his reports very carefully for errors that he enjoyed pointing out.

When he completed the report, he used his slow dial-up modem to send the e-mail. As the connection was made, his in-box flooded with departmental e-mails. The volume of mail had increased fivefold since Pope took over.

Joe perused the subject lines, deciding most could wait until tomorrow morning. The only one he opened was a press release from headquarters entitled GOVERNOR RULON NAMES NEW GAME AND FISH COMMISSIONERS.

Joe read the short list. One name punched the breath out of him. The new governor had made his second mistake.

The new commissioner for Joe's district was Arlen Scarlett.

5

JULIE SCARLETT WASN'T on the bus or at school for the next two days, and when Sheridan dialed her number at the ranch the call went straight to voicemail. The news of the shovel fight as well as the disappearance of Opal Scarlett swept through both the school and the community so fast that it was almost unnecessary to include it in the *Saddlestring Roundup*, but it appeared there nevertheless, with the photo of a startled Tommy Wayman exiting the sheriff's department car.

On Friday afternoon, after Sheridan finished track practice and waited inside the entryway for her dad or mom to pick her up, a muddy three-quarter-ton pickup swung into the alcove. THUNDERHEAD RANCH was painted on the door of the truck, and when it opened, Julie jumped out. Sheridan could see that it was Julie's Uncle Arlen who was driving.

Julie looked pale and tired, Sheridan thought. Her friend wore old jeans, cowboy boots, and a too-large sweatshirt. It was unusual to see her dressed down that way, and Sheridan felt sorry for her.

Sheridan was relieved when Julie's expression changed from distraction to joy when she saw her in the doorway. Julie broke into a quick run, opened the door, and threw her arms around her friend.

"I missed you!" Julie said, beaming. "I know it's only been, like, a couple of days, but it seems like a friggin' *month*."

Sheridan said, "I know. I've tried to call you because I was getting worried ..."

Julie dismissed Sheridan's concern with a wave. "Sorry about that. My uncles forget to tell me I've got messages since my grandma always did that. Hey, walk with me, Sherry. I've got to go pick up my missed assignments so I can get caught up this weekend."

Sheridan turned and strode down the empty hallway with Julie.

"I'm glad school is out for the day," Julie said, speaking softly. "This way I don't have to face anyone and answer all of the questions right now. That'll have to wait until Monday. So, is everybody wondering where I've been?"

"Sure," Sheridan answered, knowing Julie wanted to find out she was the topic of all conversation, even though some of the kids had said cruel things about her and her family. "Me, mainly."

"Oh, you're sweet," Julie said.

Sheridan stood near the door of Julie's math classroom while Julie got her assignments from her teacher. She listened as Julie told her teacher how rough it had been the last few days with her grandmother missing, and with her uncles fighting. The teacher eagerly drank it in. If Julie was going to repeat the story to every teacher, Sheridan thought, they'd never get out of there. While she liked Julie and was relieved she seemed okay, her friend reveled in being the center of attention.

Finally, Julie finished and left, Sheridan beside her.

"I may not be able to stay," Sheridan said. "My ride should be outside."

Julie stopped. "Are you sure? We've got some catching up to do."

"I know," Sheridan said, thinking she would much rather do that instead of listen to Julie explain what had happened at the ranch seven more times to seven more teachers. While she had the opportunity, Sheridan asked Julie something that had been on her mind since the other day. "Remember, you were just about to tell me something in the truck before we saw the fight? Remember that?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell me now?" Sheridan asked.

Julie laughed bitterly, and suddenly seemed much older than her fourteen years, Sheridan thought.

"It's not really news so much anymore," Julie said. "I was going to tell you how *weird* my family is. I was thinking about your mom coming to pick you up, and your sister, and your dad. It's so friggin', like, *normal* compared to what I'm used to."

"That's what you were going to tell me?" Sheridan asked, a little let down.

"Yeah. It's just that I didn't know how strange it was until pretty recently. I guess I thought everybody lived like I do—I didn't realize how screwed up it is."

Sheridan shook her head, not understanding.

"You need to come out and see it for yourself," Julie said, grasping Sheridan's arms. "You won't believe it until I show it to you. Wait until you see the Legacy Wall."

"What do you mean?" Sheridan asked, genuinely rattled by what Julie was saying.

“Well, you know that term ‘nuclear family’? Meaning, you know, a dad, a mom, some kids, a dog? Like your family? Well, mine’s like, a *blown-up* nuclear family. Like somebody dropped a bomb on us.” Julie giggled when she said “blown-up nuclear family,” which made Sheridan smile.

“I mean,” Julie continued, “I don’t even live with my dad. He lives on the other side of the ranch, on the east side, all by himself. My mom lives in a cabin on a creek, and she never talks to my dad. I mean *never*. I grew up in the big house thinking my grandma was my mother because she took care of me. My mom drinks, I guess. Anyway, so it’s like my grandma is my mother and my uncle Arlen is my father. Uncle Wyatt—he sometimes seems like he’s more my age or my little brother than anything. I’m very fond of my uncle Arlen and my uncle Wyatt, and they’re on our side of the ranch ...”

Sheridan shook her head. “Julie, this is getting complicated.”

“I know,” Julie said. “That’s what I wanted to tell you, how complicated it is. But I don’t want anybody else around here to know, because it’s embarrassing, you know? At least I hope Grandmother is back soon. Then it will feel more normal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her car is gone,” Julie said. “We think maybe she took a trip somewhere. We hope she comes back soon. It’s a weird situation, but it would at least be more normal if she came back. She’s a good cook.”

Sheridan felt even more sorry for Julie, how naked she seemed to be, how pathetic she sounded. But Julie’s situation also gave her an odd, cold feeling about her friend that made her feel guilty.

“Oh-oh,” Julie said, pointing over Sheridan’s shoulder. “I see your dad’s truck outside.”

Sheridan turned and looked down the hall. The green Game and Fish truck was out there, and she could see her father’s silhouette, his hat brim bouncing up and down. He was probably talking to someone. Then she could see Julie’s uncle Arlen leaning out of his window, talking back.

“I gotta go,” Sheridan said, relieved that she had an excuse to depart.

“I know, but thanks for hanging with me,” Julie said.

“Always, Julie.”

“That’s why I love you the most,” Julie said, smiling. There was mist in her eyes. “Come out for a sleepover. I’ll show you just how ... *fucked up* my family is.”

Sheridan had never heard Julie say “fuck” before, and it startled her. It seemed to startle Julie as well, who covered her mouth with her hand.

6

IT WAS A SECTION of fence out in the middle of nowhere that made J. W. Keeley think, *This is not only another world, it’s another goddamned planet.*

The fence was there when he woke up. He was parked alongside Wyoming Highway 487 headed north. The Shirley Mountains loomed over the horizon like sleeping reptiles, miles across a moonscape still covered with snow, feeling as if he were absolutely alone on the top of the world. The fence was unique in that it was only a *section* of a fence, parallel to the highway, but not connected on either end with anything else. It was a tall fence, made of fresh lumber. The morning sun fire-bronzed the planks, made it look as if it was lit up by electricity.

Because it *was* another planet, and there was no electricity. Or trees. Or power lines. Or anything resembling human presence or activity, except for that section of fence, which was obviously placed there to drive men like Keeley out of his mind, this Wyoming version of Stonehenge, as if to make him think he was hallucinating or seriously hungover.

Right on both counts, he thought. But this fence, he had to go look at it up close, prove to himself that it was real, and try to figure out why it was there.

*

ON THE BENCH seat of the old Ford pickup next to J. W. Keeley was a scoped rifle with a banana clip. It was a Ruger Mini-14, a carbine that shot .223 rounds. The night before, the coyote hunter at the bar in Medicine Bow told Keeley the rifle was used mainly for killing coyotes and other vermin because the cartridges shot nice and flat. The thirty-round clip was a vestige of the pre-assault rifle law days, back when some federal lawmakers still had spines, the coyote hunter said, back before they all started wearing frilly little skirts and drinking lattes and passing laws against gun owners. In fact, the hunter said he'd spent the day out in the sagebrush between Medicine Bow and Rock River, working a wounded-rabbit call and popping four coyotes, missing a few others. The dead ones were in the back of his truck as he spoke, the hunter said. Their fur was worth ninety dollars for a good pelt, he told Keeley, plus there was a fifteen dollar bounty on account of the coyote was considered a predator.

The coyote hunter told Keeley his name was Hoot.

Keeley told Hoot his name was Bill Monroe, hoping Hoot had never heard of the bluegrass picker.

Keeley had said "coyotes" in the way he'd always heard, emphasizing the middle syllable, "kye-oh-tees," but Hoot had made fun of him, asked him good-naturedly where in the hell he was from, because in the Northern Rockies the creature was pronounced "kye-oat" without that fruity Hollywood flare on the end. Keeley repeated "*kye-oat, kye-oat, kye-oat*" as he followed the man outside to see the dead animals.

Hoot the Coyote Hunter was a local with a bloodstained Carhartt and a trim goatee. He liked to talk, and told Keeley in the time it took to leave the Virginian Hotel bar and arrive at his pickup that he'd grown up on a ranch near Elmo, graduated from UW with a degree in social work, come back to the area he grew up in to work in the coal mines, which paid a hell of a lot better than social work, bought a small place and got married to a wench named Lisa, lost his job in the coal mine and got divorced, now he drove a school bus and trapped and popped a few coyotes in his spare time.

When Hoot asked, Keeley said he was headed north to Casper to look for work because he'd heard there was plenty there, with the coal-bed methane boom and all.

"Pinedale," Hoot had said once they were back inside from seeing the dead coyotes while he graciously accepted another double bourbon from Keeley "that's the place to go for jobs and gas. I hear a man can pull down sixty K just for showing up, seventy K if he can fart and walk at the same time."

Keeley bought Hoot drinks until the coyote hunter finally lowered his head on the bar and went to sleep. Then Keeley went back outside and stole Hoot's Mini-14 and an army cartridge box filled with over five hundred rounds.

He had driven north in the dark until he began to imagine he was on the surface of the moon, and realized it had been over an hour since he had seen even a single set of oncoming headlights. So he pulled over to the side of the road, covered himself and the rifle with a blanket he found behind the bench seat, and went to sleep.

IT WAS WHEN he awoke that he looked out over the sparse, open, endless vista and saw the fence.

Now, as he drove toward it off the highway, on a rough two-track still choked with dirty snowdrifts that meandered across the top of two hills, he saw a real cowboy astride a real horse, and J. W. Keeley thought he had awakened in the middle reel of a western movie.

The cowboy wore a long heavy coat and a wide-brimmed hat, and a dog tailed him. In the distance, toward the Shirley Mountains, Keeley could see a pickup and horse trailer parked on the side of a hill, glittering in the early-morning sun.

There were cows on the bottom of the basin, and the cowboy was probably headed down the slope to gather them up or count them or something. Whatever real cowboys did. Keeley wasn't sure. In movies, cowboys were always in town, having just come from somewhere else.

The real cowboy stopped his horse and turned when he heard the sound of a motor coming.

Keeley drove up and got out of the truck, but the dog started yapping at him, barking so hard it skittered stiff-legged across the ground. Keeley jumped back in the cab and closed the door, opened the window, and heard the cowboy say, "Sorry about that, mister. Pay no attention to him. He don't bite."

Keeley looked at the cowboy. Except for the heavy coat, scarf, and hat, the man looked normal, like anybody, like a shoe clerk or something. The cowboy wore round wire-rimmed glasses and had a brushy mustache. His cheeks were flushed red from the early-morning cold.

Keeley rolled down his window but didn't get out.

"What can I help you with?" the man asked.

Keeley gestured toward the hill. "I was wondering about that fence up there. Ain't they ever going to finish it?"

The cowboy looked at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. Keeley felt his rage shoot to the surface. The fucking cowboy kept laughing, and even raised a gloved hand to his stupid shoe-clerk face to wipe away a tear.

"You're kidding me, right?" the cowboy said.

"I guess I'm not," Keeley said, much more calmly than he thought himself capable of.

"... *'Ain't they ever going to finish it?'*" the cowboy said. "Pardon me, but that's one of the funniest things I ever heard. That there's a snow fence. This must be the first time you seen one."

"A snow fence?" Keeley said. "But it's made of wood."

Which got the cowboy laughing again, and the rage boiling up in Keeley, as much at himself as at the shoe-clerk cowboy for saying that, as if the fence would be made of snow, which was stupid.

"Yer killin' me, mister," the cowboy wheezed, between belly laughs.

Keeley looked off into the distance at a single cloud that was hardly a cloud at all, just a wispy white stringer across the light blue, like egg whites dropped in hot water. He asked, "Hey, you got family around here?"

"What?" That stopped the guy.

"You work for some rancher, or is this yours?"

The cowboy's eyes narrowed. The question had obviously thrown him off stride. "Talk about apropos of nothing," he said, then: "It's a corporate operation. They hire me and a half dozen other men to manage the place."

"But you have family, right?"

"Yeah, my wife and a couple of kids, but what does that have to do ... ?"

Keeley said, "Glad I made your day," and turned the wheel sharply and floored the accelerator. He could see the cowboy watching him—still shaking his head with profound amusement—in his rearview mirror as he drove up the hillside toward the snow fence.

At the top, he parked and got out near the fence—it was practically ten feet high—and surveyed the hillside he had driven up. The cowboy had finally turned his horse and was continuing back down the hill, toward the cattle on the bottom of the basin.

Keeley took a moment to look around. He had never seen country so desolate, and so mean. It reminded him of one of those old western movies, but worse. The movies always showed desert as being hot and dry. This was high and rough, with dirty snow. He preferred desert, he thought; at least it was warm. And except for that laughing cowboy down there, Keeley was the only man on earth for as far as he could see. There were no cars on the highway.

Keeley snapped back the bolt of the rifle, saw a flash of bright brass as the cartridge seated, and aimed across the hood of his pickup. He leaned into the scope, putting the crosshairs just below the nape of the cowboy's neck, on a band of pink skin between the scarf and the collar, and pulled the trigger.

The shot snapped out, an angry, sharp sound, and the cowboy slumped to the side and rolled off his horse. Keeley watched as the dog trotted over and started licking the cowboy's face, which almost made Keeley feel bad until he realized the damned dog was tasting blood, so he shot it too.

Keeley got back into the stolen pickup with his stolen gun, said, "Fuckin' cowboy, anyway," and turned the vehicle toward the highway, to drive north, to find that game warden.

7

TWO DAYS LATER, Marybeth Pickett threw open the front door after her morning walk and shook their copy of the *Saddlestring Roundup*. Joe and the girls were having breakfast.

"Wacey Hedeman is dead, that bastard," she said, showing Joe the front page.

Sheridan said, "Good!"

Lucy said, "You probably shouldn't say 'good,' Sherry."

"But I mean it," Sheridan said fiercely. "I hate—*hated*—that man."

Joe glanced at his wife and saw that Marybeth had the same reaction as Sheridan. Because Wacey had been the man who had shot her, causing the loss of their baby.

"You know how you wish things, bad things, on people?" Marybeth said. "I have wished harm to Wacey ever since he shot me. But to read now that he's really dead ... it's strange. I feel sort of cheated. I wanted him to know how much I hated him."

Joe was not surprised at Sheridan's and Marybeth's reaction, but it was disconcerting to see such mutual anger on display.

Joe looked at Lucy, trying to gauge what she was thinking of all this. Lucy shot her eyes back and forth between her mother and her sister. She had been three at the time, while Sheridan had been seven. Lucy seemed to take the comments in stride, probably since she'd grown up with the whole Wacey Hedeman thing—it was part of the family history.

"It says he had some kind of seizure," Marybeth said, reading the story. "They're still investigating. He might have been poisoned."

"Poisoned? By another inmate?" Joe asked.

"It doesn't say," she said. "But I guess I really don't care, considering what he did to us."

"But we're tough!" Lucy said, repeating something she'd heard over the years. It made Marybeth smile, and wipe a tear from her cheek.

"We're tough, all right," Marybeth said.

MAY

We have enslaved the rest of the animal creation, and have treated our distant cousins in fur and feathers so badly that beyond doubt, if they were able to formulate a religion, they would depict the Devil in human form.

William Ralph Inge,
Outspoken Essays, 1922

If you walk around with a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.

Unknown

8

IN THE MONTH since she'd been reported missing, Opal Scarlett—or her body—had not turned up. Not only that, but her car was missing. It wasn't that she was missed for sentimental reasons. She was missed because she held the keys to so many projects, so many relationships, so much history. Not until she was gone did most people within the community realize how integral Opal Scarlett was to so many things. Opal was on the board of directors for the bank, the museum, the utility company, the Friends of the Library. She was one of three Twelve Sleep County commissioners. Her annual check to fund the entirety of the local Republican Party had not arrived. The GM dealer had already taken the order for her new Cadillac, and it sat in the lot with a sold sign on it.

Joe kept expecting something to happen. A message from a ranch downriver saying a body had just washed up on the bank. A postcard from some faraway island, or a phone call to one of her sons to bark an order—something.

None of those things had happened. Opal's status was in a dread state of limbo and the rumors that were starting to fly had practically destabilized the entire valley.

Joe had carefully read the report issued by Sheriff McLanahan's office, and he had spoken at length to Robey Hersig. It didn't make sense that her body had not turned up. The river was, as Tommy had pointed out, surprisingly low and slow. Spring runoff hadn't started yet. There were places near town where a person could walk across the river, hopping from stone to stone. The likelihood of Opal's body washing downriver without being seen was remote.

Joe had heard some of the theories being bandied about town. Three garnered prominence:

Tommy Wayman threw her in the river, all right, but that was *after* he strangled her and weighted the body down with stones;

Hank was driving by and happened to see Opal crawling out of the river around the bend from where Tommy threw her in. Hank saw his opportunity and bashed her over the head with a shovel and took the body back to his side of the ranch and buried her, thinking he would eventually get the ranch from Arlen; and

Opal was fine. The brief swim scared her, though, and when she reached shore she got in her car, drove to Vegas, and found a young lover named Mario. She'd be back, eventually. There was even a reported sighting of her from a county resident who swore he saw her with a tall, dark young man in a casino on the strip. The report was credible enough that McLanahan dispatched Deputy Reed to Las Vegas, where he ran up an expense account that created a minor scandal at the city council meeting.

Joe stood on the sidelines with growing frustration. This wasn't his case in any way and his involvement was peripheral. But it drove him crazy that no progress had been made. He suggested to Robey that maybe he could be involved in the official investigation, and Robey shook his head no, saying the sheriff wanted no outside interference. "Since when would we call in the game warden for a missing-persons investigation?" Robey asked. And Joe knew better than to bring it up with Director Pope. Joe wasn't sure he could help the investigation along. But he knew he'd feel better if he was a part of it.

SINCE THAT MORNING in April, details started to leak out about how the Thunderhead Ranch had been run and the difficulties and complications that were resulting from the matriarch's disappearance. Joe had an appointment with Robey Hersig the next evening to discuss what was going on. Robey had been cryptic in his request for a meeting, and Joe had been intrigued.

"We may have something brewing here that none of us anticipated," Robey had said to Joe on his cellphone. "The more I dig into it, the worse it gets."

"So tell me about it," Joe said.

"Not over the phone, no way."

"Are you serious? Do you think someone may be listening?"

"You never know," Robey said, hanging up.

HAVING FED NATE Romanowski's falcons after school, Joe took Julie and Sheridan to the Thunderhead Ranch so Julie could go home. As they drove down the road they were met by a yellow Ford coming the other way. There was something he recognized about the driver, Joe thought, something about the pinched, hard look to his face that triggered a sour familiarity, but Joe couldn't place it. Unlike most people on a back road, the driver didn't wave or stop. In his rear-view mirror Joe watched the yellow Ford drive off.

"Who was that?" he asked Julie.

She shrugged. "It wasn't one of our trucks."

As they neared the ranch house, Julie said to Sheridan, "Did you ask yet?"

"Not yet."

"Ask what?" Joe said, turning his attention to the girls but still suspicious about the Ford.

Sheridan turned to Joe. "Is it okay to do a sleepover at Julie's in a couple of weeks?"

Sleepovers were all the rage among the eighth-graders, Joe knew. Scarcely a weekend went by without an invitation to Sheridan to sleep over at someone's house, along with five or six other girls. It was a group thing, a pack thing, and Joe was helpless before it. He gratefully turned over all planning and coordination to Marybeth. Marybeth rued the change in her oldest daughter from preferring the company of her family to the company of her friends.

Joe said, "Why are you asking me?"

"Because Mom may not let me," Sheridan admitted.

This was not a place Joe wanted to go. "We'll have to discuss it later."

"Come on, Dad ..."

He hated when she did that, since his inclination, always, was to give in. Sheridan had the ability to rope him in with such ease that even he was shamed by it.

"Later," he said.

"I'll call you," Sheridan sighed to her friend, patting Julie on the arm. Julie gave Joe a pleading look, and he shrugged as if to say, *It's out of my hands*.

9

THE NEXT WEEK, Joe was on a muddy two-track in the breaklands doing a preliminary trend count on the muledeer population when he got the distinct feeling he was being watched. It was a crisp, dry morning. A late-spring snowfall was melting into the inch-high grass as the morning warmed, and the moisture was being sucked into the parched earth. By late afternoon, he was afraid, the ground would be as bone dry as it had been all year. It would take much more rain and snow to turn back the relentless slow death of the soil caused by the fifth straight year of drought.

He had been counting pregnant does all morning. Most of the fawns wouldn't be born until June, but from what he could tell so far it would be another bad year for the deer population. A good year could be predicted if there were eighty fawns per one hundred does, or 80 percent. So far, the ratio had been 40 percent pregnant does. The drought—not hunting or development—was severely affecting the population. He would need to recommend fewer deer licenses for the area, which would not make him very popular among the local hunters.

Joe surveyed the horizon to see if he could spot who was watching him. He saw no one, and shrugged it off.

His cellphone rang.

"Guess who this is?" said Special Agent Tony Portenson of the FBI.

Portenson was originally from Brooklyn, and his accent, if anything, had become more pronounced the longer he was stationed in the Wyoming field office.

"Hello, Tony. Where are you?"

"I'm in your town."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Joe said, knowing Portenson had been trying for three years to get a transfer out of the West to someplace more exciting, someplace where there were gangsters and organized crime, maybe even terrorists. Over the years, Portenson had bored Joe for hours with his complaints regarding the poor quality of crime he had to deal with out of his office in Cheyenne: cattle rustling, methamphetamine labs, murders of passion on the Wind River Indian Reservation.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" Portenson asked.

"I'm out in the field counting deer."

"Jesus, I wouldn't want to interrupt *that*."

Joe could hear Portenson turn to someone, probably his partner, partially cover his phone, and say, "The guy is counting deer. No shit. *Counting deer*."

"I'm counting antelope too," Joe said.

"They can wait. They aren't going anywhere, I'm sure."

"The pronghorn antelope is the second-fastest mammal on the face of the earth," Joe said. "So that wouldn't be correct."

"I'm at that place with the corny name," Portenson said. "The Burg-O-Pardner. Meet me in ten minutes."

"It'll take me twenty."

"I'll order breakfast in the meantime."

*

TONY PORTENSON WAS sitting in a booth in the back of the restaurant when Joe entered. He looked up from his plate of biscuits, gravy, and bacon and waved Joe back. Portenson was dark, intense, and had close-set eyes and a scar that hitched up his upper lip so that it looked as if he was always sneering. When he smiled, the effect was worse. Sitting across from him was an earnest, fresh-faced, wide-shouldered younger man with buzz-cut hair. His partner, Joe assumed.

"Have a seat, Joe," Portenson said, standing and offering his hand. "This is Special Agent Gary Child."

Rather than sit with Portenson or Child, Joe retrieved a chair from a nearby table and pulled it over.

Portenson wore standard FBI clothing—tie, jacket, and slacks, which made him stand out in Saddlestring as if he were wearing a space suit.

"This is the guy I was telling you about," Portenson said to Child.

Child nodded and looked at Joe with a mix of admiration and disdain. The FBI had a low opinion of local law enforcement that was so ingrained it was institutionalized. Although Joe operated on the margin of the sheriff's department and was rarely involved with the town cops, he was considered local and therefore less than proficient. Portenson had obviously briefed Child on both cases they'd been involved in before,

probably between complaints about the wind and the snow he had to put up with during his long assignment in Wyoming, Joe thought.

“So,” Portenson said as they all sat back down. “What is the fastest mammal?”

“The cheetah,” Joe said.

“Does that mean a cheetah can chase down a pronghorn antelope?”

“Conceivably,” Joe said, “if they lived on the same continent. But they don’t.”

“Hmmpf.”

“What brings you up here, Tony?” Joe asked, assuming it would be either about the Scarletts or ...

“Have you seen your buddy Nate Romanowski lately?” Portenson asked, getting right to it.

Joe felt a tingle on the back of his neck. “No.”

“You’re telling me he just vanished from the face of the earth?”

“I didn’t say that. I said I hadn’t seen him. And before you ask, no, I also haven’t heard from him.”

Portenson exchanged glances with Child.

Child said, “Let me set the scene. Two men are murdered. Although the condition of their bodies is deteriorated almost beyond recognition, the theory of our medical examiner is that they were each killed by a single gunshot wound to the head from an extremely large-caliber handgun. The bodies were obviously moved from where they were killed. Meanwhile, your friend Nate Romanowski was known to pack a .454 Casull revolver and was at odds with at least one of the murdered men. And according to you, he just vanished?”

Joe stifled a smile. “I have a tough time envisioning Tony here as the good cop in the good cop–bad cop scenario,” he said. “This is more like bad cop–worse cop. Is this a new FBI strategy, or what?”

Child didn’t waver. “We could bring you back for questioning.”

“Go ahead,” Joe said. “I’m telling you the truth. I don’t know where Nate is, and I haven’t been in contact with him.”

Portenson wiped gravy from his lips with a paper napkin and studied Joe closely.

“What?” Portenson said.

“I can’t believe you came all the way here to ask me about Nate,” Joe said. “It seems like a waste of your time.”

“Look,” Child said, leaning toward Joe, his eyes sharp, “we don’t need to explain to you why we do anything. We’re asking the questions here, not you.”

“Then I’ve got deer to count,” Joe said, and started to push his chair back.

“Okay, okay,” Portenson said, holding his hand out palm-up to Child. “Sit back down, Joe. That’s not why we’re here.”

Joe sat.

“Actually, I just figured since we were up here I’d yank your chain a little. See if you had any new information on Mr. Romanowski.”

“I told you I don’t.”

"I believe you," Portenson said, sighing. "Although I am going to get that guy."

Joe nodded that he understood, although he didn't think Portenson would succeed.

Child sat back in the booth. By the look he gave Portenson, it was clear he didn't like the way his boss had changed tracks.

"Are you up here on the Scarlett case?" Joe asked.

Portenson looked back blankly. Joe outlined Opal's disappearance, and the battle between the brothers.

"That's sick," Portenson said, "but that's not why we're here."

"We're here on a fucking wild-goose chase," Child said sullenly.

"Get used to it," Portenson said to him like a weary father. Then he signaled the waitress for his check.

"Double murder down in Mississippi," Portenson said. "Some hunting guide killed his clients, stole the couple's car, and took off. The car was found in Rawlins last month in the parking lot of the state pen, meaning it crossed state lines, which is where we come in. A couple of days later we got a report that an old truck was stolen from the same place."

The waitress brought the check and Portenson gave her a U.S. government credit card and asked her to charge three packs of Marlboros to it as well.

"My tax dollars at work," Joe said.

Portenson ignored him and continued. "After the old truck was stolen, it was seen south of Casper in the middle of fucking nowhere. Same day, somebody shot a cowboy off his horse in the vicinity. Left a wife and two kids. We don't know whether there's a connection or not. But since the guy was headed north, we thought we'd ask around. Does any of this ring any bells? The stolen truck is a light yellow ninety-four Ford with rust spots on the doors. Wyoming plates."

Joe shook his head. There was something familiar about the description but he couldn't place it. "What's the guy's name?"

"Ex-con named John Kelly," Child said from memory. "John Wayne Kelly."

"I've not heard of him," Joe said.

Portenson leveled his gaze at Joe. "My brethren are breaking up Al Qaeda cells and saving humanity. Me? I'm trying to figure out who shot a lonely cowpoke off his horse. Does anyone but me see the *disparity* in that?"

Child snorted a laugh.

Joe shook his head at Portenson's attitude. "I bet that cowboy's widow and kids would like you to find out who did it."

"Aw fuck, Joe," Portenson said. "You're ruining the mood."

"Have you talked to the sheriff?"

Portenson snorted while he signed the charge slip. "We sent him the file but I'm delaying actually talking to him as long as I can."

"He's changed yet again," Joe said.

"I heard he's a cowpoke now," Portenson said, curling his lip in disdain.

"Something like that," Joe said.

"How could he get worse?"

"I can't explain it," Joe said, pushing back. "Good to see you, Tony."

"Good to see you, Joe. And don't forget to give me a shout if Mr. Romanowski shows up."

Joe nodded again, shook Child's hand, and got a cup of coffee to go on the way out.

10

JOE AND MARYBETH did the dishes after dinner while Sheridan and Lucy watched television in the family room. Joe had made chili and the kitchen smelled of tomato sauce, garlic, spices, and ground beef.

"It was too salty, wasn't it?" he asked, scrubbing the cast-iron pot he liked to use for chili, since it was huge.

"A little," she said. "Did you rinse the beans? Sometimes they pack them in so much salt that if you don't wash them thoroughly ..."

"Ah," he said, "that was the problem."

"It was good, though," she said. "I do wish you could learn to make a smaller pot, maybe."

Since he didn't know how to make a pot of chili for less than a dozen people, and every time he tried to make less it was a disaster, Marybeth had filled two Tupperware containers of it for the freezer. Actually, Joe didn't really want to learn how to make less chili at a time, since he liked having leftovers available, especially these days, when he was never sure when Marybeth would be home from her office or if dinner would be planned. But he didn't want to tell her that. And, like most men, he wanted her to think he was largely incompetent in the kitchen.

"What do you think of Sheridan going to the Scarlett's for a sleepover?" Marybeth asked. Sheridan had brought it up during dinner.

Joe scrubbed harder. "Julie seems like a nice girl," he said. "It's the rest of her family who're nuts."

"I know what you mean. I got calls today from both Arlen and Hank. Each wants me to meet with him and see what I can do to streamline their business operations."

"Both of them, eh?"

"Both of them."

"Uh-oh."

Since Opal's disappearance, sides had been forming in Saddlestring and the county. People were either pro-Arlen and anti-Hank, or vice versa. Both brothers kept close track of who was with them, and who was against them. Arlen preferred the Saddlestring Burg-O-Pardner for his mid-morning coffee, where he could chat with the town fathers. Hank never set foot in the place. Likewise, Hank liked his shot and a beer at the Stockman's Bar, often accompanied by several of his ranch hands. Arlen never darkened the door of that establishment.

The town was just big enough that there were two of most things—two feed stores, grocery stores, banks, hardware stores, auto-parts stores, lumber stores—so the brothers could choose. In the instance that there was only one business, such as the movie theater and medical clinic, one or the other brother claimed it outright and the other traveled north to the next larger city—Billings, Montana.

Since the Scarletts spent a lot of money in town, the choice between pro-Arlen or pro-Hank was an important business decision, and one not made on a whim. Marybeth had told Joe about it, how her clients agonized over which brother to court. It was just as important, she said, that when a brother was chosen, not a single kind word be spoken about the other. That was considered disloyalty, and reason to pull their business. The loyalty to one brother or the other extended to their ranch hands as well, and merchants had to keep track of who worked for whom.

Now, with calls from both brothers on the same day, Marybeth would have to make the same decision so many of her clients had made.

THERE WERE RUMORS of war on the Thunderhead Ranch. The stories filtered through the community every day. The word was that Hank and Arlen had each hired more men than they needed for normal ranch operations. No one doubted the new men could serve as soldiers in an all-out range battle for ownership and dominance of the family ranch. Locks were put on gates, and harsh words exchanged over the fences. Sugar was poured into the gas tanks of ranch vehicles. Irrigation valves were turned off, or turned on when they shouldn't be, or the water was diverted from one side of the ranch to the other.

Robey told Joe that Arlen's new foreman claimed that someone from Hank's side had taken a shot at him, the bullet entering his open driver's-side window, barely missing his nose, and exiting the open passenger's-side window. Since there was no proof that a shot had been fired other than the foreman's account and only soiled Wranglers to confirm he'd been scared, McLanahan filed away the complaint.

Then two of Hank's men charged they'd been run off the highway by a pickup clearly belonging to Arlen Scarlett. But no pickup matching the description could be found.

An editorial in the *Saddlestring Roundup* ran a long list of bulleted items that had reportedly occurred between the two brothers on the ranch. The editorial ended with the sentence, "Will it be necessary to call in the Wyoming National Guard to prevent a full-fledged bloodletting?"

"SO, WHO YOU gonna choose?" Joe asked.

Marybeth frowned and shook her head. "I wish I didn't have to choose either."

"That's an option, isn't it?"

"Not really. They'd both see it for what it was—a snub. Arlen and Hank insist on a choice."

Left unsaid was the fact that whichever choice she made would generate a good deal of revenue for her business, and therefore benefit the family. Marybeth was routing as much as she could into college funds for Sheridan and Lucy, and having either Hank or Arlen on her client list would boost her earnings. Since Joe's salary was frozen at

\$32,000 by the state, there was little he could do to contribute to the college funds, which made him feel guilty and ashamed.

"My mother and Arlen both serve on the library board," Marybeth said. "They're pretty good friends. I think Arlen expects me to go with him, and I *know* my mother does." She sighed. "I'll probably go with Arlen."

Joe cringed. Last fall, Marybeth's mother, the former Missy Vankueren, had married Bud Longbrake, one of the most prominent ranchers in the valley. It was her fourth marriage, and she had traded up each time. Missy had taken to her new role—that of landed matriarch—with an enthusiasm and panache that Joe found both truly impressive and frightening. She seemed to be on every board and volunteer effort, the co-chair of every fund-raiser. She was even involved, somehow, in the new addition to the Twelve Sleep County Museum, which was to be called the Scarlett Wing. Missy had never liked Joe much, and the feeling was mutual, although a kind of grudging respect had formed on both sides. She thought her daughter could have done better for herself. Joe tended to agree with that, but didn't necessarily want to hear it said. Again.

"Arlen is pretty persuasive, and we could certainly use the business. But I really don't want to get involved with either one of them. It's a classic no-win situation," she said, folding her washrag over the edge of the sink.

"Speaking of which," Joe said, "I got two messages from headquarters today. I meant to tell you about them before dinner."

She looked at him and arched her eyebrows.

"The first one was from Randy Pope. He wants me to re-submit all of my expense logs for the past four years. *Four years!* He says I still hold the record for the most wrecked vehicles in the department." In Joe's career, he had totaled three pickups and a snowmobile.

"Yes," she said, prompting him for the second.

"And an anonymous tipster called the 800-POACHER line claiming that he knew of a guy who had dozens of game-animal mounts in his home that were taken illegally in Wyoming and all over the world. The RP—that's 'reporting party' to you civilians—said the violator is prominent, a real criminal. The RP said this guy has done enough bad things to justify confiscating all of his property and equipment and fining him out the wazoo."

"Yes ..."

"The alleged poacher is Hank Scarlett," Joe said. "The anonymous caller knows enough about game and fish regulations to cite wanton-destruction statutes. He also said many of the animal mounts at Hank's hunting lodge are clearly illegal."

"Anonymous caller?" Marybeth said, smiling. "Or Arlen?"

"I'd guess one and the same," Joe said.

"And there was an e-mail sitting in my in-box from Randy Pope referencing the tip on Hank. It says, 'Wait for my authorization before proceeding on this.' " The message infuriated Joe. Never in his career had a supervisor injected himself so deeply into his

day-to-day job, much less the director of the department. In six years of working under Trey Crump, Trey had never once told Joe to hold up on doing his job. And just what in the hell was Randy Pope waiting for before providing authorization? Or was it, as Joe suspected, simply a maneuver to once again remind Joe Pickett who was running the show, like the request for back expense logs?

She stepped up to Joe and put her hands on the tops of his shoulders. "We're going to be tangled up with these people whether we want to be or not, aren't we?" She meant the Scarletts.

"Yup," Joe said, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"And you wouldn't have it any other way, would you?"

He hesitated for a moment. That one came out of left field, but she knew him so well.

"I do want to find out what happened to Opal," he said. "There's something not right about it."

"There's something not right about the whole Scarlett clan," she said. "They've got a hold on this valley that scares me. It doesn't matter if you're with Arlen or Hank, the fact is everyone feels obligated to be with one or the other. There's no middle ground, no compromise."

As she spoke, Sheridan came into the kitchen.

"You guys decide about Friday night?"

Joe and Marybeth looked at each other.

"What we've decided," Marybeth said, "is that this valley is much too small."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sheridan asked, looking from her mother to her father, obviously embarrassed to see them holding one another next to the sink.

The night suddenly split wide open as Maxine awoke from her customary sleeping place in the doorway of Joe's office and barked furiously at the front door, the fur on her neck and back bristled up like a feral hog's. Joe, Marybeth, and Sheridan all turned to the door, and Lucy scrambled from the couch to join them.

"Maxine!" Joe commanded. "Maxine, stop it!"

But the dog kept barking, her barks echoing sharply through the house. She clearly thought somebody was outside.

"What is it?" Marybeth asked Lucy. "Was there a knock?"

"I thought I heard something hit the door," Lucy said, looking away from the television. "It sounded like a little rock hit it."

Joe slipped away and strode across the living room. It wouldn't be that unusual to have a night visitor; people often showed up late to report an incident or turn themselves in. But that usually happened in the fall, during hunting season, not in the spring.

He clicked on the porch light and opened the door. No one. He stepped outside on the porch, Maxine on his heels. The only thing he could see, in the distance, was a pair of red tail lights growing smaller on Bighorn Road traveling east, toward the mountains, away from town.

"What was it, honey?" Marybeth asked.

Joe shook his head. "Nobody here now, but it looks like someone was."

"Dad," Lucy said, coming outside with her sister, "there's something on the door."

"Oh My God," Sheridan gasped, her hands covering her mouth. She recognized it. So did Joe, and he was taken aback.

A small dead animal had been pinned to the front door by an old steak knife with a weathered grip. The creature was long and slim, ferretlike, with a black stripe down its back. It was a Miller's weasel, a species once thought extinct. It was the animal that had led to Sheridan being terrorized years before, and Marybeth being shot.

And somebody who knew about both had stuck one to his front door.

11

THE NEXT MORNING Joe went for a run, fed the horses, retrieved the newspaper, walked the girls out to the school bus (via the back door, so they wouldn't have to see the Miller's weasel on the front), and paced back and forth from the living room to the kitchen, waiting for 8 a.m., when he called headquarters in Cheyenne and asked for Randy Pope. He was angry.

"The director is in a meeting," Pope's receptionist said, her tone clipped. Joe didn't think he liked Pope's receptionist; there was something off-putting and chilly about her.

"Can you please get him out of it?"

"Is this an emergency?"

It is for me, Joe thought. So he said, "Yes," knowing Pope wouldn't agree.

Joe listened to Glen Campbell sing about the Wichita lineman while he held. The music was another addition since Pope had taken over, but the choice of songs belied not only another era, but another planet.

Pope came on. "Make it quick, Joe."

"Someone killed a Miller's weasel and stuck it to my front door last night," Joe said. "I tried the emergency number there in Cheyenne and they told me you were not to be disturbed."

"That's right, Joe," Pope said, an edge in his voice. "I was at a dinner at the governor's mansion. It was a get-to-know-you dinner, and I informed dispatch I was not to be interrupted."

Joe sighed. "Randy, if you're going to be my supervisor and require me to get authorization from you for every move I make, you need to be available. Either that, or loosen up the reins and let me do my job."

Marybeth passed by the doorway to his office holding the newspaper. She cocked an eyebrow, cautioning him.

"That would be *Director Pope*," Pope said, his voice flat. "Tell me again what happened and what you want to do?" Joe could discern he was measuring his words

carefully. Joe vowed to try to do the same. Every time he talked with Pope he ran the risk of saying something that could get him reprimanded or suspended.

"There is a dead Miller's weasel stuck to my front door with a knife ..."

"That house is Game and Fish property," Pope interjected. "It doesn't belong to you personally."

Joe stopped pacing and shut his eyes. This is what Pope did, his method—he'd say something so blatant and obvious that it killed the purpose of the conversation in the first place.

"I know who the house belongs to," Joe said wearily. "And since you own it, how about a new furnace? How about that? How about putting some insulation in the walls and sealing up all of the cracks where the wind blows through?"

Marybeth was hovering in the hall, listening and not trying to hide it. He could tell she was amused, but also concerned.

"Joe ..."

"Right, you don't want to talk about that," Joe said to Pope. "So how about we talk about the animal on the front of my, um ... *our* door. The Miller's weasel is an endangered species, as you know. But it's more than that. This is personal."

"So what do you want me to do about it?"

Again, Joe closed his eyes for a moment, contemplating whether or not he should count to ten, or resign immediately. Or drive to Cheyenne and shoot Pope in the heart, which would be the best alternative—or at least the most satisfying.

"I need your authorization to investigate it," Joe said quietly, trying to keep anger out of his voice. "You said in your memo that you want to be informed prior to me opening any new investigations, so I'm informing you. I want to ride to where the last colony of Miller's weasels are, and see if I can find any evidence of who was up there to kill one. Then I might need some help from our investigators to trace the knife. I can start interviewing people around here today to see if anyone saw the vehicle or knows who did it."

The line was silent for a moment. Joe could picture Pope sitting back in his chair, maybe putting his feet up on his desk.

"Joe?" Pope said.

"Yes?"

"There's a big difference between asking for authorization and telling me what you're going to do," Pope said. "This is a good example of the kind of problem I have with you and some of the other game wardens. You act as if you're the Lone Ranger in your district, that you and you alone decide what you're going to do and how you're going to do it. No other law-enforcement officer has that luxury, Joe. Everyone else has to get authorization to proceed. Can you imagine a sheriff's deputy showing up at work in the morning and saying, 'Gee, I feel like going out on the interstate highway today and catching speeders and playing highway patrolman instead of staying in the county and following up on all of these annoying complaints.' Can you imagine that, Joe? It's time you realized this isn't how things are done in the real world, where we have

to justify our existence to the legislature and the public. Why is it you think you're special?"

"It's my problem," Joe said, opening the front door and staring at the animal pinned to it, the little body now starting to stiffen. "Like I said, it's personal. Whoever did this didn't just happen to find a Miller's weasel. He went looking for it, and left it here as a message. I haven't disturbed it since last night in case there are fingerprints or other evidence."

Pope said, "Do you plan to chase the culprit down and shoot him like you did that outfitter in Jackson? Like you're some kind of cowboy or gunfighter? That's not how we do things anymore, Joe. This is a new agency, and a new era."

A new agency and a new era. Another one of Pope's catch-phrases.

Joe had trouble finding the right words to say. He knew he was turning red. When he looked up at Marybeth, she was gesturing frantically for him to "zip it" by sealing her own mouth with an imaginary fastener.

"Call the sheriff," Pope said crisply. "That's what you should have done last night. Ask him to investigate this. It's his jurisdiction, after all."

"Sheriff McLanahan is not competent to investigate this," Joe said.

Pope chuckled drily. "Now, I doubt that, Joe. I'm sure he can handle it. The good people of Twelve Sleep County would never have elected him if he was the buffoon you make him out to be. And this is part of the problem, too. It doesn't help with our community-relations outreach when our people refer to the locals as incompetents. We need all the support we can get, Joe. You need to learn to work with ..."

Joe punched off and slammed the receiver down with so much force that the earpiece broke off. He couldn't listen to another word.

Marybeth obviously heard the end of the conversation and the crash and looked in the door as he tried to fit the pieces of the phone back together. Wires were still attached to the pieces.

"It's busted," he said, angry with himself.

"I see that," Marybeth said. "We can get a new phone. But it's not the phone I'm worried about."

As Joe pressed the pieces together, the handle shattered and covered his desktop with shards of plastic.

Joe said darkly, "Maybe I need a new job."

Marybeth said, "Phone repairman is definitely out."

SHERIFF KYLE MCLANAHAN arrived at Joe's house at ten-thirty that morning, driving the oldest pickup in the county fleet, his one-eyed Blue Heeler dog occupying the passenger seat.

Joe went outside to meet him.

The sheriff climbed slowly out of his pickup, as if he'd aged twenty years since he left town. The dog scrambled out behind him, and ran through the gate to Maxine so both dogs could sniff each other for a while.

That seemed to be McLanahan's intent with Joe as well, to sniff at him.

"That's it, eh?" McLanahan asked, pointing over Joe's shoulder at the Miller's weasel on his door.

"That's it," Joe said, watching McLanahan pull on his jacket.

"Happened last night, huh?"

"Yup."

"But you waited until this morning to call."

"Yes, I did."

"Woul'da helped if you'd called last night," McLanahan said, entering the yard and shuffling past Joe. "Before the blood dried and all the evidence was fouled up. I suppose you've touched the knife handle, and opened the fence, all of that."

"I'm afraid so," Joe said, embarrassed.

McLanahan turned to him stiffly. He moved as if he'd just dismounted after a long horseback trek. "D'you know who did it?"

Joe shrugged. "Someone who wants to send a message. You remember the history on that Miller's weasel."

McLanahan nodded. "Well," he said, reaching up and smoothing both sides of his mustache with a meaty index finger in a surprisingly effete gesture, "I ain't got much to go on, since you already fouled up the crime scene and you can't tell me anything."

"Nope, I guess you don't," Joe said, frustrated.

McLanahan ambled back toward his pickup. "You let me know if something else happens, all right? Or if you hear anything about who mighta' done this? You'll call, right?"

Joe sighed. "I'll call."

The sheriff opened the door of his truck to let his dog bound in, then stopped suddenly and looked up at the sky. Joe followed McLanahan's gaze, puzzled. A V of geese was outlined against a massive cumulous cloud.

"I like to watch the geese," McLanahan said, as if it were something profound. Then he looked back at Joe and squinted his eyes. "Next time, call me right away. Don't wait twelve hours, pardner."

12

"A MILLER'S WEASEL?" Robey asked, sitting back in the booth at the Stockman's Bar. "No shit. Where would someone even find one?"

Joe sipped his beer, his third of the night thus far. It was Saturday night. The Stockman's Bar in downtown Saddlestring was a long, narrow chute of a place that stretched back the entire length of the city block. It was a classic, old-fashioned western bar with dusty big-game mounts on the walls, a dark knotty-pine interior, a mirrored backbar, and an entire wall of ancient black-and-white rodeo photos. Between the bar and the pool tables in the back was a pod of private booths with red-vinyl-covered seats

and scarred tabletops emblazoned with local cattle brands, graffiti, and the initials of patrons dating back to the 1940s.

Joe said, "There's a small population of them in the Bighorns. I transplanted them there myself. Not many people know where they are, or how to find them."

Robey stared at Joe. "That's more information than I needed to know," he said, since what Joe had done was a federal crime. It was illegal to interfere with an endangered species.

The Miller's weasels were originally discovered in the proposed path of a natural-gas pipeline, shortly after Joe had been named game warden of the district. Their discovery resulted in the deaths of four outfitters and a local caretaker of mountain cabins, and a firestorm that destroyed friendships and relationships and ended about as badly as it could have with Marybeth being shot by Wacey Hedeman. Once the species had been verified, there followed a brief flurry of national and international publicity to Twelve Sleep County that had long been forgotten on a large scale but continued to burble under the surface in the county and the state.

"Odd news about Wacey Hedeman, huh?" Robey said, glancing at Joe and then away from him, as if he didn't want to press Joe for a reaction.

Joe nodded.

"Is Marybeth okay with that?"

"I think so," Joe said. "It brought everything back again, of course. The past never just goes away, does it?"

Robey shook his head.

"You couldn't see the vehicle, read a plate?" Robey asked.

"Just the tail lights."

Robey whistled. "There were a lot of folks who weren't real happy with you back then. People on both sides of the issue. But it's hard to believe someone has held a grudge this long, someone you wouldn't know about."

"That's why it bothers me so much," Joe said. "Right in front of my girls too," he added, his voice rising. "It really shook up Sheridan. She recognized the animal right off. In fact, she even said she wondered if someone wasn't threatening *her*. And that pisses me off, to involve my family like that."

Robey sat back, his eyes searching Joe's face. "Let's hope this was an isolated incident. It's odd that whoever did this waited six years to get back at you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, the timing doesn't make sense," Joe said. "But what better way to get me right where I live? I mean, I'm the game warden. What worse kind of thing can someone do than stick a dead animal on my door? And especially that particular animal?"

"Stay alert," Robey said. "That's all I can say. I'll do the same. Maybe one of us will hear something."

Joe nodded.

"But, Joe, if you figure out who did it, please run it by me or call the sheriff before you do anything. Don't go trying to take care of it on your own, okay?"

Joe signaled for two more beers from the bartender, not answering yes or no.

“Joe,” Robey said, “it’s no secret the situation you’re in with your new director. The word is out that he’s watching every move you make. He’s even made a couple of discreet calls to my office, and the sheriff’s office, to try to dig something up on you. He doesn’t know we’re friends.”

“I’m not surprised,” Joe said. He’d suspected Pope might be investigating him on the sly. That was the way he operated. Again, Joe felt the politics of his job crushing down on him. It was not what he had signed on for. He was battling within a system he didn’t like or respect anymore.

Robey said, “There are some things you’ve been involved in that probably won’t help you if this Pope guy digs too deeply. Like about Nate Romanowski? Or a certain Forest Service district supervisor whose death was *remarkably* ruled a suicide a few years back?”

Joe knew it was true. Robey knew more than he probably wanted to. As county prosecutor, Robey was aware of things that he likely wished he wasn’t. But as a good man, one who valued actual justice as opposed to process, Robey had chosen simply not to ask certain questions of Joe when he had a right, and a duty, to ask them. Because of that, Joe was fiercely loyal to his friend.

THE TOPIC TURNED to the purpose of the meeting in the first place.

“It’s the curse of the third generation,” Robey said, shaking his head and absently rolling the beer bottle between the palms of his hands. “I don’t know if there is a worse thing in the West than that.”

Robey paused and glanced up at Joe. His face looked haunted. “Did I ever tell you the main reason I left private practice and ran for county attorney?”

“Let me guess,” Joe said facetiously. “Would it be ... *the curse of the third generation*?”

“That would be it,” Robey said. “It’s a pattern you can pretty much predict. When I first got my license, I was involved in way too many of these cases, and it just about killed me. It works this way: A matriarch or patriarch establishes the original ranch, and passes it along to the firstborn. The heir inherits land and power, and it feels different to him because he didn’t have to fight for it or earn it. It’s his by birthright, but he’s close enough to the founders that the initial struggle still resonates. But from then on, everything starts to get comfortable. This works the same way with family-owned companies. But if we’re talking about ranches, and we are, it gets more personal than if it was a shoe factory, because on a ranch everyone lives together and eats together. Sometimes, the second generation is smart and appreciates what they’ve got and how they got it, and plans ahead. You know—they form corporations or partnerships or something.” Robey paused to take a long pull of his beer before resuming, and Joe marveled at how engaged his friend was with the subject, how much he had obviously thought about it, how it concerned him.

“So,” Robey continued, “the third generation inherits a going concern but they *really* don’t give a shit about how they got it. The third generation splinters. A couple of the sons and daughters want to keep the place, and the others want to do something

else. So when it comes time to figure out who owns what, the lawyers are called in to battle it out. It's like couples who divorce without considering the best interests of the children because they're so bitter. But instead of children, we're talking about the ranch itself. There is only so much land in the world, it's finite. Especially good, scenic, or productive land that can't speak for itself. The litigation gets so messy that sometimes it's unbelievable. Other people want that land, that asset. So we've got brothers against brothers and sisters against sisters. You can really see the worst in human nature in a situation like that, and you just want to grab those idiots and knock their heads together and say 'Wake up! Look what you're doing to a place your ancestors put all of their sweat and blood into!' "

Robey rose and pretended he was grasping litigants by their necks and smashing their heads together. Joe looked around to see if anyone at the bar was watching. Fortunately, they weren't.

Joe said, "And when it comes to our situation here with the Scarletts and the Thunderhead Ranch, we've got the curse in spades, right?"

"It's like the curse has gone nuclear," Robey said. "In this case, the original ranch was established in the eighteen-eighties, which was when most of the big ranches got going in our part of the country. Before statehood, and before homesteaders started spreading their wings. For the Thunderhead Ranch, a man named Homer Scarlett left West Virginia and used a small inheritance to buy what was then a small five-thousand-acre ranch on the river."

"That would be the original Thunderhead Ranch?" Joe asked.

Robey shook his head. "Nope, the Thunderhead was the ranch next door at the time. Homer Scarlett, the great-grandfather, acquired it through somewhat dubious means—I think he won a big chunk of it in a poker game or something—and added it to his own holdings. He picked up five or six other small ranches along the way, and kept adding on. He was ruthless, from what I've heard. But he was also a hell of a businessman, because he thrived when others around him were going broke. As he added property, he put them all under the umbrella of the Thunderhead Ranch, I guess because he liked the name. Pretty soon, Scarlett owned sixty thousand acres outright and another hundred thousand acres on long-term lease from the government. He used his influence to make Saddlestring the county seat, and for a while there they almost renamed this town Scarlettville. Did you know that?"

Joe shook his head. "No. How do *you* know all of this?"

Robey laughed wearily. "Because I'm on the museum board and a few weeks ago we took a tour through the new Scarlett Wing that's scheduled to be dedicated next month. In fact, your mother-in-law was on the tour. It's a damned nice addition to the building, and there is a special room to honor the family. Opal insisted on the display, and provided the photos and documents.

"Anyway," Robey continued, "Homer had a son named Henry and two daughters named June and Laura. In those days, it was a lot simpler than it is now, and Henry assumed control of the ranch because he was the only male heir. There wasn't any

squabbling about control, even though the daughters legally had the same claim to it. Henry Scarlett took it over in the mid-thirties, and the two daughters got nice little cottages on the ranch. June and Laura never married, so they produced no heirs. Henry had a couple of sons, though, named Wilbur and Dub. Dub died in combat at Normandy, so Wilbur had a clear line.”

“And Wilbur married Opal,” Joe said. “Who eventually had three sons.”

“Right.”

“So when did Wilbur die?”

“Early seventies,” Robey said. “He was driving a truck across an old bridge over the river on the ranch when the bridge collapsed. I read about it. He was pinned inside the vehicle, and drowned in six inches of water.”

“And Opal got everything?”

Robey signaled for two more beers. “The whole thing lock, stock, and barrel. If Wilbur specified which one of his sons got the place, or if he had plans to divide up the ranch—no one knows. There wasn’t a will.”

“So where are we now?” Joe asked.

“We are in limbo, ownership hell,” Robey said. “Arlen claims Opal assured him the ranch would be his because he’s the oldest. Hank says Opal told *him* the same thing, and that she never trusted Arlen. Opal has two lawyers here in town, and both thought the other took care of the estate planning, but it turns out neither did. The ranch is a corporation with Opal Scarlett as its sole owner, with no management agreement, no will, no nothing.”

“What’s it worth?” Joe asked, thinking of the vast acreage, the meadows, the buildings, the twenty miles of riverfront.

“Tens of millions,” Robey said. “An appraisal will need to be done, but we know we’re in the mid-teens. If it were put up for sale, there would be buyers from all over the country and the world. These days, all the rich corporate guys want to own a ranch.”

Joe whistled.

“Until Opal’s proven dead and there’s a court order—or a will is found—nothing can be done to establish ownership or a succession plan,” Robey said. “Those brothers just continue to live out there in conflict. They could decide to sell the place and pocket the money, or one could buy it outright from the other. But in order to do that, they’d need to sit down and talk like human beings. Instead, they’ve both hired lawyers, accountants, and soldiers of their own, and they’re preparing for battle. My fear is that the war won’t make it as far as a courtroom, that it’ll start breaking out all over this valley.”

In the meantime, Robey said, the case against Tommy Wayman was also in limbo. He told Joe that although Tommy had confessed to tossing Opal in the river, the lack of a body prevented him from filing charges. In a legal holding action, Robey had persuaded Judge Pennock to order Tommy to stay in the area and check in weekly until the situation could be resolved.

Joe said, "This is about a lot more than the money, isn't it?"

Robey looked quickly around the room to see who had entered since they started talking and that no one appeared to be eavesdropping. He leaned forward, lowered his voice, and said, "Joe, Opal was a damned monster. That's what I'm finding out, the more I dig into it. She played those two brothers against each other all of their lives, telling one he was the favorite and that he'd get everything, denigrating the other, and vice versa. No wonder Wyatt is nuts, if he grew up with all of that going on around him. Arlen and Hank each really, honestly believe it is his personal destiny to control the ranch, and to continue the Scarlett legacy. That's what they both call it, with a straight face, the 'Scarlett legacy.' Even Wyatt uses that term, easy as pie. According to Hank, Opal distrusted Arlen so much that she hired a third lawyer in secret to draw up a will giving Hank the whole place, but the lawyer was instructed not to come forward until Opal was declared dead. Hank says he'd rather 'Mother' show up than have her declared dead, of course, but if she doesn't, he's absolutely confident the ranch will be his. That's how crazy these brothers are."

"A *third* lawyer?"

Robey laughed, clearly not believing there was one. "Hank claims it's Meade Davis. You ever hear of him?"

Davis was one of Saddlestring's oldest and most prominent lawyers. So prominent, in fact, that Joe couldn't recall his ever taking a case. Davis was involved in real estate, convenience stores, and he owned the cable television company.

"Davis winters in Arizona," Robey said. "He isn't back yet. We've tried to track him down but his phone's disconnected and the registered letters we sent were returned. We've got a request in with the sheriff down there to find him, but so far no luck."

Joe sat back, sipped his beer, thought of the implications. Robey was clearly agitated.

"So Wyatt is out of it for sure?" Joe asked. "It's completely between Arlen and Hank? And Wyatt is okay with that?" He thought of Wyatt's tears on the floor of the sheriff's office; the heartbreak of a giant.

"As far as I can tell, Wyatt just wants Opal to come back and cook him his meals," Robey said. "He misses her. And he doesn't seem to care about the dispute either way. When I talked to Arlen, he actually referred to Wyatt as the 'turd in the punch bowl.' He has no respect for his youngest brother, but Wyatt adores Arlen. And Hank, for that matter."

Joe thought about that and wondered if anyone really knew Wyatt.

"I understand some anonymous tipster contacted the IRS and turned Arlen in for tax evasion," Robey said. "We were contacted by the feds about it earlier this week with a request to provide background."

"Hank," Joe said.

"Or one of Hank's people. But that's just the start of it. I got a visit this morning from Roger Schreiner. He was scared shitless."

"Roger Schreiner? The accountant?"

"Yup. He's working for Hank's side of the operation and he got a letter accusing him of playing a part in an illegal conspiracy to defraud Arlen. The letter even cited the RICO statutes, which means he's liable for triple damages if he's found guilty. Roger says he's innocent as the day is long, but he's scared to death of going to court because he's not sure how far his firm will back him."

"Arlen," Joe said.

Robey nodded.

Joe told Robey about the 1-800-POACHER tip he'd received earlier, naming Hank.

"Oh, man," Robey said. "What could that mean if it's true?"

Joe said, "Tens of thousands in fines, but that's not what would hurt Hank the most. What would hurt Hank would be the confiscation of the equipment used to poach the animals, meaning his airplane, vehicles, and guns. And even worse for him, his license to guide and hunt could be revoked. Since he runs a big hunting operation in at least three locations, it would put him out of business."

Robey shook his head. "Jesus," he said. "This is getting even nastier than I thought."

Joe snorted. "Of course, before investigating Hank I need proper authorization from my supervisor, which I'm still waiting for."

"You're kidding," Robey said flatly.

Joe just looked at him. He *hated* feeling the way he did. Pope's management of Joe stripped away both his independence and his confidence. But that was Joe's problem, not Robey's.

"And you know what?" Joe said, pointing the mouth of his bottle toward Robey. "I don't think we've seen anything yet in regard to Scarlett versus Scarlett."

Robey nodded. "We haven't, because the next stage in the war will be more of what Arlen started in going after the surrogates of the other brother, like Hank's accountant."

"Or," Joe thought out loud, "Arlen's future management consulting firm—MBP Management."

Robey sat back. "You think?"

"It fits," Joe said.

And the door opened and in walked Hank Scarlett with a ranch hand. Joe watched as Hank mumbled hellos to men seated at the bar and then took the stool at the end that used to belong to ex-sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum, before Barnum went away. Hank's tiny eyes, set close together in his thin face, burned like coals as they swept the room, settled for a moment on Joe, then moved on. He was doing inventory, Joe thought, seeing who in the Stockman was in his camp, and who wasn't.

"Speak of the devil," Joe said, his eyes narrowing. As he stared at Hank Scarlett, things started to tumble together and click. Six years before, Hank had been one of the most vocal opponents of calling in the feds when the Miller's weasels were discovered, and he publicly blamed Joe for the intrusion of biologists, endangered-species advocates, and environmental groups that came as a result. Hank felt the issue would be best resolved locally, meaning: *All the animals should be secretly killed*. That's how he'd always proceeded with endangered species.

In addition, Hank knew the Bighorns as well as anyone in Wyoming—even better than Joe, because he had hunted and explored every inch of them. If anyone knew where the colony of Miller’s weasels thrived in the wilderness, it was Hank. The fact that Marybeth had chosen to work for Arlen in Hank’s mind put Joe in his brother’s camp, even though it wasn’t the case.

“Joe, I don’t like that look on your face,” Robey said.

Joe didn’t realize he had any look at all.

“If you think Hank had something to do with that Miller’s weasel, you had best keep it to yourself until you can prove something,” Robey said.

Joe thought about the animal on his door, the steak knife pinning it there, the single streak of dark red blood that coursed down and pooled in a crack. And of Sheridan’s horrified expression when she realized what it was, what it meant.

“Excuse me,” Joe said, and slid out of the booth.

“Joe ...” Robey said, his voice hard, but Joe didn’t turn around.

He approached the bar. Hank had his back to Joe, although the man Hank had come with watched Joe intently. Joe measured Hank’s companion, met his eyes dead-on. *This one is a thug*, Joe thought. There was nothing cowboy about him. He was tight through the chest, and his rolled-up sleeves revealed enhanced forearms with coils of cablelike muscle writhing under tattooed skin. His face was thin and pinched, his mouth full and rubbery. He had a soul patch under his lower lip and a ponytail. He wore the wrong jeans and his boots were black Doc Marten lace-ups, not real working cowboy boots. The man’s hat was Australian outback, not cowboy. And there was something about him, Joe thought, something familiar. When he looked at the man’s face he saw somebody else he was familiar with, or the shadow of that person. But Joe couldn’t remember if he had ever seen this man before.

The beer Joe had been drinking with Robey surged through him, deadening what should have been self-preservation warning bells going off like a prison break.

“Hank,” Joe said, to Hank’s back.

“Is there a problem here?” the man with Hank said in a low southern accent.

“I was talking to Hank,” Joe said, looking from the ranch hand to the mirrored back bar, noting that Hank saw him and was staring back with his dead sharp eyes.

The ranch hand spun on his stool and rose to his feet, but Hank said, “It’s okay, Bill, he’s just the game warden.”

Bill relaxed, stepped back, sat down.

Hank took a long drink from his glass of bourbon, then swiveled around, not getting up. Joe was three feet away, and he tried not to let his face twitch as Hank frowned and leveled his gaze on him.

“What can I do you for, Game Warden?” He said *Game Warden* with detached sarcasm. Hank’s voice was high and tinny. He bit off his words, as if speaking them were painful in itself.

“I wanted to ask you about something that happened at my house,” Joe said.

Hank flicked his eyes toward Bill, then back. His voice was a low hiss. "I don't believe you've met our local game warden before, Bill. He's the one who arrested our last governor for fishing without a license, and shot and killed both Wyoming's greatest stock detective and our best out-fitter. He's sort of our own Dudley Do-Right. Joe, this is Bill Monroe, my new foreman."

Monroe snorted and squinted and showed his teeth, which were white and perfect replacements for teeth that had been knocked out sometime in his career.

Joe looked at Hank, felt his rage build. Hank's face was still slightly yellow—bruised from his fight with Arlen a month before. His nose was askew.

"Bill," Joe said, trying to stanch his fear, "why don't you take a walk? Go out and buy some new cowboy clothes, or something? I need to talk to Hank here."

"Fuck you," Monroe said.

"Settle down," Hank said without looking at Monroe. "What was that about your house? I'd like to have a drink in peace."

"Somebody stuck an animal on my door," Joe said. "A Miller's weasel."

Hank stared for a moment, then smiled with his mouth. "I'm not exactly sure why you're asking me about that, Game Warden. Do you think I had something to do with it?"

"That's why I brought it up," Joe said. "My daughter was pretty upset."

Hank said, "Her name is Sheridan, right?" Saying her name as if it were the first time he'd ever enunciated it. "She's Julie's friend, isn't she? I've seen her. She's a nice girl, from what I can tell. Not as damned goofy as her father. Why would I want to upset my daughter's best friend?"

Hank was enjoying himself at Joe's expense. And Joe felt humiliated. But it made Joe even angrier, because he sensed there was something Hank knew about the incident.

Joe said, "Hank, I don't care what you say about me to your rent-a-wrangler here. But don't screw with my family."

Hank smiled.

Monroe rose again, said, "'Rent-a-wrangler'?"

"Sit down," Joe said to Monroe, his voice harsh. "Or I'll make you sit down." As he said it he couldn't believe it had come out of his mouth. But it worked, and Monroe leaned back on his stool, poised on the edge, ready to lunge forward if necessary. His eyes bored into Joe's face like dual twin lasers. Something was going on behind those eyes that was violent and seething. Joe thought, *I've got to watch out for this guy.*

Hank chuckled drily. "That sounded a lot like a threat, Joe. That's big talk from a state employee. Especially one who has sided with my brother. Or at least his wife has. I'd watch what you say, Game Warden."

"I haven't sided with anyone," Joe said. "Neither has Marybeth." He still couldn't believe that he'd threatened Monroe that way. "But if it was you, this is the end of it. Don't come to my house again, or send any of your ..." Joe thought about it for a second, then forged on. "... *wranglers* to my home. If you do, things are going to get real western, Hank."

Hank started to answer, then didn't. He looked away, then turned to Monroe and said, "Settle down."

Monroe seemed as if he were about to explode. He clenched his fists and glared at Joe as if trying to figure out whether to strike with his left hand or his right. If he did either, Joe thought, there would be trouble, and he'd likely come out on the worst end of it.

Hank said, "You've had a few beers, I can tell. And I can see you've been listening to Robey Hersig over there, hearing how Arlen should get the ranch and I shouldn't. So I'll let this go for now, and pretend you don't know what the hell you're talking about. Which you don't. But let me tell you something, Game Warden."

Hank paused, letting the clock tick. Eventually, Monroe turned his head to hear what his boss had to say. Joe was rapt.

"The Thunderhead will be mine," Hank said. "Nothing you, or your lovely wife, or anybody can do about that. So get used to it."

Then Hank leaned forward on his stool, looking up at Joe under scarred eyebrows, and said, "My family was here a hundred years before you were a gleam in your daddy's eye. We *own* this place. We *stuck*. The rest of you come and go, like lint. Goddamned *lint*. So don't poke your nose where it doesn't belong. This ain't your fight."

He swiveled on his stool, turned his back to Joe, and sipped at his glass of bourbon.

Joe felt Robey tugging at his sleeve, saying, "Let's sit down."

But Joe found himself staring at the back of Hank's sweat-stained Stetson, and thought of his daughter looking at the animal pinned to his front door. He said, "It better not have been you, Hank. And by the way, we got a call on you. I'll be out to see you soon."

For the first time, Joe saw a slight flicker of fear in Hank's face in the mirror.

THEY FINISHED THEIR beers, and Robey spent most of the time telling Joe not to react, not to get mad, but to cool down and let the process work. Joe only sort of listened. He was furious that Hank had gotten the best of him, and even angrier that he'd opened himself up to it. He knew better than to create a confrontation when he was unprepared. But something in Hank's eyes and demeanor had told Joe that he knew more than he let on. So if for no other reason than knowing that, it had been worth it.

The night went on. Robey was drunk, and repeating himself about the curse of the third generation. Joe called Marybeth on his cellphone, woke her up, and said he'd be home soon. She was groggy, and not happy with him.

Hank left the Stockman without looking back, although Monroe paused at the door and filled it, glaring at Joe, letting cold air in, which normally would have resulted in shouts from the patrons. But because Monroe was with Hank Scarlett, no one said a word.

JOE LEFT WITH Robey, and they both marveled at the night itself, how two grown men with families had drunk the night away, how unusual it was for them. They blamed the Scarletts for creating a situation where they felt it necessary—even

justified—to do so. Robey started in on a soliloquy about drinking in general, and how intrinsic it was to living in the mountain west, how important it was to understanding the culture and isolation, but Joe said good night and sent him home, wishing there were a cab he could call for his friend, but taxis didn't exist in Saddlestring.

As he searched for the ignition key on his key ring in the dark in the tiny parking lot behind the Stockman, Joe had an almost disembodied reaction to the sound of approaching footfalls crunching through the gravel, each step gaining in volume, realizing at the last possible second that someone was upon him. He turned with a frown and glimpsed the flash of a meaty fist in the moonlight before it struck him full in the face, the blow so powerful that his world went red and spangling white and his head snapped back and cracked the driver's-side window of his pickup. He staggered to his left and felt his legs wobble, sidestepping furiously to regain his balance. The man who hit him mirrored his movements and snapped another blow out of nowhere. The explosion Joe felt on his cheekbone was tremendous—it seemed to make his brain erupt with sudden flashes of orange. Blood flooded his nose and filled his mouth from the back of his throat, tasting hot and salty. His legs gave out, and he was down on his hands and knees, gravel digging into the palms of his hands, pebbles under his skin. The attacker stepped back and delivered a kick to Joe's stomach as if kicking an extra point in football, and Joe felt himself momentarily lifted into the air. When he came down, all his limbs were rubbery and his bloodied face smashed into the pavement. His ribs burned and he knew instinctively that a few of them might be broken. He thought: *Get under the truck. Roll out of harm's way.* But in his confusion he rolled the wrong way, his arms and legs askew, and he was farther away from his pickup than when he started. That apparently confused his attacker, who yelled, "*Stupid fucker,*" in exasperation as Joe found himself on the black Doc Marten lace-up boots, stopping Monroe from kicking him again. Monroe leaped back, getting clear, and Joe tried to rise but he couldn't get beyond a clumsy crouch because his bloodied head swooned, and he rocked back in slow motion and fell, splayed out like a gut-shot animal on the asphalt of the parking lot. Despite the booming pain in his head, Joe thought, *You've beaten me.*

He heard a shout from across the parking lot. Instead of another blow, he heard the slow crunching of gravel as Monroe walked away and Hank saying, in the shadowed distance, "Yeah, that's enough."

JOE WAS HELPED to a sitting position. He leaned back against his truck tire. His benefactor was Hank.

"Here," Hank said, handing Joe a bandanna from his pocket. "Use that to clean off your nose and mouth."

Joe took it.

"I called the sheriff a minute ago. Somebody ought to be here any second."

"You called?" Joe asked.

"Damndest thing," Hank said, squatting down by him. "When I saw what Bill was doing, I told him to stop and he ran off. I don't know where he went."

"You said, 'Yeah, *that's enough*,'" Joe said.

"Right."

"You said it like you ordered and approved of the damage so far."

Hank cocked his head to the side in an exaggerated way, said, "I have no idea what you mean, Joe. Bill was acting on his own there. If I could find that damned Bill, I'd be the first to testify at his trial that he attacked you for no good reason."

"Hmmm," Joe said, not believing Hank, but having no way to prove otherwise.

"Hmmm,'" Hank mocked. "Maybe you shouldn't have called him a rental wrangler, or whatever it was you said. You must have really made him mad."

"Yup," Joe said, cringing against a headache that was barreling through his head from the base of his neck.

Deputy Reed pulled into the parking lot. He got out and bathed Joe in the light of his flashlight, said, "Who the hell did *this*?"

THE NEXT MORNING, a warrant for arrest was issued on Bill Monroe, age unknown, last known address Thunderhead Ranch.

13

ON FRIDAY EVENING, nearly a week after the beating, Joe drove Sheridan to her sleepover with Julie Scarlett on the Thunderhead Ranch, his thoughts echoing what Marybeth had said: *This valley is getting too small*.

His body still ached each time he turned the wheel of the pickup, even though it turned out his ribs were bruised, not broken after all. But his right eye was still partially swelled shut, and his nose felt detached, as if it were floating around his face like a slow bird, trying to find a place to land.

Joe had spent the last week in the field, repairing fences and signage for public fishing access and walk-in areas. The maintenance needed to be done, but it wasn't urgent. The primary reason for keeping his distance from town was to avoid anyone seeing him and asking what had happened. He knew the beating was already a bit of a joke with McLanahan, who had worked long and hard on a description of what had happened, calling it, "The Fistfight at the KO Corral," which the sheriff thought sounded western and funny. In a response to an e-mail from Pope asking if Joe was, in fact, injured in a brawl, Joe wrote back: "It takes two to brawl. I'm fine."

While fixing signs and fence, he had seen no other people, which was how he wanted it. Instead, he stewed and thought about what had happened. He should never have challenged Hank without anything concrete to challenge him with. He had tipped his hand, lashed out because of the Miller's weasel. Hank was much too experienced in trench warfare, and Joe came off like a rank private. Looking back, he thought of the look in Bill Monroe's eye, a look of peeled-back hatred that still gave Joe the chills when he recalled it. And the embarrassment of being beaten up hung over his head, darkening the sun. He was ashamed, humiliated, violated. The worst thing was when

Lucy looked at him at the breakfast table and made a face similar to the one she had displayed when Maxine vomited a bag of jerky on the carpet. Or when Sheridan cocked her head to the side and asked, "Somebody beat you up? Jeez, Dad." It didn't help that Marybeth was quietly disdainful of what had happened, shaking her head and expelling a little puff of breath every time she looked at him.

EACH DAY SINCE the beating, Joe had called headquarters and asked for Randy Pope when his e-mails went unanswered. Joe wanted authorization to proceed on the 800-POACHER tip on Hank Scarlett. The director was out of state at a national conference in Cleveland, the receptionist said.

"They don't have telephones in Cleveland?" Joe asked.

That morning, before leaving his house for the field, Joe called again and got a message on the receptionist's phone saying she was "either on another line or away from her desk."

"Joe Pickett here," he said on her voicemail. "Again. Calling for Randy Pope. Again. Wondering if he realizes he has crossed over the line from bureaucratic micromanagement to obstruction of justice."

Joe had also called the sheriff's department throughout the week to check on the status of the investigation into Bill Monroe.

"That Bill done hit the highway" was how Sheriff Kyle McLanahan sized it up.

JOE GLANCED OvER at Sheridan as he drove. Her overnight bag and rolled-up sleeping bag were on the floor. She looked back with an expression that said, "What?"

"I'm taking you to the main ranch house, right?" he said.

"Uh-huh."

"And there will be other girls there?"

"A few."

"And the reason we're going to the main ranch house, not Julie's father's house, is that she actually lives at the main house, right?"

Sheridan nodded her head, as if she were engaged in a competition and speaking would make her lose points.

"Sheridan, I'm not crazy about this idea," Joe said.

"I know," Sheridan said.

"It was one of Hank's men ..." He couldn't say *who beat me up*.

"I know," she said. "But I've never even seen Julie's father, Hank, on Uncle Arlen's side of the ranch."

Joe cringed inside. He didn't want his daughter to think he was scared of Hank, or Hank's man, and it wasn't just fright anymore. He knew he was capable of violence if he saw Hank or Bill Monroe again.

"I still don't see why you couldn't have had Julie to our house for a sleepover," he said.

"Because she invited me and some other girls," Sheridan said. "That's how it works."

Joe sighed. Recently, he had begun to encounter some of the same intransigent behavior from Sheridan that Marybeth had been dealing with for the past year. Sheri-

dan was close-mouthed, sullen, and, more often than not, sarcastic. Where had that little chatterbox gone? The one who verbalized everything? The little girl who once provided play-by-play commentary of her own life in wild bouquets of words? Joe had to admit that her moods hadn't bothered him as much when they'd been directed at her mother. But now that they extended to Joe too he didn't like it. He always had a special relationship with his older daughter. Deep down, he thought it was still there. But they had to get through this early-teen thing. At the recent parent-teacher conference, Sheridan's English teacher, Mrs. Gilbert, asked him and Marybeth if they knew what was worse than an eighth-grade girl. They shrugged, and the teacher said, "Nothing on earth."

"ARLEN WILL BE around the whole time, right?" Joe asked.

Sheridan did a quick eye-roll, so fast he would have missed it if he hadn't been looking for it. "Yes. And so will lots of employees. Not to mention Uncle Wyatt."

"Maybe you *shouldn't* mention Uncle Wyatt," Joe said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. "He's kind of an odd guy, from what I can tell."

Sheridan said, "I'll avoid him. I always do."

"What about her mother?" Joe asked. He'd heard that Julie's mother, Hank's ex-wife, lived in a small cabin on the ranch in order to stay involved in Julie's life.

"I don't know. Probably."

"Sheridan," Joe said, exasperated, "what *do* you know?"

Which really made her clam up.

Joe said, "Sorry," and kept driving. He knew Marybeth had extracted enough information out of Sheridan to give the sleepover her stamp of approval. But he wanted to know the details too.

As he drove, the motor hiccupped and the check-engine light came on.

"What's wrong with the truck?" Sheridan asked.

"It's a piece of crap," Joe said.

THE MAIN RANCH house was a lumbering stone castle of a home with sharp gables and eaves and the look of a building that belonged not in Wyoming on a river but on some country estate in England. Towering hundred-year-old cottonwoods shrouded the home on all sides, the spring leaves having burst out just that week. Joe approached the home from the east on a firm, graded and graveled three-track that snaked through heavy trees. He could see assorted outbuildings through the timber; old sheds, a tall barn that was falling down, an old icehouse built of logs.

As they crossed a bridge over a little stream made manic by snowmelt, Joe saw what looked like an old chicken coop tucked away in an alcove facing the road, and noticed the windows had glass in them and the roof had a new set of shingles. It puzzled him that the Scarletts would maintain a chicken coop, and he was about to say so when Sheridan said: "That's where Uncle Wyatt lives."

Joe stopped the truck.

"Wyatt lives in a *chicken coop*?"

"That's what Julie told me," Sheridan said. "He keeps odd hours, so instead of waking everybody up all the time, he lives in there. I guess he doesn't mind."

Joe looked at his daughter. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Sheridan nodded grimly. She was of an age when the last thing she wanted to do was admit that her parents might be right.

"Julie's my friend," she said.

"We can still back out," Joe said.

"No. I'm not doing that."

ARLEN GREETED THEM in the ranch yard wearing an apron and cleaning his hands with a towel. There was a smudge of white flour on his forehead. He strode across the yard and stuck his hand out to Joe, who climbed out of his pickup. Julie was right behind Arlen, beaming at Sheridan and running around to her side of the truck.

"My God, your face," Arlen said, booming.

Joe looked over. Sheridan and Julie were packing the sleeping bag and overnight bag into the house and chattering. He wanted to talk to Arlen but didn't want the girls overhearing him.

For a few moments, Joe had forgotten about his injuries. After shaking Arlen's hand, he reached up and touched his closed eye with the tips of his fingers. Now that Arlen mentioned it, his face hurt again.

"That's what Bill did, eh?" Arlen asked, reaching out and cupping Joe's chin in his big hand so he could look closely at the damage. Joe didn't like another man touching him that way and turned away as if checking on Sheridan. That was something about the Scarletts that grated on Joe, he realized. These people thought they owned everything in the valley, even the game warden's face.

"Guess they haven't picked him up yet, huh?" Arlen said. "Does Sheridan know who did it?"

"Nope," Joe said. "Not by name."

Arlen said, "When Bill Monroe showed up a couple of weeks ago he came to me first to ask for a job. My impression of him was that he was trouble with a capital T. I turned out to be right. I guess when I sent him on his way he drove up the road and Hank hired him."

Joe nodded.

"I'm a pretty good judge of men," Arlen said. "Hank's got a couple of other new guys over there I'd put firmly in the 'thug' or 'cutthroat' category. If I see Bill slinking around the ranch anywhere, I'll call right away."

"Arlen, let me ask you something," Joe said. "How safe is it here right now? I mean, with the problems between you and Hank, and Hank's new men? Do you feel okay about things?"

"Joe, it's perfectly safe around here," Arlen said, his voice low. "In fact, I'd wager it's safer than just about anyplace I can think of. Safer than your own house, if you don't mind my saying so. I heard about that little gift on your door ..."

Joe felt his face flush when Arlen said it. He'd never liked the implication that he couldn't protect his own family, and Arlen seemed to be implying that, if indirectly.

"Sure, Hank wouldn't throw me a rope if I were drowning," Arlen said. "But despite everything that's wrong with that guy, and it's a lot, he desperately loves his daughter. I don't blame him, the girl is a gem. Hank still pines for Doris, his ex-wife. Doris is in the kitchen in there now, helping me bake some nice bread," Arlen nodded toward the main house. "Hank wouldn't let anything bad happen to his wife or his daughter and by extension, to her friends. He wants them to think he's a good guy. He needs allies. He believes one of these days they'll all come to their senses and move back to his place." Arlen smiled at the absurdity of the notion.

"Besides," he said, arching his eyebrows, "not every man on Hank's payroll is loyal to Hank, if you know what I mean. If Hank was going to try something, I'd know about it well in advance."

Arlen's words had the ring of truth, especially that last bit of news. Arlen was a schemer, and he obviously had an informant in Hank's camp.

"What's the deal with Wyatt?" Joe asked, turning his head toward the road they had just come in on. "Sheridan said he lives in that chicken coop."

Arlen laughed. "It's much nicer than that, Joe. Wyatt's got it all fixed up now. You make it sound like he's sleeping in there with chickens. There are no chickens in there anymore."

"Still ..."

"It's odd, I'll grant you that," Arlen said. "But Wyatt has always marched to the beat of his own drummer. The man just doesn't sleep, or when he does, it's for an hour at a time. He used to keep us up all night wandering around the house, puttering, doing his hobbies. Wyatt has a lot of interests, and almost all of them"—Arlen rolled his eyes, then settled them back on Joe—"stink. Everything Wyatt does stinks."

Despite himself, Joe smiled at the way Arlen said it.

"He's either making model planes and spacecraft, which smell of glue and oil paint, or he's tanning hides or reloading bullets. Taxidermy is his newest obsession. Those chemical smells can get to you."

JULIE AND SHERIDAN came back out through the front door with an adult woman in tow. She was dark and attractive, Joe thought, but there was something hard about her. Her eyes took him in. Her expression didn't reveal what her conclusion was about him.

"I'm Doris Scarlett, Julie's mother," she said, extending her hand.

"Joe Pickett." Her fingers were long and cool. She didn't wear a wedding ring.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "We're going to get these girls to bake some bread, and then some cookies. We thought we'd have a few more girls coming out, so we have more than enough dough to roll in there."

"Lindsay, Sara, and Tori can't make it," Julie told Sheridan, who had caught what Doris had said about the other girls.

Joe wondered if the other parents were concerned about the situation at the Scarletts, or if it was happen-stance that the other girls weren't there. He thought, as he often thought: *What would Marybeth do here?* He decided Marybeth would proceed with what they'd already decided, that Sheridan could spend the night with her best friend. Arlen had assured Joe things were fine. And they appeared fine.

"Nice to meet you too," Joe said to her. She smiled and nodded, and turned and went back into the house. Joe could tell the introduction was for his benefit, at Sheridan's instigation, to assure him that things were okay, that she and Julie were well supervised.

Arlen said, "When Hank and Doris started having trouble, Mother let Doris and Julie move across the ranch to the guest house. Hank doesn't like it one bit, but at least he can see his daughter from time to time. Mother really doted on that girl."

Arlen stood there, something obviously on his mind, making it awkward for Joe to turn and go.

Arlen said, "Now I've got a question for you, if you don't mind."

"Fire away."

"I heard someone called and reported my brother Hank had committed some pretty serious game violations. That he had illegal mounts and species displayed at his house. Do you know anything about this?"

Joe thought: *Now I know for sure who made the call.* But he said, "I got the report. I'm waiting on authorization to proceed." It embarrassed Joe to say that.

Arlen searched Joe's face. "Authorization?"

Joe knew he was on thin ice as he proceeded, Arlen being a new Game and Fish commissioner. But why protect Randy Pope?

"You might have heard," Joe said, as diplomatically as possible, "the agency director has assigned himself the job of being my immediate supervisor. He reserves the authority to okay my actions and duties."

"And he hasn't done so," Arlen said, his voice cold.

"No sir, in this case ..."

Arlen turned on his heel and walked back to his house. "Wait here," he said over his shoulder to Joe. "I'll be right back."

Joe leaned back against his pickup, wondering what kind of trouble he'd just gotten himself in now.

SHERIDAN CAME OUT of the house to hug him goodbye. As he pulled her into him, he leaned down and whispered, "I can still take you home."

She stepped back and raised her eyes to him. "Dad, I'm the only girl who showed up. I can't leave. Don't you understand?"

Joe looked at her, wanted to insist she get her things and climb back in, but he saw his growing daughter in an admirable new light.

"Then at least promise to call immediately if you need anything, okay?"

"That would be easier to do if I had a cellphone," she said, her eyes triumphant.

"We'll talk about it later," Joe said, sighing.

Arlen appeared at a window on the second floor of the main house holding a telephone. He leaned out of the window, and gestured a thumbs-up to Joe.

"What's that about?" Sheridan asked.

"Hank," Joe said.

JOE SLOWED AS he cruised by Wyatt's chicken coop. The place looked dark and buttoned down, the window curtains pulled tight.

His cellphone burred and he plucked it from its mount on the dash and said, "Joe Pickett."

"Hold for Director Pope," said Pope's administrative assistant.

Joe smiled. That hadn't taken long.

"Pickett," Pope said brusquely, "I want you to proceed with that 800-POACHER tip as soon as possible."

"Gee," Joe said, "what's the hurry?"

Silence. Joe could imagine Pope gritting his teeth, having just concluded his call from Arlen.

"Just get right on it," Pope said.

"It'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"What do you mean it will have to wait?"

"I've got to get home and write up my daily report," Joe said. "My supervisor demands it by five p.m."

"Oh, for God's sake ..."

"And you need to get me a new truck. This thing is ready to fall apart," Joe said, looking at the temperature gauge, which was in the red. "I don't think it'll last the month."

"*Another* truck!" he said, as if Joe were asking Pope to pay for it out of his own pocket instead of simply assigning another from the fleet. "We've had this discussion, I believe. You've damaged more government property than any other single game warden in the state, as you know. The damage case file we've got on you is ..."

"I can't hear you. You're breaking up," Joe said, tapping the phone against the side of his head before punching off.

His visit to Hank would need to wait, Joe said to himself, until his daughter was off the Thunderhead Ranch.

14

THE WORD THAT popped into Sheridan Pickett's mind that evening, as the Scarletts sat down to dinner in the old dining room of the main ranch house, was Gothic. Ranch Gothic. Not the kind of Gothic she was used to, like those black-clad Goths in school who painted their nails and lips black and looked amazingly silly in P.E., but the older definition of Gothic, the kind she'd read about in novels. Until now, that definition had always been beyond her grasp, because she'd never encountered it.

She never thought there was anyplace in Wyoming ancient enough or sinister enough to be considered Gothic. Until now. An image of Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* wearing her wedding dress and riding a horse across the meadow outside popped into Sheridan's head. She almost giggled at the thought but she was too on edge.

A ROILING BUT invisible cloud seemed to hang in the air of the dining room and throughout the house. She imagined the cloud to be made up of violent past emotions. The whole place, she thought, could use a good airing out.

The décor within the main ranch house had obviously not been changed—simply added onto—since it was built. The walls and wallpaper were dark and the trim ornate, the cornices were hand carved, each doorway a custom lark of intricate woodwork. Ancient wagon-wheel chandeliers hung from high ceilings on rough chains. The kitchen was big enough that when the cast-iron cookstoves were replaced by modern ovens there was no need to throw the old ones out. The dining room and sitting room were close and stuffy, with old paintings on the wall of Wyoming and Scottish landscapes. Sheridan had found herself staring at an entire wall of framed black-and-white photographs in the living room.

"This is the Scarlett Legacy Wall I told you about," Julie had said, sweeping her hand through the air. "There are pictures here of all of my relatives."

Sheridan had looked at her friend, expecting to see a smile on Julie's face when she said "the Scarlett Legacy." But she was serious, and much more solemn than Sheridan had seen her before. It was as if Julie had been schooled to be solemn in front of that wall the way a good Catholic would cross herself in midsentence as she passed by a cathedral.

Julie pointed out the photos of her great-great-grandparents who had founded the ranch, then her great-grandparents. Prominent within the display was a portrait of Opal Scarlett as a girl, the photo tinted with color to redden her cheeks and bring out her blue eyes. Even then, Sheridan thought, she looked like a tough bird. Her eyes, even through the blue tint, were sharp and hard and gave off a glint, like inset rock chips. In the photo, though, Opal had smiled an enigmatic smile that was disarming. Sheridan had only met Julie's grandmother a couple of times before and had never seen the smile.

The high school portraits of Arlen, Hank, and Wyatt were fascinating, she thought. It was telling seeing Julie's dad and uncles at ages more closely resembling her own, so she could look at them more as contemporaries than old men. Arlen looked then as he did now: handsome, confident, full of himself, and a little deceitful. Hank wore a fifties-style cowboy hat with the brim turned up sharply on both sides, his face sincere, serious, earnest, dark. It was the face of a boy who looked determined to stake a claim, a hard worker who would not be stopped. Wyatt looked big and soft, eager to please, proud of a mustache that was nothing to be proud of. Something about his face seemed wounded, as if he'd already met great disappointment. He was not a guy, Sheridan thought, you would pick first for your team if you wanted to win. Arlen would

be, though, if the competition was a debate. And Hank would be the choice if there was a chance a fight might break out.

“Your dad looked cool,” Sheridan said.

Julie nodded. “He can be,” she said simply.

“But you live here with your uncle.”

“I moved to be with my grandmother and my mom.” Julie shrugged. “But my grandma, well, you know ... she’s gone.”

AS SHE SAT across from Julie at the massive table that at one time fed twenty “strapping ranch hands,” as Arlen put it, Sheridan felt as if she were in a place and with people who shared a mutual faded glory that she wasn’t a part of.

She tried not to stare at Arlen or Wyatt as they ate, but she did observe them carefully. Wyatt tore into his food as if he were a starved animal. He pistoned forkfuls of food into his mouth with a mechanical fury, as if he couldn’t wait to complete his meal and punch off the clock. Arlen was leisurely, urbane, continuously refilling his wineglass before it was empty.

Julie appeared to be oblivious to both of them, picking at her food. She seemed put out by something. She kept stealing glances at Sheridan, and Sheridan had the feeling she was somehow disappointing her friend.

Sheridan was uncomfortable. It wasn’t the food, which was very good: steak, salad, fresh hot rolls with butter, garlic mashed potatoes, apple cobbler for dessert. Uncle Arlen was a great cook, and he told both girls so repeatedly.

It was interesting when Julie’s mother, Doris, returned from the kitchen with a plate filled with the cookies Julie and Sheridan had baked. As she served Sheridan, Doris leaned down and spoke in a tone so low the others at the table couldn’t hear her.

“This place used to weird me out as well,” she said. “But you eventually get used to it.”

Sheridan nodded but didn’t meet her eyes.

BEFORE THEY WATCHED a DVD movie and went to bed, Uncle Arlen told them stories with a fire crackling in the fireplace. He was a good storyteller. He knew how to use words and inflection and would look right into Sheridan’s eyes as he made a point, as if it were the most important thing in the world that she hear him and hear him now.

Sheridan had been seated next to Julie on a bear rug at Arlen’s feet. The way Julie walked over, collapsed on the rug, and turned her immediate attention to her uncle suggested to Sheridan this Story Time was a very common occurrence.

“Tell about Grandpa Homer,” Julie had asked her uncle. And he complied. About how Homer had to confront a bear (“You’re sitting on it,” Arlen said). How he fought with the Indians. When Homer stood up to the ranch hands—there were dozens of cowboys living on the ranch back then—and told them either to get out or shape up when they threatened to walk off the job unless they got more pay and better food.

To hear Arlen tell it, the Scarlett family had been involved in everything that had ever happened in the valley, and in Twelve Sleep County, Wyoming. While haughty

newcomers either tried to overreach and failed or panicked and ran, the Scarletts provided the grounding force. When locals ran around like “chickens with their heads cut off” about a drought, fire season, flash floods, or the fact that the world seemed to have passed Saddlestring by, the Scarletts were there to provide context, experience, and wisdom. Sheridan was aware of how Julie kept looking over at her as Arlen talked, as if to say, “See how lucky you are that I’m sharing this with you?”

Arlen called it “oral history,” and said he repeated the stories to Julie over the years so she could continue the tradition when she got older. “It’s sad that families don’t hand down stories anymore,” Arlen said. Then, shaking his head and clucking, he said, “Of course, maybe they don’t have much to tell.”

That stung Sheridan, because at the time he said it she was thinking she didn’t really know much about her own parents, where they came from, and therefore where she came from. Well, there was Grandma Missy, but she reminded Sheridan of some of the popular girls in her school. Missy was whatever she was at the time, but there wasn’t much more to her than that. Sheridan remembered her grandmother being the aristocratic wife of a real estate developer turned politician in Arizona whom they’d never seen. That’s when she first knew her, when her grandmother insisted she and Lucy call her “aunt.” Then Grandmother Missy moved to Wyoming, and now she was on the huge Longbrake Ranch. She’d done okay for herself, but Sheridan had no idea where she’d come from.

And she didn’t know much about her dad. Until that moment, when Arlen said it, she hadn’t given it much thought. Her dad didn’t talk much about growing up, but Sheridan always felt that it couldn’t have been too good. Once, when she asked him about his mom and dad, her grandparents whom she’d never met, he said, simply, “My parents drank.”

She had looked at him, waiting for more that never came.

“That’s one reason I wanted to be a game warden,” he said at the time, gesturing toward Wolf Mountain, as if he were explaining everything. There was also a hint about a younger brother, who would have been Sheridan’s only uncle. Something had happened to him. A car accident.

Unlike the Scarletts, who passed down everything, Sheridan’s family seemed to be starting anew, creating their own legacy and tradition. She didn’t know which was better. Or worse.

However, the longer Arlen talked, the happier Sheridan was that the family oral history in her household seemed to have started when her dad met her mom. What Arlen presented seemed to be too heavy a burden for a girl as shallow and frothy as Julie to carry on. It would be nice, though, to know more.

AS SHERIDAN AND Julie had gone upstairs for bed, Sheridan had noticed the pair of binoculars on a stand near a window in the hallway and had asked about them.

In response, Julie parted the curtain and pointed out across the ranch yard into a grove of trees, where Uncle Wyatt’s chicken coop could be seen in the distance.

"That way Uncle Arlen can check to see if Wyatt is around," Julie said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"My grandma used to tell me stories," Julie said to Sheridan when both girls were in Julie's room for the night. "She'd tell me about my great-grandfather Homer, and my grandfather, her husband. And about my dad and my uncles. She had this really pretty voice that would put me to sleep. I really miss her, and that voice."

Sheridan didn't know quite how to respond. The Julie she knew from the bus and school—impetuous, fun loving, charismatic—was not the Julie she was with now. This Julie was cold, earnest, arrogant, superior—but at the same time very sad. She didn't think she liked this Julie much, although she did feel sorry for her. This Julie just wanted to tell Sheridan things, not have a conversation. Although Julie's monologues had, at first, been interesting, Sheridan had reached a point where she wished her friend would not make it so completely about *her*.

"You probably don't know what it's like to be a part of a famous family," Julie said. "I mean, if it weren't for the Scarletts, there would be no Saddlestring, and no nothing out there. Like, without us, you wouldn't even be here. No offense, of course."

"Of course not," Sheridan said, sarcastically.

"You don't have to be like that," Julie said, sounding insulted. "I'm just telling you what is, you know? That's what my grandma used to do. She made sure I knew I was special, and that my dad and uncles are special too. We have the Scarlett Legacy and nobody can take it from us. I'm the sole heir, that's what she told me from the time I was little, how special that is."

Sheridan simply nodded. This was going to be a long night.

"I miss her," Julie said.

SHERIDAN LAY WIDE awake in her sleeping bag on the floor of Julie's bedroom. Julie was next to her in a sleeping bag of her own. It was one of the rules of sleepovers: both the guests and the host slept on the floor, so there would be no jockeying or fighting over the bed. Sheridan could hear Julie's deep, rhythmic breathing. Her friend was asleep.

Sheridan felt both scared and guilty. The house itself frightened her, and she felt silly about it. What Julie's mom had said about "getting used to it" helped a little, but not much. The house was so big, so dark, so creepy. There were sounds, the soft moaning of old boards in the roof, the pop or squeak of a floorboard. She thought of what Julie had told her once about Uncle Wyatt rambling through the hallways in the middle of the night because he couldn't sleep. She wondered if he was out there now.

And there was something about how Julie, Doris, Arlen, and Wyatt looked at one another, as though they were sharing a secret. It was probably just intimacy, she knew. Her own family probably displayed the same thing to strangers, a familiarity so comfortable that others could only wonder what was going on. But in this case, she felt remarkably like an outsider.

Jeez, she thought, her dad had given her a chance—more than one chance, actually—to back out of this sleepover.

Now, though, she tried to persuade herself there was no need to be scared. It had been years since she had felt this way. She wondered if it was the house, or the odd way Julie had acted, those photographs, the dinner, what? Maybe a combination of all of them. She wished she had a cellphone. *Really* wished it. If she had one, she could call her dad to come get her.

Then the guilt came in. Where she once saw Julie and thought of royalty, it seemed what Julie had inherited was a kind of genetic disease. The poor girl had been reared by relations who disliked one another, a kind of parents' committee made up of her separated father and mother, her uncle, grandmother, and a number of domestics and ranch employees who treated her with barely disguised contempt simply for who she was. She grew up isolated from other kids, in the middle of a simmering stew of anger and resentment. That she'd turned out halfway normal was a testament not only to her mom but also to Julie herself. And it wasn't as if Julie had lots of friends, even though it seemed like it at school. When it really mattered, like tonight, Julie had only one friend: Sheridan. No one else showed up.

Julie needed Sheridan's friendship and understanding. Sheridan vowed to try harder to give it to her. She only wished she didn't have the feeling Julie needed much more than Sheridan could provide.

SHERIDAN HAD TO go to the bathroom but didn't want to get out of bed to do it so she lay there in the dark, studying the ceiling, wondering if she could hold out all night. And deciding she couldn't.

She slid out of her bag wearing her pajama pants and a T-shirt. Julie didn't wake up, even when Sheridan stepped over her and took a thin fleece blanket from Julie's bed to wrap herself in against the chill in the house. Opening the bedroom door, Sheridan stuck her head out and looked both ways in the hallway. It was dark, although there was some kind of light coming from the first floor, down the staircase. There was a bathroom at the end of the hall next to Arlen's bedroom. Although his door was closed and there was no light under it, Sheridan thought it best to go downstairs to use the guest bathroom.

SHERIDAN PADDED DOWN the stairs in her bare feet, wrapping the blanket around her. She found herself drawn to the Scarlett Legacy Wall, and specifically to the tinted photo of Opal she had seen earlier that night. It was one of those portraits that drew you in, she thought. Something about that woman's eyes and that confident but mysterious half-smile. She broke away and quickly used the toilet, washed up, crept out, and shut the door. Since the bathroom didn't have a cup near the sink and she wanted a drink of water, she followed the light.

The kitchen was empty and stark, and she had the feeling the light hadn't been left on by mistake. Then she saw the loaf of bread and a knife on a cutting board on the counter, the cold cuts near it, and wondered who had been up making a sandwich but wasn't there now. And she decided she was in the process of scaring herself silly, so she must stop it. The main house of the Thunderhead Ranch wasn't simply the home for Julie and Uncle Arlen. It was also the business headquarters of a large enterprise.

Employees could come and go. Maybe one of them wanted a midnight snack, she thought. There was nothing frightening in *that*.

Nevertheless, when she heard a set of deep men's voices outside approaching the house, Sheridan reached out, grasped the handle of a steak knife from a collection of them near the cutting board, and pulled it inside the blanket. As the front door swung open and heavy boots scraped the hardwood floor in the living room, Sheridan had a choice to make: either dash through toward the stairs and be seen by the men, run out the back door into the ranch yard, or stay where she was.

She quickly reasoned that just as there was nothing wrong with making a snack in the middle of the night, there was nothing wrong with her getting a drink of water from the kitchen sink. But she would also keep the knife under her wrap, and return it later when the coast was clear.

She recognized one of the voices as Arlen's. The other was unfamiliar, a guttural but syrupy southern drawl. They were coming toward the kitchen. She would be caught unless she made the decision—*now*—to run out the back door into the ranch yard. She froze.

Arlen was saying, "So he's got all you boys building fence ..." when he swung the kitchen door open and saw Sheridan standing there by the counter. He was obviously startled, and what Sheridan took as genuine anger flashed across his face for a brief second. Then his semi-authentic smile returned.

"Sheridan, what are you doing up?" he asked.

"I wanted a drink of water," she said as boldly as she could.

The man with Arlen squeezed into the kitchen behind his host, his gaze fixed on her. He was medium height, rangy, with pinched-together eyes, a taut skeletal face, and thin lips stretched over a big mouthful of teeth. His brown ponytail spilled down his back from beneath his hat over the shoulders of his denim jacket.

Arlen stepped aside stiffly, as if embarrassed by the situation he was in. "Sheridan, this is Bill," he said.

"Bill Monroe," the man said. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sheridan Pickett."

His voice, Sheridan thought, chilled her to the bone—and the way he looked at her, with familiarity even though she was sure she had never seen him before. She was glad she had the knife hidden under the blanket in her fist.

Then it hit her. "How'd you know my name is Pickett?" she asked.

The question made the man blink, as if it startled him. Uncle Arlen looked over, intrigued.

"Why, everybody's heard of Sheridan Pickett," the man said, making a lame joke as if he were saying the first thing that popped into his mind while trying to think of something better. "Actually, I believe Arlen here might have said your name."

Sheridan didn't reply, and felt threatened the way Monroe looked at her, with a kind of leering familiarity.

"I don't remember saying anything," Arlen said. "But whatever ..."

“Or maybe I heard it from Hank,” the man said with sudden confidence, as if he liked this version much better. “Yeah, I heard it from Hank. You’re a friend of Julie’s, right?”

“Right,” Sheridan said.

Bill Monroe nodded knowingly, then tilted his head to the side without once taking his eyes off her. “That’s what it is,” he said. There was an awkward silence. Sheridan wanted to leave, but the men crowded the door. Obviously, Arlen expected her to go back to bed. Bill Monroe—who knew what he wanted? Whatever it was, he wouldn’t stop staring at her, sizing her up. He scared her to death.

Then she thought: the man knows both Arlen *and* Hank, and knows them well enough that he could say Hank’s name in Arlen’s house without retribution. What did that mean?

Finally, Arlen said, “Well, Sheridan, did you get your drink? You can take a glass of water upstairs with you if you want. I was about to make a couple of sandwiches for Bill and me while we talked a little business. Can I make you one?”

“No, thank you,” Sheridan said.

“Good night,” Arlen said, stepping aside as she sidled around the counter and headed for the doorway.

“Night,” she replied. She was close enough to Bill Monroe as she passed to smell him—tobacco smoke, dust, and bad sweet cologne.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Bill Monroe said to her back.

As she went up the stairs, she looked over her shoulder to see him watching her carefully, a hint of a smile on his lips, and for a second it felt as if a bolt of electricity had shot through her.

WHEN SHE AWOKE she could hear Julie still sleeping beside her, a burr of a snore in her breathing. Her dreams had been awful, once she finally got to sleep. In one, a vivid dream, Bill Monroe was outside their house, on the lawn, looking through the window at Lucy and her as they slept.

In another dream, Sheridan went back out into the hallway in the dark to where the window was and parted the curtain. A yellow square could be seen through the distant trees, the light from Wyatt’s chicken coop.

She raised the eyepieces of the binoculars to her eyes and adjusted the focus tight on the square. Then something or somebody passed by the window inside, blocking out the light like a finger waved in front of a candle flame. And when the person passed, she could see the slightly smiling face of a woman, her expression paused in mid-conversation.

It was Opal Scarlett.

EARLY THE NEXT morning, in the chilled high-altitude predawn, J. W. Keeley labored up a rocky hillside on the western slope of Wolf Mountain with a bucket full of creek water in each hand. He walked carefully, the soles of his Docs slick in the dew on the grass, trying not to slosh water on his pant legs.

When he reached his pickup he lowered the buckets to the ground, then rubbed his gloved hands together hard, trying to work the soreness out of them from the bucket handles. It would be a little while before the sun broke over the mountain and he could see well enough to finish up.

While he waited, he leaned over the hood of his pickup and raised the binoculars to his eyes. Over a mile away were the house, the garage, the little barn, the single blue pole light. As the sky lightened, the white picket fence around the front lawn began to emerge. He couldn't see much behind the place yet. He knew there was a steep hill, and a red-rock arroyo back there.

Inside the house, the family slept. Except for the oldest girl, of course. She was still at the Thunderhead Ranch.

Keeley lowered the field glasses and used the back of his glove to soak up the snot running out of his nose. He would never get used to the cold, he thought. Even when it should be nearly summer, when the grass was coming up and the trees were budding, it still dipped below freezing most nights. Sure, it got warm fast once the sun came out. In fact, it heated up so quickly and with such thin-air intensity that he found himself short of breath at times. It felt as if there were nothing between him and that sun, nothing to mute the heat and light. Like *air*, for example.

He wished it weren't so far down the slope to the little creek. He'd need to make a few more trips with those buckets. He had a mess to clean up. The bed of his pickup was wet and sticky with blood and clumps of hair.

MORE THAN ONCE since he'd been in the Bighorns, he thought about that cowboy in the Shirley Basin, the one he'd shot. When he recalled that morning, he shook his head and looked at the ground, not out of remorse but because an act like that was such a bold and reckless chance to take. A smile would break across his face and he had to make sure no one was looking, because he was infused with the kind of raw dark joy that he'd felt only once before in his life, with that hunter from Atlanta and his wife.

But that cowboy, well, maybe that had not been the smartest thing. There was a highway within view, and someone could have seen him. Hell, there could have been someone in the cowboy's truck, waiting for him. Keeley hadn't checked out that possibility at the time.

That he had just raised the rifle and shot the way he did, as easy as it was, as slick as it was, man ...

Maybe it was smart after all, he figured. Anyone investigating the shooting would look at the cowboy's friends and family, try to figure out who didn't like him, whom he

owed money to, that sort of thing. The randomness of the act accomplished a couple of things. It reminded Keeley that he had ultimate power over those who fucked with him. Anybody could get angry, or let himself be insulted. But it took someone with big brass balls to do anything about it. Recalling that morning made him think harder about what he was doing, and what he was about to do. He couldn't be impulsive again, for one thing. No more lashing out, no outbursts. He had to be cool and smart.

That was the difference, after all, between him and those assholes in Rawlins, even the late Wacey Hedeman. Damn, he wished he'd been there to see *that*, when Wacey took his last chew. It wasn't quite the same thrill when it happened offstage, even though in the end the result was the same.

LUCK WAS HIS lady, though. Luck and cool and a purpose. They'd all come together, like whiskey, ice, and water to form something perfect. For five long hot years at Parchman Farm, Mississippi's only maximum security prison, he'd had to just fucking sit there and stew. The more the rage built inside, the colder he got on the outside. He'd learned about what happened to his brother Ote through a letter from their mother. Two years later, after Mama died, he found out about Jeannie and April from his shit-for-brains lawyer. While he cooled his heels at Parchman Farm, what remained of his family was being taken from him one by one and there was nothing he could do about it. His frustration and anger was white-hot, and in some ways it was the purest emotion he'd ever felt. But he channeled it, tucked it inside himself. And waited. His reward for holding his emotion in, he felt, was coming now. Events were finally breaking in his favor. Getting hired by Hank Scarlett within a day of hitting town, what was the likelihood of that? Plus, Keeley knew how this small-town stuff worked. Normally, he would have attracted a little bit of attention, being so different and all. But two things were happening. One, the coal-bed methane companies were hiring just about any warm body they could find, so there were lots of new faces in town. Hard men, like himself. Many were from the South, like him. Second, the feud between Hank and Arlen took center stage in Twelve Sleep County, and the new men Hank was hiring were lumped into the category of thugs. No one cared about the individual makeup of Hank's private little army, just the fact that the army existed.

Keeley couldn't imagine any other scenario in which he could have been hired as a ranch hand with practically no ranching experience. The closest he'd ever come to cows, he thought, was eating a cheeseburger. But Hank had looked him over the way a coach evaluates on-field talent, said the word *sinewy*, then asked his name.

"Bill Monroe," Keeley had said, thinking of the first name that popped into his head.

"Bill Monroe," Hank repeated, "you've got yourself a job."

One of these days, Keeley thought, somebody was going to be a bluegrass fan and ask him twice about his name. But so far it hadn't happened.

THERE HAD BEEN that morning two weeks ago, Keeley recalled, when he watched Joe Pickett through the scope of his rifle and nearly pulled the trigger. Hank had sent him out to drive the fence line and check the locks. The game warden was out counting

deer when Keeley saw the familiar green pickup. Hunkering down in a tangle of brush, Keeley placed the crosshairs of the rifle scope on Joe Pickett's nose.

The game warden seemed to sense he was being watched, the way he looked around. But he never saw Keeley.

It would have been simple. Easier than the cowboy. The game warden would never even know what hit him. Keeley had flipped the safety off, pressed his cheek harder into the stock of the rifle, and begun to squeeze the trigger ...

Then he thought better of it. That was the problem; it was way too easy. He didn't want to kill him from a distance, without Pickett knowing who had done it or why. The why was important.

Even the week before, when he had Joe Pickett down on the pavement behind the Stockman's Bar, it would have been easy to stomp him to death. Hank couldn't have stopped him.

But he didn't want to just kill the man. He wanted to destroy him first. That would take more time.

IT HAD BEEN quite a surprise to meet Joe Pickett's daughter the night before, Keeley thought. She was kind of a little cutie, he had to admit. Too bad he couldn't see her better, but she was all wrapped up in that blanket that way.

How old did Arlen say she was? Fourteen? That would be about right.

Then he thought: April Keeley would be twelve if she were alive today.

But she wasn't.

And he knew who was responsible for that.

IT HADN'T TAKEN Keeley long to size up the situation on the Thunderhead Ranch. It was Hank versus Arlen, and Hank was hiring. Hank's employees would be expected to do a hell of a lot more than ranch work if it came to it. There were standing orders to confront any of Arlen's men if they were stupid enough to cross over to the east side of the ranch for anything. There had already been a few spitting contests of sorts, with Hank's men threatening Arlen's men and vice versa. Keeley had taken out some dumb Mexican irrigator who was working for Arlen. The Mexican never even knew what hit him. He just woke up in Twelve Sleep County Medical with a concussion from a two-by-four.

Keeley was lying low since he'd thumped the game warden. By working for Hank in the open and Arlen behind the scenes, Keeley had assured himself he would be in the middle of anything that happened between the two brothers, and he might be able to use his unique position to manipulate the outcome. He knew he had stumbled upon a great opportunity. And not only was he smarter than those dick-weeds down in Rawlins, Keeley thought, he was also smarter than those two brothers.

NATE ROMANOWSKI. KEELEY had heard the name spoken in quiet tones enough times around the ranch and in the bars in town that he was concerned. This Romanowski guy was a friend of Joe Pickett's and he wasn't someone to screw around with. He was rumored to be behind the murders of two men, one being the former county sheriff. Hank said he'd heard Romanowski carried a .454 Casull handgun made

by Freedom Arms, the second-most-powerful pistol on earth, and he could hit what he was aiming at up to a mile away.

But Romanowski was nowhere to be found. No one had seen him in six months, and with the outlaw falconer gone or missing, Keeley knew it would be easier to get to the game warden.

KEELEY WAS RINSING off his knife and bone saw in one of the buckets when he noticed movement at the house on Bighorn Road. Yup, someone had turned on the porch light.

He put the saw and knife on the tailgate of his truck, wiped his hands dry on his jeans, and picked up the binoculars again. He focused on the front door.

AT THE SAME moment on the Thunderhead Ranch, there was a shout.

"Girls, time to get up," Arlen called from downstairs. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Julie moaned and rubbed her eyes. "Are you hungry, Sherry?"

"No," Sheridan said, rolling over, feeling the hardness of the steak knife under the sleeping bag where she'd hidden it the night before. "I had a really bad dream. I just want to go home."

Which was true.

As Julie dressed, Sheridan peeled back the bag and looked at the knife in the morning light, feeling suddenly sick. She let the flap drop back over it before Julie could see what she had been doing.

"You don't look good," Julie said, looking over while she brushed her hair. "Your face is completely white."

"I don't feel very good all of a sudden."

"What's wrong?"

Sheridan hesitated. Should she tell her? She knew at that moment that no matter what, things would never be the same between her and Julie Scarlett.

No, she decided, she couldn't tell her that the knife she'd taken from the kitchen matched the one that had pinned the Miller's weasel to her front door.

16

"I 'LL GET THE paper if you'll make coffee," Joe said to Marybeth as he yawned, snapped on the porch light, and looked outside through the window on the front door.

"You've got yourself a deal," Marybeth said from the kitchen. Then: "You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep," he said, sitting on a bench to pull on his boots.

"What were you worried about?" she asked.

He smiled. She knew him so well. If he couldn't sleep it was because he was concerned about something. Nothing else ever kept him awake.

"I hope it wasn't Sheridan's sleepover," Marybeth said.

Joe had to proceed cautiously here. In fact, it had been about Sheridan's sleepover. He kept thinking his daughter was in over her head with the Scarletts, but that she would never admit it. Something was brewing besides coffee, he thought.

"Just a lot of things," Joe said.

He clamped on his cowboy hat and cinched the belt on his bathrobe against the morning chill and was three strides down the cracked concrete pathway in his front yard when he realized he was being watched. He froze, and felt the hair on his neck stand on end.

He looked quickly at the road. There were no vehicles on it, and no one was parked. Wolf Mountain, still in shadow, loomed to the north, dominating the view. Then he felt more than saw something in his peripheral vision. Something big and black, hanging above the ground. Joe snapped his head to the side.

Then to the other side.

For a moment, he thought he was surrounded and he wished he'd brought his weapon.

He realized what it was, and his stomach surged and he felt sick.

Four elk heads—the Town Elk—had been mounted on the posts of his picket fence, facing inward toward his lawn. Toward him. The tongue of the big bull elk stuck out the side of its mouth, pink and dry. All eight cold, black eyes were open.

Joe tried to swallow, but couldn't.

Whoever had done this had hit him where he lived in more ways than one. Not only had he killed and beheaded four popular animals in Saddlestring that he was responsible for, but he'd brought the heads out to his own home and stuck them on posts to taunt him. To humiliate him. To frighten him and his family. He was telling Joe nothing was off-limits, and that he didn't fear or respect him. He was bringing it right to him, and shoving it in his face in front of his family.

He was disgusted as well as angry. Who in the hell was he up against who would do something like this?

"Joe?" Marybeth was at the door.

His first impulse was to run back and physically turn her around before she could see the heads.

"Oh My God," she whispered. "Joe ..."

He was too late.

In the distance, above the thumping of his own heart and Marybeth's gasps, he could hear an engine start up. They were being watched by someone, all right.

Unfortunately, Wolf Mountain was covered by a spider's web of old logging roads. Unless he knew specifically where the vehicle had been parked, he would never be able to track the driver or drivers down.

"Who is doing this to us?" Marybeth asked.

"I don't know."

"Joe, what can we do about it?"

"I don't know that either," he said.

"I hope you get rid of those things before Lucy gets up and sees them."

Joe nodded.

"This is awful," she said. "It's getting worse."

"Yup."

"What if he doesn't stop?"

Joe went to Marybeth and took her in his arms.

"Joe, what if he doesn't?" she said into his shoulder.

"He'll stop," Joe said, with no confidence in his words.

A FEW MINUTES later, Marybeth came out the front door again to find her husband walking across the lawn in his robe, cowboy hat, and boots, holding a severed elk head aloft by the antlers.

"Come in and get dressed, Joe," she said, distressed. "Look at yourself. What if someone drives by and sees you?"

Instead of answering, Joe held the head up. "This really pisses me off, Marybeth."

"Come in, Joe ..."

JOE WAITED FOR the dispatcher to patch him through to the sheriff, who was having morning coffee with the rest of the "morning men" at the Saddlestring Burg-O-Pardner.

He drawled, "Sheriff McLanahan. What can I do you for, Joe?"

"Somebody cut the heads off of four elk and stuck them on my fence," Joe said. "They were the Town Elk. All four of them."

"Jeez," McLanahan said. "I was beginning to really like those critters."

"They're all dead now. You want to come look at them?"

"Naw," McLanahan said. "That ain't necessary. I seen plenty of elk heads before. Shoot, they're on just about every wall in town!"

"Now they're in my yard."

"That's not very neighborly."

"No, it's not very *neighborly*," Joe said, loud enough for Marybeth to hear. She looked up and grimaced. "Sheriff, it wasn't neighbors. It was the same guy who pinned that Miller's weasel on my door. He's upping the ante."

"Are you sure it was the same guy? How do you know that?"

"It has to be."

"So you're speculating," McLanahan said, pronouncing it "speck-u-late-un."

"Who else could it be?"

"I don't rightly know."

"You 'don't rightly know,'" Joe repeated, feeling his neck flush hot.

Marybeth stood in the doorway, listening to Joe, shaking her head as if to say, *This valley is getting too small for us.*

KNOWING HE WOULD need a front-end loader to dig a hole deep and wide enough to dispose of the massive elk heads, Joe angrily carried three of them into the back of his truck and drove them deep into the timber of Wolf Mountain, where he disposed of them. Although insects and predators would make short work of the hide,

flesh, and soft parts, leaving only the skulls and antlers, the act of dumping the heads like bags of garbage went against everything he stood for. The last head he'd dragged behind his garage and covered with a tarp to ship to state forensics. It was possible, although not probable, that they could find a human hair or fiber that could lead them to the killer.

He was not in the mood for a cellphone call from Randy Pope. When Joe saw who was calling on the display, he considered not answering. But it was early Saturday morning. The headquarters office in Cheyenne was closed. It could be something important.

"Yes?"

"I'm at home, Joe," Pope said, not trying to disguise his indignation, "when I get a call from a sobbing reporter from the *Saddlestring Roundup*. She asks me if I have any comment on the slaughter of four elk in the middle of town. She says the bodies are in the park for all to see, but the heads are gone. She says little kids are bawling."

Joe closed his eyes. On the underside of his lids, he saw red spangles.

"She also tells me the sheriff said the local game warden says the heads turned up at his place."

"That's true," Joe said.

Pope hesitated a moment before shouting: "What in the hell are you doing up there? Can't you even protect wildlife *in the middle of your goddam town?*"

Joe couldn't think of how to answer that. He opened his eyes to the sky, hoping for a sign of some kind.

"This will hit the wires, Pickett. It's the kind of juicy story the press loves. Four poor innocent animals. And it will all come down to the fact that the local game warden can't seem to do his job. But they won't call you, Joe, they'll call *me!*"

"Somebody is trying to destroy me," Joe said, not liking the paranoid way the words sounded as they came out.

"I'd say that somebody is you!" Pope shouted. "Have you been out to Hank Scarlett's place yet?"

"No."

"Just what in the hell are you doing?"

Joe sighed. "Cleaning up the mess."

Pope was so angry he sputtered, not making sense. Joe didn't ask him to repeat himself. Instead, he closed the phone and threw it as far as he could into the trees.

Before he left the timber, though, he reluctantly walked back and retrieved it. He felt like leaving his own head in the brush. Pope, and most of the people in town, would probably endorse that concept.

FROM WOLF MOUNTAIN, Joe drove to the Thunderhead Ranch to pick up Sheridan. He was used to how Sheridan looked after sleepovers—wan and exhausted—but he quickly perceived there was something more to her demeanor. That's when she told him about meeting Arlen and Bill Monroe in the kitchen, and about the bad dreams she had when she went back to bed.

"Who?" Joe asked suddenly, startling her.

"Bill Monroe."

"He's the man who beat me up," Joe said.

"Oh, Dad ..."

It tore him up inside, the way she said it. He wished he hadn't said anything. At that moment, he hated his job, hated what had happened in that parking lot, hated that Sheridan even had to know about it. And he hated Bill Monroe.

He thought: What was Bill Monroe doing in Arlen's house? Wasn't Bill Hank's man? Then he remembered what Arlen had said about having an informer in Hank's camp. He also knew Arlen had misled him about Monroe's role.

When she showed him the knife she had taken from the Scarlett kitchen and hidden in her overnight bag, Joe pulled to the side of the road to examine it.

"It looks like the one that was stuck in our door, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Pretty close," Joe said, turning it over. The length and design were the same. The dark wood handle seemed more worn, though.

He looked up at her. "Sheridan, what are you thinking about this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'll feel really bad if the knives are from the same set, but I'll feel bad if they aren't and I took the knife. I already feel bad about being suspicious of my best friend's family. Do you know what I mean?"

Joe nodded. "I know what you mean, darling." At that moment, he was proud of her for what she'd thought about and done, and profoundly sad for her what she'd discovered.

Joe asked about the dreams, hoping to change the subject. "So you dreamed you saw Opal Scarlett alive, huh?"

"Um-hmmm."

"What did she look like?"

"Are you going to make fun of me?" Sheridan asked, raising an eyebrow at her father.

"Nope," he said. "Remember when I promised to pay more attention to your dreams no matter how goofy they seem at the time?"

"Yes."

"I'm doing that. Just don't give me any woo-woo stuff," he said.

"She looked kind of pleasant, actually," Sheridan said. "Like a nice old lady. Nicer than I remember her. But I didn't *really* see her, you know."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I just spent too much time last night staring at a portrait of Julie's grandmother on the wall. It's a pretty interesting picture. I let her eyes get to me, I guess, so when I finally got to sleep that's what I dreamed about."

"Bill Monroe is the name of a famous bluegrass singer and bandleader," Joe said. "Some people called him the Father of Bluegrass. Ever hear of the 'high lonesome sound'?"

Sheridan looked at him as if he'd swallowed a bird.

“Really,” Joe said. “Dig in the glove box. I think I’ve got *The Very Best of Bill Monroe* in there.”

She opened it and rooted around and brought out a CD case with a black-and-white photo of a man playing a mandolin in a suit and tie with a cocked cowboy hat on his head. “This looks awful,” she said. “And it isn’t the Bill Monroe at the ranch either.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“I wonder if they’re related in some way?” Sheridan asked, turning the case over and reading the back. The look of distaste remained on her face. Joe was pleased they had digressed somewhat from their earlier discussion. He didn’t like seeing Sheridan troubled.

“Listen to it before you decide,” he said.

“Have you been listening to the CD I made you?” she asked.

“A little, not much,” Joe confessed.

“You need to get with it,” she said. “You need to know what’s good.”

“So do you. Put that on.”

“Hmmpf.”

Joe thought it was odd Hank had hired a man with a southern accent named Bill Monroe.

“Footprints in the Snow” filled the cab.

Sheridan said, “Ew!”

WHEN THEY GOT home, Joe wrapped both the steak knife he had found stuck in his door and the knife Sheridan had brought home and sent them to the state forensic lab. He attached a note asking the staff to confirm that they were the same brand and lot number.

17

BY LATE MORNING, Joe was cruising east on the state highway that bordered the Thunderhead Ranch all the way to the Bighorn Mountains. It was one of those schizophrenic spring/summer/winter May days when storm clouds shot across the sky in fast motion dumping both slashing rain and wet snow as if ditching their payloads in a panic, then darting away leaving sunshine and confusion, only to be followed by a second and then a third wave of clouds doing the same thing. There was something wildly adolescent about days like this, Joe thought, as if the atmosphere were supercharged with hormones and just didn’t know what in the hell to do next.

There were five entrance accesses to Thunderhead Ranch from the state highway. Two were on the western half of the ranch, Arlen’s side. The other three were on the eastern half, Hank’s. The difference between the sets of entrances was Hank’s gates were closed and locked with heavy chains and multiple combination locks. To get to Hank’s lodge, one either needed permission to enter via the state highway, or went

through Arlen's side, where there were three different access roads. Joe didn't know the status of those roads, but assumed they had locked gates as well.

After his frustrating conversation with Pope, Joe had done a quick inspection and review of the gear and paperwork he might need to search Hank Scarlett's home. He put fresh evidence vouchers and envelopes in his briefcase, and made sure his digital camera and microcassette recorder were fully charged. He tossed two clean legal pads into his case for taking notes and making sketches, if necessary.

His plan was to call Hank and inform him that he wanted to come to his home for the purpose of doing a cursory inspection to determine if there was evidence of illegal mounted game animals. If Hank could produce documentation that the animals had been taken legally, Joe's investigation would be over. If not, Joe would proceed with issuing citations or, if the infractions were serious enough, arresting him outright and taking him to the county jail. *That* would certainly raise some eyebrows in town, Joe thought.

In Joe's experience, the only people who denied him permission to search were those who had something to hide. Simple as that. Not once had anyone refused him entrance who hadn't violated the law. In that case, Joe had always been able to obtain a search warrant signed by Judge Pennock in Saddlestring within the day and come back.

Pulling off the highway onto the gravel two-track that led to the second of three locked gates on Hank's side of the ranch, Joe parked, snatched his cellphone from the dashboard, and called.

The phone rang only twice before a voice answered and said, "Thunderhead East."

The voice sounded familiar, Joe thought. Deep, southern.

"Is this Bill Monroe?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You're answering a question with a question. Let's stop that right off. Again, is this Bill Monroe?"

Hesitation. Joe guessed Monroe had recognized his voice.

"You aren't supposed to be around anymore, Bill," Joe said. "Both Hank and the sheriff claim you left the state after attacking me. You pounded me pretty good, Bill. What I want to know is if it was your idea or if Hank put you up to it? Not that it'll matter in the end, when I arrest you and put you in jail, but I am wondering."

Silence.

"And what are you up to with Arlen? What's that about?"

Joe hoped Monroe wouldn't hang up on him.

"If you tell Hank about me meeting with his brother, there'll be blood on your hands. I'm the only one keeping them from going at each other."

Joe heard the truth in that. If Bill was Arlen's inside man, it was not a good idea to expose him. Yet.

"I'm making a deal with the devil," Joe said.

"Call it whatever you want."

"Bill, let me talk with Hank, please."

A beat, three beats, then a mumbled "Hold on."

Joe heard the handset clunk down on a table. He felt a wave of sweat break over his scalp. There was no way to prove it was Bill Monroe, he thought, unless he caught him outright. But the behavior of the man who answered was evasive enough that he thought he had his man.

He could hear voices in the background, then the heavy sound of boots on hardwood.

"Hank Scarlett," Hank said.

"Hank, this is Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett. We have an anonymous tip alleging you have game mounts in your home that were taken illegally. The tip also alleged evidence of violations that might have occurred in Alaska at your outfit up there. I'd like to come out to your place and have a quick look around to assure the department there is no merit to this tip."

"That's interesting," Hank said. "I bet I know who called."

"I have my suspicions as well," Joe said. "But it doesn't matter. The call was placed with some pretty specific details in it, and my director has authorized me to come out and take a look. Mind if I check it out?"

Hank didn't hesitate. "Yes, I mind."

Joe said, "Look, Hank, I'm at the gate to your place. If you'd send one of your men out here or give me the combination of the locks, I could be at your place in fifteen minutes and we can get this all cleared up."

"This is private property," Hank said, his voice flat. "Don't that mean anything to you?"

"Yes, it does. That's why I'm calling."

"Every entrance is locked. You can't come out here unless you bust the locks and enter illegally. And if you do that, I'll have *you* arrested, Mr. Game Warden."

He said it with such calm assurance, Joe thought. It unnerved him, but he continued. "Hank, is Bill Monroe still out there? I thought that was him who answered."

"Nope," Hank said. "Just somebody who musta' sounded like him."

"I can get a search warrant and be back out within a few hours. Are you really going to make me do that?"

Joe could almost feel Hank smile on the other end, that cold smile he had, the one he reserved for people beneath him. "Yes, Mr. Game Warden, I'm really going to make you do that."

And he hung up.

JOE SPEED-DIALED ROBEY Hersig and got his voicemail.

"Robey, I'm on my way down from the Thunderhead Ranch. Hank refused access, so I need a warrant drawn up as soon as possible and signed by Judge Pennock. And when I come back, I may need a couple of deputies to help look around, if you don't mind coordinating that with the sheriff."

Robey came on the line, saying he had just stepped into his office. Joe repeated what he'd left on the voice mail.

"I'm meeting with the judge this afternoon," Robey said. "Will that work?"

Joe said it would.

"I wonder why he's being so cantankerous," he said, then chuckled, "but I guess that's just Hank."

"Or he's guilty as sin," Joe replied. "And his friend Bill Monroe is out there too, answering his phone for him."

"Really?"

"That's another reason why I might need the deputies."

"So you don't do something over-the-top to the guy?"

"No," Joe said. "So he doesn't beat me up again."

JOE SPENT THE afternoon at his home trying to put epoxy over all the cracks and holes in his drift boat. He kept his cellphone on and in his front breast pocket. He was ready to drop everything on a moment's notice and meet the deputies at the entrance to Thunderhead Ranch.

Robey didn't call until a few minutes to five.

"The judge won't sign the warrant until he sees the documentation for probable cause."

"What?"

"That's what he said, Joe."

"He's never asked for documentation before. What does he want, the transcript of the tip? That's all we can provide him."

"I guess so."

"But a tip is a tip. I told you everything in it."

"Joe, I'm just the messenger here."

"Oh, I thought you were the county prosecutor," Joe said, immediately feeling bad that he'd said it.

"Fuck you, Joe."

"I'm sorry. What is it, is the judge hooked up with Hank? Or is he just shy about doing anything if the name Scarlett is involved?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I said I was sorry."

"I don't want to talk to you right now," Robey said.

"Robey ..."

He hung up.

Joe angrily tossed his phone into the boat, where it clattered across the fiberglass bottom.

JUNE

As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. So one generation of men will grow while another dies.

Homer,
Iliad

I wished to possess all the productions of nature, but I wished life with them. This was impossible.

John James Audubon

18

ARLEN SCARLETT was distracted. Marybeth could tell. Though he was looking at her across her desk with the well-practiced face of an eager-to-please canine, his mind was clearly elsewhere. Even as she explained that she had broken Opal's code when it came to her record keeping for the ranch, something Arlen *should* have been ecstatic over, his mind was elsewhere.

The previous week, Arlen had shown up at Marybeth's office with five banker's boxes full of paperwork—envelopes, statements, invoices, files. He complained he could not make hide nor hair of them. Opal had kept the books on the ranch, he said, and she'd never explained to anyone how she did it. Arlen claimed he had no true idea if the ranch made money and if so how much, or if they were in trouble.

Marybeth had reluctantly agreed to take a look at the contents of the boxes to see if she could find a method in Opal's madness.

"It didn't really take me as long as I thought it would," she explained to Arlen, who looked at her but not really. The antenna of a cellphone extended out of a snap-buttoned breast pocket of his white cowboy shirt. Even though he never looked down at it or reached up for it, Marybeth got the distinct feeling the phone was what he was concentrating on, even as she spoke. He was waiting for a call.

"At first," Marybeth said, "I couldn't figure out why she filed things the way she did. It seemed like random collections of paper held together with rubber bands. Some of the papers went back years and some were as current as two months ago, just before

she ... went away. All in the same bundle. It was obvious she wasn't using monthly P and Ls, or any kind of cash-flow records to keep track of things. But we know Opal was not the type of woman to maintain haphazard records, so I figured there must be some kind of formula she was using. It came to me last night," she said, widening her eyes, trying to engage Arlen. "I realized she grouped records by season and category. It kind of makes sense, when you think about it. For example, you grow and sell grass hay, correct?"

Arlen nodded.

"Well, Opal's approach was to start a file with a receipt from the first hayseed purchased for a specific meadow and go from there. She's even put the purchase of a new tractor in that hay file if the tractor was used for cutting and baling. If one of your employees fell off the hay wagon and busted his arm, the workers' compensation hearing materials would be put in the hay file."

"We paid workers' comp?" Arlen asked, surprised his mother had been so progressive.

"No, of course not," Marybeth said, shaking her head. "Opal fought every single claim to the death. My point is that the only way to figure out what you've got here is to understand how Opal kept track of everything. It was her own system, and I still don't have everything figured out yet, but I'm getting there. There are a few bundles of invoices I can't assign to a specific project or category yet."

"You've done a great job," Arlen said. "I looked at that stuff for a month and couldn't make anything out of it. My lawyer looked at it for ten hours, which he charged me a hundred dollars per hour for, and handed it all back and said there was no logic to it. But you figured it out. Damn, you're good."

Marybeth thought, *Yes, I am.*

"So?" Arlen said.

Marybeth arched her eyebrows, not sure what he was asking.

"Are we making money?"

"You're making a ton of money."

"Did you find anything that will help me in my battle with Hank?"

"Actually," Marybeth said, "Hank's side of the ranch seems to make more money than yours. It's more efficient."

Arlen said dismissively, "You mean he's more ruthless."

"If that's possible," Marybeth said, thinking of the workers' comp claims.

Arlen's cellphone rang and he jumped in his chair, clawing for it. Marybeth sat back and observed. He plucked the phone out of his pocket and stared at it for a moment while it rang. She realized he was unfamiliar with it, and didn't know for sure how it worked.

"New phone," he mumbled to her. "The buttons are so damned small ..."

But he pushed one and held it up to his face, tentatively saying, "Yes? This is Arlen?"

From where she sat, Marybeth could hear a loud, deep voice on Arlen's phone. As he listened, Arlen peered around her office. His expression was anticipatory.

"You're here *now*?" Arlen said, looking at Marybeth as if she should be as amazed as he was at the identity of the caller. "You're right outside on the street?"

Arlen signed off, dropped the phone in his pocket, and stood up. His face had drained of color.

"Meade Davis is outside," Arlen said, referring to the lawyer Opal was rumored to have worked with to develop an updated will. "He just got back from Arizona today and he says everybody he meets tells him we've been looking for him. He said someone broke into his office while he was away and stole a bunch of records. But he says he's got some news for me." Arlen was clearly excited.

Marybeth said, "You'd better go meet with him, then. Maybe we'll actually see a resolution to the dispute. Please let me know how it goes."

"I will," Arlen said, acting more nervous than Marybeth had ever seen him.

When he left her office his Stetson and barn coat were still on her couch, so she knew he would be back.

She stood up and watched him through blinds. He bounded outside and approached the dusty black Lincoln Continental that belonged to Meade Davis. Davis got out. He was portly, avuncular, with thinning hair and a white mustache and a quick smile. Arlen and Davis were of the same generation. Marybeth watched Davis shake Arlen's hand, then place his other hand on it as well, as if offering condolences. Then he shook his head from side to side, and Arlen looked momentarily distraught.

It looked to Marybeth as if Davis was delivering bad news. Marybeth was surprised, but not as surprised, it seemed, as Arlen.

But Arlen quickly recovered. He spun Davis around, threw an arm over his shoulder, and they started walking away, Arlen bending his head toward Davis, putting his face in Davis's ear, his jaw working, talking up a storm.

AN HOUR LATER, Arlen burst through her door. His eyes blazed.

"There *was* a secret will," Arlen said excitedly. "Meade Davis drew it up last fall. Mother gave me the entire ranch, as I knew she would. Hank gets nothing."

Marybeth was taken aback. But when she watched them it had looked like ...

"Congratulations are in order, I guess."

"You can say that again," Arlen said, beaming.

"When I saw you outside, it looked as though Davis was telling you something awful. You looked unhappy with what he said."

Arlen stared back at Marybeth as if frozen against a wall by a spotlight. He regrouped quickly, and fully, threw back his head and laughed too loudly for the room. "When he told me his office had been broken into and the will stolen, I thought Hank had beaten me once and for all. That's probably what you saw. Then I realized that if Meade testifies to what it said, and what Mother's wishes were, it's as good as finding the will in the first place! You must have seen me before I figured that out."

"That must be it," she said, rising and holding out her hand. "Again, congratulations." She said it not so much for Arlen but for the rest of the valley.

AFTER THE DINNER dishes were cleared away, Marybeth and her mother, Missy Vankueren-Longbrake, sat down at the kitchen table with cups of coffee. Joe had called from somewhere in the mountains to say he would be late and he would have to miss dinner because someone had reported a poacher allegedly firing at a herd of deer. Marybeth found it suspicious that the night her mother came to visit was the night Joe happened to be late.

Missy had retained her previous name and added the “Longbrake” after marrying local rancher Bud Longbrake six months before, saying she liked the way it sounded all together. Sort of patrician, she explained.

Sheridan and Lucy were in their room, ostensibly doing their homework. Missy favored Lucy, and Lucy played her grandmother like a musical instrument. Sheridan seemed to hold both of them in disdain when they were together because she claimed they fed off each other and thrived in a place she called “Girlieville.”

Marybeth had just told her mother about the Miller’s weasel stuck to the front door and the elk heads on the fence the week before. Missy shook her head in disgust while she listened. Marybeth knew Missy’s ire was aimed at Joe as much as the incidents themselves. It was no coincidence that Missy and Joe were rarely in the same house together. She tried to time it that way. The two of them had been operating under a kind of uneasy truce borne of necessity: they had to live in the same county and there were children and grandchildren involved, so therefore they couldn’t avoid each other. But they did their best.

“SO WHERE ARE the elk heads?” Missy asked, raising her coffee cup and looking at Marybeth over the rim.

“Joe buried them somewhere out in the woods. I think he was ashamed of them.”

“My God. You can’t imagine some of the things people are saying in town,” Missy said. “They loved those elk. The people can’t understand how someone could just shoot them right under the nose of the local game warden.”

“Mom, Joe’s district is fifteen hundred square miles. He can’t be everywhere.”

“Still ...” Missy said, sighing. That “still” seemed to hang in the air for quite some time, like an odor. Then Missy leaned forward conspiratorially. “I can’t help but think it has something to do with the situation on Thunderhead Ranch. Your husband must have done something to make one side or the other angry.”

Missy said *your husband* instead of using Joe’s name when she was making a point.

“My guess is he angered Hank,” Missy continued. “Hank would do something like that. I’ve heard he’s hired a bunch of thugs to do his dirty work. I know Arlen pretty well and he’s a good man at heart, a good man. He’s the majority floor leader in the Senate, for goodness sake! We serve together on the library board.”

“I know you do,” Marybeth said, looking away.

“You don’t have to say it like that. I’ve had several long conversations with Arlen.”

"Mom, Joe and I have been here for six years and we can't figure out all the history in this valley with the Scarletts. No one can who hasn't grown up here. There's just so much to know. Yet you've been here two and a half years and you're an expert?"

Missy raised her eyebrows and narrowed her eyes. She had a glass doll-like face that belied her age. It tightened with arrogance. Marybeth hoped she hadn't inherited that particular look.

"Some of us have the ability to get to the bottom of things quickly." Her eyes flicked in the direction of Joe's tiny office, then her voice turned to ice: "Some of us don't."

SHERIDAN INTERRUPTED THEM when she brought her math book and work sheet out of her room and asked Marybeth to help her with a problem.

"Don't ask me," Missy said, raising her coffee cup to her lips with two hands. "Math is like Greek to me."

"That's why I didn't," Sheridan said brusquely.

SHERIDAN RETURNED TO her room with her homework and closed the door. There was a long pause as Marybeth felt her mother assessing her, wearing the most profound and concerned expression. It was a look Marybeth knew always preceded some kind of dire statement. It was another look Marybeth hoped she didn't share.

"I'm just thinking about the children when I say this," Missy said, "so don't take it wrong."

Marybeth braced herself. She knew what was coming by the tone.

"But given what's been happening here, with the dead animals and the severed heads and all, and the fact that whoever is doing this seems to be able to come and go as he pleases, I would strongly suggest—for the sake of your children and my grandchildren—that you pack up and move out to the ranch with me for a while."

Marybeth said nothing.

Missy put down her cup, leaned across the table, and stroked Marybeth's hand. "Honey, I don't want to have to say this, but you're putting your children in danger staying here. Obviously, there isn't much *your husband* can do to stop it. Whoever is doing this has no qualms about coming right to your home, literally, and doing these things. What if they get worse? What if whoever is doing this gets worse? Can you live with that?"

Marybeth sighed, started to speak, then didn't. Her mother had a point, and one she'd considered herself.

"I've got a five-bedroom ranch house," Missy said, "meaning we've got four empty rooms. You and the girls would be safer there."

"What about Joe?"

Missy made a face as if she'd been squirted in the eye with a lemon. "Your husband would be welcome, of course," she said without enthusiasm.

Marybeth nodded, thinking it over.

"You deserve better. My granddaughters deserve better."

"I thought this was about our safety," Marybeth said.

"Well that too," Missy sniffed.

MISSY LOOKED AT her watch and prepared to go. "Thanks for dinner, honey," she said, pulling on her jacket. "Please think seriously about what we spoke about. I'll talk to Bud to make sure it works with him."

"You haven't discussed it with him?"

Missy smiled and batted her eyes coquettishly. "It's not a problem, dear. Bud doesn't argue with *me*."

"Right."

"Right."

Marybeth nodded. She planned to raise the issue with Joe when he got home that night. It should be about an hour or so, she figured.

Sheridan and Lucy were now in their pajamas and they came out so Grandmother Missy could kiss them good night. Lucy was dutiful; Sheridan shot a glance at her mom about the goodbye ritual that Marybeth pretended she didn't catch. Missy turned to go.

Marybeth was behind her mother and snapped on the porch light as Missy opened the front door.

Missy froze on the porch.

"Marybeth, who is out there?" she asked.

Marybeth felt her legs almost go limp. *Oh, no*, she thought. *What now?* The way her mother asked ...

She looked over her mother's shoulder. The porch light reflected back from the lenses of a pair of dark headlights as well as the windshield of a vehicle parked and pointed at the house in the night.

"Someone's just sitting there," Missy said, backing up into Marybeth, "staring at us."

"Come back in the house," Marybeth said, stepping aside, thinking of the loaded lever-action Winchester rifle in the closet in Joe's office.

When she looked at the profile of the vehicle in the darkness, she recognized the squared-off roofline and the toothy grille.

"*Oh my*," Marybeth said, pushing past her mother onto the pathway that led through the lawn toward the gate.

She heard Sheridan come to the door behind her and say, "Who is it out there?"

"*Nate!*" Marybeth said over her shoulder.

"That's not Nate's Jeep."

And it wasn't, Marybeth realized as she went out through the gate and practically skipped to the driver's-side window. It wasn't Nate at all, and in an instant her fear returned, canceling out the surprisingly strong burst of elation. Instead of Nate Romanowski, a man she couldn't see well slumped against the window from the inside, his cheek pressed against the glass in a smear of drool.

Marybeth felt foolish for jumping to conclusions. She rapped against the driver's-side window with one knuckle.

Tommy Wayman sat up with a start, then turned and looked at her, his eyes wide for a moment until he seemed to recognize where he was, who she was.

She opened the door. "Tommy, are you all right? Why are you here?"

"Is Joe here?" the river guide gushed. She could smell the fetid smell of alcohol. As he spoke he moved in his seat and Marybeth could hear empty bottles clink at his feet.

"No," she said, stepping back.

"I saw her," Tommy said, his eyes comically widening, as if he'd suddenly remembered why he came in the first place and everything was just rushing back to him as he sat there. "I fucking saw her today!"

"Who?" Marybeth said coolly. "And please watch your language at my home."

"Opal Scarlett!" Tommy hissed.

"What?"

Opal. I saw Opal."

"I doubt that," Marybeth said to Tommy, then turned back to the grouping of her mother, Sheridan, and Lucy on the porch looking out. "It's all right," Marybeth said. "It's Tommy Wayman. He's drunk."

Missy gestured "whew!" by wiping her brow dramatically.

"I really did see her," Tommy said, reaching out and grasping Marybeth's arm, imploring her with his eyes. "I need to tell Joe! I need to tell the world she's alive!"

"You can wait for him out here or in his office," Marybeth said, hoping Tommy would choose the former. "He should be home anytime now. I'll call and tell him you're here."

"Tell him who I saw!"

Marybeth went back into the yard. This was the kind of thing she hated, these late-night adventures with drunken men who wanted to talk to Joe. Add this to the fact that someone was harassing them, and Missy's idea about moving to the ranch sounded better all the time.

"Watch out for that guy," Marybeth heard Sheridan telling Missy. "He throws old ladies in the river."

"I'm not an old lady," Missy said icily.

As Marybeth passed her daughter, trying not to smile at the exchange, Sheridan leaned toward her mother and said under her breath, "Nate, huh?"

Marybeth was grateful it was dark, because she knew she was blushing.

20

"SO YOU CLAIM you saw her exactly *where*?" Robey Hersig asked Tommy Wayman, who was drinking his second cup of coffee.

"I told you three times," Tommy said, raising his mug with two hands but not successfully disguising how they trembled. "At that big bend of the river before you

get to the old landing. Closer to Hank's side of the ranch than Arlen's. She was just standing there in the reeds looking at me as I floated by. Scared me half to death."

Joe had been home an hour. When he heard what Tommy had to say, he called Robey and Sheriff McLanahan. McLanahan claimed he needed his "beauty sleep" and sent Deputy Reed, who was preferable anyway. The three of them sat around Joe's kitchen table because there were too many big bodies to fit in his office. Marybeth went upstairs to read and the girls were in bed. Tommy was at the head of the table, nursing black coffee. He had asked Joe for a little shot of hooch in the coffee to "cut the bitterness," but Joe had refused.

"She said something to you," Robey asked. "What was it she said?"

"No," Tommy said, shaking his head, starting to get angry at the repetition of the questions. "I said I *thought* she was telling me something, but I couldn't hear the words over the sound of the river."

Reed checked his notebook. "Earlier, you said she smiled at you. Are you serious? Is that *really* what you meant, that she *smiled* at you as you floated by?"

Reed looked from Joe to Robey and back to Tommy. He was clearly skeptical. "What kind of smile?" he asked. "A Hi-Tommy-happy-to-see-you-again smile? Or a Get-over-here-and-pay-me-my-fee smile?"

"Damn it," Tommy said, thumping the table with the heel of his hand, "that's what she was doing. And yeah, I guess it was sort of a, um, *pleasant* smile. Like she was, you know, happy."

Reed rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

Although small details kept changing, which was very disconcerting if one wanted to believe Tommy Wayman's story, the basic tale was the same: The outfitter took his fifteen-foot Hyde low-profile drift boat out on the Twelve Sleep River to do some fishing of his own after a pair of clients canceled. He brought along his cooler, which had been filled with beer for three. Fishing was good. The beer was cold. Tommy landed nothing smaller than twenty-two-inch rainbows on dry flies. He lost track of how many beers he had drunk after counting eleven, and how many fish he caught after twenty. He may have even dozed off. Yes, he *did* doze off, which wasn't a good thing, generally.

Luckily, he thought to drop the anchor off the back of the boat before he settled back between the seats on a pile of life vests and took a little nap. No, he wasn't sure how long exactly. Maybe a whole hour. When he awoke he didn't know where he was at first. He raised the anchor and started to drift downriver, picking up speed. That's when he saw her. Opal Scarlett, right on the shore, standing in thick brush. But close enough that he could see her face, even if he couldn't hear what she was saying over the river sounds. He had drifted too far and was picking up too much speed to row back upstream to hear her words. Nevertheless, he had hollered back at her. "Turn yourself in, Opal, for Christ's sake! Everybody thinks I drowned you in the river!"

"You said she was closer to Hank's place than she was to her own house," Robey said to Tommy. "Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

Tommy was getting annoyed with the questions, and a hangover of industrial strength was starting to settle in, which made him even tougher to deal with.

"The whole fucking thing strikes me as odd, Robey," Tommy said. "What has she been doing out there for a month when she knows the whole county is wondering what happened to her?"

Reed reviewed his notes, sighing loudly. Tommy looked over at him.

"*What?*" he asked.

"When I first got here and wrote down your story, you said you were fishing and you looked up and there she was," Reed said. "Then, an hour later, you say you passed out in your boat, and when you woke up there she was. Now you say you were drifting downriver and picking up speed, and you didn't see her until you looked back and by then it was too late to go back. That's three different versions of the same event, Tommy. Which one are we supposed to believe?"

Joe had noted the discrepancies as well. Tommy was turning red. Beads of sweat were breaking out on his scalp.

"The last one, goddammit," he said. "It was the last one. The last version."

"That doesn't sound too credible," Robey said, sounding more sympathetic to Tommy than Joe expected him to be.

"And what exactly was she wearing?" Reed asked, not kind at all. "You say she was in jeans and a plaid shirt. What color was the shirt?"

"Huh?"

"What color was it? You said earlier it was a certain color. Do you remember now?"

Tommy looked down at his coffee cup and mumbled something.

"What was that?" Reed asked.

"He said 'light yellow,' " Joe repeated.

Reed rolled his eyes again. "Light yellow is the color of the shirt he originally claimed Opal was wearing that day he threw her into the river. Are we supposed to believe she's been wearing the same clothes for a month?"

"Yeah," Robey said, rubbing his jaw. "And I think you said earlier she was wearing a dress, didn't you?"

"If I did, I didn't mean it," Tommy said.

"Tommy Wayman," Deputy Reed said, snapping his notebook closed and shoving it in his shirt pocket, "you are full of shit."

Tommy moaned and sat back in his chair.

"I did see her, you guys," he said thickly. "I just can't remember all of the little details 'cause I'd been drinking."

Robey said, "Of course, it would just be a coincidence that if Opal were actually seen on her ranch then you'd be completely off the hook, right?"

Tommy looked from Reed to Joe to Robey and said, "Really, guys ..."

"I'm out of here," Reed said. "You want me to give Tommy a ride back to his house?"

"Really, guys," Tommy said again as Reed helped him to his feet.

JOE AND ROBEY sat at the table. It was midnight, and Tommy Wayman and Deputy Reed had been gone for fifteen minutes. Joe had poured a bourbon and water nightcap for both of them.

"That was interesting," Robey said. "I thought for a minute there we had something."

Joe nodded.

Robey said, "I think he wanted to see her alive, so he did. She's probably on his mind all the time, since he could wind up in Rawlins because of her. He probably dreamed she was there while he was passed out, and when he woke up he convinced himself she was there. Tommy is losing it, is what I think. I hope he holds together long enough to go to trial. He's a good man, Joe. He drinks too much, but he's a good guy."

Robey looked up for a response. Joe stared at his drink, which was untouched.

"What? Something is bugging you."

"Sheridan said she had a dream about something similar to Tommy's. She said Opal was alive out on the ranch."

Robey stared. "A dream, Joe?"

"Hey," Joe said, raising his hand. "I know. But Sheridan's had some dreams that turned out to be pretty accurate. She's like Nate Romanowski that way," he said, wishing immediately he hadn't brought Nate into it.

"Speaking of ..."

"Nothing," Joe said. "Honestly. Not a word."

MARYBETH CAME DOWN the stairs in her robe. Her blond hair was mussed. Joe could see one bare foot and ankle and she looked particularly attractive standing there. He was suddenly ready for Robey to head home.

"Are you guys about finished?" she asked.

Joe said, "Yup." He was glad he was the one staying. He wondered if Robey had the same thought and guessed that he did. *Go away, Robey*, Joe thought.

"Did Tommy have anything interesting to say?"

Robey chuckled. "That was the problem, Marybeth. He had so many interesting things to say—so many versions—that in the end he had nothing. It was a waste of time."

"Maybe I should have called Nancy to come get him," she said.

"You did the right thing."

"He scared us when we saw him out there," she said.

"With all the things that have been happening around here, we're a little jumpy."

"I understand," Robey said.

Joe said nothing. It made him angry to think about it.

He saw Robey to the door. As they passed his office, Joe said, "I've been meaning to ask you about that search warrant for Hank's place. Do we have it yet?"

Robey turned, his face wary. "You haven't heard?"

"Not a thing."

"Judge Pennock refused to issue it."

“What?”

Robey nodded. “I’m sorry, I thought you knew. The judge said we needed probable cause, that the anonymous tip wasn’t enough to search a man’s home. Even though you transcribed the call real well.”

Joe was confused. He’d never had a search warrant refused before.

“Judge Pennock and Hank are friends,” Joe said.

“I’m afraid so. I didn’t realize it before. They must be pretty close.”

Joe snorted. “If they are close, Pennock would have recused himself. It’s got to be more than that.”

“I don’t even want to speculate, Joe,” Robey said cautiously. “I have to appear before Judge Pennock all the time. I can’t push this one too hard or he could make my life miserable.”

“Can’t we go over his head?”

Robey suddenly looked very uncomfortable. “We could, but I hesitate to do so.”

“*You ‘hesitate to do so’?*” Robey’s choice of words was so formal and bureaucratic that Joe repeated them.

“Look, Joe,” Robey said, “there are things I will go to the mat with, as you know. There are some subjects, for example, I won’t discuss with you because I don’t want to know the answers. But this fight between Hank and Arlen ... I don’t know. It’s so dirty, and so ...” He searched for a word. “... *epic*, you know? I’m not sure how hard I want to come down on either side. And we’re just talking about what? The possibility someone may have taken some animals out of season? That’s not even a felony.”

As Robey talked, Joe felt his anger rise.

“How about if we try to enforce the law,” Joe said. “You know, on a lark?”

“Joe ...”

“Enforcing Game and Fish regulations is what I do, Robey. I take it seriously, because I’ve learned if a man will do something illegal or unethical out in the field when no one is looking, he’s capable of anything, no matter who he claims to be, or how big a man he is in the county.”

Robey sighed, reached out, and put his hand on Joe’s shoulder to calm him. “Joe, sometimes I think you take things a little too far, you know? It seems like you think bad character is a crime. Again, we’re talking about some game animals that might have been poached.”

“No,” Joe said. “We’re talking about looking the other way because we don’t want to appear to take sides in a conflict. Well, I’m not taking sides, and I’m not looking away. I’m doing my job.”

Robey shook his head. The silence grew uncomfortable.

“I’ll run it by Tucker Fagan in Park County,” Robey finally said, sighing, referring to the new judge there. “Thunderhead is so big it’s in Park also, right?”

“Right.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you, Robey.”

“Good night, Joe. Sometimes you piss me off.”

JOE AND MARYBETH lay in bed facing each other. They talked softly so the girls wouldn't hear them. Marybeth's reading lamp was on low. The light cast a buttery glow on the side of her face and softly illuminated her blond hair. As they talked she stroked his forearm, rubbing it with her thumb.

She had broached the subject about moving the girls to the ranch. Joe had grunted at the idea.

“I know you don't like it,” Marybeth said. “Frankly, neither do I. But if this continues ...”

Joe started to argue, but caught himself. There was no reason to think it wouldn't continue. And get worse. The sheriff's department had done nothing he was aware of to investigate the incidents. His hands were tied by Pope to investigate himself. But enough was enough. This was his family, and his wife was talking about *moving*.

*

SHE HAD TURNED off her light and shifted to his side of the bed in the dark, her hands moving over him under the covers, her lips brushing his neck and ear. Joe liked it. He smiled in the dark.

They both froze when they heard the sounds.

A two-beat noise, a sharp *snap*, then a tinkle of glass downstairs.

“What was that?” Marybeth whispered.

Then the roar of a vehicle racing away on Bighorn Road.

Joe shot out of bed, naked, and cast back the curtain on the window. There were no lights outside, and no moon. The starlight was shut out by cloud cover.

He looked right on the road, the way to town. Nothing. Then left, nothing. But he could hear the motor, so how could it be?

Then he saw a flash of brake lights in the distance. Whoever had been outside was fleeing without his lights on, and revealed himself when he had to tap on his brakes at the turn that led to the foothills and the mountains beyond.

But aside from the brief flash of brake lights, he could see nothing about the vehicle itself, whether it was a car or pickup or SUV.

He cursed for two reasons: he could never catch who had been out there, and whoever had been out there had destroyed the mood in bed.

“What do you think that sound was?” Marybeth asked.

“I'll go check.”

“Put some clothes on ...”

JOE SNAPPED ON the lights in the living room. He had pulled on his robe, and he carried his .40 Glock loosely in his hand. He could see nothing amiss. He might have to get Marybeth to come down, he thought. It was one of those male/female things, like his inability to notice a new couch or when his daughters got a haircut unless it was pointed out to him. Conversely, he could see a moose in a faraway meadow on Wolf Mountain when it was a speck and Marybeth wouldn't see it unless it charged her and knocked her down.

But when he walked near the front window, he felt slivers of glass dig into his bare feet and he yelped in pain.

Then he saw the hole in the glass, like a tiny star. Someone had shot into their home.

He turned, visualizing the trajectory. The shot originated on the road and passed through the glass into the family portrait. Marybeth had arranged for it the previous summer. They had stood smiling against the corral fence rails so the mountains framed them in the background. In the photo, Joe thought they all looked a little uncomfortable, as if they were dressed for a funeral, and the smiles were forced. Except for Lucy, who always looked good. The portrait was slightly askew.

Joe limped across the living room, his feet stinging, and stared at the photo. The bullet had taken off most of his face and lodged into the wall behind the frame. Beneath the hole, his mouth smiled.

A chill rolled through him. Followed by a burst of rage.

Again, whoever was doing this had come right to his house and this time, in his way, he had entered it. The bullet hole in his face in the portrait was no coincidence. Joe thought, if Nate were around he'd ask for help now. But Nate *wasn't* around, and Joe was officially prevented from investigating.

Screw that.

Marybeth came down the stairs looking at the bloody footprints on the floor. She followed them to where Joe stood.

Joe said, "You're right. Let's get the kids. We're moving to the ranch."

"Joe ..."

"I'm going to get this guy."

IT WAS ALMOST dawn when he felt her stir beside him. He was entangled, spooning, skin against skin, his leg thrust between hers, pulling her so tightly into him that he could feel her heart beat from where his hand cupped her right breast. His feet were bandaged. She was wide awake, as he was.

"It's so personal," she said in a whisper, "it scares me to death."

"I'll find him, Marybeth."

She didn't speak for a long time. As the minutes lapsed, he started to fear what she would say. He thought she might mention Nate Romanowski. That she wished Nate were there to protect them, instead of him. If she said Nate's name, Joe wondered if he could go on, because he would feel that he had lost everything. Their tight little family was the only thing that anchored him to earth, the only constant. A breach could tear them apart and unmoor him to a degree he didn't even want to imagine.

The sun slowly rose and backlit Wolf Mountain and fused the blinds with soft, cold gray light.

He was deep into melancholy when Marybeth said, "I love you, Joe Pickett. I know you'll protect us."

Despite the situation, Joe was suddenly filled with joy and purpose. He rolled over and kissed her, surprising her.

“What was *that* about?” she asked.

He tried to answer. The only thing he could come up with was “It’s about everything.”

But as he rose, the thought that they were running away came rushing back at him. And he hated to run.

21

SATURDAY BROUGHT THE grand opening of the Scarlett Wing of the Twelve Sleep County Historical Society. The day was fresh with early summer, aching with sunlight, character provided by the new wildflower smells and the first bursts of pine pollen drifting down from the mountains.

Joe sat next to Marybeth on metal folding chairs set up in the parking lot of the museum. It seemed as if most of official Saddlestring and the county was there, including Missy and Bud Longbrake, who sat in the row in front of them and had saved seats for the girls. Although no usher greeted each arrival with an extended hand and whispered “Arlen or Hank’s side?” the effect was the same, with Hank’s backers on the right facing the podium and Arlen’s on the left.

On the raised podium itself, Arlen sat comfortably in a chair looking out at the audience, waving and winking at his friends. There was an empty seat on the other side of the podium. The chair was for Hank, as both brothers were supposed to speak at the event. The closer it got to 10 a.m., when the wing was to be dedicated, the emptier the seat seemed to be.

*

JOE HAD AWAKENED in a foul mood that continued to spiral downward as the day went on. It had started when he opened his eyes in bed, looked around, and realized once again that his family was on the Longbrake Ranch instead of in their own home. It continued through breakfast, as Missy held court and pointed out repeatedly to his daughters how many fat grams there were in each bite they were taking. His black mood accelerated and whipped over into the passing lane when he started to contemplate just how ineffectual he had become; how useless, how he was no better than the bureaucrats he worked with.

Then there was the message on his cellphone from Randy Pope: “You left your house? Don’t you realize that is state property? What if it is vandalized even more while you’re gone? Do you plan to take responsibility for *that*?”

Joe seethed as he drove.

He was tired of following procedure, asking permission, seeking warrants, waiting for instructions, hoping for help.

No one, except him, was going to get him out of this.

As he drove his family to the grand opening, Joe made a mental list of things that were driving him mad. While he did so, he vaguely listened to Sheridan tell Lucy

about the incredibly boring English Literature class she was in. They were now reading Shakespeare, she said. Suddenly a thought struck him with such force that his hands jerked on the wheel and Marybeth said, "Was there a rabbit in the road?"

"No," Joe said. "Something just occurred to me."

"What?"

"About Opal. Something I never thought of before."

"So ... ?"

"Sheridan," Joe said, looking up into his mirror so he could see her face, "would you please repeat what you just told Lucy about the play you're reading? The one about the king?"

AS THEY WAITED for the ceremony to begin, Marybeth said, "I've been thinking about your new theory."

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure I buy it. Is Opal really capable of something that mean? With her own sons?"

Joe nodded. "Opal is capable of anything. Remember, she didn't have any qualms about stretching a neck-high wire across the river. And you untangled her books. You know how secretive she could be."

Marybeth shook her head slowly. "Joe, if you're right ..."

"I know," he said.

Marybeth started to say something to him when she was distracted by the fact that most of the people in the crowd had turned in their seats and were craning their necks and pointing.

"Well, look who's here," Marybeth said.

"Who?"

Marybeth pointed at the black new-model Yukon that had entered the lot with a license plate that said simply one.

The driver's door opened and a big man with stooped shoulders and an easy smile swung out. He began instantly shaking hands and slapping backs. He moved through the crowd with a slick expertise, never stopping long enough to be engaged, but making eye contact with each person and calling most by name.

Marybeth said, "He looks like he's headed this way." In a moment, he was right in front of them.

"Joe Pickett?"

"Yup."

"I'm Spencer Rulon."

"Hello, Governor."

"Call me Spence. C'mon, let's go for a little ride. Is this your wife?"

"Yes. Marybeth."

"Lucky man. Come along, Marybeth. We'll be back before the hoopla begins."

WYOMING GOVERNOR SPENCER Rulon drove and spoke with a kind of daredevil self-assurance that came, Joe thought, from being pretty sure all his life he was not only the smartest but the cleverest human being in the room.

"We've got ten minutes before I need to be back at the opening," the governor said, roaring out of the parking lot and onto Main Street, making the turn on what felt to Joe like two wheels. "Then I've got to take the plane back to Cheyenne right afterward. A pack of snarling Feds are coming to meet with me at four o'clock about the wolf issue. They're like hyenas when they smell blood, and since we lost that court case they're circling what they think is a dying corpse. But we're not dead yet. We'll win." He shook his head in disgust. "*Feds*," he spat.

Joe fumbled for the seat belt and snapped it on securely. He shot a glance back at Marybeth in the back seat, who was doing the same thing.

Rulon looked over at Joe and flashed on his full-blast smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Joe Pickett."

"Likewise," Joe said, shaking the governor's proffered hand while, at the same time, glancing out the windshield as they drove through a red light. Luckily, there was no cross traffic at the moment.

"I've been wanting to meet you."

Joe couldn't think of how to respond, so he didn't.

"How is that Scarlett situation going up here?"

"Not well," Joe said.

"You know Arlen's the majority floor leader, right?"

Joe nodded, trying to keep up.

"He explained everything to me after the session. About his brother and all. What a clusterfuck that is, eh?" Then he glanced in the rear-view mirror and said, "Sorry for the inappropriate language, ma'am."

"It's quite all right," Marybeth said. "It's a perfect description."

"JESUS CHRIST!" the governor howled, hitting the brakes. "Did I just drive through a red light back there?"

Joe said, "Yes. It's our only one."

"Then why the hell didn't you say something?" Rulon asked. "Why did you just sit there and watch me do it? And when did Saddlestring get a light?"

"We were through it before I could say anything."

"Don't let me do that again."

Joe snorted. "I'll do my best, sir."

"I'm still getting used to my new ride," Rulon said, patting the dashboard as if it were the head of a dog. "Pretty nice, eh? It gets twelve miles a gallon, a real gas-guzzler. A couple of my supporters asked me how I could drive a car like this when I'm a Democrat and I'm for energy conservation and the like. I explained to them I'm a *Wyoming* Democrat, which means I'm a Republican who just wants to be different and stand out from the crowd, and we've got a hell of a lot of oil in this state we want to sell at high prices. Besides, it's comfortable, ain't it?"

Joe nodded, wishing the governor had not fired his driver.

"You should see the state plane. It's really a dandy. I didn't think I'd use it much, but this state is so damned big it's really a blessing."

"I can imagine."

"So, I've got a question for you," Rulon said. "An important question I've been wanting to ask you since I got this job."

Joe was surprised the governor even knew of him, much less actually thought about him.

"What's it like working for Randy Pope?"

Joe thought, *uh-oh*. He did not want to be put in the position of talking about his boss to the governor. Besides, what Joe thought was no secret. His allegations about Pope were in the report he had submitted after he returned from Jackson Hole.

"Actually, that's not *the* question," Rulon continued. "That's *a* question. *The* question is still to come."

As he said it, he rolled down his window again and shouted at a woman carrying groceries from her car toward the door of her town house.

"Hey, you want some help?" he shouted at her. "I can send over a trooper if you do!"

She turned on the walk and grinned. "I'm fine, Governor," she said.

"Hell, I can give you a hand myself. Do you have any more bags in the car?"

"No."

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Have a good day, then, ma'am."

He powered the window back up. "I do enjoy being the governor," he said. Then: "Where were we?"

Joe gestured toward the digital clock on the dashboard of the Yukon. "We all probably ought to get back."

"You're right," Rulon said.

And he stopped in the middle of the road, did a three-point turn through both lanes, and roared back down Main toward the museum.

"That was an illegal turn," Joe said.

"Screw it," Rulon said, shrugging, picking at something caught in his teeth. "I'm the governor."

RULON STOPPED PARALLEL to Joe's pickup in the parking lot.

"What a piece of crap," Rulon said, looking at Joe's vehicle. "They give you *that* to drive around in? It's an embarrassment!"

"My last truck burned up," Joe said, not wanting to explain.

Rulon smiled. "I heard about that. Ha! I also heard you shot Smoke Van Horn in a gunfight."

Joe paused before opening the door. "You said you had a question for me."

Rulon nodded, and his demeanor changed. He was suddenly serious and his eyes narrowed as if he were sizing up Joe for the first time.

"I've followed your career," Rulon said.

"You have?" Joe was genuinely surprised.

Rulon nodded. "I'm endlessly fascinated by the kind of people I have working for me all around the state. I'm the biggest employer this state has, you know. So when I see and hear something out of the norm, I latch on to it."

Joe had no idea where this was going. He shot a glance at Marybeth in the back seat, which she returned.

"So, here's my question," the governor said. "If you caught *me* fishing without a license, what would you do?"

Joe paused a beat, said, "I'd give you a ticket."

Rulon's face twitched. "You would? Even though you know who I am? Even though you know I could get rid of you like this?" he said, flicking an imaginary crumb off his sleeve.

Joe nodded yes.

"Get out then," Rulon said abruptly. "I have to say hello to the rest of the people here."

Joe hesitated. That was it?

"Go, go," Rulon said. "We're going to be late."

"Nice to meet you, Governor," he said, sliding out.

"You have a lovely bride," Rulon said.

JOE AND MARYBETH returned to their seats.

Missy had been waiting for them and turned completely around in her chair.

"What was *that* about?" she asked.

Joe and Marybeth exchanged glances.

"I have no idea," Marybeth said. "But I'm suddenly exhausted."

TEN MINUTES BEFORE ten, when the grand opening was to begin, a dirty pickup rattled into the parking lot and disgorged Hank. Joe saw that the driver of the pickup was Bill Monroe.

"There he is," Joe said, sitting up straight and pointing out the driver to Marybeth. "Just driving around wherever he wants to go. He's not worried about McLanahan, and he's not worried about me."

"That's Bill Monroe?"

"Yup."

"Why does he look familiar?"

Joe snorted. "I thought the same thing at first. I told you that. But there is no way in hell we've ever met him or run into him before."

"Still there's something about him," Marybeth said, and he knew she was right. He waited for her to recall where she'd seen him. She was good at those kinds of things.

As the pickup drove away, Joe searched the crowd for Sheriff McLanahan, who stood on the side of the podium talking to some ranchers on Hank's side about the state of alfalfa in the fields.

Joe left his seat and strode over. "Hey, Sheriff."

McLanahan looked up with his eyes, but didn't raise his chin.

Joe said, "Did you see who was driving that truck? That was Bill Monroe. Aren't you supposed to be looking for him? Isn't there a warrant out for his arrest? That was him right there."

Pink rose from under McLanahan's collar and flushed his face. He looked away from Joe for a moment.

"Didn't you see him?" Joe demanded. "He was right here in this parking lot. He dropped Hank off. Aren't you supposed to be on the lookout for him?"

Joe stepped closer to the sheriff, talking to the side of McLanahan's turned face, to his temple. "I know what you're doing. You're playing both sides, keeping your head down until it's resolved between the brothers. But don't you think it's time you started *doing something* around here? Like arresting people who commit crimes, no matter what their name is or who they work for?"

McLanahan stared ahead, angry, his mouth set tight.

"How long can you sit back and watch geese fly? Or waste your time calling my boss and telling him I'm not doing my job?"

That made McLanahan's face twitch. Yup, Joe thought, it was McLanahan after all.

"I've got an idea what might be going on with Hank, Arlen, and Opal," Joe said. "You want to hear it?"

McLanahan hesitated, said, "Not particularly."

"I didn't think you would."

With that, the sheriff turned on his heel and walked away, past the podium, around the corner of the museum.

Joe returned to the chairs and sat down next to Marybeth, who had seen the exchange.

"What are you doing, Joe?"

He shrugged. "I'm only half sure. But damn, it feels good."

JOE WAS INTERESTED to note the differences between the pro-Arlen and pro-Hank contingents. Arlen's backers tended to be city fathers, professionals, merchants. Hank's crowd looked much rougher than Arlen's, consisting of some other ranchers, bar owners, mechanics, outfitters, store clerks. If it were a football game, Joe thought, Arlen's folks would be cheering for the Denver Broncos and their upstanding players in their clean blue-and-orange uniforms. In contrast, Hank's crowd would have spiked their hair and painted their faces black and silver and would be waving bones and swinging lengths of chain rooting for their Oakland Raiders.

Joe and his family sat on Arlen's side; but Joe didn't feel completely comfortable about it. Especially after Marybeth told him about Arlen's meeting with Meade Davis. And even more so after the cellphone message he had received that morning from forensics at headquarters. He wished there were seats in the aisle between the two factions.

THE NEW WING, called the Scarlett Wing, was actually larger than the rest of the building it was attached to, which was how Opal had wanted it. The museum itself was like every little town museum Joe had visited throughout Wyoming and the mountain west: a decent little collection of wagon wheels, frontier clothing, arrowheads, rifles, tools, old books. The new addition had state-of-the-art interactive exhibits on the founding families of Twelve Sleep County, the historic ranches, the bloodlines that flowed through the community from the first settlers. In other words the Scarlett Wing was about the Scarlett family, and was simply a much larger version of the Legacy Wall in their own home that Sheridan had told him about.

The addition had been completed that week. An earthmover and a tractor still sat behind it. Grass turf had been so hastily rolled out to cover the dirt that the seams could be clearly seen. The manufacturer stickers on the windows had yet to be removed.

ARLEN TALKED FOR twenty-five minutes without notes, his melodious voice rising and falling, his speech filled with thunderous points and pregnant pauses. It was the speech of a politician, Joe thought, one of those stemwinders that, at the time you were hearing it, seemed to be all profundity and grace, but as soon as it was over, there was nothing to remember about it, as if the breeze had carried the memory of it away.

Despite that, Joe focused on what Arlen said about his mother:

“Opal Scarlett was more than a mother, more than the matriarch of Thunderhead Ranch. She was our link to the past, our living, breathing bridge from the twenty-first century to the pioneers who founded this land, fought for it, made it what it is today. And we celebrate her now with the opening of this museum ...”

As Arlen spoke, Joe looked for Wyatt. Finally, he spotted the youngest brother, sitting off by himself, behind the podium. Arlen’s words had obviously touched him, because Wyatt’s face was wet with tears.

*

THE MAYOR INTRODUCED Hank Scarlett next.

Hank sat hunched over on the other side of the podium, leaning forward in his chair so his head was down and all that could be seen of it was the top of his cowboy hat. He was studying his notes with fervor. The paper shook in his hands. Nervous, Joe thought.

“Now would be a good time to go out to his place and see all of his poached game on display,” Joe whispered to Marybeth, “while he’s here and not there.”

“But you need a warrant,” she said.

HANK SHUFFLED TO the podium. There was something dark, mumbly, James-Dean-in-*Giant* about him, Joe thought. Hank followed Arlen with a crude but somehow more sincere and affecting message: “I ain’t much of a speaker, but when Mother asks you to say something you say ‘okay’ ...”

While he spoke he read from his notes, which were wrinkled and dirty in his hands. Joe guessed he had been reading them over and over for days.

“Mother lives and breathes the ranch and this valley,” Hank said. “It’s like the Twelve Sleep River runs through her veins instead of blood ...”

He talked less than five minutes, but his tinny, halting delivery was more riveting than Arlen's speech. Never, in the entire time they were there, did either brother acknowledge the other, even with a nod.

When he was through, Hank folded up his notes, stuffed them into the back pocket of his Wranglers, and walked off the stage. While Arlen came down into the crowd to shake hands, Hank walked away through the parking lot toward the street. The pickup driven by Bill Monroe appeared and took him away.

Joe looked around for McLanahan and saw him in the parking lot talking heatedly with Robey Hersig.

THE CROWD MILLED around after the speeches. Groups formed to take tours of the new Scarlett Wing, others headed toward the snacks and drinks set up near the museum entrance. A few made their way to their vehicles.

Robey, his face red and his eyes in a snake-eyed squint, marched up to Joe and stabbed a finger into his chest. "What are you trying to do? Burn every damned bridge behind you?"

"Stick around," Joe said, smiling. "I've got a few more to go."

Robey turned on his boot heels and strode away from Joe toward the parking lot.

22

"JOE, I DON'T know if you're doing this right," Marybeth said. "This isn't like you. You seem to be a little out of control."

"You're probably right," Joe replied. "But it's time to shake things up."

She had lured him away from the crowd to a secluded place on the side of the addition. Joe felt his boot heels sink into the brand-new sod. There was real concern in her eyes.

"Joe, I see these people every day. I work for some of them. We have to *live* here."

He tipped his hat back and rubbed his forehead where the sweatband fit. "I hate to give any credit to Randy Pope," he said, "but he may be right about one thing, and that's the tendency to go native if you stay somewhere too long."

"I'm not following."

"Think about what you just said. You're starting to weigh my job and my duty against who we may offend. If that's a problem, Marybeth, maybe we've overstayed our welcome here."

Her eyes got wide, then she set her face. She put her hands on her hips and leaned forward. Joe rocked back and thought, *Uh-oh*.

"Listen to me, Joe Pickett," she said. "Don't you *ever*, for one second, think I would want you to compromise your principles or your oath in order for us to get along better here. I have *never* done that to you. If that was in my mind, I would have insisted on it years ago, before you and your stupid job put us in harm's way again and again and AGAIN."

Marybeth took a step forward and Joe took one back. She was now jabbing him in the chest. He wished she hadn't said "stupid job." But he didn't point that out.

"Don't you dare blame this on me," she said. "I think your problem is *your* problem. You're working for a man and an agency you don't believe in anymore. You're frustrated. You're finding out that everything you based your career and your validation on might be built on a foundation of sand. It kills you that you're thinking you're just another government employee working for a government agency. And instead of admitting it or dealing with it, you're lashing out. Am I right?"

Joe glared at her.

"Am I right?"

"Maybe," he conceded. "Just a little."

"Okay, then."

"It kind of pisses me off that you're so smart," he said, chancing a smile. "I must drive you crazy sometimes."

She punched him playfully in the chest. "It is a burden," she said.

AS THEY WALKED back toward the parking lot and the people, Joe said, "I'm still mad, though."

"You don't get mad very often, so I suppose you're allowed to every once in a while."

"There's a lot going on here," he said, gesturing toward the museum and the Scarlett Wing, but meaning the county in general. "We can't see it happening because we're too close. I think it's right there in front of us, but we're not seeing it because we're looking for something else."

Marybeth stopped and searched his face. "What are you talking about, Joe?"

"Where does Bill Monroe fit into all of this?" Joe said. "I can't figure out his role in it. He's Hank's thug, but he seems to be working with Arlen too. How do you square that deal?"

"I don't know."

"Something struck me during those speeches," Joe said. "I was wondering if you picked up on it."

"What?"

"Think back. What was the biggest difference between how Arlen spoke and Hank spoke?"

"Arlen was articulate and Hank was not?" Marybeth said.

"Hank spoke of his mother in the present tense," Joe said. "He said, 'When Mother asks you to say something you say "okay."' Remember that?"

"Yes." The realization of what Joe was getting at washed across her face.

"But Arlen spoke of his mother in the past tense: 'Opal Scarlett was more than a mother, more than the matriarch of the Thunderhead Ranch ...'"

"So what does it mean?"

Joe shrugged. "I'm not sure. But clearly, when Hank thinks of his mother she's still around. That's not the case with Arlen. As far as he's concerned, she's gone."

JOE GLANCED UP and saw Arlen making his way through the crowd straight for them.

"Here he comes now," Joe said, trying to get a read on what the purpose of Arlen's visit might be.

Arlen ignored Joe and greeted Marybeth. "It's so good you could come," he said. He threw an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze, then stepped back. "Thanks to your wife," he said to Joe, "we are now within sight of making Thunderhead rightfully ours. She cracked the code in regard to Mother's accounting system on the ranch." Arlen gestured with his fingers to indicate quote marks around "cracked the code."

"I heard," Joe said.

"She's quite a woman," Arlen said.

"I agree."

"You should be proud of her."

"I am."

Arlen stepped away from Marybeth, who had been grinning icily the entire time he was next to her. Arlen's face was suddenly somber, the look he showed just before he commenced with a speech.

"I heard what happened at your home," Arlen said. "I heard about those town elk. It's a damned shame."

Joe nodded, eyeing him carefully. "I decided this morning to involve myself in the investigation of your mother."

"Oh?"

"Yup," Joe said. "My boss said stay away from it, but I'm going to anyway. I have this idea that maybe things aren't what they seem, Arlen. While I've been sitting on the sidelines, no progress I'm aware of has been made on the case. And at the same time, somebody has targeted my family. I think everything that's happened is connected to Opal's disappearance."

Arlen had listened with hooded eyes and a blank expression, offering no encouragement. "Really," he said. Arlen looked at Marybeth to gauge her opinion, and she stared back impassively. Joe noted the exchange.

"Really," Joe said.

"Are you telling me this in the hope that I won't inform Director Pope?"

"I don't care what you do," Joe said. "Pope knows about everything I do. The sheriff makes sure of that. Maybe someone else does too."

"I see." Arlen's expression hardened, as if he were concentrating on giving nothing away.

"So I hope you can clear up a couple of things for me."

Arlen didn't respond.

"It would help if you told me what your relationship with Bill Monroe is," Joe said. "I'm trying to figure ..."

"That's confidential," Arlen interrupted.

Joe sighed. "He seems to work for Hank, but Sheridan saw him ..."

"*It's confidential*," Arlen said in his most stentorian voice, cutting off debate, looking around to see if anyone had overheard them. No one appeared to be listening.

Joe stared at Arlen, taking new measure of the man. At his chiseled profile, his silver hair, his big lantern jaw and underbite, his darting eyes.

"You see that earthmover behind me?" Joe asked.

Puzzled, Arlen glanced over Joe's shoulder. Marybeth looked at Joe.

"Yes, what about it?"

Joe said, "If I find out you're playing me, which I'm beginning to believe you are, I'm going to get in that thing and knock this building down. And then I'm coming after *you*."

Arlen's mouth dropped open. He was truly surprised.

"I got a message on my cellphone this morning," Joe said. "From forensics. The knife that was stuck in our front door matches the collection of knives in your own kitchen. Same model, same manufacturer. 'Forged German CrMov steel, ice hardened and glass finished,' forensics said."

Arlen said, "Many people have access to my home—employees, ranch hands ..."

"Right," Joe said. "And it appears Meade Davis seems to have changed his story to one you liked better. Anything to that? Do you think Meade Davis would stick with the latest version if I brought him in?"

It was amazing how icy Arlen's eyes had become, Joe thought, how frozen the expression on his face. This was a different Arlen than the glad-handing speechmaker. This was the Arlen Joe had glimpsed in the sheriff's office baiting his brother into violence, but acting as if he didn't know what he was doing.

Jabbing his finger at Joe, Arlen said, "You have crossed the line making accusations like that. Do you realize who you're talking to?"

"I realize," Joe said. "It's getting old."

Arlen shook his head, contemplating Joe, but saying nothing. As if Joe was no longer worth his words.

Arlen turned to Marybeth. "You've lost my account. If you can talk some sense into your husband, you might have a chance to get it back."

Marybeth's eyes were fiery. "He has plenty of sense, Arlen. We can live without your money."

ON THE WAY back to the Longbrake Ranch, Marybeth broke the silence.

"So you really think she's still alive," she said to Joe as they drove past the town limit toward the Longbrake Ranch. Sheridan and Lucy were touring the museum with Missy, so Joe and Marybeth had the truck to themselves.

"Yup," Joe said. "I think she's holed up somewhere on the ranch, just sitting back and watching what goes on. I can imagine her seeing what lengths her sons will go to to get the ranch. Seeing how much they love it and therefore how much they love *her*. Everything she's done over the years fits the theory—the secret wills, the internalized accounting, her obsession with her legacy. It came to me when I thought about Tommy

Wayman claiming to have seen her, and Sheridan's dream. Maybe it wasn't a dream after all. In both cases, they described the same thing. They said she was *smiling*."

Marybeth was lost in thought for a few moments, then she asked, "Do you think Hank knows?"

"No."

"Arlen?"

Joe shook his head. "Maybe, but I can't be sure. I was hoping to smoke him out back there, but he's too damned wily for me."

After a few miles she turned to him. "There's only one thing about your theory that might be wrong."

"What?"

"I don't think it's about love at all," she said. "I think it's about hate."

Joe said, "I don't understand."

"Look at them," she said. "She raised them to hate each other and love her. What kind of mother does that?"

23

ON MONDAY MORNING, Joe pulled on his red uniform shirt and jeans for perhaps the last time, called Maxine, and drove out into the breaklands to finish up the mule-deer trend count he had started weeks before.

As he cruised down the state highway, he kept a close watch on the blunt thunderheads advancing over the Bighorns. The clouds looked heavy and swollen with rain. "Come on," he said aloud, "keep on rolling this way." By his count, it had not rained in twenty-five days. Maxine thought he was talking to her and got excited.

He had one more quadrant to go before submitting his report. The area butted up against the property line of the upper Thunderhead Ranch, Hank's half.

When his cellphone rang, Joe opened it and expected to hear "Hold for Director Pope."

But it was Tony Portenson. "Hello, Joe."

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Joe asked, keeping the sarcasm out of his voice and wishing that years before he hadn't given his phone number to the FBI agent.

"We got a call from a contact in Idaho," Portenson said. "Someone matching the description of Nate Romanowski was spotted at a Conoco station in Victor, headed east toward Wyoming. I was wondering if perhaps you'd seen your old friend recently."

Joe felt himself smile, but kept the grin out of his voice. "No, I haven't seen or heard from him."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Joe?"

"Nope, I don't do that."

Portenson sighed. "I guess you don't. But you'll keep me informed if he shows up, right?"

"Nope, probably not."

"At least tell him I want to talk with him, okay?"

"I'm sure he knows that."

"You're not very helpful, Joe."

"He's my friend," Joe said. Then he quickly changed the subject. "Did you ever find that guy you were looking for? The one who shot the cowboy?"

Portenson's voice dropped. "He's still at large. We faxed the information to the sheriff's department but haven't heard anything from him."

"I'm not surprised," Joe said.

Portenson said, "Tell Romanowski I haven't forgotten about him."

BY THE TIME Joe found the south-east corner of the quadrant, the dark clouds had redoubled in scale and continued their advance. Thirty miles away, he could see spouts of rain connecting the clouds to the earth, an illusion that made it look as though it were raining up. Rain in any form was a revelation.

"Keep on rolling," he said again, wishing he could see the secrets and motivations of the people in the valley with the same long-distance clarity.

Instead of mule deer, he happened first on a herd of thirty pronghorn antelope grazing and picking their way in the distance across the tabletop flat of a butte. Their brown-and-white camouflage coloring, which worked for eight months of the year, failed them miserably against the pulsing green carpet of spring grass and made them stand out like highway cones.

Joe fixed his spotting scope to the top of his driver's-side window and surveyed the pronghorn. Antelope almost always had twins, and the little ones were perfectly proportioned, despite their size, and within days were capable of running as fast as the adults. He loved to watch them play, chasing other newborns around, scampering between the legs of their mothers like shooting sparks.

Joe swung the telescope and found the lead buck. As always, he stood alone facing his herd, prepared at any moment to wade into the throng to enforce his will on them or punish transgressions. As Joe admired the buck through the scope a puff of dust and hair shot out of the buck's neck and the animal crumpled and dropped. A rifle shot followed, *pow-WHOP*, the sound of a hit, echoing across the sagebrush. In the bottom of his scope view, Joe could see the buck kicking out violently, windmilling his legs in a death dance.

"Man!" Joe shouted, amazed at what had happened right in front of his eyes.

The rest of the herd ignited as one and were suddenly sweeping across the top of the butte leaving twenty-nine streams of dust that looked like vapor trails in their wake.

Angry, Joe jumped out of his pickup with his binoculars. Antelope season was four months away. Before raising the glasses to his eyes, he swept the hills, trying to see the shooter. Was it possible the poacher didn't know the game warden was in the vicinity? No, Joe thought, the odds were totally against it. In a district of fifteen hundred square miles, the chance of his actually being there to see the kill in front of his eyes were infinitesimal. The act was a deliberate provocation, a direct challenge.

He followed the long line of three-strand barbed-wire fence that separated the public Bureau of Land Management land from the Thunderhead Ranch. The fence went on as far as he could see. But behind it—on a ridge, partially hidden by a fold in the terrain—was a light-colored pickup he didn't recognize.

He raised the glasses and focused furiously.

The pickup came into view.

It was an older model, at least ten years old, light yellow, rust spots on the door. The description was familiar to him, but from where? He didn't take the time to figure it out. The driver's-side door was open, and the window was down. A rifle rested on the sill, still pointing in the general direction of the butte.

A man stepped out from behind the door and waved.

Bill Monroe.

He waved again at Joe in a goofy, come-on-y'all wave.

Then Monroe stepped away from the pickup, set his feet, and pulled out his penis: a flash of pink against blue jeans. He urinated a long stream into the dirt in front of him, then leaned back in an exaggerated way, pointed at Joe with his free hand, and Joe could read his lips as he shouted: *"This is what I think of you, Joe Pickett."*

A THUNDERCLAP NOT unlike the sound of the rifle shot boomed across the breaklands followed by a long series of deep-throated rumbles. Joe could feel the temperature dropping even as he drove, as the clouds pulled across the sun like a curtain shutting out the light, muting light and shadow.

He had plunged his truck over the rise into the saddle slope of a valley in pursuit of Bill Monroe. There were no established roads that would get him from where he had seen the shooting, across the top of the butte, to the border of the Thunderhead Ranch, so Joe kept his left front tire in a meandering game trail that pointed vaguely toward Monroe's pickup and let the right tires bounce through knee-high sagebrush. He was driving much faster than he should have, the engine straining. Maxine stood on the bench seat with her front paws on the dash, trying to keep balanced.

Damn him, Joe thought.

Joe hated poachers, and not simply because they were breaking the law he was sworn to enforce. He hated the idea of poaching—killing a creature for sport with no intention of eating the meat. Joe took poaching as a personal affront, and to see it happen this way, to be mocked by Bill Monroe in this way ...

And Bill Monroe was not yet running. He was still up there, outside of his pickup, on the far ridge, outlined against the roiling dark clouds. Monroe had plenty of time and distance before Joe got there, and he was in no hurry.

Maybe he wouldn't run at all. Maybe he would wait for Joe, and the two of them could have it out. Joe thought that sounded fine to him.

He was halfway across the saddle slope when three things happened at once:

His radio came to life, the dispatcher calling him directly by his code number, saying he was to call Director Randy Pope immediately off the air.

The check-engine light on the dashboard flickered and stayed on while the temperature-gauge needle shouldered hard into the red.

And the clouds opened up with a clash of cymbals and sheets of rain swept across the ground with such force that the first wave actually raised dust as if it were strafing the ground.

BILL MONROE WAS still on the ridge, standing in the rain as if he didn't know it was soaking him. Joe was closer now, close enough to see the leer on Monroe's face, see his hands on his hips as he looked down at Joe climbing up the slope, aimed right at him.

A moment later, there was a pop under the hood of the engine and clouds of acrid green steam rolled out from under the pickup, through the grille, and into the cab through the air vents. The radiator hose has blown.

Joe cursed and slammed the dash with the heel of his hand. He stopped the truck and the engine died before he could turn the key.

JOE OPENED THE door and jumped out of his crippled pickup. Despite the opening salvos of rain, the ground was still drought dry; the moisture had not yet penetrated and was pooling wherever there was a low spot. The rainfall was steady and hard, stinging his bare hands.

Joe looked up the slope at Monroe.

"What's wrong with your truck?" Monroe shouted down.

"You're under arrest," Joe shouted back.

"For what?"

"For killing that buck. I saw the whole thing."

Monroe shook his head. "I didn't kill no buck."

"I saw you."

"I don't even own a rifle."

"I saw you."

"Your word against mine, I guess."

"Yup."

"I understand you're pretty convincing when it comes to Judge Pennock," Monroe said.

Joe felt a pang in his chest. So Monroe was well aware of the rejected search warrant.

The rain hammered the brim of Joe's hat and an icy stream of it poured into his collar and snaked down along his backbone.

"Good thing your truck blew up," Monroe said. "You would have been trespassing on private property."

The fence line was just in front of Monroe, Joe saw.

Then Joe realized Monroe wanted him to come over there onto the Thunderhead, where access had been previously refused by Hank. What would Monroe have done when Joe crossed the line? What had been his plan?

IT WAS AN odd thing, how sometimes there could be a moment of absolute clarity in the midst of rampant chaos. With the rain falling hard, his vehicle disabled, the

dispatcher calling for him, and Bill Monroe grinning at him from behind the fence, at least part of the picture cleared up. Portenson's call had reminded him of something.

The truck Monroe was driving was light yellow, ten years old, with rust spots on the door. Where had that description come from? Then it hit him.

Joe looked up at Bill Monroe, who wasn't really Bill Monroe.

"You know who I am now, don't you?"

Oh, God. Joe felt a chill.

"You're John W. Kelly," he shouted, dredging up the name Special Agent Gary Child had told him.

Monroe snorted. "Close," he said.

"You shot a cowboy in the Shirley Basin," Joe said, suddenly thinking of the .40 Glock on his hip and the shotgun in his pickup. Up there on the ridge, Monroe had the drop on him.

Monroe laughed. "I didn't shoot no cowboy, just like I didn't shoot no antelope buck."

"I saw you."

"It's just too damned bad your truck blew up," Monroe said. "Another two hundred fifty feet and you woulda' been on private property. Who knows what would have happened."

Joe started to answer when Monroe backed away from the top of the ridge. In a moment, Joe heard an engine flare and the grinding of gears before the truck drove off, leaving him there.

JOE STOOD IN the rain, thinking, running scenarios through his mind. They kept getting worse.

He got back inside the cab with Maxine. Even though the motor wasn't running the battery still worked, as did his radio. He even had a cellphone signal, although it was weak.

BEFORE CALLING RANDY Pope, Joe reached Bud Longbrake on the ranch. Bud had a one-ton flatbed with a winch and he was much closer to where Joe was stranded than any of the tow-truck drivers in town. Bud agreed to come rescue Joe, bring his truck back, and even lend Joe a ranch vehicle in the meantime. Bud was positively giddy when Joe talked with him.

"This rain just makes me happy," he said. Joe could tell Bud was smiling by his voice. "It hasn't rained this hard in three years."

*

ROBEY WASN'T IN his office when Joe called. His secretary said he was trapped in his house because a flash flood had taken out the bridge that crossed over to the highway from Robey's property. She told Joe that Robey's phone was down now as well, as were most of the telephones in the valley, because lightning had struck a transformer and knocked the service out.

"What about his cell?" Joe asked.

"You can call it, I guess," she said. "But I can see his cell phone sitting on his desk in his office. He must have forgotten to take it home with him last night."

Joe rolled his eyes with frustration. "Please have him call me the minute he makes contact," Joe said. "It's important."

"Will do," she said. "Isn't this great, this rain? We really needed it."

"Yes," Joe said.

THE NEXT CALL was to the FBI office in Cheyenne. Joe asked for Tony Portenson and was told Portenson was away from his desk.

"Tony, this is Joe Pickett," he said on Portenson's voice-mail. "Can you please fax or e-mail me the file on John Kelly? I may have a lead for you."

FURTHER DELAYING THE inevitable, Joe speed-dialed the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff's Department and asked for McLanahan.

"McLanahan." He sounded harried, high-pitched, and out of breath.

"Joe Pickett, Sheriff. I'm broken down on the border of the Thunderhead Ranch where I just had an encounter with Bill Monroe, although I don't think that's really his name."

"I'm lost," McLanahan said.

You sure are, Joe thought. He outlined his theory and told McLanahan about the yellow pickup and the investigation by the FBI.

McLanahan was silent for a moment after Joe finished, then said, "Are you sure you aren't just obsessed by the guy?"

"What?"

"He's the one who pounded you, right?"

"What difference does that make? You've got a warrant out for his arrest, even if I'm wrong about the rest of it. Why don't you drive out there and take the guy down?"

McLanahan sighed. "Have you looked outside recently?"

"I *am* outside."

"It looks like a cow pissing on a flat rock, this rain. We're in a state of emergency right now. You can't dump three inches of rain on a county that's dry as concrete and expect it to soak in. We've got flash floods everywhere. Bridges are out. In town the river has jumped the banks in at least three places. We've got a mess here, Joe. I've got truckloads of sandbags on the way from Gillette. I can't do anything until we get it under control."

Joe thought, *Man, oh man*.

"I've gotta go," McLanahan said. "Somebody just saw a Volkswagen Beetle float down First Street."

JOE BREATHED IN and out, in and out, then direct-dialed Randy Pope's office. He got the evil receptionist. The gleeful tone in her voice when he introduced himself told Joe all he needed to know.

"I told you I needed a new truck," Joe said when Pope came on the line. "Because of this lousy equipment you gave me, a poacher and murder suspect has gotten away."

Pope's voice was dry, barely controlled. "Joe, when I ask that you call in immediately, I mean immediately. Not when you get around to it."

"I was in pursuit of a murder suspect," Joe said. "I couldn't stop and call in at the time."

"That was an hour ago."

"Yes, and I called as soon as I could. I need to get this broken-down truck towed out of the middle of nowhere."

Pope sighed, then said, "I got a call from Arlen Scarlett, Joe."

Joe sat back. "I figured you would."

"We've now got official protests lodged against you from both Arlen and Hank Scarlett. Think about it. The only thing those two seem to agree on is that you are completely out of control, and that reflects on me. You're wasting time on a case totally out of our purview while game violations are going on in the middle of town."

"And you're only too happy to side with them," Joe said.

"You're fired, Joe," Pope snapped.

He heard the words he had been expecting to hear. Nevertheless, Joe still had trouble believing it was actually happening.

Pope's voice rose as he continued. "As of today, Joe, you're history. And don't try to fight me on this. You'll lose! I've got documentation stretching back six years. Threatening a legislator and Game and Fish commissioner with property destruction and bodily harm? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

"Do you really want to know or is that a rhetorical question?" Joe asked, his mouth dry.

"I won't miss your cowboy antics," Pope said. "This is a new era."

"I've heard," Joe said. He was tired of arguing with Pope. He felt defeated. The rain lashed at the windshield.

Pope transferred Joe to someone in personnel who outlined, in a monotone, what procedural steps were available for him to take if he wanted to contest the decision. Joe half listened, then punched off.

IT WAS THREE hours before Bud Longbrake showed up in his one-ton. The rain had increased in intensity, and it channeled into arroyos and draws, filling dry beds that had been parched for years, even rushing down the game trail in what looked like a river of angry chocolate milk.

Joe watched the one-ton start down the hill, then brake and begin to slide, the wheels not holding. Bud was driving, and he managed to reverse the vehicle and grind back up the hill before he slid to the bottom and got stuck. Bud flashed his headlights on and off.

Joe understood the signal. Bud couldn't bring the one-ton all the way across the basin to pull the truck out.

"Fine," Joe said, feeling like the embodiment of the subject of a blues song as he slid out of the truck into the mud carrying his shotgun, briefcase, and lunch and walked

through the pouring rain to the one-ton with Maxine slogging along, head down, beside him.

"Fine!"

24

WHEN BUD PULLED into the ranch yard, he splashed through a small lake that had not been there that morning and parked the one-ton in his massive barn.

Joe saw Marybeth's van in there also. She was home early. As he entered the house through the back door they used to access their new living quarters, Marybeth looked up, saw his face, and sat down quickly as if her legs had given out on her.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Let's go into the bedroom and shut the door," she said.

HE TOLD MARYBETH he'd been fired, and her reaction was worse than he anticipated: stunned silence. He would have preferred that she yelled at him, or cried, or locked herself in their room. Instead, she simply stared at him and whispered, "What are we going to do now, Joe?"

"We'll figure something out," he said, lamely.

"I guess we knew this would happen."

"Yes."

"When do we tell the girls?" Marybeth asked. "*What* do we tell them."

"The truth," he said. That would be the hardest part. No, it wouldn't. The hardest part would be that Sheridan and Lucy would expect him to say not to worry, that he would take care of them as he always had. But he couldn't tell them that and look them in the eye.

DINNER THAT EVENING was one of the worst Joe could remember. They sat at the big dining room table with Missy and Bud. Missy's cook, a Latina named Maria, had made fried chicken and the pieces steamed in a big bowl in the middle of the table. Bud ate as if he were starved. Missy picked at a breast that had been skinned and was made specially for her. Joe had no appetite, even though it was his favorite meal. When he had been employed, that is. Marybeth was silent. Sheridan spent dinnertime looking from her mom to her dad and back again, trying to figure out what was happening. Lucy was oblivious.

The rain roared against the roof and sang down the downspouts. Bud said a half-dozen times how happy he was that it was raining.

AFTER THE DISHES were cleared, Joe asked Bud if he could borrow a ranch pickup.

"Where are you going?" Missy said. Now that they were under her roof, Missy felt entitled to ask questions like that.

"I've got birds to feed," Joe said.

"Have you looked outside?" Missy said with an expression clearly meant to convey that he was an idiot.

"Why? Is something happening?" Joe said. He really didn't have the patience to deal with his mother-in-law tonight.

Marybeth shot him a cautionary look. Sheridan stifled a smile.

"I hope Bud doesn't have to come out and rescue you again if you get stuck," Missy said, and turned away.

"I don't mind," Bud said. "I kind of like driving around in the rain. It makes me feel good."

"I'll try not to get stuck again," Joe said as he headed to the mudroom for his still-damp boots and coat. Marybeth followed him there.

"Sheridan knows something is up."

"I know," Joe said, wincing as he pulled on a wet boot.

"Maybe when you get home we can talk to the girls."

Joe sighed. "I guess." He'd been putting it off all night.

"Joe, it's nothing to be ashamed of."

He looked up. "Yes, honey, it is."

"My business is doing well."

"Thank God for that," Joe said, standing, jamming his foot into a boot to seat it.

"Thank God for your business, or we'd be out on the street."

"Joe ..."

He looked up at her and his eyes flashed. "I brought it on myself, I know that. I could have played things differently. I could have compromised a little more."

She shook her head slowly. "No you couldn't, Joe."

He clammed up. Anything he said now would make things worse, he knew. His insides ached. How could she possibly know how it felt for a man to lose his job, lose the means of taking care of his family? He kept pushing the crushing reality of it aside so that he was only contemplating the little things: that he would no longer wear the red shirt, that he would no longer carry a badge and a gun, that he would no longer perch on hillsides watching deer and antelope and elk. That he would no longer bring home a monthly paycheck.

"Be careful," she said, taking his face in her hands and kissing him. "I worry about you when you're like this."

He tried to smile but he knew it looked like a pained snarl.

"I've got to get out for a while" was all he managed to say. God, he was grateful she was his wife.

Missy swept in behind Marybeth and stood there with her eyes sparkling above a pursed mouth. "This is interesting, isn't it?"

"What are you referring to?"

She opened her arms toward the window of the mudroom, a gesture designed to take in the whole ranch. "Three years ago, I was camped out on your couch in that

horrible little hovel you made my daughter and my grandchildren live in. And you wanted me *out*.”

Joe didn’t deny it.

“Now look where we are. You’re a guest in my home and your family is comfortable and safe for the first time in their lives.”

He felt his rage build, but was able to stanch it. He didn’t want this argument now, when he felt quite capable of wringing her neck.

“It’s interesting, is all,” she said, raising her eyebrows mockingly, “how situations can change and things that were thought and said can come back to haunt a person?”

SHERIFF MCLANAHAN WASN’T kidding. The rain had transformed everything. It wasn’t like other parts of the country, where rain could fall and soak into the soil and be smoothly channeled away. This was hardpan that received only eleven inches of rain a year, and today had already brought four. The water stood on top of the ground, forming lakes and ponds that hadn’t existed for years. Tiny draws and sloughs had turned into funnels for raging brown water.

Joe drove slowly on the highway, water spraying out from under his tires in rooster tails. The sky was mottled greenish black and the rain fell so hard he couldn’t hear the radio inside the cab of the ranch truck. He had no business going out, and especially going to Nate’s old place to feed the falcons, but he needed something to do. If he stayed at the ranch contemplating his complete failure while Missy prattled on about fat grams and social clubs, he didn’t know what he might do. Plus, he wanted to put off the talk with Sheridan and Lucy. Would Marybeth warn them, he wondered. Tell them to reassure their father, not to get angry or upset? He hoped she didn’t. The only thing he could think of that was worse than being a failure was to have his girls pity him for it.

THE ROAD TO Nate Romanowski’s old place was elevated enough that he was able to get there in four-wheel-drive high. On either side of the road, though, long lakes had formed. Ducks were actually sitting on ponds that hadn’t existed eight hours ago. And he could hear frogs. Frogs that had been hibernating deep below the surface for years were coming out, croaking.

It was amazing what renewal came with water in the mountain west. Joe just wished that somehow the rain could renew *him*.

JOE CRESTED THE last rise near Nate’s home to see that the river had not just jumped the bank, but had taken Nate’s falcon mews and was lapping at the side of his house. He had never seen the river so big, so violent. It was whitewater, and big rollers thundered through the canyon. Full-grown cottonwood trees, cattle, parts of washed-out bridges were being carried downstream. The rickety suspension footbridge across the river downstream from Nate’s home was either gone or underwater.

Joe parked above Nate’s house on a rise. There was less than an hour of light left, and he wanted to feed the birds and get out before nightfall. He climbed out and pulled on his yellow slicker. Fat raindrops popped against the rubberized canvas of his slicker as he unwrapped road-killed rabbits from a burlap bag in the bed of the truck. This

was a foolish thing he was doing, he conceded. The birds could probably wait. But he had made a promise, and he would keep it.

The sound of the river was awesome in its power. He could feel the spray from it well before he got to its new edge.

He laid the rabbits out on a sandy rise so they could be seen clearly from the air. In the past, it took less than ten minutes for either the peregrine or the red-tailed hawk to see the meat. Joe never had any idea where the falcons were, or how they always knew he was there. But they did, and they came to eat.

Joe could never get used to the relationship—or more accurately, the lack of a relationship—he had with Nate’s falcons. It was something Nate had once told him about, how different and unique it was with birds of prey compared to other creatures. The cold partnership between falconer and falcon was primal and unsentimental. Quite simply, the birds never warmed up to the falconer and certainly not to Joe. To *anyone*. Raptors weren’t like dogs, or horses, or even cats. They didn’t pretend to like humans, or show even a flicker of affection. They simply coexisted with people, using them to obtain food and shelter but never actually giving back anything but their own ability to hunt and kill. The falcon could fly away at any time and never come back. There was nothing a falconer could do to retrieve a bird. It was a relationship based on mutual self-interest and a kind of unfeeling trust.

After twenty minutes, Joe saw a dark speck dislodge from the gunmetal clouds. He stood and wiped the rain from his face and watched as the speck got larger. It was the peregrine, the ultimate killer. The red-tail appeared shortly thereafter.

The peregrine buzzed Joe twice before flaring and landing on the edge of the rise. The red-tail made two false landings, close enough to see the meat, then climbed back up into the sky and disappeared.

He looked at the peregrine closely. The bird wasn’t the least bit interested in the rabbits. And there was something else: the bird’s gullet was swelled to bursting and there were blood flecks and bits of white down on its breast. It had already eaten.

Joe squatted and looked into the falcon’s eyes, which were as impenetrable as shiny black stones.

“Who fed you?” Joe asked. “Or did you kill something yourself?” Then he thought about the red-tail. “Did you *both* make a kill?”

Something made him turn and look at the stone house that had stood empty for half a year.

Fresh lengths of pine boarded up two of the windows. The front door had been replaced. And half a row of new shingles were laid out on the roof.

Despite the drumming of the rain, Joe felt his heart whump in his chest.

He called out, “Nate, where are you?”

Then he saw him. Downstream, where he’d been hiding and watching in a thick stand of reeds. The reeds were dancing around him with falling rain. Nate rose from them, naked, holding his huge .454 Casull in his right fist. Joe didn’t even want to ask.

“Have you come to kill me?” Nate called out.

“No.”

“I deserve it.”

“I know you do.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” Nate said.

They stared at each other for a minute. Nate was slick with rain and his white skin was mud streaked from hiding in the bog. His long blond hair stuck to the tops of his shoulders. His eyes bored into Joe.

Nate had once vowed to protect Joe’s family. Joe had promised to keep Nate’s birds fed. Despite everything that had happened, both had lived up to their obligations, something greater than mere friendship.

Joe said, “Why don’t you put on some clothes?”

25

J.W. KEELEY DIDN’T LIKE the way Hank Scarlett was talking to him. He didn’t like it at all.

The rest of Hank’s men had been dismissed from the dinner table—only he and Hank remained. The men had gone back to their bunkhouse a mile from Hank’s lodge. They had grumbled through a huge steak dinner about the rain, how it had knocked out their telephone service in the bunkhouse and how the lights kept going on and off. Especially annoying was the fact that the cable was out for television and they would miss the third game of the NBA playoffs. And the worst thing of all was the news that the river had jumped its banks and was flooding the roads to the highway. The men would be trapped on the ranch until the water receded, so they couldn’t even go to town to see the game. They had complained without quarter until Hank finally pushed away from the table, threw his napkin onto his plate as if spiking a football, and said in his loudest and most nasally voice, “Why don’t you boys just get the hell out of my house and go bitch somewhere else?”

That had shut them up, all right.

“Not you, Bill,” Hank had said. So Monroe sat back down at the table.

Because the electricity was out again, the dining room was lit by three hissing Coleman gas lanterns. The light played on Hank’s face, making the shadowed hollows under his cheekbones look skull-like and cavernous. The glass eyes on the head mounts of the game animals on the walls glowed with reflection.

That’s when Hank began to annoy him, chipping away with that damned high voice, each word dropping like a stone in a pond, *plunk-plunk-plunk*.

“You need to stay away from that game warden,” Hank said.

Keeley had told Hank and the boys the story over their thick steaks: how he’d dropped the buck right in front of the game warden, then watched the warden’s truck break down in an aborted hot pursuit. The boys had laughed. A couple of them had laughed so hard that Keeley considered spilling the beans on the other things he’d

done to get under the warden's skin. Luckily, he held his tongue, because that would have led to too many questions. Hank had appeared to be smiling, but now Keeley understood that it hadn't been a smile at all. It was too damned tough to tell if Hank was smiling or not. That was just one of the things wrong with the man.

Keeley glared at Hank. "That's my business," he said in response. "It ain't no concern of yours."

"The hell it ain't!" Hank snapped back. "I didn't make you my foreman so you could draw the cops in here because of your fucking antics with the local game warden. Joe Pickett knows for sure you're out here now, and I would guess he's told the sheriff."

Keeley gestured toward the ceiling at the sound of the rain thrumming the roof. "That sheriff couldn't get out here right now even if he wanted to. Didn't you just tell the boys the river's over the road?"

Hank nodded. "Except for one little two-track on high ground down by Arlen's place, my guess is there is no way in or out."

"Where's that?"

"About a mile downriver," Hank said. "I'd guess that road is still dry. But if the river gets any higher, that one'll be underwater too."

Keeley filed away the information.

"What's your problem with him, anyway?" Hank asked.

"Personal."

"That's what you always say," Hank said. "But since what you do could bring the wrath of God down on my ass, you need to tell me just what it is between you two."

"The wrath of God?" Keeley said, thinking, from what he had observed, that it was an odd way to describe Joe Pickett.

"Him and his buddy Nate Romanowski," Hank said. "Didn't I tell you about them?"

Keeley nodded.

"Why don't you grab that bottle of bourbon from the kitchen?" Hank said. "I'd like a little after-dinner snort. You can join me."

Keeley hesitated for a beat as he always did when Hank asked him to do something that was beneath him. He wasn't the fucking kitchen help, after all. He was the new ranch foreman. But Keeley sighed, stood up, and felt around through the liquor cabinet until his hand closed around the thick neck of the half-gallon bottle of Maker's Mark. A sixty-five dollar bottle. Nice.

Hank poured two water glasses half full. He didn't offer ice or water. Keeley sipped and closed his eyes, letting the good bourbon burn his tongue.

"This thing you've got with the game warden," Hank said again, "it's time you dropped it."

"I ain't dropping it," Keeley said, maybe a little too quickly. Hank froze with his glass halfway to his lips and stared at him.

"What do you mean, you 'ain't dropping it'?"

"I told you." Keeley shrugged. "It's personal."

Hank didn't change his expression, but Keeley could see the blood drain out of Hank's cheeks. That meant he was getting angry. Which usually meant someone would start hopping around, asking what Hank needed. *Fuck that*, Keeley thought. Enough with Hank and his moods.

"Since you got here, you've been asking me questions about him," Hank said. "You've been kind of subtle and clever about it, you know, not asking too much at once and not tipping yourself off to the other boys. But I observed it right out of the chute. You got me to talking about those Miller's weasels, and what happened up there with the Sovereigns in that camp. You asked me where the game warden lived, how many kids he's got, what his wife is like and where she works. Don't think I haven't noticed, Bill. You're obsessed with the guy."

Keeley said nothing. Hank was smarter than he thought.

"There was that Miller's weasel stuck to Pickett's front door," Hank said. "Then what? The elk heads? I didn't like that one very much. It reminded me of what those fuckin' towelheads do over there in the Middle East, cutting off heads. Plus, I like elk. Now I hear somebody put a bullet through their picture window," he said, his eyes on Keeley like two flat black lumps of charcoal. "I'd say that's going too far. That's too damned mean, considering there are children in the house. Made that family move, is what I hear."

"So my question is," Hank said, leaning forward, "just what in the hell is wrong with you? Why do you hate Joe Pickett so much? I know if I hadn't found you and stopped you that night outside the Stockman you would've beat him to death."

"There ain't nothing wrong with me," Keeley said, resenting the implication. Feeling the rage start to surge in his chest and belly.

Joe Pickett was all he had left, Keeley thought. After five years in prison they raided his hunting camp and tried to find the bodies of that Atlanta couple, and Keeley was forced to run away. The only thing he had of value was his hatred, and that was still white hot.

Damn, he hated to be judged by any man.

Then he realized what Hank was leading up to. He was going to fire him. That wouldn't do. Not yet.

"People think I'm a hater," Hank said, refilling his glass. "But I'm not. I'm just not. Not like you. I don't even hate Arlen. He hates me, and my defense just looks to some like hate. No one has ever been as mean, as low, as my brother Arlen. There's a hole where his feelings should be. I've always known that, because I saw it up close and personal when we were little boys. He puts up a damned good front, damned good. Hell, I admire him for it, the way he can prance around and shake hands and act like he gives a shit about people. But he doesn't. He doesn't care for anyone but Arlen. Arlen is his favorite subject, and his only subject. He hates me because I know him for what he truly is. Did I ever tell you about the time he cut the hamstring tendons on my dog? When I was six years old and he was ten? He denied it, but it was him. Damn, I loved that dog, and I had to shoot it."

Keeley was speechless. He had never heard Hank talk so much before. Why was the man opening up this way? Didn't Hank realize who he was talking to? That Keeley was much more like Arlen than Hank? That instead of invoking sympathy or a bond or a mutual understanding, Keeley listened simply so he could look for an opening where he could strike?

Hank *wasn't* so smart after all, Keeley thought.

"Mother knew, but she wouldn't admit it," Hank said. "She didn't want to think her oldest boy was a fucking sociopath—although that's exactly what he is. She didn't want the town to know, or anybody to know. That's why she stayed down there at the ranch house, so she could keep an eye on him. And that's why I think he got rid of her."

Keeley poured himself more bourbon. This was getting rich.

"That's why Mother had that will drawn up with Meade Davis giving me the ranch if something happened to her," Hank said. "She told me about it but kept it a secret from Arlen. But then he broke into the law office and found out what the will really said."

Hank looked up, and his eyes flashed with betrayal. "I shoulda' fucking known that a lawyer like Meade Davis would change his story if he was offered enough money. That's what Arlen did, that son-of-a-bitch. He got to Davis and either threatened him or sweetened the pot. Or both. Now Davis claims the ranch was supposed to go to Arlen after all.

"I can't keep up with the guy. All I can do is fortify my bunker," Hank said morosely, gesturing around his own house.

"He even convinced my daughter I was a bad man," he said, his eyes getting suddenly misty. "That may be the worst thing he's ever done."

"At least you have a daughter," Keeley said flatly.

Hank didn't follow.

"I had a daughter once," Keeley said. "Her name was April. My brother thought she was his, but she wasn't. She was mine. April was the result of a little fling I had with my sister-in-law, Jeannie Keeley. My brother, Ote, never knew a damned thing about it."

Hank's face went slack. "Keeley ..." he said. "The Picketts had a foster daughter named Keeley."

"That's right."

"Ote Keeley was your brother? Jeannie was your sister-in-law? Jeannie, who died in that fire with April?"

"That's right," Keeley said, his teeth clenched.

"Jesus," Hank said.

"Joe Pickett was responsible for the death of my brother, my sister-in-law, and my daughter," Keeley hissed. "And he don't even know why I'm here. I'm an avenging angel, here to take out the man who destroyed my family."

Hank sat back. "Joe didn't kill anyone," he said. "You're full of shit, Bill."

Keeley felt his face get hot. "He was in the middle of everything. He was responsible."

Hank shook his head. "I've been here a long time, Bill. I know this country, and I know what happened. Joe Pickett tried to save your daughter, if that's who she was. He didn't ..."

"My name ain't Bill."

That stopped Hank.

"My real name is John Wayne Keeley."

Hank stopped and swallowed. Keeley liked the look of confusion on Hank's face.

"You know," Keeley said, standing up and pacing, "when I first heard about what happened to April I was in prison. I went along for a year or so, not really thinking about it. Things that happen on the outside don't seem real. Then one day I looked up and I realized I had no family. Nobody. No one was still alive to connect me to anyone else. My folks were dead, my brother, my sister-in-law, now my little daughter. I tried to forget all that when I started a guide service. But this fucking arrogant asshole client from Atlanta was there with his wife. They treated me like dirt, especially him. So I fucked her just to piss him off, and he walked in on us, and ..."

Hank's eyes were wide.

"You remember Wacey Hedeman?" Keeley asked, still pacing, although he now circled the table.

Hank nodded, following Keeley's movement with his eyes.

"That was me."

Keeley left out the cowboy. He would never tell anyone about it. That was his secret, like a sexual fantasy, the way that cowboy had tumbled off his horse after the shot.

He was behind Hank now, and the rancher would have had to turn completely around in his chair to keep his eyes on him. But before he could do that, Keeley snatched a dirty steak knife from the table with his right hand while he clamped Hank's head against his chest with his left hand and he cut the rancher's throat open from ear to ear.

Hank tried to spin away, but all he could manage was to stand and turn around, facing Keeley while his blood flowed down his shirt. Keeley used the opening to bury the knife into Hank Scarlett's heart. It took three tries.

Hank looked perplexed for a moment before his legs turned to rubber and he fell to the floor. Keeley stood above Hank's gurgling, jerking body, watching blood stream across the floor like the Twelve Sleep River jumping its banks outside.

THE LIGHTS FLICKERED on. Keeley had no idea how long it would last, but he used the opportunity to walk across the dining room and pick up the phone. He left bloody footprints on the Navaho rug.

There was a dial tone, so Keeley punched in the numbers out of memory.

Arlen picked up.

Keeley said, "You owe me big time now, Bubba ..."

"Who is this?"

"You know who it is."

"Bill? What are you talking about?"

"You know who it is. The problem is solved."

"Again, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Knock it off, Arlen. You know what we discussed. You said you'd make it worth my while in a big way if I helped you out with your problem. That night in your kitchen, remember? That's what you said."

"Who did you say is calling?"

Keeley held the phone away from his ear, trying to figure out what kind of man Arlen really was to suddenly play this dangerous game with him.

"Arlen, goddammit," Keeley said, his voice cracking, "you know who this is and you damn well sure know what I'm talking about when I say your problem is solved ..."

"Bill," Arlen said, his voice flat, "you must be having a bad dream. We've never discussed anything of consequence I can think of ..."

And then the lights went out, plunging the room into darkness except for the lanterns.

*

"I'VE BEEN BETRAYED," Keeley told Hank's lifeless body as he poured another half glass of bourbon. "You were right about him. He has no conscience, that brother of yours."

Keeley sipped. The bourbon had long since stopped burning. Now it was just like drinking liquid warmth. The aroma of the alcohol drowned out the copperlike smell of fresh blood. That was a good thing.

Cut the body up, Keeley was thinking. Scatter the pieces all over the ranch. What the predators don't eat, the river will wash away.

But he'd need more fortification before he could start *that* job, he thought. Keeley had butchered hundreds of animals over the years. He knew how to do it. But this would be his first man.

He'd retrieved the skinning knives and bone saws he used on the Town Elk from the shed. Now all he needed was nerve.

After draining the glass, Keeley managed to lift Hank's body up on the kitchen counter, so it straddled the two big stainless-steel sinks. He was surprised how light Hank actually was. All that gravitas he'd credited to Hank was a result of attitude, not bulk, he guessed.

Keeley slipped the boning knife out of the block and sharpened it on the steel, expertly whipping the edge into shape. The German steel sang on the sharpening stick, so Keeley almost didn't hear the sound of the front door opening.

It had to be the wind, Keeley thought. Or one of those fucking ranch hands, wandering back up the road to complain about something. Whoever or whatever it was, he had to make sure no one entered the dining room ...

As he flew through the doorway of the dining room, into the living room, he could see the front door hanging open and the rain splashing puddles outside. Keeley reached out to close the door when an arm gripped his throat in a hammerlock.

“You were about to ruin his face” was the last thing Keeley heard.

KEELEY ROLLED OVER on the floor and opened his eyes at 4.30 in the morning. Predawn light, muted by the storm, fused through the door and the front windows.

He was freezing. His cheek where his head had been turned was wet with both rainwater from the open front door and blood from the dining room.

He managed to sit back on his haunches. Everything hurt, including his brains. He stood, and the events of the night before came rushing back.

Hank’s body was gone.

Arlen had screwed him over.

The Scarlett family was even sicker than he’d originally thought.

But there was no going back now. No way to undo what he’d done, and what happened afterward.

Keeley formed a plan. It came easily, and the simplicity of it stunned him. There was a way to get back at Arlen and Joe Pickett in one fell swoop.

It was still raining.

26

JOE GOT UP EARLY enough to consciously avoid running into Missy in her kitchen, made coffee, showered, and was pulling on his uniform shirt when Marybeth said, “Joe ... should you be wearing that?”

He stopped, puzzled at what she meant for a moment, then remembered he had been fired. He had no right to wear the uniform anymore. But he didn’t *feel* that he was fired. He felt normal, or as normal as normal could get while they remained at the Longbrake Ranch and after his encounter with Nate Romanowski the night before.

“This is going to take awhile to get used to,” Joe said, stripping the shirt off and replacing it with a baggy University of Wyoming hooded sweatshirt.

He said, “What in the hell am I going to do today? Why in the hell didn’t I just sleep in or something?”

Marybeth didn’t have an answer to that.

AFTER RETURNING FROM Nate’s house the previous night in the rain, Joe and Marybeth had sat down with Sheridan and Lucy and told them he’d been fired.

Their questions were practical, if somewhat uncomprehending:

Lucy asked if it meant that she would no longer have to go to school.

Sorry, dear, *Joe said*. No such luck.

Sheridan asked if it meant they could get a new vehicle to replace the lousy old Game and Fish truck.

Maybe someday, *Joe said*. In the meantime, they’d have to settle for the van and maybe borrowing one of Bud Longbrake’s vehicles.

Lucy asked the toughest question of all: “Does this mean we’ll be safer? That we can move back to our old house now?”

Joe and Marybeth exchanged glances. Marybeth said, "We're going to be staying here for a while, Lucy. Our old house doesn't really belong to us. It never did. And as for being safer, I suppose so. Right, Joe?"

Joe said, "Yup." But he had no idea. Whoever had been targeting them might stop now, but then again ...

"I like our old house," Lucy said, starting to cry and tear Joe's heart out. "I'll miss our old house ..."

Sheridan studied Joe's face for a long time, saying nothing. Joe wished she would stop. She understood better than he'd expected how devastating it was to him, how doing the thing he loved had been taken away. He doubted she thought much further than that yet. But he was somewhat reassured by the fact that her demeanor reflected concern for his feelings, not what it would mean for the family. Yet.

IN BED, JOE had told Marybeth about finding Nate. He watched her reaction carefully, and she knew he was doing exactly that.

"And how was he?" she asked.

"Naked as a jaybird," Joe said.

"You know what I mean. Was he doing all right? Is he just passing through, or what?"

"We didn't really discuss it. I suggested he put on some clothes and he did. I don't know why he goes around naked all the time. He thanked me for keeping his birds fed. I told him there were a lot of people looking for him, starting with the FBI. Then I left."

Marybeth wanted to ask a million questions, it was obvious, and Joe really didn't want to answer any of them. He was tired, and beaten down. Nate was a subject he didn't have any energy for. Plus, he was unemployed.

"I don't understand men sometimes," she said. "How could you see a friend you haven't seen in half a year—a man you've been through hell with on more than one occasion—and just say hello and go home?"

Joe shrugged. "It was pretty easy."

"Where has he been all of this time?"

"He didn't say."

Marybeth shook her head in disbelief.

"If you're wondering if he asked about you, he didn't," Joe said, turning away from her in bed.

"That was cruel, Joe," she said.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry I said that."

Someday they would need to talk about what had happened while he was away in Jackson. But for reasons he couldn't really grasp, he didn't want to know. Marybeth seemed to want to explain. Nate had even acted as if he was looking for an opening. But Joe just wanted the entire thing to go away, and thought it had. But that was before Nate came back.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE it," Lucy said at breakfast, lowering the telephone into the cradle. "They haven't canceled school."

Sheridan moaned. Both girls had convinced themselves over breakfast that the rain and flooding would mean that school would be canceled. But Lucy had called her friend Jenny, the daughter of the principal, and received the news.

Joe found himself hoping school would be closed as well. He wanted the girls around the ranch house. He couldn't imagine spending the day not working, rambling around the place, ducking Missy.

"I'll drive the girls out to the bus," Joe said, pushing away from the table.

AS THEY DROVE to the state highway in one of Bud's ranch pickups where the bus would pick them up, Sheridan asked Joe, "Are we going to be okay?"

"Yes, we are. Your mother has a great business going, and I'll find something soon," he said, not having a clue what it would be.

"It's weird thinking we won't be going back to our house. Can we at least go get our stuff?"

"Of course," Joe said, feeling instantly terrible for putting her through this. "Of course we can."

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

"Julie will be on the bus," Sheridan said.

"Isn't that okay?"

"Yeah. I just don't feel the same way about her anymore," she said. "I feel really guilty about that. I used to think she was so cool and now, well, I know she's weird but it isn't her fault."

"Things change," Joe said.

"I wish I could be more girly-girl," Sheridan said. "I wish I could see Julie and squeal and pretend nothing was wrong, but I just can't. Other girls can do that, but I can't."

Joe reached over and patted her on the leg. "You're okay, Sherry," he said, meaning it.

"Look at the ducks," Lucy said, pointing out the window at a body of water that had once been a pasture.

THE BUS ARRIVED at the same time Joe did. Because they were now living so far out of town, there was only one student on board—the first to be picked up. Julie Scarlett pressed her face to the window and waved at Sheridan as the girls climbed out into the mud and skipped through puddles toward the bus.

Joe waved at the driver and the driver waved back.

27

"I NEARLY DIDN'T make it this morning," Julie Scarlett told Sheridan and Lucy. "Uncle Arlen had to drive through a place where the river flooded the road and we nearly didn't make it. Water came inside the truck ... it was scary."

The school bus had another five miles to go before picking anyone else up on their way to Saddlestring. The three girls were trying to have a conversation but it was hard to hear because huge wiper blades squeaked across the windows and standing water sluiced noisily under the carriage of the bus.

"I still don't know why they're having school," Lucy said. "It's stupid."

"For once I agree with you," the bus driver called back over his shoulder. "They should have given us all a day off."

"Why don't you call them and tell them we're flooded out?" Lucy suggested coyly, and the driver laughed.

"What is *this*?" the driver said, and the bus began to slow down.

Sheridan walked up the aisle and stood behind the driver so she could see.

A yellow pickup truck blocked both lanes of the road, and the bus driver braked to a stop.

"What an idiot," the driver said. "Maybe his motor quit or something. But I'm not sure I can get around him because of all of the water in the ditches."

Sheridan watched as a man opened the door and came out of the truck. The man wore a floppy wet cowboy hat and was carrying a rifle.

Her heart leaped into her mouth.

"I know him," she said, then called to Julie over her shoulder, "Julie, it's Bill Monroe."

Julie screwed up her face in puzzlement. "I wonder what he wants," she said, getting out of her seat and walking up the aisle next to Sheridan.

Monroe was outside the accordion doors of the bus now, and he tapped on the glass with the muzzle of the rifle.

"You girls know him, then?" the driver asked cautiously, his hand resting on the handle to open the doors.

"He works for my dad," Julie said. "But I'm not sure what he's doing out here."

"Well, if you know him ..." the driver said, and pushed the door handle.

The smell of mud and rain came into the bus as Bill Monroe stepped inside. Sheridan gasped as he raised the rifle and pointed it at the face of the driver.

"This is where you get off," Monroe said.

Beside her, Sheridan heard Julie scream.

A HALF-HOUR LATER, the phone rang at the Longbrake Ranch. Missy was having coffee with Marybeth and reading the Saddlestring Roundup. Marybeth was ready to go to work. Joe was in their bedroom, doing who knows what.

Missy answered, said, "Hi, honey," then handed the phone to Marybeth. "It's Sheridan."

Marybeth frowned and took the phone. Sheridan had never called this early because she shouldn't be at school yet. Maybe they had canceled school after all, Marybeth thought. Maybe Sheridan needed someone to meet them on the highway so they could come home.

"Hi, Mom," she said.

Marybeth sensed something was wrong. Sheridan's voice was tight and hard.

"Where are you?"

"I'm on the bus. I need to ask you a question. Is it okay if Lucy and I go out to Julie's house after school tonight?"

Marybeth paused. The scenario didn't work for her. She asked Sheridan to repeat what she had said, and Sheridan did. But there was something wrong in the tone, Marybeth thought. There was something wrong, period. What were Julie and Sheridan cooking up? And why would they want to include Lucy in it?

"You know I don't like it when you spring things like this on me," Marybeth said. "What are you girls scheming?"

"Nothing," Sheridan said. "We just want to hang out. There probably won't be practice."

"You want to hang out with your little sister?"

"Sure, she's cool."

"That's a first," Marybeth said. "Let me talk with her."

"Just a minute."

Marybeth could tell that Sheridan had covered the mouthpiece of the phone so she could discuss something that her mother couldn't overhear. Marybeth sat forward in her chair, straining to hear. She could sense Missy looking at her now, picking up on her alarm.

"She can't talk," Sheridan said, coming back. "She has food in her mouth."

"What?"

"She's eating some of her lunch early," Sheridan said. "You know how she always does that? Then she doesn't have enough to eat at lunch and she has to mooch from either me or the other kids?"

"Sheridan," Marybeth said, dropping her voice to a near-whisper, "Lucy has *never* done that. She brings most of her lunch home with her, and you know it. If only I could get Lucy to eat. Now what is going on? Where are you calling from?"

"The bus," Sheridan said, too breezily. "On my cell-phone."

"On your cellphone," Marybeth repeated back. "*Your* cell-phone."

"That's why you got it for me," Sheridan said, "for emergencies like this ..."

Suddenly, the call was disconnected.

Marybeth felt as if she'd been hit with a hammer. Sheridan had been trying to tell her something, all right.

"Oh my God," Marybeth said, standing, dropping the phone on the table and running out of the room while Missy called after her to ask her what was wrong.

"Joe!"

JOE WAS NOT in the bedroom, but in Bud's cramped and cluttered home office. He had recalled his conversation the day before with Tony Portenson's office, how he'd requested a fax be sent to him. But since he wasn't at his house to see what had arrived, he had called again that morning and asked Portenson's secretary to fax the information to Bud's home office instead.

He stood near the fax machine, watching the paper roll out.

SHERIDAN SAT WITH Lucy on the bus. Julie was in the seat behind them. Bill Monroe had taken the phone and dropped it in his pocket and had returned to the driver's seat, saying, "I hope you didn't just do something there that will fuck us up." His eyes were pulled back into thin slits and his jaw was set. He needed a shave and he needed to clean what looked like blood off his hands and shirt.

The bus shuddered as Monroe worked the gears and did a three-point turn and the bus almost foundered in the ditch. But he got the bus turned around, and it picked up speed, and Monroe clumsily raced through the gears with a grinding sound.

They were headed for the Thunderhead Ranch.

Sheridan held Lucy, who had buried her head into her chest, crying.

MARYBETH FOUND HIM in the office, holding up a sheet of paper.

"Joe," Marybeth said frantically, "I think something has happened to the girls. Sheridan just called me and said she was on the bus, but I don't know where she really is. Or Lucy, either. She said she was calling from her cellphone. Something is horribly wrong."

The look he gave her froze her to her spot. He held up the sheet of paper and turned it to her. It was the mug shot faxed by Portenson's office.

"This is J. W. Keeley," Joe said. "He's an ex-con who supposedly murdered a man in Wyoming and a couple of others down in Mississippi. The FBI is looking for him. But he has another name, Marybeth: Bill Monroe."

Marybeth couldn't get past the name Keeley.

The name of her foster daughter who had died tragically. This man had the same name? And was from the same place?

It all became horribly clear.

28

JOE JAMMED THE mug shot of J. W. Keeley into his back pocket and violently rubbed his face with his hands, trying to think of what to do next. Marybeth stood in the doorway of the office with her arms wrapped around herself, swaying a little, her eyes wide.

"Okay," Joe said, forcing himself to be calm while his mind swirled with anger and fear of the worst kind. "I need to find the bus. A school bus can't be hard to find."

"Should I call the sheriff?" Marybeth asked.

"Yes, call him. Call the school too. Call the FBI in Cheyenne—the number's right here on this sheet," he said, handing her the remaining pages of the fax that outlined the allegations against J. W. Keeley. "My God ..." he moaned.

"Joe, are you going to be all right? Does this man have our daughters?"

"I don't know," he said. "But he might. I'm going to go find him."

"I can't think of anything worse," she said, tears bursting from her eyes, streaming down her face.

"Stay calm," he said. "We've got to stay calm and think." He paced the room. "If he took the bus into town, it'll be easy to find. The sheriff can find it. Ask for Deputy Reed, he's competent. But if the bus turned around, it would be headed back here or to the Thunderhead Ranch. Or to the mountains. I'd guess he's going that way."

Joe plunged into the closet and grabbed his belt and holster and buckled them on. Then he pulled out his shotgun.

"I've got my cellphone," Joe said, clamping on his hat. "Call me and tell me what's going on since I don't have a radio. If you hear something—anything—call me right away."

Marybeth breathed deeply, hugged herself tighter.

"The sheriff, the FBI, the school. Anybody else?" she asked.

Joe looked up. "Nate. Tell him I'll be on Bighorn Road headed toward the mountains. If he can get there to meet me, I can use the help. If he isn't there in fifteen minutes, I'll leave him. I can't wait for him to do his hair."

Marybeth nodded furiously.

"Tell him to bring his gun," Joe said.

Missy came into the room, said, "What is going on?"

"I'll tell you later," Marybeth said, shouldering past her. "I need to use the phone."

JOE ROARED OUT of the ranch yard with his shotgun on the bench seat, muzzle pointed toward the floor. The sky buckled with a thunder boom that rolled through the meadows, sucking the sound from the world for a moment. He drove fast, nearly overshooting the turn from the ranch onto the highway access road and he fishtailed in the mud, nearly losing control of the truck. He cursed himself, slowed down, and felt the tires bite into the slop. If he got stuck now, he thought, he would never forgive himself.

The ditches had filled even more than when he took the girls to the bus that morning, and the water was spilling over the road. He drove through it, spraying fantails of brown-yellow mud.

The highway was in sight, and he made it and didn't slow down as he turned onto the wet blacktop.

JOE TRIED TO put things together as he drove. He couldn't. He hoped like hell Marybeth had overreacted to the phone call, but he doubted it. Her intuition was always right on, especially when it came to their girls. The thing about the cellphone, that Sheridan was calling from her cellphone, tipped it.

If that bastard J. W. Keeley had his girls he would kill him, Joe vowed. Simple as that.

God, how sometimes he hated the distances. Everything out here was just so far from the next. Thirty miles to Saddlestring. Twenty-two miles from his old house. Fifteen miles to Nate's. And thirty miles in the other direction to the first entrance to Thunderhead Ranch. Joe knew enough about Thunderhead and its proximity to the flooding river to realize that there would be only one road still passable, the road to

the lower ranch, Arlen's. The other roads would be flooded. Would Keeley take the girls to Arlen's place? And if so, why Arlen?

No, Joe thought. He wouldn't even try to figure out Keeley's motivation and loyalties. That would come later. Now, he just needed to find the bus.

Even if Marybeth was able to get the sheriff on the first call and the department scrambled, it would be a half hour before they could traverse the length of Bighorn Road in search of the bus. The helicopter was grounded because of the weather.

It was up to him.

NATE STOOD ON the shoulder of the highway wearing a long yellow slicker. His shoulder holster was buckled on over the top, and he stepped out into the road as Joe slowed and stopped.

Nate jumped in and slammed the door. Joe floored it to get back up to speed.

"So we're looking for a bus," Nate said.

"Yup."

"Marybeth said the guy was named Keeley."

"Yup."

"Jesus. One of *those* Keeleys?"

"Yup."

After a beat, Joe said, "Thanks for coming, Nate."

"Anytime, partner," Nate said, sliding his big revolver out of his holster and checking the rounds.

JOE AND NATE passed under the antlered arch with the thunderhead ranch sign and plunged down a hill on the slick dirt road.

"There it is," Nate said, pointing.

The school bus was stalled at the bottom of the hill in the middle of the road. Or what had been the road. Now, though, the river had jumped the dike and water foamed around the bus and into the open bus door.

"It looks empty," Nate said, straining to see through the wet windshield. The wipers couldn't work fast enough to keep it clear.

Joe slowed as he approached the bus and stopped short of the water. He jumped out, holding his shotgun. The rear of the bus was twenty feet away, the level of the river halfway up the rear door. The sound of the flooding river was so loud he couldn't hear himself when he shouted, "There's nobody on it. They must have gotten out on the other side before the dike blew open!"

Joe visualized a scene in which J. W. Keeley herded the girls through the rising water to the other side, marching them toward the ranch buildings two miles away through the cottonwoods. The vision was so vivid it deadened him for a moment.

He wouldn't even consider the possibility that they'd all been swept away by the water.

He looked around at the situation. They were helpless.

They couldn't go around the bus or they'd risk stalling themselves or getting swept away. Joe looked upriver and Nate looked down. There was no place to cross.

"Is there another road in?" Nate asked, shouting at Joe from just a few feet away.

Joe shook his head. All the roads would be flooded, and even worse than this.

He thought about getting to the ranch from the other direction; driving back the way they had come, going through Saddlestring, taking the state highway into the next county and coming back the opposite way. But that highway paralleled the river as well at one point. It would likely be flooded, and it would take hours to get around that way even if it wasn't.

Joe waded into the water, testing the strength of the current to see if there was any way they could cross. Maybe by shinnying along the side of the bus, using the force of the current to hold him upright against the side of the vehicle, he could get to the other side. He was in it to his knees when something struck him under the surface, a submerged branch or length of wood, and knocked his legs out from under him. He plunged into the icy water on his back, his shotgun flying. The current pulled him quickly under, and gritty water filled his nose and mouth. He could feel swift movement as he was carried downstream. When he opened his eyes he could see only foamy brown, and he didn't know if he was facing up or down.

Something solid thumped his arm and he reached out for it and grasped it and it stopped him. He pulled hard, and it held—a root—with his other hand. The surface was slick but knotty, and he crawled up it hand over hand, water still in his mouth, trying not to swallow, until his head broke the surface where he spit it out and coughed.

He turned his head to see Nate upstream, fifty feet away, running along the bank in his direction.

Joe righted himself until he could get his feet underneath him. He shinnied up the root until he was out of the water. He hugged the trunk of the old cottonwood like a lover, and stood there gasping for breath.

"That wasn't a very good idea," Nate said when he got there.

JOE WAS SHIVERING as they backed the ranch truck out and ground back up the hill.

"There is only one way to get to the ranch," Joe said, his teeth chattering.

"The river?" Nate said.

"Yup."

"We'll die."

"We might. You want me to drop you off at your house?"

Nate looked over with a face contorted by pure contempt.

"I'll row," Joe said. "You bail."

*

JOE BACKED THE ranch truck on the side of the garage of his old house and Nate leaped out. It took less than five minutes to hook up the trailer for the fifteen-foot drift boat with the leaky bottom. The boat was filled with standing rainwater, and the motor of the truck strained to tow it onto the highway. Despite losing minutes, Joe stopped so Nate could run and pull the plug on the rear of the boat. They got back

on the highway and drove with a stream of rainwater shooting out of the stern of the vessel. Joe wished he had finished patching up the leaks.

"Have you ever taken a boat like this on a river like *that*?" Nate asked as they backed the trailer up toward the river at the launch site.

"No."

"This is technical whitewater," Nate said, looking out at the foamy white rooster-tails that burst angrily on the surface. Downstream was a series of massive rollers.

"Where are your life vests?"

Joe said, "Back in the garage."

29

IT WAS A rocket ride.

Nate was in the bow of the boat, holding the sides with both hands to steady himself. His job was to warn Joe, who was manning the oars, of oncoming rocks and debris—full-grown trees, cattle, a horse, an old wooden privy—by shouting and pointing. Joe missed most of them, rowing furiously backwards and turning while pointing the bow at the hazard and pulling away from it. They hit a drowned cow so hard that the impact knocked Nate to the side and Joe lost his grip on the oars.

Without Joe steering, the boat spun tightly to the right. Joe scrambled on his hands and knees on the floor of the boat through twelve inches of icy, sloshing water, trying to get back on the oars, when they hit the privy.

The shock sent both Nate and Joe falling to the side, which tipped the boat and allowed gallons of water to flow in.

They were sinking.

Luckily, the river calmed and Joe was able to man the oars again. Straining against both the current and hundreds of pounds of water inside the boat, he kept the oar blades stiff and fully in the water and managed to take the boat to shore. They hit a sandy bank and stopped suddenly.

Joe moaned and sat back on his seat. "This isn't going well."

Nate crawled back on his bench and wrung the water out of his ponytail. Joe watched as Nate patted his slicker down, making sure he still had his weapon.

"We need a big rubber raft for this," Nate said.

"We don't have one."

They got out and pushed the side of the boat with as much strength as they had, finally tipping it enough so most of the water flowed back out to the river. With the loss of the weight, the boat bobbed and started to race downstream again. Joe held on to the side, splashing through the water, the boat propelling him downstream, then finally launching himself back in. Nate pulled himself in and fell clumsily to the floor.

Joe pointed the bow downriver, and their speed increased. He could hear a roar ahead, a roar much bigger than what they had just gone through.

“Get ready!” Joe shouted.

Nate reached out for the rope that ran the length of the gunwales and wrapped his wrists through it with two twists.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Joe asked. “If the boat flips, you may not be able to get out of that rope.”

“Then don’t flip the boat,” Nate called over his shoulder.

Joe could feel their speed pick up. The air filled with spray from the rollers and rapids ahead. They were going so fast now that he doubted he could take the boat to the bank for safety if he wanted to. Which he did.

THE BANKS NARROWED into a foaming chute. What had two days ago been gentle ripples on the surface of the lazy water were now five- and six-foot rollers. On the sides of the river, trees reached out with branches that would skewer them if they got too close.

They had to go straight down the middle.

Joe knew the trick would be to keep the bow pointed straight downriver. If he let the bow get thrown right or left, the current would spin them and they’d hit a wall of water sideways, either swamping the boat or flipping it.

“Here we go!” Nate shouted, then threw back his head and howled like a wolf.

The bow started to drift to the left, and Joe pulled back hard on the right oar. It would be tough to keep the oars in the water as they hit the rollers, but he would have to. If he rowed back and whiffed—the oar blade skimming the surface or catching air—he would lose control.

“Keep it straight!” Nate hollered.

Suddenly, they were pointing up and Joe could see clouds. A second later they crested, the front half of the boat momentarily out of the river, and the boat tipped and plunged straight down. He locked the oar grips with his fists, keeping them parallel to his chin, keeping the blades in the water.

They made it. Only a little splash came into the boat.

But before he could breathe again, they were climbing another roller, dropping again so swiftly he thought he’d left his stomach upriver, then climbing again, aiming straight at the clouds.

Joe kept the boat straight through seven massive rollers.

When the river finally spit them out onto a flat that moved swiftly but was much more calm, Joe closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply.

“Damn,” Nate said with admiration.

“That was perfect.” Joe relaxed his hands and arms and gave in to the terrible pain that now pulsed from exertion in his shoulders, back, and thighs.

“JOE,” NATE SAID, turning around on his bench and facing Joe at the oars, “about Marybeth last year.”

“Not now,” Joe said sharply.

“Nothing happened,” Nate said. “I never should have behaved that way. I let us both down.”

"It's okay," Joe said. "I mean it."

"I wish I could find a woman like that," Nate said. He started to say more, then looked at Joe's face, which was set in a mask.

"We've got to get square on everything," Nate said. "It's vital."

"Okay, we're square," Joe said, feeling the shroud that he'd been loath to admit had still been there lift from him. "Now please turn around and look for rocks. Finding my girls is the only thing I care about right now."

THE RIVER ROARED around to the right and Nate pointed at something on the bank. Joe followed Nate's arm and saw the roof of a building through the brush. A moment later, corrals came into view. The corrals were underwater, the railing sticking out of the water. Two panicked horses stood in the corner of the corral, water up to their bellies.

"It's Hank's place," Joe said, pulling hard on the oars to work the boat over to the corrals.

They glided across the surface of the water until the railing was within reach and Nate grabbed it and the boat shuddered to a stop. Joe jumped out with the bow rope and pulled the boat to shore. They tugged until the boat was completely out of the water, so that in case the river continued to rise the boat wouldn't float downriver without them.

AFTER FREEING THE horses, they slogged through the mud toward the lodge. Nate had his .454 Casull drawn and in front of him in a shooter's grip. Joe wished he still had his shotgun because he was such a poor shot with his handgun.

As he followed Nate through the dripping trees toward Hank's lodge, Joe drew his .40 Glock. The gun was wet and gritty. He checked the muzzle to make sure there was no dirt packed into it. He tried to dry it on his clothing as he walked, but his shirt and pants were soaked. He wiped it down the best he could, then racked the slide to seat a round.

Hank's lodge was handsome, a huge log home with a green metal roof. It looked like a structure that would suit an Austrian prince who entertained his hunting friends in the Alps.

Nate began to jog toward it, and Joe followed. The front door was open. Joe could see no signs of life, and no lights on inside. He wondered if the storm had knocked out the electricity.

Nate bounded through the front door and moved swiftly to his left, looking around the room over the sights on his revolver. He had such a practiced way about his movements, Joe noted, that there was no doubt he had entered buildings filled with hostiles before in his other life.

Joe mimicked Nate's movements, except he flared off to the right.

It was dark and quiet in the house. It felt empty.

The floor was wet and covered with leaves from the open door. Dozens of mounted game animals looked down on them from the walls. Elk, moose, caribou, antelope,

mule and whitetail deer. A full-mount wolverine, an endangered species, looked poised to charge them. A golden eagle, wings spread as if to land, hovered above them.

"That son-of-a-bitch," Nate said, referring to Hank but looking at the eagle. Nate liked eagles.

Arlen was right, Joe thought. The lodge was filled with illegally taken and poached species. The mounts were expertly done. He knew the work of all the local taxidermists, and whoever had done the mounts was unfamiliar to him. But that was part of his old job, Joe thought. It no longer concerned him.

Nate moved through the living room into a massive dining hall. Joe followed.

Dirty plates covered the table, and a raven that must have flown in from the open front door walked among the plates. The bird stopped and looked at them, head cocked to the side, a piece of meat in its beak. The raven waddled the length of the table until it got to the head of it. Then it turned and cawed, the sound sharp and unpleasant. Nate shot it and the bird exploded in a burst of black feathers.

"I *hate* ravens," Nate said.

Joe's ears rang from the shot in the closed room, and he glowered at Nate.

"Uh-oh," Nate said. "Look."

The chair at the head of the table was knocked over. Nate approached it and picked up a red-stained steak knife from the floor next to it.

Joe began to walk around the table when he felt the soles of his boots stick to the floor. He looked down and recognized blood. There was a lot of it, and it hadn't dried yet.

"I wonder who it was?" Nate asked.

Now Joe could smell it. The whole room smelled of blood.

But there was no body.

They quickly searched all the rooms of the house. It was empty.

As they slogged back to the boat, Joe felt a mounting sense of dread that made it hard to swallow. The river would take them to Arlen's place next.

"Let's go get my girls," Joe said.

30

THE NEXT SET of rapids was not as severe as the big rollers they had been through, and although his arms were aching, Joe kept the boat straight and true and they shot through them without incident. The rain receded to a steady drizzle, although there was no break in the clouds. Because the sky was so dark, Joe couldn't tell the time. He glanced quickly at his wristwatch as he rowed but it was filled with water and stuck at 8.34 a.m., the exact time the river had sucked him in.

Joe and Nate didn't talk, each surrounded by his own thoughts. Joe contemplated what they would find at the lower ranch. If he let his mind wander off the oars to the fate of his girls he found it difficult to remain calm. Inside, his heart was racing and

something black and cold lodged in his chest. As hard as he tried, though, the faces of Sheridan and Lucy at breakfast kept coming back to him.

He thought: No matter what, there will be hell to pay.

THE RIVER NARROWED through two tall bluffs. Although there were no rapids, it was as if the current doubled in speed. Joe could feel wind in his face as they shot forward. The tiniest dip of an oar would swing the boat about in water this fast, so he steered as if tinkling the keys of a piano, lowering an oar blade an inch into the water to correct course.

As the river swept them along and the bluffs receded behind them, Joe started to recognize the country. To the left, a mile away, was a hill that looked like an elephant's head. Joe had noted it when he brought Sheridan out to Julie's. They were getting close.

The river widened. The tops of willows broke the surface a third of the way to the edge where the river normally flowed. The thick river cottonwoods began to open up a little, allowing more muted light to fall on the surface of the water.

Because his feet and legs were numb, Joe didn't notice at first that the boat was sinking. But when he looked down, he saw the water at his ankles. Somewhere, they had knocked more cracks or holes in the hull and the water was seeping in. He hoped they could get to the ranch before the boat filled again. He didn't want to waste another minute dumping the boat.

Nate started to bail with a gallon bucket. It helped a little, but he was losing the battle.

They rounded a bend and the river calmed for the first time since they'd gotten in the boat. The roar of the water hushed to a whisper. Calves bleated just ahead. The ranch was near.

That's when Joe saw her. She stood on a brushy hillside on the left side of the bank, hands on hips, thrusting her face out at them with an unfamiliar smile on her face. His mouth dropped open and he let the oars loose in an involuntary reaction.

"Joe, who is that?" Nate asked, pausing with the bucket in midbail.

"Opal," Joe said, his voice cracking. "Opal Scarlett."

This was the exact spot described by Tommy Wayman, Joe thought. She was there after all, had been there all along, just as he surmised.

Nate said, "Why in the hell is she standing out in the rain like that?"

"She's watching the end play out," Joe said.

"Jesus," Nate said, screwing up his mouth in distaste.

"Opal!" Joe called out, raising his hand. "Opal!"

She didn't react. As they passed her, she didn't turn her head and follow them, but stared stonily at the river.

"She couldn't hear you," Nate said.

"How could she not?"

"She's old and probably deaf. And definitely crazy," Nate said in awe.

"She's been here all along," Joe said, his mind numb.

THEY BEACHED THE boat on the bank with the water level inside just a foot below the sides of the boat. Another ten minutes in the water and the boat would have gone under.

Joe and Nate leaped out, leaving the boat to settle into the mud.

“Should we go talk to Opal? Find out what she knows?” Nate asked, looking from Joe to the ranch compound ahead and back. He was deferring to Joe, a new thing.

“Later,” Joe said. “I don’t want to waste time chasing her down. We can find her after we’ve checked out the buildings. Sheridan and Lucy have to be here.”

Nate gave him a look. How could he be so sure?

Joe didn’t acknowledge it. He just felt they were near.

The side of a fresh embankment had collapsed into the river from the rain. Something stuck out of the dirt of the wall, something long, horizontal, and metal. Nate approached it and rubbed mud away. It was the bumper of a car. Someone had used a front-end loader to bury it.

“Cadillac,” Nate said, clearing the mud from the logo.

“Opal’s car,” Joe said. “She buried it so everyone would think she drove away.”

“Why would she do that?”

Joe thought for a moment. “So she could see who won.”

AS THEY APPROACHED Arlen’s house, Joe’s insides were churning and he tried to swallow but couldn’t. He glanced down at the gun in his hand and saw it shaking.

“I’ll take the front,” Nate said. “You come in the back.”

“If you see Keeley,” Joe said, “shoot first.”

“Not a problem,” Nate said.

As they parted, Nate reached out and grabbed Joe’s arm.

“Are you okay to do this?”

Joe said, “Sure.”

“Stay cool.”

JOE KEPT A row of blooming lilac bushes between him and the side of the house as he jogged around toward the back. As at Hank’s house, he could see no lights on inside or any sign of life. A calf bawled in the distance from a holding pen. Drizzle flowed softly through the leaves of the trees and running water sang through the downspouts of the house.

He stepped over a low fence and into the backyard. There was a porch and a screen door. The door was unlocked and he opened it as quietly as he could and stepped inside a dank mudroom. Heavy coats lined the walls and a dozen pairs of boots were lined up neatly on the floor.

The mudroom led to the huge kitchen where Sheridan had described seeing Arlen and Bill Monroe together. Joe skirted the island counter and stood on the side of the opening that went into the family room.

There was an acrid mix of smells in the home—chemicals Joe couldn’t identify, years of cooking residue on the walls, and a sharp metallic smell that took him back to Hank’s dining room: blood.

Holding his weapon out in front of him, he wheeled around the opening into the dining room and saw the Legacy Wall facing him. All the pictures were smashed and some had fallen to the ground.

Furniture was overturned. A china cabinet was on its side, spilling coffee cups and plates across the floor. A wild spray of blood climbed the Legacy Wall and onto the ceiling. A pool of blood stained the carpet on the floor. It was a scene of horrendous violence.

"Jesus," Nate said as he entered the living room from the front and looked around.

Joe called, "Sheridan! Lucy!"

His shout echoed through the house.

Nate wrinkled his nose. "I recognize that smell."

"What is it?"

"Alum," Nate said, turning to Joe. "It's used for tanning hides."

THEY HEARD A sound below them, under the floor. A moan.

"Is there a basement?" Nate asked.

Joe shrugged, looking around.

They heard the moan again. It was deep and throaty.

Nate turned, strode back through the dining room toward the front door. "I remember seeing a cellar door on the side of the house," he said.

Joe followed.

*

OUTSIDE, NATE TURNED and hopped off the front porch toward the side of the house Joe had not seen. They rounded the corner and Joe could see a raised concrete abutment with two doors mounted on top. The mud near the cellar was pocked with footprints leading to it. Someone was down there.

Nate ran to the doors and threw them open, stepping aside in case someone was waiting with a weapon pointing up. But nothing happened.

"Sheridan!" Joe called. "Lucy!"

The moan rolled out, louder because the door was open.

"Come out!" Nate boomed into the opening. "Come out or I'll come in!"

The moan morphed into a high wail. Joe recognized the sound of Wyatt Scarlett when he had cried months before, after his brothers got in the fight.

Joe pushed past Nate and went down the damp concrete stairs. Nate followed. The passageway was dark but there was a yellow glow on the dry dirt floor on the bottom. The chemical smells were overpowering as Joe went down.

He had to duck under a thick wooden beam to enter the cellar. Nate didn't see it and hit his head with a thump and a curse.

What Joe saw next nearly made his heart stop.

It was a taxidermy studio. A bare lightbulb hung from a cord. Half-finished mounts stared out with hollow eye sockets from workbenches. Foam-rubber animal heads filled floor-to-ceiling shelves, as did jars and boxes of chemicals and tools.

Wyatt sat on the floor, his legs sprawled, cradling Arlen Scarlett's head in his lap. Arlen's eyes were open but he was clearly dead. There was a bullet hole in Arlen's cheek and another in his chest.

Hank was laid out on a workbench, his cowboy boots pointed toward the ceiling, his face serene but white, his hands palms up.

And there was a man's entire arm on the floor near Wyatt's feet, the hand still gripping a pistol. The arm appeared to have been wrenched away from the body it had belonged to. Joe didn't think that was possible, but here it was right in front of him.

Joe didn't even feel Nate run into him accidentally and nearly send him sprawling.

Wyatt looked up at Joe, his eyes red with tears, his mouth agape with a silent sob.

"Wyatt," Joe asked. "What happened here?"

The youngest Scarlett boy closed his eyes, sluicing the tears from them, which ran down his cherubic face.

"Wyatt ..."

"My brothers are dead," Wyatt said, his voice breaking. "My brothers—"

"Who did it?"

Wyatt's body was wracked with a cry. "Bill Monroe."

Joe thought, *J. W. Keeley*.

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He ran away."

"Is that his arm?"

There was a flash in Wyatt's eyes. "I tore it out when I saw him shoot Arlen. Took a few hard twists to get it off, but it wasn't no different than pulling a drumstick off a roast chicken. I thought I killed him last night, after what he did to Hank. But he came back."

Joe thought: the blood on the wall and ceiling upstairs.

"Wyatt," Joe said, trying to keep his voice calm but failing in his effort, so as not to upset the big man and cause him to clam up, "Did Monroe have my girls with him?"

Wyatt nodded sincerely. "And Julie too. But not anymore."

"Where are they?"

"They're safe," Wyatt said. "They're in my shack. Bill told Arlen he was going to hurt them if he didn't give him money. Julie's mom is there too."

Joe felt a surge of blistering relief, although he wondered where Keeley was.

Nate asked, "Why are your brothers down here, Wyatt?"

Wyatt clenched his eyes, shaking his head from side to side. He looked like he was about to explode.

"Nate," Joe cautioned.

Nate pressed, "Why did you bring them down here?"

Wyatt whispered, "To preserve them. So I could preserve my family. We're very important here. And I loved them so much, even though they didn't love each other."

"Like you preserved your mother," Nate said.

Wyatt nodded, then looked up eagerly. "Did you see how I made her smile? Not many people knew how she could smile. They know now."

Joe turned and shouldered past Nate toward the stairs.

"Please stay with him," Joe said. "I'm going to get my girls."

HE RAN ACROSS the ranch yard and down the road on legs that felt as if they could go out on him at any time. The scene in the cellar had scorched his soul, and Wyatt had broken his heart.

J. W. Keeley was still out there, as far as Joe knew. As he ran, he held his gun in front of him with two hands and searched for movement of any kind in the dark trees near the ranch buildings. How far could a man go with a wound like that, he wondered. He'd seen deer and elk travel for miles with legs blown off by careless hunters. But a man?

Then a horrible thought struck him as he ran: Maybe Keeley had found the girls.

SHERIDAN'S EARS WERE numb from the drumming of the heavy rain on top of the tin roof of the shack. So numb, that when she heard a cry outside she doubted herself. Just like earlier, when she thought she had heard gunshots outside and even the unholy scream of a man. In both instances, she couldn't be sure that her mind wasn't playing tricks on her. This time, though, she heard the cry again.

"Is someone coming?" Lucy asked from where she was huddled in the corner of Wyatt's shack.

"Yes," Sheridan said, summoning all her courage to approach the window and brush aside the curtains. The glass outside was still streaked with running rain, and the view undulated with the water. A form appeared in the murk outside, a man running toward the shack, crouching, looking around as if he expected someone to jump out at him. She recognized the form.

She stepped back from the window and turned to Lucy, beaming. Everything was suddenly right with the world.

"Dad's here," she said.

LIGHTS WERE ON in Wyatt's shack. Joe called out again for his girls.

He heard, "Dad!" in response. Sheridan. A squeal from Lucy.

The door was locked. He jerked on it and pushed it but it was solid.

"Just a minute," Doris Scarlett said from inside.

He heard a bolt tumble and the door opened inward. Sheridan, Lucy, and Julie Scarlett were inside, behind Doris. Lucy ran across the floor and bear-hugged Joe around the waist.

Sheridan said, "Boy, are we glad to see you."

Joe closed the door behind him and pulled both of his daughters to him.

Lucy said, "You're really wet, Dad."

Joe sat them down on a couch with Julie. He said, "Tell me what happened."

Sheridan told the story about Bill Monroe taking over the bus, turning it around, and getting it stuck as they tried to cross the river. Monroe made them get out and wade to the shore, and they all walked through the mud to the ranch. When they got

to the ranch yard, Wyatt came out of the cellar and yelled at Bill Monroe to go away. When he wouldn't, Wyatt charged him and hit him in the head. Monroe ran, cursing, toward the house where Arlen now stood on the front porch. Monroe went inside and Arlen closed the door. Wyatt told Doris and the girls to go to his shack and lock the door and not let anyone in unless it was he.

That's all they knew, and Joe was relieved. They hadn't seen what happened inside.

"Have you seen Keeley since?" Joe asked, "I mean Bill Monroe," he said, to avoid confusion.

"Keeley?" Sheridan asked. "Like April? The same name?"

"I'm afraid so."

Sheridan and Lucy exchanged glances. "I told you his face was familiar. He has April's eyes," Sheridan said to Lucy, referring to her stepsister.

Joe shook his head, then looked at Julie who sat silent and alone at the end of the couch. She had no idea she'd lost her uncle and her father. Thank God her mother was there.

He stood.

"Keep the door locked, just like Uncle Wyatt told you. I'll be back in a minute."

Doris said, "Please be careful. Don't let Bill Monroe find us."

Her voice trembled as she said it, and Joe could see how terrified she was. "Can't you stay with us?"

Joe considered it, but shook his head. He couldn't assume Keeley had bled to death. And even if he had, Joe needed to see the body. "I need to be sure he can't threaten anyone again," he said.

"Then can we go home?" Lucy asked.

Joe didn't ask which home she meant. "Yes," he said.

ALL HIS THOUGHTS and feelings channeled into one: revenge.

Joe returned to the front porch of the house and studied the concrete. Although rain had washed most of it away, he could still see traces of blood. Nate must have missed it in his haste on the way in. He backed off the porch and looked around on the wet loam. A spot here, a splash there. Headed in the direction of the barn.

It was like following a wounded game animal, Joe thought. He looked not only for blood flecks but for churned up earth, footprints, places where Keeley had fallen as he staggered away.

There was a depression in the grass where Keeley must have collapsed, his shoulder punching a dent into the turf that was now filling with water and a swirl of blood.

Keeley hadn't made it all the way inside the barn. He sat slumped against the outside door, next to a boat that was propped up against the wall. Joe guessed Keeley was going for the boat when he collapsed. Keeley's legs were straight out in front of him. He held the stump of his left arm with his right hand, covering the socket tight with bone-white fingers. Still, blood pumped out between his joints with every weakening heartbeat. Joe couldn't see a weapon on Keeley or near him as he approached. But Keeley watched Joe the whole time, his eyes sharp, his mouth twisted with hate.

"That Wyatt, he is the one I never thought about," Keeley said. "He is one strong son-of-a-bitch."

"Yup," Joe said, remembering when Wyatt snapped the Flex-Cufs.

Keeley looked up. His eyes were black and dead. "You destroyed my family. My brother, my sister-in-law, my baby girl."

"What do you mean, your baby girl?"

"She was *my* daughter," Keeley said, and his eyes flashed.

"You mean, you and Jeannie ..."

"Damned right, me and Jeannie. Ote was gone a lot."

"So that's why you did all of this? To get back at me?"

Keeley nodded.

"I did all I could to save April," Joe said, angry. "We loved her like our own."

"Horseshit. Not like a father loves a daughter."

Joe clenched his fists so hard his nails broke the skin on his palms. He wanted to hurl himself at Keeley and start swinging. Instead, he felt his right hand relax enough to undo the safety strap on his service weapon.

"What the hell would you know about being a father?" Joe said. "You were just the sperm donor."

"Fuck you," Keeley spat.

Joe stood over him, looking down, his fingers curling around the pistol grip. "Is there any point in talking to you? Telling you I had nothing to do with the death of your daughter or your brother?"

"I know what I know," Keeley said. "You and Wacey Hedeman were involved in my brother getting killed. You were there when April was assassinated."

Joe shook his head, speaking calmly. "You were the one who poisoned Wacey then too?"

"Yup."

"And the cowboy? The one who got shot on Shirley Rim?"

"That one was the best of all."

Keeley made a cold smile with his mouth but his eyes remained steady on Joe. "I wish I'da taken care of your daughters. I should have. They were right there. I got greedy, though. I got stupid. I wanted to make Arlen live up to his word to pay up."

Joe squatted so he could look at Keeley's face at eye level. What he saw disgusted him, terrified him. He thought of what Keeley had done to his family. What he had done to Wyatt. What he could do to him and others if he recovered, as unlikely as that seemed. J. W. Keeley would always be a threat to him and to everyone around him.

"I need a doc," Keeley said. "Call me a doc. I ain't got long like this."

Joe said, "Six years ago Wacey Hedeman was in a situation just like yours. He was down on the ground bleeding. I let him go. It was the wrong decision."

Keeley studied Joe and sneered, "You got a badge. You can't just do that."

Joe said, "Not anymore," and raised the Glock, pressed it against Keeley's forehead. Behind him, Nate called out, "Joe! Don't!"

Joe pulled the trigger. Keeley's head kicked back against the barn door and he slumped over to the side, dead. Even Joe couldn't miss from an inch away.

WHEN JOE STOOD and turned, he saw Nate stumbling across the grass toward him. Nate was hurt.

"The son-of-a-bitch Wyatt coldcocked me when I looked away," Nate said unsteadily. There was blood on the side of his head.

"Wyatt did that?" Joe asked, his voice disembodied due to what he had just done. He didn't feel triumphant, or guilty. He didn't know how he felt yet.

Behind Nate, a curl of smoke came out of an upstairs window of the ranch house. Then another. And the windows lit up with flame inside.

Joe approached Nate, his gun hanging limply at his side. He was numb everywhere. Although he knew what he was watching, it seemed as if it were on a movie screen; it didn't seem real. He could still feel the sharp recoil of the gun in his hand, feel the shock waves shoot up his arm from the shot. Thought about the way Keeley had simply collapsed on himself and pitched to the side, like a side of beef, the evil spark gone that had once lit him up.

Thinking: Killing is easier than it should be. John Wayne Keeley probably had the same thought.

Then: What has happened to me? How could he have dared to threaten my daughters?

FLAMES WERE LICKING through the windows and front door, the roof was burning. Joe could smell the smoke, hear 120-year-old wooden beams popping inside the structure.

"Where's Wyatt?" Joe asked, his voice seeming hollow, lifeless.

"I think he got out," Nate said, now recovered enough to stand next to Joe.

"Nope," Joe said, pointing. "There he is."

Wyatt appeared on the side of the house through the smoke. He was hard to see clearly because of the pulsing waves of heat. But it was big-shouldered Wyatt, walking straight toward the house with something over his shoulder.

Opal. Stiff as a board.

Wyatt carried the mount of his mother through the front door, straight into the teeth of the fire.

"My God," Nate said. "He's making a funeral pyre."

"I was sure wrong about Opal," Joe said, his voice tinny and distant.

Nate said, "Before he thumped me, Wyatt told me his mother died of a heart attack that morning after some guide named Wayman threw her in the river. She died peacefully, and Arlen found her. Arlen buried her in secret because he knew about the will giving Hank the ranch, but Wyatt saw him and dug her up. Wyatt made her into what she always wanted to be—immortal. And what *he* always wanted her to be."

"Pleasant," Joe said.

"Hell of a legacy," Nate said.

AS DUSK APPROACHED, Joe sat with his girls in Wyatt's shack. Doris comforted Julie, whispering to her that things would be all right. Julie appeared catatonic. Sheridan reached out to her, held her hand.

The house continued to burn until it collapsed in on itself. The rain stopped and the sky cleared.

Joe was surprised to find out that telephone service was restored to Wyatt's phone, and he called Marybeth.

"I'm with the girls," he said. "They're safe."

He listened with tears in his eyes as Marybeth cried with joy, and handed the phone to Sheridan and Lucy so they could talk with her.

When they finally handed the phone back, Joe gave her an abbreviated version of what had happened. Since the girls were listening, Joe didn't tell her about any of the details, only that J. W. Keeley had brought the girls to the ranch, that they'd been saved by Wyatt, and that Keeley and the Scarlett brothers had had a fight which resulted in the house burning down.

The story shocked her into silence.

"There's a lot more to it, isn't there, Joe?"

It was as if she knew he'd killed J. W. Keeley in cold blood.

"Yes, there is. But it's for later," he said.

She said the sheriff's office had just called and they were sending the helicopter out. It should be there any minute.

"Is Nate still there?" she asked.

"Yes, but I haven't seen him recently."

"You might want to tell him the sheriff is coming," she said.

Joe agreed and hung up.

JOE COULD HEAR the distant approaching thump of the helicopter as he walked the ranch yard. The smoke from the fire stung his nose and made his eyes tear up.

Nate was gone. So was a drift boat Joe had seen earlier leaning against the barn. And so was J.W. Keeley's body. Joe guessed it was in the fire, where it would be discovered with the others. Neat and clean.

Joe drew his weapon and threw it as far as he could into the river. His holster followed.

It was crashing in on him now: what had happened, what he'd done, how J.W. had forever welded the fates of the Keeley, Scarlett, and Pickett families together by death.

As he saw Sheridan and Lucy walking toward him from Wyatt's shack, he thought: But we are the ones who are left standing. Unlike Keeley or the Scarletts, Sheridan and Lucy are still here.

And that was all that mattered.

Sheridan stood close to him and asked, "Are you okay, Dad?"

"I'm fine," he lied.

"What happens now?"

He could have said, “Everything will be different.” But he didn’t. Instead, he pulled his daughters close to him and waited for the helicopter.

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