

# HORRIBILUS



**STAN WALCHUK, Jr.**

# HORRIBILIS

A Novel

**STAN WALCHUK JR**



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## *DEDICATED TO:*

Youth. Kids born into a technological society but through the love of parents, friends, family, God, or virtue, providence, reasons unknown, are children of the earth. Kids who willingly pass up screen time to camp, hike, plant gardens, walk dogs, fish, hunt, climb mountains, ride horses, kayak, canoe, ski, etc. Don't ever stop – the natural world needs you and you need it, more than you may ever know.



The Grizzly Bear's Science (Latin) Name:

*Ursus arctos horribilis*

'The Horrible Bear'

-Named by early American Explorers



# *CONTENTS*

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	22
Chapter 3.....	40
Chapter 4.....	45
Chapter 5.....	59
Chapter 6.....	78
Chapter 7.....	119
Chapter 8.....	145
Chapter 9.....	152
Chapter 10.....	187
Chapter 11.....	218
Chapter 12.....	239
Chapter 13.....	287



# CHAPTER 1

Forests and farmlands of the mountain valley are smothered in early morning fog. Mountains run either side of the valley, their peaks thrust high above, hidden by the fog.

A weathered clapboard farmhouse sits along the forest's edge, its crooked structure melted into quack grass. A spit from the house lay pigs huddled in the corner of a soiled page wire hog pen. Second growth willow and aspen crowd the wire, intent on devouring the enclosure.

A young pig – a shoat – rose to its feet, nose pointed toward the forest. The shoat held steady, snout stuck out, curly tail rigid, the fine form of a German Shorthaired Pointer. It sensed something, studied the forest muted grey in the pre-dawn.

A bear's head materialized, a floating apparition suspended in the fog. Brown and blonde hairs shone wet, deep-set black eyes, dished bulldog head; self-possessed, cruel. The grizzly stepped forward its bulk emerged from the brush, nose up, head swayed side to side. Stink of the bear's fetid hair and hide flooded the shoat's nostrils. The shoat grunted then ran to the far corner. Pigs up and milling.

The bear charged the pen, stopped abruptly, then rose on hind legs to full height. A melee of pigs sprinted nowhere then back again. The bear dropped, nose to the ground, snuffed, paused, then slashed, once, twice, three times. Three-inch claws

ripped through wire as if spider's web. The bear stuffed its bulk through the jagged hole. Shoats dashed blindly in a pig storm, horror descended, squeals of terror, echoes of ancestors butchered.

Pigs scattered, one shoat hesitated. A blow, the shoat sailed then ground struck, face in the dirt.

The shoat's body inert then clenched between jaws and lifted skyward. Surreal, even for a pig. The sound of bones crunching, body spasms, then dark nothing. The shoat's body slung loosely from jaws like the sausage it was destined to become. The bear stepped through the hole then hesitated, turned its head, considered the pigs now bunched in corners. More for the taking.

A movement on the house porch.

BOOM!

The bear's body slammed sideways, dropped the shoat, kept its feet and lunged for the cover of brush.

BOOM!

Right-front leg buckled, three legs drove forward, crashed over saplings blood red in the wake. Momentum stalled, thrusts forward as a dozer lost its track, losing power. Back legs spasm. Blood spray a blanket to lay on. Death moan like a bull's bellow; anger, defiance, sorrow, the bear's final effort on earth.

The old lady rammed two 3-inch magnum, 00 buckshot shells into a battle-scarred 12-gauge pump shotgun. "Got you this time you sonofabitch," she said.

\* \* \*

Tom Beck's body splayed on the bed his face crushed against sheets, a bare leg stuck out over the side, other leg slid

up against Billy-Jo. His morning face creased, what Beck called sleep wrinkles. No, Billy-Jo said, lifelines, you earned them, your map of a life well lived. Kids used to grab hold of Beck's jowls and pull bat wings then laugh and call it elephant skin. Then grandkids did the same thing.

Music.

Beck's arm jumped as if expecting the call, snatched the cell phone off the bed stand. "What," he said. "Who is this? Do you know what time it is? Yes ma'am, 6am. Yes ma'am, a bear in the yard is a common thing these days, best to call the office in a couple hours and Wanda will write up a report. What? You shot the bear? Well then, it's not going anywhere is it. No, this is head warden Tom Beck, Cooper was transferred down to Wainbridge last Christmas. A grizzly? You sure it's a grizzly? No ma'am I'm not questioning your judgement. No, I did not say I don't care about your pigs, hogs. Well ma'am, it's dead, it won't mind waiting a couple hours. Well, you're welcome."

The cell phone set on the bed stand. Beck found the pillow, laid his head back and dragged a forearm across his eyes.

"How'n the world the pig lady get my personal cell number?" he said.

"Tom, this town has 800 people in it, about 600 of them have your phone number, Billy-Jo said. If they don't, their neighbour does. I guess Mrs. Finn had no trouble finding it."

"I get to feelin' they all got me on speed dial."

"You want I'll make bacon and eggs."

"You're a sweetheart, always were, always will be. No, you stay put, I can make my own cornflakes."

\* \* \*

Beck squatted by the hog pen, studied the jagged tear in the page wire now sewn with haywire. Fingered a strand older wire, a rusty band-aid. "This other wire looks sewed on at a different time," Beck said.

Old lady Finn stood, arms folded across her chest. "That was when the bear broke in and stole two shoats last fall," she said. "I already told you that. Could've ended it right there if I'd have been home. Was off dealing with Harry's funeral arrangements. Don't let the missus die on you, they're more trouble after they're dead than before."

"I'll keep that in mind. Show me where you last saw the bear."

"Call me Etta, that's short for Freida. Never did like that name." She pointed a bent forefinger to the bush.

Beck walked to the bush, took up an obvious trail. Saplings bent down, some painted lung blood red. Beck followed the path a few yards, the dying place obvious, pooled blood dark as vampire's lipstick. Studied the ground. Fresh tractor wheel tracks in the blood. Looked back at the old lady then beyond the blood toward the big timber, saplings folded over from tires like felled dominoes. Looked back at the old lady.

"Fresh wheel tracks in the blood," he said. "Where's the dead bear?"

"Bears," she said.

"Bears? You mean there's more than one?"

"Two young'uns. Dealt with them, too. Had to."

Beck squatted, placed his hand against his forehead, rubbed his face, talked to the blooded ground. "You killed three grizzly bears. He looked at the old lady. Where are they now?"

"The bury pit."

“Bury pit? You dig a hole then put three dead bears in it, and one dead pig?”

“Three dead bears. Pig’s in the kitchen cut up and salted down. No. Charlie Jenkins down the way got a hoe, comes over every few years, digs me a hole. Dead pig or what else dies they go in the hole and I shove in dirt so’s it keeps the stink down. What warden Cooper told me to do to keep the bears away. Lotta good that did.”

“You can’t just shoot three grizzly bears then bury them in a hole.”

“I can’t? I just did. Exactly what warden Cooper told me to do. That sow kilt two of my shoats last fall and he said she comes in again and threatens me then go ahead and shoot her.”

“Well, if he did, and I ain’t saying he did, that was last fall. Could be a different bear.”

“No, same sow. A little gaunt maybe, woke up this spring and took her time coming back for more dinner is all.”

“Beck shook his head. Etta, it’s a sorry day all around. That bear didn’t threaten you, she threatened the pigs. I admit she killed one, but you got no legal right to kill that sow and cubs. Have to dig up those bears and take pictures.”

“The hell you say. Dig ‘em up, what for? Those pigs is my livin’. All I got to support myself. Let the bears, coyotes, cougars kill ‘em and may as well bury me in that hole with ‘em. Here I go calling you because Cooper tells me to call if I have to kill that sow, and now you talking nonsense.”

Beck stood and faced the old lady. “You don’t give me any choice. Have to lay charges.”

“Get the hell off my place.” The old lady pointed to the road then jammed her finger in Beck’s chest. “You got more blarney

in you than my old granddaddy and him as Irish as Paddy's pig. Should've listened to what everyone said – shoot, shovel, and shut up.”

\* \* \*

“You know you're going over 70 miles an hour, slow down,” he said.

The driver lowered his side window, cold damp morning air ripped through the Ford pickup's cab. Pastures and hay fields raced by, morning dew in bright sun as brilliant diamonds. Morning fog dissipated. “Blue highways is what I was born for,” the driver said.

“This bear wagon begins to weave and it won't matter what you're born for. You should'a been a truck driver, not a game warden,” the passenger said as he turned his eye at the driver.

“Damn, just passed a cop hidden in that approach,” the driver said, then lifted his foot from the gas pedal and hit the brake and the passenger lurched forward palms braced against the dash.

“Geesus,” the passenger said.

They both checked their respective rear-view mirrors and see vacant highway. A short rise and a draw and the pickup slowed to 50 miles an hour about to dip out of sight. The last seconds before dropping into the hollow, a car suddenly slipped into the rearview mirror. It's flashing lights, red and blue, unmistakable. “Well shit anyways,” the driver said.

Siren wailed and the pickup edged shoulder side and stopped. The officer stepped to the driver's window already down. Lean, dark skin, sharp facial features. He studied the

driver then looked past the driver to the passenger. Nodded. The passenger nodded back. "Hello Lewis," the officer said.

"Hello Officer Albert John."

The officer gave the driver a brief study. "I suppose you got a bear in that trap."

"Yessir."

The officer paused then walked back to the trailer and looked into the breath holes of the gated metal drum. Saw the inert bulk of a black bear, radio collar around its neck. Walked back. "You know how fast you were travelling?"

"No sir."

"Seventy-two miles an hour. You have a reason for hauling this bear over my county at 72 miles an hour?"

The driver glanced at his watch. "Yessir," he said, "we need to get him up the end of Blueberry Mountain Road before the Telazol wears off."

The officer looked at the passenger. "Lewis," he said, "you worried about the drugs wearing off?"

"No sir, but then I'm not the guy who drugged him."

The officer looked back at the driver. "Where you from warden?"

"Aintry."

"Your name."

"Dennis."

"Your whole name."

"Dennis Gibson."

"Walt Betts your boss?"

"Yessir."

“How would a \$200 ticket for speeding and another \$200 for dangerous driving while hauling a trailer with a bear in it look on the resume of a game warden?”

“I’m sorry sir, I just got carried away wanting to get the bear into the woods. It won’t happen again.”

The police officer reached out a hand to grasp the west coast mirror frame, pulled closer, then pinned the driver with his eyes. The driver looked down at his shoes, at the brake pedal.

“Seventy-two miles an hour. Out of respect for the bear you’re saying.”

The driver dropped his eyes, forced a look at the officer. “Partly, I guess. I won’t let it happen again.”

The officer studied the driver. “I don’t believe a word of it,” he said, then looked across the ditch, across a field of hay laid in swaths, then back at the driver. “That black bear has white hair on it.”

“Yessir, a white patch on its chest.”

“You know what that means?”

“No sir.”

The officer looked at the passenger then back at the driver. “Spirit Bears have white hair on them,” he said, “you insult that bear’s spirit you won’t find a hole deep enough to hide in. I seen it happen to Tommy Jacks over at the Deep Creek Band, haunted by the bear spirit till he went insane and took his own life.”

“Sir?”

The officer looked at the passenger. “Lewis, see you Sunday at the Becks,” he said. “Don’t forget to get Ellie a gift. A good one. She’s the age, now, where she’d know the difference even if she wouldn’t say it.”

The officer looked at the driver. “Drop that bear off careful, and if I ever catch you speeding again you’ll wish you’d never crossed the county line. Now get out of here.”

The Ford turned off the highway then beat over a Texas gate and the bear wagon threw out to the side then fell back in line. They bounced over the Green River on a rough planked wooden trestle bridge. The first mile up, fence posts ran along pastures. Gophers popped from dirt mounds, sprinted hole to hole for no reason but the joy of it. Up the mountain haul road, pothole rough and runoff riddled, 60 years of trucks, skidders, semis, ATVs. A small-forker whitetail buck bolted across the road, back legs slipped and buckled in the sippy clay ditch, frantically scrambled to find its feet then up the side bank and disappeared into dark timber.

“Hand me one of them sodas, Pepsi,” the driver said.

Lewis glanced down at the yellow plastic 7-Eleven bag. “It’s 9am, too early for drinking,” he said.

“Ok, hold the whiskey, just the pop.”

Lewis slid the bag closer with a foot then reached down and pulled a soda from the plastic rings careful not to crush bags of potato chips.

The driver cracked the tab and lifted the can. Drank. Sighed. “He’s just shit’n me, ain’t he?”

“Who?”

“That cop. What is he, native?”

“His name’s Albert John.”

“So, is he a Indian or what?”

“From the Nakota Nation. Was raised in the deep coulees far from anywhere, said he never saw a white man until he was six years old.”

“Six years old. I guess it was all downhill from there.”

“Don’t mess with him, those Nakota people was the fiercest warriors of all. U.S. cavalry is lucky most of them are in Canada, or they would have known a whole other meaning of ‘Indian Wars.’ I’m not kidding, he’ll nail your ass. Albert is the best cop we got in Greenville. Your uniform’s got nothing on his.”

“That part about the Spirit Bear is bullshit, isn’t it, a white patch on its chest don’t mean anything, those white Spirit Bears is all white and come from the coast somewhere. Bella Coola or something.”

“They’re not always all white, part white sometimes. And you’re missing the point. You’re bouncing that bear inside that drum like a basketball and Albert John gave you a break so you can see that your lack of respect is the point.”

“You’re wrong,” the driver said, “Nez Perce is the fiercest warriors. Last tribe to give up. U.S. Cavalry chased their asses all over hell and back, cut ‘em off at the Canadian border. Rode those spotted horses with the scrawny tails.”

“Appaloosas.”

“What?”

“Appaloosas are what those horses are called. They come from the Palouse River, grasslands country in Oregon. Chief Joseph made that last stand just east of Idaho somewhere. Tell you what else you don’t know is why those Nez Perce warriors was such fierce fighters.”

The driver glanced at Lewis. “So, what, tell me,” he said.

“Well, if you had to ride an Appaloosa five miles to get to a battle you’d be totally pissed off too.”

The stream and the logging road hugged each other up the valley, forced bed partners between tight mountains. Steep

slopes, trees laid flat from past snow slides, slides with scree and boulders high cliff side then scattered down and slid over to grass and moss, interspersed willow brush. Dense spruce, fir, and hemlock roadside. The stream flat water smooth when over sand and gravel, bolder strewn rapids and churning froth at the hard drops. The truck laboured up and up the road, more a skid track than a road, finally levelled off, the stream hugged the left mountains, the track edged along trees against the right mountains. The narrow valley broadened, a meadow between the stream and the track winked between trees.

“Another couple miles at the end of the meadow is about as far as we’ll get,” Lewis said.

A log cabin set in the meadow suddenly appeared; sheds, wood pile, pickup truck, splitting block, surrounded by big spruce.

“I’ll be damned, look, there he is,” the driver said. “You think he sees us?”

“He’s walking right towards us. He don’t see us he’s blind or dead. He ain’t dead and I doubt he’s blind.”

The truck rolled along, the wardens with a sense of invasion as if they just trespassed into any Joe’s back yard unannounced.

“What’s that, is that a axe he’s carrying?” the driver said.

“Yup. There’s the cabin, there’s the wood pile. What’s he supposed to do, split wood with a rope?”

“Can’t see his face from here.”

“Just keep driving.”

\* \* \*

He stood with the axe in his hand until the truck and bear wagon laboured through a stand of trees and disappeared, then he walked and stood on the cabin deck. Four hounds around the corner of the cabin whined and yowled with anticipation, the sounds of the passing truck. Each dog ground-hitched with a 30-foot fine chain, each with a rough lumber doghouse. "Quiet," he said, then pressed the metal door latch and opened the saw-board door, stepped in, pulled the lid off a pan set on the stove, fingered a cut of steak into his mouth, chewed with purpose, slid a green canvas rucksack from a wooden wall peg and laid it on a plank table.

\* \* \*

The driver unlatched the hitch pins of the bear trailer and lowered the tailgate a short drop to the ground, the gentle ramp now set for the bear to make his way to freedom. You unlatch the trap gate, he said. Lewis looked at him and stepped up to the metal gate then pulled the bolt and swung it open. The bear's head lolled, its paw slowly reached out involuntarily for some unknown object. The driver stepped back.

Lewis grinned. "He's still loopy," he said.

"I don't wanna drive back late. It's Friday," the driver said.

"So? What, you have a hot date? We can't leave him until he walks off on his own. Government policy. Give it a half hour."

"Half hour. Ok. Half hour." The driver opened the cab door, sat, closed the door, put his head back, closed his eyes. Lewis sat on a cushion of moss, his back to the truck panel, a stem of spear grass in his teeth. Fifteen minutes later the cab door opened. "Let's just go," the driver said.

“Let’s wait,” Lewis said. “You’re scared of bears aren’t you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh, just thinking it. Maybe that idea about the Spirit Bear’s ghost got you spooked.”

“Shit. Maybe it’s got you spooked, you’re the one thinking it.”

“You know what those Nez Perce braves did, what they did to show their courage, what the young braves did to become a man?” Lewis waited for a response, but none came. “When they saw a bear, say when the bear was eating blueberries or digging out a ground hog or something, they would slip up behind the bear, reach out and grab a pinch of bear hair and run back the way they come. A show of courage, earned respect from the tribe, power over the bear.”

“The driver studied on it, stepped from the cab. I could do that,” he said.

Lewis looked up at the driver, smiled. “Sure,” he said.

The driver reached behind the seat and pulled out a tire iron. He walked to the back of the bear trap. “Come and have a look,” he said.

Lewis looked inside the drum. The bear lay on his belly, feet forward, eyes glazed, head tilted, confused, uncertain of life; what it was, what it is, what it will be.

“Watch out,” the driver said... BOOM, the tire iron slammed against the drum. The bear scabbled half out and half down the ramp, hesitated, staggered, pulled himself forward, then found his legs on the grass and wobbled his way 30 yards then laid belly down, face to the meadow, ass to the wardens.

Five minutes later the bear still laid flat, head up at times, resting at times.

“Let’s get out of here, the bear’s good to go,” the driver said.

“Well, he’s not gone yet, is he? Still feeling the Telazol. You really are scared of bears, aren’t you?”

“Stop the bullshit.”

“You said you could do it.”

“Do what?”

“You know, the brave thing, show your courage over the bear. Look at him, just laying there. Just think what the boys at the office would say.”

The driver folded his arms over his chest, studied the bear. Then he sat, unlaced high top work boots, pulled one off then the other, stood in socked feet. Looked over the meadow as if formulating a major offensive. He crouched, then slowly stalked toward the bear, 30 yards, 20 yards, 15. Stealthy, each foot creeping forward, acutely conscious of what lay under socked feet; a grass stem, a pebble, a twig. He stopped, looked back to Lewis then looked to the bear. The moment of truth, one more step and no turning back.

He took a deep breath, sprinted at the bear, body bent, arms, hands, outstretched as if racing to the ends of the earth. The final moment a blur – hands reached out for the bear’s hair, then.....foot betrayed by a clump of sod, stumbled, tripped, hands braced for the impact, hands hit, bear’s body fat and fluid, arms fold, face-first into the bear’s ass. The bear jumped, the driver screamed, arms flailed, rolled to the side, clawed at the ground, crabbed wildly back toward the truck yelled all the while, found his feet, ran with all his might his flight response

boosted by the horror. Survival mode kicked in, the death blow certain to come. Lewis convulsed on the ground in fits of laughter. The bear slowly waddled toward the meadow. Never did look back.

\* \* \*

He sat in a wooden rawhide-laced chair, warm coffee on the plank table. Rattle of the pickup approached from the uphill direction this time, the clatter of the bear wagon, on by, then faded. He stood, lifted a 45/70 Marlin lever action hung on a wall peg then set it on the table. Wool Mackinaw coat, dog radio collar receivers set on the table. He sat and pulled laces on his moose hide moccasins. He stepped outside and unlatched doors on two plywood dog boxes back of an '80s Dodge one-ton flat-deck. Hounds whining. A large male black-and-tan-cross's low melodic bark of the chase, the bitch and the two three-year-olds break out with chorus. He unclipped the big male's collar, the dog ran in circles, pissed on a truck tire. He unclipped the bitch, tapped the dog box. Kennel, he said. She leaped with grace, up and in then the male followed and he closed the gate. He led the three-year-olds to their box and they jumped in. He grabbed the coat, pack, rifle off the table, turned to the door.

Right side of the door-jam a mirror nailed to the log. Caught in the reflection of his own face. He stopped, slowly turned his head, partial view of the left side of his face, angle view visible only with his one good eye as far as the mirror would allow. Stopped and stared, a ritual before a chase was about to begin.

What stared back is what shut the door on his life. How fickle is fate, how the fools in the valley will learn the hard way, that paths in life they *think* they get to choose, what is every man's

and woman's *right* to choose, are subject to fate like every other damn thing. Choices get plugged with dead fall, washed out, wiped away in an avalanche, your only choice to breathe or not, to live, or not.

What he saw: half a face, dead eye a white marble, sunken crushed cheek. From twisted hairline down to the neck is skin but not skin, mangled scar upon scar; reds, browns, like dried rot. Two great white scars from scalp to jaw where claws struck, the nightmare imbedded, branded for life. White scars the masterpiece of the cruel hands of fate. He stepped out the door. Where those wardens finished their business was where his would start.

\* \* \*

Tom Beck walked through the main doors of the government building, through the doors of the warden service, poured a black coffee, added one sugar, swirled four times, walked past his secretary. "Hello Wanda," he said as he entered his office.

"Don't get too comfortable," she said to his back as he walked by. He sat in his swivel chair, propped feet upon his desk and crossed his legs. He took a drink, looked at the pictures of his wife, two grown and married kids, and three grandkids who weren't really kids anymore themselves. Of course, half the community seemed like a kid to him, now. He wondered where life had gone, then knew exactly where it had gone.

"Not a moment's rest," he said loudly out the door, then took another drink then added, "can't even let a man enjoy a morning coffee."

“I tried that,” she said, “you just bark at me, telling me, why did I wait so long to tell you the news.”

“And,” he said. The secretary appeared in the doorway. “John Stubbins called in first thing. He’s got a cow down he says needs to be looked at.”

“I ain’t a vet.”

“You know what I told him?”

“No, what?”

“You’re not a vet. He said it don’t need a vet, it needs revenge. He thinks a bear did it. Not your average gut pile, he said. Mr. Stubbins doesn’t strike me as someone who exaggerates.”

Beck tapped his finger against the edge of his coffee cup. “No, I guess he don’t.”

The secretary sat back at her desk and talked through the doorway. “BJ called and said don’t forget Ellie’s graduation dinner tomorrow. It’s Friday already. Stubbins ranch is on the Shasta Lake Road. Go over the second Texas gate, turn right at the next metal gate that goes into the pasture and follow the track.”

“I know where the ranch is,” he said. “Where’s Lewis anyway?”

“Gone to another bear release with that Dennis warden from Ainty.”

“Did they strap a camera to that one?”

“Don’t know, not a grizzly so I doubt it.”

“Friday,” he said as he walked out.

\* \* \*

Dust serpents trailed tires as the truck snaked its way over a dirt track through pastures of junegrass, bluestem, clumps of hair grass. Wild grasses, ancient ground yet untilled, old as the stunted pine and fir scattered on the bench top ahead, but not as old as the snow-covered mountain ridges running the length of Shasta Road from the main valley then 10 miles up to Shasta Lake. Cow patties scattered far and wide as he could see, a shitty reminder that life is now, not ancient times. The truck edged off the track and parched grasses crackled under tires like crushed grasshoppers, and some were. Beck thought the crackle of parched grass an omen. Rolled the possibility through his mind. Been bone dry all spring and now late June and no rain, he said to himself. May skies had been clear with a few late, hard frosts. Beck made a mental note – check the blueberry patches. No flowers, no berries, hungry bears, more bears down low, more trouble. As if there could be more. The truck climbed the bench then wove around a few head-high fir and straight ahead a dust-covered dark blue dually one-ton sat just off the track.

Beck stood at the head end of the dead cow. The cow's head and neck turned under its own chest, dirt-caked fleshy nose protruding from under a shoulder like a tumorous growth. Lifeless tongue a swollen slug extended to its sad end. The tall rancher stood near, his black shadow lay over Beck like a fence post. "See what I'm say'n," he said, "no cow I ever saw had a neck snapped like that, nearly at the shoulders. You tell me what did this."

Beck squatted and studied the carcass, parting hair at the shoulders and neck, along to the protruding nose. He stood and walked around to the gut of the cow, bent and lifted a loose flap of gut hide to reveal an empty gut cavity. The rancher removed

his weathered gray Stetson, wiped sweat from his forehead, placed the Stetson back on. "You see, almost no blood," the Rancher said, "no claw marks. That neck looks to me to be broke by one smooth blow. You ever see anything like this Tom? And the guts is gone, eaten out like someone with a sharp knife knew how to gut an animal proper. Eaten clean out."

"Well, it's no wolf, or cougar," Beck said.

"No, a cougar can't do that, maybe one awful big black bear, the rancher said." Tom walked around the carcass again, studied the sandy soil then walked eccentric circles around the cow then bent over as a man looking for nickels. He squatted and ran fingers over the soil then stood and slowly walked, then squatted again, fingers traced the ground again. He looked above toward the pasture bench, beyond the bench a wall of dark evergreens a few hundred yards distant. Pale undersides of light green underbrush. Ran his fingers over the ground again as if searching for some hidden truth coaxed from the soil. He walked further. Laid his spread-out hand, palm down, fingers and thumb splayed. Around the hand, inches to spare, the telltale ridges of a bear paw print, claws of a front paw cut into the sandy soil as if rimming a pie plate. Truth found.

"Come look at this," Beck said. The rancher stepped close, looked to Beck's hand then bent lower and the curious lines that ran his brow relaxed and he stood straight and new lines appeared, then he too looked to the distant forest. "Sunofagun," he said.

"Not a black bear," Beck said as he stood.

"I'll be darned. Grizzly maybe."

"No maybe about it," Beck said, then noticed the track of the bear's left front foot - not as deep or as distinct, smudged in

the sandy soil, the toes turned in. Maybe the bear turned abruptly, maybe favoured a damaged foot. Maybe born that way. Maybe.

“It’s gonna come back and finish his dinner,” the rancher said.

“You would think so. Maybe you could bring over a loader or hoe or something and bury the cow.”

“You paying me to run my tractor up here and dig a hole?”

“It’s up to you, it might help to send the bear on its way.”

“I’ll tell you what will send it on its way, my 300 Winchester Magnum rifle.”

“I won’t say I’d be sad to see this bear gone, but you can’t sit over dead domestic animals waiting for a grizzly to come in. There’s not even a grizzly season.”

“Well, that’s not my doing. I’ll just set up here before first light or after last light and wait for a coyote to come in and see what shows up.”

“What happens is you’ll walk up here in the dark with that bear downwind knowing exactly where you are. You’ll meet those paws up close and personal.”

“The rancher thought on it. Well, maybe I’ll just come in the daylight and see what’s on it.”

“You shoot that bear and it’s found out and your peaceful farm life will be traded for a nightmare. Every bear-hugging city fool and media type in the country will be after your hide. That’s everyone who loves Smoky the Bear, Bambi, and Winnie the Pooh, which is nearly everyone. There won’t be a fine big enough to satisfy them or any judge either. You better have a barn full of money, and it’ll be your hide nailed to that barn.”

“The rancher crossed arms over his chest, ran a boot over the ground. Well damn it all anyway,” he said. “I ain’t about to just stand by.”

“Sorry John, it’s just the way it is. I know it’s a loss. But those old boars generally don’t hang around. Best to let it go.”

“And go where, to kill somebody else’s cow, or worse?”

Beck walked to the truck then stood with arms laid over the front hood, looked over the length of the forest as it rimmed the pasture. A sorrow began to sink in like black water, bearer of something inexplicable as if the dead cow was an omen, a purveyor of the future. As if some crossroads of fate suddenly invaded the deep reaches of his soul, its flood a dark energy. His neck hairs tingled sending a cold chill. He looked long at the distant trees, the undergrowth, as if the trees themselves were looking back, or something was. The feeling passed. He got in, started the truck, drove off. It’s a fact that living each new day meant nothing would ever be the same, he thought. What he seriously wished, prayed for at times, if you could call it that, was that things *would* forever be the same, after a good day that is, at least for a long while. “Well,” he said, “nothing ever does stay the same.”

\* \* \*

The bear lay under a wide-limbed pine tree like a great content dog. Fully fed with beef innards and watered at a forest seep. Hidden by smooth grey stalks of alder thickets, stippled leaves waving pale green undersides in the light breeze, 10 feet from the pasture’s edge, 400 yards downwind from the kill. Seeing the kill meant nothing, smelling it was everything.

Hearing the doors of the humans' metal machines closing meant nothing, smelling the humans but a temporary concern. The bear's small black eyes saw all things close, the bear's nose knew the truth of all things far. The bear's mind held a lifetime of lessons. Nostrils as radar identifying and homing in on what is food, what is danger, what is everyday, what was suspicious. At times a three hour walk to what scent was caught in the breeze; carrion, offal from another predator's gutted animal, ripe rotted berries.

These humans would not remain. Besides, their presence would temporarily keep away coyotes, wolves, cougars, other bears. The bear stretched out his front legs, flexed five, four-inch claws on each foot, logger's wedges hard as steel, bases indestructible, leading edges dexterous and sharp. The movement brought the familiar pain to his left shoulder, a reminder of the hated humans, acute now as every time their rank smell filled his nostrils. And now, they stood at *his* kill. Yes, he had eaten his dessert first – stomach, intestine, lungs, heart, visceral fat – but the main course for the coming midnight meal was rightfully his, and ripe for the taking. The humans would leave. He was in no hurry.

# CHAPTER 2

Tom Beck sat at his desk, feet crossed upon the desktop, tips of Tony Llama cowboy boots aimed at the ceiling. Hands behind his head, fingers intertwined. “What do you know about this Luke Kamisky kid?” he said through the open door.

“You mean the hockey kid?” Wanda said.

“Yes.”

“You mean Ellie’s boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Seems like a nice young man.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Last Sunday over at McIntosh’s he held the door opened for me with my arms full of groceries. Called me ma’am, too.”

“I guess that will qualify.”

“Herbert Stotz volunteers for the Spartans and plays poker Wednesdays with Fred. Says he’s always polite. Uncommon, he says, for a local all-star hockey hero. Apparently got a full ride to North Dakota.”

“I heard Denver.”

Beck opened the top slide pen drawer, reached to the back and removed a set of half-size keys strung through and tied to a 30-06 rifle casing, a hole drilled through the neck. Unlocked the bottom left drawer, fished at the back and his hand came out holding a hunting knife with a staghorn handle, aged brown

leather case, leather thong through a brass fitting's hole at the handle end. He placed the handsome old knife crossways on the desk, hands off to the side. He knew he should not have brought the knife back into the light, did not want to see it, did not keep it at home for that reason. Knew the feelings would come again. His mind's eye absorbed the knife as if it was the first time. It wasn't. He could see, always would see, his grandfather, grey and bent, sitting on the old farmstead home porch, once the most respected woodsman in Greenville. To Beck, forever the most loved. Saturday it was, another day of roaming the woods and adventures with his .22 Cooney single-shot, 27-inch barrel. Eleven-year-old Beck, a ruffed grouse swinging hip-side, bird legs tied to his belt, proud as if he'd built Greenville's covered bridge singlehanded. Sit down, the old man said, have a look at this, and he held out his hunting knife for the boy to handle.

Beck lifted the knife, removed it from its sheath, PUMA model 6393, etched into the blade. Then memories of his grandfather blew away like smoke. Other feelings, inescapable ones. Why he inexplicably gave the knife to his brother, Eli. Maybe because he was older. Maybe because he was favoured, deserved to be favoured. How it came into Beck's hands the reason it stayed hidden in his office desk.

He slid the blade back into its sheath then tucked it into his personal briefcase.

He took his cell phone off the desk, dialed. "Hello Walt, how are things up at Ainty?"

"Hi Tom, good as any living person should expect. You?"

"Fine. We need to talk."

"Sure, that would be the reason you called. Nothing ever stopped us from talking before, except maybe that time up on

Piva River, the day you caught that eight-pound brook trout, when the second bottle of whiskey had words comin' outta your mouth that no one could understand anyways. How old were we, about 16?"

"Walt, that was you who forgot how to talk, not that you had anything intelligent to say. If you've gone senile on me just tell me now and I'll hang up."

"No, I think I'm still here, go on."

"Walt this is serious. We need to do something about these bears, and we can start by doing something about this relocating of someone else's problem bears dumped up our valleys. And let's be specific about it. A lot are your district's problem bears getting dropped off in mine. I know it's not your doin' but it has to stop. Maybe together we can shut it down."

"I hear you Tom, and I don't disagree. We been at this a long time. When we picked this job we knew it'd be about poachers, an extra couple trout under the seat, outsmarting old Tim Weaver taking four bucks with one huntin' license, selling deer meat out of his garage. Maybe they got no license at all. Now we don't have the manpower or time to even be out there and protect the God-given animals we swore to protect. Now we depend on Joe Public, a report-a-poacher hotline, put up a roadblock somewhere couple times a year."

"It's the predators got us by the short hairs, Walt. The coyotes and cougars are problem enough, we don't need to make extra problems for ourselves. It's the bears pulling the bricks out from under us. Half my budget goes to checking bear complaints, relocating problem bears. We got bears that been relocated four times. Three different grizzlies at the same time feeding in Joe Ripley's field, a hundred yards from his house,

under a mile from the school yard. *One mile* Walt. Last May we had complaints nearly every day. And it wasn't for the same bear."

"It's everywhere Tom. Last week a town councilman stood on his porch and a grizzly walked by his loafing sheds, he coulda hit it with a rock. The bear headed through a patch of bushes. He went to get his gun. He run out to where his horses stood watching the grizzly walking toward them. He run up alongside the grizzly 40 yards away and it couldn't have cared less. Paid him no mind. The bear charged the horses, he shot three times, missed every time, the sound finally changed the bear's mind and it walked off not a care in the world. You tell me what this world is comin' to. If it was a human chasing our horses or killing our cattle they'd be in jail, most likely some of 'em dead."

"What I'm saying, Walt, is we got to keep our own bears in our own district. Watch our own back yard. I can't have Lewis using up our time and money headed out relocating your bears, and you don't need to be bothered by mine. We're trading problems, Walt, adding more, wasting what little time we had in the first place."

"I don't disagree, but you know as well as me it's out of our hands. Dropoff sites are set in some office I never been to in a city I never been to. Between you and me, if I had my way, they would not be relocated at all, or relocated the old Mike way."

"Old Mike the beaver trapper," Beck said.

"Remember old Mike? He relocated here himself from the Lower Mainland. Retired here. Told me one day that the Vancouver end of the Fraser Valley is polluted with beaver. Plugging culverts, dropping trees on houses and out-buildings,

building dams and flooding roads. But of course the same people who want ‘em gone don’t want ‘em killed. Too cute. Head office had to relocate them. The best beaver man in the country gets the job. He live-trapped those beavers. Hundreds of them. He relocated them alright, to the skinning wall in his garage. No one in the country sold more beaver pelts those years than old Mike. Don’t tell me the bosses didn’t know. What you need to do is call head office, the big boss, put some common sense into the higher ups.”

“Brian Buckwold,” Beck said.

“He seems reasonable enough, but who knows what fingers are stuck in his pie.”

“I would say just about every bear dropped off up Blueberry Valley or up behind Dome Mountain is back on the flat causing trouble in a day or two, Beck said. The ones that aren’t probably ate by a bigger black bear or a grizzly. Or shot by a farmer who’s had enough.” And the moment Beck said it, old lady Flynn came to his mind and he was sorry he did say it. Sorry, too, what he said to her when obviously his own mind was thinking what she was thinking.

\* \* \*

Big aspen stood center of the yard, a light breeze picked up and thousands of small heart-shaped aspen leaves rippled a chorus, music to Beck. Along with the songbirds, squirrel chatter, horses whinnying in the pasture, the finest 40-acre symphony he knew. The tables set with drinks, beers in a cooler, a punch bowl, buckets of ice, bowls of chips and dip, platters of

veggie sticks, cheese, crackers. The cars and pickups began to arrive.

“Look at this place, all dolled up like a wedding,” the old man said.

“Let me get you a blanket for your legs, papa,” Beck said.

The old man removed a hand from the wheelchair arm and lay it on his thigh. “It’s blue skies, I’m good. I like my thighs done just right, not froze and not boiling. I don’t know why you put this wheelchair out here, I walked from my place over to yours. Makes me feel like a invalid. How about a glass of that Macallan’s single malt settin’ on that table there.”

“Its just more comfortable is all. Nurse Rachael said not good for you to set long in those hard chairs, she also said no alcohol.”

“Don’t contradict your old dad, too late for that now. I’ll nurse it alright, nice and slow, the only nursing I can appreciate. Now go and get it and don’t be late for supper.”

Beck gathered a plastic cup and ice and poured an ounce of scotch and four of water and two cubes of ice. BJ covered a picnic table with a cloth, hummingbirds on a pale-yellow background. “You do wonders,” Beck said. “Nice how you set all these chairs in a big horseshoe and the booze table in the middle. That way the drunks won’t have far to go. I don’t recall our patio chairs and tables looking so new. So white in the sun.”

“I painted them,” BJ said.

“When?”

“This morning.”

“You are amazing, and I’m not just saying that.”

“Does Russel need help with the barbeque?”

“I just asked, he told me to get lost. Imagine that, my own son-in-law treating me that way, and him a pastor.”

“Just be a good host, be nice, to everyone.”

“Well why wouldn’t I?”

“Even to Luke’s hockey coach.”

“Bill Everson? I’d rather stick a needle in my eye. Why’d you invite him?”

“Luke’s parents thought it would be nice since he got Luke that scholarship deal.”

“I feel myself slipping already, why don’t I just get pie-eyed and sit under that tree with papa there.”

“Behave yourself. Did you get Ellie a gift?”

“Of course.”

“What?”

“Never mind. You’ll see. Where is Ellie?”

“Her and Luke are getting their camping gear together. She’s on her way.”

“BJ looked to the main road. There’s Lewis and Laura pulled in, and Albert John right behind.”

“Let the party begin,” Beck said.

A half-hour later Beck sat next to papa. Horseshoe of chairs filling, bodies milled about, gossip and laughter filled the air. Coach Bill’s voice rose above the din. He’s here!

Guess he forgot whose party this is, Beck thought. Luke and Ellie stepped out from a GMC half-ton crew cab, gloss black in the sun.

“That’s one strapping lad,” the old man said to no one although Beck sat next to him. “Does remind me of Eli, back in the day,” he added, his words trailed off, as if saying them carried him to a distant place.

“Look at that, poor kid can’t even get through the gate smothered with handshakes. People he don’t hardly even know,” Beck said.

“It gets worse,” the old man said. “I never knew a moment’s peace,” those years with Eli. “Scouts, media, paperwork, scheduling, secret deals. And don’t ask where Luke got that truck. You know you coulda’ sold tickets to Ellie’s little grad gathering. Townsfolk would have lined up for the chance to talk up the town’s hockey hero.”

The old man watched Ellie. “Just look at her,” he said. “All grown up. Boyfriend and all. I swear, time flies. People say time heals all. I never found that to be so. It flies by but leaves its shadow.”

Beck reflected on that.

“Remember that 4H steer Ellie had? The copper coloured one with the wavy hair. She must have been maybe 9 or 10 at the time.”

“Ripples,” Beck said.

“Yes, that’s the one. She coddled that animal like it was kin. Combed and petted it and had to call her in to supper. Wanted to feed it in the house like the rest of us, so we had to let it eat at the porch.”

“I remember.”

“You remember how we dreaded having to butcher that steer? Did it when she was at school and her none the wiser. Supper time we sit down and Ripples’ fresh liver settin’ on the plate.”

“I remember.”

“And what she said, staring at her plate. Is that Ripples? Well, we all about choked on our food. Never forget that

moment. She looked at us and at her liver on her plate and cuts off a piece and chows down and spoke not a word. But it spoke worlds about that girl.”

“Remember that too.”

“The women in our family is the strong ones. There’s more to her than meets the eye. Good to remember that.”

Four more stepped from the Suburban. The Kamiskys - Luke’s parents, and two more. “That must be the newcomers, the old man said.”

“The mother and daughter from Ukraine,” Beck said. “They live in the Kamisky’s cottage house, take care of the yard. Lord knows it’s big enough. They watched the group make introductions to Kate and BJ. Ellie took the teenaged daughter by the hand and walked her over to the punch bowl. Handed her a plate for snacks.”

“It’s a pity what’s happening over there,” Beck said.

“No,” the old man said, “it’s a tragedy. He watched as the young gal slid a couple of treats onto her plate. You know, when that whole thing started I swear I had to check the news every day, twice a day.”

“Not all of us have that luxury,” said Beck.

“And then somehow it just got old. I guess we all like a good story, till it falls off the front page. Looking at that mother and young gal I’m ashamed to say it.”

“You always told me if we were meant to know what goes on in faraway places we’d have been born with a bigger stride. I guess I bought into that. Can’t say believing you did my history grades any good.”

“I guess you caught on by now, there’s no end to the sadness in this world. But then I guess you got enough brutal assassins in your own world.”

“In my world?”

“I heard John Stubbins got a murdering grizzly up at his place, I guess that will do till another assassin shows up.”

Beck shook his head in mock disbelief. “If the government could harness the gossip in this town it wouldn’t need satellites, he said.”

“The old man took a sip of his scotch. Looked at Beck. Makes you wonder, don’t it?”

“What?”

“Natures got its natural born killers, maybe some of us being monsters is in our DNA. Maybe only way to deal with it is for the good folk to stamp out the bad before it gets out of hand.”

“It’s called democracy. It’s a still a free country ain’t it.”

The old man took another drink. “Careful, you might get to believin’ it.”

Ellie marched past the group toward the house. Kate cut her off, talked briefly then walked over to Russel at the barbeque. Smoke rising, addictive aroma flooded the yard. Ellie stepped toward the house then turned at the sight of her grandmother. A smile settled on BJ and her arms opened and Ellie met her in a hug. “I’m so proud of you,” BJ said, “we all are.”

“Hi grandma. Everything looks so nice. You didn’t have to do so much.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. You just relax and enjoy dinner. How are things going for your camping trip?”

“Ok. A little tired.”

“I guess so, those final exams and all. All that preparing about university next year. You still set on nursing?”

Ellie looked down then hugged again. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Of course. You just relax, don’t lift a finger.”

Beck stood up. “Well, they been dating for six months, guess I better go meet the in-laws.”

Beck intercepted the Kamisky family. “Wade, Elizabeth, Luke, glad you could come. Step over here, let me solve all your problems.”

“Call me Liz.”

“Liz it is. What’s your pleasure?” And he lifted a bottle of wine and one of dark rum. He poured the parents a drink, white wine for Liz, Captain Morgan and soda for Wade. “Luke, can I make you a drink?”

“No thank you, sir.”

“Congratulations on your scholarship. Where is it, Denver?”

“No sir, North Dakota, Luke said.”

“Well, so much for rumours. That’s good, a little closer to home. I hear you had a great year, 40 goals, and what, 42 assists?”

“Yes sir. Not a Spartans record though. I guess you know who owns that.”

“No, but I’m sure you do.”

“Your brother, sir, Eli.”

Beck silenced, caught for words.

“Sorry sir, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Nothing wrong son, just caught me by surprise. I never knew. It’s me should apologize, for not taking in more of your

games. I confess it's been years since I took in a Spartans game."

"I understand."

"Well come on now," Beck turned, "let's take a seat and join this circle of tall tales, half-truths and bald-face lies." He faced Luke and said, "and I won't ask where you got the truck." They all laughed.

"Tom, get over here, you gotta hear this," Lewis slurred his words.

"Mind your manners, Lewis. Mr. Beck to you."

"So," Lewis said loudly then waited for silence. "Warden Dennis barrelin' down the highway over 70 miles an hour. Albert John here, hiding in an approach – Albert, did you know that wasn't me?"

"Knew it wasn't your warden truck. Your truck has rust spots around the wheel wells."

"So, he pulls us over, gives supreme shit..., sorry pastor, supreme heck to Dennis. Then goes to look at the bear in the trap, bear's got a white patch on its chest. Comes back, calls it a white Spirit Bear and its ghost is gonna haunt Dennis off the face of the earth for speedin' and bouncing it around in that trap, then tells us to get lost. Thank you, Albert. Then in the meadow up the head end of Blueberry Road we let the drugged bear out and it stumbles 30 yards then lays down. I tell Dennis he's scared of bears and he gets pissed...sorry pastor, and then I tell him about what I read somewhere about a tribe where the young braves, to prove their bravery, they sneak up on a bear and pull out some hairs and run like hell...sorry. And that bear laying there on the grass drugged up getting his wits together. Dennis, he takes off his boots and sneaks up 10 yards from the bear, then

runs, hands outstretched, reaching for a pinch of hair, and guess what. He trips, face first into the bear's ass! Sorry reverend...face in the bear's pooper!"

Everyone laughs.

"He's rolling and scrabbling and screaming like demons got a hold on him then runs past the truck door, finally circles back and jumps in rubbing his face like it was on fire. Laughed so hard I thought my guts about to bust."

"What happened to the bear?"

"Nothing, walked off into the woods."

Albert John grinning, white teeth bright as ivory. "Well, at least he run in the right direction, can't be as dumb as he looks."

"God, I hope not," Lewis said. "Sorry Pastor."

"See you in my office first thing Monday morning," Beck said.

"Why did he do that?" Mrs. Kamisky addressed Lewis.

"Ma'am?"

"The bear. Why did he want to pull hair out of the bear? I mean, that would hurt the bear wouldn't it?"

"Not as much as it could have hurt Dennis."

A few chuckles.

"Is that true?" Mrs. Kamisky looked at Albert John. "Did they really run up and pull hair out of a bear to prove they're men? That seems awfully foolish to me."

Albert John glanced around, surprised that he was being addressed. He spoke. "I heard it said, but I can't say what nation. I'm Nakota. Men in my culture did it different, how to pass into manhood."

"Oh," she said.

“See, we had this pole dug into the ground. Twenty feet tall. Two buffalo or elk rawhide strands from the top down to the boy who wanted to be a man. Then two pencil-shaped sticks were skewered through his breasts, in behind his nipples, and the strands attached to the ends of the sticks in each breast. The young brave would lean back with their body weight pulling on the sticks and stay that way until they passed out from pain or lack of water or food, or just plain passed out. Took hours, sometimes days. Called it the Sundance.”

Liz Kamisky flushed in silence.

Ellie unclipped the snap of her purse, searched deep in a side pocket and pulled out the tube. She pulled down her pants, panties, sat on the toilet, studied the angular tube for a moment then pulled off the plastic lid, careful not to touch the cotton swab tip. She spread her legs and placed the cotton tip close and began to pee. She counted to seven then held out the urine-soaked cotton tip, then sat waiting. It didn't take long. Two bands, one above and one below the marker stripe. Affirmative for hCG. Test positive. She was pregnant. Ellie looked to the garbage can nearly full of crumpled tissues, buried the tube. She stood, pulled up her panties, then pants, then flushed the toilet and closed the lid, then sat back down. Turned herself sideways, crossed her arms over her face and leaned against the edge of the vanity. “Oh God no,” she said.

Tom Beck and warden Lewis and officer Albert John helped clean tables, gathered gifts and laid them on a table ringed by the half-circle of chairs. Ellie sat next to the gifts as if waiting in a doctor's office. Smiling in all seriousness. Kate and BJ handed her the gifts, one by one. The gifts opened one by one and Ellie thanking each person sincerely, one by one. The last two gifts

opened; a new fishing rod from the Richards for her upcoming grad camping trip to Shasta lake, and all the camping trips thereafter. And a small gift near forgotten under crumpled wrapping.

“What’s this?” said BJ. “Kate, look at this.”

They look at each other and burst out laughing.

Everyone waiting for the punchline. BJ held the small package up like a trophy and said, “Everyone please notice the wrapping paper, green Christmas trees and candy canes and snow. Now who do you think this is from?” Everyone clapped.

“Hurraaayyy!” Lewis and Albert John echoed.

Everyone laughed. Ellie opened the package, hesitated, and a palpable silence crept over the moment. She held it up for all to see, an old, sheathed Puma hunting knife. Lost for words, she pulled the knife from the sheath. Beck suddenly realized she might not even know what the knife really was, how it had been in the family for over 60 years. Feelings of failure - why did he do it? Too busy to go and buy his own granddaughter a gift? Or something else. So, maybe it could start a new life, she did not need to know the whole story.

“Just a little something for your camping trip,” Beck said.

Ellie held up the sheath in one hand and knife in the other, the oiled, hardened steel blade blinking in the sun. Placed them on the table. She began to cry. Kate stepped in front, blocked her from the crowd.

The guests glanced at each other, at the ground, some took a drink, some rising to their feet, making irrelevant comments. Kate and BJ looked to each other. “That’s ok honey,” Kate said.

“I don’t want to go to college,” Ellie said, her sobs smothered in Kate’s chest, then she pulled away and walked off to the house.

“That’s grandpa’s old Puma isn’t it?” said the old man.

“It is,” Beck said.

“That girl has more of great-grandpa in her than anyone I know. You got her that .243 when she turned 16. Now she’ll have something to skin a deer with. You did the right thing, not giving her what she needs.”

Beck looked at Grandpa.

“What she probably needs,” the old man said, “is a new coat, socks, textbooks for college. But that’s not your job, it’s the parent’s job to put a roof over her head. Your job is to tend to her roots. You did right.”

They sat silent for a minute. “I guess I never expected to see that knife again. Near forgot about it,” the old man said.

“Can’t say that I did,” Beck said. “Would have liked to forget about it. Maybe now that it’s out of the house. At least Ellie can get some use out of it. She’ll give it her own stories.”

“Maybe,” the old man said. “Somethings decide their own story. Don’t ask me how.”

Beck looked at the old man. “And some old timers tell stories that don’t make any sense,” he said.

“You live long enough you get to see things. Things about human nature. About how you get up every morning thinking it’s a new day, a new beginning, a fresh start. Then one day you wake up and realize what’s laying there is what always laid there. And what you amounted to is the sum of what you did all those years. Your past ain’t just something, it’s totaled all together added up to who you are.”

“What’s that go to do with the knife?”

“You tell me that after living with an object your whole life, maybe your old truck, your .300 Savage rifle, your Billy Cook saddle, that it don’t have a mind of its own, its own story to tell. Its life story mixed in with your own. You get to believing it. That don’t mean said object intended to tell a story with a happy ending, either. You ain’t seen the end of what some objects has to say.”

Beck sat back. Looked up at the brilliant morning sun. “I can’t say as to whether you’re not getting enough sun, or too much. I can say you got too much time to think. I hear the seniors in town started a Bocca ball club. Maybe you should join.”

The old man glanced up at the sun.

BJ watched and wondered as Ellie walked off to the house. The gift unwrapping finished, she followed, checked the bathroom. She wasn’t there. A small light blue strip from a shredded wrapper lay on the floor. She picked it up. Sifted through the waste basket.

BJ knocked gently on the bedroom door.

“What?”

“It’s grandma. Can I come in?”

“What for?”

“I just want to talk.”

“About what?”

“I’m just a little worried.”

“About what?”

“It’s just me, can we talk sweetie?”

A pause. The door slowly opened, Ellie sat on the bed, BJ sat and took her hand in hers. “Are you alright sweetie?”

“Why?”

Ellie’s long sandy hair disheveled, strewn wisps over red eyes. Her features distinct. Feminine, pretty, yet pronounced cheek bones, bold nose, squarish jaw line, what one might expect of a female gladiator, a Joan of Arc. Her face, her hair, for 17 years what with a simple glance could send BJ into a hopeless spin – love, guilt, remorse. She, Ellie, dirty blonde while her parents, grandparents, all brunette, and Tom’s hair nearly black, where it wasn’t grey or receded. On guard for life, there was simply no defense, she melted with empathy whenever she looked at her granddaughter. No mistaking where her features, her bold personality, came from. No mistaking that some things in life you just do not get over. BJ collected herself.

“Tell me what’s wrong Ellie.” Ellie looked down at her socked feet. “Is it that you’re going off to one college, and Luke off to another? You know, long distance relationships can work. There’s FaceTime, you know, and texting,” BJ smiled.

Ellie looked at her grandmother, her face contorted, and she buried her face into her grandmother’s shoulder.

“I’m pregnant,” she said.

# CHAPTER 3

The original home place was three quarter-sections along Solomon Road three miles south of Greenville. It still was, but for the quarter furthest from town which Tom's sister Dorothy inherited and eventually sold - traded in farm life for a lawyer's life in the city. Grandpa Beck lived alone on the closest quarter to town, in the old farmhouse, the family home Tom Beck was raised in. Beck and BJ built on the joining quarter 20 years ago.

Tom opened the fridge, removed an oversize piece of pie on a dinner plate then sat at the oak pedestal dinner table, coffee and fork already in place. BJ rinsed a handful of cutlery and slotted them in the dry rack, squeezed out the washcloth, then wiped down the arborite counter top. "I'm surprised that piece of pie managed to survive the dinner," BJ said.

"It didn't, I rescued the biggest piece before Lewis and the rest of his ilk could get their hands on it," Beck said as he filled his mouth. Washed it down with a gulp of coffee. "How'd I get so lucky as to marry the person who makes the absolute best apple pie in the county? I suppose you're tired of hearing that." Beck looked out the kitchen window, the remnants of an orange sunset between mountain humps to the west, the glow of town lights rising from evening's shadows to the north.

“And how did I marry the only guy in North America who’d give his granddaughter on her graduation dinner a fifty-year-old knife wrapped in Christmas paper?”

“Sixty-year-old.”

“I doubt she knows anything about that knife, about where it came from. Probably thinks it’s some old knife you picked up at a garage sale.”

“I hope she never does know,” Beck said between mouthfuls. BJ threw him a heated look.

“She’ll find it useful on her camp trip,” Beck said.

“I’ll have a talk with Ellie when she gets back from camping,” BJ said.

“I don’t know why. It’s just an old hunting knife been in the family for a while.”

“You had that knife in your drawer for exactly you know how long and I never once saw you take it out. I guess maybe it’s not just an old hunting knife.”

“Best not to talk about it,” Beck said.

BJ pulled a cup from the drying rack, poured her own coffee, added a small spoon of honey and sat. “Heard any word about fire bans? I’m sure those kids plan to have a roaring big fire. I hope those Wagner parents have the common sense to keep things under control up there.”

“You know how many vehicles I sent Jeremy Wagner out to get with his tow truck in the last 30 years?” said Beck. “Too many to count. You know how many times I’ve seen him wear a remotely clean T-shirt? Zero. He’s about as bright as dirt, his tow truck hasn’t been washed in those 30 years and it’s cleaner than him. You want common sense? Gather your sleeping bag and head on up there yourself.”

“I’m saying that would be a bad place for a fire, only one road in and out. It seems like the heat would let up. June and already so hot. One good thing is it can’t be as bad with the drought and fires as the last two years.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Mother would always say the good thing about when a drought is over, what follows is agreeable weather.”

Beck smiled. “Grandpa would say a drought is like rolling a pair sevens on dice - it don’t know when the last one happened. I expected Kate or Russ would be up there with the kids. I can’t think of a basketball game or a track-meet or anything where they didn’t offer.”

“They did, Ellie would have none of it.”

“I guess there’s a time when you have to let go. Every kid at 10 years old is as close to his dad as possible, then at 13 as close as they want to be is about a mile.”

“Is that what you were like?”

“From 10 to 20, if I saw Everett coming I’d hide or run. I don’t know why, embarrassed I guess, my dad being just an old farmer. Other kids’ dads in nice clothes and new cars. But I guess he always was closer to Eli anyway.” Beck looked out the window again to see the sunset.

“I think Ellie’s embarrassed her dad is a pastor.”

“I don’t know as I can blame her. Ellie’s got fire, loves sports, fishing, camping. No offense to Russ but he’s the opposite of Kate. Kate and Ellie are the same, lightning and fire all under the same roof. I doubt understanding all the scripture in the good book means he really understands his own daughter. She’s a Beck.”

“Tom, I need to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.

“Ellie told Kate she didn’t want to go to college, when we were unwrapping gifts.” BJ paused, uncertain how to continue. Beck waited, BJ looked down briefly then said, “Ellie wasn’t herself today, said she was queasy, went to the bathroom for 20 minutes. I went to see if she was ok, found her in the bedroom. Tom, Ellie is pregnant.”

Beck sat back. “My Lord,” he said.

“I don’t know what to do, Tom. I was going to tell Kate, then thought it was best to leave Ellie go camping and have time to think. Lord knows she needs it. Put things into perspective.”

Beck looked out the window, the horizon trimmed thin orange, its life about to be swallowed by the night. “I don’t know that somethings know how to be put in perspective,” he said.

\* \* \*

Waxing moon a glowing crescent in a black night burning with stars. Solo spruce and pine, midnight sentinels scattered on the grasslands. The trees, the brush, the bear, indistinguishable in the dark. The grizzly’s legs and body dark chocolate brown, eyes rimmed black, face oddly layered with tawny brown and cinnamon hair the look of a bandit’s mask. Evil bearing of a wolverine. The candid brutality of the face reason enough that prey, knowing its end, quits the struggle.

The bear moved slowly, its bulk simply part of the dark undulations of the rolling pasture. Nose up in the slight breeze, a rumble deep in his chest. All day the scent of the dead cow was forecast to the binge, the perpetual need to eat. And now, an added scent, one he knew very well. Another bear. A black bear.

The grizzly did not materialize in the dark, he was part of the dark. He was nowhere then suddenly just there, as if casually interested in this act of piracy. The black bear tearing at the flank of the dead cow, its bovine leg jerking with each tug of the bear's jaws. Two great leaps, the black bear half spun at the sound - a one second mystery. Great eight-inch-wide paw slammed its head, its neck snapped as a dry twig, the black bear twitching on the ground while the greater bear's mouth clenched on its neck, shaking the three-year-old black bear like a rat in a terrier's jaws.

The grizzly dragged the black into a spruce thicket, rolled it onto its back, a forepaw centered on its chest, the foremost claw sunk then pulled down like a linoleum knife severing hide, fascia and gut lining, chest to hams. Bloodless incision, grey gut sack, dull green coils of intestine spilled to the ground, bitten then hauled behind yet another clump of spruce. The guts eaten. The grizzly eating from the inside out, claws pulling hide away from rib cage and hams, devouring soft bone and meat in huge chaws. Two hours later the small bear's hide splayed skin-side-up as a taxidermist displaying a bear rug. The head ignored, as if already set in with a foam form. Glazed eyes lifeless.

# CHAPTER 4

A high overcast ceiling advanced above the small lake. Still water mirrored the grey skies. Far shores of the circular lake hazy with evening's lost resolution. Two canoes, a 10-foot inflatable boat, and a belly boat, idle on a fine-gravel beach. A hundred-foot swath of clumped swamp grass and floating sedge fen surrounded the unfriendly circumference of the lake. The forest less friendly yet, swamp spruce and scruff tamarack walled in the lakeside grasses and moss. Beyond the dense forest wall a few distant mountain peaks reminded campers of the wild that mountains did, in fact, march in all directions from the lake.

The campsite a former logging landing from a time when no regulations existed regarding allowable distance between active logging and a fertile lake. The landing a suitable enough campsite, a flat and grassy meadow interspersed with willow and alder cut in two by a dirt truck trail, the track edged with patches of thistle and devil's club. Two old cedar picnic tables both with weathered decks of cedar two-by-fours, tops now crowded with cups, plates, unwashed cutlery, beer and coke cans, whiskey bottles, selectively placed between random divots of rot. A few functional patio chairs and several sitting stumps, remnants and relics from trout fishers and hunters past. Oh, the stories stumps could tell if they could speak. Four dome tents and a couple of two-man wedge tents scattered themselves at respectable

distances, close enough for those inhabiting them to blurt comments to their neighbours, far enough apart that whispers and passion in the night remained secrets.

Four crows drifted along the lake, circled over canoes and boats. Two landed on the tips of spruce trees, two circled twice more then touched down at water's edge, gentle ripples against calloused crows' legs. They waded in pecking at fish guts. Dace minnows bolted leaving traces of silt in their wake. One crow lifted from the shallows, wings flapping awkwardly then found its pace, a foot-long entrail limp as a snake dangled from its beak. A third crow landed shoreline; claws latched on to a surgically removed wedge-shaped trout head, then flew off. The fourth crow took to the air, circled the campers, cawing insults against the intrusion of 11 loud teenagers, then followed the three back along the shoreline they had flown minutes before.

Ellie sat alongside the huge fire. Looked up at the crow then continued her gaze into the fire. Flames' voices timeless, speaking of heat and brilliance, yet so much more. The teenagers basked in the glory of their evening fire. It enlightened them, as fires have since time immemorial. Survival and flourish for homo erectus. Warmth, cooked food, protection from predators, a place of safety and comfort allowing time to plan, to make tools, to develop language.

"Pass me a Bud," an enlightened face said. Firelight for cracking beer and soda can lids, reading beer labels, scanning disconnected iPhones for images, registering faces: quizzical, serious, humorous, ridiculous. Words spoken between glowing, white teeth and mobile lips. Glassy marbled eyes.

Puma hunting knife in hand, Ellie poked the blade at a log that slipped from its burning place then handed it to Luke who slipped it in its sheath strapped to his belt.

“That damn smoke follows me everywhere, those beans can burn for all I care, pass me another beer,” said a round-faced, blonde-haired kid, the shortest of the bunch. “Show me that filleting knife,” he said.

“It’s not a filleting knife, it’s a hunting knife,” Luke said. “Ellie’s grandpa gave it to her for a grad gift.” He pulled the knife and gave it to the kid. He gripped the handle and inspected the five-inch blade then turned away from the blinding smoke, arm crossed over his eyes then jabbed at the toxic swirl. “Take that you damn smoke.”

“I wish my granddad would give me a knife like that.” A girl’s voice.

“All my granddad gave me was a kick in the ass,” the boy said.

“Ivan,” Ellie said, “say dead rabbits, dead rabbits, dead rabbits, and the smoke will go away.” She knelt with a spatula in hand and flipped a delicate trout, its white flesh crumbling away from the thin silver skin. Luke sheathed the knife.

“Not a chance man, smoke follows evil,” grinned a burly kid with glasses. His brown hair tight to his head, curled locks stuck to his forehead. He took a deep drink then crushed the Budweiser in his hand. “That’s what I can do to your face,” he said to no-one.

“Oh ho! Byron,” said Luke, “pissed because Ivan caught more trout than you?”

“No, pissed because I just caught six beers and killed them all.”

“And he did it with a fly rod,” Luke said, “And you? What? Nigger-fishin’ with a worm!”

Ellie turned toward Luke, pointed the spatula at him. “You didn’t need to say that.”

“Say what?”

“You know what, you didn’t need to say it that way.”

“What? You mean nigger-fishin’? That’s what it’s called. What am I supposed to say, explain how to stick a worm on a hook, where to stick on a weight, oh, and how exactly to jerk the fishin’ rod up and down?”

Ellie glared at Luke. “The jerk part should be easy for you,” she said.

“Ooohhhh,” a wave of mockery from the group.

“Geez, c’mon, give me a break.”

“Hey, Ellie.” Ellie looked at Ivan, his hand dug in his pocket then appeared with a crumpled paper bag. “Want some nigger babies?” he said.

Ellie’s eyes threw daggers. “Theresa, you mind taking over?” said Ellie. “I have to use the can. The fish are nearly done, just stir the potatoes and watch the beans don’t burn. I hope there’s enough fish for all of us.” She walked out from the campfire then said over her shoulder, “it’s nice you guys caught like eight fish, next time catch fish outta adult school instead of kindergarten, where you guys belong.”

“Boooooo,” echoes of male voices.

Ellie walked to the outer edge of the meadow, past her Cabela’s three-man dome tent, into the dark of the cool timber, walked around lichen-covered logs scattered about like graves. Legs sunk to calves in sphagnum moss like mounds of sponge. She listened to the rants of the kids as she squat, heard the

scrapings of forks and spoons as they dug in. Simon's high voice. "Toast," he said, "here's to four days without teachers, parents, cops, politicians, or job interviews."

"I'll drink to that," someone said.

"I miss my iPhone," someone else said.

"Toast," Luke said, "to Ivan for leaving his parents at home, I don't know how you did it but, like, awesome!"

"I just took off and left a 24-pack of beer on the coffee table. I don't think they even know where Shasta Lake is."

"Like what are we, teenyboppers that need a chaperone?" Ralph's voice, a heavyset boy, the face of Sir Winston Churchill with Moe's mop of black hair. He was lighting a joint." Not us, not me, macho man!" he said.

"Yes!" A chorus of male voices.

"Hey what about the ladies?" A girl's voice.

"That included you, macho woman," Ralph said. "Here," he held the reefer out to no one, "anyone want a hit?" No one responded.

"Ass." The girl's voice.

Ellie pulled up her pants, stood, lightheaded, swayed slightly, hand against the crumbling scales of a spruce tree. She looked into the impenetrable darkness of spindly and solemn black spruce. Lower limbs bare and dwarfish, green topmost branches struggling for sunlight, individuals crammed like prisoners in a gas chamber with faces skyward reaching in desperation for light they would never see. Sadness welled inside Ellie, reduced her to an aloneness palpable in the forest. She sat on a hummock, back to a tree trunk.

A sorrowful moment and she knew it was not only of the moment, not to be shaken loose with good times and kind words.

It grabbed at her, held her hostage, surrounded by tree trunks like prison bars, the tragic story of her life locked in the metaphor. Ellie laid an arm across her stomach. “What can I do?” The words crept from her lips, frightened her. Ellie knew now what she never knew before, that freedom was really just having choices: education, travel, future, love of living life, love of Luke, taken by what grew under her hand, under her shirt, deep inside. What remained but two impossible choices: to keep it, or not.

The light outside the dark forest no longer belonged to the day. She wished to melt into the sponge moss, gone forever. She sat and let the darkness overcome her. She did not want to pretend anymore. About anything, to anyone. She saw her future as a hard reality, knew now that it was possible to grow up in a moment of time. In the still of the coming night, she listened to the jousting of lifelong friends that now felt distant and alien.

Ellie stepped out of the timber. How fast the night came. One minute evening’s light and the next a black vacuum. The campsite 50 yards distant, illuminated waves of firelight, faces shone as beacons in the night. She stood in front of her tent, unzipped the door, laid on her sleeping bag. Laid an arm across her face. Sat up, pulled on a fleece jacket. A lump in one pocket. Pulled out a small bag. Forgotten from Mason’s Confectionary in town. Pulled out two gummy bears and placed them in her mouth. A yellow and a red, she guessed. “Nigger babies,” she said, then laid back.

Luke’s voice. “You guys should have tossed those fish guts out in the deep lake.”

“Ya, I told numb nuts here, but no, he wanted to clean them on shore, easier. So now we got fish stink floating around the country.”

A girl’s voice, Pauline, Ellie thought. “I don’t know what difference it makes, look at all this junk. Coke cans, burnt pork and beans, bags of spilled cheezies.”

“What, I’m eating those cheezie suckers, no worries man.”

“Hey Luke,” Ivan said, “tell them about those two girls who hiked up Red Earth Creek over at Banff Park.” Everyone looked at Luke.

He hesitated. Orange flames danced across his face. “Oh ya, it was my mom and dad picked ‘em up along the highway.

“What happened”? The voice of a girl.

“Well. He turned his head to look at his audience. There was three of them. Three girls. Last August. A really hot day. They backpacked up the Red Earth Creek trail. About seven miles. You can see the sign on the way to Banff. The trail goes up following the creek and at the top end there’s a really nice lake. Good fishing too. When they got there it was late. No one around. Took off all their clothes and went skinny dipping. Hot night too. Later that evening two girls slept in one tent and the one girl slept alone in the other tent. She left the door open for a breeze, still so warm. After the swim she rubbed baby oil all over her body and laid down naked on top of her sleeping bag then fell asleep.”

Luke hesitated, as if maybe he did not really want to tell the rest of the story, then said, “Suddenly she woke up, felt something at her feet. Something was licking her feet. Knew right away it was a bear. She was so scared she couldn’t move. It kept licking and licking that oil. Licked it off her legs then kept

coming further in the tent licking up her body, all the way. She was paralyzed. The bear licked the oil off her entire body. All the way, everything. Then it just left, walked away. Luke stopped, noted the intense faces, and said, then the girl ran back to town to get more oil.”

Laughter. Guffaws. Then uncomfortable laughter, self-conscious as if the story was funny but not funny.

It made Ellie sick. Stupid, really stupid. I just want to be home in my bed, she thought. Laying in her bag in the vacuous dark her body drawn into itself she felt her heart beating, imagined with each throb the blood that surged into reaches of her body like water gushing from grandpa’s old hand water pump.

A noise, footsteps near the tent. Ellie held her breath.

“Ellie, what are you doing? What’s wrong? Come back to the fire.”

“I don’t want to.”

“C’mon Ellie, it’s our last night out here.”

Silence. The sound of the tent flap unzipped. Luke climbed in, sat on his own sleeping bag next to hers, then placed a hand on Ellie’s arm. Seconds rolled by like minutes. “Are you feeling ok?” Luke said.

“I’m fine.”

“What’s so serious? It’s just a bunch of guys joking around. You’re worrying me now. Could be our last time together before college.”

“So, what if it is?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Ellie what’s going on? There’s something you’re not telling me about. You’re acting like you don’t want me here. Don’t do this.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

Luke’s head dipped, his voice tight. “Are you serious? You don’t mean that.”

“You’re going to college. How did it get like this? I’m dumb, real dumb, it’s too serious. You don’t know what will happen.”

“Is that what you think? What happened with, ‘we’ll make it work’ and ‘long distance relationships can work, we’ll see each other at Christmas.’”

Silence.

Luke touched her upper arm. “And so what if we can’t predict the future, more reason to have fun tonight.” He ran his fingers gently along the softness of skin, his face low for a kiss. The firelight reflecting off the tent wall enough to see his attempt.

“Don’t touch me,” Ellie said.

Luke sat up stiff. “You really don’t want me here, do you? Fine.” He crawled on all fours to the tent flap and out of the tent, then stood in the dark. Ellie sat up, grabbed his sleeping bag and stuffed it out the door. “Take this back to your own tent,” she said.

“Ok.” Luke jerked at the tongue of his belt, you can have your damn knife back. He reached an arm into the tent and tossed the knife and Ellie felt its weight hit her shoulder and roll off. She felt for the knife, pulled in inside her bag, turned to her side, tears streaming wet tracks down her cheeks to a wet place on her pillow. Luke walked off, his sleeping bag a twisted rag half in the tent, half in the dirt, a sorry statement of the sadness that put it there.

\* \* \*

The grizzly lifted its nose to the slight westerly breeze that came and went as drifting feathers. The black bear was devoured, hide splayed on the ground. It was time. There would be no lingering with the man and machine scent dissipating from the ground and grasses. Eighteen years of surviving near the hated men, and a chip of shoulder blade turned sideways, a long-ago long distance shot from a varmint gun, the splintered piece of scapula now encased in fibrous tissue. It taught him that surviving near men meant motion and stealth. The steady ache in his shoulder intensified when he stood or rested for too long. But the loss of food from his refusal to linger, the ambulate lifestyle, teeth blunt and sore with age, had transformed his body from the massive power ball that it once was to an angular machine. Lost vitality from old age, menaced look of snout hair turned white, his bulk now swaths of uneven guard hair ruffled in odd directions.

He walked off. A slight limp from the needle pain in his left shoulder. West into a gentle breeze, through the cattle fields, into timber, a downward cast. And when the Shasta Lake Road began to climb as mountain slopes crammed against the road and stream, the bear stepped onto the packed gravel and clay of the road. He did not fear the road in the dark. The black night with its stars intermittent in the overcast was *his* world. His playground, his dinner table, his home. The king of his castle. He walked steadily up the road. Nearsighted beady black eyes, a non-factor, he lived by his sense of smell. The hard-pack road dry from drought. Mud puddles solid or pockets of damp clay cracked puzzle pieces perfectly matched with partners. He

avoided the damp patches, not because of his tracks, that man might see them, but to avoid his own scent that would linger, as it always did. He used damp places to tell him the scent of others – bears, deer, moose, elk, cougars – who were in the neighborhood. He stopped middle of the road, lifted his snout to the westerly wind - a distant scent. Faint, but no mistaking it. A few hours walk to the source, at least. The slightly pungent, unmistakable essence of fish.

\* \* \*

Every stump, bush, hummock, appeared to be his tent. He steadied himself, certain that one direction had to be the right one, but which direction was it? Then he remembered, his sleeping bag was still in Ellie's tent, or was it? He put his shoulders back and took a few deep breaths, as if aerobics would clear his drunken mind. Back there was the fire, he could see the picnic tables, although they wavered somewhat. So, he was headed in the right direction. That dark wall must be the timber. He stepped towards it, did not recall the ground being so bumpy, so much tangle grabbing at his legs. He nearly stepped on it, the quilting caught his foot. He bent down to get it but the ground shifted, he squatted to a knee, took hold of his bag, and dragged it to where he thought his tent should be. It was. He managed to climb in the tent, collapsed on the crumpled bag. Closed his eyes, the grog pulling him to sleep, but the dark began to spin like the churning Milky Way, like when he got his bell rung in the last game of the year. He opened his eyes to still the queasy feeling in his stomach. It helped, the spinning settled. Closed his eyes again...not supposed to be this way... why is she doing

this...sick about it...forget it...pass out...fix it tomorrow... and the grog pulled him under.

All was black, but degrees of black. All things inanimate blended, the idea of resolution itself a falsehood lost to the dark. The grizzly did not walk but appeared to sift, float, there and then not there, not sure if it was ever there. Silent as a wraith. He circled the camp toward the boats. He moved downwind from the campfire. Embers dead. Smoke, alluring smells of things edible, desirable but overpowered by the human stink. A deep rumble in his chest at the thought of humans, spurred from the pain in his shoulder aggravated by the night's walk. Humans had an ability he did not comprehend; to inflict pain from a distance. He had eaten many gut piles of moose, deer, elk, sheep, the scent of kill sites often mixed with the foreboding scent of humans and steel. Revenge was not reason enough to lose caution. The bear ringed the camp, entered thick timber, nearly back to the lake, another attempt to pinpoint the source of the fish smells.

The scent was unexpected. Fragrant as blueberries. Human smell too but not repulsive, oddly fragrant, as late season flowers melted down in a rain. The object in his path lay as a strange log. The source of the luring smells from one end. The bear stood. All was silent. It was not a good place or time to hesitate. But the scent was a lock. Brush, trees, the strange shelter, all things distinguished in the pre-dawn. And him lord over his empire, food his reason to live. The bear's head entered the hollow end of the shelter. The sound of breathing and what breathed he knew was human and this one time him dominant over this horrible life form and his hatred boiled and in that moment he knew what lived between him and his food could be eliminated in a bite, in one blow. He stepped one great paw into the shelter

and when he did the sleeping human under his paw squirmed and instinct was instant - his great jaws bit hard, but a soft membrane strange to him covered the being that struggled inside, then a scream of which he had never heard before, and he bit harder and shook his head fiercely and his jaws locked tight, the death grip given all his prey. And again the terrible scream and in that moment the sudden desire to flee this strange place. He hauled back out the flap of the shelter dragging the strange cloth and its living form screaming, and he heaved the fabric clenched in his jaws and the being followed, and he dragged it to the timber a place of refuge where he would throttle the being for once and all.

Suddenly conscious. Tent smells, sleeping bag smells, his own body. Sides of the wedge tent sagged with dew, confined, the sense of being bound in a coffin. Feet heavy. Boots. He had his boots on. Dry mouth... Ellie.

Horrible screams then terrible moans of anguish. He swiveled then bolted out the tent door, running, sprinting, toward the sound, toward Ellie's tent. His hand slid to his hip and felt for the knife. "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God," his mouth open as he ran, his hand fumbled for the knife that was not there. Screams beyond. Past the tent toward the timber, and against its shadowed wall a great bulk materialized. Dragging something. Ellie.

A hitch, his feet stumble, the thought of where he ran to a reality beyond fathoming. Screams. Ellie. His run forced momentarily, then full on, please, please.... soundless screams in his own horrified mind, feet pounding over the soft moss. The bear preoccupied, dragging, hauling.

He leaped for the bear's back and at that moment the realization of its enormity a blow against all hope. He landed full on the immense muscularity of taut spring steel, one arm grappled around the neck, the other a balled fist pounded again and again against the massive skull, a miniscule act of futility. The great bear roared, spun, incredibly lithe for its size. The boy tossed, a loud grunt as air slammed from lungs as he hit the ground. The great jaws clenched on his neck. Windpipe crushed, he twisted, his screams muffled, the bears hold adjusted, let go, then bit his head.

Stunned, then a surge of panic his arms flailed and fists pounded again and again against the bear. His head in a grip, his face slathered in saliva, teeth and tongue all he feels, black all he sees. Rancid breath, the sound of dog's teeth grinding bone, knows it is his own skull. Push, push, push, his mind cries out, but his arms now dead to him. Feels the tearing of flesh on his face. A warm feeling. Wet. Aware of fading, willing himself to stay conscious.

Luke's grunt as he hit the ground a battle cry. Ellie half out of the blood-soaked bag she surged forward, her right hand clamped on the knife. Fear transformed to adrenaline, the flame to fight instantaneous, mankind's eternal fight for survival, womankind's fight for survival, motherhood's fight for life and eternity. Her knees scrambled forward against the huge bulk of the bear and she drove home the blade, once, twice, the roar of the bear as it spun full circle, the knife knocked from her grip, her hand dove to the dirt for the knife and her hand locked on to something firm and she squeezed, but it was not the knife. It squeezed back.

The attack of two humans and the bight of the blade was surprise enough. The bear moved off, silent as a ghost.

A weight lifted. Luke heard voices, distant whispers that struggled for clarity, somewhere between consciousness and oblivion. His mind's eye struggled to the light, then swirled to the heavens, sunk by fatigue. Focus. A warm feeling. Voices. Eyes blinking' struggling through the wet. Faces looking down. Angels. "Ellie," he whispered.

She lay flat. His hand gripped in hers. She wormed forward shoving at the ground with mangled legs. She touched his hand to her belly. "Love you," she said. And that was all.

# CHAPTER 5

“Morning,” Beck said to Wanda. “The start of a new week, you up for it?”

“Yes sir,” she saluted as he walked by.

Tom Beck nursed shades of a hangover, the party’s reminder of the vagaries of getting old. He sat at his swivel chair, feet up, crossed upon the desk, the toes of Tony Lammagator skin boots pointed at the overhead light. Hands behind his head, fingers locked. The office phone rang. “Here’s your call,” Wanda said through the open door, “line one.”

“Thank you for returning my call, Mr. Buckwold. Yessir, everything is fine with the family, weather is fine. Too fine if the truth be told. Well sir, it’s shaping up to be another dry year. Yes sir, I hope not too. Grass is already dried up. We lose our wild berry crop and it’s another year of bears coming in from the hills. Well sir, Mr. Buckwold, yes, there is something you can do for us. It’s the bears, the reason for the call. These release bears brought into our district without fail end up in someone’s backyard, someone’s campsite, eating someone’s hogs, breaking into someone’s garage. The problem is they’re city bears. What ones don’t end up back in the main valley get ate anyway. Yes sir, that’s what I said, ate. By bigger bears. Smaller bears is a primary food source of large male bears, been that way forever, it’s in the studies. No sir, I meant no disrespect. Yes, there is

something I ask, and I would be glad to do it myself, with your permission. Just tell the other divisions to deal with their bears in their own district, don't send their problem bears for us to deal with. Yes, we do have wild mountains all around but every bear hauled 20 miles up into the mountains on a logging road or truck trail one day later is back near town or the bottom farmland causing trouble. If it ain't eaten. What studies? Yes sir, but I don't see how tracking collars or Go Pro cameras strapped to bears will keep a bear from killing a calf. Well, I don't know what good the biologists can do unless they're willing to come up here and dispose of my problem bears. No sir, I am not seriously suggesting you send biologists up here to shoot bears. Garbage? We do that, constantly. Yes, we do, we put ads in the local paper, fliers in mailboxes, educate until we're blue in the face, but it's not just about dealing with our garbage. It's about what I just said, it's about too many bears. It's about no respect for humans. Yes, I am aware shutting down the grizzly season was a political decision, but it don't make for fewer bear problems. Yessir, I appreciate you taking into consideration my suggestions. Beck tapped his fingers on the desk. Can I ask for your advice on a situation? Thank you. I got a 75-year-old lady lives by her lonesome on an old homestead off at the edge of farmland. Lives off what her few hogs can provide. Last year a grizzly come in and took two of her pigs. She said warden Cooper, now transferred down to Wainbridge, told her if the bear comes back and threatens you again, shoot it. Well, she did, a sow and two of her cubs. Buried them in a pit. What's your solution to this situation? No, no witnesses. Well, yessir that is exactly what I told her, explained to her what the law is, that

they did not threaten her, so I have to charge her. Thank you for your advice, sir.”

Beck hung up the phone. “Politician,” he said.

Wanda waited a moment then called through the open door. “Lewis just called,” she said.

“You need to close the door when I have these conversations,” Beck said. “Where’s he at?”

“Up at John Stubbins Ranch, the dead cow.”

The office chair squeaked as Beck shifted position. “Dead cow,” he said. “Tell me. The dead cow I inspected at the Stubbins place two days ago suddenly reincarnated itself only to get killed again.”

“Same cow. He said you have to see this. Really wants you up there. Said he’d wait.”

“Holy cow,” Beck said.

Beck turned the neck collar over in his hands. Red dot flashing from the encased plastic receiver. “Number 472,” Lewis said, “the bear from Ainty we let out Friday. I guess that’s about 20 miles in three days.”

“Just what’s happened here Tom?” the rancher said. “Peeled clean like someone with a sharp knife about to make a bear rug.” Tom handed the collar back to Lewis. He studied the hide laid flat, skinned open with paws turned up. White stumps of leg bones like bleached shore sticks stuck protruding from paws. The wet white inner skin to the sky, red patches of thin flesh as if a careless job scraping a hide to be tanned.

“Knew how to make a bear hide alright, but not with a knife,” Beck said. “I guess you already seen the size of these other tracks. This black bear’s paws maybe half the size of those ones.”

“You mean another bear did that? I’ll be darned,” the rancher said.

“Tom, the bear that killed my cow, could be the same one as killed this bear and ate it,” Lewis said.

“Could be. Likely is,” Beck said.

“But that don’t explain what happened to its head,” the rancher said. “You mean to say this bear got its head cut off by the other and the other packed it off like a trophy?”

Beck squatted and tilted his head as if the flaccid hull of the bear’s hide could whisper answers only Tom would hear. Then he glanced northwest toward the forest, beyond, visualizing this bear 20 miles and three days from the meadow where it was set loose, to here. He stood.

Lewis walked around, checking the ground. He bent over, looked at Beck. “Have a look at this,” he said. Beck bent alongside Lewis. In a sandy depression the clear indent of a human footprint. Not a boot. Smooth edges, like a moccasin covered foot. Lewis stood and looked down at Beck.

“You think what I’m thinking,” Lewis said.

“You think whatever you need to think,” Beck said. “I don’t need to hear it.”

“I know it,” Lewis said.

Beck looked at the rancher. “John,” he said, “I don’t know what can be said about this. If it’s not a mystery wrapped up in a mystery I don’t know what it is. I wish I could help.”

“What’s that bear from Aintry way doing over here? I got coyotes and wolves killing calves. And the last couple years cougars showed up like this is the getting place for a free meal, and now bears like they own the place. I guess there is something you can do about it, Tom. You can tell the folks over

at Ainty to keep their damn bears to themselves. What the hell they doing releasing bears over here anyway?"

"We don't get the final say in where Ainty gets to release their bears. Politics." Beck said.

"Politics," the rancher said. "I guess the only one around here in control is the big bear that done this. He ain't a politician and he ain't a government employee."

Beck studied the distance. The faint drum of a helicopter. Louder, headed up Shasta Lake Road from the direction Beck had just drove, its pulse beating a path over the washboard gravel road up from the main valley. Visible now, a speck in the distance with the imposing beat of revolving blades like battered wind sucked from a tunnel. A half mile distant the chopper looked like a great dragon fly inspecting the road beneath, up the road then swallowed by mountain walls, its echoed pulse faded. Beck and Lewis and the rancher watching where it disappeared. The silence full of itself like the vacuum after a head-on collision. Then, just as faintly at first, came the growing wails of sirens, dust roiling with the sounds like wispy brown shadows hung in the air followed the same path the chopper did a minute before. When sight finally caught up to sound, the black specks of two police cruisers and two ambulances spearheaded a dust wake. Their mechanical crying finally silenced as they continued and disappeared, the dust snake dissipated as thoughts rolled through the minds of each.

Beck snapped from his trance. "In the truck, now!" he barked, then jumped into the pickup. Lewis jumped in a step behind then the truck engine roared and wheels spun and the truck lunged then bounced down the bench and the rancher John Stubbins stood arms at his sides perplexed and watched the

warden's truck disappear. He had no answers to anything more than what he had an hour before.

What, what, what? Vain reckonings cycled through Beck's mind as the truck sped up the Shasta Lake Road. Possibilities took hold – drowning, gunshot wound, axe cut, bear – blood coursed through his heart and mind, then erased those thoughts, throttled by the calm that was the rock inside him, what had carried him through the countless emergencies of a warden's lifetime. Vehicle accidents, and yes, drownings, gunshot wounds, falls, and bears.

But it was the thought of bears, a bear, that gripped his chest, bleached his face and beaded drops on his forehead to slip and sting his eyes. He ran his arm over his forehead. Lewis glanced but said nothing.

Please God just let it be a minor accident. But it was the first thought he could not shake. Please, please, please, he begged for mercy, heart and soul, and as he did the guilt that rode shotgun whenever he asked for spiritual help rode right over him. In his daily life not a thought for penance, for prayer, or thanks for the grace and good that is God. So what right did he have to ask God's help now? C'mon, c'mon, he mouthed the words, it's just another minor emergency. But a chopper, and so many ground responders; the chill that seized him sunk to depths that were limitless.

He knew the road as well as the hallway of his own house, travelled it countless times checking fishing and hunting licenses; what they caught, what they poached, or simply a good day on the job - to see the lake, witness the hatch, the trout rising, to cast a fly or a spinner if no one was in sight. And like his own hallway he paid no notice, but now, time and possibility

held him hostage, until the last curve, the final stretch that headed into the meadow and campsite.

The hammer of helicopter blades overhead. A chopper roared above the cab of the truck, its bottom cast a shadow like a miniature wave of night, skids tilted then righted and then pounded back down the valley from where it came. Ambulance lights. First responders milling, opened back doors, moved with trained haste. Kids sat on picnic tables, a girl, her face buried in hands. Albert John faced the kids, arm and finger pointed toward the lake then toward the trees. Beck whipped the pickup alongside the second ambulance, jumped out, opened his mouth to speak then saw attendants kneeled over a stretchered form. Yellow body bag. He would never remember the steps he took toward the victim, but he would never forget the covered prostrate form. Too big, too long, to be Ellie, he thought, his paternal instinct kicking in. The attendants about to zip up the bag.

“No, wait,” Beck said.

The paramedics looked up and one nodded and Beck stepped close to the victim and the blood-covered head, dark runs of blood nearly dried, bright patches of truculent blood, hair blood soaked and soil matted, long gouges along the right side of the face like harrow spikes dragged over. Through the disfigurement he knew. It was Luke. A dizziness washed over Beck. He steadied himself.

Ellie. Ellie. “Where’s Ellie?” said Beck. A paramedic looked back toward town, to gesture the direction. “In the chopper,” he said. “She’s stable, Tom,” one of them said. “She lost a lot of blood. Lacerations. But conscious. Bear came in on her in the tent. The boy fought the bear with his bare hands, had

the bear's hair clenched in his hands. Her vital signs are good, but she's going to have a lot on her mind." The paramedic turned back to the job at hand, the hard sound of the metal zipper that sealed Luke's face.

Albert and Lewis stood near the picnic tables. Near the forest the collapsed frame of a green tent. Beck strode toward the collapsed tent. No tracks on the hardpan ground. He walked to the forest. Thick black spruce, boggy moss, no tracks. He squatted over the site. Torn blooded ground, green moss sprayed dark red. Beck stood up, turned to walk, his foot struck something solid. Kicked at the torn ground. The glint of a blade. A blood covered knife. Picked it up. A Puma 6393. Knew every blemish. Ellie's knife. He turned the knife over in his hand. Beck's eyes watered, his chest tight. He put a hand over his eyes. "No, no, no," he said.

He wiped at his eyes with his coat sleeve, walked to the campsite, to the lake, squatted in the mud and fine gravel sand of the beach. He rinsed the blood from the knife and his hands. Looked to his side. Tracks in the mud. Beck stepped over then squatted, placed his splayed right hand on the ground, its entire size swallowed by the circumference of a huge bear's track. Another track, the track of the left front foot. He went to his knees. Looked close. The foot had a deformed twist, toe to the inside. He stood and looked out across the grey lake, stepped into the water, ripples played along his pantalooned calves. Beck looked at the knife gripped in his hand. He looked up to the sky but did not see the sky. A vision took hold, a face, not Ellie's face. Eli, his brother.

Lewis and Albert John cut over. "Tom," Lewis said.

“Who’s the best hound man in the county?” Beck said. They looked at him then at each other but neither spoke.

“Not counting him,” Beck said. “Who’s the best hound man?”

“Best hound man or the best hounds?” asked Albert John.

“Bear dogs.”

“Well, if not...him...then that would be old Delbert Humphrey,” Albert John said. Lewis nodded.

“Lewis, you go with Albert. Get hold of that old poacher and get him up here with his dogs in three hours. Tell him to pack enough food and gear to stay out overnight. You do what it takes, just get him here.”

“Tom,” Lewis said. “Everyone knows his dogs are solid, but that man is as contrary as a wasp in a car. There’s not a chance in hell he’s about to come up here on a moment’s notice.”

Beck stepped at Lewis. “I’m not asking. Whatever it takes,” he said, and walked on.

“I’ll head on over to the Kamisky place,” Albert John said to Beck’s back. Inside a minute Beck raced out of the meadow.

\* \* \*

Kate sat in the small hospital’s waiting room only feet from the main doors, waves of grief and nausea, hands to her face, bent over, faint aroma of fresh-baked muffins from hands and clothing. The muffin pan at home askew on the kitchen counter half filled with muffins, muffins pulled and cooling on the cutting board when the call came. Disinfectant, floor polish, every hospital’s subtle pervasive odour of sickness and medicines. Brief waves of fresh air when the entrance doors

opened then bumped closed. Clean, white, sterile walls, glowing fluorescent lights, forced into a mind numbing, heart wrenching, bright and hard reality. Life's left-hand turn into hell? Kate rocked forward and back, please God, let her live, let her be ok, how could this happen? Russel sitting, gripping her free hand. Tyler sitting, hands latched on to padded metal chair arms, feet that do not reach the floor kicking back and forth as if in nervous anticipation of a dentist. BJ pulled another tissue, handed it to Kate.

A commotion at the emergency doors. Liz Kamisky's desperate voice as she charged around the corner, Albert John's hand clenched, tugging back her jacketed arm. Wade Kamisky in tow. "Where is he?! Take me to him! Now!"

Albert John's pleading voice. "Mrs. Kamisky"

"Don't tell me that!"

She confronted the Beck family and stopped abruptly, oblivious to their own grief, her face contorted, a mask of anguish, arms lashing in defiance. "Where's Luke? Where is he? I want to see him! I want to talk to him. Now!"

"Please Mrs. Kamisky," Albert John's voice firm and gentle, "please, here, sit down, we'll call the doctor." Wade Kamisky stepped to the front, took hold of her waving arms, enveloped her as if smothering her anguish might open a door for sanity. "Liz, Liz," he said, "sit down, the doctor is coming. Liz, you heard what they said."

"No! It's not true!" And she shoved her husband then looked about as if disorientated. Mr. Kamisky hugged his wife. Russel graced in his pastor's black and white clerical collar placed a hand on her shoulder. "Come with me," he said, then slipped his hand behind her arm. Mr. Kamisky's arm circled her

waist and she swayed then stepped forward with the vague thought that if they found a doctor he would lead them to her son. Russel led the way, the quartet of anguished faces headed toward the hospital chapel. A doctor appeared from around a blind corner and strode toward Kate, BJ and Tyler.

“Kate,” he said, “your daughter is stable. She received multiple lacerations in both legs. And her right lower leg, her tibia and fibula, have been shattered. She has lost blood, but it is something of a miracle that her femoral artery was not severed. It is critical that she receives more blood. I assume you know her blood antigen type is K Negative. We had one pint of K Negative blood on hand but we need three more. It can be flown here from Vancouver but that will take hours. To keep her stable we need it now, the sooner the better.”

Kate wiped her red eyes. “We know,” she said, “we know her blood type is K Negative.”

“Very good. Then you know the blood type is hereditary, we can get you or your husband set up immediately.”

“But Russel and I don’t have K Negative blood. We are both K Positive.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We were always told O Negative blood can be used, we never gave it much thought.”

The doctor changed his stance, appeared uncomfortable. “We could use O Negative blood under regular circumstances,” he said, “but the blood tests show she is pregnant. The fetus may react to other blood types and place them both in danger. It needs to be K Negative to prevent hemolysis. If you are both not K Negative, then one of her grandparents must be.”

Panic and confusion gripped Kate. She looked at her mother.

BJ looked downward momentarily, her face flushed, then locked eyes with the doctor.

“Doctor,” she said, “can you give us a few minutes alone?”

“Of course. Just ask the desk to page me when you’re ready.”

The floor had been pulled out from under Kate. She sat down. Her mind spun, lost in a nightmare with no beginning or end. She looked at Tyler who sat silent and confused, whose feet had stopped swinging.

“I knew. I just knew,” Kate said.

“I’m sorry.” BJ’s eyes teared. “I’m really sorry. I know we should have told you, said something. We always meant to. I guess we just never really felt we needed to. I’m so sorry.”

Kate ran her hands down her thighs, took a deep breath. “I guess I knew,” she said. “Always had that feeling. Remember that Rusty kid who lived down the block. That little mean kid. I always tried to avoid him, crossed the street if I saw him coming. He would laugh at me, point his finger, called me the freak’s kid. I never knew what he was talking about, just passed it off as him being a bully. Then in Grade 9, Mrs. Rosewell had us do some research about our past, some sort of heritage project. Had to do library research at the town library. I found your wedding photo and newspaper story. My birthday and your wedding day didn’t seem to match up. I guess I just passed it off as some sort of editor mistake or something. And now Ellie pregnant. My sweet Lord.”

They sat in silence.

“It was so complicated,” BJ said. “I guess I would have to say it was the most difficult time in my life. But it gave me you. And you were the most precious thing in my life. Maybe I thought telling you would change that. I couldn’t stand the thought of that, Kate. I can get the blood. Let me talk to the doctor, he can rush his Vancouver blood here as fast as he can. I’ll go get the blood Ellie needs quicker. If I can.”

Kate did not respond.

BJ stood. “I have to go,” she said.

“Kate looked at the far wall. Why didn’t you tell me?” she said, her face contorted and her tissue again ran over her eyes.

The entrance doors opened and hard familiar footsteps on the granite floor. Beck came at them. Kate stood and he hugged his daughter and she cried and shook, then settled. Beck’s eyes flooded.

“Dad,” Kate said, “she’s stable, her lower right leg is broken badly and multiple lacerations. She’s lost a lot of blood. But she’s stable.”

“Tom,” BJ said, “listen to me.” She took Beck’s hand. “Doctor Samara gave her one pint of blood but she needs three more. Ellie has K Negative antigen blood, and she needs K Negative and nothing but. Now. In the next few hours.”

“That don’t make sense. We know that. They can use O Negative blood.”

“Tom,” BJ said.

Kate glanced at BJ.

“Tom, it’s not Ellie, it’s the baby. If it’s O Negative it could react, put them both in danger.”

Beck sat. “Well,” he said, then dropped Kate’s hand. BJ looked down at Tom. “We have to get that blood. You know that. Tom, you have to go see your brother.”

Beck looked at Kate. Kate put her hands over her face. A sick feeling overwhelmed Beck. “I can’t,” he said.

“I can, and I’m headed there right now.”

“You do what you have to do. I do what I have to do.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know what it means. That bear has to be stopped. It’s gone bad and you and me and anyone else don’t know what it might do.”

“It’ll do what any bear might do. That bear is gone. We need you here.”

“BJ, look at me. I think it’s the same bear killed John Stubbin’s cow and another bear. I’m meeting old Delbert Humphrey and his hounds at the lake in an hour. It won’t happen overnight.”

“Lewis can go. It doesn’t need to be you.”

Uncomfortable silence followed.

“Lewis doesn’t know dogs. It’s my job.”

“It’s not your job unless you make it your job. You haven’t had hounds since before we were married.”

Beck stood. “BJ, I have to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Call Lewis, he’ll know where I am at with the inReach GPS. We can stay in touch by texting. If I lose contact because we’re in a bad place or some other reason, I don’t want you worrying. I’ll be back.”

“You don’t want me worrying.”

Beck held BJ and kissed her. Leaned over and kissed Kate. He turned to leave then said, “When Ellie comes around you tell

her I'll be back as soon as I can, that I had to go. I had to do this."

"Ok," said Kate. BJ watched his backside as he walked out.

Beck walked out the glass doors of the Greenville Memorial Hospital. Stepped onto the stone landing and headed to his warden truck. A young Hispanic looking man stepped to his front. Beck hesitated then bumped him as he walked past.

"Sir," the man said as he jogged to catch up. "My name is Gabriel Medina. Reporter for the Greenville Review."

"I know who you are. Read your column. If I have time."

"Sir, do you have a minute, just a few questions."

"No, I ain't got a minute. What I got is a job to do." Beck kept walking.

"Sir, I just need to know one thing, so I can do my job - if you think the bear that killed that boy is the same one as killed rancher Tom's cow the day before."

"Boy's name is Luke."

"Yessir."

"You know what my job is?"

"No sir."

"To catch people who kill animals illegally. Protect wildlife. Protect the environment. Protect people. Swore to it. Even catch drunk drivers, thieves, and possibly murderers. Did you know that?"

"No sir."

"Well, now you do. Kindly step out of my way." Beck pulled open the pickup's door, jumped in and started the engine, and drove off.

\* \* \*

The silver Jeep Liberty crawled up the dirt track to the log cabin, paused, then went silent. Her hands clenched to the steering wheel, eyes studied the yard, absorbing the scene of his life, a life that she knew long ago she would never understand. She lost that possibility years ago.

Could it still be same the old Dodge flatdeck? Had to be. Red cab. Faded now, rusted around the wheel wells.

Hounds whining, tails wagging, tied with long lines to dog houses. Chickens scratching and pecking at grass and dirt. She did not want to open the Jeep's door. When she did, what penetrated were scents of pine, grasses, dirt, dogs, feces, other organic aromas she shuddered to guess at. What flooded in was confusion – pain and guilt, memories kept at bay for 38 years by her reality: family and a life of purpose well lived.

It was not an act of deception. She had years of practice, reasoning, convincing herself that there was no choice, no other way, that it was for the best. But that house of cards crashed when her foot touched the ground and her heart pounded. Ghosts from the past sucked at her breath, sent her head to swirl, her heart to pace. Her mission, Ellie, drove BJ back to the present.

She stepped toward the cabin's door then noticed bear skulls nailed to the cabin's sidewall, under the lean-to overhang. She edged to the side of the lean-to. Bleached white bear's skulls, each pinned to the house logs with spikes, eye sockets hollow, teeth grimaced, canines curved down and deep and vicious. The top two rows from the front of the sidewall to the back were large skulls, some very large, then several rows, row upon row, down to the packed dirt. The entire wall covered front to back, top to bottom. Dozens. A hundred? Not the entire wall, the top row, the row with the largest skulls, an empty space, a missing

skull, or one never nailed up, closest to the front of the cabin. Ellie, she said, and regained focus.

The rumours, she thought, they're true, as she turned and walked up the porch steps and rapped her knuckles against the rough planked door. No response. She knocked again. The door opened itself slowly, to no one and nothing. The squeak of metal hinges an exclamation to the mystery of who done it. Her heart pounded. She stepped in.

There he sat, opposite a rough-cut plank table, as if a decision had been made which side to present to her. And he had. Balding at the front, wispish greying shoulder-length hair. His face, the left side she could see, dark and weathered, wrinkled, an obvious resemblance to Tom's. A deer skin shirt, v-neck, looked home tanned and sewn, left arm with a hand like a paw, thick fingers like Tom's, resting on the table. White ceramic mug at his finger-tips. He is casual, relaxed, fingers softly running a rhythm on the table.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

"You're in," he said, then pointed to a chair.

She sat. All that she had rehearsed on the drive, what to say, when to say it, evaporated like yesterday. She looked about the room as if searching for a conversation that could make some sense – why after 38 years she would suddenly show up on his doorstep. She dropped her eyes then straightened up and held his eyes steady.

"I guess you're wondering why I'm here. I mean, after all these years."

"I know why you're here."

She was confused, must be some misunderstanding, some misbegotten information that, what? In his mind derailed the

truth of why she had come. Some thread of hope that she had come for him? Thoughts from loneliness that gelled in his mind? She couldn't let any of that derail what was critical now. She looked at him. He had not moved, as if his head was welded to his neck. Then against the wall she noticed an electronic box. Wires leading from the box through a window jam to outside. A UHF radio? GPSD unit? Police monitoring scanner?

"I see," she said nodded toward the box. And what she also saw was that he appeared to have read her mind before what she just said, and what she was about to say.

"I know why you're here," he said again.

Eli. Her heart cringed as she spoke his name. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I just had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. When you told me to go, that night in the hospital, that you didn't want to see me anymore, I should have been stronger, I should have stayed, waited..."

"For what?" he said. "For this?" And he turned his head, the right side of his face exposed and she turned away and tears clouded her eyes and it was well they did, to blur the mutilation of it all.

She wiped her sleeve over her eyes. "Ellie is your granddaughter," she said. "I guess you know that. You know she's hurt badly. She's alive. She lost a lot of blood. She needs K Negative...she needs... *your* blood."

Eli studied BJ as if looking for a crack in her story.

BJ kept talking. "I never forgot that day, how the doctors fought to save you. When a doctor said you had K Negative blood. How they did not have enough. They don't have enough now. You were always strong, Eli. Ellie's strong too, independent. She's so much like you. She needs you now."

“I don’t owe you nothing,” he said.

BJ’s heart dropped like a rock.

Then he said, “And you don’t owe me nothing. Got over feeling sorry for myself years ago.”

BJ looked at him again, the estranged yet familiar side of his face back in place. “I just wish you and Tom could have made up. All these years. So unnecessary. He never did tell me what happened that day.”

“Leave us out of this.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...it’s just so much sadness. So much sadness. It just makes me feel more sad when it seems to happen for no good reason. Eli, we really need you. Ellie needs you. I’m begging you. There’s not much time.”

They sat in silence and the silence was a dagger in Billy-Jo’s heart.

“Eli,” she said, “I need you to understand. I was lonely too. I realized that.... that with the baby coming and all, I had to make hard decisions. I knew the loneliness would not leave, not for a long time. What happened to me, to us, was loneliness that I did not choose. You, Eli, my love for you, was the reason for that loneliness, and it was the worst kind. I had no control. So when I turned to.... Tom, it was a way out, and if there was to be loneliness in the future it would be of my own choosing. Not secondhand, but what I chose.”

He sat statue straight. If words meant anything it did not show. Words had not meant much to him for nearly 40 years. He looked at BJ, the hint of a smirk at the good corner of his lips, as if all along her words were nothing but an act, a ploy.

“You made the right choice,” he said.

“Eli, we can’t take a chance with O Negative blood. Has to have the K Negative antigen. Because now she’s the one who’s pregnant.”

# CHAPTER 6

At the sight of Delbert Humphrey, Beck thought what he always thought - one look at his face and hope to God he never wound up in a mental institution for the fact he'd be stuck there just for the way he looked. Skinny neck, skinnier off-center head, buck tooth grin that had nothing to do with friendly and everything to do with smart-ass. With stick-like arms and legs stuck out from under baggy Dickie coveralls, along with a beat up dark brown small-brimmed Stetson, there was little chance of crows setting down in the immediate vicinity. Delbert stood, leaned against the downed tail gate of an orange, early '70s GMC four-wheel-drive pickup truck. A smallish, spotted female hound of mixed breeding stood tied to a tailgate hinge, an electronic receiver collar strapped to its neck, the short rubber antennae waving at the world. Others scuffled inside the dog box.

“Glad you come,” Beck said as he dragged a loaded internal frame backpack and a 45/70 lever action carbine rifle from his passenger seat. Beck slung an inReach GPS unit around his neck. “You set for a few days out?”

“Got my gear. Lewis say'd this'd be a payin' job,” he said.

Beck set down the pack and rifle, walked over, dug two white envelopes from his pile-lined Warden Service coat pocket and handed him one. “Here's \$300 now. I'll keep this other one

until we're done. We don't quit until I say we're done. This is my own money and it's between you and me. Not a word of this to anyone. You ok with all that?"

"Don't matter to me where my money comes from."

"These bear dogs or cougar dogs?"

"They's dogs for whatever they get sent for."

Beck studied the man. He offered no further response. "What's the dog's names?" Beck said.

"This'uns Thelma, the others is Corey and Digger. Call 'em whatever you like." Delbert unlatched the dog box and two similarly bred dogs jumped out, all three barking with anticipation of the hunt. One took in the surroundings, the other male sniffed Beck's pack and lifted a leg. "Hey!" Beck barked and stepped back and the dog cut his job short. The GM's door slammed and Delbert slung a weathered, canvas, wood framed Trapper Nelson pack over his shoulders.

Beck studied the half full canvas sack stuck to Delbert's back like the hump from the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Shook his head. "You bring enough to last a few days? What you need to stay out?"

"I got enough. This ain't my first dance with Yogi."

Hope it's not your last, Beck thought. "You got extra batteries for your dog collar?" he said.

"Don't take batteries, full charged. Delbert untied the bitch and scratched her ears. Go give'm hell," he said with a twisted grin, brown teeth at odd angles suited the rest of him just fine.

"Ok, let's go," Beck said and walked off to the timber. He stopped. Stood over scuffed and torn mosses, blood stains dark on lime green, pooled blood soaked into the earth. Where Luke had lain. Instantly the dogs took bear scent, their yowling sent to

a high pitch. Thelma hauling on the lead with Delbert in tow. Delbert walked her in a circle around the site then again, and twice at the same place Thelma yelped and strained toward the deep forest. The third time around he let several feet of webbing slip through his hands and the two free dogs coursed ahead but within sight. Thelma leaned into her collar and Delbert for all his tilted gangly appearance stepped out light on his feet and quick over and around sticks and dead fall and thick bog spruce. Both traveler's feet sunk each step into the hummocky sponge moss forest floor. Neither of them cursed the moss, both knowing the faint rabbit and squirrel trails etched in the spongy terrain were good going compared with what would lie ahead. They faded into the dark timber.

It was as clear to the dogs they were on a track hot as if a dead bear had been dragged on the ground. It was clear to Beck that the bear rimmed the lake heading south and west and if it kept up that direction it was wild country, country he had flown but never walked. Canyon and ridge country. Hell country, he had said as he looked down that first time from a chopper as he flew over this landscape.

Delbert stopped abruptly, bent down, rubbed the red on a shrub's leaf. The red stayed on his forefinger like watered-down paint. Blood, he said to himself. Waited for Beck to catch up, heard Beck's breathing before he rounded a clump of trees. "Bear's wounded," Delbert said.

"He is. Knife wound."

"You never told me he was wounded."

"You never asked. We're wasting time."

"Different deal now. Wounded bear ain't no regular bear. It's gonna make hard miles before it settles down. Can't predict

an angry bear, already feels cornered. Could lay for us. Won't hold like it should. Attack my dogs for what already happened to him. Guaranteed man hater." Delbert stood still as a stick. "Call'n my dogs off."

"Like hell you are, we got a deal."

"This ain't part of the deal."

"Delbert, this bear's got to be stopped, if you're worried about money, we can make it work."

"It ain't just the money" - words spit from a sour, tilted mouth. "How much we talking?"

Sweat already shone on Beck's forehead. "Tell you what, we get that bear and it's another \$500, on top of the other \$300 I already promised you." Beck unzipped his coat to get rid of heat. "Maybe more."

"I don't cotton a man goes back on his word," Delbert said.

"We're wasting time."

They walked through lakeside timber, the sheen of lake water winking between trees on their right. The winking quit as they passed the end of the lake, but the track continued a line south and they penetrated deep forest. Beck knew the land could not stay level for long and inside an hour they stood on a high ridge looking down into a deep, heavily forested valley that came up from the left, where 20 trackless miles distant lay the farms and ranches of the main valley. Between looming grey knifed hard shale mountains a stream ribboned along the bottom, flat grey in the calm, boiled white at the drops.

The dogs held strong on the scent.

"Wait," Beck said. He removed his coat and tied it to his pack. "Where do you think that bear went from here?" he said.

“Could be straight down to the bottom through the timber, but likely stay high for now, headed up valley then sidehill down yonder.” He pointed to smooth, light green meadow-like streaks running from high mountain ridges down to the valley floor. “See there, those slides, prob’ly hit those, that thick alder and willow’s a good place to hide. Got roots he can eat there, maybe plan to hole up with that wound. Better keep sharp. Keep that gun handy.”

The bear did stay high then angled down slowly, the valley steadily gaining elevation coming up to meet them. They side-hilled, edges of stiff soled boots dug into moss and the spruce needle covered dirt of the steep timbered slope. At times boots gave out, the two of them seemed to take turns skidding down a few feet until a root, stone, or clump held and boots again dug in. They cursed and skidded along. The dogs yodeled when the mood struck them.

They broke through the timber into a slide of choked willow and alder. Beck looked up to rock faces and the cascade of a small stream. The slide looked pleasant enough from afar, the lighter, brighter grass meadows up high blended into the deciduous below, a break from the monotony of dark evergreen timber. They stepped out and instantly Beck’s feet slipped out. He skidded down on knees, his left hand holding the rifle high and his right grabbing on to brush. His heart raced, his gun flailing in hand. A tight spot for a bear charge. Beck found his footing, switched the gun to his right hand and kept it in a firing position best he could. It was slip and slide again and again. The dogs cut down into brush that looked waist high a mile back on the ridge but now swallowed them under a leaf canopy. Full leafed alder and willow branches as lattice work confined them

and they shoved them aside. The branches shoved back. They ducked and slipped through and wondered how any bear could get through a maze too dense for a rabbit, let alone a beast of this size. A muddied streamlet hidden in an alder dip revealed in the mud an immense front paw print set Beck's jaws tight and face to flushing.

Beck gathered his breath. Just what good was it being out here, what chance was there of getting a crack at this bear now, and what chance would he have if the bear came at him from a few feet away - all he could see in this hell was a wall of a tangle? He bulldogged his way, shins scratched and skinned on deadfall hidden in deep grasses and weeds. Careful to avoid devil's club but it surprised him anyway, his denim jeans no protection from the bite of dense spines that kept biting long after. Sometimes a glimpse of Delbert in the mess, sometimes only his stream of curses to follow.

"The hell I expected it to be," Beck said to no one. Eager dogs through it all. The great grizzly feet planted hot scent on damp ground, the lure they needed, had and lived for. Their happy tails waved constantly what Beck for some reason resented, yet that same unfailing optimism gave Beck hope.

The ground still steep but less so then suddenly an abrupt change of habitat, in timber once again. Beck stopped and listened for the yips of the dogs, for Delbert's crashing, for Delbert talking at the dogs. It was silent. Exhausted, he took several deep breaths, sweat rolled into his eyes, he wiped them. Listened again. Nothing. Delbert, Beck cursed. Now on better ground and the dogs making time they left him behind. Panic gripped Beck. He walked then trotted, dodging trees. He ran, dodged a wide limbed evergreen, ducked his head and shoved at

a wide-reaching bough, barged through the busted end of a dead branch, its jagged end caught his face, pain jolted him, he could feel blood ooze wet, elevated his panic and he dove through tight-knit trees then his feet dropped out from under him. He skidded down, ass to the ground, into a small steep draw, then nearly bowled Delbert over as he piled up at his feet.

Dogs wagging tails. “Where’s the fire?” Delbert said with a grin.

Beck rolled to his front, inspected his left hand. A nail half torn from his middle finger. The fingernail’s loose half at 90 degrees from the bloody finger, attached along one edge. He bit the nail’s remains, yanked it with his teeth, spit out the jagged shard, then sucked his finger and spit blooded saliva. The valley stream gurgled in the distance. He sat up and looked at open timber. Light underbrush. The sound of water nearby rushing over stones.

In five minutes they made the bank then stepped down to the pleasant gravel bar of a small meandering river. “This here is the north fork of Blackstone Creek,” Beck said. “Let’s stop for a bit.” He dropped his pack and sat on a hummock under a large fir tree. Delbert ignored his comment and walked out of sight then in a few minutes showed up again. “Can’t be stopping if we hope to catch up,” he said.

“Not long, five minutes, just to catch my breath, get some energy in me.” He reached to his jacket slung on his back and dug an energy bar from a pocket. Tore the packaging, took a bite, then stood and slipped down the brief bank and kneeled streamside for a drink. He sat back down under the same tree. Delbert opened the tie string on his green canvas pack and stuck

in a hand and pulled out a candy bar. Eatmore. Tore the wrapper with his dirty narrow fingers and took a chew.

“What all you got in there?” Beck said. “Doesn’t seem like much else but maybe some dog food.” He noticed the two dogs still missing. “You sure your dogs won’t just head up the valley and disappear?” No sooner than he finished the sentence the two males ran around a tree and nearly into Delbert’s lap with tails wagging. Delbert tore off a chunk of Eatmore for each.

“You never said,” Beck said.

“Said what?”

“You got enough dog food in there for a few days?”

“No need.”

“What? You gonna feed them Eatmores?”

Delbert ignored Beck.

“You’re not serious, I hope. You don’t have dog food?”

“This is dog food, and Delbert put his hand on the worn Cooley .22 repeater. Tend to your own,” he said.

Beck looked at Delbert as if he had seen him for the first time. As if for the first time he realized this man was more than what met the eye. The hard lean raggedness of him, his habits, what kind of man he was. His cast taken years in its forming not subject to change, would never be uprooted, immune to scrutiny. How Delbert’s ability to carry himself through the brush and along the mountain was not just something he decided to do, but what was honed from a lifetime of surviving in his hard world.

“Ok, I’m ready if you are,” Beck said. Beck glanced up at the skies. In the short time they rested a grey ceiling had settled in.

The valley bottom was nothing to stop a man on foot. They walked around fallen logs, around thickets, and chose streamside

gravel and sand bars when they lay gentle. They stepped over streamlets that cascaded from high above yet crawled peaceable enough to their master. Beyond each joining water course the main flow above grew that much smaller. The afternoon turned evening and they kept on, feet plodding firmly on game trails laced through stunted evergreens that at times looking impenetrable, but always a thin path or hidden passage. The valley floor no more than a couple hundred yards across, mountain slopes on either side tight to the stream, upshot slides intermittent with runs of dense spruce and fir running vertical up to broken rock. Beck could not remember a time when he was so tired, so beaten.

A slow drizzle began as a soft and gentle cloud that hid peaks and scabble and within the hour a steady cold and penetrating rain. There was nothing gentle about heading into a barren mountain pass under freezing rain. Each one had pulled on rain gear, each act unnoticed by the other. Beck in a thin-skinned Helly Hansen and Delbert covered with a worn canvas oilskin coat that Beck supposed was at one time a matched set with the abused oilskin Aussie hat Delbert wore. A faint game trail lay through the pass like the thinnest line on a road map. Up ahead Delbert flowed in and out of the fog as an ill-conceived foreign apparition then disappeared behind a wall of alpine fir. Beck kept pace, avoiding drenched limbs that reached out like branched showers.

A shot rang out.

Startled. Beck stepped up then rounded a thicket and nearly collided with Delbert. A rabbit laid inert on white lichen, limp body, blood-soaked rib cage, its head lolled at an odd angle. Long white incisor teeth a grimace as if death was the final joke

played on itself. Beck froze. The vision that held him was not the blood-soaked rabbit but Luke; Luke's scalp torn from his head, blood spray and blood pooled, all things blood. He clutched a tree branch for steadying, a spray of cold rainwater from its branches. The female whined with anticipation but did not move. Knife in hand, Delbert looked up with a grin, a few rotted teeth sunk in an unsavoury black hole surrounded by lips and black unshaven whiskers. Water trailed off of his hat.

"Stand back if'n you don't want to get run over, unless you'd like a share," Delbert grinned. He drove in a large Bowie-type knife behind the hare's shoulders then sawed toward the ground and then again, separating the carcass into three, then parceled out the chunks leaking of muddled innards. The males came charging through the trees then held up, heads jerked left and right between Delbert and the carcass. Beck stepped back, hand still clenched to the wide branched spruce. "Eat," Delbert said and they each grabbed a piece and each wolfed down the bloody hair-bound chunks - a hairy foot, wagging ears, disappeared between grinding jaws and white teeth.

"We're about out of trees," Delbert said.

"I see that."

"How far through the pass, to the other side where we get into timber ag'in?"

"Can't say as I remember, exactly, flew over only once. As I remember it was a narrow but long enough pass. Looked flat. We got enough light to make it to the other side."

"Got a hard choice to make. Fact is this rain'll soon wash away the scent, if it ain't already. Best to make camp while we still got trees. Truth is its jest as well to head back down this

valley in the morn'n and stay on this creek till it comes out down below on some road."

"Truth is, we ain't," Beck said. "There's no road for 20 miles down this creek. Other end of the pass there's a big alpine valley. A stream heads off to the south from there, then turns back east down toward the main valley. Big Child reserve is on that stream. Once we get over the pass it's about 12 miles to the reserve. Closest way out. We're going after that bear, that's what you're paid to do and why we're here. Let me worry about when it's time to quit."

Delbert aimed the knife's big blade at Beck and bobbed it up and down. "You mind what I say. This rain's about to last all night. No dog'll pick up a track after rain all night. Jest as well to chase ghosts." He wiped the blooded blade on white lichen now streaked red then slipped the knife into a leather home-stitched belt sheath.

Beck held Delbert's deep-set eyes then said, "Look, this bear went through this pass we're standing on. Agreed?"

"Most likely."

"How far does that collar work, how far can they feel it enough to know to come back?"

"Two miles."

"Look, why not send them all out? We got an hour before dark. We can make good time over the pass. By the time we get to the other side the dogs should still have some scent and if they get into the timber where the rain's not heavy there'll be more scent. Any luck the rain will pull up and we're on the track at first light. We only got four hours of actual dark."

Delbert shook his head at the ground. "And jest where is that bear? What you don't know is what it's like to come up on a

bear in near dark. How you gonna shoot, dogs and bear all tangled up? That bear ain't no two-year-old black. It's been hunted and chased for 20 years. The wind's blown in our face all day. It could be that bear slowed down some, could be ahead anytime, waiting."

"They catch him in the pass it could be the best thing, the dogs can hold him out in the open till we catch up."

Delbert shook his head then stood and unclipped the female from her leash. With tails wagging and whiskers painted rabbit blood red, they dashed off. "You're a hard man Beck," he said. "Your man Lewis told me that boy got kilt back there. What you got boiled up in you don't give you the right to make fools of the rest of us. He said what that bear did to that boy. It made an impression on me and I done more'n 50 bear kills."

"Made an impression on me too," said Beck. "I ain't gonna quit. Let's go."

They slugged through the pass. The dim slopes squeezed them, the dropped ceiling scraped their heads. They trudged bent against the wind through dips and hollows and around boulders, avoiding plate scree shale sloughed and skidded down from fractured rock. Soaked boots heavy as bricks splashed through puddles of drizzle collected on the dim path, slippery in the grey light like a slimy thin grey snake. Its form imprinted from the feet of living things from distant times for reasons unknown. They pushed hard as drained bodies and sore feet would allow. Delbert's hand up at his chest and Beck knew he was at the controller unit, and the dogs came running back and were sent out again.

"Well hell," Beck said to himself.

The fading light left them midnight blind as they finally began to drop, their path blocked by waist-high black walls that were stunted white fir, their bright scent contrast to the depleted night. The wind slowed, now at their backs. A tricklet of water played alongside and as one they turned into a thicket of some substance. They shed their packs. Delbert leashed the males and tied dogs to separate trees. Beck lay his pack under as dry a tree as he could find. He dug out a headlamp and a 60-foot length of quarter-inch double braid nylon rope, strung it between two trees as high as he could reach, pulled over an ultralight nylon fly, tacked the two backside corners down with small aluminum pegs then pulled down the forward corner ropes and pegged them to set the lean-to.

Beck dragged his pack under, laid out his mummy bag head to the closed side of the fly. He dug in his pack and pulled out a granola bar, an energy bar, a small bag of mixed nuts and dried fruit, and a half bottle of water. He searched the bag again and came up empty. He was not alone yet he was suddenly overcome with an overpowering sense of aloneness. He dug in the bag again, searched the deep corners, and came up with a plastic Ziplock bag. He unzipped the bag and removed a yellow inReach device and his cell phone. He connected a small back wire between the two. He sat up, pressed the “on” button, was relieved to see satellite bars. He typed in his message slowly, fingers cold and clumsy in the glaring light; *on pass head of drummond creek. all ok. how is Ellie. will contact Lewis tomorrow eve. love you.* He slid the unit into his dry sleeping bag.

Delbert dropped his bag under the lean-to, pulled out a green wool army blanket, laid it out, placed his coat at the open

end for a pillow, his pack outside of the pillow for a windbreak. He lay on half the blanket then pulled over the other half. He lay back his head on the oilskin then reached down into his pants and found an Eatmore. Tore off the wrapper. He chewed slow and silent. The thin patter of drizzle on the lean-to.

Beck slid out of his slicker, laid his own coat for a pillow, laid the slicker between his coat and the wall, crawled in the bag, positioned the inReach and cell phone along his side. He chewed his supper and sipped water. When he finished eating he lay still and listened for sounds. The drizzle softened, the wind settled. All silent in this remote land of many moods. Delbert's breathing. The rancid smell of a wetted Delbert - the dogs smelled like flowers by comparison. Beck's mind a whirl, lost in a maze of thought, all important, all elusive - nothing made sense. Beck had survived the turbulent life of a game warden by not dwelling on troubles late in the evening. It all sorted better, made more sense in the morning's light. What's that they say - every morning is the first day of your life; or, new dawn, new beginnings - something like that.

"The dogs still look to be catching some scent," Beck said.

After a minute Delbert spoke. "Not likely they can pick it up. Maybe if the rain quits. Maybe search for it. No reason for that bear to be travelling all night. Maybe it's close. Maybe it ain't. Best get some sleep. Four hours till first light."

"That boy," Beck said, "his name is Luke." He was my granddaughter's boyfriend. He was trying to protect her. Fought off the bear.

Silence.

"Your man Lewis never told me that. Sorry to hear it."

“When I left the hospital she was stable.” She’ll pull through.

“It ain’t only kin folk who is family,” Delbert said.  
And that was last thing said.

\* \* \*

The breeze sifted gently down from the pass. All day long the wind had streamed toward the boar’s front. The steady westerly wind fed his nose and assured him of no surprises, at least from a west direction. But with the clearing weather the wind had shifted and now blew from the east. He lifted his snout to the night skies that had finally shed its rain and now shone blue and silver with a dusting of stars. The bear shifted, took pressure off his aching shoulder, rolled to the opposite side where the knife wound throbbed. He shifted again, this time to his belly. He moaned sorrowfully what climbed his throat as a snarl.... a profound hatred of the humans who dared pursue him, who would cause him this pain. Should they meet, these teeth, these great paws, they would know his wrath, as are all living things subject to the whim of the king.

He lay cliff edged under a favourite tree, looked out into the black night, sensed the vacuum of space below. The void was a playground of scent, the free flow of air currents a mosaic of modulating smells. In the daylight the view of the great basin was something to behold. He’d taken refuge under the sprawling wide-limbed hemlock many times, a commanding cliff top view over a great alpine meadow with several rubbing posts nearby; dead or half dead spruce denied life with busted branches from

20 years of his back scratching. A sudden draft buffeted his backside and again he lifted his snout to the night.

The stink hit like a hammer. He surged to his feet. No mistaking the rancid sweat of human and dog. How could it be, how could they be so close?

He stood silent in the night. An hour slipped by. The stink held steady. For a moment he thought of slipping away, it would be easy to do. But only for a moment.

He turned and faced the breeze directly. The sneak would be easy, high alpine suffered little deadfall, few twigs underfoot, little debris. Waist-high white pine that had survived a hundred years and more in the harsh subarctic biome left few deceased relatives. He moved off, slid between wet, feathered branches, stepped soft on carpets of grass, a vindictive stealth fashioned for cutthroats. The bear slipped up to the camp like a wraith in the night. He edged crossways and determined the exact resting place of each person and dog. He stood downwind among the sleeping dogs and listened to their soft sighs, their pitiful nightmare whimpers.

That surreal moment when unconscious nothing meets conscious hell. Denial; this can't be happening. Shock; knowing the terror truly is. Beck's heart jumped from calm to frenzied. Snarls and growls and yipes and shrieks and thumping bodies. Beck's hand dove to the head of his sleeping bag, under his coat, grappled for the headlamp, twisted it upon his head its glow ejaculated wildly among the trees. His hands grabbed at the rifle, he turned toward Delbert's screams, his whiteness lunged from his bed as he dove toward the melee.

“No!” Beck yelled then jumped to his feet, lifted his gun and in the erratic light caught Delbert’s charge and a looming black beast. Boom! The reflex blast of Beck’s gun.

Silence.

Dogs whining.

Beck stood among the wreckage. Delbert on his knees leaned over an inert form. The young male stood by and licked Delbert’s arm. The female faced the timber and snarled. Delbert lay his forehead upon the dog’s chest. The lifeless form of Digger. Beck thought he saw movement, a rise in the dog’s chest. He aimed his headlamp full on. Delbert’s blooded hands and face. No movement, only his wishful imagination.

\* \* \*

The cold morning materialized slowly and never did become clear in the gloom. Stubborn fog had settled on the pass like a wet rag. Beck nursed a meager fire, busied himself collecting feeble sticks of dead underbrush. Delbert sat silent, backside to an evergreen trunk. Beck lifted a small tin pot from the fire and poured hot water into a tin cup then spilled a spoon or so of instant coffee from a small plastic Ziplock, then added sugar from another Ziploc then edged over to Delbert and placed the cup on the ground. “The hot will feel good,” he said.

Delbert stared ahead at nothing, as he had since first light, and as Beck knew he had before first light. Their enclave in the stunted alpine evergreens was surrounded by scatterings of stone and plate scree that subject to the forces of geology and gravity had slid down from escarpments and settled in places more accommodating. Delbert stood, then with the look of the walking

dead, he disappeared. Beck heard the clack or rocks. He followed the sound and found Delbert in a dip of stone and loose shale, struggling with a slab of stone. Digger lay at his side. Beck kneeled and together they loosened the plate then hauled it from the depression then pulled up others. Once the hole was sizeable Delbert stood up. "Let me be," he said.

"Can't find blood. Don't think I hit him," Beck said.

"Let me be," Delbert said again.

Beck moved about the camp, stuffed his packsack. Delbert walked in, his kit already packed, lifted the pack to his back. He turned the young male loose, untied the bitch, her lead in his hand. The dogs whined and pulled toward the down valley direction.

"This be the shortest way out?" Delbert said.

"It is."

"Better be. You keep up, I ain't waiting."

The two dogs hauled off and in 40 yards they picked up fresh spoor and the bear once again ahead of them from the direction the bear had just come. The dogs yodeled over the hot track then whined as tails flagged. If they felt remorse for their fallen kin or empathy for their owner, those emotions were locked behind instinct that for countless centuries had driven hunting hounds forward. Beck trotted to keep up through the easy going of the downhill run through subalpine. The downward grade steepened and the sounds of dogs yowling suddenly lost, Beck picked up his pace. He jogged around a clump of evergreen, the trail etched in the notch of a small draw. He ran down the draw. Suddenly the ground disappeared. His momentum about to carry him into space he dropped to the ground, skidding downward, his feet splayed, his hands

grappling for scrappy brush. His feet dug in and he grabbed hold of a stunted fir then stopped dead. Gravel his feet dislodged free-fell and pinged off the cliff wall on their paths down to somewhere infinite. His hands clenched to brush he turned to his stomach and he looked up and there on flat ground just above and off to the side stood Delbert and the dogs. The dogs watched Beck with curiosity. Delbert stood relaxed as a street corner tourist interested only in the variety of humanity crossing a street.

“You could have warned me,” Beck said, as he pulled himself to his feet and climbed to the flat spot where Delbert stood. Delbert gave a baleful grin. But for the notch that dropped to the void, the ground was level right to the brink of the cliff.

“Grizzly bear lookout,” Delbert said, “rub’n posts.” He pinched a tuft of hair from a branch stub. Dark brown guard hairs, light brown under-hair. It bent in the breeze, waved in front of Beck’s face.

“Spent the night not more than a half mile from us,” Delbert said. “This is likely where the bear was laid up when he got our scent. He could’ve just as well headed off, but he come after us.”

Beck sat down his back to the very trunk of the tree the grizzly had laid against not 10 hours earlier. His breathing finally slowed down to something controlled.

“What’d you come out here for?” Delbert said.

Beck looked at Delbert. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You think you gotta score to settle? That bear spent its whole life collecting scores he got to settle with man. What you got is a hard-on for a old he-bear who’s been taking abuse from people since about he was a cub. Gett’n shot at for jest livin’,

eating a meal wherever he can. He just as soon as have nothin' to do with you and your kind."

"My kind? That's a hell of a way for a hound hunter to talk. How many bears you killed?"

I kill 'em to make a living. Kill 'em because no one else hardly does. They's too many and they raise pure hell on moose calves and every other kind of calf. I kill em' because you government types won't. We're part of nature, too, s'posed to be, and we ain't living up to our part of the deal. You know damn well for years we're losing our moose and elk number to bears and all you do is talk about regulating moose and elk what's already wiped out by predators, and you can't see no-how that you can't regulate moose and elk if you don't regulate what kills 'em. I swear for each year you book learn'n types study in school you get one year dummer. Dummer'n hell, I say."

"I'm not a science type. We're wasting time."

"Time for what?"

"We've been on that track all along. Look at this," and he lifted his hand to wave at the great alpine valley that lay sprawled at their feet. "Look how far this cliff runs along the bowl, all the way to the far end, can't even see that far. The bear can't go up here," and Beck pointed up to his left where a cliff rose high and continued up a rocky shoulder to a snow-covered pyramid peak. "He ain't going that way, he's got to go on to our right, probably stayed high on the slopes above the cliffs. The dogs will have no trouble following."

Delbert turned, his back to the great basin, a snarl fixed to his face. "You and your righteous ways. Don't matter what price somebody else pays to get what you want. Makes me sick. You

already kilt one dog. I aim to see it aint' any more. It's true what your sidekick said, ain't it, you tell me it's not."

"What?"

"The day before that boy got hisself killed, a big grizzly killed a cow not 10 miles down the valley from that lake where the boy was. Don't take me for your fool. The whole way I see'd that track in every mud hole, that left foot a little turned off. Now tell me that bear killed that cow didn't have the same crooked track."

"It could have. What difference does it make? A bear kills a cow or a pig don't make it a people killer."

"And what does that make you? A lawmaker let his own granddaughter camped up with her boyfriend a few hours walk from a cow kill'n bear and not a word said about it. You got hell to pay and a lifetime comin' try'n to make amends."

"Shut your mouth. We got bears killing calves, pigs, dogs, about every week. Can't shut down life because of it. Damn rights I got a job to do. Damn rights I feel guilty. That's none of your concern. You agreed, we're headed that way anyway and..... Mother-of-God." Beck looked beyond Delbert's rigid form. That's him, it's got to be! Beck squirmed out of his pack, dug out binoculars then looked far down the bowl.

Delbert turned.

"Son of a.... look a'that, its headed in this direction." Beck lifted his binoculars. Focused. "That bear is headed back this way to the same valley we have to head down, Drummond Creek. Lookit the size..... that's him for sure, it's got to be! I know it. Well look at that." Beck said as much to himself as he witnessed the exalted air about the great bear's being as it carried itself through the meadow below.

He turned his binoculars to the cliff face as it rimmed the great basin. At places the cliff face shrank to what appeared was only a dozen-foot drop to the main valley below, but Beck knew the distance played tricks and the drop at the lowest points was likely twice that. Why? Why is he headed our way? he thought. Why did you not just keep going west? Why turn back and down Drummond Creek? Ok, every badass makes a mistake sooner or later - what he learned in the service from chasing badasses for 40 years. "We got him now," Beck said.

"You fool, listen to you. We got noth'n. That bear knows this country better'n you know your own kitchen. He was headed that-a-way the whole time. Jest had to travel to the end of the cliff before it could get down and walk back."

"Well, that's our good luck, isn't it."

"It's nobody's good luck. We got but two dogs. Maybe run him for a while. Maybe help that he's old, wounded, but no chance to hold a bear with two dogs. Catch his rest then head out again. He's not headed down that creek for your good luck."

"Then why is he?"

"You know this country, you figure it out."

Beck ran the possibilities, but none made sense. There were other places, other passes, that would have taken him further away faster from the hated dogs and men. Is it food? Beck thought, is there more food down low? No, it's near July, more food up high, roots, plants, marmots, the young of elk, moose, sheep, goat. Beck dwelled on it. What did he miss, and what difference did it make? "What difference does it make," Beck said, "we're headed that way anyway."

“Headed where anyway? That bear just walked miles along those slopes just to get down this cliff, then a couple miles back again. You get him out of your head. We’re not catching up.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? No. No maybe.”

“See that draw,” and Beck pointed a half mile distant, it almost comes down to the lower valley. “Looks only maybe a 15 or 20 foot drop.”

“Only? If that bear can’t get down there you aint either. Or me. Or my dogs.”

“I got an idea. A way to get down.” He studied the exact location of that break in the cliff, marked the spot with the trees and brush on the slide above.

Delbert watched Beck studying the landscape. “What?” he said, “You got a magic carpet up your ass?” Delbert huffed and turned away, untied the bitch, then walked off along the top edge of the cliff. Once again the dogs hit on the hot track and as expected the spoor did rim the top of the cliff. For 100 yards Beck followed along. Delbert trudged slowly, terrible underbrush. Beck considered; he’s exhausted, sure, but stubborn too, slowing down on purpose, determined to fall back. He doesn’t want to catch up, he’s avoiding the bear. Beck stepped up his pace then jogged past Delbert and the dogs. He kept a hard pace for another 100 yards until the high slope forced him to traverse steep sidehills. Boots grabbed plates of scree to find them as sleds that tobogganed downwards and they skipped across as they slid and dropped until boots found footing on slippery moss. He shoved at alder thick as prison bars. Worse, prison bars would not have grown sideways then shove back as hard as Beck gave. Devil’s club that ran the length of slides

stung hands and penetrated jeans. For a moment Beck envied Delbert's choice of long johns, but after three patches of devil's club Beck doubted that underwear of any type could make much difference. His legs stung awful bad and Beck had no ointment of any type and knew the bite of these thorns would last for days. Beck pushed on, leaving Delbert further behind. He constantly searched above for his markers. The trees and plants and slopes *did* look different now than they had from a distance.

He recognized a group of three larger spruce with a dead lobster stick stuck out at an angle. He cut down to a hillside notch then slowly worked his way down, hands grabbing hold of willow and alder for shaky stability. He reached a ledge and peered. Twenty feet straight down. Sloughed shale scabble strewn at the bottom. He looked back up the notch. Waited. Saw the dogs first then Delbert.

"Delbert! Hold up!" Beck shoved exhausted legs back up a few feet then held up 20 yards from Delbert, leaned over panting as if he'd been run by hounds himself. Delbert sat, his left cheek blood streaked from a deep scratch. He placed elbows on his knees, dropped his head. "Can't take much more of this," he said.

Beck dropped his pack, unlashed the top and removed the lean-to cord. "We can make it down here," he said.

"What's that?"

"That's 40 feet of rope, the drop is maybe 20."

"That ain't rope, its string, what do you aim to do with that?"

"Its quarter-inch double-braid nylon cord with 2,000-pound breaking strength."

"Well you just go right ahead."

“Look, I’ll go first, then you can lower the dogs, then follow.” Beck turned and moved carefully back down to the lip of the cliff, tied off one end of the rope to a stout fir. He looked up. “Delbert,” he said, “we can’t go on this way. You know it. Come down and watch what I do. It’s not hard.”

Delbert studied the tangle that was the slope ahead then looked out over the open meadows of the lower bowl. He stood up and edged down to Beck. “What about the dogs?” he said.

“Can you tie a bowline?”

Delbert nodded.

“Here girl, “Beck said then took her leash then with the free end of the rope fastened a bowline around her chest just behind her shoulders. “She don’t weigh much,” Beck said. “Now watch me close.” Beck untied the rope from the dog then held the rope near the tree and wrapped it around his left leg then pinched the slack of the rope between the bottom of his left foot and the arch of his right foot. Then he held the cord tight in both hands. “This is how you have to rappel your way down. Don’t change how you do it halfway down. Keep the rope tight around your leg and tight between your feet. After I’m down send the dogs and the packs. Send my rifle down separate. Tie it to the butt stock. Make sure you reach out far so it don’t bounce off the wall. Now watch me careful.”

He sat cliff edge then wormed his way over, playing out the pinched line through his hands and through his feet. Shoulders and knees and hips scraped against the cliff-side, teeth gritted from the pain as he descended slow and steady. Halfway down, his weight was too much for the strength of tired hands and the rope slipped and burned and the last few feet he let up his grip and dropped on to the smooth shale. He stood and looked up. He

could not see Delbert, so Delbert did not see his few feet of freefall.

“I’m good,” Beck yelled up, go ahead with the dogs. In a few minutes the female appeared, lashed to the rope. She scabbled wildly as she lost her footing then swung freely and squiggled as a worm on a hook. Resigned to her fate, she calmed then descended and Beck reached up and gathered her in his arms and placed her gently on the ground, her tail wagging in appreciation. “Ok!” he yelled, and the rope yanked up and soon the second dog squirmed his way down in the same fashion. The rifle came down first and the barrel ticked against the rock wall, and then the packs. Delbert finally showed.

It was obvious. Too much slack. The rope was not wound tight around his left leg. He slipped down several feet then the rope slipped from between clenched feet. All that held was his hands as his legs grappled wildly, trying once again to control the rope and they finally did, partially. With fragile control he slid down several more feet, but too fast, and Beck knew his burning hands could not last. Delbert let go and dropped to the scree.

Delbert lay on his side, turned slowly to his back. He lay quietly then sat up, grimaced, and placed his hand on his right foot. He test-moved his foot, grimaced more, then pressed fingers against his ankle.

“Let me see that,” Beck stepped over.

“Never you mind,” Delbert said with a spiteful look. He rolled to his knees then stood and put pressure on his foot and winced then wiggled his foot and stepped softly, limped a few steps, then reached for his pack and carefully placed it on. “Here girl,” he said then took her lead and led off with a limp.

Beck watched him head out, a man abused and beaten in about every way possible, yet he wondered if he himself could match his grit, or had the stuff to keep up. He grabbed his pack. The pack's hood was open, he had forgotten to tie it shut. He took the big Puma knife from the sheath on his hip and reached up and cut off as much rope as possible then stuffed the rope in the open mouth of the pack, then tied it shut.

Progress was slow with Delbert favouring his ankle, but the open meadows interspersed with patches of evergreen were welcome respite from the snarl of the high slopes. They kept a diagonal line to where the high valley dropped into a central treed draw, to where they last saw the bear. They hit a faint path in the hard ground; packed dirt and stone indelible from centuries of cloven hoofs, bear paws and wolves' feet funneled up or down from the high country. The second they hit the path, the dogs yodeled and the bitch leaned into her collar.

They held up.

"Why not let her go, that bear's headed the same way we are. What have we got to lose?" Beck said.

"You already made it clear to Digger you ain't got nothing to lose. No, they stay with me."

"Look, you got the transmitter, why not let them go and just call them in every half hour or so?"

"Lots can happen in a half hour."

Beck contemplated. "What if the bear doesn't go down to low country, what if it heads off up a side creek somewhere, up a slide? We'll never know it unless the dogs show us it did. Maybe then we got something to show for it, we'll know at least where it's headed."

“You don’t get it yet, do you? That bear knows where it was headed the moment it kilt my dog. It knowed it was headed down here. And it knowed why.”

“Why? Why is it going down Drummond Creek instead of staying high and headed straight away from us?”

“You know the difference betwixt a three-year-old bear and a ten-year-old boar?”

Beck waited for Delbert to continue.

“A three-year-old is a clown. A old boar is a killer, assassin, Hitler.”

“That don’t explain why he’s headed down this valley. He’s headed straight to civilization. Only about six or so miles and it levels out, trails, people from the Big Child Reserve. Horses. Hunters. Berry pickers. Fishers.”

“It don’t explain it to you, that don’t mean it can’t be explained. Assassins only live long if they’re smart. He knows dogs got his scent, knows he can’t shake ‘em up in the high country. Down low is a way out.”

Beck thought on it. “So, it gets down into man country. Horses, cattle, the reserve, people, other bears, black bears. Maybe fresher tracks than his. He loses the dogs. Is that it?”

“That bear ain’t afraid. He’ll walk straight through the Chief’s lodge if it’ll help him lose us.”

Beck thought on that. He remembered a news article from this past fall about a grizzly that just plain walked through a door and on into the kitchen of the Lone Prairie Hutterite Colony, down south of Redstone.

“We saw the bear,” Beck said, “it wasn’t moving fast, maybe the knife wound’s got him stoved up. Could be that bear is only a mile or two ahead of us. How about this. How about

you let the dogs go for only 15 minutes at a time then call them back, keep them close, close enough that if they hold up the bear we can hear them. You said how good your dogs are. I don't deny it. They're smart enough to know how to hold a bear without getting hurt. Even if we don't catch up to the bear at least we can make better time, get out of here by dark. I guess neither of us want to spend another night out with that bear close by."

Beck guessed right.

Delbert looked down the trail. "How far out to the reserve, the closest road?" he said.

"Maybe seven miles. Only four hours if we can keep up."

"Heel," Delbert barked at the straining female. She came around to his left and stood. "We'll go," he said, "keep 'em close for a couple miles then if the track stays fresh straight down, I might turn 'em out."

"How's your foot?"

Delbert walked off at a quick pace, his right leg with a hitch.

In a mile they came across scatterings of last year's horse manure. Pushed on. The good trail took a crooked line down the valley center. At first the small stream was what Delbert could step over, even with a sprained ankle, then as feeder streams poured in it grew and there was no stepping over and they plowed through shin-deep then knee-deep water, careful not to slip on greasy round stones. The ice water eased the ache in Delbert's ankle. It was the fastest pace since they had left the lake. The male whined and the bitch strained on her lead and after a couple miles Delbert turned them loose. Beck lifted his gun and checked the open V-notch sights. He opened the bolt

and checked the bore and it was clear, so he slipped a round into the chamber then shoved on the safety.

They made quick time. If they noticed that the wind funneled down the valley from behind, neither of them mentioned it.

\* \* \*

The bear raised his nose and tested the air then raised himself from his moss mattress and stepped to the stream. He dropped to his belly and lay his muzzle to the water and sucked it up. He lifted his muzzle then stood like a dog, lapped up more water. He had had little to eat in the past day, only a few Hedysarum roots and shoots. Once again, he raised his snout to the air. There was no question. The same dogs, the same humans, as it had been for the past few hours, the past couple of days. In younger times he would have simply run for it. Back then he could amble and trot and run all day if need be. Use the rough terrain, the changing winds, then perhaps a stream to mislead and lose the hated dogs. Those days were gone. He had neither the stamina, speed, or the desire to run. But he still controlled the game. This was his world, his living room. He ambled down the trail.

The stream that rolled along pleasant enough began to drop. At first boulders and rapids, then chutes and cataracts blasted with raging waters. Spray hung mist in the dank air. Space closed as mountain ridges pinched the stream forcing it to cut through cliffs. The trail was pinned between rock walls and white water, then after a few hundred yards, cliffs pulled back and a grass and moss slope marked with boulders reached up from the left side of the stream and up to crags. The bear looked

up at a house-sized chunk of rock 50 yards up from the trail, what had slipped down to its resting place many years ago, silent if there was no living thing to hear it. Centered on the path, the bear walked in tight concentric circles, out further with each round, around and around and around. He stopped 30 yards from the huge, jagged rock then walked straight up to its right side, the downstream side, then hugged the stone and walked up and curled around the stone to the upstream side, then lay down on a dirt sill hidden behind a section of rock split from the mother rock.

Hidden. He peered upstream through a notch in the cracked rock and studied his back trail. The buffeted canyon tossed wind currents. There it was again. The stench flooded his nasal cavity, its stink accentuated in the mist damp air.

He let roll a rumbling growl then lay down to rest. He would need all his energy.

\* \* \*

It was all of 15 minutes, maybe more. Delbert pressed the activate button on the transmitter. The small round green light that signaled a transmission did not light up. He pressed it again, and again. It did not engage. "Well damn," he said. "Then pressed it again."

"What's the matter?" Beck said.

B"attery's dead." Delbert's voice was tight. He studied the trail as it wound down through timber. He looked at his feet, at a mudded seep that melted over the trail and there was the distinct impression of the human foot-like hind paw print of a huge bear. And there were the paw prints of his dogs. He glanced at Beck. Then he ran.

"Well damn," Beck said, and trotted out behind.

The two crossbred hounds lived in an insular world. It was enough to eat, sleep, play, and hunt. No, the hunt was not simply enough, it was everything. Eating and sleeping were sustenance for life; hunting was the reason for living, the pinnacle of existence. Genetics that coursed through their veins was the irrevocable stamp that stuck noses to ground and kept blood pulsing. Tails wagged as they loped along, eating ground with the single-minded thought that indeed there was a bear in this track, and indeed they would harass and hold this bear until their master arrived and would dispatch this bear. Determination, fearlessness, the love of the hunt bred in.

They plunged heedlessly into the stream when the trail crossed, ran over gravelly hard ground, pine needle-carpeted ground, black mudded ground, which is what it was when the trail squeezed between the rushing, frothing stream and cliff walls. A damp, dreary, suffocating place where geography had hung an aura of evil. An omen perhaps, for a human.

But the dogs only minded the bear scent fixed to the ground. And then it quit. And they turned back and found that before it quit the scent was spread about in circles. And so the dog's noses followed those circles. And as they had been trained as pups, rehearsed since pups, they unraveled that cluster of scent to determine the fresh strand that would lead them to their quarry, as in fact it must since the quarry could not fly.

They sniffed about, finally settling on scent that led up toward the side of a large boulder. The bitch stopped, perked her ears, looked around for a moment, then continued up to the right side of the boulder. The young male followed behind, reaching the large rock as the bitch disappeared around its curve.

The bear listened carefully, heard the second dog's feet mince on stones and at the point where the dog was at the rock it slipped out and stepped stealthily around the big stone then charged at the sight of the dog's rear end. The male caught the scrabble of gravel at the same time his nose filled with the overpowering smell of bear. The dog spun instantly, his fangs barred for the fight, but it was too late, the bear lashed out with its great paw and all the intentions of bravery and barred teeth smashed to death in a blow that managed but one yelp. His busted body bounced off the ground and up against a tree trunk, his heart quivered inside a crushed chest.

The bitch leaped at the bear's backside, slashed at his rear, teeth sunk deep, gripped on meaty flesh, the bear spun to dislodge the dog. The dog's jaws clenched for all their worth, the bear humped and jumped forward, the bitch's teeth lost their grip then bit again hard into the leg bone of the bear. He leapt forward and spun again then twisted his great bulk and rolled to the ground, the dog dislodged under the rolling mass of muscle and hair then the bear rolled downhill several yards then on its feet and charged up to the bitch and light on her feet she dodged the bear. The bear lunged and the bitch dodged again then jumped to the bear's backside and the bear spun and again the dog jumped to its backside, this time quicker than the bear could turn, and she slashed at the bear's flank with fangs and the bear roared then spun and swiped at the dog and she dodged the paw, then again leapt to the bear's backside and this time bit into its left ham. And that was her error. As quick as a blink the bear twisted sideways, the dog's back legs flung out, the bear grabbed a leg between his jaws then yanked her forward and, yelping, she was pinned to the ground with paws. The bear snarled over the

twisting dog then with razor claws he raked the length of the dog, chest to groin, the bitch laid out squirming on its backside. The bear paused then roared its final statement.

And in the silent aftermath the bear heard a sound from the path below, a movement.

Boom!

A sharp sting raked the bear and it jumped forward scrambling for dense timber bordered with the boulder slope. Boom! The bear was swallowed into the timber.

Beck lowered the rifle. Delbert scrambled up to the boulder. Dropped his pack at the sight of the female. She lay on her side, a patch of moss for a bed. Glazed eyes wide open. She lifted her head to look at Delbert then dropped it. Her tail wagged softly. Her belly and groin saturated with blood. Mid stomach a white slice of exposed fascia, a grey-green coil of intestine spilled out. Delbert dug into his pack and pulled a leather pouch then dumped its contents: a large sewing needle threaded with surgical thread and a small, clear, plastic squirt bottle, the type used to suck up gold dust from a pan. He removed the cap and squirted red-brown betadine on the needle and thread, then more on the exposed fascia and intestine, then more yet on his soiled fingers. As carefully as shaking hands would allow, his fingers probed the gut back into the intestine lining. With one hand holding the lining in place, he pierced the head of the separated fascia with the needle then began to sew with a stitch common to mothers mending socks.

Delbert's needle dove in several times closing the separated fascia as he worked along. The dog did not move. Did not raise her head. Did not wag her tail. Delbert made another stitch.

Stopped. Placed a hand to her chest. Oh Thelma, he said, then lowered his forehead to her chest while tears clouded his vision.

Beck walked over to the male and sat beside its slack body. "I'll send a message to Lewis for a chopper," he said, "get us all out of here." He removed his pack then loosed the draw string then searched its contents. He began to pull items from the pack; raincoat, sleeping bag, extra socks, fleece night shirt. He opened the bag's mouth wide then turned and dumped out the remaining contents. Granola bars. Headlamp. Beck looked up at the spired tops of the evergreen trees that surrounded them. "My inReach," he said to himself, "it's gone. Fell out back at the cliff."

The afternoon laboured into evening. Beck's legs moved along the horse trail with a will of their own, some mechanical force born of stubborn anger that lifted one foot at a time. The determination, desire, adrenalin, that had drove him on through all hardship over the days, the miles, the ordeals, had dissolved and evaporated. What he did expect of Delbert was nothing at all, that he would simply drop to the ground or wander off. What he did see in those moments when he turned was a moribund specimen of the walking dead.

In the falling light stars began to wink between tall trees. The ground leveled. Beck knew it could not be far until they hit pastures, fences, some wasteland of the Big Child Reserve. He turned, focused his eyes to catch a glimpse of Delbert's movement in the dark timber. He sat, would wait for Delbert, as he had again and again. Beck felt a side pocket then slid out a lighter and a chunk of fire starter. He gathered makings for a fire and lit a flame. He gathered sticks and the flame grew and as he walked the ground for dead limbs he saw a black post rise from the flames and it wavered and it was Delbert coming into view.

They drank from the stream, ate a bar each, Delbert's last Eatmore, Beck's second last granola bar. They rolled up in their beds neither of them suggesting that they set the lean-to.

"It's not far now," Beck said, his face turned toward Delbert. "Maybe a couple miles to the reserve. This stream don't cut through the middle of the reserve, just along the edge. No point cutting across to the village, closer to stay with the stream. Where it crosses the highway is Drummond Service. Pay phone. Place to eat."

Delbert lay with thoughts all his own. Beck's own thoughts were what was waiting for him at home.

Beck was pulled up off the ground. He struggled, fought, resisted with all his heart and will. 'Let me go, let me go,' surfaced in his mind. Like the ropes that bound Gulliver in Gulliver's Travels he was bound like a puppet and forced to rise against his will, pulled upward by an alien force. He struggled to gain reality, drove these imaginings away from the grip of this foreign will, forced himself into the light of cold grey skies of dawn, felt the cold damp earth beneath.

Reality. Beck was laid out flat. He stared up into the face of a demon. Frozen. His eyes refocused. It was not a demon. An old man, a native man. He wore denim pants and a laced buckskin jacket. Next to the man stood a white slab-sided horse. A tall horse. Beck remembered: The Big Child Reserve.

The old man's face was weather lined and flint hard. Beck thought a hint of a smile on the man's thin lips. He twisted his head at the sound of a rustle. Delbert stuffed his blanket into his pack and as he stood he winced and lifted his right foot then stood with the toe barely touching the ground. The old man pointed a long bony finger at Beck then at Delbert then motioned

to his horse. Beck gathered his bag and stuffed it. He stood then wavered. Flagged with light-headed fatigue. He steadied himself.

“You ain’t going anywhere with that foot,” Beck said. The old man pointed to the horse again and barely audible said what sounded like *ponokamita*.

They walked along the stream. In less than 500 yards they walked out of a glade of cottonwoods and onto rough grasslands. Inside of a mile they had opened and closed two sagged barbwire gates and crossed two cow pastures riddled with dried patties. They heard the drone of a semi cut the distance. The other side of a low rise they opened the final gate and walked down into the ditch of a paved secondary highway. They walked along the ditch. Another rise and there was Drummond Service, two low-slung, brick buildings, at one time whitewashed, now pock marked as a Dalmatian dog. Above a service garage a tin circular sign, “Mobil,” pinned high to a metal post with two short sections of chain. Ernie’s Eatery posted over the door of the other building. Delbert dropped the reins and slid from the horse. He held tight to the saddle horn letting his left foot find footing then touched down gently with his right.

We tie your horse, Beck pantomimed, you come in, he pointed at the eatery. Eat, he said and rubbed his stomach. I buy. The old man watched Beck. Beck thought he saw a hint of a smile. Beck felt unsure, even a tad stupid. The man probably spoke perfect English, but hadn’t said a word or given any indication of verbal comprehension, and Beck knew that was probably just a sign of distrust or disengagement or even just his personal amusement at the odd predicament of these two bedraggled strangers – maybe all three. The old man gathered

the reins and turned and walked away, back to the ditch, back the way they had come, Beck's curiosity unanswered.

The telephone booth was missing its door, broken hinges. A bullet hole through side glass. Plexiglass. He lifted the receiver. Dial tone. He dialed Lewis's cell phone. In two rings it picked up. "Lewis," Beck said.

"Tom, is that you? Geez what happened to you, we're about to send out a chopper, a search party."

"I'll explain later. Call Billy-Jo. Tell her I'm ok."

"Where are you?"

"At that Drummond Service place. Highway 22. You need to get on over here and get us."

"Us."

"Me and Delbert."

"And his dogs".

"No."

Beck could hear Lewis's breathing. "I'll be there in under a half hour," he said.

Beck hung up the receiver. "Let's get us something to eat," he said.

Delbert followed Beck like a beaten dog. Beck put his hand on the worn brass doorknob of the paint-peeled wooden door then read a sign hung by a string on a nail, 'NO VAGRANTS ALLOWED.' Beck looked at Delbert. His deep-set eyes, lined, weathered, unshaven face with the red scratch along one side. Wispy hair disheveled and greasy. A tear down one arm of his coat. Limping badly.

I doubt that I look much better, he thought, then opened the door.

Two rows of bench seats with spackled arborite table-tops. They chose a table midway on the window side. They were the only customers. When the waiter arrived it was plain he was more than a waiter. Wore the white clothes and apron of a cook, white bandana as a skull cap tied tight. Likely the owner, too, thought Beck. It was the large size of him that spoke volumes. Well over six feet, muscled arms and chest busting from a stained white T-shirt. His puffed face nearly white as his shirt, smooth skinned. He stood with his groin nearly touched to the table's edge. Looked at one, then the other.

"You got money?" he said.

"We ain't vagrants," Beck said, then laid two \$20 bills on the table.

"What about him?" he jabbed a thumb toward Delbert.

"He's with me, I'm paying."

The cook eyed them suspiciously.

"We'll take two coffees to start and two hamburger deluxes loaded, with fries," Beck said, then added, "look, we had a rough trip. You want we can provide references."

The cook's face reddened. He took the two twenties and glared at Beck then turned abruptly. In a few minutes he returned with the coffees then disappeared into the back.

The door opened. A round faced mid-aged lady, a young girl, and an ancient man, all of the native, stepped in, let their eyes adjust, then walked the aisle and sat down across from Beck. They looked straight ahead, did not acknowledge Beck's faint nod and smile as they sat. Their clothes were weathered but clean. The lady wore a patterned kerchief over her head and tied under her chin, similar to the Polish and Ukrainian immigrants Beck had seen as a kid.

The cook arrived with ketchup and cutlery. Dropped them off at Beck's table then stepped to the native family. His arms across his chest. "You see the sign," he growled with gravel in his voice.

They stared ahead, subdued. "I see. No speak English," the lady said. She opened a clenched fist and dropped a crumpled bill on the table. "Coffee," she said.

"Don't cater to your types in here," he said, "take your dirty money and get out." He pointed a heavy arm to the door. They sat passive as ever. The cook glanced across at Beck then back to the lady. "You get out, now." He left abruptly.

They made no effort to move, as if nothing untoward had occurred. The moments passed. Beck took his cup in hand and leaned over and placed his coffee in front of the old lady. Delbert looked at Beck as if he'd just noticed his presence, or it was the act he just noticed. He looked at the old native man. Delbert stood, lifted his coffee, placed it in front of the old man, and sat back down. He looked at Beck again.

The waiter returned. Stopped with two orders of hamburger and fries, a plate balanced in each hand. Looked at the coffees on their table. "What the hell," he said, then laid the two heavy plates on Beck's table. "You sonofabitch," he said to Beck, "you both get the hell outta here too." They sat as passive as the natives.

Beck glanced up at the cook. Grinned.

"You sonofabitch," he said again, then reached out a quick arm, grabbed hold of Beck's jacket, reefed him forward, and as Beck came off his seat he grabbed the heavy plate with burger and fries off the table and smashed it against the side of the cook's head. The cook staggered back then lunged at Beck

already out of his seat, the cook's arms outstretched. Beck sidestepped and grabbed hold of the big man's T-shirt as he lunged by, then shoved him harder and the man fell full to the table in front of Delbert then rolled off the table onto the seat, then jumped back up surprisingly quick for his size. He brought up his fists like a boxer. Then stepped into Beck, fists wheeling. Beck backed away, his backside toward the entrance door. As if by some new calculation or change of strategy the big man suddenly lunged. Confined in the aisle between benches Beck tried to sidestep but took the full force of the big man and they hit the floor, the man's large hands grappled for Beck's throat, his thumbs pressed into Beck's windpipe, and Beck stunned by the agony. Beck's hands flung up and his thumbs pressed into the man's eyeballs. The man screamed, let go, one hand grabbing at Beck's thumb, pulling it away from his eye then Beck twisted and the man lost his other grip but Beck was still pinned under the massive weight, no chance to run. The man smashed down his fist at Beck's face and Beck brought up his arms to protect what he could, but the man kept pounding at Beck's face and shoulders and arms, wherever his fists happened to land. Beck's face was mashed and bloodied to the point he felt himself quit the struggle. And the man, exhausted, his own arms too drained to lift for another blow, stopped then reached for a bench seat then stood up on wavering feet then reached down and grabbed Beck by the scruff of his coat and dragged him to the door. Opened the door and dragged him through. The door on a spring closed itself. A beautiful sunny morning outside. He hauled Beck a few steps from the door, gave him a kick, and turned back to the door. He lifted the sign "NO VAGRANTS ALLOWED" from its nail, walked to Beck still laid on the

ground, then grabbed the hair on his head and draped the string around his neck, the sign resting on his chest. He walked back into the eatery. A few moments later the door opened and Delbert on his feet with the man's hand on Delbert's coat collar. He hauled him through the door and heaved Delbert who hit the ground and rolled in the gravel and lay still. The man disappeared back inside.

A pickup truck pulled into the eatery's dusty parking lot. Stopped alongside the building. Door opened. Lewis stepped out. "My God," he said.

Beck managed to sit up, the sign hung over his chest. "Hello Lewis," he said faintly through distorted lips.

# CHAPTER 7

The bedroom door opened. Footsteps in the hallway. A chair slid in the kitchen. BJ rose from the sofa, her hand on the TV remote, then put it down. She left Ms. Marlene Dandridge, host of Channel 7 National News, talking to an empty room. Background noise. Beck sat at the kitchen table, loose fitting pajamas, arms folded in his lap, glazed eyes forward. BJ slid out a chair opposite and sat.

“This table don’t look the same since the kids left home,” Beck said. He caught the voice of the newscast from the living room. “What time is it?”

“Six.” Supper time.

“Supper time. I guess that food cooking smells more like supper. I thought it was morning.”

BJ studied Beck. “You only slept a few hours.”

“You don’t have to look at me that way. I know the way I look.”

“What way is that?” BJ said.

“Like my face caught fire and someone put it out with a rake.”

“Tom, we have to talk.”

“It ain’t never stopped us before.”

“You need to tell me what happened.”

“Tell you what?”

“About what happened out there.”

“We didn’t get the bear.”

“I know that. I heard Delbert Humphrey’s dogs was all killed. All!”

“Yes, they were.” Beck looked at BJ then bowed his head.

“That’s it, that’s all you got to say? Ever since I known you, when I really need you to talk, tell me what you think, how you feel, it’s like you got the right to say nothing at all. You don’t have that right Tom, never did, and I’m tired of it. You tell me you love me. Well this don’t feel much like love to me.”

“What do you want to know? How we got tore apart by devil’s club, clawed our way over mountains, got beat up by alder brush, twisted ankles on boulders, side-hilled across hell? What?”

“You left us Tom. When we needed you. Not just me, your family, Ellie.”

“I regret that, worried about it the whole time.”

“You don’t make up for it by turning your back.”

“You ain’t lookin’ at my back. I’m here darl’n, I ain’t at odds with you. You’re right, you always did have a way of setting things straight. I guess this is one more time. Truth is my mind’s been run over by events. I need some time Billy-Jo, one thing at a time.”

They sat still, BJ’s eyes held to Beck.

“Tell me about Ellie,” Beck said. “Lewis said she’s doing well, expects a full recovery. Now you tell me how she really is.”

“She was awful lucky. It’s hard to imagine how tore up her busted leg is, and the femoral artery didn’t get severed. Her left arm tore up bad too. She lost a lot of blood. Took in a lot of

blood. She's still on penicillin, will be for some time. Doctor Samara says she's healing well, no signs of infection. Expects near to a full recovery. Maybe a limp for some time."

Beck laid his arms on the table, turned up his palms. "Well thank God for that," he said.

BJ placed her fingertips in the palm of Beck's hand. "You got someone closer to home to thank for that," she said. "Did you forget?"

"No, I did not."

"It's not right for you to sit back. You need to make amends, show you're grateful."

"BJ, I can't hardly think straight right now. I need time."

"I know. I planned to talk with you about all this tomorrow. You need time Tom, that's a reality, but the other reality is you don't have time."

As if the TV volume turned up itself, Ms. Marlene Dandridge's voice seemed to fill the house – "And more on the Greenville bear mauling and death of young Luke Kamisky." BJ stood and faced the television. "Chief warden Tom Beck has returned from the hunt that ensued soon after the fatal incident. They did not kill the offending grizzly, but three hounds belonging to tracking specialist Delbert Humphrey *were* killed in close encounters with what's believed to be the same bear. At this time we have no comments from Mr. Beck." Tom Beck's face caught in a candid pose filled the screen. "But we do have words from Mr. Clive Booker, president of the Global Wildlife Foundation, who appears to have taken a serious interest in this unfolding incident."

Beck moved past BJ, grabbed the remote from the sofa. “We don’t need to hear this,” he said, then stabbed at the power button.

“Tom, it’s been on the news for three days now. A young man, a hockey star, killed by a grizzly while protecting his girlfriend. With his bare hands. What did you expect?”

“Damn it all anyway.”

\* \* \*

He sat patiently for the better part of an hour. The off-white hospital room true to form with the faint yet pervasive odours of sickness and disinfectant. Nurses strode past the opened door, their ID tags emblazoned on uniforms like sheriff’s badges. She lay covered in a white sheet. Her pale face lacked the colour, the vitality, the glow, that it had radiated the entire 17 years of her life. Black circles that ringed her eyes cast a sadness that broke his heart. All her life she had come to him, depended on him, for every little thing; learning to tie her shoelaces, to ride a bike, cast an open-faced fishing rod, saddle a horse, train and ride that horse. And now, Beck sat helpless when she needed him most. Yet, what Beck saw before him was not the waste of an injured girl, but the divine repose of an angel. Despair held no sway here. Brilliant July early morning sun rays beamed through the slats of the window’s Venetian blind. Ellie’s firm chin and high cheekbones inherited from BJ held resolute determination and certainty. Beck held out the back of his hand to her face. Her warm breath feathered his rough skin and came slow and even.

Ellie opened her eyes. “I knew it was you grandpa,” she said.

Beck smiled.

Ellie smiled, then the smile faded as she saw his face. “What happened ...?”

“Happened? Oh, my face, I guess branches just got in the way. Nothing to worry about.”

“But grandpa.”

“I know sweetheart. I don’t look so good. But I never did look so good. This might even improve a few things.” He grinned. “But look at you! Doc says you’re getting better by the day, heck, by the minute. I bet if I stick around for another hour, you and me would be dancing a polka.”

“I don’t know how to polka.”

“No?! Everyone should know how to polka!”

“I never learned.”

“Not even in school? Why, we all had to learn how to dance in Grade 9 gym class.”

“No,” Ellie laughed, “that’s silly.”

“I admit it did feel silly. Remember it to this day. I never took notice of your grandma until that day, your grandma happened to be in that same dance class. Got no use for poetry, did not care for it, still don’t. But the day I watched your grandma dance I do believe I witnessed poetry in motion.”

“Did you dance with her?”

“No, but I do remember my dance partner. Helga was her name. Poor girl wasn’t much to look at. Felt sorry for her. Don’t know why. I seem to recall we was all partnered on the merits of our good looks, or lack thereof. I guess I figured that good looks was more important to a girl than they was to me. How I looked made no difference to how fine a bead I drew on a squirrel, or how fast it came to skinning that squirrel.”

Ellie laughed.

“Ellie, I’m so sorry I had to leave. So glad you’re going to be just fine.”

“Tell me what happened, no one tells me anything.”

“What happened?”

“Out there, on your trip, what happened out there?”

“Well. It was a tough trip. We didn’t do so good. We didn’t get the bear.”

“Grandpa, you don’t have to get that bear. I don’t want you to get hurt. It won’t bring back...”

“I know sweetie.”

“Did you see the bear?”

“Yes.”

“What did it look like? Was it big?”

“Yes it was big.”

“What colour?”

“Sweetheart, maybe it’s best to try and forget....”

“No. I’ll never forget. Ever. I just need to know what happened. Mrs. Kamisky, she told mom it’s not the bear’s fault. She said the bear just smelled food and wanted to eat. Said that the bear had been harassed its whole life and shot at for no reason and you couldn’t blame it for what it had done.”

“Listen Ellie, some of that may be true and it may not be true. I don’t like when people compare animals to humans because it makes them seem like people, and seeming doesn’t make it so. But one thing I can say about both animals and people, there are some good and some bad, and most in between. Bad things happen to people and to bears. It don’t mean they become killers. If they do, they need to be dealt with. It’s not about punishment, it’s to protect others. Do you understand?”

“I do. I felt that way but didn’t say it to anyone.”

“You always were the sensible one. Ellie, that’s my job, to deal with those problem bears. But this time it’s more than that. That bear is a very bad bear no matter what happened to it. And what it did to you, our families, and Luke... Ellie, I ain’t prepared to let that go. Someone else could be next.”

Ellie turned away, her chest heaved with sobs, then she cried outright. The sudden flood of emotion confused Beck.

Beck sat. He let her be. She finally stopped.

“Did they tell you. Do you know? About me?” Ellie laid her hand across her stomach.

“Yes sweetheart, I know.”

“Mom says she thinks I should give it up. She said it’s better if I decide soon, a few days. It’s so hard grandpa, it’s just so hard, I just can’t seem to want to let it go. It feels part of me, part of...” Ellie covered her face with her arm, stopped her light sobs.

“I was so mean to Luke. Before it happened. I told him I didn’t love him anymore, told him to go away. I pushed him away! If he stayed with me things would have been different. I killed him Grandpa!” Ellie cried.

Beck took her free hand in his.

“Ellie, you listen to me. What happened to you should never have to happen to anyone your age, or anyone at all. You have God in you Ellie, but you’re not him, and you’re not a grizzly either. You don’t know what might have happened or not. This world is tough enough, we don’t need to beat ourselves up with guilt. You get in the habit of holding on to guilt and it’ll put you into the grave before your time. You can’t get clean by rolling in the mud. Ellie, you, me, everyone around you, we got to learn to get over our losses. You hear me darlin’?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. As powerful sad as it is, there ain’t nothing you can feel that ain’t been felt by people forever past and forever coming. You only got one life to live, Luke is proof of that, and I know it hurts bad but it’ll always be a reminder that you gotta live it right, best you can, and live it proud. Don’t get dragged down by all of life’s troubles because there’s plenty out there to do it.”

Ellie squeezed Beck’s hand. “I love you grandpa,” she said. “It’s just so hard.”

Beck stood and hugged her. “You know we love you, always will. Whatever you decide, we’ll all be there with you.”

“What’s that I feel in your pocket?” she said.

“Oh.” Beck dug his hand into a side pocket, pulled out the sheath covered Puma hunting knife, placed in the opened hand that seconds ago held his hand. “I thought maybe you might want this. It’s yours.”

Ellie turned away and looked to the ceiling, yet her arm lay still, and the knife in the palm of her open hand, frozen. Look at me, it said, feel me. I’m still here. I was there when you needed me, and I still am. A simple knife, but not a simple knife. I’m not an object to be ignored, I’m a participant in your story. You can see that now, can’t you? Touch me, I’ve got secrets you need to hear.

\* \* \*

The office of the Global Wildlife Federation was located in Seattle, Washington, three blocks up from Union Bay, on the fifth floor of a nondescript red brick building, in a nondescript business section where most streets looked like back alleys.

Clive Booker, the founder and president of GWF, stood at the wall-sized picture window looking out over the bay, as if searching for a clue to some perplexing puzzle. He turned abruptly and walked over to the front of his desk then leaned his backside on the desktop.

Two GWF agents sat on fifties-style wooden office chairs and did not need to be told to pay attention. Anyone summoned to Clive Booker's office knew that a bomb was about to go off. The only question was how big and how close.

"Veronica, Damian, so glad you made it on such short notice. Damian, I hope your flights went well. You must be wondering why I have summoned two of the best. Let's get right to it."

Veronica admired Clive. Robert Redford, she thought, she always thought. Same tall, lean, body, same engaging white toothed smile, same clean-cut sandy hair, same piercing blue eyes. Same contradiction – beach boy coating on the outside, steel and grit on the inside; more battalion commander than surf slacker.

"Veronica, tell me about what's happening in Nepal."

"About the rhinos? The lawsuits?"

"About Chitwan National Park. About the news stories. About our rangers abusing women, killing villagers. Are they true?"

"To some extent. You know the story. A poor villager makes more from selling one poached rhino horn than they can working in the rice fields for a year. They know what's at stake, Clive. They poach, they pay the price. What is it you say - life's tough south of the Brazos. It's complicated."

“It’s always complicated, but it doesn’t always cost us millions in bad press. These stories are killing us. Sure, there’s going to be fallout, but not the press accusing us of killing villagers! The media is our friend, not our enemy. The public is our friend, not our enemy. We build empathy, not anger. You know this. Veronica, it’s your press, you wrote those stories - *we need soldiers, weapons, boots on the ground...* The public thinks we were financing a war on peasants!”

“The rangers are making progress. Good progress,” Veronica said. “This year in Nepal, 30 per cent fewer rhinos were killed than last year.”

“At what cost? Not if we lose millions. Not if it’s a war.”

“It is a war,” Damian said. “Last year more than 200 rangers and soldiers killed protecting endangered species. It doesn’t pay to be the second guy pulling the trigger. What you’re paying me, you don’t want me to be the second guy pulling the trigger.”

Clive looked into Damian’s black eyes. Could not tell where his black pupils met irises. Did he ever blink? Clive blinked first. “You don’t need to be pulling any triggers on this job. You’re undercover.”

“I didn’t sign the contract, yet. People do the unexpected when least expected. You want a guarantee I pull no triggers, then it’s a bigger number.”

Clive Booker did not like field operatives, particularly contract field operatives. He preferred to ignore details, just get results. That’s what they were paid to do. That’s why he retained Damian. He never failed, never left a mess, never left a trace. A legend in the business, other operatives called him the ghost. High level poachers, ring leaders of poaching gangs, didn’t call him anything, after he finished a job.

“You want to talk numbers?” Clive said. “The GWF grossed less than \$500-million this year, that hasn’t happened since the economy took a dive in 2017. Veronica, you need to put a lid on this. I want worldwide press releases distancing us from these rangers. Make it very clear that we will not tolerate abuse of villagers, women, children, by rangers or soldiers or anyone. And make it clear that we will not fund rangers found guilty of these abuses.”

Clive uncrossed his arms then reached back and pulled a newspaper off his desk. “So, who are we here - the brains, the beauty, and the beast. I’m the brains, you guys decide which of the other two you are.” Clive grinned. “Let’s give the rhino a break. We’ve beat it with a stick long enough. It’s time to milk another cow. Pandas, gorillas, elephants, coral reefs, tigers, sure we need them, but they aren’t going anywhere. Same old story. What we need now is something more manageable, closer to home.” Clive unfolded the newspaper. Held it up. ‘Hockey Star Killed by Grizzly’ screamed the headline with an image of a man in game warden’s khaki attire.

Veronica, confused, looked at Damian. Damian watched Clive with casual interest, deadpan. No vibes from this guy, she thought. She didn’t know him but knew his reputation. Everyone in the GWF knew his reputation. Sitting next to him was unnerving.

“Ah, I see the doubt,” Clive said. “Listen carefully boys and girls, come to daddy.”

“Clive,” Veronica said, “we’ve just finished a major push on the grizzly. Remember, we won that one. No legal grizzly hunting anywhere in North America.”

“That’s right, and what a great battle it was. Very few sat on the fence, either for the grizzly hunt or against it. Our supporters in USA and Canada jumped 10 per cent from this episode alone. Remember, they may be bleeding hearts, but they like a good fight.”

“But Clive, if this bear killed that boy everyone in that town will want its hide stretched on a barn door,” Veronica said, “everyone in town and most people across the country.”

“Ah, you underestimate the power of bear love – Smoky the Bear, Winnie the Pooh, Care Bears, Paddinton, Yogi and BooBoo, not to mention that idiot up in Alaska who swam with the grizzlies then got himself killed. Bear love runs deep, deeper in those with deep pockets. Look, we print T-shirts with pandas on it and we make a million. We find a feel-good animal story that holds the interest of a nation, and we make \$10-million. You find a bear love story that runs episodes like the Beverly Hillbillies, or better yet, CSI, and we make hundreds of millions.”

“Ok, we got a good story, a kid gets killed by a bear, but it’s happened before, many times before. No millions made there that we know about,” Veronica said.

“Not like this. This boy was a local hockey star in a hick town called Greenville. Killed by a grizzly. So, what’s the big deal? But wait. See this guy, Clive points to the image of the man in the newspaper. One Tom Beck. Guess what? It’s his granddaughter this young lad was trying to save, the boy’s girlfriend. And, he fought the grizzly *with his bare hands*. And guess what? This Tom Beck is a game warden, the very one who took up the chase of the killer bear, did not get the bear, but

managed to get three tracking dogs killed in the process – how will dog lovers feel about that?”

Clive grinned then continued. “This Tom Beck is a man on a mission – to kill this grizzly bear, a grizzly that has been harassed to the limits by mankind and now he’s fighting back. Man encroaching on his habitat, his natural food sources, the ecosystem he is the king of, shot at and harassed by hounds for doing his natural duties. The bear is the victim here, make no mistake about it. That is what our faithful already know, that is what we feed the rest. And Mr. Beck is the perfect villain. An unrepentant hunter, a reckless hound killer, a bear nemesis, bent on revenge. And a renegade, who did not, does not, have his superior’s approval for his manhunts, sorry, bear hunts.”

“We got the victim, we got the villain,” Veronica said, “what’s it going to take to free the victim and hang the villain, do we have an in, someone on the inside?”

“Wait, I’m not done, it gets better. You’re right, we need to get that noose around our villain’s neck. This is where it gets interesting. It seems his brother is exiled – self-exiled – lives in a hidden cabin up a remote valley. Rumour has it he has a hundred bear skulls nailed to his cabin wall.”

“Sheesh,” Veronica said, “why?”

“That’s right, why? Why is because he was attacked by a grizzly, mauled, recovered to a degree, but his face badly disfigured. Was with his brother when it happened – now his estranged brother. We don’t know the exact story, but whatever it is it runs deep. *And guess who his brother is?*”

“Tom Beck,” Damian said. Clive looked at Damian, uneasy with the interruption.

“You got it. Yes. This story writes itself. So, what we got is a truckload of material here. That’s your job, Veronica. I want to see copy every couple of days. Build this narrative for the public. Damian, you’re on the ground. Take your toothbrush and your camping gear. Who knows where you’ll end up. Keep your phones glued to your ear, check in every day, if one of you can’t be reached by the other, there better be a good reason for it. Damian, you’re undercover. You need to be obvious, but not suspicious. Trusted. You need to ask questions and get answers. Move fast when the time comes.”

“A reporter,” Damian said. “Funeral on Sunday, town meeting on Monday.”

“Fine. A reporter. That place will be flooded with reporters. Damian, luck is with you. We got a five-star break. The unfortunate lad, Luke Kamisky, his mother is a level three contributor. A faithful for 10 years. You need to get close, real close. Befriend her. Be delicate about it, it’s not a good time. Convince her that saving the girl’s life makes her son a hero. The world needs heroes, needs to know the depth of this boy’s courage, bravery, and love for his girlfriend. Her son deserves all the accolades, his rightful place in history. The media will be focused on Beck. That’s ok, we want him to become a character in the public’s view. With the grieving mother, tactfully slide in the fact that Beck’s stealing the media’s attention, what rightfully belongs to her son, and skewing the story. I doubt she’s in love with the family. Her son just died trying to protect Beck’s granddaughter. But listen, Damian, get her comments recorded, use them in the press for full effect, but do it soon, very soon. The girlfriend, also mauled, is *pregnant, with the boy’s child*. Mrs. Kamisky may not know this. The only reason I

do is we have a few contributing members working at the hospital. Word is, no one is sure if the girl will keep it. If she does, Mrs Kamisky might despise this new addition, or she might decide to love this child. It's anyone guess. Works for us either way. If we play this right, we can feed the media for months. It's a bona fide blue-ribbon event, a ready-made movie – if we play it right.”

“It's got nothing to do with luck,” Damian said. “You tell me what you want, but don't tell me how to do my job. Once I get in there, I'm the one who'll work the situation.” Damian's posture stiff, the barren look on his face, his emotionless monotone from a well of darkness.

“If the warden service or the cops find out who I really am, he said, it's not good. I avoid jails. That gorilla campaign last year in the Republic of Congo.”

Damian stood, lifted his black T-shirt, a ragged knife scar cut from above his left breast down to his navel. He let the shirt down, sat down. “I avoid jails. If I end up in prison, you better get me out before the first breakfast on a plastic tray.”

“You end up in prison and I can't get you out, I'll get in there with you,” Clive said.

“You need to listen. I avoid jails. The cops, the wardens, they have guns. I have guns.”

“You're not serious.”

“Desperate people do desperate things.”

Use your head, not guns. “You might find this interesting,” he tossed the newspaper at Damian. It hit his chest and fell to the floor. Damian did not move a muscle.

“Meeting adjourned,” Clive said. “Thank you for your time. Nice seeing you, business waits. You can excuse yourself.”

Damian picked up the newspaper. Assembled it, looked at the bear story. Another image alongside the warden Tom Beck. A young lad, smiling, wearing some sort of team jersey. Fake handshake for the camera with a suit standing next to him. The suit with a self-inflated grin. A draft photo maybe? Damian could not take his eyes from the image, began to walk out of the office, stopped, turned to Clive. “You didn’t sign the contract,” he said.

Clive leaned over his desk. Signed a paper. “Send you a copy,” Clive said.

Damian turned and walked out. Held up the news story and read as he walked. This teenaged boy, the dead son - black hair, pompadour hair style, same as Damian. Similar dark skin tone, chiseled facial features. Not close enough for a twin, kid was a little leaner, softer – maybe a brother – if I had one.

“What is it?” Veronica said.

“Nothing.”

Damian followed Veronica, tossed the paper in a secretary’s waste basket as they left the building. So that’s it, that’s why the redevye from New York to Seattle, he mused. That’s why big numbers on my GWF contract? Not just another bush boy in good shape. So, he wants a lookalike, I’d say he’s got one. The mother, she’s the way in. Damian smiled, but the smile did not reach his face.

Clive Booker listened to the sound of their retreating footsteps. Stood at the great window overlooking the expanse of Union Bay. He reached for the window slide, get some fresh air, then hesitated. Grey cloud slashed over still grey waters like angry brush strokes from an artist reduced to mixes of white and

black. What fresh air? Carbon monoxide, sulfur, ozone, lead - a toxic cocktail may as well breathe poison.

Clive looked down, five stories down, the city a world of congested cement. Vehicles, people, specks, moving through spaces like bees, organized worker bees, workers that built a landscape of towers and skyscrapers. Worker bees to build, queen bees to organize and rule. Even the animal kingdom had it right. He was not the queen of a hive, but he *was* the king of his castle. Built it from the ground up. He demanded cooperation, despised chaos. He turned his back to the window. If the office building of the GWF was covert, his office was not. Sixty feet across, Becote hardwood floor, a 12-by-14-foot silk Isfahan rug on that floor, an expansive Hekman oak desk. Beck admired the office sidewall. His wall of fame. Framed images of GWF greats - animal superstars who raked in millions. He loved them all, named most of them - Rambo, Sally, Tank, Bilbo... gorillas, chimps, rhinos, elephants, even named a coral reef Ruby for its red hues, genus *coralium*. Hmmm, should he give this grizzly a name?

No, not yet, too much uncertainty. Too early in the game. Too many mavericks: this Beck character, the local paper, local cops. And this contract operative Damian, he does not play inside the box, not anyone's box. Too many complications. Simplify, Clive thought, that's what I do - simplify, arrange, attack, get results. Ok, get on the inside with the Kamisky lady, the media will eat up everything she has to say. What else - the hunt, we need to be on top of any plans for the next bear chase - how? How about the daughter, what does she know? About her dad, about what's coming? The wife is out, unquestionably faithful. What about Beck's boss? Some ass kissing brass from

the Department of Wildlife doing nine rounds with politicians, no doubt. He needs to drop Beck, cut off his support, get him out on a limb then we cut it. That's my job. And this next bear hunt, the two brothers, estranged, yes, but the same agenda. What if they put a band-aid on their feud and join forces? What a story. Ripe for squeezing. Ok, so if they head to the same place at the same time, the chase is on, that's the ticket. GPS trackers on their vehicles.

Clive was ahead of himself. Loved it. Loved his vision, his visions. One more detail. This grizzly has to die. In the end. He smiled. What irony. GWF, saviour of all things wild, anything to save the grizzly, then watches it get killed. The longer it lives the better, more media, more time, more millions flowing in. Then, out with a bang. Killed by the villain Tom Beck. He's done. And then, the wrath of a nation, the world, an explosion of media, a flood of donations, memberships. Hallelujah and checkmate. But, what if for some reason this Tom Beck doesn't kill it? *If Beck doesn't do it, Damian will.* That's why the big contract. Not just another bush boy, or a lookalike. Clive reached for the window latch, slid open the great pane of thick glass, took in a breath of fresh toxic air. The wind ruffled his hair. He closed the window. Enough for now. He smiled, and it did reach his face.

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His desk phone buzzed. He lifted the receiver. "Yes Myra," he said.

"Line one," she said. "A Mr. Clive Booker from the Global Wildlife Federation."

“Thank you,” Buckwold said. He placed a hand over the receiver. “Shit,” he said, laid his head back, then collected himself.

“Hello,” Buckwold said.

“Hello, is this Mr. Brian Buckwold, Department of Wildlife, supervisor in charge of the Greenville warden service, boss of one Mr. Tom Beck of the Luke Kamisky bear death?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“And what manner of speaking is that?”

“The person you need to talk to is Tom Beck. He is the one knows the details, the one closest to the story.”

“We don’t need details, we have our people for that. We need you.”

“Excuse me.”

“Look Brain, can I call you Brian? You have a problem. Tom Beck is a loose cannon. You have an agent in the field whose granddaughter was mauled and he wants revenge, taken matters into his own hands. This man represents you, your entire division, but he’s the grandfather of a girl who nearly died from a mauling. He’s too close to the story to be impartial. To put it bluntly he’s a bear killing hound man on a rampage. Are you aware that Mr. Beck investigated a killer grizzly only 10 miles away, the day before the death of Kamisky? An unsupervised kids’ grad party and he said not one word to anyone? We’ve got 10 ways to write that story and have it out on tomorrow evening’s wire.”

“Tom Beck is a senior warden, our most senior. He may have his own way of doing things but he knows how to handle bear problems, has for years. He’s the one to talk to about this bear situation.”

“You’re not listening Brian. Beck is going down, the only question is if you go down with him.”

“Is that a threat?”

“The truth often sounds like a threat to those most vulnerable. I have been at this game a long time, I know the facts. It’s already national news, it’s about to become worldwide. It’s what we do, and we’re good at it. It’s right in our name, the Global Wildlife Federation. It’s in my DNA. It’s what I do, and I don’t lose, Brian.”

“We have lawyers, Clive, can I call you that? It sounds like I need a lawyer before we continue this discussion.”

“You gather a room full of lawyers and your chances of winning a lawsuit against us won’t be one turd in a field of Greenville cows. You don’t have the budget for it and you don’t have the facts on your side. The media is ours. We’ll eat you alive. Every courtroom scene on TV means more viewers joining the battle, more donations. You want a list of movie stars, music legends, who will sing your name in defense of this bear? And not in a good way. No Brian. Let me tell you about your story. It’s already written. Beck goes down and because you supported him, defended him, you go down too. Your history, an easily treated disease, is like this - your own department avoids you like the plague, lost in the shuffle or dismissed, cement tied to your feet and tossed into Green River, figuratively speaking, of course. Your politician golf buddies shake their heads in remorse on the ninth hole while you’re on the eighth. That’s your epitaph.”

“What do you want from me? You want Beck fired, is that it? You want me to set that ball in motion? It’s the government, it’ll be a year just for the paperwork and hearings.”

“Let me ask you Brian, did Beck have government approval to go after that bear?”

Silence.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Enough. What do you want?”

Nothing.

Silence.

“Is this some sort of a joke? How do I even know you are who you say you are?”

“You’ll know by tomorrow evening’s national news. You let Mr. Beck do whatever it is he does. Give him free rein. Let him hang himself. Just do not support him, do not associate yourself with him or give the public the impression you agree with his actions. You let our operatives do their job. Don’t interfere. If they need a favour, I’ll call it in. In a few months this will be simply another bump in the road, dust in the wind, a bad dream. Don’t make it into your worst nightmare. Goodbye, Brian. *Do not interfere.*”

The phone went dead.

\* \* \*

“Hello Lewis, Wanda,” Beck said as he walked past Wanda’s desk.

“Good Lord, what did happen to you? Not so fast,” Wanda said.

“Closed for business. Whatever it is it can wait till Monday. What are you two doing here anyway, it’s near six on a Friday.”

“Waiting,” Wanda said, “just in case, by chance, the miniscule possibility, that you should so choose to make an

appearance. Tom, I been fightin' off alligators for three days. Brian Buckwold just called again, says it's urgent."

"He can take a ticket."

"Not wise. You know what they say, Murphy's Law. You don't call him back now and he will, at the worst possible moment."

"I know, like every time I walk into this office."

Beck sat down, rolled his office chair back and forth, picked up the phone. Dialed.

"Brian Buckwold here."

"Hello Mr. Buckwold, Tom Beck here."

"Tom, thank you for returning my call. I hear you had a tough time these past few days."

"You could say that."

"Tom, I know it's late Friday but we need to talk. Get organized. You seen the news lately?"

"Yes sir."

"You don't have to call me sir. Call me Brian."

"Yes sir."

"You ever heard of the Global Wildlife Federation?"

"Apparently."

"They're in on this mess, Tom, our bad luck they took an interest in this bear situation. This town hall meeting on Monday was supposed to be a friendly gathering, farmers and locals, what to do about keeping bears out of the yard, away from livestock, what's legal and what isn't. Now the media got a hold of it. It's not going to be friendly, our town hall meeting's about to blow up and we'll be front row and center. I expect we'll be part of the panel up front: you, me, a department biologist, the local mayor."

“They never are friendly. I’ve been gone for four days, I got lots of catching up to do, don’t know if I can make the meeting.”

“Tom, you’re not serious. You’re the one they want to talk to, the one with the answers. You’re not there and it’s a circus. A damn circus.”

“It’s a damn circus if I’m there or if I’m not there.”

“It’s political Tom, the public demands answers, deserves answers. The town’s flooded with media. I’m told Peterson’s Motel is booked solid. First time since the Vietnam protest in ’67.”

“I ain’t a politician. And I ain’t a part of no circus. Dealing with clowns is your job.”

“Ok Tom. That’s the way you want it. I’m not asking, I’m telling. You be there.”

“Or else?”

“You don’t want to go there. You don’t want your family to see you humiliated by the press calling you a coward, not facing up the last year of your career. You want to go into retirement disgraced, someone who lost his job, lost his full pension?”

“The hell you say. You want me up on the stage like a whippin’ boy, let the crowd throw balls at me and dunk me under. Take the pressure off you and your politicians, ain’t that it?”

“Tom, I’ll be sitting beside you, not behind you. You go under, we both go under.”

“I’ll think about it,” Beck said, then hung up.

“Lewis! Get in here!”

Lewis walked in.

“Sit,” Beck pointed to the chair opposite his desk. “How long I known you?” he said.

“I come here straight from taking that environment course down in Rockyford. I guess I walked in these doors at 24, so six years ago.”

“No. You were a sprout. You and your dad fishing for bass down at Cottonwood Creek. You was nine years old. Your pa, God rest his soul, had no fishin’ license. Or you either.”

“I didn’t know you even knew that was me back then, or knew my name.”

“I knew it because I asked your dad as I was about to charge you both. You must have had a dozen small mouth bass laid out on the grass. Never did charge you.”

Lewis needed a moment, taken by surprise by the strange conversation. “Why not? Why didn’t you?” he said.

“It was plain that your dad had no intention other than feeding his family. As I recall there was not a lot of spare cash flowing at that time. Couldn’t bring myself to do it. The law was clear, but it was also clear I had the privilege of deciding the difference between right and wrong. What I’m gettin’ at here is that the law was clear, my duty was clear, and it was mostly clear who was a criminal and who was not. And mostly clear that I could get along with my own conscience.”

Beck crossed his hands over his belly, rocked in his chair.

“Lewis, you tell me what we got here now. We got predators roaming at free will: bears, cougars, coyotes, even wolves. Eatin’ our livestock and pets and garbage, and in our yards and campsites with not a care in the world. We got biologists, doctors of science, studied wildlife half their lives got next to no say in making wildlife policies, admit it freely they got next to no say in wildlife management policies because it’s politics deciding. You tell me what that means – how we live

with our wildlife, give them the best chance to live proper, decided by office folk in capital cities. Homesteaders, trappers, hunters and fishers in the northwest USA, Yukon, Alaska, northern BC, folk who lived in the bush and lived side by side with animals their whole lives, living with laws and regulations crafted up by people who all they know about animals is what they see and hear from kids books, movies, rock stars.”

“Now that you put it that way,” Lewis said.

“What other way is there?”

“Boss, your momma ever tell you just because your friend jumped off a bridge it don’t mean that you have to follow ‘em?”

“She did, many times. It just made me look for a lower bridge. Lewis, I had enough. That bridge looks more appealing every day.”

“Boss, you got half a year before retirement. Full pension, a town that appreciates all you done for many years, at least the ones you never sent to jail. Might be a good time to ignore the chatter, keep walkin’ straight, turn the other cheek if you have too. Heck, let ’em look at your butt as you walk off into the happy sunset. Give ’em the finger without looking back.”

“Lewis, we got animal rights groups trying to bury us, telling our bosses what to do, running the media. What chance we got to tell our story even if we wanted to. I can’t play politics. I got no ability and no desire to bend over for a brown nose or the other possibles. Just can’t do it. Too old. Truth is, I lost my ability to care.”

“Tom, there’s still lots to care about. It don’t have to be your job. That idea of the bridge is no way out.”

“It ain’t about dyin’, it’s about jumpin’ off to freedom, no matter what lies below.”

\* \* \*

Beck stepped off the cement steps, walked toward his warden's truck. Reached for the door handle. His way blocked. The young reporter, Gabriel Medina.

"You again. What is it about the word "no" you don't understand? I got a gun in this truck can help you understand the meaning of the word."

"Mr. Beck, sir. You heard of the Global Wildlife Federation, the GWF?"

"Apparently. Know nothing about them, don't care to. Now move before I move you."

"Sir, they sent us an op-ed article and an ad request down at the news office, full half-page. All about the plight of the grizzly, how it's been pushed to the limits, and about the cruelty of bear hunting with dogs. Mr. Hoffer, the publisher, he sent a message back, told them to stuff it, said the article was unfounded and that he did not permit false advertising. An hour later he got hit by a law firm, all about free speech, about how the freedom of the press is for all interests. He can't hold them off for more than a few days. Even if they file a lawsuit it's enough to put him under. These are heavyweights, sir."

"I guess Mr. Hoffer got the right to do as he pleases."

"This ad, it names you as the main player in this unjust pursuit of the maligned bear."

"Maligned, that's a big word. You must be a reporter."

"I did some research. These people are all but unstoppable. I would say that in your case, they are. You need friends. You need media to tell your side of the story. And you need ammunition to defend yourself in the public's eye. Facts about

what happened, about the truth about bears – studies, mismanagement, not managed at all, you need someone in your corner. You can't do this alone. They'll destroy you. They might anyway."

"And I suppose that's you? David and Goliath?"

"Mr. Beck. There's a man showed up in town asking questions. About what happened with Luke, with Ellie, asking about you. Tall, dark hair, dark features. I followed him, he's staying at Peterson's Motel. I think he's with the GWF."

"Well I don't know where else he would stay, it's about the only motel in town. If you don't count the old hotel. Mr. Medina, it appears to me you're overly interested in this situation yourself."

"Yessir. I got a history about these things."

# CHAPTER 8

The bear crossed the stream then nosed his way a hundred yards up a slide through tall thickets of dogwood and willow. He angled toward a knob slick with lichen and tufts of grass that sprouted from exposed patches of dirt. His eyes cleared the tops of alder and he stopped and studied the stream below. Gravel and sand bars, heavy spruce, and a path winding down the valley that appeared now and then. He lay down, stretched out, mouthed tender seeded heads of Junegrass. He rose and studied the valley floor then lay back down for a rest, then rose again an hour later.

He heard them before he saw them. The swish of a branch then the padding of feet. Human feet. They broke from the spruce, the shorter human in front. They walked a gravel bar to its end then stepped up a low bank and disappeared into the trees. The bear stepped down to a moss hollow and settled, then stretched out and dozed. Ears like miniature catcher's mitts twitched at mosquitoes that tunneled through dense fur. He slept, awoke, shifted to relieve his aches, then slept again, then woke again. The sun set. He stood, embraced the damp cool of the coming night, then nosed his way back down through the thickets to the trail, invigorated by crisp scents that floated from a night world into his broad leathered nostrils. A world where sharp eyes ruled the day, but keen noses ruled night. That his

nose reigned supreme was not self-ordained but simple biology. A genetically predisposed killing machine when in the dark underworld, he crept out for possession of his rightful half of the day. Predators lived to kill, prey lived to be killed.

He made his way back up the trail. Feet on dirt silent as carpet. He stood still below the killing place. The large boulder above loomed with a density darker than the surrounding black. The sounds of silence told a hundred stories: light breeze ruffled leaves, a mouse skittered through last fall's detritus, the hollow beat of owl's wings as it flew overhead and down the valley. He was cautious. He knew there would be no humans in the vicinity any longer, but patience was as vital to killing as stalking or attacking or smashing or tearing or ripping. He stood over the freshly dug mound. Stood silent, then tore out the shallow grave and wrenched out the carcass, then stood on the dog's head with one foot and ripped open the gut cavity with the other. Coiled guts like winter-balled snakes spilled from the cavity and he champed the bloody mess until all the internals were devoured then he dug up the other dog. Inside of an hour he was fed and continued up the night path.

First light found him at the base of the great alpine basin he was pushed from two days earlier. He watered in a seep and moved off the path and laid to doze. He slept until midday then moved off along the bottom fringe of the basin through thickets and grass meadows and fields of alpine flowers, at times stood in these fields with thick shagged legs tickled by beauty that evaded him; red petals of monkey flowers with flared mouths ready to swallow what they never could, glacier lilies like delicate yellow ballerinas suspended upside down, feather dusters of paintbrush dipped in orange paint brilliant upon the

alpine canvas. The bear walked slowly over God's creation, stopping to forage sweet vetch in a fertile bowl, his blunt molar's lacking the bite to grind the vegetation for maximum benefit. He walked on. Marmots whistled and conversed, then at the sight of the bear cried shrill and dove into tunneled holes.

The bear moved slowly, rambled through basins, rimmed ridges, dipped in and out of draws of dirt and scree, constantly testing the wind for the sweet musk scent of elk. He had no desire or ability to count how many elk he had taken from this basin over the course of his lifetime, but through the years it was the kitchen most prowled, the slaughterhouse that most fed him. Now it failed him. It was devoid of elk. Up high he did see the white shine of mountain goats. He knew upon which ridges and high basins sheep lay suckling their young, but his rugged bulk did not have the stamina it once did, his heart the desire it once did, to climb to dizzying heights and chase sheep over ragged ridges and cliffs with the optimism needed to be successful, as he once did. This spring past had been cold, the snow late to leave, the valley slow to green up. He had feasted on rotted carcasses of winter kill and instinctively knew those same elk were not alive to feast upon, or to give birth to delicious and tender young as they were ripped from their birth sacks; the delicate flesh, soft bone, and afterbirth devoured before feasting on the mother.

In the late afternoon of the third day of wandering and foraging horse tail, vetch, and kinnikinnick, he edged over a grassy rise to spy a Columbian ground squirrel colony. The orange bellied gophers ran their senseless routes hole to hole and stood over holes like sentries on battle works, whistling greetings to comrades and insults at rivals. The bear crouched

and edged forward then held motionless. Within minutes a large gopher, itself looking like a flattened fat bear with legs cut short, skittered along to a mound 20 yards from the bear then turned its backside to the bear and stood up on its haunches to face the colony below, then whistled. The bear charged. Gophers facing the bear shrieked, the bear lunged, his mouth wide and teeth barred at the backside of the gopher. In a blink and a hair's breadth the gopher vanished. The bear pulled his snout from the hole. Huffed. Put his snout back in, measured the strength of the pungent rodent's scent. Pulled back. Looked about over the abandoned fellowship. Growled. Stuck a massive paw into the hole and ripped back soil like a toothed excavator bucket. He stopped and looked about again, then his body tensed, muscles drew rigid, distinct and powerful even under his disheveled hide loosed with old age. Razor paws dove, ground and gravel salted with stone flew from the digging frenzy.

In a half hour only the bear's hind end was visible. Gravel flung about a crater, the fallout of a gravel pit. The scent of the rodent wavered from acute to faint then sharp again, and so the bear's effort came as bursts of assault, and him mindless of the truth: that he was the brunt of one of nature's many cruel jokes - he did not have the faculty to assess that what energy he just spent digging for the gopher he could never gain back from this morsel of a meal, even if he ate the gopher. With an already painful shoulder aggravated from the effort, he finally pulled out and stood on the lip of the hole. He turned his snout to blue skies alive with white puffs of cumulus cloud and snarled, then shook his massive head and walked off.

The bear walked through the bowl in a westerly direction, opposite from where the men and dogs had appeared a few days

earlier. Early evening he moved slowly up a short grass chute broad as a fan down low, now narrowed and aimed at a high pass where two ridges led down from opposing snow-covered mountain peaks. The bear rested often, fatigued by thin air, wasted energy, lack of food, and the throb of the knife wound that nagged him. He sulked about, nibbled on tender shoots sprouted from small black dirt pockets churned fresh each year from spring runoff. Nearing the pass, plate scree sounded like dinner platters underfoot then gave way to hard moss in the narrow notch of the pass.

The view of the opposing valley came quick, a green gouge cut so deep the nearly vertical sides would be a badlands gorge but for the thick cover of tenacious evergreens that clung to its steep slopes. A mile down, the valley abruptly flattened to a plateau. The waters from the valley that spilled onto the plateau stagnated as a small narrow lake, its murky edges coloured shades of lime and melon with water lily and sedge fen. A thin brown vein of clay and gravel etched into the right-hand slope and crept downwards with the drop of the valley. The bear side-hilled through stunted trees and hit this precarious path then edged along into the black void of the coming night.

The moose calf dashed past its mother, split to a side trail, dodged around spindly black spruce then jumped onto the faint trail in front of its mother, then dashed ahead and bucked wild as a joyful colt. Quick and sure for such stilted ungainly legs it ran back right under the mother's nose with bravado. The cow's large mule ears laid back. She butted at the calf with her homely snout, but the calf twisted away and ran a circle around its mother. It was the calf's favourite time of day.

The scent of delicious water vegetation came thick, and the cow picked up her pace and in seconds broke from the cover of the forest onto the lakeshore. She held up, cranked her head around and stretched her neck at the calf. He stopped, grimaced comically as if to imitate his mother. She scanned the lake in search of anything out of place, any movement, any foreign smells. The calf moved quick, stuck his snout up to her teats, his lips nibbling for a hold then latched on and nudged and bumped as his throat pulsed with waves of white liquid coursing down his throat. All was as it had been each day since late May, when for the first time she led the calf from the hidden shelter of his birthplace to the lush plant life of the lake. Only now in July had her slick summer coat finally shed the remaining grotesque tufts of long, coarse, winter hair. The cow walked into the calm water, her long legs cut a dark trail through green algae scum. Clouds of mosquitoes and blackflies held at bay in the afternoon's warmth besieged the cow. She submerged her head then lifted and shook a spray of water then inspected the shoreline as a line of water trailed from her bell to the lake, a life-line symbolic of her connection to this world of water.

The calf trailed along until only its neck and head broke the water then he shoved back to the shore then turned back to the lake and dashed in a few feet then reared and charged in with a splash. He stood dripping from head to hock and shook his head as his mother had. He watched as the cow's head submerged for the longest time then re-appeared, her mouth grinding at water lilies, their stems limp as green spaghetti.

The blow was instant.

One second the calf absorbed with the wonder and joy of youth, then shock, his body dragged, his legs flailed, his world

cockeyed. Jaws clamped on his spine, a bolt of lightning sent a white flash throughout, then nothing.

The bear dragged the calf's limp body to dry ground. The cow's ears thrust back, her crest hair in hackles. She bellowed and charged the bear then stopped short, her feet rose above as thrusting spears driven at the bear. He dropped the calf then lunged at the cow. She dodged the charge and bolted to the safety of the forest then bellowed and charged again but stopped with distance. The bear ignored the cow and bit into the calf and dragged it deeper into thick spruce. A hundred yards from the lake the bear hauled his kill into a bulwark of tree trunks and began to tear at the calf's mid-section. The cow moaned and busted brush, her distress swallowed by deep timber and the sinking night.

The bear tore at guts and lungs and liver and heart, soft ribs crumbled to mulch. He feasted greedily into the night, then slowed. He stopped. Listened. There it was again. Closer now. Another mournful howl then another, end notes dropped low to a sad end, portend of things to come. The bear ripped at the ground with fore paws then dragged the mutilated carcass toward the fresh hole. Canine stink filled his nostrils. Like gathering fireflies, glowing yellow almond eyes blinked between trees. Each pair of eyes joined to others coordinated by unseen threads, their many minds as if one. They circled in synchrony then dashed forward in turn and nipped at the bear's hind end. The bear growled madly and spun and lunged repeatedly but no matter how large his size or great his power he knew the story, had played this game before, many times. This time, too many wolves, him too old and too tired and wounded, their desperation greater than his. He slowly slid back in grudging retreat, his jaws

popped threats, but the wolves already tore at the carcass. His carcass; now theirs. And the concession of it stabbed his instinctual ego like another stab of the human's knife.

# CHAPTER 9

The Suburban turned off main street down Second Avenue and at the bottom of the hill turned onto the flat of River Road. The road wound a half mile along Green River through meadows and massive balsam poplar. At times, gravel bars and stones shone bright in the clear water. The road crossed the river on the old wooden trestle bridge. The pleasant drive a reminder to the Greenville Lutheran Church's faithful that God or nature or both were alive and well in this beautiful valley.

Cars and trucks jammed the small parking area, the overflow haphazard along the edge of Madoff's cow pasture. Those paying respects but not able to find seats in the modest white stucco church stood outdoors on the landing and in the vestibule. Lewis opened the passenger doors and Tom Beck, BJ, and Kate stepped out. Lewis removed the folded wheelchair from the back and set it up, then he and Beck placed hands under legs and arms careful not to disturb Ellie's casted leg, then lifted her into the chair. Good citizens helped lift the wheelchair up the stairs and place it on the landing.

Beck took control of Ellie and they moved forward, heads bowed, nodding politely at faces that turned, known and unknown, who nodded to them with solemnity. It was Ellie they turned to see, whom they had spoken about for more than a

week, that they might stand in the presence of the girl who lived it, the center of it all.

The family moved slowly through the vestibule and the sanctuary's 14 rows of pews and up to the front. The Kamisky family on the left. Beck glanced at Mrs. Kamisky, her head bowed, sobbing, hand to her face partly veiled. All in shades of black, Beck in a black suit, black tie over a starched white shirt. He felt the twinge of guilt he always felt when entering pastor Russel's church. His son-in-law never once condemned him for his lack of attendance, his religious truancy. The guilt did not stop Beck from glancing up at grand images of Christ, his disciples, saints, and golden crosses, interspersed with vivid stained-glass windows that reached above trusses to angled peaks. Beck always thought the vision both beautiful and intimidating. Maybe that was the point. He accepted that it should be. The Beck family sat at the right front, Ellie in the aisle, Kate tight to her side.

The gathering sat in silence. An odd cough, whisper, delicate sobs. The closed dark burgundy wood coffin lay elevated on the sanctuary floor at the foot of the chancery, directly below the pulpit. The coffin a magnet of emotion drawing every person's heart to a place of no return, every mind sucked from daily chatter to grim reality - I am Luke, this is what my death looks like, this is the end, it could not be avoided.

Pastor Russel attired in black robes floated from the back out to the dark walnut pulpit, laid his hands on top. He paused, the seconds uncomfortable, Russel unfathomable.

"We have gathered here today to pay our respect and our tribute for a young man, Luke Kamisky, a man of God, our brother, a young man who loved life. Not only have people from

this congregation and community gathered here today, but family, teachers, coaches, former teammates, some from many miles away, many who have loved him as a friend.

We are here today to show our love and support for Luke's very precious family. Not only have we sensed our own personal feelings of loss over Luke's passing, but our hearts have been drawn toward his family, and we will continue to be with them.

Finally, we are here today to seek and to receive comfort. We would be less than honest if we said that our hearts have not ached over this situation. We are not too proud to acknowledge that we have come here today trusting that God would minister to our hearts and give us strength.

It is our human nature to want to understand everything now, but trust requires that we lean on God even when things seem unclear.

I'm not going to tell you not to cry or not to experience emotions. Jesus Himself said, "*Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*"

I'm not going to tell you today that you'll never have questions come to you. But I will tell you this: There is something wonderful that you can focus on. Choose to focus on the things you know...the goodness that Luke shared with you, with friends, with family. From his dedication to loved ones to his dedication to school and sport, his goodness knew no boundaries. We must believe that trusting in God is our path to understanding Luke's place in heaven. Someone once wisely said: "The measure of a life is not in its *duration* but in its *donation*."

When we think of Luke's donation... what he contributed... what he invested... we have much to be thankful for!

*Ring out the welcome.*

*Swing wide the gates.*

*Choirs of angels stand and sing, "Amazing Grace."*

*There's one more soldier of the King.*

*Whose trials are past.*

*Ring out the welcome loud and clear –*

*He's home at last."*

The service ended the hall filled with the sweet sounds of singing, mixed with bittersweet sounds of lament, most lifting from the Kamisky side. Ellie cried, Kate cried, they held hands. Tom and BJ Beck each dabbed their eyes with a napkin. In time they stood, waited for the Kamiskys to rise and turn down the aisle. Mr. Kamisky supported Mrs. Kamisky, her body wracked in emotional pain. They moved slowly, Tom wheeling Ella behind Mrs. Kamisky. Beck avoided eye contact and kept alert, aware of the possibility that Mrs. Kamisky might collapse from her grief. Suddenly she stopped. She looked to her side, a man in the right aisle, her hand reached up to this person's face, to touch his face, as if she beheld a saint. Beck took notice that the face was that of a young man, and he looked like Luke, almost uncannily so.

Mrs. Kamisky went limp. Her husband looped his arms around her, and Beck stepped in. They held her until the moment passed and she gathered herself. A man in the left aisle caught Beck's attention. Gabriel Medina was staring at Beck. The young reporter nodded toward the young man as if in warning to say, "*it's him.*"

\* \* \*

The young female receptionist sitting behind the second-floor hospital reception desk looked up at the sound of elevator doors opening. An attractive man strode with a bounce in his feet down the hall toward her. He gripped a huge flower bouquet in his right hand, an eruptive mix of white anemones, orange roses, peonies, lilies, and orchids. He wore a red baseball cap and a wide smile. He strode happily straight to the girl, reached the flowers out toward her. Her hand instinctively reached up to take them, eyes wide with surprise, then hesitated. Jody, the man said, noticing her name tag without looking at it, then laid the flowers on the countertop their brilliance and fragrance inches from her nose.

“I, uh, that’s very nice..... but... really... I can’t accept those...” she blushed.

“They’re not for you anyway,” he said, and snatched up the flowers, gave the nurse a rascal’s grin then continued down the hall still grinning and with the same bounce in his step.

The door was open, TV on, a CSI re-run. Lunch tray on a wheeled table turned to the side. He edged in, knocked faintly.

Ellie looked to the door. “Yes?” she said.

“Ellie?”

“Yes.”

“My name’s Jack Wilson.”

“Do I know you?”

“No. I was Luke’s assistant coach a couple years ago. I know this might seem odd, me coming to see you, but, I really liked Luke, and, well, I have a sister a couple years younger than you. And I thought it’s just something I needed to do. I hope you don’t mind.”

She looked at him. “No, it’s ok,” she said.

He held up the flowers, “these are for you,” he said.

“They’re beautiful. What team did you coach?”

“Pee wee Triple-A. He was our best centerman, he got 58 points that year.”

“Maybe I should call a nurse, get a vase for the flowers”.

“No worries, I already met Jody at the front. I can do that with her before I leave. I don’t have much time.”

The man looked familiar. Even with his light brown hair he somehow reminded her of..... Luke. Dark brown eyes too, but deeper, harder somehow. His lips thinner.

“So how are you doing? I mean, I hear you are healing up ok.”

“Yes, I’m good, Doc says I should be heading home in a week. Start therapy for my leg at the end of the month.”

“That’s great Ellie. Really good.” He looked down then at the flowers, then at Ellie. “I can’t imagine how hard it must be, what you went through, what you are going through, I mean, I can’t even imagine. I guess that’s part of the reason I’m here, thinking how I would handle it if it happened to us, to my sister.”

“What’s her name?”

“Carmen.”

They sat in silence.

“It is hard. It’s hard just to be here. Sometimes I think I shouldn’t even be here, sometimes I wish it was me instead of Luke.” Ellie felt the feelings rise again. Her chest tightened. She stopped it.

“Don’t do that,” the man said.

“Do what?”

“Go back and put it through your mind again and again.”

“I try not to. Just laying here, so much time, I can’t help it.”

“I’m familiar with these kinds of things, trauma like this. It takes time. Did anyone come and talk with you about it?”

“My mom, my grandpa.”

“Not like that,” he said.

“Oh, you mean like a counsellor.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, a nice lady. She came a few times now. Says I’m doing great. They all say that.”

“I guess your grandpa didn’t take it so well.”

“No.”

“I guess it didn’t go good for him out there in the bush.”

“No.”

“I guess if it was me, I’d want to do the same thing.”

“The same thing?”

“I mean, get the bear, if that’s what it did to my family.”

“He’s the county game warden you know.”

“Really.”

“It’s his job, dealing with bad bears, even cougars. I told him he didn’t have to do it for me. Luke’s mom said it’s not the bear’s fault.”

“She did?”

“He said he can’t just let it go. It’s bad and it’s his job to deal with it.”

“How, how does he plan to deal with it? I mean, the bear’s gone now, what can he do?”

“Mom said nobody knows bears better than grandpa’s brother. He’s a dog man. They don’t talk much.”

“They plan to go after the bear?”

“Mom said bears have habits, patterns, they travel the same places every year. Says if anyone can figure out where the bear is, it’s him.”

“I see.”

“Ellie looked at the TV.”

“Ellie, I know this may not be the right thing to say, but what the preacher said in church about Luke is true – we have to carry on with life and remember Luke for the good things, it’s what Luke would have wanted.”

She stayed with the TV, her eyes began to water.

“What Luke did was very brave, I mean, with his bare hands. It’s one of the great things about him that no one will ever forget. And your presence of mind with the knife against a force of nature like that. It may not seem important now, but years from now just having that knife will feel like a keepsake, reminding you of Luke, his bravery, *your* bravery. Like the pastor said, Luke’s investments in his family, in you.”

“I still got it.”

“Really. That’s great.”

Ellie leaned to the side, slid open the top drawer of the side table. Reached in and took out the Puma knife.

Damian looked at it. Amazed at his good fortune. The ice in his eyes sparkled. “Ellie,” he said, as he felt his pocket for his cell phone. “That is one cool knife, he said, can I look at?”

“I guess,” she said, but her hand held tight to the sheathed knife. Damian watched her. She seemed to emerge from a spell, slowly open her hand, let the knife roll onto the table.

Damian slipped the knife from its sheath. The long, curved, five-inch blade menacing. A clip point, he said to himself, multipurpose, good for stabbing. The blade dulled from lack of

oiling, polishing. Dull smudges. Recent. Blood. He'd seen blood on blades many times. He shoved the lunch plate over and laid the knife and its sheath side by side. He framed them in the screen of his cell phone.

“Ellie, this is so cool, is it ok if I take a picture?”

\* \* \*

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel of the rented Toyota Corolla, rolled his head around to relieve kinks in his neck. What could be more inconspicuous than a Toyota Corolla? Six cramped hours of surveillance these past few days, across the street and a half block down from the Kamisky's two-acre lot, its sprawling bungalow, guest house hidden somewhere behind an impressive collection of trees, shrubs, flowers, finely trimmed lawn. No need to be anonymous now. Mrs. Kamisky donated to save-the-wildlife causes for three years running, so in this probe the best cover would be empathy - a sympathy visit from a GWF agent. And looking like Luke.

And there she is. She had been a recluse after the kid's death. Understandable. Then she suddenly emerged three days before the funeral, two in the afternoon, on her knees, garden trowel in hand, weeding her flowers along the sunny side of the house. Then again the next day. He stepped from the vehicle, opened the back door, looked down at the flowers, large orange heads dropped over like inflamed lilies. He grabbed the bunched stems and held the flowers at a distance, their dead skunk stink turned his stomach. Flowers; never again. He walked with them held out to his front. No, I don't love you, he said. He crossed

the street, walked along, up her front walk, along the side of the house, stood over her bent form.

“Mrs. Kamisky?” he said.

She spun on her knees. “What do you...” She saw the flowers. Eyebrows arched in anger melted to confusion. “Who are you, what do you...?” She recognized his face. She stood up slowly, stiff from the bent labour. “You’re the man from the church,” she said. “You look like my.....” She felt the swell of sadness, what she knew would never end, but could learn to control, at least with strangers. “Who are you?”

“Mrs. Kamisky, my name is Damian Prouse, I’m with the Global Wildlife Federation, I just came to pay my respects. I’m truly sorry.”

“Came from where?”

“From where? From New York.”

“New York? I thought the GWF was in Seattle?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m from New York. New York to Seattle, then here to meet you.”

“My goodness.” She looked at his black pompadour hair, so familiar with Luke this past year, and dark features, again the sorrow began to swell. She rubbed at her eyes with her blouse sleeve. “Crown Imperials,” she said. “They’re beautiful, exquisite. Why Crown Imperials?”

“I heard they are your favourite.”

“You did? From who?”

“It’s our job to know things, especially about the generous supporters we care about. We may be a large family, but we’re still family.”

“Did they tell you they stink?”

“No. I found that out for myself. My car stinks like a dead skunk, managed that smell without actually killing one.” Damian cut a forced smile.

“I got just the place for them. Follow me.”

They crossed an expanse of manicured lawn, sat under a gazebo, in two white wrought iron chairs with cushions, either side of a matching glass topped table. She removed old flowers from a vase and placed in the Crown Imperials. She found her cell phone in her slacks and dialed. “Sofia, can you bring two lemonades to the gazebo,” she said, “is there any of that pumpkin loaf left? Very good, thank you.”

“You have a Ukrainian refugee,” he said.

“And her daughter. Don’t call her that. She believes she’s only here temporarily, misses home dreadfully, no matter what’s left of it. Wants to go back now, if she could, no matter what horror she went through to get here, and what hell it is there now. Mr. Prouse, we cannot imagine how powerful our bond with home and family are, until they’re gone.”

“Call me Damian.”

“You did not fly all the way from New York just to see me,” she said.

“I did. Like I said, seeing you is something I felt I needed to do, and the GWF agreed. There’s something especially important about what you and your family are going through, and we felt moved, like a calling to us.”

She looked at his dark features, chiseled face, understood why she had been swept by his similarity to Luke, had been struck with inflated emotions. But now a deeper truth, where Luke was brimming with sentiment this man was wanting. This person would never be her Luke.

“There must be something else.”

“Have you seen the news since your family’s tragedy?”

Sofia walked the stone path to the gazebo, placed two lemonades on the table, a pumpkin roll on a platter, four sections thickly sliced with white icing pinwheeled to their centers, and napkins. She smiled and left.

“No, not at first. Watched some news on the TV today.”

“Mrs. Kamisky...”

“Call me Liz.”

“Ok, Liz. The GWF cares about what happened here. The importance of what happened to your son goes far beyond what the narrow minds of locals and even what the media can understand. Your son, Luke, gave his life to save another. What he did, how he did it, is beyond what most mortal souls would be capable of. His bravery, his courage, his devotion to Ellie, is remarkable. Liz, Luke is a hero.”

Damian paused. “Liz, what did you see when you watched the news about what happened?”

Mrs Kamisky’s ran her right hand over her left wrist, her fingers settled on her golden wedding band. Her words slipped through trembled lips.

“What everyone saw,” she said. “So hard, so hard to watch it. I can’t face it, don’t want to face it, not yet, maybe not ever. I don’t know if I can survive this. My husband, he...” she went silent.

“Liz. All that pastor Russel said about your son is true, not only in a spiritual sense, but in a very real, practical sense. Luke left this world too early, you’re still here to carry on his good name, his good deeds. The world desperately needs heroes,

fearless champions of good causes. He is that, and more. You are that. You care about helping those that need help.”

Mrs. Kamisky composed herself.

“What you saw on TV is what everyone saw - what happened out there in the woods, chasing the bear with dogs, men bent on revenge. Hear me. What’s on the news is not the important story. The story that needs to live on, the important story, is Luke’s legacy. We are here to make sure of that. Luke’s legacy must live on. We don’t want that stolen by the wrong story unfolding in the media.”

Mrs. Kamisky began to cry. “How?” she said.

“Yes. How. There is only one way. Those same TV newscasts, same newspaper stories. They want more, they can’t stop wanting more. They will listen to you. They need you as much as you need them. Liz, think about this man, Tom Beck, bent on revenge, determined to kill that bear. Blinded by hate, no sense of that bear’s plight, how its world was overrun, its habitat ruined by mankind, how it has been chased, harassed, by men like Beck, and their dogs and machines and guns. No understanding about bears needing to feed themselves, needing their space. What do you expect from an old bear stumbling upon a campsite with irresistible food for the taking?”

Damian let his words work.

“I know,” she said. “I have been telling people that. No one wants to listen, not even my husband.”

“They will. Did you know that Tom Beck knew the entire day before that there was a hungry bear not 10 miles from where it happened, and not a word said to anyone? Nothing to prevent unsuspecting children, his own flesh and blood, from wandering into the path of a bear just being a bear.”

She wiped her eyes on a napkin.

“Liz, I respect your space, can only imagine what you are going through. But now is the time to tell your truth, Luke’s truth. That’s your power. And it’s these bear killers, this Tom Beck, and their dogs, and the revenge execution that they are planning, that have stolen the spotlight, stolen your son’s place in this story. We can change that. Do you understand how we feel?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, how about if I come back a time or two to visit you, bring a friend, a nice lady, a smart lady who sees the real story. She will have her camera and your interests at heart. It won’t take long.”

She looked at his dark eyes. Her gut reaction; I’ll think about it. The words that came out instead. “Yes. Yes,” she said.

\* \* \*

Gabriel Medina sat at the formica table in his modest apartment above the Greenville Review news office, which also doubled as the town’s print shop. The shop was located at the corner of Main Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. He gazed out the apartment’s only window, a scarred wood-framed antique that offered a view of Greenville Centennial Elementary School, particularly interesting at recess and lunch times when kids frolicked in fields, on monkey bars, swings, climbed nets and jungle gyms. As the Greenville Review reporter, photographer, editor, and general gopher, he often worked from the confines of his apartment, which suited him just fine – a better space to relax, slip in the odd TV show, and observe the mischief of

school kids at play and war. He got to know them as regulars, identified their personality traits: some loners, some shy participants, some bullies. Mostly he knew his enjoyment came from witnessing a childhood he never had. Yet he could not avoid latent feelings of jealousy, angst over a childhood denied the social interactions these kids enjoyed, every regular kid needed.

Along with brothers and sisters, he was raised on his family's sheep farm south of Animas, New Mexico. They were poor. Four kids and proud parents together in a three-roomed whitewashed adobe hut, but they were the best years of his life. Gabriel had memories of being bussed into school in Animas in Grades 1, 2, and 3. Distinct memories, the faces of friends, teachers, colouring books, a juggler who performed for the kids – he fed that flame, played those scenes over in his mind often.

The Gray Wolf changed all of that.

He stuffed the last of his tortilla in his mouth, drained the last swallow of Modelo beer, focused on the television perched on a dresser at the other side of the room. News time. The holy grail, to Gabriel. Aside from adult school, writing and reporting courses, TV and news articles were where he learned the trade, his reporter skills, where he continued to hone those skills – how to lead off, what's the hook, what facts are important, what's not, choice words and phrases at key moments. And to think, a national news story in his hometown! What an opportunity, sure, but he learned something new – news stories were not simply stories to watch on TV, they were real, affected real people in real ways, sometimes good, sometimes sad, sometimes hurt that cut deep. He was not a local, but these people had accepted him

as one, eventually. It was his town. He had an obligation beyond words in print. Why would Tom Beck not understand this?

Gabriel sat at attention. It did not take long. The latest on the mauling and death. There had been various angles and various reporters. *But look at this, this is new.* A live interview with Mrs. Kamisky, not from a scrum but clearly a well-manicured clip. “The bear is not to blame, the bear is the victim here, persecuted in so many ways. How can you blame the bear for being a bear? My son did his best, protected that girl with bare hands, but he did not hate that bear, and I do not hate that bear...” The camera cut to a stark shot of a hunting knife laid on a table, the camera dialed in on the keen blade.

..... “*ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!*” Gabriel yelled to the walls. He strode to the fridge, yanked open the door, popped the top of another beer, sat down hard, and sank into thought.

\* \* \*

BJ hung up the dish towel. Looked out the kitchen window. Headlights along the county road. They slowed, turned into her yard.

“Tom, there’s someone pulled in.”

“Tell them I’m not home.” He turned a page of *Outdoor Life*.

BJ turned on the porch lights, watched out the window as the car stopped in the dark beyond the yard gate, door opened, a man stepped out, walked toward the house. Another man behind.

“Looks like that news reporter, Gabriel, from town,” BJ said.

“No,” Beck said, then tossed the magazine to the couch. “Well that’s about enough. Where’s my cell phone, call Albert John, that punk reporter’s about to see the inside of a jail cell.”

“You won’t have to.”

“What?”

“Albert John is right here with him.”

Beck sat in an armchair. They sat on the couch. Albert John picked up the *Outdoor Life*. “I guess you read the poacher stories, see who did what, who’s who in a game warden’s world of crime?”

“Never, just trying to keep up with my deer huntin’ skills. Hate to see you get a bigger buck than me again this year.”

“You can try, but it won’t happen. I got special powers.”

“I saw you talking on the street with that medicine man, Danny Weaslemoccasin. I guess it’s him give you special hunting powers.”

“No, it’s him give me sole huntin’ rights to the whole of the backside of the reserve that butts up against Redstone Mountain. Don’t even think about hunting up there.”

“You hurt my feelings even thinking about it. Only forkers live there anyway.” Beck looked at the reporter. “Albert John, you don’t need my permission to charge this young man with harassment. It would have been closer just to take him straight to the jailhouse.”

Gabriel flushed, but no one noticed.

Albert John laid down the magazine. “Tom, did you watch the news tonight?”

“I make a point not too.”

“This whole thing is getting out of hand. The town hall meeting tomorrow night is looking to be trouble.”

“You drove out here to tell me that? With him?”

“Gabriel here says they had your old Puma hunting knife on TV, the one Ellie used on the bear, on the news tonight. I checked it out. National news, across the country. Tom, why would you do such a thing? Why show them your knife? It’s like cuttin’ your own throat. Makes no sense. Surprised me, Tom.”

Beck looked over their heads, face coloured with frustration. “I didn’t. It’s not possible. Ellie’s got that knife with her, I gave it to her in the hospital.”

Albert John and Gabriel looked at each other.

“These people don’t play fair, I told you that, Gabriel said. I called the hospital and talked to Jody. Only person there today was someone named Jack Wilson, Luke’s assistant coach from Peewee. I called Joe Ferner at the hockey office and he said Jack Wilson was definitely Luke’s past coach, but Jack is coaching in Switzerland right now and was definitely not back home. *Someone* was there, Mr. Beck. Someone who lied about being Jack Wilson.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Tom, Gabriel here said he offered his help. Get the other side of the story out to the public. You know me, Tom, I got less love for the media than you do, the only thing they make of a court case is a mess. But sometimes there’s a point to getting the word out. This time, you need to listen, let him help. What happens, happens, but you gotta give yourself some protection for your own sake.”

Albert John looked at Gabriel.

“Mr. Beck,” Gabriel said, “it’s personal, they’re out to get you, they used your granddaughter to do it. I have a good idea who it is.”

“This impersonator at the hospital,” Albert John said, “provided false identity for personal gain. Section 403 - identity fraud. It’s a criminal offense. It’d probably never turn into a conviction, but it’s certainly arrestable. Put the GWF in the public’s eye in a way that really hurts.”

“You saw him yourself,” Gabriel said.

“Saw him? Where?”

“At the service.”

“The funeral.”

“Yes.”

Beck looked at the wall between the two of them, anger stirred inside, his blood hot. “That fellow, black hair, looked a little like Luke,” Beck said, “is he the one you said’s been asking questions around town. The GWF man?”

Gabriel nodded. “And this is him,” the reporter said, holding out a trio of candid photos. Beck recognized the background details. The church. Gabriel smiled and said, “Mr. Beck, you and Albert John aren’t the only ones in this town who know how to operate an investigation.”

Beck managed a half smile. “Ok. Throw his GWF ass in jail. You don’t need my permission. You want me to press charges? Damned right I will.”

“Gabriel and me, we talked about it on the way here. Just pressing charges won’t do it, it’s not enough. We need to do it right. Let everyone see it for themselves.”

“Well, we can’t just sit here.”

“No, we can’t.”

“So what?”

\* \* \*

BJ pulled up to the curb. Small crowd on the landing of the town hall, two reporters with cameras, one with a microphone boom in hand. A deputy sheriff stood by the double doors. "I guess by now they're all inside," she said.

"You sure you won't come in there with me."

"No. You don't want me to."

Beck sat and watched the crowd on the landing. "No, I guess not. Just leave me a piece of that strawberry rhubarb crisp for when I get home."

"Tom. I got a bad feeling about this."

"Well, I got a good one, I guess that about makes it even."

Beck got out, walked to the cement landing, stepped up one step, edged through the bodies and the talk that came from them. The Deputy Sheriff opened the door.

The hall nearly full, small groups chatted in aisles. The head table up front, name tags – Elmer Horwitz/Greenville Mayor, Tom Beck/Chief Warden, Brian Buckwold/Supervisor Department of Wildlife, Lonnie Grisham/Biologist Department of Wildlife. The heads already seated. They nodded at Beck as he walked up from a side aisle. He smiled. Albert John stood at the side of the table, surveyed the hall, nodded at Beck. "Remember," Albert John said as Beck moved by, "You got friends here." Beck sat, a cordless microphone at his front. He shoved the mic over to Buckwold.

He made a quick scan of the hall. He was easy to spot, on Beck's left, forth row from back, last seat against on the side, next to the aisle. His dark complexion and black hair an obvious contrast to the tall redhead he talked with. A group of three more stood by and listened to their conversation.

Mayor Horwitz stood, lifted another cordless microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are ready. Take a seat everyone.” They did, except for some of the media who prowled the edges. “Let me introduce our guests tonight,” he said, and each stood in turn and was introduced. “Let’s begin. We are all very much aware that many of you will have your own views and thoughts about what will be said here tonight. That is why we are here, is it not? To gain some common ground, some understanding about our predator issues, bear problems, to look to some solutions. So, I ask that each and every one of you be patient. If you have something to say, you will get your turn. Mr. Buckwold, from the Department of Wildlife, you have the floor.”

He did not stand, pulled the mic close as he smiled at the crowd. “Hello everyone,” he said, “I hope you are all very well this evening. I know many of you have travelled great distances, and I, our department, thanks you for your time and effort. As you know, this meeting was called as part of the government’s Bear Wise program. To help answer questions, face concerns, look to solutions, for what appears to be an increase in bear problems and confrontations. I am also aware of the recent unfortunate bear mauling and death in this county. To all of you I offer my sincere sympathy, and condolence, for your loss.” He paused. “Please keep in mind the main purpose of this meeting. We will not have all the answers, but we’ll have more if, by the end of the night, we find common ground, our voices more unified than they are now. With that I will turn it over to Mr. Lonnie Grisham, biologist and bear specialist. Mr. Grisham.”

“Thank you, Mr. Buckwold,” he began. “I wonder, if many of you realize the difficulty, the complications, with the problems that we face - the issue of bears in our lives, of bear

safety, of confrontations, of implementing policies that can be accepted by so many, so many who have a vested interest. So many groups – landowners, farmers, ranchers, industries like forestry, oil and gas, environmental non-government organizations, outdoor recreationists, native groups, First Nations, hunters, outfitters, guides. Contrary to what some may believe, our department of environment, our scientists, are not your enemies, not at odds with you, because as much as you, we want to work things out, form policies that are workable and make sense for the community as a whole, and for bears. Let’s find some common ground to begin, let’s look at some facts about bear numbers, information we as biologists have gathered.”

He reached down to a bottle of water, took a drink. “Are bear numbers rising? Generally, yes. Traditionally, studies across the northwest used bear collars and location tracking to gather information. For example, in our southern district, Core Unit 55, an area about 25 miles wide and 80 miles long, down along the foothills, we estimated that in 2013 there were about 67 grizzlies. In 2016, with new DNA genetics testing methods, from hair samples taken across Unit 55, we determined that there were just over 200 grizzly bears, three to four times more bears than we originally believed. Results from these recent studies have been published by the Chronicle of Wildlife. All indications are the numbers are continuing to rise.”

A few hands began to rise, held there patiently.

*“We know the issues, we have done the studies, we are aware, and understand that ranchers losing cattle to bears, bears rummaging through campsites, forcing hunters off their kills, families faced with bears while walking in the woods, even in*

populated neighborhoods, are serious issues. This is what we are here to discuss - what Bear Wise was created for. We believe that with discussion and sensible agreement on common ground, we can make firm policies that all vested interest groups can live with.”

“Hey.” An elderly gray-bearded man waved his hand, dressed in black wearing a black hat. He stood. “Your studies,” he said. “What you got for studies outside your study area, what good’s those studies do for us at the Redstone Hutterite Colony. We’re 60 miles east of the foothills. We got grizzlies walking the coolies all over the place, killed six calves this spring. Last fall one of ‘em walked through the door, right into the communal kitchen! No fooling. Maybe we should have thrown your heaviest bear study at him. We didn’t see you out there offering your help. And who’s going to pay for our losses?” He sat down.

“Yes sir, your point is well taken, we need to learn how to co-exist, that is what we are here to discuss, make some sense of it and plan what to do next.”

“The hell you say,” someone blurted out, “are you telling us to co-exist with a grizzly that just walked into someone’s kitchen? How about walking through our back yards with kids playing in them? I can’t even count how often that happens at our place.”

A dozen hands waved above the crowd.

Brian Buckwold stood up. “Ok,” he said, “it is understandable that you have concerns, again, that is what we are here to address and make some sense of, gather information for policies that can work.”

“Policies, someone barked. It’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What policies you give us these past 20 years that worked for anyone? Tell us that!”

“Ok. You got a voice, we’re here to listen. So, let’s listen. Let’s listen to your concerns one at a time. Give your names please, before you speak, so we know whom to address.” Buckwold pointed to an old lady with her hand up in the second row from the front.

“My name’s Freida Finn, folks call me Etta. Got me a pig farm over on Eddy Road up against the mountain. I just had a grizzly sow come and kill a shoat. Same sow as killed two shoats last fall. Warden said if it threatens me again, shoot it. I did, her and two cubs, buried ‘em. This warden here, she pointed a finger at Beck, this Mr. Beck, set’n right there, says the dead bears got to be dug up, and he’s gonna charge me for kill’n ‘em. Go to hell, I sez. What I want to know is this: this Bear Wise Program, how’s it work? How you gonna teach all them bears to be so wise they don’t come and kill my pigs anymore?”

The crowd broke into chuckles and laughter.

“Thank you, Etta.” Next, Buckwold pointed to a big man in a denim jacket. “Well sir,” he said, “I live just a half mile from town. I got 30 acres into hay, alfalfa, clover. I had three different grizzlies in my fields feeding on my crops last year, a half mile from the school yard! You don’t need to tell me, any of us, bear numbers are rising. Henry,” he said, pointing to a man to his left. “Tell them about your place.” The man stayed seated and said, “well, I live 10 miles from town right along the highway. I got nine different bears feeding in my back field this spring. Mostly grizzlies. I guess you could go and see for yourself right now if you want.”

A few chuckles.

The first man still stood. “You talk about policies. I just told you about three grizzlies in my field a half mile from the school yard, what’s your policy about warning people about dangerous bears, bad bears, bears that cause trouble, bears that are *in* town, bears that threatened people? Nothing, far as I can see. The national parks, they tell people to stay away from where bad bears are, stay out of certain places, avoid some trails. They put up signs. What are you doing? And what about Mary Gaudreau out at the Little Bend Reserve, when she got mauled last year pickin’ berries? Not a word said, not an article, nothin’ on the news. For all we know that bear could be the same bear that killed Luke!”

The crowd boiled, anger rolled through the hall.

“That’s a very good point Mr....”

“Mr. Falson.”

“Mr. Falson. Truth is, as far as I know, there is no policy on that, but I agree there should be. I believe we leave that up to local counties, to local Parks. You contact my office in a few weeks and I will have an answer for you.”

“So,” someone yelled, “what about it, what about bear control? Government controls every damn other thing, controls how many moose and elk and deer us hunters kill, manages us, but what kills the most don’t get managed at all!”

“Boooo!” A chorus of voices echoed from a pocket of the audience. Beck looked out. The red-haired man and his friends. “What do you know about bears?” One yelled. “You gonna eat that bear Mr. hunter? Bloody bear murderer!”

Beck’s face flushed, his blood rose.

“That’s a question for the biologist,” Buckwold said, then looked at Grisham, then sat down.

“Yes sir,” Grisham said. “Let’s talk about bear control. That’s a good question. What kills game animals? Bear’s predatory effects. It’s not just about bears killing game, it’s about a balance between wildlife and all of the pressures on them. As I said, many studies have been done over the years, population dynamics of ungulates, of predation and survival rates, and all of the pressures combined, including pressures from bears, wolves, extensive road systems, logging, mining, ATVs, and hunting of course. The population of bears and what damage bears do to wildlife is specific to a certain area, for example how desirable is the habitat for bears, and the survival rates of calves dependent, to some extent, on how many moose there are in that area. It is difficult, complicated, to understand the effects of predation in a certain area, unless all of the pressures are taken into account for that area, plus the quality of the habitat those animals live in.”

Gabriel Medina did not wait to be invited, he stood up, waved his hand. “Excuse me, my name is Gabriel Medina, reporter for the Greenville Times. I have with me here one of the country’s most notable bear experts, the author of “Bears In Our Lives” right here in our town tonight, for this important conversation.” He tugged the man’s shirt and the man rose, turned, looked over the crowd, smiled.

“Hello everyone, my name is Donald Kerr, many of you know me as “the bear man” from my articles, books, and presentations. I have been asked by Gabriel Medina to attend this gathering. Like many of you, I have been absorbed by this very unfortunate mauling and death of a young man. I want to

say that over the years, I have studied, interviewed, and written about more than a hundred bear maulings, many of them fatal as well, and learned the habits of bears extensively, the science of bears, and also out on the land. You may be interested in some of those findings.”

He paused. “Let me say that, first, I agree with Mr. Buckwold and Mr. Grisham, that finding common ground with so many interest groups is extremely difficult, and to agree on policies regarding bears, particularly grizzly bears. Kudos to Mr. Grisham for being candid about the continuing increase in bear numbers. Many biologists would not admit that fact. And they are correct, various interest groups have different perspectives, self-motivated and often selfish perspectives, that often have nothing to do with science, on how to deal with bear management and human-bear conflict.”

The bear man smiled again. Looked up to the front panel then turned back to the crowd. “To begin with, you are not told the whole story or the whole truth about bears. It is impossible to know whose statistics on bear population studies and predatory impacts to believe. If we could base our decisions strictly on non-biased science, decisions would be more likely to benefit everyone, including bears, but science is almost impossible to get right on a landscape so vast, and it would never satisfy the wants of an interest group with a political agenda. And just so everyone knows, I am not affiliated with any group or any level of government.”

“So,” he continued, “here are some interesting details that might help your understanding of bears in your lives. Bears are omnivores; they eat vegetation as well as meat. In general, their diet is 60 to 70 per cent plant matter and 30 to 40 per cent animal

matter. What is important here is that unlike wolves, lynx, perhaps coyotes and cougars, bears are not as cyclical in their population numbers because they do not depend as much on their prey. If prey – moose, caribou – is at low numbers, the bears can survive primarily on vegetation. This means that their numbers may continue to climb, which is a serious concern when moose and caribou numbers are already low around here, right? The bears are still able to expand into new territory, he nodded toward the Hutterite man and gestured to the man near the school.

Next is the effectiveness of bears as carnivores. Recent DNA studies from hair samples, and placing cameras on grizzlies, are new ways we are finally getting the real story on bears as predators and also how bears hunt. One wildlife study by biologists in Alaska, using video cameras strapped to the necks of 17 grizzlies saw those bears each kill, on average, 248 moose and caribou, primarily calves. That is an average of 34 kills per grizzly every six weeks. This is right in line with other studies using video cameras, and they consistently show rates of about 30 calves per month per bear – a calf a day during the spring season! These are well documented studies.

What is less often discussed is the effort required to find and kill their prey. In the study with the 17 bears, their daily activity was noted. It went like this – 60 per cent of the time resting or bedded, 21 per cent travelling, six per cent standing, six per cent feeding, one per cent hunting. That's right, to kill 30 calves in a month, each, they only had to hunt one per cent of the time. They are extremely effective killers. Bears' noses cannot be denied. They can zero in on female moose and calves at will. In another study of 44 moose calves collared, only five made it

through the summer. The biologist said he believed that the only reason the other five did not die is because of the success those cow moose had fighting off the bears, and I think we all know how fierce a cow moose would be. The bears are just that good at what they do.

The message here? That without bear control, talking about managing ungulates properly and effectively in bear country, helping moose and caribou and elk recover from devastatingly low numbers, is not just wishful thinking, it is a foolish notion. Ladies and gentlemen, it's not just about hunters. You cannot begin to compare the numbers of moose taken to eat by hunters with the predation numbers by bears, wolves, and cougars. They literally kill thousands of ungulates across the USA and Canada, every month of the year. Regulating hunters only is like putting your finger over a pinhole leak on one side of a bucket, while water gushes out a blowout on the other. Truthfully, what kills more bears each year, both black bears and grizzlies, has nothing to do with farmers or ranchers or hunting, and everything to do with how long winter lasts into the spring, and how warm it gets in February and March - if its too warm bears come out of their dens too early and have nothing to eat.

“Enough!” A small man with wirerimmed glasses jumped to his feet. “Why are we listening to this at all? Why are we listening to you? You must be living on another planet! Grizzlies are listed as a threatened species. You can have your studies, your statistics, your stories of bear kills and people mauled. Grizzlies are threatened, vulnerable. PERIOD. Proven and done. They need our help to recover. You don't get it, do you? Some things are more important than a cow or two your ranchers lose, a few bears eating grass in a farmer's field. These bears suffer

constant devastation of the wilderness, loss of their habitat, their home, then you complain because they rob your camping cooler or bother your sport hunting? *THEY ARE PROTECTED*. Get the message. Go cry in your milk. *No* grizzly hunting anywhere in North America. If you can't coexist, go live someplace else. *You* adjust. Leave the threatened grizzly alone!"

"What is your name sir?" the bear man asked. "Are you affiliated with anyone?"

"What difference does it make?"

"All the difference."

The small man looked around. Stood steady, "I'm with the Society For American Wildlife," he said.

"An NGO."

"Yes, an NGO, just like the Global Wildlife Federation, and armies of people who GET IT. Animal activists to some of you hillbillies, and we are about to cut the balls off of all you bear haters and nature destroyers."

"Yahoo!!" yelled the group with the red-haired man, "screw all you bear murderers, because that's what you are!" They rose and cheered." Damian sat alone near the throng of activists, unmoved, his face a blank page.

A murmur rose through the hall, a scatter of angry voices. "Go home you tree-hugging bastards," someone yelled.

Cameras ran, their mobile lights soared above on thin poles like portable suns shining on the faces of the controversy, microphones whipping back and forth between seated speakers and agitated rowdies.

"Well sir," the bear man said, "everyone here certainly knows your position. You might find what else I have to say interesting, even comforting. May I continue?"

Hostilities reluctantly simmered. The small man sat uneasily. The disorderly group high-fived each other then sat.

“I won’t take up much more of your time,” the bear man said. “These conflicts, the issues that surround bear and predator management in general, have plagued us for years. And for good reason. Here is a document from a government branch called Attainable Wildlife Development.”

He waved some papers above his head. “They did an in-depth study on the difficulty of finding common ground, in-depth interviews with all of the various interest groups, perhaps some of you here today. Here are a few of the conflicting but valid statements that were identified, in no particular order.”

He paused, then read, “A lack of public confidence in government.” There was a cheer from just about everyone in the room, regardless of the side they were on in the bear discussion.

Kerr let the noise die down and continued.

“Scientists’ rationale for listing grizzly bears as threatened thought to be motivated by funding priorities or personal values.” The rural residents gave that a whooping cheer.

Buckwold interrupted. “Look, he said, “I’m actually interested in what Mr. Kerr, here, is talking about and it seems you all are, too, so let’s save the cheers and applause for the end and just let him talk this through.”

Kerr nodded his appreciation towards Buckwold and carried on, pausing at the end of each item gleaned from the report.

“Inadequate consultation processes and lack of transparent communications to the public by government.

A lack of willingness from participants (ranchers, farmers, forestry, petroleum industry personnel) to accept the costs of

living with grizzly bears, including accepting limitations on industrial developments in order to protect bear habitat.

“Tolerance to coexist” was a contested concept. For some it meant human activities in grizzly bear habitat be sustainable for bears. For others it meant keeping bears out of human-dominated spaces – meaning, “not in my backyard.”

Ranchers said, it’s fine for city folks to say “we want all these bears protected” but if the bears were in their backyards the way they are out here, it wouldn’t be fine for them anymore.

There’s only two per cent of the population that represents rural agriculture now, one rancher said, so we have no political clout whatsoever, even when we’re right. It’s the urban folks that have it all, and they’ve got no idea about what’s going on.

Another rancher said, I’m calving it’s cold and dark, you’re out there tired and alone, and there are bears around, so it’s dangerous being out there. It takes too long to wait for compensation for a livestock kill. Let me just take care of business myself.

People not reporting human-grizzly bear conflict. Using a “shoot, shovel, and shut up” mentality was commonly expressed to occur across rural communities.”

“So, there you have it,” said Kerr. “The government’s own studies make it clear that about the only thing that can be agreed upon by various interest groups is that they agree to disagree. You tell me, how is that going to change? Animal welfare groups are not government, ranchers and farmers are not city folk. Hunters and fishers in the woods are generally not dying their hair lime green and riding the subway in New York. What is the solution? I have not seen one. We just all do the best we can, make decisions we believe are right for our livelihood, our

families, in our own world. That doesn't mean we stop all debate, but it does mean that the other sides have their points. For those of you who are hunters, fishers, campers, backcountry travelers of all types, you have absolutely no reason to believe there will be fewer confrontations, fewer maulings, fewer deaths, in the future. With the loss of grizzly hunting completely, there is no question bears have recently shown less fear and respect toward humans. In a perfect world that would mean man and bear getting along in close quarters, and in many cases I believe it does mean that man and bear have become more tolerant of each other, but hungry bears are hungry bears, angry bears are angry bears, mother bears are mother bears."

The bear author paused. "As I speak these words, there is at least one Indigenous band in the north that is now paying its members \$1000 dollars for every dead grizzly. Well, does that not put a new slant on shoot, shovel, and shut up? I thank you for your time."

Some of the crowd clapped. In that moment Damian rose from his seat, his presence felt as much as seen, a specter who seemed to instantly cast a degree of malevolence inhaled by all, his voice slow and hard and loud. Cameras and lights and microphones pivoted as though with a mind of their own.

He stood, his arm, his forefinger, pointed to the sky. He spoke.

"Did you forget Luke Kamisky? Forget the real cause of his death, so quick to blame the bear? Is this how you show your compassion for such a brave young man who died saving the life of the granddaughter of that man there! Tom Beck!" Damian drove his finger directly at the head table. "He *knew* a bear was on the hunt not 10 miles away from a kids' camping party, and

did nothing to warn them, or anyone. Innocent kids in a vulnerable position put right in the path of a hungry bear doing exactly what we all know bears do! Of course, it turned into a disaster! And the only thing he can think of to address his guilt and dig his stupidity deeper is to set off in hot pursuit of a creature that already suffered a life of harassment and violence, and Tom Beck even gets the hunting dogs killed in the process. How many kinds of creatures have to die from one man?"

The bear advocate gang jumped to their feet. "Murderer!" they yelled. "Dog killer!" they screamed. "Luke would still be alive!" someone shouted.

The people around the room caught in amazement.

Albert John, one moment seemingly from nowhere suddenly hurled himself at Damian from behind, grabbed the operative's arms, wrenched them back as the deputy sheriff made to clap handcuffs on writhing wrists. A burst of power from Damian who twisted away and flung Albert John to the floor, punched the deputy in the same motion, then jumped towards Albert John staggering to his feet. About to drive his fist into Albert John's face - an arm swooped around Damian's neck and he was ripped off the ground in mid stride. His feet kicked, his arms waved, the great arm that held him did not give. Damian cranked his head to see what held him and the sight he saw stilled his efforts. When he tried to renew his struggles, he felt the dozy effects of sleep suddenly envelope his shocked body and he nodded off limply from the solid sleeper hold. Before his world turned black he noted the smell of wood smoke and pine.

The room fell silent.

The woodsman who held Damian like a limp rag doll stood facing the back of the hall. A different bear man, one of infamy.

He let Damian slip to the floor. Albert John and the deputy gathered themselves and stood over the crumpled man, face down, unconscious. The Deputy pulled hands back and snapped handcuffs over wrists no longer conscious to struggle. Albert John looked over the people then down at the limp form. He said, "You are under arrest for providing false identity for personal gain. Identity fraud, Section 403 of the Criminal Code."

The sheriffs looped arms under Damian and dragged him to the back doors. The people stared in a different direction, held in a trance by this rumour of a man, a recluse, in this moment bearing witness to the immensity of this most significant local gossip in years. Then the mountain of a man turned, faced the front, looked at the head table, at Beck. The left side of his face exposed to the crowd. The hall buzzed - the shock of the disfigurement. A rumble like gathering thunder rose then stilled.

"Look at you all," he said to the crowd. "A fine young man killed, a young lady mauled. A dangerous predator wandering loose, gone bad, and you sit here talking about getting along with bears. Only one man in the lot of you got the guts to deal with matters properly," and Eli pointed to the head table, to his brother. "You spend a year up country and in the mountains and not see a moose where there were dozens, hundreds, a few years back. And thinking if you kill that bear in your yard, you'll somehow annihilate the delicate balance of nature, while hundreds, thousands more bears are out there in the wilderness. Fools." He pointed again at Beck. "You need to thank that man there for what he's done and hope he finishes the job." He turned and walked.

A 10-year-old boy stood at the aisle's end, last row. His heartbeat like a drum as the tall woodsman dressed in buckskins

walked towards him. He had the urge to run, hide, but stayed pegged to the floor. He tried not to stare but looked up at the tall man with the disheveled hair the colour of the buckskin hides he wore. Long as he lived, he would never forget that man, his face, his clothes, his moccasin feet, the smell of the woods and sweat. He would never forget his terror as the man looked down at him - then winked, as he walked by.

# CHAPTER 10

Beck shoved in another mouthful. “I don’t know what it is about your strawberry rhubarb crisp that makes me crazy. So addictive it should be illegal.”

“So, what went on there? The phone’s been ringing off the hook before you even got home.”

“Seems quiet now.”

“I put it on mute. Go on.”

“I told you to come to the meetin’ with me.”

“What happened? What did they do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope, nothing. Going in, I believed the chance of me walking out of that place with a smile was about as great as winning the lottery, and I never bought a ticket in my life.”

“Well, that don’t make sense. What about those GWF people, were they there?”

“Complete with a fan club of hecklers. They never really got going, tried to at the end. It was too late.”

“Tom, that GWF man who lied to Ellie, told her he was a reporter, he had to have done something.”

“Tried. Billy Jo, are you sittin’ down?”

“Close enough that I can reach across and slap you.”

“Billy Jo, everyone in that place was so hot under the collar there never was any attempt at peace making, let alone policy making. Just another opportunity to vent, one anger after another, what I expected. But that Medina kid did me a favour - I underestimated him – brought in a so-called bear expert, a big-shot author, and this fellow did a good job laying it on the line, made enough sense to enough people so they listened. That did not sit well with Mr. GWF man. He come at me, started yelling, blamed me for all what happened to Luke, for being a bear hater, what ails the world, whipping the crowd up, what I expected.”

Beck paused then went on. “That was Albert John’s cue. Him and the deputy walked up behind the guy and Albert John read him his rights and the deputy held his arms and tried to put the cuffs on.”

“Tried.”

“He shoved Albert John hard. He fell, spilled over chairs and the guy spun and punched the deputy and was about to run for the doors, then from nowhere a big arm wrapped around the guy’s neck, got him a sleeper hold and he passed out mid-struggle and slipped to the floor. They got the cuffs on him alright. Reporters and cameras got it all, up close and personal. The crowd was stunned.”

“So, who was the big man?”

“A man in buckskins,” Beck smiled.

BJ studied Beck to find a reason for his thin grin, then she sat back with a sudden realization. “You’re serious,” she said. “Your brother, Eli.”

“Wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t see it.”

“I don’t know whether to believe you or not.”

“Believe it.”

“Tom. If these GWF people, the media, are as serious as you say, powerful as you say, it’s not over.”

“No, I don’t expect so. Billy Jo, the place was loaded with media, Gabriel said what happened is a disaster for them. These people build bandwagons and expect everyone to get on. Who’s gonna want to jump on the wagon with a guy in handcuffs for identity fraud.”

Beck took another big bite of the rhubarb crisp.

“So, what now?” BJ said.

“Gabriel’s getting the news out. We lay charges.”

“Who’s we? Ellie is the one he lied to.”

“I know. Let Albert John handle that.”

Beck tapped his fingers on the table. “Billy Jo, Gabriel asked if he could visit Ellie, said it’s important for her to speak her mind about what happened, said it will help our situation. He wants to have a talk with me, too. The news people need to hear from others besides the animal welfare types. I said I would, and said go ahead and talk with Ellie, as long as you or Kate approve. You plan to see her tomorrow, tell her she’s about to have a visitor.”

“You trust him?”

“Don’t have a reason not to. I was stubborn not to have listened in the first place, I ain’t beyond admitting I was wrong.”  
“Good kid, a little on the short side.”

“He’s taller than you.”

“Thought you were gonna say better lookin’ than me.”

“That, too. Tom, how many court appearances you made in a lifetime of being a warden?”

“Never counted.”

“You know how hard it can be on people, not just the guilty but those trying to prove it. You know what I’m getting at.”

“You’re worried about Ellie. Darlin’, we can’t just let it be. We do and they’ll just run right over us – me, the department, our family.”

BJ sat silent. Her eyes softened. “You look good in a smile, she said. Make sure you wear it for a while.”

Beck thought for a moment. “Remember you and me sittin’ on that porch in the dark on our wedding night? Old Walter Witwicki’s newly built cabin he let us use down by the river. We sat holdin’ hands and every time I looked at you all I could think of is how bright your wedding dress shone in the moonlight. And what you said.”

“You don’t expect me to remember what I said.”

“I do, always will – ‘Life is too short to worry about anything. You had better enjoy today because tomorrow doesn’t promise anything.’

BJ did remember it.

\* \* \*

His right forefinger punched the “send” button on the keypad.

“Gone, go with the grace of God,” he said. Gabriel stood, looked at a fine gold chain with a crucifix slung over the dresser mirror. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic, he said, at least if you’re a Mexican.

He studied a framed photograph on the dresser. A faded image of his parents, his mother dressed in a flowing white huipil, vivid with colourful embroidered flowers. So handsome,

so young, he supposed before he was born. So full of life, so innocent of life's misfortunes yet to come. He knew those misfortunes.

"This one's for you," he said, "love you mom and dad."

He looked at his own image in the dresser mirror, then at the red letters of the radio clock, 3:34am, then looked at himself again. Tired eyes, but not bad. A smirk drew across his face. Go ahead, gloat, you earned it, just don't let it go to your head, you know what's coming down the pipe.

It's 5:34am in Chicago, 6:34 in New York, ok you guys, get on it. You know it's good, Pulitzer Prize stuff. Gabriel wondered, imagined, how many newsies were pulling his story off the wire at that very moment, how many would run the story this very day. Well imagine that, small time reporter in a small town and a national news story. He looked at his parents' photo again.

So, so good it felt using his name in the article. Clive Booker. You sonofabitch, I hope you remember mine, he said out loud.

\* \* \*

"There's someone here to see you," she said.

"I don't have any appointments right now," he said.

"He said you're expecting him."

Brian Buckwold tapped his pen on the desk. Who? he thought. No one came to mind. He signed a form. "I'm not expecting anyone," he said.

"His name is Clive Booker."

Buckwold stood instantly, "give me a couple minutes," he said. Then he sat, then stood, then sat again. This is not possible,

why would the head of the GWF be outside my office, at this very moment? This makes no sense. Buckwold suffered an impending sense of being strangled, submerged in a river.

His lifted the phone and punched button one. "Ok, send him in."

Clive Booker strolled in, smiled, and stood over the desk. Buckwold leaned back as if pushed - two like poles on magnets repelled by each other and him the weaker of the two.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Mr. Booker? You're a long way from home."

"On a field trip."

"I see, what can I do for you? Have a seat." He pointed to the empty chair at Clive's side.

"I prefer to stand. We had an agreement," he said.

"I am aware of that."

"Do you have any idea what this fiasco at your meeting did to our revenue, our members, sponsors, seeing one of our own taken away in handcuffs?"

"I had nothing to do with that. Your man, someone by the name of Damian Prouse, impersonated another for the purpose of personal gain. Identity theft, fraud, section 403. I had nothing to do with it."

"That's right, you had nothing to do with it, no control over the situation at all. That was the deal, you keep control over your man. And what happens? He's involved in a plot to disgrace the GWF, involving the local sheriff and a newsie. My good name slandered across the country. And you had no idea. No idea."

Booker leaned over and placed his knuckles on the metal desk. "What good is a department head with no idea what his

employees are up to, who are willing to sabotage their own boss? Your ass is mine.”

“If your good name has been slandered, then you should sue your man, he’s the one responsible.”

“Don’t be a smartass. Mr. Prouse paid a friendly visit to a mauling victim to make her feel better, nothing untoward. That is what we do. Make people feel better.”

“Identity theft is a criminal offense,” Buckwold said.

“Be serious, a girl who is taking painkillers, disorientated, psychologically impaired from a devastating experience, in bed day after day, who, understandably, confused a compassionate GWF man with a former coach of Luke’s.”

Clive Booker looked at his watch. “I have no time for this nonsense. You call a press conference. Tell them that it was a misunderstanding, that Mr. Prouse was there for a compassionate visit. That it was simply a case of mistaken identity.”

“It’s not up to me. The sheriff is the one who presses charges. I have no control over the sheriff.”

Clive scowled, “You have no control over anything, it appears. It’s got everything to do with Beck, who you will be sure understands the situation - that his granddaughter is 18, she’s an adult, and will have to be involved in court proceedings, dragged through the legal wringer. She’ll be shredded and you know it. Your man, Beck, will have no problem convincing the sheriff to let it go.”

Buckwold’s pulse began to stabilize, he began to breathe easy.

“Don’t get comfortable. This isn’t a baseball game,” Clive said. “No three strikes. *Two* strikes and you’re out. Don’t get in

the way of Beck's sadistic plans for vengeance. Let him go. That bear is long gone by now, but these hillbillies have long memories when family's been slighted, and they know how to find bears. They will go after that bear, sooner or later. You report to me now. Anything related to what Beck is up to or what you can only imagine he is up to." Clive tossed a card on Buckwold's desk. "You have my personal cell number and you'd best use it." He walked out.

Damian stepped out the glass doors of the courthouse, the jail, and whatever else it was. Stopped. Turned up his impassive face to grey skies. Air filled his lungs. He breathed slow and deep, could feel his heart rate slow, feel the wrench clamped to his gut release. His cell phone dinged.

"Merry Christmas," it said.

He stepped down the two steps. The walk to Peterson's Motel at the edge of town would do him good. A refuge, a place to get clean and put the pieces together. His feet hit the cement and he walked out.

Blast of a car horn, his heart jumped. A gloss black Lincoln Navigator. Damian looked into the window, through the luster of luxury glass. Clive Booker at the steering wheel.

Damian hesitated, looked up the street then at Clive, waited, as if walking or staying were options that made little difference. He moved to the passenger door and got in. Looked through the windshield.

Clive waited.

Finally said, "I told you, if you go to jail and I can't get you out, I'll get in there with you. Here I am, and here you are."

"This was not supposed to happen," Damian said.

Clive gripped the steering wheel with both hands. “Why did you resist?” he said.

Damion did not answer.

“Do you know what this does to us? Our memberships, donations, were climbing, across the world, spiking in North America. Cut off with a knife, by one stupid act. You know how many calls I got from GWF offices? You know what they want?”

Damian did not answer.

“They want your balls cut off with a knife.”

“Those hillbilly cops overreacted. A little visit to that girl,” Damian said. “Take me to my room.”

“No. They did not overreact. They played you. You took that photo of the knife. That was their chance to crucify us. In front of cameras, reporters, microphones. Now we’re all paying for your stupidity.”

Damian looked at Clive through venomous, black, pin-holed pupils. “You build these stories. You don’t want the knife, don’t use it.”

“Veronica should have known better. I saw the print, not the images.” A mistake.

“Take me to my room.”

“No. To the airport. You’re done here.”

“I got accounts to settle. I’m not done here.”

Clive tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “That man who grabbed you. Eli. He’s not anyone to mess with. You need to read the news. You’re public enemy number one, at least here in smallville. You’re done here. For now. We got other jobs to do. You’re being relocated. You’ll get your chance to make things right, make them pay. This Eli and his brother Tom Beck,

they won't quit. That's clear. We keep track of their movement with the GPS trackers attached to their trucks. You've done that, correct?"

Damian looked at Clive.

"Ok. We'll know when they move together. Look, the GWF can't be linked to you right now. This needs to blow over. When the time comes, when the next hunt for the bear starts, you'll be informed. You'll be on it. When these guys kill that bear it needs to be recorded. Footage, photos. If they don't, if they miss, wound the bear, you're paid to finish the job. You know what that means."

"So, what, I just walk up and say, boys, here I am, let's go."

"Basically, yes, they won't quit because you show up. They can't stop you. If they try, it's you with the Go Pro on your forehead. It'll record everything. They're smart enough to know better."

"They'll be gone before I get there."

"Lucky for you, you get a chopper ride and drop in unannounced. Let's go and get your things." Clive started the deluxe rental. Did not put the SUV in gear. "Oh," he said, "does the name Gabriel Medina ring a bell?"

"The local reporter."

"Before that."

"He must be something to you."

"Think back, about eight years ago."

"I need a shower and a change of clothes before I do any thinking back."

"Remember that story we did on endangered species, wolves being reintroduced. Big story. About the Gray Wolf of southern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona? The name

Medina sounded familiar, so I checked it out. That Mexican sheep farmer who got caught with a dead wolf in his snares, from south of Animas, New Mexico. He claimed wolves never were extinct, killed his sheep regularly. Had no choice but to protect them, same old story. Got caught again with another dead wolf and we stepped in and put the screws to him. Another national news story. City folk love their wolves almost as much as they love their bears. We put pressure on the warden service. They gave him a \$5,000 fine. To a New Mexico sheep farmer! I doubt he cleared a few hundred a year on his sheep.”

Damian did remember. “Never heard about that family again,” he said.

“That’s because the old guy killed himself.”

“He’s a Medina?”

“Yes, him and this reporter kid, both from south of Animas.”

“Coincidence.”

“Sure, and his dad and the guy who killed himself were both named Hector. Coincidence.”

“It’s a free country.”

\* \* \*

Beck sat in his swivel chair, feet crossed up on the old oak office desk, Tony Llama cowboy boots pointed to the ceiling, fingers entwined behind his head, head back, looking up to the ceiling, same spot the tips of the Tony Llama’s happened to be aimed at.

“Wanda, what time did you tell them to be here?”

“Nine in the morning.”

“Well it’s nine now.”

“What do you want me to do, run up and down the street yelling their names?”

“I would like to see that.”

“You still have time to return Mr. Buckwold’s phone call.”

The office doors opened. Footsteps. Hello Wanda. A second voice – hello.

“Go right in, he’s waiting for you.”

“Albert John, Gabriel, come in and sit. Wanda, get Lewis in here too.”

“I’ve been sitting here for a half hour,” Lewis said from the other side of the door.

“Readin’ magazines, I imagine.”

“The ones I took from your desk drawer,” Lewis said. He walked in.

Three chairs waited opposite Beck’s desk. They sat.

“What’s up?” Albert John said.

“Just wanted you all to be here when I called Mr. Buckwold. Buckwold said its urgent. I don’t know what else it could be but your performance at the town hall the other night. I don’t know I can trust my own opinion about what he’s got to say. Or what I got to say.”

They all smiled.

Beck dialed. He pressed speaker phone. The phone rang loud and clear. Then he pressed a button on a small tape recorder that sat desk-top.

“Beck, thank you for calling back.”

“You’re welcome sir.”

“I guess you know why I’m calling.”

“I imagine it’s not about the weather.”

“No. You know why. You had that planned, didn’t you Beck? The sheriff, your assistant Mr. Lewis, far as I could tell even that newspaper guy, the Latino, he in on it too?”

Beck glanced at Gabriel. He was calm.

“In on what?”

“C’mon Beck, they were right there with the cuffs, just waiting for the chance. What’s this about, Beck?”

“Mr. Buckwold, sir, I was up there at the table with you. Right beside you, not behind you. We’re in this together, back each other up, remember?”

“Cut the nonsense. There’s not a person in the place didn’t see the smile on your face.”

Beck grinned, “They all grinned at each other.”

“Well sir, that GWF fellow... I’m told identity fraud is a serious offense, he was guilty of a criminal act. Lying to that young girl that he was Luke’s hockey coach in order to gain benefit to himself. I guess you saw the news with that knife pictured on it. That young lady happens to be my granddaughter.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? This girl is your granddaughter. It’s personal Beck. You’re too close to this situation.”

“And you don’t think it was personal what this fellow said when he was yelling at me?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Damn right it’s the point. Why didn’t you step up and say something. Or was that a smile I saw on your face when he called me a sadistic bear killer?”

“That’s enough.”

“I would say so. Why don’t you just tell it like it is, Mr. Buckwold. What’s the Global Wildlife Federation got on you? What aren’t you telling me?”

“You think this is all about you? This bear? What happened? Listen Beck, you, me, our Department of Wildlife, we’re all being held accountable. These people have power, legal power and media influence, and money you can’t even imagine. I’m your supervisor, yet it seems I got no control over what you do, what you say, what plans you made to slander his man and his organization without me knowing about it.”

“Whose organization?”

“You haven’t met Mr. Clive Booker, yet.”

Beck looked at the group.

“Mr. Buckwold, I have not done anything I would not have done in any similar circumstance in the past. We had two bear maulings over my career. Both times we tracked the bear and shot it. Everyone one was the better for it. Not a word said but thank you. And now this. Tell me this Clive Booker does not have you in his back pocket.”

“That’s enough! You don’t do anything, plan anything, about this bear situation, including going after the bear, without my knowing and my approval. You understand this, are we clear?”

“Like going after the bear?”

“Like going after the bear. I want to know when you plan to go, when it happens.”

“If I go.”

“Don’t screw with me.”

“The bear is long gone.”

“That was your brother at the town meeting grabbed that man. What you two got going on I need to know?”

“You don’t have the legal right to ask what your askin’.”

“You just don’t get it. It’s not just about you, or your family, or a bad bear. There’s lots of people involved, good people in the department, my bosses, the public.”

“All those good people want my job, you can fire me and hire them.”

Silence.

“Let’s just say you’re lucky you’re retiring in a few months.”

Silence.

“Got anything else you want to say?”

“You tell your town sheriff to drop those charges. They’ll never stand in court, and he knows it. You and I both know your granddaughter is not up for a court battle. Tell that Latino reporter to lay off. The more he writes the more aggravated this Global Wildlife Federation and their supporters get. We just don’t need the fight. Not now.”

“Why don’t you tell them all yourself?”

“What. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They’re right here, sir.”

“Well you....”

“What’s that sir?”

The phone went dead. Dial tone.

They sat, looked at each other.

“Well, that went well,” Albert John said. “Seems to me like you two have irreconcilable differences,” he grinned.

“You think?”

“Was I supposed to take notes?” said Gabriel.

“Anything there you can use in a court case?” Beck said.

“Not without a court case. We haven’t even talked to the prosecutor about probability of conviction.”

“Now you sound like a lawyer. I guess you’re multitasking.”

“Tom,” Albert John said. “He’s right about one thing.”

They waited.

“We go to court over this and at best it’s a small fine. We don’t have a budget that allows for any wasteful court cases. The Crown prosecutor would think I’m nuts for trying. And Ellie, Tom. You don’t want her involved in this. She doesn’t even need to know about it. Think about it, you don’t really want this.”

“I did, BJ and I talked about it last night. We agree. I needed you here to witness this phone call.”

“Oh, now I get it,” Albert John said. “The court battle you wanted to arm yourself for is against your boss, for you being fired for unwarranted reasons. So close to full pension. Am I right?”

“And to see where Buckwold is at. You guys taught me well, cover my ass. Thank you for coming here. I mean that.”

“Sir?” Gabriel said.

Beck looked at him. “You don’t need to call me sir. Call me Tom.”

An uncomfortable look came over Gabriel. “Ok, Tom,” he said. “Is this a good time?”

“For what?”

“For a talk on the record, some background. A couple more articles are important now.”

“I suppose. I did say you could talk with Ellie.”

“I already have sir, just after you gave me permission. I just need a few minutes with you. And here we are.”

Beck looked at his watch. “You let me know if anyone else tries to talk with Ellie. You better treat her right.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ok, a few minutes.”

Albert John stood. “I’ll leave you two at it,” he said. And he walked out.

“You want a coffee? Can’t promise the quality.”

“Sure, ok.”

Beck got up and walked out and returned with two cups and placed them on the desk. “Well,” he said, “it’s your dime.”

They talked for an hour. About Beck’s education, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncles, and great uncles who served as wardens and sheriffs and the military in both world wars. They talked about his most memorable moments as a warden; cases he cracked, poachers he collared, bears he had tracked down and destroyed, about his ranch and the life he lived with his wife. He asked about this bear, if any bears in his past were as bad as this one. And about how the chase went, how the dogs died.

They sat at moments and sipped coffee and kept thoughts to themselves.

And finally, Gabriel asked Tom. “About this bear, did you know, suspect, it was the same one that killed the rancher’s cow the day before at the rancher’s place, 10 miles from the kids’ campsite?”

Beck studied Gabriel.

“You want details,” Beck said, “facts, you want an angle. I understand that. But you need to understand. There are no

precise circumstances, no absolutes with bears and what they are capable of. Where's the good in second guessing what could have and should have been done? To hold myself accountable, to what? We all suffer the failings of every other human being who did not make the right choice that changed their life. Bring upon ourselves unbearable guilt to no benefit of anyone but to block out what joy in life there might be? And why? To drag those we love into our own self-pity, drag everyone's life down with us? No sir."

Beck sat back. "You want to write about that too?" he said.

"Mr. Beck. That is what needs to be written about: our thoughts, our feelings, the unsaid that needs to be said. You change people's hearts first and then you change their minds."

"I guess you're the writer. Tell you what, you show me what you write before you print it. Deal?"

"Deal. And it's a deal I make with no one, but I'll do it this one time with you, and if anyone ever asks, I will deny I did it."

Beck studied Gabriel. "So, tell me about it," he said.

Gabriel looked confused. "About it?" he said.

"About your history."

"History?"

"Last time we talked you said you got a history about these things, about fighting back, against these people who are after me."

"Oh. That. You don't really need to hear about it."

Beck looked at his watch. "Time does fly when you're having fun. Give it to me shorthand," he said.

Gabriel took a breath. "Ok," he said, "it's not complicated." He rubbed his hands together, looked at them. Paused. "We were

poor. No different than the rest of the Mexican sheep farmers south of Animas.

“Animas, New Mexico,” Beck said.

“Yes. We didn’t have much. Lived in an adobe house, a three-room hut really. Two older brothers and a younger sister. But we had a good life. Always food on the table, parents who loved us. I think often about how life was different then, and what happened, and why it did happen. I think about how I spent my whole life outside, tending the sheep, playing games with my brothers and sister, with other kids, with the dogs.

We had three sheep dogs. Then suddenly we had two. I asked what happened to the missing one but my parents and older brothers never said. They did talk about losing sheep. Everyone lost sheep, to wolves, but we seemed to lose more, maybe because we lived the furthest from town, our farm backed up against wildlands. My dad never said much about it, but some mornings he would come in late, eat after us. I never knew where he went, it had to be in the dark. Then one day I was snooping in the shed and I lifted an oiled cloth slipped in between old boards in the shed wall. I saw wire snares.”

Gabriel sat quiet for a moment, immersed in reflections.

“In school, Grade 3, he said, our teacher, Mr. Peebles, my favourite teacher, the one I remember most, told us about the Gray Wolf and how it was almost extinct and that if we happened to see one to let him know. That they were protected. Then things changed. My parents argued often. They never argued before. We sold sheep. My brothers argued with my dad, not to sell sheep, we needed them. My dad was angry. Agitated. For a year, at least, I never saw him smile. I remember the kids in school looking at me different. Even my teacher did not talk

with me the same. Then we sold the farm. We moved to a different town. A bad town. The kids were mean. We lived on a produce farm, in a wooden shack, as many did. Poor Mexicans, mostly from Mexico. It was rough.”

Gabriel put his hand over his eyes, then said, “They picked green beans. Sometimes corn. My dad was never the same. He drank. I saw him on the porch one night, crying. The next day, I never saw him again. My mother said he went away to work on another farm and that he would come back home. He never did. I learned later that he took his own life. I was angry. I asked questions, to my mother, brothers. We had a rundown library in a small town near us. I learned how to search for past news articles. I read about the Gray Wolf. About the people who pushed for them being listed as an endangered species headed for extinction.”

Gabriel paused. “There were many wolves in the hills around us,” he said. “We had to protect our sheep, or we would starve. There was no thought given to us, to what these people did to us. They gave my father a fine so large he could never pay it. He had no way out. Mr. Beck, those people, the people who did this to us, they killed my father. Mr. Beck, you know who they are.”

“The Global Wildlife Federation,” Beck said.

“And him.”

“Him?”

“Clive Booker. I cannot forget that name.”

\* \* \*

The wheel-chair rolled down the ramp and onto the sidewalk, then around the hospital parking lot then along the street. With a hand on each handle Gabriel kept to the center of the sidewalk, kept a steady pace.

“Faster,” Ellie said, “you walk like an old lady. We’ll never get to the park.”

“What? An old lady? You want to go faster, are you sure?”

“I can push myself faster than this. I need some excitement, I need speed!” She laughed.

“Seriously, your leg sticks out like a... like a broken leg. What if you wipe out, your mom will kill me. You grandpa will murder me.”

“What’s wrong with that? A two for one deal.” She laughed. “Don’t be a wuss. Faster!”

Gabriel walked faster, then began to trot. By the time they got to the local park his lungs burned, his T-shirt sweat stained at the arm pits. He forced the wheelchair over grass to a picnic table under the shade of a large tree. Sat down, breathed hard.

“You’re not in very good shape, are you?” Ellie said.

“Thought I was. I’ll practice pushing a 200-pound rock, for next time.”

“Oh, you’ll pay for that.”

Gabriel smiled.

They listened to leaves ripple in the breeze.

“You have no idea how good it feels. The wind on my face,” Ellie said.

Gabriel listened.

“My Grandma, she told me one time that life happens in stages, seems to roll along normal, then some event happens, maybe you move, a new job, a family problem, a death, and

you're pushed into a new place in your life, a new level, and then things stay normal for a time until the next change of life happens. I didn't really understand what she meant, until now."

"I guess that's like saying nothing is for certain but death and taxes."

"Not really. Geez, I expected a higher level of understanding from a writer."

"A reporter."

"You never think of becoming a writer? I read your articles, you're good."

"I think of keeping myself fed, maybe owning a house someday." He stopped.

"Maybe a family?" she said.

"Maybe."

Ellie lifted her face to the stir of green leaves in a breeze. "How wonderful that wind feels," she said. "Did you ever think, all the ways that people try to make things beautiful - pastel colors, dazzling fabrics, makeup, fancy architecture - and yet nature has already done it all. All the colours imaginable we can see in an alpine valley full of flowers, in the sky, a sunset, animals that change colour."

"I agree," Gabriel said, "we try so hard to make things special when what's special is already there for us to see, if we'd only open our eyes to see it."

Ellie laughed. "Wow! You could be a romantic, if only you'd open your eyes to see it!" She laughed.

"I'm Mexican. It comes natural. We're born emotional. Did you know that Mexican babies when they're born come out of their mom's va.... you know where, when they come out they cry twice as loud and twice as long as a white baby?"

Ellie looked at him. He grinned. “You’re full of it,” she said. “Besides, being emotional doesn’t mean you’re romantic.”

“I’m proof of that. I’m emotional, but a beer and a tortilla full of beans and the 6 o’clock news is romantic enough for me.”

“Maybe you never had better. How do you know what lives inside unless you feed it?”

“True. Are you offering to feed me something besides beans?”

“Maybe, we’ll see.”

“Ok, I guess I’ll have to behave myself.”

“But not too much.”

They sat for an hour. Told stories, laughed. When it was over, Ellie realized it was the first hour since, since then, since what happened, that in one form or another what happened had not raised its ugly head into her conscious thought. Gabriel pushed the wheelchair back to the hospital, slowly. Ellie did not ask to go faster. They turned along the parking lot, turned again, and nosed to the last turn. Gabriel stopped.

Dead ahead. Ellie’s leg inches from a black Lincoln SUV. A man inside. He looked at Gabriel. Smiled. Gabriel stared. Didn’t smile.

“What’s wrong,” Ellie said.

Gabriel turned the wheelchair, shoved it ahead. “Nothing,” he said.

\* \* \*

Beck turned the key, off. The engine quit. Four hound dogs ground-hitched with fine chain rose to their feet then yowled and whined, tails wagged. Chickens walked about, their beady eyes blinking their heads cocked at his intrusion. He sat, waited. No

movement in the yard, the cabin door closed. He got out, walked toward the dogs, they rose and wined louder, tails waved side to side. Beck turned to look at the cabin's sidewall. Bear skulls nailed top to bottom. He counted the rows of bear skulls, 9, counted how many skulls across in each row, 12. 108 skulls. Top two rows the biggest skulls, long canine teeth curved as shearing scythes. Grizzly bear skulls. Beck shook his head. Then he noticed a missing skull – the top row the spot closest to the front of the cabin, a place where a skull should have been, or one never was – 107 skulls.

“You come up here to a admire my trophies?” A voice boomed behind Beck and his heart jumped and he spun. And his heart flipped again - half the man's face a ruin.

“107 bear skulls, probably more,” Beck said.

“I got a huntin' license, buy one every year.”

“Every year.”

“Every year.”

“Two bears a year, one each spring and fall. I guess you started huntin' bear when you was one year old.”

“And a trapper's license, good for another bear every year, and the grizzly skulls, when it was open season. Before you government types gave in to the tree huggers.”

“I suppose you haven't taken a grizzly since the seasons shut down.”

“That's right. You plan to charge me? Or just leave.”

“I can leave if you want me to.”

Eli studied Beck.

Beck smiled.

“You're here now, may as well come in.”

“Appreciate it.”

Beck walked in, sat at the wood slab tabletop. Eli grabbed two tin cups, poured coffee from an oversize enamel coffee pot. “How do you take your coffee?” Eli said.

“Very seriously.”

Eli set the cup in front of Beck.

Beck looked about the cabin. Five electronic dog collar receivers hung on a 10-inch spike nailed to a wall log. UHF radio sat high on a board shelf, the antennae wire run outside through a small drilled hole stuffed with insulation. Lever action carbine leaned in a corner.

Beck nodded to the gun, “Marlin Guide’s gun,” he said, “45/70?”

Eli nodded. He sat with his good side to Beck.

“Same as mine, mine’s the stainless one.”

Eli looked at Beck but did not speak.

“Eli,” Beck said. “I ain’t expecting miracles here, I just come to tell you what you did at the town meetin’ was a good thing, a very good thing. To be honest it caught me by surprise, never did expect it.”

“I did it for Ellie.”

“I know. Eli, I’m just real sorry how things turned out. I know I got some apologizing to do. I guess I was never good at it. Probably never will be. But I’m here now. I, I think about that day, think about it a lot. I...”

“Don’t. I told BJ, and I’m telling you. A lot of years gone by now, I ain’t holdin’ a grudge.”

“Wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“Somethin’ lost, somethin’ gained, words true if any ever were. I don’t know I’d move back down to the valley even if my face....”

Eli held up, looked into his cup. Looked at Beck. “No, he said, I would not move back down below. My life is here. I never did cotton to crowds, don’t know if I ever would have gone to college. You know me, always was a bush guy at heart. You don’t need to be holdin’ yourself accountable.”

They sipped coffee.

“Did BJ tell you she was here?” Eli said.

“She did, did not say much about it.” Never asked.

“I never did say it, but I don’t think it would have worked. Her and me.”

The UHF radio buzzed. Muffled voices, some of them clear.

“Well,” Beck said, “that sounds like sheriffs’ talk.”

“Boring stuff, mostly,” Eli said, “unless it’s you talking with your crew, or with Albert John.”

“You’re serious?” He looked again at the small orange box perched on the shelf.

“It’s not rocket science. 450 to 475 MHz frequency.”

“Well,” Beck said again. “I guess you know when not to be at the cabin. Eli, what you said at the meeting, you supported me, when my own boss wouldn’t. You surprised a lot of folks, and you made them think. You took some pressure off me.”

“Fools! The lot of them! I said what I meant, and meant what I said.”

“And it’s not just about Ellie,” Beck said. “Well, it is, but the situation ain’t over. Not until I take care of it.”

“You tried.”

“Yes, I did, old Delbert and me. Got close to the bear. Remember the bear hunts we did with our dogs when we was kids, I remember everyone, but never one like this. Lost all three of his dogs.”

“That bear,” Eli said. “At the meet’n, talked with your man Lewis, he said its got a twisted foot.”

“Yes it does.”

Eli sat, looked ahead as if lost in a memory. “I seen it,” he said.

Beck thought. “You chased it with the dogs?” he said.

“No, thirty-nine years ago.”

“What are you say’n Eli. Bears don’t get that old.”

“Saw it close. You was there.”

“No.”

“You never did see it. I was in it. Left foot turned in.”

Beck looked at Eli. Eli turned his head. White scars raked down the side of his head.

“My God,” Beck said. Tingles surged through Beck. “You think its possible? His father?”

Eli stayed silent. He took a sip of coffee.

“A hunt like this you can’t question what needs to be done, have to be all in,” Eli said.

“I don’t plan to quit,” Beck said.

“You’re here because of my dogs, not because of me.”

“No, that’s not true. I meant every word of what I said. You’re not the only one who gets to talk straight.”

“You’re here for my dogs. Delbert had good dogs but it don’t take good dogs, it takes great dogs, hard dogs, dogs with 20 hunts behind ‘em and lived to tell about it. Brave dogs, not afraid, step in quick, and smart enough not to get caught, how to circle and hold a bear. And this bear is not just any bear, he’s a giant, a killer, and smart enough to know when to run and where. Didn’t get old by being dumb. You know what uncle Amos used to say about young bears and old bears.”

Beck thought. Then said, “Young bears are clowns capable of killin’, old bears are assassins who know how to count their dead.”

Eli tapped fingers, like sausages bounced on the table.

“You got the dogs that can do it.” Beck said.

Eli ignored the comment. Glanced out a dusty window. “One dog,” he said.

“One dog. You don’t mean to hunt a bear with one dog.”

“One dog. You need one dog above all others. A dog that got no quit, knows how to make a bear stand and hold, jump in and bite and escape death, hold the bear till the others catch up. Born brave and tough and mean.”

“You got a dog like that?”

Eli looked at Beck. Did not answer.

“You really want to do this?” Eli said. “You do and there’s no turning back. All you got is what you got to lose - your life maybe. A man sends his dogs after a bear and the bear kills a dog and what happened is what he knew could happen, what he holds himself accountable for, don’t hold it against the bear for what man and dog set in motion.”

“I know that. I’m livin’ it. It don’t change things.”

“I got dogs at stake, you got more than that. You got family to think of, and your own self, should things go sideways.”

“I got communities of people to think of. That bear needs to be killed.”

“You don’t need to convince me.”

“I been convinced since I looked at that dead boy’s body,” Beck said.

They looked at each other. One corner of Eli’s mouth turned slightly up in an attempt to smile. “Ok,” he said.

“So,” Beck said, “what now? That bear is long gone. Near impossible to find him now.”

“That is so.”

“So, what?”

Eli stood and stepped to what looked to be big, scarred, oak, school teacher’s desk, the only manufactured piece of furniture in the large room. He pulled open the top slide, walked back to Beck’s side, and laid a weathered topographic map on the table. Flattened its bent and warped face with his hands. Beck knew the map, knew the country. He had flown and hiked and rode horses over it many times. Where possible. That was the thing about mountain wilderness, places inaccessible were generally avoided. He quickly saw the small blue circle that was Shasta Lake, quickly saw the routes of his and Delbert’s travels, quickly saw that what they travelled through was only a fraction of the immensity of this wilderness, and what remained was difficult, or near impossible to access on foot or horse. Obstacles, complications, was what climbed into Beck’s mind, not confidence.

Beck watched as Eli drew an oval shape around Shasta Lake country with his heavy finger. “This,” he said, “is likely where we find the bear, where it is now. An area about 20 miles wide and 50 miles long. “See, here”, he said, then ran his hand along the top of a mountain range. “Fifty miles,” he said, “from north to south, and 20 across, from the flat country over the Owl’s Nest range and down over to the Blackwater River. It’s not likely he spends much time across the Blackwater.”

“What about the hills, the flat country? You know grizzlies have been showing up in the hills, all the way into the prairies.” Beck ran his fingers along the foothills and east.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it, we don’t get to decide exactly where that bear will wander. But we got some advantage.”

Beck looked at Eli. Waited.

“First of all,” Eli said, “that bear is old. The times I saw his track was in these valleys running off Brewster’s Peak. At times he might have been in the hills, the flat country, but I’m betting at his age he’s staying closer to home. Second, this time of year, grizzlies favour grasses and plants high up. They slaughter moose and elk and caribou calves when they’re born, and for a month after, but now they’re a tougher kill. Moose and elk cows with calves can run faster, change country more regular. So, he’ll stay close to alpine plants and what he can dig out - marmots and ground squirrels.”

“Third, there’s his wound, and we can thank Ellie for that. I don’t care if you’re an elephant or a whale, if you get that knife stuck into you its going to have an effect. He won’t be as ambitious or as rangy as he would’a been. If he has a home, he’ll be near it.”

“I know how big this country is,” Beck said, “I’ve flown it many times. Finding that bear will be like finding a needle in 10 haystacks.”

“There’s no point going after him.”

Beck was about to protest then wondered if he heard right.

“Let me finish,” Eli said. “There’s no point going after him. Now. He’s likely too high up, too rugged, too much rough ground. Not likely to run across this one bear’s fresh tracks or catch him in the open.”

“So, what?”

“So, we wait.”

Beck waited.

“We wait until he comes down low, and he will, has to. He’ll be more a creature of habit now than he’s ever been before.”

“But when? That might not be until fall!”

“No choice. When berries ripen, when the frost hits, he’ll drift back down to lower country. Closer to where he dens up. Look,” and Eli pointed to rancher Tom’s property, “that’s where the rancher’s cow was killed, and here’s Shasta lake. That bear was down in this country in the springtime, his den is somewhere on these east-facing slopes.”

“The first slopes to catch the spring sun,” Beck said, “the warmest slopes, the greenest grass to come out first. But that’s still a huge area. What do we do, travel up the valleys and look to cut a track? That don’t promise much.”

Eli walked to another 10-inch common nail drove into a log and lifted a green canvas sack from it, placed it on the table. He pulled open the draw string and placed six trail cameras on the table.

“Trail cameras,” Beck said.

“It’s our best chance.”

“Ok, so you’re saying we put the trail cameras up where we might expect a bear, and wait.”

“No, I’m saying *I* put the trail cameras up where *I* expect bears will get to in the fall – berry patches, breeding areas of elk and moose. Then place baits. Use master bait to draw them in.”

Masterbait?

Did you forget? Eli said.

Beck did, then he didn’t. “Spring bow and arrow hunting trips when they were teens. Lured the bears to tree stands with

the stuff. Molasses, liquid smoke, HP sauce, squirted on trees,” Beck said as he grinned.

“And extract of anise,” Eli said. “And a bag of oats dumped to the ground mixed with fancy molasses. Bears that come in and step in it then spread the scent when they walk out.”

“That’s illegal in grizzly country,” Beck said.

Eli smiled, then said, “Six trail cameras to check, three of them wireless. That’s illegal too.”

Beck shook his head.

# *CHAPTER 11*

August skies rolled over the Owl's Nest Mountain Range. Cumulus clouds floated over valleys like marshmallows misshaped by errant winds. The clouds cast fragmented shadows over grass meadows, bald ridges, jagged peaks. Westerly winds advanced grey skies sullen as the grey seas that conceived them, carried storms wicked as the surf that sired them. The great bear roamed freely under these shifting skies, fed freely on choice plants, but struggled digging out marmots and ground squirrels, and but for one cow elk caught unaware, large mammals had evaded his attempts at ambush and attack.

Age continued to diminish his muscles, calcify his joints, and slow his speed. The once burly bulk of his youth had been on a steady decline for some time. His bulk had become slab sided and his hide once thick and splendid had turned loose and shaggy. His incisors, once meat shears, were now dull; his molars, once milling stones, were now blunt and receded so that nutrition from plants once ground to fine mash was now locked within fiber that spilled from his rectum, its vitamin value dumped to the ground. The wrath of old age had set in and like old people resentful of youth, he bore a foul temper, ill will toward the world, anger at whatever was in reach, and a nagging hunger.

The bear had finished with the moose along the narrow lake and now roamed the west slopes of the Owl's Nest Range that looked down upon the remote reaches of upper Blackwater River. July and August he foraged in nameless valleys, basins, and passes that led upwards to peaks. He travelled routes ingrained since the first time his mother showed him and his sister, yearling cubs, the ways of travelling and feeding on the home territory. From his alpine haunts he looked west beyond the river, over an infinity of mountains and valleys that continued to the Pacific Ocean, a convoluted grey mass whose valleys now and then accepted roads and towns.

Early September he rounded the northern edge of the range, 20 miles north of the great bowl where the men and dogs had chased him. He cut east around the base of mountains, then swung back south over ridges and draws as he hugged alpine. He foraged and hunted as he moved south along the east side of the Owl's Nest Mountains. When skies were clear, the farms and ranches of Green River County lay as a patchwork quilt in the distance below. Late September he ambled down from a shoulder to the eastern rim of that same great alpine basin. He stood looking over the great basin then lay his tired body under that same canopied fir tree he had lain under when the scent of dog and man had startled him so, too tired to bother relieving his back on the rubbing post. He rested, repeatedly turned, slept in snatches, waking intermittently from aching muscles and joints. The knife wound ached, not as it had, but enough to stir his rest. If that had been his life's only wound, perhaps it might be tolerable, but it was not, only the freshest.

The bear's deepest sleep came just before dawn and when his eyes opened it was to a world that had turned white. Large

snowflakes drifted lazily in the grey dawn and the bear rose then scratched at a bothersome root with his paw and freed it, then he settled and closed his eyes. He knew the skiff of snow was a sign of things to come but was, he knew from experience, too early in the season to last.

He could use this small weather event to his advantage. The cold clear early morning air was prime for telling scent, scent that could travel distances greater than 20 miles, smells that would ride the breeze like butterflies and birds then home in on his nostrils. The bear stood, tested the wind that came from the west, walked out from under his tree then stood still as a statue and continued to look west for a half hour, only his great head turning as he eyed and nosed the landscape. He turned and walked 100 yards toward the east, out past dwarf white fir and into the open pass. He stopped, stood, remembered when he had been chased from Shasta Lake over steep slides and through thick black spruce forests. He thought of the forested hills above farms and ranches where patches of low-bush cranberries and gut piles of hunters' kills waited. His mind contemplated. He stood for another half hour, concentrating on the pass and slopes and ridges on either side of the pass.

The bear's memory turned past events over in his mind - the irresistible aroma of the human who struggled inside the strange soft, slick, tasteless hide. The surprise when another human attacked then the sting that sent waves of pain through his body. And the men and their dogs. The bear turned, walked back to his resting tree and the rubbing post. He stood on his feet as a human, placed his back against the tree with branches busted short and jagged, turned his snout to the skies, then shoved his bulk up and down against the broken tree. He gave himself an

aggressive massage, rubbing on itch spots and avoiding pain points. Once satisfied, he walked off, headed west, above the high cliff-top ridge that rimmed the north side of the basin, as he had three months earlier. By mid-afternoon he reached the small pass that looked down upon the narrow lake where the despicable wolves had pushed him off his moose kill. He walked the narrow path down, then, along the lake and beyond, moved lazily through big timber, swiping bites of horsetail whose hair-like stalks sprouted from sink holes and dry mudholes. By dark, the bear could hear the hum of the Blackwater River in the distance.

In a patch of vetch he sat on his butt like a huge chocolate dog. He was pleased with his decision. There was little time before winter turned the land barren, little time to fatten up on cranberries, rose hips, what game he could kill and what carcasses he could find or steal. The snows would come soon and he had to fatten up and find a suitable den. He knew where a den was located from the first time he wintered near the lower Blackwater River, but he generally did not use the same winter home more than once. Turning away from Shasta Lake was the right decision. He did not trust the Shasta Lake area, not any longer, did not trust people and machines on backroads and trails, was wary of the ranches with cattle and farms with sheep and pigs. There was a time when he wouldn't have cared less, outsmarted or sidestepped danger, but with a caution born of experience and wisdom he knew well enough to trust his hunches. And besides, he had used the lower Blackwater River once before, several years ago when humans forced him out of the great basin. They had penetrated the area with horses. The stink of humans and horses and guns with their violent

penetrating blasts like thunder had sent him running to lower ground.

The lower Blackwater River was not overly familiar country, but familiar enough. Last time there, he had been challenged by an old blonde boar whose territory he had trespassed upon, but killed him with a bite to the back of his neck. The lower country off the river had been good to him. Berries had been plentiful, and moose lived in the river's backwaters. There were few roads, towns were far removed, signs of man rare but for the odd human foot track on the skid trail of a remote logging block, or a fisherman who hiked upriver.

A moonless night, the bear swallowed by night's ink as were great trees of the river valley whose presence he perceived rather than saw. Dazzling stars above. Orion the hunter, his belt and sword, and Canis Major, the wolf he despised, meant nothing to the bear but were part of night's brilliant crystalline ceiling that graced his world, as did the sun and sky, cloud and rain. His footsteps mute on the dirt path he travelled, the trail well defined as trails that follow rivers often are. He ate up distance in spite of the deep tiredness that plagued him. Dew dropped with the dawn, soaked hair, matted legs, dripped from branches, dripped from his nose, shed from thick fur like water off a duck's back. At times the trail dropped onto broad gravel river bars and when it did he saw that the mountains he had travelled through had fallen back. He studied them as if deciding what to make of the loss.

It was time to leave the river, take a side trail, search hard ground slopes for low bush cranberry. A good game trail cut in from a brushy hill to his left and he turned up the trail and

climbed the hill through the forested slope as it wound upwards. The musky smell of elk flooded his nose, small herds who, late evenings, hustled down to the river for a drink then scampered back up to the safety of deep woods and bedding thickets. The trail climbed for a few hundred yards then topped a dry ridge that came down from the final mountain butted up to the foothills. He sat to gather his strength but the well he drew energy from was empty. He lay on his belly on the path. Moaned. Looked side to side at the monotonous drift of thin, barren-trunked pine trees. The forest was sterile, no lush growth, no sign of life. He felt a hollow in the pit of his being, an inexplicable sorrow he had never known that had settled on him in recent weeks. He knew he could go on, living meant moving, and he was not dead, so he would move. He had no understanding of his own death as he had never experienced it. No understanding of death other than the act of eating what just died. Death was merely wrapped within instinct.

He rested, then stood, then walked slowly down the ridge that he knew would eventually lead him back down to the river, downstream from where he had climbed up. He stopped, sniffed the air, walked down several yards to a patch of lowbush cranberries, their tiny dark green leaves a mattress covering the pine needled ground. He stood over the carpet, walked a few feet, dropped his muzzle to the tiny leaves, licked them. The thick carpet of leaves were there, the scent of berries was there, but only a few shriveled berries not worth the effort even if they could be singled out. He sat again, the act of sitting stilled the waves of hunger that rolled through his stomach. He looked down the ridge, looked up his back trail. The wind had changed, the westerly breeze that sifted down from the upper valley

swirled then lost ground to a quick cold wind that came from the east and buffeted treetops that swayed together in a synchronous dance uniform in dress and motion.

It hit him. The aroma so alluring it came as a shock. Never had his nose captured such a treasure. He looked to his back-trail then locked into the scent as if the molecules that filled his nasal cavity possessed him, drew him to his feet, forced him forward with a will of their own, and he with no desire to will it any other way.

\* \* \*

The headlamp's beam flooded scattered pine trees and the forest floor littered with pine needles and dead twigs. His hands fumbled with the trail camera strapped to a tree. His pulse quickened. The molasses-soaked grain was eaten, residual oat kernels scratched from the dirt. He flipped the catch, popped out the SD card, slipped it into the card holder attached to the iPhone then scrolled. He scowled – one bear, a big black. He turned his head 180 degrees and the headlamp's beam scanned the night. He unstrapped the camera from the tree, slipped the soft camo day-pack from his shoulders, placed the camera inside and walked out. Rubber slip-ons over moccasins crunched on frosted ground. Vapour rose from his nose with each breath. He stepped out onto a logging skid trail and the sky opened, the Milky Way above spilled out its sparkling milk.

Eli's mind wandered, wandered from the peaks of the Owl's Nest Range down to the farm and ranch country of Green River County. He cursed. A month of checking trail cameras, and multiple bears captured on video, just not the right one. Where, where was he at? Only so many possibilities, and Eli had

covered them all. Unless. Unless the bear never did come back to den on the east side of the mountain range, the sunny side, which it had in the past, where it was when the cow was killed, and Luke. In a mile he reached the old Ford flat-deck at the end of the truck track, got in, sat for a moment, started the truck and crawled back down the scanty roadway that followed Cullivan Creek.

Eli pulled over at the highway. Turned off the ignition. Thought, and thought. So, what if Tom's first chase pushed the bear right over to the west side of the range, what then? Well, he should just show up back here. And what if he did not come back here to the east side? What were the possibilities? Ok, so he could have come around the north end of the range, or the south end, about 20 miles apart. Well, he knew bears, and knew that the forests of the north end were barren, no streams, dry pine forest. But the south end?

He started the pickup and headed south over the hardtop, cruised past the access road to Greenville and kept on. Checked his watch. Midnight. He drove past the truck stop, past the reserve, 10 miles later turned west onto a forest service road. The road wove a crooked path over hills then turned a hard right. On his left, moonlight shimmered over smooth stretches of the Blackwater River. He slowed over the potholed road. Luminous eyes in the night, a small herd of elk dashed across and vanished. Nice to see, he thought, all things considered.

The rough road dead-ended at a turnaround blocked by a deadfall-choked forest. He grabbed the big pack already loaded with grain, molasses and master-bait, found the footpath that led fishermen and hikers and hunters up the river. Looked at his watch, 1:30am. He headed upriver, kept on for an hour, scanned

the right side of the forest as he had for the past half hour then finally saw the small meadow he knew was there. He walked a few yards through the meadow over frosted wheatgrass, his tracks black holes in what remained of a fresh white sheet of snow that was almost melted away from the first skiff of the season. He stepped into the forest then dropped his pack, dumped whole oats under a broad-limbed tree, position the camera downwind from the grain, poured a quart of molasses over the grain, squirted the master-bait on limbs high as he could reach, then left. In a half mile he stopped to rest. Turned his beam back up the trail, then back down the trail, the babble of the river at his side. A hard breeze cooled his damp face.

He started the pickup then sat. Tired. Too damn tired, all this running around. Tired of waiting. Something had to happen. He slipped the floor shift into first gear and the truck crawled out. An hour later the truck's light beams picked out the approach to the highway. He pulled over and turned off the engine. Pulled on his coat, lay sideways on the bench seat, rolled a vest under his head and fell asleep.

When Eli woke, hard frost covered everything and he was cold to the core. He sat up and started the engine and shoved a lower dashboard lever to its warmest setting. He reached to the floor and found the ever-present thermos and poured a coffee. It was still warm. He found the white plastic grocery bag and took out a wholegrain sandwich, its sliced onions stuck out the side. The first thing he tasted was mustard. Then the onions. And that didn't allow much flavour for the bear burger. While he ate, his thoughts moved along. But not like the recent nights before. He was focused. Something bothered him. No, not a bother, as if a message hid in the corners of his mind and he could not dig it

out, as if he should know something. He thought again of all the possibilities, all the places he had set cameras and baits. Three cameras were wireless, in cell phone range, and could be checked whenever he drove down from the cabin. This one was not.

The breeze. That's it, the breeze, it's from the east. Brisk, steady. The masterbait scent is covering a lot of country upstream along the Blackwater River. If the bear was somewhere in that part of the country.... He tapped the steering wheel with his fingers. The cab warmer now. He put his hand on the stick-shift then let it slip to the seat. Looked at his lunch bag, another burger in there and an apple and a granola bar.

You know what you're thinking, he said out loud, you just don't want to admit it.

He sat for a minute then got out and grabbed his 45/70 lever action and his daypack, stuffed it with his lunch, fire-starter and vest, then headed back up the river. An hour and a half later he crossed the small meadow, the frost melted from what little heat the morning's sun managed. He stepped around trees and stopped. Stared. Blood pulsed through him. The grain was scattered, half eaten. Eli stepped around careful not to approach the leftover morsels. A part of his mind strained to understand why any was left behind at all, not like any bear to leave anything behind so easily consumed, so why? His hands shook, tried to open the lid, then did, then dropped the SD card. He picked it up, brushed off wet dirt and slid it into the device.

"My God," he said.

\* \* \*

Beck never heard the knock, his head never left the pillow. BJ rose from the kitchen table, her fingers slid between the curtains as she looked out to the break of day.

“Who in the world,” she said as she walked to the door. She left the door’s chain hooked as she opened a crack. She fully opened the door in the next heartbeat.

They just stood and looked at each other.

“I need to talk to Tom,” Eli said.

BJ felt the chill of early October, and maybe something more.

“Well, come in,” BJ said.

“I can wait here,” he said.

“No, you can’t,” she said, “get in before I freeze.”

He stepped inside.

“I guess this must be important. Is it what I think it is?” she said.

He nodded.

BJ left him standing at the door, a sick feeling followed her to the bedroom, what she knew would happen but hoped would not happen about to happen. She placed a hand gently to the side of Beck’s head. “Tom,” she said, get up.”

He stirred.

“Somebody here for you.”

He opened his eyes. “What?” he said.

“Somebody here for you.”

“Tell them to go away.”

“You tell him.”

“What time is it?”

“Time to get up. They’re waiting.”

“They?”

He.

A jolt of adrenalin pried open Beck's eyes.

"Who is it?"

"Are you going to lay there and ask questions or just get up?" BJ tossed him his housecoat.

Beck placed his feet to the floor and fumbled on slippers as he wedged himself into the housecoat and followed BJ, more awake then he had a right to be. Emotions flipped inside.

Beck turned to the front door and was suddenly facing him. They stood facing each other. Neither spoke for the longest of seconds.

"Is it him?" Beck asked.

Eli nodded.

"Don't just stand there you two. Where's your manners, Tom?"

"C'mon in," Beck said.

"No, I have to get on and get my things together."

"Lord above, BJ said, here you are looking like a cat dragged you through the night and all you can think about is rushing off. The both of you, sit, I'll make some eggs and bacon. You have to eat one way or the other."

"You got your kit ready?" said Eli.

"Been ready since July," Beck said.

Eli nodded.

"You?"

"Been ready since I was 20."

Beck nodded. "Well, may as well eat, could be the last decent meal for awhile."

They ate breakfast. Eli told Beck about the night, about the hit on the camera.

“What made you go back on up there?” Beck said.

“I don’t know, just a feeling.”

“No, not just a feeling, you know bears and that’s what give you that feeling.”

“I got another feeling. You seen that bear. It’s not your normal bear, not any kind of normal. You best prepare for a long trip. Take extra food, extra warm clothes, extra socks, be sure your boots are oiled.”

“All of the above, check,” Beck said.

“You got a way to communicate to the outside?”

“An inReach, brand new. Last time out old Delbert’s dog collars went dead.”

“Mine use batteries, I have extra.”

They pushed plates aside and sipped coffee, the warm liquid down their throats with thoughts trickling through their minds. BJ sat alongside Beck. “You don’t have to go, neither of you, she said, no one expects you to do anything but what you decide to do.”

They glanced at BJ, did not speak.

“You two don’t see each other for years, no use for each other, now teamed up like two stubborn mules hitched to the same wagon. I declare.”

BJ’s eyes watered and she wiped them then said, “I guess I should call Ellie, and Kate, promised I would if anything happened.”

“No,” Eli said, “wait until we’re gone.”

“He’s right,” Beck said. “Last thing we need is a crowd.

Anyone finds out and what’ll happen is the lid blows off.”

“What about Albert John, and Gabriel? They deserve to know, they been with you all along.”

“Tell them, just wait until we’re gone.”

“Be on the trail by noon,” Eli said.

BJ took Beck’s hand in hers. Looked over to Eli who looked at BJ then he looked to the curtained window. BJ reached out and took Eli’s hand with her free hand. He winced imperceptibly but did not pull away.

“What you boys won’t do for a little excitement,” she said. “I swear you’re like kids all over again. Thirty-eight years changed everything and changed nothing.” She held their hands for a few moments then stood.

“Don’t you come home dead, I won’t tolerate it,” she said then left the room.

\* \* \*

Veronica swiveled a complete circle in her wheeled office chair at the Global Wildlife Federation headquarters - the desk, the door, the wall-mounted control panel, the TV monitors, the bamboo plant, the window, then the door again. “Another trip around my world,” she said, “saw the GWF brain center in 10 seconds.”

Her eyes blinked behind black rimmed glasses. Something was not right. She swiveled the chair and faced the control panel. Jumped to her feet. Afraid to take a step closer should the apparition disappear. No, it was real. The GPS monitors attached to each of the pickup trucks blinked on the screens as red dots, as they had faithfully for three months. For three months she waited, hoped, waited, hoped, then gave up on the possibility that these two brothers alienated from one another for nearly 40 years would, by some miracle, join the dots.

Was there a glitch in the system? No, the miracle was real, she said, then stepped to the office phone and picked up the receiver, then looked again to the screen for final confirmation. The dots had separated. One dot moving off. What? What now? What just happened? Was this the glitch? No, there were no glitches, something's happening. She buzzed Clive on the fifth floor. Same fifth floor as she was on, different office. His was the big one with the big window overlooking Union Bay. Hers was a miniature version overlooking garbage bins. Good for a 10 second tour.

\* \* \*

He sat between creosote bushes, 30 yards of white beach between himself and the gentle surf that lapped sand then sucked back then lapped again. A ring-tailed coatis shuffled along the beach like a giant raccoon, and like a raccoon it was bent on destruction. It did not see Damian, could not, would not, see him dressed in black - all black, black boots, black balaclava, black pistol in a black waist band. The Coatis began digging in the sand.

Damn you, Damian said to himself. The desire to jump up and strangle the big South American raccoon before it dug down to the leatherback sea turtle's precious nest of eggs was overpowering.

He turned his head slowly toward a stretch of Oaxaca Beach that held luxury resorts, lights in their distant windows, but none on the beach. He heard footsteps from the opposite direction, like kids scratching holes in the sand. He turned his head slowly. One, then two, then three, all in dark clothes, all with canvass bags slung over shoulders, all with short shovels in hand. He

watched as they approached, stopped, stood quietly. Muffled Spanish voices. One began to dig.

Damian waited until all began to dig, until their backs were turned. He whispered into a cell phone. "Now," he said quietly, then crept out slowly, dark as night. Twenty feet from the nearest man, he charged and the man began to turn but Damian's body hit full force, the man blew over as if bashed by an NFL linebacker. Damian crushed the man into the sand put the barrel of his pistol to his head. Yelling and scuffles broke out down the beach and he recognized familiar voices of the police. He said to half the man's face, the other half shoved into the sand, "muevete y mueres." The man grunted. Damian pulled out handcuffs and jerked the man's hands back and snapped one bracelet on just as his cell phone vibrated.

Damian snapped shut the other cuff on the poacher's wrist, reached into a pocket, pulled out the cell phone. It was Clive Booker, who else?

"Clive," Damian said.

"Damian," Clive said, "how goes the battle of the leatherbacks?"

"Fine."

"Got those poachers on the run?"

"Got'm tied up." The man squirmed. Damian shoved the pistol barrel into the man's cheek. The first squirm was not followed by a second.

"Good. How about those damn beach lights from the resorts? If we don't keep those things turned off at night, those leatherbacks won't lay their eggs, simple as that."

"Under control," Damian said.

“Really? I guess those brochures you handed out did some good.”

“I don’t hand out brochures. Gave them to a peon to hand out.”

“Dammit, we need to keep those lights off at night.”

“It told you, they are.”

“These resorts don’t give a damn,” Clive said. “They advertise how wonderful it is to watch the turtles laying eggs, under bright lights. Idiots. What do you mean they are?”

“They just are.”

“How is that exactly? – just are.”

“I shot out the lights.”

“Shot out the lights?”

“With a pellet gun.”

Silence.

“Damian, you need to shut it down. Martina Perez is on her way. She can watch the turtles.”

“She can’t keep the lights out.”

“Ok, listen, next mission, that’s why I’m calling: you got a flight booked, 8:30am, Huatulco to Vancouver. Be on it.”

“I’m good here. I get along with Mexican cops. They know how to treat criminals. And nuisance lights.”

“They found the bear.”

Silence.

“You there?” said Clive.

“I’m gone.”

\* \* \*

The cell phone dinged from inside his shirt. Buckwold let the machine drip its final drip then carried the cup into his office

and sat it down on his desk fastidiously on a coaster well clear of the neat stacks of paperwork. He reached into his pocket. Hello Brian, the text read, how are things? Enjoying three months of bliss? But it's not over. We still have the last battle. Its time, Brian, I'm calling in the favour. Beck and his brother found the bear, up the Blackwater River, on the hunt by now. Oh, you didn't know? Your renegade warden has gone AWOL. Are you surprised? Time to finish what we started. Brody Eakin, Eakin Helicopters just out of Greenville. You use him for your bear studies, what, a dozen bears with cameras on bears as we speak? You call him and tell him you got a package to deliver to Beck who is out on the trail. That package will show up at his hanger at first light tomorrow morning, and I mean first light. We both get what we want. I get the firsthand footage and the gruesome reality of these bear haters in action, and you get to crucify Beck once and for all. Don't screw up. Oh, does Beck have your warden-issue inReach with him? I'm sure he does. Make sure the pilot gets the coordinates where they are camped before first light. Sweet dreams. Don't screw up.

\* \* \*

Gabriel relaxed in the plush armchair, his feet elevated, popped the cap off a Modelo beer, placed it on the TV tray. The armchair the one luxury he allowed himself. He pressed the DVD player's remote play button, the music began, the title - LONESOME DOVE. He watched the credits, knew what was coming - Gus McCrea kicking the pig off the porch. Knew what everyone in every scene would say before they said it. Why not, he'd watch the four-hour movie series four times, at least. Took

him back to his land, the American south, the desert, cactus, chapparal, the Brazos River country. Nothing set him at peace more than his homeland, as hard a land as it was, and nothing took him there better than this movie. He took a deep pull on the beer.

His cell phone rang, he lifted it from the TV tray. "Yes," he said.

"Gabriel Medina?"

"Yes."

"This is Brody Eakin, Eakin Helicopters. You said to call you if anything came up, for example if I saw a certain large dark brown grizzly while flying the mountains. Something that could help Tom Beck."

Gabriel sat up, grabbed the remote and pressed the 'mute' button. "Yessir," he said.

"Well, I didn't see the bear, but I got an odd request. A call from a Brian Buckwold of the Department of Wildlife. Booked a chopper for first light tomorrow morning. For one person, to locate Beck's camp and set this person down. Struck me as odd. If they're out after this bear with dogs why would someone drop in on them, unless it's someone uninvited.

Gabriel's mind whirled. If Beck's out on the trail with dogs, there was only one set of dogs in the county to do it. Why didn't Beck tell him?

"Are you sure about this, that its Beck you're trying to find?"

"Hundred per cent."

"Thank you, Mr. Eakin, this is very much appreciated."

"Well, good luck. I would have turned down the request but the government is my biggest client. Would be like cutting my

own throat. Know what I mean? And if I'm telling the whole truth, I wanted to see where this was going."

"Of course. Thank you."

They hung up. Gabriel punched the cell phone's keys.

"Ellie," he said.

"Gabriel."

"You didn't forget my name."

Ellie laughed. "I just left your place an hour ago, no amnesia since then, but I confess, I might need some if you're going to keep serving tortillas and beans and shredded chicken all the time.

"Ellie, listen. Your dad is out on the trail, I think with Eli, going after the bear."

"I know, my mom just told me, I was about to call you."

"I just got a call from Brody Eakin, the chopper pilot. He's about to drop off a visitor in your dad's camp, first thing in the morning, where they happen to be on the trail. Unexpected, I think. Why didn't he tell me?"

"He didn't tell you or Albert John. He told my mom he'll text you both from the inReach with any important news."

"It's all important news," Gabriel said. "What else did your mother say?"

"Nothing, really."

Gabriel shook his head. Sighed.

"Gabriel, I wanted to give my grandpa something, something to take with him on his hunt. For the bear. I really wanted to. Do you think the chopper pilot would drop it off for me?"

Gabriel thought, and when the thought crossed his mind, he thought he knew.

“I don’t know,” he said, “maybe. But maybe the chopper can’t land where your grandpa is.”

And when he said it he knew that if the GWF was involved they would not have to land, they had ways to get feet on the ground.

“Ellie, wrap it up real good, tie a red ribbon on it like a long tail, a couple feet at least, maybe some flagging tape or red cloth. I’ll come over and get it. I’ll take it to Mr. Eakin.”

“No, don’t come over, I don’t want my mom to know. I’ll drive my mom’s truck.”

“You sure? Your leg’s still sore.”

“You say that every time I come over, you’re worse than my mom. Get a grip. See you soon.”

“We can share a beer.”

“No, I’m going for a ride with you, to the chopper guy. I hope you’re not watching Lonesome Dove again.”

# CHAPTER 12

Beck leaned his gun against a tree.

“What ammo you got in there?” said Eli.

“405-grain bear loads. Factory. Solid lead. You?”

“450-grain handloads. Lead.”

“I wish I’d checked the weather before I left.”

“I did. Mixed, cold in a couple days.”

“Feels cold now.”

“Won’t for long. You ready?”

“Ready.”

Eli walked to the tailgate, dogs whined, opened the gates of the dog boxes. Four dogs jumped out all with receiver collars, short antennas jerked about, eager as the dogs’ tails.

Beck watched. “Same as the dogs we used when we was kids, black and tans, Plott and coonhound mix. What’s the big one, the one with the coarse hair, salt and pepper? He’s no coonhound.”

“Half hound, half German wirehair, got the Drahthaar bloodlines. Used for wild boar in Germany. Hunting dog, attack dog, got a nose near as good as the hounds. Don’t get friendly with him because he won’t.”

“Big enough, smart enough, brave enough. That’s the dog?” Beck said.

Eli ignored the comment, clipped leads on the bitch and the wirehair. Just wait a few minutes, he said, let me check the freshest trail out. They walked circles around the bait site, dogs leaned into leads, noses stuck to the ground, then Eli held up. “Ok, let’s go.”

Beck bent to lift his pack. The smallest dog, a sad-eyed male with eyes rimmed tan, walked up to Beck and nuzzled his hand. Beck pulled his hand away. “Mind your manners,” he said, and shouldered his pack.

Eli led out, the two dogs pulled at their leashes, the two freed dogs trotted out, noses to the ground, but stayed within sight.

“Are you gonna let ‘em loose?” Beck said. The memory of battles with Delbert unwilling to turn his dogs loose came to Beck as clear as yesterday.

Eli walked out, ate up ground with big steps.

The scent led up behind the bait site onto a pine ridge then slowly upwards, parallel to the river, the ridge gaining elevation headed towards a distant mountain. Beck began to sweat, lowered the zipper on his coat. Cold rushed in. The grueling conditions from the last chase also came back like yesterday: bone weary, endless fatigue, feet crippled with blisters. There was not much good to remember about his ordeal with Delbert. The good, he thought, was that you forgot some of the bad. The sky was grey, ceiling low, yet the forest was dry. Not a bad day for a long walk, could be worse, he thought. Don’t even think it, he said to himself, you know what’s coming around the corner.

Eli wove through the timber, his backside blinked between trees.

“Better if we don’t sweat up in this cold,” Beck said. Eli walked on.

“Geesus,” Beck said to himself. The memory of his older brother ignoring him as a kid also clear as yesterday.

The track led up the ridge for about a mile, then just before breaking into steep brushy slide thick with stunted timber, the dogs hit a game trail, angled downward along the pine sidehill with sounds of the river becoming distinct. Fresh elk tracks on the trail. The dogs ran silent. They had nothing to say, their actions rote, another warm track to follow, another day at the office.

Eli stopped, dogs milled about. Eli bent over a small streamlet cut through black soil, crystal water over small stones. He drank. Beck moved upstream a few feet then slipped out of his pack then bent and also drank. The smell of rich black loam fresh in his nose. He pulled back and stayed on his knees. “We need to pace ourselves, careful we don’t sweat up or we’ll freeze later when night comes,” Beck said.

“When night comes we’ll make a fire,” Eli said, then stared at the ground. He pointed at the mudded dirt path where it crossed the stream. Beck walked over to where he pointed. Electricity ran through him, energized him. The doubt – were we even following the right bear? – went poof. Huge grizzly tracks. Eli still pointed, “Did you see this?” he said.

The left front footprint was turned in.

“I see it.” Beck looked at the track then up at trees, at spaces between trees, at a future that he had no control over suddenly rushing toward him.

“What?” Eli said.

“Nothing.”

Eli stood to go and said, “He never touched that bait pile that first time. Left some of it un-ate. Hard to say if he just never came back or he heard me or smelt me or he smelt us. Any way you look at it he’s headed down to the river. Likely he go down that way then turn and head up river. We only got maybe two hours of daylight, we need to push hard and close the gap. And right now we got the wind in our favour. Too late and the bears too far ahead to turn the dogs loose. How do you feel?”

“Like a 60-year-old horse hitched to a team of five-year-olds. These extra cold weather clothes we packed is a burden.”

Eli smiled, the good side of his face to Beck, then he turned, his face flipped sides, the smile exchanged for depravity, like a coin with the queen on one side the devil on the other.

They hit a well-worn game trail along the river, turned upriver, wove through big timber until dark. Made camp in a small willowed flat next to the river. Eli fed the dogs while Beck stretched a cord between trees and set the light nylon fly. They sat silent next to a large fire. Ate freeze dried meals. Crawled into mummy bags. The flames died.

“I don’t like to camp to close to a stream,” Eli said.

“Me either,” Beck said.

“The sounds of the river make it hard to hear anything else, something comes close you can’t hear it.”

“And what sounds the river makes sounds like something no river should make, and you spend half the night awake wondering what made that sound.” Beck said.

They listened to those sounds of the river. Somewhere above, a nighthawk’s dive cut the air, whistling like incoming shells.

“If you’re up before first light, wake me up, we gotta make miles,” Eli said.

Beck had hardly shut his eyes when they opened to bright flames. He heard Eli rustling about. He looked up to a sky that held but a hint of the coming day. “God help me,” he said, and buried his head in the folds. He waited until the billy pot boiled, sat up, watched the shadow of Eli fool with his breakfast.

“When you say first light you mean just the idea of first light,” Beck said. He could barely see brush, trees, the dogs.

“Eat. Pack up the fly. Let’s go.”

Beck downed a bowl of granola with river water. Took down the lean-to, wrapped it tight and stuffed it in his pack. Eli fed the dogs a ration of high protein dry dog food, waited for them to finish. An odd sound like high wind buffeting against treetops came from down river. Louder. Steady.

“Damn it all,” Beck said.

The pound of the rotors drove the chopper right over them, disappeared upstream, then turned and drifted back down, hovered low over the willows. They stood, necks cranked in disbelief. The side of the chopper slid open. A large bundle, a backpack, sailed to ground landed with a thud. A packet with a red streamer like a kite’s tail followed. A rope ladder dropped down to the brush. A man slid out of the chopper and grabbed hold of the ladder, and the ladder swung wide and he clung to the ladder and it settled. He climbed down one step at a time.

“I’ll be damned, it’s that GWF man,” Beck said.

“Like Hell! Eli grabbed his gun leaned against a tree and ran to the ladder.”

“Eli, no!” Beck yelled.

Eli grabbed hold of the ladder and shook it madly. The ladder swung wild the man reeled, lost a step.

“Go back where you came from!” Eli yelled. He jerked the ladder back and forth, the man’s hand lost its grip, the other foot slipped and the man free fell, disappeared into the willows with a thump. Eli dove in after him, Beck ran into the brush and Eli about to drive the butt of his rifle into the man’s face Beck body-slammed Eli. They crashed to the ground together then grappled and locked arms and rolled in the brush, Beck yelling, “It’s me, Eli, it’s me, Tom. Let up!”

Eli stopped. Suddenly recognized Beck’s face inches away. They let go, rolled apart. “My God, Eli,” Beck said, then sat and breathed hard. Eli sat beside him, laid his gun across his legs. They looked at each other. Beck shook his head. Eli grinned. Beck began to laugh, Eli laughed, they broke out in laughter, shook with laughter and it put them both on the ground.

The chopper rose, the ladder trailed like a thin tongue, it sailed down the valley, the deafening beat of the blades faded to nothing.

Damian rolled from back to his belly, collected his senses, surprised to find his arms and legs intact. He got to his knees, crawled to his backpack. A rifle strapped to its side. He glanced back at where he last saw the brothers rolling on the brush, slipped the gun from its case, opened the bolt, slid a brass 30-06 cartridge into the chamber. He stopped. The end of a rifle barrel pressed to the back of his head.

“Drop it,” Eli said. Damian turned his head, all the while the muzzle pressed against his skin. Hatred written on his dark face.

“Let him be,” Beck said.

“Tom, let me deal with this right now. We can leave him lay right here. Give him a lickin’ and take his gun.”

“No, it’s what he wants. See what he’s got strapped to his head? A damn camera. A GoPro. Let’s just go.”

“We can take the damn GoPro.”

“No, leave him to himself.”

“Eli pulled back his gun. You just made the biggest mistake of your life, comin’ in here,” he said.

Damian stood, reached into the brush, a red ribbon tangled on the ground attached to a packet. He tossed the small package at Beck’s feet. This is yours, Damian said. Beck picked it up. A small paper wrapped packet about the size of a.....a knife. He shoved it in his coat pocket.

Eli walked back to the dogs, let two dogs go then snapped leads on the bitch and the wirehair and walked off. “Keep up,” he said to Beck, in a few hours we let the dogs go.

At times the game trail lost itself in muskeg, struggled through thick black swamp spruce, but stayed with the river. They walked quick, wove around deadfall, stepped over fallen trees, rimmed swamps, sometimes walked the length of fallen logs as if on a tightrope. The dogs grew restless, tugged at the leads, whined and yodeled.

“Ok,” said Eli. He rubbed the heads of both dogs then unsnapped the leads. They bolted like a shot, dropped noses to the ground and settled into a dog trot with a purpose. “Well, if he don’t know we’re on him he will now”, Eli said, then turned at the sound of a snapped branch. Damian stood a few feet back, dead pan eyes held on Beck. Beck shook his head. “I got no interest in what nonsense you got planned. You stay out of our way. See that man up there?”— Eli had disappeared in the trees —

“he’ll leave you in the dirt if you try anything foolish.” Beck walked out quick then trotted to catch up to Eli. He could hear the rattle of brush from who followed.

They walked steady, trotted at times when the footing was flat and solid and the forest clean. A grey shale-sided mountain closed in from the right. The clamour of dogs echoed against its steep walls. The echo and the noise of the river made the location of the dogs hard to pinpoint. Eli stopped. Listened. “You hear that?” he said.

Beck went down to one knee, took deep breaths. “What?” he said.

“That don’t sound right. Not ahead of us anymore. They might have crossed the river. Let’s go.”

They pushed on, running when they could. The path shouldered a long gravel bar. Eli walked out onto the bar. Stopped again. “Hear that?” he said.

“They’re on the other side of the river,” Beck said.

“That bear took ‘em across, but they’re up high, the dogs still on the track. Good boys and girls, he said. Smiled half a smile.”

“What do we do now?”

“Nothing, keep going.”

“But that bear is up high, we have to cross.”

“No, we don’t. That bear made his play, tried to lose the dogs on the river, he didn’t. Look at that mountain side, those cliffs and peaks up high. A solid wall as far as you can see. He’s not going over that. Those dogs’ll push him, he has to come back down.”

“What if he makes a stand, the dogs won’t hold him, we’re too far behind.”

“We are too far, that’s the point. He’s far ahead of the dogs. He’ll come down before they get too close. Chances are he’ll come back to this side. He knows this side of the river.”

Damian ran up. They looked at him. Sweat rolled down his face. He listened. “The bear’s on the other side of the river, he said, up there, he pointed. I can hear them, what are you waiting for?”

Beck looked at Eli.

“Go home,” Eli said. “You don’t belong here.” Eli walked off along the gravel bar. Beck followed.

Damian watched them climb the river bank then disappear. He walked along the gravel bar until shallow water rolled gentle over a fine gravel lip. A small river, 50 yards across, or so. Clear water. He sat down, began to pull off his boots. No, leave them on, can’t take a chance on cutting a foot, slipping on smooth stones barefooted. He waded in, edged along the lip. Ten yards from the other side he saw that he would have to climb up a five-foot bank, the river cutting against the shoreline. The shallow lip he waded on suddenly dropped and water rushed against his legs. He edged in, up to his knees, then his waist, nearly across he lunged for the bank, grabbed for shrubs, slipped on slick clay, fell to his front, the weight of his pack forcing him down in freezing water. Its shock grabbed at his breath, arms flailed, water churned muddy as he splashed his way to the bank then clawed through muck up to solid ground.

He cursed. Removed his boots, dumped out water, wrung out his socks. The cold air bit hard. Just keep moving, he said to himself. He slid into his pack straps, hoisted the weight to a standing position, and listened. The faint bark of a dog up the mountain slope, now further upriver. “Ok, angle up,” he said to

himself out loud. He never talked to himself, at least out loud. Well, that freezing water was a shock. “Keep moving,” he said out loud again. Damian shoved his way into thick brush, the bottom of a slide, pointed himself to where he last heard the dog’s yap.

Beck saw the wisdom of it. The bear went up the mountain slope, through the hell it meant to lose the dogs and humans. Eli and he did not. They headed straight upriver, gained steadily on the anticipated end location, to catch up to the bear when he comes down. If he comes down. Eli stopped every few hundred yards to listen. The dogs closer now, almost straight up the mountain slope. They studied the slides. Knew it would have been brutal to fight through those unsteady patches, willows and alder, thickets near impenetrable.

“See that deep rocky gorge ahead of the dogs come down from the cliffs up ahead?” Eli said.

Beck nodded.

“That bear won’t go through it, no point, he’ll walk down to the river. Should cross the river to our side about there. Let’s go.”

They walked a half hour then stood on the river’s edge and listened. A yip came from across the river. Headed this way, Beck said. He checked the sights on his gun, looked at the end of the barrel, the piece of black electrical tape still over the bore. “Let’s try to get in position,” Beck said. “The bear looks like it could cross somewhere here.”

“We’d have seen him by now.” The bear’s ahead of us, Eli said, “maybe crossed this morning early, but we gained a couple hours on him.”

The dogs filed out of scrub brush one after the other, onto a sand beach, gazed across the river at Eli and Beck comical like, not believing their own eyes.

“Here boys,” Eli yelled. They whined, pranced the shore back and forth, then the wirehair dove in and they followed as if joined together by a thread. One by one they jumped up the bank, shook water spray from wet coats, looked at Eli, then set into the forest. He left them free.

A dog suddenly yodeled and then another and another. “They’re still on the track,” Eli barked. He broke into a trot and Beck followed. The thrill of the chase spiked in Beck, could feel it run through his veins. Beck and Eli joined together like old times, blood between brothers, hunters in arms. They ran through the soft clay of a back-eddy. Eli stopped. Crouched. Placed his hand on the ground. Beck looked down. Eli’s thick hand laid in the paw print of a bear. His fingers did not touch the edges of the depression. Eli’s good eye took on a light, wide and wet as if hidden treasure discovered. “Track’s fresh,” Eli said. “Maybe an hour or two old.”

“What do you think, can we catch up?”

“We have to move, make time.”

“I don’t know how to make time more then we have been all day.”

Eli looked at his brother and nodded. “I feel it too,” he said. “We go hard for a half hour. If dogs don’t bay we’ll call ‘em in. We need the rest.”

“We do that and the bear keeps going all night. What good does that do?”

“We do what he does.”

“Go all night?”

“Follow till dark. Make a fire, warm up, something to eat. Nap for an hour or so. Then put on headlamps and head out, hold on to the dogs, stay on the track. Bears need to eat and rest same as us. We’ll make up ground. Wind still coming down the valley, at least our scent won’t push him. Let’s hope it stays that way.”

They headed out. The Blackwater valley stayed friendly. Large balsam poplar interspersed with evergreens, the forest floor as open as could be hoped for. The game trail distinct, streams that boiled down from heights settled on the valley floor then crawled into the river. They slipped on rain pants and wrapped pant bottoms tight with tape and crossed these freshets without taking in water. The dog’s voices grew faint. Grey fall skies sucked the life from the day before its time. The temperature dropped, Eli slid the control button on the dogs’ collars to Level 5, pressed buttons, kept walking. Five minutes later pressed Level 4. Ten minutes later the dogs came trotting through the woods, the wirehair and the bitch and another sided up to Eli. He knelt and scratched behind ears, pulled out a small plastic bag and took out some energy treats. Gave one to Beck. “It’s not for you,” Eli said, “it’s for little Willy there, who for some reason’s taken a shine to you.”

Little Willy looked up at Beck his tail waved happily, willing the treat from Beck’s hand into his mouth with adoration. Beck sighed, kneeled, rubbed Willy’s head, laid the treat in his palm and instantly it was scooped by sloppy lips.

“I’m surprised you never asked the dog’s names,” Eli said.

“Learned not to.”

“Eli glanced at Beck.” I see. “You need to look beyond yourself.”

Beck looked up and down the trail, at the trees. “Beyond myself?” he said.

Eli tapped his finger on the bitch’s head. “It’s what dogs was bred for, what they live for, and yes, what some die for. You and me grew up eating wild game, huntin’ and fishin’. It’s in us same as these dogs. We eat bear meat. It’s the way we live, the good food that feeds us, kept us strong. We set after a bear and things go bad and a dog dies and it’s no one to blame but the way we chose to live, have for thousands of years. Certainly not the bear to blame just being a bear. All those years alone up in that valley gives a person time to think. I’ll tell you this. What’s still left of our old world after man is done with it, what’s alive, if anything is, will live by those same rules that you and me lived by. And if dogs are there with us then by gawd they’ll live and die and hunt by man’s side as these ones are bred to do, and might very well do now.”

“Amen.”

“You want to know the others’ names now?” said Eli.

“Maybe later.”

Eli rose. “Another half hour and we stop,” he said.

“I wonder what happened to that Damian,” Beck said.

“He’s gonna learn the hard way.”

The fire cracked and popped, dogs tied to trees fed and rested. Firelight danced across dogs’ faces a specter of ancient Basenji dogs partnered with Neanderthals. Beck rested, legs crossed, his back to a smooth spruce tree trunk, branches spread out overhead. His spoon fished inside a tinfoil packet for the last of the freeze-dried lasagna, scooped it into his mouth. He dug out the down mummy bag from his pack then removed his pants and coat and wiggled in. He reached to his side and found the

45/70 and slid it close. The days now short, the sun gone early, they were set upon by penetrating cold. Beck dug a watch cap from his coat pocket, slipped it over his head, fixed his coat under his head for a pillow. He looked over at Eli who sat with his back against a tree. "I'm about done," Beck said.

Then he remembered. He sat up, stuck his arm deep in the pack, scabbled around, felt the package and pulled it out, trailed by red flagging tape. He unwrapped the paper, let it fall, held the sheathed knife in his hand. He slid the knife from its sheath. The blade glistened yellow and orange in firelight. He ran a thumbnail across the sharp edge. Slid it back into the sheath, placed in under the coat. Beck glanced over at Eli.

He watched Beck.

"Two hours at the most and we're gone," Eli said.

Beck closed his eyes. Thought of BJ, what she would be doing at this moment. Watching the news, maybe, unless it's over.....

Beck's eyes opened instantly. Pitch black but for the red glow of coals from the expired fire. Looked over at Eli, his form slumped beside the tree trunk, soft snores. Again, he heard it, he strained his ears.... footsteps, in the forest. A twig snapped. Beck's hand slipped out, grabbed hold of the gun. The steps closer. Beck pulled at the zipper with his free hand, struggled to sit. Quiet, he said to himself as panic gripped him. A scrape against a branch the edge of camp, Beck raised the gun, the sights swallowed in the dark but for the white bead. He pointed at the sound, and out it stepped. Beck's hand tensed, the front sight's bead on its bulk, the glow of the coals, his finger on the trigger. The explosion. The barrel jerked up and a scream and dogs barking in the chaos.

Eli jumped to his feet, gun pointed at the body on the ground. He lowered the gun. "For hell's sake," he said.

Damian lifted his face from the dirt. He was not shot. Rolled out from under his pack, sat up. His eyes bulbous in the red glow, his face was scratched, one ear bloodied, pants torn at the thigh. His clothes wet.

Beck's heart felt it was about to bust. "Well, if that don't beat all," he said. "You come out here all about to save a killer bear and crucify me, and all you do is try to get yourself killed. Well, that's a story we'll have to tell."

"You should have finished him," Eli said, then he looked up to the dark. Large snowflakes began to drift down, settled on the frozen ground, trees, their packs, the dog's noses. "Not good," Eli said. "Tom, get your kit together, it's time to go."

Beck slid out from his bag.

"Where you going?" said Damian. "Now? It's night."

They ignored him, gathered up and packed their gear.

Damian gathered scraps of dead branches and tossed them on the fire. Flames finally sprouted. He watched the flames grow. "I can't go, I'm frozen, beat," Damian said.

"I'll help you," Eli said. Damian's dirt-streaked face bright in the flames. "Dry yourself before you go into shock or get sick. Eat something. First light, head back out of here while you still can. If you ever come creepin' in on our camp again, you won't find my brother so charitable the next time he pulls the trigger. And I was never that charitable. That was your one free pass."

Eli lifted his pack, slipped the straps over his shoulders, untied two leashes from trees, unclipped two dogs. He gathered up the leads of the bitch and the wirehair. Flakes lazily sifted to the ground. The ground whitened. "Let's go," he said.

They walked a couple hundred yards. Eli stopped, held tight to the straining dogs. "Look," he said, "I know we're pushing it, we're not 20 anymore. But this snow changes things, if it covers the bear's tracks it covers the scent, we lose the bear. We have to go hard, really hard. But we gained on him yesterday, we could be close, closer than we think. We go hard till we get on his tracks in the snow. Then things change for the better. Unless we got a storm comin' we can stay on the tracks easy enough. We need to make our play today. Only a couple more days of dog food. You need to think like the bear. He's tired too, pushed hard, no time to feed proper. Could make a mistake."

"Could lay for us," Beck said.

"That's right. And that's his mistake. These dogs will be all over him, keep him at bay, we just need to be close enough."

Beck had other thoughts, other memories of what this bear could do, what it did do, darker than words could say. He said nothing.

They walked briskly, set a strong pace and kept it. Beck sweated up, opened his zipper and removed his watch cap and slipped the raincoat's hood over his head. Still sweated up, no avoiding it. All the while the dogs eager and no hesitation. Eli held up for a quick breather. "Something else," Eli said, "these dogs got no problem with the scent this whole time, even with this skiff of snow. That's the thing, this bears track's twice the size of a regular bear, twice the scent to go with it. Could be the difference."

They came to downed timber, slowed to go around this graveyard of fallen trees that lost the battle against stiff winds, shallow roots in damp sponge ground, their bulk crashed to the ground. Beck walked around these fallen soldiers, jumped over

them, walked along them, stepped on them, cursed when his foot slipped and a shin scraped then fell to the ground. The heavy timber kept snow off the ground. The dogs whined and pulled hard into their collars. The bitch began to yodel, the others joined in their chorus that rang through the forest.

“Trail’s hot now,” Eli said, an edge to his words Beck had not heard since he was 17 years old.”

“If that bear don’t know he was bein’ followed before, he does now,” Beck said.

Eli stopped, unclipped the leads. “Look!” He pointed to the ground. Grizzly tracks in the snow. Tracks large enough to be a Kodiak. “Get’em!” He barked, and all four dogs shot off, barking and howling, the wirehair’s low bellow set apart. “Sshshsh...” Eli said, then turned his head his good ear intent on the chorus. The sounds of the chase lifted Beck’s emotions to where they had not been since he hunted with Eli as a kid, did not expect it, did not imagine it could ever be this way again. They listened for a minute. “Ok,” Eli said, “a hot track but not so close. I’d say that bear’s at least a mile ahead, but not much further.”

The Blackwater River Valley was a timbered valley its entire way to the north end of the Owl’s Nest Range and beyond, where it curved to the west before separating to streams and streamlets headed to high places, high alpine valleys some that never felt the boot of a human. The valley floor set a table of every type of vegetation known to the area. The narrow lake where the bear lost his moose calf to the wolves was about half the way to the north end of the Owl’s Nest Range. The timber around the lake and down to the river was black spruce thick as hairs on a dog’s back over a bed of damp moss-covered ground.

Just south of the lake two mountains tight to either side of the river created a higher ground, dry pine country, open timber and firm pine needle covered ground void of heavy underbrush.

Beck and Eli stood to the south of that high ground, sat on their haunches, opened coats and shirts, steam rising from wet bodies. The bear had not wandered. The tracks straight up the valley, the dogs' voices carried straight ahead.

"I don't get it," Beck said. "It don't make sense, that bear travelling straight, he can't outrun the dogs."

"He's been running off and on for a half hour. Look at his tracks," Eli said.

Immersed in the music of the dogs, Beck had not been looking at tracks.

They forced themselves to their feet and walked on then Eli stopped again. "Shshsh," he said.

Beck heard what Eli was listening to. The dogs were off to the right, turned off the trail and headed east up the side of a mountain.

"What do we do?" asked Beck.

"They're headed up that valley," Eli pointed, this side of the mountain. "See up there, that draw goes deep, that's where he's headed."

Beck scanned the high draw and it led up to a massive snow-covered group of peaks. "Don't know if I have the energy," he said.

Eli looked at Beck. "You tired?" he said.

"No. I was tired four hours ago."

"He's on home ground now. He won't go up there without a plan. He knows where he's going and it don't make sense that he's about to turn around and come back here."

Beck dropped his pack and sat on it. "I don't know," he said.

Eli reached in his coat front and pulled out the transmitter and pressed a button. The distant chorus stopped. A lone yowl started up and Beck pressed the button again and it stopped.

"Those dogs are a mile away," Beck said.

"Five-mile range," Eli said.

"So, what now?"

"Rest, eat a little. That bear's headed up that draw. It's not snowing so hard it'll erase tracks. Twenty minutes."

Fifteen minutes later the dogs showed up. They rested another ten minutes then picked their way up to where the dogs were heard at their furthest point and struck the tracks of the dogs at the place where the dogs were turned back. The bear's tracks like plates in the snow but snowing harder now, tracks beginning to fill in. They trudged on, and up, and up. The draw narrowed, smaller evergreen and brush on both sides. Small slides from steep scree slopes with cliffs topside hemmed them in. Busted trees, branches, boulders and plate shale scattered down slide paths, victims of the punishing force of spring snow given to the force of gravity. The bear kept tight along a small stream that gurgled center of the gorge. They followed the stream itself, short spills of water into pockets like mini waterfalls, they stepped up those as ladders, walked in water or out, it made little difference.

They stood at the foot of an impasse. A chunk of mountain dumped to the stream bed, the workings of ancient geology. The stream spilled over a 20-foot wall. The bear's tracks cut left at the base of the waterfall and scrambled up the side slope then up and around. They clambered to the top of the waterfall and there

the terrain changed for the better, mountainsides less dramatic, the scree gave way to smooth slopes, the feel of grass underfoot beneath the snow. Eli held up, tossed his pack and sat on a boulder. Beck dropped his pack and sat on it. He looked up, large flakes settled on his face. He placed his hand to his forehead to shut out the snow and looked up to what could be seen through the swirling bluster. A ring of snow-capped peaks, hard ridges, steep sides, circled them as an unforgiving cul-de-sac.

“We ain’t goin’ over that,” Beck said between breaths.

“No, we ain’t, neither did the bear.”

Beck looked to the snow underfoot and realized they were no longer on bear tracks. He turned around looked to the side-hill they walked along and saw the bear tracks above. They never did come around the waterfall, but side-hilled up and up then disappeared.

\* \* \*

The bear forced himself through the snow, climbed up and up then stopped just before cresting the mountain shoulder. He stopped and turned and looked back across the tight draw to a world of snow, his perception of depth lost in a blank world of white. His chest heaved, with each breath vapour shot from nostrils like twin smoke stacks. He could not see the men and dogs. He raised his snout to changing winds that battled each other, tested the air. He could not smell them. It made no difference. He had been smelling them off and on the entire climb. He growled - anger towards the men and their dogs and their relentless pursuit, frustrated with fatigue, aches that wracked his body. Wind blasted his front as he pushed over the

ridge through drifting knee-deep snow. Once over the crest the ridge took a dive. Down the west-facing slope he slid, at times as if riding a toboggan.

\* \* \*

The men and dogs began the climb, followed the bear's wind-blown tracks along the steep slope. There was no path, feet dug in the snow, sometimes with luck, sometimes they slipped, sometimes skidded down so that they had to struggle back up a few feet. Beck went to his knees, gloved hands dug in the snow to stop his slide. His brown pack a hump on his back, he himself looking like a bear in a storm. Dizzy with exhaustion. His knees hurt. The dogs and Eli were ahead, somewhere. He forced himself up, forced his legs forward. He had reached his limit halfway up the mountain – he thought – did not have energy, a body has only so much to give. But his legs seemed capable of taking one step at a time on will power alone.

Suddenly the ground leveled, they made the crest of the ridge, at the same time a blast of cold wind stuck him. He lifted his hands to his face to block the wind, just to breathe. He stumbled into Eli and the dogs. "We're losing the tracks," Eli yelled. "The dogs'll stay on the bear but we can't stop or we'll freeze."

They slugged through knee-deep snow, climbed over a hardened drift, abruptly slid down-slope, then caught themselves and stopped. Eli looked back at Beck through the blasting snow then stepped out taking short steps straight down, sliding several feet with each step, yet he stayed on his feet. Beck lost sight of him. He wanted to follow but sat. Ice rimmed the watch cap

under his coat hood. He stamped his feet, numb from intense cold. A chill took hold and he shivered from foot to head. He felt his eyes tear and it was more than from the brutal wind. He forced himself to his feet. Beck stood up, stepped careful, then slid down and down and in a few hundred yards stopped at a boulder garden on sloped ground. He rounded a fragmented block of stone the size of a truck. Eli and the dogs stood backs to the wind.

“You ok?” Eli yelled.

Beck glanced at him then sat.

“We can’t make it in this,” Eli yelled. “We’ll freeze for sure. Follow me.” Eli walked past the stone to another large stone split in half its entire length. “Get out your fly and your stove and an extra tank,” he yelled.

They dropped their packs, then fumbled out gear, pulling strings closed with numb fingers. Eli crawled into the crack of the split stone and butted his pack against the backside of the split. Beck crawled in the other end of the split rock and placed his pack against his end of the crack, then he unraveled the fly and together they drug it over them and tucked it tight all around. They lay on their bellies, the stoves under their faces. They tried to light the stoves but even in the makeshift shelter, wind blasts blew out the thin flames. Beck searched the back side for air holes, then crammed the fly tighter yet. He clicked the igniter on the tiny stove, this time the flames caught and held. He dug a level spot for the fuel tank to sit flat, then lay over the stove, elbows in gravel his hands held up the fly, his face inches above the flame, yet he could barely feel the heat. Wind somehow still managed to toss the flames. He placed one hand at a time near what heat there was. Beck touched his face

and felt a sensation of pressure but no feeling from his frozen nose.

They lay face to face.

“How do your feet feel?” Beck said.

“What feet?”

“Same,” Beck said.

“Once our hands and heads heat up our feet will thaw,” Eli said.

They lay for an hour, the wind attacking from all sides. Eli wiggled his toes until they stung then they slowly thawed to something with feeling – burning sensations.

“Will butane fumes affect us?” Beck said.

“Not with these flames waving like they are.” Plenty of air.

“What about the dogs?”

“Don’t worry about the dogs.”

“This ain’t their first dance with Yogi,” Beck said. Then he thought about Delbert, what he would say if he saw them now.

Beck dug in his pocket for an energy bar. Tore at the wrapping with his teeth. Eli did the same.

“That wirehair could stay out in this weather all day,” Eli said.

“But he wouldn’t,” Beck said.

“No. He’s smart.”

Beck thought about it. “Why do you say that?”

“Just the way he is.”

“How do you know he’s smarter than any other of your dogs? Remember that kid lived over behind the hardware store? His dad worked that store for some time. Billy Willis or something?”

“Billy Woolsey,” Eli said.

“That’s him. Quiet-like, never said much. I believed he was the smartest kid in Grade 5. Knew so much he didn’t have to say anything about it. Just smiled smart-like. One day teacher handed back our daily spelling quiz and I got the wrong one. Four right out of 12. It was his. Being a kid I got to talkin’ it up with him and he didn’t have much to say, because he had nothing to say it with. Like drawing water from a dry well.”

“You’re saying that wirehair is like Billy?”

“No, I’m saying how do you know he ain’t?”

“Chickens,” Eli said.

“Chickens,” Beck said. “What about chickens? I’m talking about a dog.”

“Chickens,” Eli said. “Every now and then one of my chickens would go missing and all I found is feathers near where the dogs are chained. Now, all those dogs would gobble down a chicken if there’s one dumb enough to get too close. But chickens ain’t dumb, they’re smart enough to know better. So, I took notice. The dogs always laying about, dead to the world. A chicken comes close, the dog gets interested and perks up and the chicken walks off or walks around. Not the wirehair. He lays down feet toward where the chickens come around the cabin. If his back was toward them he’d never get up and turn quick enough. Now, chickens walk by but he ignores ’em, gets them to thinking chicken dinner is the furthest thing from his mind. After 20 times walking by and 20 chickens later, one gets comfortable with him, just naturally gets careless, and he knows exactly when to pounce, and poof, feathers in his mouth.”

“Chicken dinner,” Beck said. “I’d expect you’d give him what for.”

“No, don’t care to have dumb chickens on my place.”

They lay silent, warming faces and hands while the wind pounded the mountain. Coats open, steam rose from shirt fronts. Shifting position constantly the stones underneath and at their sides a discomfort.

“You must get lonely up there at times.”

Eli did not answer.

“I guess your cabin up so high on the mountain it gets mighty cold. Must get some hard winds there, too.”

“Sometimes for weeks on end,” Eli said. “Blows so hard you have to lean into the wind just to keep from falling. Get used to it. Day in, day out the chickens lean into that wind.” He paused. “Was outside one time, he said, cuttin’ firewood in that stiff wind. No choice. Suddenly that wind just stopped, and all the chickens fell over.”

Beck looked at Eli, would have smiled but for his frozen face.

“We can’t stay up here,” Eli said.

“I’m just warming up.”

“You tell me when you’re able and we’ll make for the low country. Less wind, warmer, we can build a fire. You tell me when you’re able.”

“I’m able,” Beck said.

“We got no tracks to follow now.”

A sinking feeling flooded Beck. Eli was about to head back.

“This draw just goes down the same as the other one came up, just the other side of this shoulder, down back to the river. We’ll head down and head straight to the river.”

Beck’s mind eased. “I’m thinking maybe the bear went down to the river at an angle, if he’s headed upriver anyhow. Why not take the same angle the bear probably took.”

“Probably right, but we don’t know,” Eli said. “If we hit the river straight and don’t find his tracks heading back down we know he’s up river. Should find fresher tracks as we head up. This same snow that plagues us is what helps us find him again.”

“Don’t it make you wonder?” Beck said. “Why that bear came up here at all if he intended to go back down.”

“No, I don’t. The whole point is to lose us in this storm. He might yet.”

He might, Beck thought to himself, but he don’t know the make of the man who’s following him.

They dug themselves out of the snow, creatures buried emerged like iceman renewed. The dogs also buried, their heads like periscopes in a sea of white they jumped to their feet. They plowed down-slope in the blizzard, over arctic alpine and an hour later, frozen again, they hit timber. Less snow in the forest they pushed down another hour and the slope gave way to swells, then the forest floor leveled. Eli held up. “Another half hour and we’ll hit the river,” he said, “you good for that?”

Beck waved on, too exhausted to waste breath on words.

When they heard the river it was close, its murmur somehow muffled by the snow, trees covered with it. The snow had stopped. Only a few inches on the ground in the valley bottom. The air had warmed, the evening sun’s hue fixed in grey overcast. Spruce tree branches facing the sun began to drip. Eli stopped on the riverbank, looked out across. Dogs milled about happy to be back where they belonged. He looked down on a snow-covered gravel bar. “Well, hell,” he said.

Beck walked up alongside. “I’ll be damned. Who’d of thought. Maybe they’re not his.”

“Not an ice cube’s chance in hell,” Eli said.

They walked along the forest's edge and the human tracks came up the bank from the river and they followed Damian's boot prints as they edged along up the river. A half hour upriver they smelled smoke. "Hello the fire," Eli bellowed. They walked into a break in the trees. A fire blazed in its center, a small green one-man wedge tent under two large spruce trees. Damian sat on a turned tree stump next to the fire. They walked up to the fire. No one spoke. Finally, Damian said, "What took you so long?"

Anger boiled through Beck. He stepped past Eli. "You're a damn fool. You have no idea where you even are. We'd be long gone by now and you'd be stranded if that bear hadn't took off up the mountain."

"I figured it would," Damian said.

"Shut your mouth," Eli said.

"You won't shake me, I aim to keep up. I'll get what I need, one way or the other. You want trouble, here I am."

"You know what you look like sittin' there?" said Beck.

Damian's dark complexion had paled from exhaustion, someone who'd suffered the elements. "I look like someone sittin' by a fire in a free country," Damian said.

"You look like one big pile of trouble, fixin' to get into more trouble."

"It's a free country, you can move on if you like."

"I told you to shut your mouth," Eli said as he stepped to Damian. Damian's right hand hidden by the stump lifted and the barrel of a rifle slid across his lap his hand on the stock and finger on the trigger.

"Try me," Damian said.

In an instant Beck brought his gun to point on Damian's chest. "Don't be the fool you are. Put that damn thing away. Hope to hell you don't have need for it."

Damian smiled a hollow smile, his finger slid from the trigger.

"Let's go build our camp," Beck said.

They set to work, Eli tied dogs and Beck fixed the lean-to. Eli snapped off handfuls of dead under-branches and dragged lobstersticks leaned against spruce trees then started a fire. It roared within minutes. They stripped off wet clothes, slipped into their one extra set. Beck put a billy pot to boil while Eli fed the dogs. Night had fallen, stars backlighted behind breaks in the grey/black skies, a full moon cast eerie shadows on the snow, fire illuminated steaming clothes slung on poles like haunted visitors from Hades. Eli walked off. Beck poured water into tin foil freeze-dried pouches and sat watching steam rise. Eli walked back into the ring of light dragging a log to sit on.

"I got two meals," Beck said, "one spaghetti and meat sauce, one beef stroganoff. You pick."

"You pick."

"I prefer beef stroganoff."

"I prefer spaghetti."

They ate.

"Nearly a full moon," Beck said.

"Someone might say that bear would travel the whole night, but he won't."

Beck waited for him to continue.

"He needs to eat, even if its old skunk cabbage along the river."

"Seen lots of that," Beck said.

“We leave before first light.”

“One good thing about huntin’ in October,” Beck said. “You can set by the fire for two hours thinkin’ about life then go to bed and it’s only nine o’clock. Eight hours sleep and it’s only five in the morning.”

“Count on four hours sleep. It’s a full moon, we can see all night.”

They sat for two hours and thought about life; the way life should be, the way it was, how they were not one and the same, how they probably never were and never would be.

“I don’t have a good feelin’ about that man,” Beck said. “He don’t set right with me.”

“I’d say you was in touch with your feelings.”

“It’s that damn camera stuck to his head. I’d about like to rip it off and throw it in the river.”

“What’s the world comin’ to?” said Eli.

“I don’t know, I truly don’t. Seems to me it’s about technology. It’s caught up to us, then it passed us, now it owns us. I truly feel sorry for young’uns these days. A kid’s whole perspective of things, including what they’re worth as human beings, comes off a phone or computer of some sort. What have we all bought into, Eli?”

“What we all bought into is what we can’t buy our way out of.”

“I hope to God we instilled some common sense in Ellie. Seems to me BJ and me did, at least we helped.” Beck said. Then realized what he had said and regretted it. Ellie - who he helped raise, enjoyed every moment, her entire life cut off from her own true grandfather and him cut off from her. And him, his own brother, sitting next to him.

“I’m sorry,” Beck said, “didn’t mean to say it that way.”

“No other way you could say it,” Eli said. “Let’s stay focused on what we got to do.” He stood and walked to the lean-to and crawled in his bag.

Beck gathered clothes from the drying sticks and stuffed them in two black plastic garbage bags. He crawled in his sleeping bag, found his headlamp under his rolled coat then dug the inReach from a side pocket of his pack, turned it on, three bars, he texted – 20 miles up Blackwater River. All good. No bear yet. On tracks. Hope you ok. Love you, Beck.

Beck opened his eyes to the dark smells in his sleeping bag. He pulled the folds back, looked out to the night and saw a fire. Damian’s fire. He cranked his head and Eli sat beside a second fire behind the lean-to. He dressed and stuffed his bag in the pack. He pulled the stuffed bag back out of his pack, stuck his hand in and scrabbled around inside then pulled out the knife. Took it to the fire and squatted, warmed his hands, one hand holding the knife. Eli looked at him, looked at the knife. “I got coffee in the pot, scrambled eggs in the pouch,” Eli said.

“Is that the knife Ellie used on the bear, Grandpa’s knife?” Eli said.

“The same,” Beck said.

“How’d you come by it?”

“Had it all these years. In a drawer.”

“How’d you come by it now.”

“I don’t know, Ellie somehow put it on the chopper. Eli,” Beck said, “this knife is rightfully yours. Grandpa give it to you. After what happened that day, I, I just ended up with it. Should have given it back to you years ago. I don’t rightly know why I

didn't. I guess I just couldn't face up to it, face up to you, after what I done."

"Wasn't your fault," he said.

"It was, and you know it. I know it."

"Water under the bridge," Eli said.

"No. Some things is just too big to flow under that bridge." Beck looked into the flames then looked at Eli. "If I was man enough I would have come up to you and just plain asked your forgiveness. But then, if I was man enough, things wouldn't have turned out the way they did. I would have picked up that knife and did what Luke did, and him with his bare hands."

"If you'd done that you wouldn't be here now."

"Maybe. Or maybe you would have had a family by your side all these years." Beck regretted saying it, did not know why he said it. "You was always better than me at everything," Beck said. "Sports, huntin', fishin', socializin', girls, school. Hardly a day goes by I don't run what happened through my mind. It just runs like a movie every time it wants to. I deserve to carry the guilt."

"You don't have to keep rolling in the mud because of what happened nearly 40 years ago."

"That's what I told Ellie. What I'm trying to say is.... It's not just what the bear did. It's me, Eli, what I did, what I felt when it happened. Why part of me held back when that bear was on you. Me standing there with this knife in my hand. Not just fear I froze from, but what I been asking myself for 38 years, that I stood by partly from jealousy, that you was getting what you had coming to you, for being a better man than me."

Beck paused, the knife limp in his hand. "You remember learnin' about Cain and Abel in Bible study. I guess I got some

of Cain in me, don't know how else to say it. What I done I can't forgive myself for, don't deserve to be forgiven for."

"We were kids," Eli said. "Don't beat yourself up on my account."

"We was kids, but you tell me how much a different person you are now than when you was a kid, deep down inside. I tried that, convincing myself that I got the ability to better myself, be smarter and better now that I'm older. Then something happens and I react much the same as I would have when I was 20. Layin' in bed I know who's ever up there lookin' down at me sees the same person he saw when I had this knife in my hand, and didn't use it."

"Tom. Who's ever looking down at you forgave you many years ago, and so did the one looking straight across at you. You just got to learn to forgive yourself. We might react the same as when we was kids, *inside*, but what comes out isn't the same, don't make the same choices, thank God for that."

Beck looked at his brother. "I guess there is some truth to that. I got the ability to forgive others, should be able to do it for myself. I just don't know what that looks like."

"Look, if you were me and spent your life livin' in a remote cabin in a lonely valley, you'd have come to make peace with yourself. No other way around it. No one else to live with besides yourself so you got to forgive yourself, your sins, or you'd go crazy."

"Maybe, maybe it's easier up there to forgive your sins, maybe you got less opportunity to pile them up, livin' up there."

"Maybe we should trade places and find out. How about when we get out of here you move up to my cabin for a year and

I take over your house. As long as BJ lets me crawl in alongside her.”

Eli looked at Beck and grinned. Beck grinned back.

“Enough of this chatter,” Eli said. “I guess if we can call each other “brother” that’s a good enough place to start.”

“Brother,” said Beck.

“Brother,” said Eli.

“Eli,” Beck said, “I want you to have it. It’s rightfully yours.” He handed the knife to Eli. Eli pulled the knife from its sheath, turned the blade. It felt good, like it belonged. “It’s been a lot of years since I held this knife in my hand, never forgot the feel of it though,” Eli said. He slid the knife back into its sheath, lifted his coat, unlatched his belt, slid the belt through the sheath onto his right side then latched his belt then pulled down his coat.

They packed up.

Damian sat by the fire and as they walked by he fit both his headlamp and his GoPro over his watch cap, looked like a four eyed monster, then shouldered his pack and grabbed his rifle and stepped out behind them. Eli stopped. Let Damian catch up. “What cartridge you got in that thing?” he said.

“30-06,” Damian said.

“That’s not enough, not for a grizzly this size.”

“I’m not here to shoot a bear, I’m here to see you two slaughter one, to let the world see. This gun will kill a bear if I want it to.”

“It’s not about killing a bear, it’s about stopping one, a big one. Stick to killing poor villagers,” Eli said and walked off.

There were no bear tracks and no reason to turn out the dogs. They picked their way along the valley bottom, sometimes

using the river bars and banks as a path, all eyes searching the snow for signs of a track. Stars faded and trees and mountains defined themselves as the first rays of sun they had seen for three days pierced the forest like laser beams setting lucky trees and grass to shine. Mountains like castles paraded along either side of the valley, sent hard shoulders down to reach the river, but none did. A couple of hours into the day the snow began to melt.

They walked through a fairytale forest, huge fir trees with great canopies that sheltered a private world below. Melting snow kicked up underfoot, grass laid under snow like a carpet. Beck thought leprechauns could live here. Large mushrooms with thick white trunks and orange muffin tops scattered about for those leprechauns to sit on. Eli picked up one of the mushrooms and broke open the orange top. It was wormy. No supper here, he said to Beck. They slipped out of packs and rested. Beck was relieved to sit, a deep fatigue plagued him since the storm, having pushed himself beyond what he ever thought he had. He could not shake it, did not expect to, only prayed he would last just long enough.

Damian sat a few yards off to the side.

“He didn’t cross the river. Not yet,” Eli said.

“Maybe he doesn’t plan to,” Beck said.

“See that steep ridge coming in from the right?” Eli pointed ahead. “If we don’t cut his track when we get there we’ll head up to the base of that ridge, not more than a half mile from the river. There’s no reason that bear would head up this big valley by walking over that steep ridge. We should cut his track, if not, we have to backtrack along the base of the mountains to see what happened.”

“Maybe he holed up,” Beck said.

“Not likely, not with dogs and us after him, not so soon.”

“I’ll go,” Damian said.

“Go where?” Eli said.

“Head to that shoulder, see if there’re tracks.”

“And what’ll you do if you find them?”

“Come back and tell you.”

“And we’ll be here a sittin’ and whittlin’ sticks waitin’ on you,” Beck said.

Damian did not speak.

They walked on.

“He ain’t a quitter,” Beck said quietly to Eli as they walked.

“Don’t go getting soft on him,” Eli said.

“I won’t,” Beck said.

“What he is, you want no part of.”

They walked tight to the river to a point where the steep mountain ridge came closest to the river. Eli turned off east headed directly toward the ridge. The snow had completely melted in places, the forest floor a patchwork. Beck knew without being told that the chance of finding the bear grew slimmer by the hour, and if they didn’t find tracks in the next half mile, their chances of ever finding the bear were slim. They walked carefully, examining what remained of the snow and any sign of a print – bent grass or weeds, a scratch in thin grass or moss.

Damian swung wide and searched hard. He *had* to find that bear, the damn bear that Clive was so wrapped up in, what he got everyone wrapped up in. Sitting there on his throne, he had no idea what Damian went through to get the job done. Like a gorilla thumping his chest, all Clive Booker thought about was

power. “I got my reputation at stake,” Damian said out loud, his face to the ground, searching. “He’ll pay, big time.”

A thought crossed Damian’s mind, he wondered why he did not think of it sooner. *Clive wants that bear dead, no matter what, that’s what he said, even if I have to do it. So, what if I do? What if I make sure and do it? What would Clive pay me to keep my mouth shut, from telling it to the world!* Damian allowed himself a rare smile.

The big wirehair and the bitch had walked along all day as if on a walk in the park. Willy and the other male spent most of their time up front, but cheated, entertained themselves by being distracted, turned off to sniff whatever, piss on it if it was worthy. Willy sniffed the female’s butt. She snapped at him. He jumped away then ran ahead, the other male followed. They disappeared around some brush. Eli watched them go. Bringing them back was as simple as pressing a button. Eli walked past the patch of brush – no dogs. He stopped. “Here boys,” he said. Nothing. Then a bark, then a yodel more like a howl, then both of them yapping, their voices headed away.

“Well son-of-a-gun,” Eli said. His hands shook as he unlicked the wirehair and the bitch. “Sic’em!” he said, and they took off. Beck and Eli looked at each other as if stunned. Beck looked where Eli stood. A patch of snow and huge prints, the edges sharp, still crumbling. “By God,” he said. They glanced at one another then left in a trot.

“Ok, farm boys,” Damian said as he ran to catch up. “Let’s see who’s the big dog.”

The unexpected yammering of the hounds so close was a jolt. The bear turned his head to his back-trail then swung his massive head forward at the same time as his front feet flew off

the ground in a gallop. He ran steady, ran where instinct took him, ran even though penetrating hunger gnawed at his gut, as it had for days. He did not run out of fear but ran with hatred for what pursued him, ran for time, time to decide where to run, to set a plan, a trap, for the hated dogs and men. It was instinct that pointed him in a familiar direction. The thick black spruce were close. That would slow the men. If the dogs got to him first, he could handle them. Once in the spruce thickets he knew the paths to the narrow lake, where he was headed in hope of finding a moose to kill, at least some good patches of skunk cabbage and fiddlehead ferns, even if they were over-mature. But he had not eluded the dogs after all.

He made the dense stands of black spruce and wove over thin dirt paths toward the narrow lake then cut over sphagnum moss. The chorus of the dogs always there, closer now, but he still had time to pick his place of ambush.

A familiar scent hit his nose as a blast from the ground. He stopped, put his nose to the dirt, inspected the terrain, but there were no tracks to see, only monotonous humps of moss speckled with Labrador tea. He walked swiftly, followed the smell. It curved to the left, to the west end of the narrow lake, back toward the river. He kept up the brisk pace, always on the scent - the scent of another bear - a boar grizzly.

The dogs paced along the bear's track with the single-minded determination of all scent hounds. The spoor was sharp and consistent. They let loose with howls and yowls and barks, the inflection and frequency of their voices bred through generations, what told hunters how fresh the spoor, the location of the pursuit, if the game was still running or at bay. This bear still ran, the dogs gaining. The dogs single file yet indifferent

about who led the pack and who was last, but often the dominant bitch blessed with the best nose led the pack. They ran through the open undergrowth into mixed forest then into dense black spruce over thick sphagnum moss, the scent of the bear mingled with a heavy bearing of damp decay. If they had taken the time to look they would have seen the still waters of the west end of the narrow lake.

The bitch stopped. She tested the air then circled one direction then the other, nose to the ground. The two males followed suit, keeping pace but searching as if something lost, or something in question. The wirehair stopped to her right. Sniffed the ground, looked to his right, walked off to the right, put his nose to the ground again. Looked into the crowded forest. He glanced back at the bitch and her followers but they had trotted off, once again had taken up the pace and headed west toward the river. The wirehair took a few more steps, put his nose to the ground. Followed the scent. It stayed strong. He barked, looked again to where the dogs disappeared, gave out a long mournful yowl that ended in a low moan that to a human would speak of loneliness. He trotted out, nose to the ground.

They walked fast and ran when they could. The sound of the dogs clear but further and further. They were swallowed by scrub black spruce and confined to woven dirt paths imprinted with moose tracks, then led over moss, legs burning from the run now pained struggling in the sphagnum. Silver water appeared to their right. Wait, Beck said, his breath coming in rasps. Damian bent over for breaths behind Beck. I know this place, Beck said. It's a small narrow lake. Flew over it once or twice. Up high, back to the east, is a small pass and the other side a big basin,

where the bear took us the first time. They caught their breath, focused on the effort to hear the dogs.

As if from hope a yodel rang clear through the timber.

Eli, about to speak, stopped. "What was that?" He listened, strained to listen. There it was, a low howl, a bark. But not in the same direction! "Keep up," he said. They trotted off. In a hundred yards the water blinking through trees gave way to a murky sedge fen at the end of the lake. Eli stopped again. The dogs chorus lit up to the west, toward the river. Damian began to walk in that direction. "Wait!" Eli barked, "quiet!" They stood at attention. Beck thought he heard an odd sound like a lonely howl.

"You hear that?" Eli said.

"Over that way," Beck said and pointed north across the end of the lake.

"Damn", Eli said.

"What?" Beck said.

The wirehair is off on his own.

"What happened?" Beck said.

"That damn bear. He took us to where there's other bears, got his track mixed up with them."

"What now?"

"We got no choice, going one way or the other is too much a gamble. We're close, real close - just which way is the right way. Drop your pack," Eli said as he dumped his to the ground. "Easy to find them here later. Take your gun and a bar or two. We have to go for it. Now!"

"Which way do we go?"

"Both."

"Both?"

“You head out with the three dogs straight to the river. You got him pinned. The bear ain’t far. I’ll go after the wirehair, got no choice.”

“I don’t like it,” Beck said. “We got three dogs now instead of four, and you got one. Don’t sound right to me.”

“You want to quit? Just say the word.”

“No.”

“It’s not right but there is no other way. That wirehair is worth three of the others, he can hold a bear himself, done it before. I hear shooting I’ll call in the wirehair and head your way. You do the same. Leave the packs. They’ll be easy enough to find here. Now we run.”

What about him? Beck nodded toward Damian sitting several yards off. He stood and walked towards Beck.

“What about him, he ain’t coming with me,” Eli said.

“I’ll go where I want,” Damian said.

“Not with me you won’t,” and Eli grabbed his gun and ran off, around the end of the lake to the north-east, to where he heard the moaning yowl. Beck dropped his pack, stood, then bent over the pack and removed the inReach and stuck it deep in his pant pocket then took off toward the river. Damian stood for a moment, looked in both directions.

Beck made the river, now a pleasant fine gravel stream having lost a dozen feeder streams below. Mountains now tight to the west side of the river. As he ran he caught the sounds of music dear to a hound-man’s ears. He stood on the riverbank and listened. The yodeling came from straight across the river, the ragged cliff high above acted as a megaphone that amplified the chorus and sent Beck’s adrenaline skyward. The dogs were somewhere on the brushy slope below the cliff. He plunged into

water up to his knees then halfway across he turned to see Damian's surging across the river behind him. An outburst of baying erupted from the slope, yodels exchanged for growls and snarls and howls filled with excitement. And Beck suddenly a younger man, back to a time and place he thought was left behind but was just under the surface waiting to bust out.

He charged across. Into the brush, herbaceous plants high as his waist then into tall alder and Damian crashing behind him and the brawl just up ahead. He stopped and checked his gun and slipped off the safety and charged through a wall of willow and into service berries to his waist. There they were. Dogs and bear in a raging battle, the bear lunging and swatting, the dogs circling and biting and snapping. The rifle jumped to Beck's shoulder. The gun's sights erratic. He calmed himself and drew a bead - then lowered the gun. Silver tipped hairs. The bear's back flush with silver tipped hairs!

Not the same...

Damian charged past Beck, his shoulder knocking Beck into bushes. Beck lunged to his knees, no... don't...

Boom!

The blast next to Beck's ear was deafening. He jumped to his feet and drove at Damian who crashed to his side. It's not the same bear! Beck yelled, then turned to the bear and brought up his gun ready for a charge.

The bear thrashed on the ground. Dogs snarled and yiped and dove in snapping and biting at legs, paws, hams, as the bear twitched in the brush, no longer in control of its faculties, his life's blood spilling and grass and plants splattered red.

Damian stood. His eyes ablaze. "I got him!" He cried.

“You sonofabitch, that’s not the one we need. You shot the wrong bear!”

Beck pulled two leads from his coat pocket and snapped them on the bitch and the older male and pulled them snapping and snarling off the bear and tied them. He stood at the fallen bear, its belly exposed to the sky. “Geesus,” he said, then bent down and took hold of an object. He followed a strap around the bear’s chest. This bear’s got a camera on him, one of the study bears, Beck said. He removed his hunting knife from its belt sheath and cut black nylon straps around the bear’s neck and chest and put the small camera in his pocket. He stood.

“I’ll take that,” Damian said with his hand open, his gun held in the other hand.

Beck stepped toward Damian, looked him in the eye, and in a blink of that eye the butt stock of his rifle came around full force to the side of Damian’s head. He crumpled, rolled on the ground, held his head and moaned. Beck picked up Damian’s rifle, jerked open the bolt. The brass casing spun then bounced then Beck picked the brass off the grass and put it in his coat pocket. He released the clip and slipped it in the other pocket. He bent and dug through Damian’s pockets and found four more rounds. He stood. “You can follow or stay here for all I care,” he said then he turned to take up the dogs and leave.

A rifle shot clapped in the distance. “Lord no,” he said, then ran.

The bear skirted the lake on moose trails then worked his way through the skinny-trunked trees up a steady slope in a direction just north of the mountain pass to the great basin. He did not have the energy to climb up to the pass. And the dense spruce did not suit him. The humans would expect an ambush

there and trees were too close together to maneuver when the time came to fight off the dogs, if they caught him, so he trotted and loped up the steady incline into open pine forest. He ran past a clump of brush then circled back and lay on his belly behind the small thicket. The sporadic barking drew closer. A low, deeper bark than he had ever heard. Then howls that dropped low like a wolf's mournful howl, not like any yapping, yowling hound he had ever heard.

Eli ran toward where the wirehair's last barks came from. He ran on a moose trail headed east along the north side of the narrow lake. He knew the howl came from deeper in the woods so after a couple of hundred yards he angled left over moss and through thick black spruce that slowly gained elevation then gave way to spruce trees then into open pine with isolated alder thickets. He stopped, gathered his breath and himself. He did not hear the dog. He looked around, looked for the sun. Was he turned around, his directions confused?

Suddenly, like a battle between big dogs, an eruption of snarls and woofs broke out ahead. Eli checked his lever action, shoved the safety, cocked the hammer. Then again all was silent. He knew the dog had caught up with the bear and that the bear broke loose and once again was on the run. Eli ran straight toward where the battle had been and ran over needled soil tore up from claws. He kept on through the clear forest then suddenly stopped. Amazed. The wirehair was running toward him through the scattered pine. An impossible thing. Eli hesitated, then walked past a bush toward the dog. What went wrong?

A movement from his side. Eli's gun at his hip. He spun and the rifle blasted, he was slammed and hit the ground. Stunned, he felt teeth in his backside then they let go and the dog's and

bear's ferocious growls and brush rattled. Eli got to his knees, the dog and bear feinting with each other, the dog dashing in and biting and the bear slashing. He saw the size of the bear and his heart dropped. It was impossible. Then he saw his gun only feet away and he crawled for it. He saw the dog leap as if sailing, then land on the bear's back, his jaws latched to the bear's spine. The bear spun and the dog locked on then the bear rolled and the dog went under, then reappeared flat on the ground. He rose but staggered and the bear spun and jumped at the dazed dog. The wirehair sidestepped but the bear's paw lashed out and four-inch claws raked flesh. The dog yelped, then the other paw slammed him into a pile on the ground. Eli's hand grabbed the gun and he brought it up as quick as he could but the bear anticipated the move and with the dog out of the way, he charged. The sight of such a massive beast its broad head and cruel dark pig's eyes froze Eli. Hope vanished and he fell and curled in a fetal position, fingers intertwined behind his neck, braced for the blow. The bear pounced and bit into his shoulder. Pain shot through him. The stench of the bears putrid breath. The bear shook him and agony wracked his upper body. The bear let go.

All was still. Eli opened his eyes, his face nearly touched the bear's shaggy foot. The bear did not move for a moment, then did, he sunk teeth into Eli's lower leg. Eli closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, the only way he could tolerate the pain without screaming. The bear's jaws squeezed harder and harder then held steady until he and Eli together heard bones crack. Then the bear let go. Silence. He heard the padding of feet. Eli opened his eyes. The bear walked to the inert form of the wirehair. The bear sniffed the dead dog. Looked about, then walked out of Eli's field of view.

Eli lay still for what seemed forever, what was all of five minutes. Slowly, his right hand slid from its position on his neck, slowly down, eased silently along his side, down to the knife. His hand gripped the handle, pulled slowly...and the blow hit him. He skid and rolled on the ground and the bear pounced again and grabbed the same chewed shoulder and shook violently. Eli screamed and kicked at the bear, the bear slapped his feet aside then bit his buttocks and Eli felt the warmth of wet liquid on his rear. He knew it was his own blood. He lay face down in the dirt. Did not move, his will draining along with hope. The paw of the bear suddenly pressed on his back, stayed there. Eli lay motionless. Then the pressure came off his back. The padding of feet as they moved off. Eli did not move but for minute movements of fingers and toes, eyes. They seemed to work. He lay still, felt blood trickling, gathering in clothing, and felt faint from its loss, or from shock, he knew not which. He lay for a long time. Then a scratching sound. Sticks dragged, twigs snapped. He felt something on his back, like sticks and twigs and pine needles. And they were. And more of the same.

The bear was dragging debris and piling it on him. He was burying his kill. Then all was silent. Eli opened his eyes and peered through the latticework. The bear stood over him. Blood dripped, but not from Eli. There was blood on the ground, under the bear. It dripped steady. He had not missed the bear, his bullet hit, but not well enough.

Eli waited, and waited. He knew he could wait only so long. Blood that trickled down his shoulder and back and legs had to be stopped or shock would claim him. Eli felt himself fading, fought to stay conscious. Yet still he waited. He had to move. His body wracked in pain and stiff from being locked into one

position. It was unbearable. He slid his hand with the knife up toward his face, slightly shifted his legs. Pain wracked his shoulder and leg. And then a growl, rushing feet pounded the earth. And the bear's claws raking the brush, tossing off the debris piled on Eli. Jaws clenched on his thigh then hauled back and Eli was pulled from his shallow grave then dragged along the ground. The bear dropped him. Eli heard scratching sounds then the movement of dirt, rumbling and moaning as the bear worked. Eli opened an eye. The bear scratched out a hole as if a dog digging for a bone. Eli's grave. The bear dug the branches and debris from the original site near to the new one.

The bear's jaws clamped onto his thigh again and hauled him to the hole, dropped him in the shallow grave not deep enough to cover him. The bear shoved dirt from the sides and put his back to Eli and pawed at the dirt like a dog and Eli lay on his back closing his eyes as dirt flew over him. It scattered over his body. The bear dragged a large dead branch over Eli then stood over his work. Eli opened his eyes again. They watered and he blinked from pain and debris. He looked up at the underside of the bear's chest. The knife was still clenched in his hand. He had one chance, if any. Eli shifted his body, cocked his arm, drove the knife up with all the effort he had. The bear roared, spun and reared on hind legs. Blood flowed from the gash, the knife fell to the ground, the bear unsure what had happened. It looked at his buried prey, then tore at branches and dirt, but stopped short of Eli's flesh. The bear turned and stood on its hind legs.

A chorus of hound's voices flew through the forest. Dogs busted from trees and they surrounded the bear in a chaotic flurry. He swatted and lunged, they dashed and nipped, and they

drove each other wild with fury. The bear gave ground, backed up past the premature grave, gave ground. He felt the same anger when he gave ground to the wolves but the colours of the world duller, his roar climbed slowly from a dry throat. Around and around they went, the bear losing power. He stood on hind legs and growled. A human charged from the forest, the hateful stick in his hand. The bear charged, the stick bellowed he felt a blow then he bowled the man over. The man lay on the ground. The bear held him down with a paw then clenched jaws on his head. The man flailed arms and legs, then dogs went into a frenzy, their fangs raked the bear's hams, he dragged the man by his foot then dropped him and spun to battle the dogs, and as he did he backed up over his enemy.

Beck felt teeth grind against his skull, gagged by foul breath and greasy slobber. Then suddenly was let go. Blood streamed over his face and in his eyes. Disoriented, he shoved his legs forward, crawled away, then bear's teeth clamped on his foot and dragged him, but let go. The dogs' clamour and assault so violent, Beck's own blood spiked with adrenaline and Beck, beyond himself with shock, clambered onto knees, foot dragging, out of the fray again. The dogs at the bears front the bear backing up to Beck. He hit the dirt bare hands splayed in the dirt he felt something. Fingers closed on a handle. The bear over him he looked up to the bears chest he tensed and screaming inside drove the knife up behind the bear's leg with all he had. Blood spurt like a gusher, its spray all over the ground and Beck and he knew he had hit home. He rolled to his belly and placed his hands behind his neck and lay still and by the time he did, the din had died. Dogs growled and whined over the carcass.

Beck rolled to his stomach and pushed himself up to sit. He blinked, rubbed a hand over his eyes. Blinked again. “Eli,” he tried to say, but his voice cracked. The dogs worried over the dead bear. He saw the wirehair. Dead. He crawled toward the dog then saw a hand. Please, no, he said to himself. He crawled over to the hand, shoved away branches. Dirt and cloth in a shallow hole. Eyes blinked up at Beck like cats-eye marbles. “Eli,” Beck said, this time getting the word out. He pulled branches off Eli and grabbed hold best he could and pulled. Eli responded and Beck slid his battered form out of the hole. Beck’s hands covered in Eli’s blood and his own held him close and cried.

“Brother,” Eli mumbled.

Beck dug his hand into his pocket, pulled out the inReach, fumbled with hands greased in blood and shoved the SOS switch. He began to work, took off his coat, his shirt, his undershirt, put the two outer layers back on, then tore strips from his undershirt using the knife. He bound Eli’s bleeding wounds as tight as he could. Blood had already begun to clot. Some seeped through. He pressed a section of T-shirt to his own head, held it tight, took stock of his foot. There was little bleeding there. “C’mon,” he said to no one, don’t let me down now. Eli moved his arms, his legs, rolled his head side to side. Tried to speak.

“Shshsh”, Beck said, “help is on the way. You hang in there, brother.” Beck took Eli’s hand, held it tight.

\* \* \*

His cell phone rang. “Eakin’s air service,” he said.  
“Brody, this is Officer Albert John.”

“Hey Albert.”

“Where are you right now?”

“Just fueled up the Bell 505, got some oil and gas gents here about to take to site.” He smiled at the small group of men assembled in his office, dressed in field khakis and denim, packages and cases at their feet.

“No, you’re not,” said Albert John.

# CHAPTER 13

Three of them hovered over Beck's face. The doctor in a white smock and two nurses in blue scrubs. All with face masks. An anesthetist sat on a stool off to the side. The doctor sighed and placed a retractor and blade on a stainless-steel tray. Cleaning and trimming done, the doctor said, "Iodophor and gauze, please."

Nurse one handed over a small drip bottle and cotton gauze. The doctor soaked the gauze and wiped face wounds free of debris, then wiped skull wounds, the scalp already shaved, wounds already red/brown from the disinfectant. The doctor looked up at a clock.

"It's taking longer than we expected," nurse two said.

"Always does with these types of wounds. The time it takes to clean and disinfect," the doctor said.

"Bear wounds," nurse one said.

"Bear wounds, dog bites," the doctor said. "Sutures please, and a half-circle needle."

Nurse two handed over the needle and sutures. The doctor picked up the retractor and pinched tissue, then slipped the needle through skin. The nurses looked on.

"I hope you don't have plans for dinner the next two hours," he said.

“Six puncture wounds,” nurse one said, as if they could not see for themselves.

“That other man, he just came out of surgery,” nurse two said. “Six hours.”

No one commented.

“They’re brothers, both of them mauled by the same bear, she said. The other brother already had a badly disfigured face from a different time.”

“Really?” the doctor said as he worked. “That man was mauled twice?”

“It doesn’t seem right, that it could happen twice to the same person,” nurse one said.

“There’s media in the waiting room,” nurse two said.

“Why?” the doctor said.

“Oh, you never heard? These are the men from that bear story on the news, from that little town in the mountains. Remember the boy who died fighting a bear off of his girlfriend?”

“Oh, I did hear about that. Two of them mauled by the same bear? Isn’t that the one the Global Wildlife Federation is involved in?”

“The same,” nurse two said.

“Seems to me someone needed to be a better shot,” the doctor said. The two nurses looked at each other.

“Well, I don’t understand what a man will go through to kill a bear,” nurse one said.

\* \* \*

Ellie, Kate, and BJ sat in chairs lined up along the side of Beck's hospital bed. Beck's skull and half his face wrapped with a bandage. His mouth free to talk, his face shades of black, blue, olive green, nearly unrecognizable from swelling. His left lower leg bandaged. Beck turned his head, his words came slow, between breaths.

"Must be a celebrity, got a room to myself," he said. The words hurt. He looked at Ellie, her pregnancy showing. She placed her hand over her belly. "Don't worry sweetheart, come back tomorrow, we'll polka," Beck said.

She dropped her eyes. "Ok grandpa," she said.

"Tom," BJ said, "doctor said the surgery went well."

Beck looked at BJ then turned his head away. "I'm sorry," he said."

"You just get better. We need you."

"How's Eli?" Beck said.

"It was a long surgery, six hours," she said. "Doctor said it went well as could be expected, that he's conscious. Doctor said he's stable, said the wounds are bad but no reason he can't recover from them, expects he will. But Tom, he hasn't spoke a word since he come out of surgery."

Beck looked to the ceiling.

"Dad," Kate said. "Mom's right, we need you. We'll be here until you can travel. Doctor said you can be transferred to Greenville hospital in a few days."

They sat in silence. Beck noticed a large bouquet of colourful flowers.

"Those from you?" he said.

"We didn't know what flowers you liked, so we bought 'em all," BJ smiled.

“Never told you my favourite kind.” Beck forced a puffed smile. It hurt.

“Gabriel is here, he wants to talk with you. He’s been sitting in the waiting room since this morning. You want we can send him in, or not, or later.”

“He drove to Vancouver?” Beck said.

“Came with us,” Kate said.

Beck thought. He looked at Ellie. He studied Kate. “Ok,” he said.

They sat silent for a few minutes. Then the girls talked about the city, about the rainy October weather, about the traffic. “We better go see Eli,” BJ said.

“Go. I’ll be here.”

“We’ll be back soon, you can’t get rid of us that easy.”

Beck watched them leave.

BJ made the door then stopped, faced Beck. I meant to tell you. That man that was with you. That GWF man. No one knows what become of him. I’m telling you this, Tom, because others will be asking you. Real soon I expect, there’s news people in the waiting room, and outside.

They walked into his room. He lay on his back, his long sandy hair washed clean, his face up, eyes open but he did not acknowledge them. Eli’s head uncovered, his good side facing them. She could see it now, how when they were young he resembled, to her, General Custer. She had teased him at times, calling him the General. Eli’s shoulder and torso were heavily wrapped, his leg in a cast, elevated. They sat still for a few minutes.

“Eli, the doctor said the surgery went well,” BJ said. “You have lots of wounds, but nothing that can’t heal.”

He did not respond. “We’re all here. Me, Kate, Ellie.”

His head did not move but his eyes shifted to look at them, then back as before.

BJ looked at Kate. Kate’s eyes glassed over. She pulled a tissue from her coat pocket, gave it to Kate. “Maybe we haven’t been much of a family,” BJ said, “but we are. We want you back home, make up for things, different this time Eli.”

They sat silent for several minutes, each immersed in their own thoughts.

“Your dogs are with us at home. Grandpa is feeding them. Doing him good, he misses the hounds. Caught your chickens too, put them in cardboard boxes and brought ‘em home. That was fun. Got them into grandma’s old chicken coop. Grandpa fixed the door. We don’t want you to worry about anything.” BJ shifted closer to his side, took Eli’s hand in hers. “Eli, papa made a room for you at the home place. Your old room. For now, until you feel up to going back to your cabin. Papa wants you with him. It would do him good.”

They sat for a few more minutes then stood and looked down at Eli. A distant look in his eyes. They quietly left the room.

Gabriel entered Beck’s room. “Mr. Beck,” he said.

Beck slowly turned his head.

The sight of Beck, his face. Gabriel needed to sit. He swallowed, collected himself.

Beck tried to turn to his side toward Gabriel, his face twisted with pain. Managed a quarter turn then held up.

“Tom, sir,” Gabriel said. “I appreciate you seeing me.” Gabriel waited. “Sir, I thought you would like to know some things, what Albert John and Lewis want me to tell you. Did you

know? They're the ones that flew in there to get you, along with the first responders."

"I know," Beck said. Pain ran through Beck's skull with each word spoken.

Gabriel nodded. "They can't find the GWF man. Seems to have disappeared. They sent out two search parties last I heard. Albert John and Lewis and me, we don't think he went missing. We think he hiked out. They found your two packs and brought them out."

"Three," Beck said,

"Three?"

"Three packs... together."

"Ok, so that says it all, he has his pack. He's out and gone."

"Lewis took some pictures of the dead bear," Gabriel said. "I want to use them for a story. The size of the bear is a story in itself. People need to know the bear has been dispatched for public safety, that it can't do harm to anyone ever again."

Gabriel paused. "Sir, I understand if it's too difficult, I can come back later. I took time off for a few days."

"Not that bear," Eli said.

"Not that bear?" Gabriel said.

"Other dead bear."

Gabriel looked at Beck, confused. "There were two bears?" he said.

"Top drawer," Beck said.

Gabriel looked at the bedside drawers, three sliding shelves. Stood and opened the top drawer. Inside was a small white grocery bag wrapped tight. Gabriel took it, sat down and unwrapped it. He held a small camera unit with busted straps.

Cut, he supposed, going by the smoothly sliced nylon. He held it up to Beck. "This?" he said. "What's on it?"

"Damian shot the bear. Make three copies. You, me, Albert John. Email to Clive Booker...Buckwold."

Gabriel held the camera, its contents a mystery he wrapped it back in the plastic bag.

"Later," Beck said. He waved Gabriel away. Beck rolled to his back.

Gabriel stood. "Mr. Beck, I'll be back tomorrow, if you're feeling up to it. I can get this looked at somewhere here."

"Your eyes, only."

"Yes, of course."

"Gabriel," Beck said. He wanted to say "take care of Ellie." But he waved his hand. "Later," he said.

\* \* \*

Clive Booker opened his eyes to see the pale grey ceiling of his office. He threw back the sheets. Another day at the office, he said. Then slung his feet to the floor precisely onto his slippers. The plush office couch was actually a pull-out bed. No one would ever think. And few knew. A day at the office was often 24 hours, or 48 hours. Clive did not mind, he thrived on long work hours, private time. He looked at the GWF mascots decorating the wall. Rufus the Lion, a beautiful specimen with a seriously buff mane, and one of the last lions to be seen in Egypt. He was a fighter - smart, a survivor, every day of his life, no matter what the chances. That's what it took, Clive thought, that's what I need to be, a fighter, smart, a survivor, no matter what it takes.

He rose from his bed, a thin beam of sunlight pierced the curtains and shot across the Isfahan rug. He pressed a button and the curtains retracted. The room lit up with sunshine. Wonderful, Clive said. He looked over the brilliant expanse of Union Bay, shining water under a wide blue sky. A rare day. Stood for a few minutes running over the daily agenda. Looked at his watch. Breakfast as usual, oatmeal, one boiled egg, and fruit, to be delivered in a half hour.

Start the day as usual, check the incoming. He pressed the monitor's "On" button. He scanned the emails, kept his eye peeled for news from Damian. He should have reported by now. C'mon Damian, we need copy, what's happening out there? He stopped. "Well," he said, "at least one surprise." He sat and slid the mouse and clicked on an email from that newspaper kid, the pain in the ass Gabriel Medina punk from Greenville. So, what's this about? Did Buckwold put some pressure on the kid, is he flipping, got some news for the GWF? What does the kid want? Money? Everybody wants money.

He clicked on the message. Courtesy of the Gray Wolf, it said. The Gray Wolf? What's this kid up to? A video link, the file only 1 GB. Clive pressed it. Unbelievable, yes! There he is.

Why is Damian's gun pointed at the camera?

The camera suddenly rocked, dropped into brush, not just brush, hair, a leg, the grizzly?!

Something happening to the camera, someone's hands, the video all over the place, then held steady, then Damian pumping his fist in the air, wide grin on his face. Then suddenly the camera walking toward Damian, his elated face turned to shock. Then the camera turned to the face of the person holding the camera – Tom Beck!

Can't be, just can't. This can't be happening! Clive screaming inside. That bear had a camera on it! Damian shot that bear!

Clive's office door blew open.

"Clive," Veronica said in a panic. "You catch the morning news? NBV, national news, across the country."

Clive slumped in his chair. Put his elbows on his desk, his face into his hands.

Veronica sat in her chair. "Clive", she said. "This video clip's gone viral. From someone called the Gray Wolf. Clive, Damian's on that clip, he shot a grizzly. With Beck, but Damian shot the bear!"

"I know."

"Clive, I repeat, did you watch the morning news?"

"No."

"That wasn't the bear anyone was after. Damian shot the wrong bear!"

Clive's mind swam, trying to surface but sinking, drowning, grabbing at what could keep him afloat. Nothing to cling to, the life sucked out of him. He shoved his chair back, stood, paced around the desk, twice.

Maybe there was one last straw.

He sat and grabbed his cell phone off the desk. Pressed keys. Pressed speaker phone. The phone rang.

"Hello, Buckwold speaking," came a voice.

"Brian, how are you?" said Clive.

"Ok."

"Look, I've been thinking about this whole grizzly thing. Maybe it's time to bury the hatchet, move on to other more important stories. We'll call in the wolves, Brian, give Tom

Beck, yourself, the department, a break. Bury it. What do you say?"

Silence.

"Here's what I'm thinking, Brian: a statement from Beck. That he regrets the whole event, that he sees both sides of the story. That no one can understand the difficulty of a bear chase, that whatever happens out there no one should carry the blame alone, including Beck, the bear, who-ever. Look, we'll put a news story on the wire that we agree on, together. Beck, you, our man out there with him, no one to blame. What do you say?"

"Clive, I saw the news today, just like you did."

"Brian. You don't want this, ok. We've got the manpower and the funds. We'll slant the media how we want. You don't want this to go on, you don't want Beck to go through this, or his brother. I can't image what they are going through at this time."

"Beck's at the Greenville hospital, recovering. Word is he'll recover just fine. Look, Clive, if Beck is thinking of you at all right now it's with a smile on his face."

"C'mon, Brian. We can end this right now, it's the right thing to do."

"Clive?"

"Yes."

"I'm out."

The phone went dead.

Clive looked at the Wall of Fame. The one blank space waiting, waiting for the bear to prove himself. He looked to the great window, looked at Veronica.

Veronica looked at Clive. "Boss, we can figure this out," she said. "There's an email from Damian this morning."

“What! What does it say?”

“You should read it yourself.”

“Ok, here it is,” Clive said to himself as he scrolled through emails, here’s the lifeline -maybe shooting the bear was an accident, or something that Tom Beck did to make it all happen. There it is. Clive clicked on it.

‘Clive, Damian here, don’t get excited, it won’t help. You won’t find me. I’m thinking about a nice beach house, something big overlooking beach front, say, in Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, maybe Greece or Italy, or even Portugal. The thing is, Clive, you set me up, told me you wanted the bear dead, that I should shoot it myself if the need arose. Well, the need arose. I know what you’re thinking, that you didn’t say those exact words. It won’t matter. Did you see the news releases this morning? They’ll eat up whatever I have to say. This whole story, the video, the dead bear, its all on you. You just need to tell me if you’re in, or out. If you’re in, I will send you the routes to deposit five million. If you’re out, I’ll swing a deal with the news people who are offering the most. It won’t be as much, but I get the opportunity to watch you squirm like a worm until you drown. What will your platinum contributors think? They’ll want to go forward with fresh blood, Clive. You’re out and you know it. I know what you’re thinking, that you let a poisonous snake into your house and now you’ve been bitten. You did, and you are. I’ll give you until 4pm today to decide. I can’t keep my media friends waiting.’

Veronica sat and watched Clive roll through waves of emotion. She had never seen him so, so - out of control. She looked around at the office she had seen a hundred times, more.

A few changes and it would suit just fine. A good view from where Clive sat.

\* \* \*

The pickup rolled into the yard. Beck stepped out onto bare ground frozen solid. He walked awkwardly toward the house over frozen ruts, wondered when the last time it was that the old man's yard was properly graded. That would be my fault, he thought. The morning sun resplendent in dark blue skies. A fine day for November 23<sup>rd</sup>, American Thanksgiving. He walked up to the old house, knocked on the dilapidated door.

"Come in."

Beck stepped through the doorway, the door hitched to a spring, complained then closed behind him. Packed suitcases and cardboard boxes on the floor.

"Hello papa," Beck said.

"Come and sit."

Eli sat at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee at his front. Beck sat across. The kitchen a masterpiece of bachelor living, dirty dishes piled high, cluttered counter, grit and wrappings and dust balls on the floor.

"You want a cup of coffee?" the old man said.

Beck looked at the large tin coffee pot on the stove, brown coffee stains running down its sides. "When was it you made coffee last?" he said.

"Generally make a pot every week, every Sunday."

"Today's Saturday," Beck said.

"Still some left."

Beck looked around. "Where's all your cats at?"

“Well, there’s one or two in here somewheres. They don’t cotton to hound dogs, though. I expect some left the country.”

“I don’t expect the dogs cotton to cats either.”

“Oh, they love ’em to death.”

Eli looked at Beck as if he had not heard a word, or as if words did not register.

“Eli, how are you?”

Beck thought he saw a glint in his eye, maybe a hint of a smile.

“You ready Papa?” said Beck.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

A vehicle pulled into the yard.

“Well, let’s go then,” Beck said. He stood and took hold of a box and stepped out the door and met Albert John and Lewis. “I appreciate you doing this,” he said.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Lewis said.

“Same,” Albert John said.

“You’re good to drive Eli’s pick up?”

They looked at the old flat bed with the old plywood dog boxes on its deck.

“I’ll drive,” Lewis said. “Albert John could get confused with no siren and no flashing lights to play with.”

“There’s boxes and suitcases in the house. I’ll load the dogs.”

They loaded the back of Beck’s pickup, Beck opened the swinging gates of the dog boxes, released each dog one at a time and walked them to the flat deck. He gave them all a rub and they wagged tails, then jumped in and he closed the gates and shoved a chained latch pin through the latch of each.

Beck got in his truck, the supplies already loaded, and drove it close to the door, then walked into the house.

Eli looked up at him. The old man stood by.

“Well Eli, it’s time,” Beck smiled. “Goin’ home. Can you walk or do you want the wheelchair?”

Eli put his hands on the table and forced himself to rise. Beck placed Eli’s arm around his neck and step by step walked to the door and down the porch step and Albert John at the open pickup’s door helped lift Eli’s legs and him into the seat. Albert John snapped on the seat belt. Eli folded the wheelchair on the porch and lifted it into the box of the pickup. Albert John climbed into Beck’s truck through the driver door then slid over and snapped the seat belt. Beck climbed in.

“I forgot,” Albert John said. “When we found you, you had this in your hand. Had to pry it out”. In Albert John’s hand lay the Puma knife. Beck stared at the knife. Albert John waited then lay the knife on the seat between them. Beck took off his jacket and put the knife in a pocket then tucked the jacket under the seat.

“I thought it was lost up there,” Beck said.

The two pickups drove out of the yard, turned north on the highway then turned off the highway on to a logging road. The pick-up slowed to a crawl over the rough-planked wooden trestle bridge. Beck looked down to the crystal-clear waters of the Green River, the shores rimmed with thin plate ice. They drove along cattle pastures. Gopher mounds dotted the landscape but not a gopher in sight. Beck drove slowly.

“How you feeling, Eli?” Beck said loudly.

Eli did not respond.

“How do you feel about those neuropathy sessions you been goin’ to? They help much?”

Eli stayed silent.

“Takes time, Tom,” Albert John said.

I know. “I heard that neuropathy treatments can do wonders for post-traumatic stress.”

“It can. Eli’s come a long way, walking now and all.” Albert John tapped Eli’s thigh with the palm of his hand. “Right Eli,” he said loudly.

They drove in silence. Up past the fields, into the forest, squeezed along a bubbling mountain stream between mountains. A half hour later the track leveled and a meadow appeared between trees. They pulled into the yard and parked near the cabin. The sun had climbed and the day had warmed. Beck found a folding beach chair with arms and placed it facing the sun and the cabin wall decorated with bear skulls, alongside grand wide-limbed spruce trees that dotted the yard. He put the wheelchair between the dogs’ trees and the beach chair.

Lewis walked up to the cabin and unlocked the door then he and Albert John carried suitcases and boxes into the cabin. Beck helped Eli out of the truck and over to the wheelchair.

“Papa,” Beck said, “come and sit here in the sun with Eli for now. Let me get some chairs from the house.” The old man sat. Beck dragged three handmade wooden chairs with woven rawhide string seats out to the sun and placed two next to Eli and one next to papa. He went in and looked around the cabin, pleased with how well stocked the cabin was, the firewood and kindling next to the stove. He carried a cooler from the pickup out to the chairs and sat.

“Come and sit,” Beck said to Lewis and Albert John. He opened two non-alcoholic spritzers and handed them to Eli and papa then opened three beers. They sat faces to the sun. Beck looked across the meadow and up at mountain slopes. “I do declare,” he said, “why we don’t all live here. Lord knows I could use the quiet.”

“You can, you’re full retired, congratulations,” Lewis said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Albert John said, and they did. The old man did. Eli sat looking at the spritzer clamped in his hand.

Beck stood and walked to the dog boxes and let little Willy out first. He sprang to the ground and Beck squatted and he nuzzled Beck and Beck playfully petted Willy’s head. He let out the rest. They ran around the men and around the trees and around the house and the men watched and wondered the same thing – would the dogs show up from the other side of the house? – They did.

“Well, I better tie ‘em up,” Beck said, “or we won’t have any dogs at all.” He stood and walked to the truck and gathered leashes and walked to the dogs scattered about. Eli lifted his hand. He moved his head.

“What?” Beck said. “You want I should leave the dogs free?”

Eli dipped his head slightly.

“Ok Eli,” Beck said. “They take off and it’s your job to chase after them.” He sat down next to papa. The dogs ran circles then settled down. Lewis brought out some kibbles and dumped a few piles and the dogs dug in with tails wagging.

They all sat, basking in the warm rays of the sun.

Albert John and Lewis chatted with each other and with Eli.

Papa, Beck said with a quiet voice. “Are you goin’ to be ok up here, just the two of you?”

“I’ll be fine, looking forward to it.”

“I guess it’ll be a new experience, being away from home and all. I don’t recall you being much of a traveler. You going to be ok driving that old truck if you need to? With your legs and all.”

The old man looked at Beck. “Did you ever think how it was your brother never come to town but lived up here all these years – who it was brought him his supplies?”

Beck thought it over. “I guess I never give it much thought,” he said. “I don’t know why. Too busy working and raising a family, I suppose. If you’re trying to make me feel guilty on a sunny day you’re succeeding.”

“It was your mother and me. Come up about every two weeks.”

Beck thought about it. “I don’t know how I could not have known that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We always came up while you was working. That was most of the time. Seems strange thinking about it now, your mother not telling you. She wanted you two to work it out on your own. Didn’t feel it was her place. The one thing she wanted most in her life, aside from loving her kids and grandkids, was to see you two gettin’ together again. You may not have seen it but it near broke her heart, all those years.”

Beck sat. Did not speak. Tears welled in his eyes. “I’m sorry papa, I truly am.” He looked to his papa.

“Tom,” the old man said, “you got no need to worry yourself, your momma’s lookin’ down at you right this very minute, as proud and happy as can be.”

Beck heard the old man but needed to wipe his eyes. “I hope she is,” he said.

“I know she is, who’d you think gave use this beautiful sunny day in late November.”

They sat in silence.

“You get old and you get tired,” the old man said. “All the time you spend worrying about what’s been took from you, there’s more goin’ out the door. Best you can do is try and forget about it, let it go. Get good at it too.”

They sipped beers.

“Papa,” Beck said, “I’m worried about Eli, how hard it’ll be for him up here. Did those neuropathy sessions help?”

“Why do you think he’s up here now. Nearly walking on his own.”

“What about the rest of it?”

“Oh, he talks out in his sleep, not as much as the first month. Calls out in the night once in awhile.”

“It worries me,” Beck said. “He just stares out at nothing all the time.”

“Its not nothing he’s staring at. He’s playing it over in his mind, what happened. Again and again. I expect about all what happened on your trip. It’s something he’s got to work out. He talks more now than he did.”

“I’m not hearing it.”

“You will.”

They sat quiet and sipped their drinks.

“Tom,” Lewis said, “is now a good time?”

“Good as any.”

Lewis went to the truck and came back with a plastic garbage bag with something heavy inside. A hammer in his hand. "Ok," he said.

Beck and Albert John stood up. "C'mon, Eli, come for a walk", and he and Beck pulled up on Eli's arms and he rose and they slowly walked a few feet to the wall of skulls. Lewis put down the bag and reached inside and struggled with the object and pulled it from within and the bag fell away. In his hands was a huge bear skull, cleaned white, dark holes for eyes, three inch long wickedly curved incisors what accounted for countless and nameless deaths. In the center of the skull a 10-inch spike shoved through a drilled hole. Lewis held it up to the spot with the missing skull, or there never was a skull, or it was a place waiting for a skull.

They all watched Eli, what his reaction would be. He just looked at the bright white skull. Albert John placed the hammer in Eli's right hand, Eli closed his fingers around the handle. Lewis made sure the skull was in the right position.

"Ok," Albert John said. "Just hit the nail, go ahead." Eli's arm began to rise then dropped. "Ok," said Albert John, "how about this," and he helped lift Eli's hand with the hammer and Lewis holding the nail in place they tapped the nail. Once, twice, three times. Albert John let go of Eli's hand and the hammer fell to the ground. Albert John picked it up and placed it in Eli's hand again. Albert John's hand over Eli's. He held it. "One more time," he said, and they struck the nail, once, twice, three times. The skull stayed in place. Albert John took the hammer. They stood, stepped back, smiled. They watched Eli. He stared up at the skull. He lifted his hand and touched the skull, his hand

shaking, the good side of his face anxious. They walked Eli back to the chair.

They sat and finished their drinks.

“I guess we better head on home,” Lewis said.

“I guess that’s me too, unless you take my truck and I walk back,” Beck said.

“Thanks for the beer,” Lewis said then held Eli’s hand. Albert John gave Eli a hug. They shook the old man’s hand.

“Everett,” Albert John said, “until later.”

Beck stood up. “Papa,” he said, and gave the old man a hug. “Don’t forget how to use that inReach.”

“Ok.”

Beck stood over Eli then crouched beside him. “Eli, you’re home. I’m retired now, I’ll be up to see you regular. Billy-Jo won’t have it any other way. I’m sure you’ll get tired of our company. And Kate and Russel and Ellie too. You want I can take you to town for groceries.” Beck reached up and held on to Eli with a long hug. Tears welled in Beck’s eyes. He pulled back.

“Ben,” Eli said softly.

“What?”

“Ben.”

“Ben?” Beck said.

“The wirehair.”

They rode silent on the way back to Greenville. Crawled down the rutted road, drove through forests, along cow pastures. Slowed up for the old wooden trestle bridge. The car bumped across uneven wooden planks, reached gravel on the far side. Beck pulled over. “I have to stop for a minute,” Beck said. He reached under his seat and grabbed his jacket. Got out and

walked back over the bridge. Stopped halfway. Looked down into the clean clear water of the Green River. It ebbed along gentle over smooth stones.

Beck felt calm, connected to the river, felt the flow of the river as if it moved through him. He listened to its sounds and felt peace and joy in its rhythm. He always loved streams and rivers, how they were challenged by what stood in their way yet continued to their destiny. How ebbing water pulsed like something alive, secrets and wisdom hidden in their depth's.

He reached in a pocket and took out the sheathed Puma knife. Pulled it out of its sheath, held it in his fingers and turned it and looked at it from different angles then put it back in its sheath. He looked upriver, watched eddies swirl and bubbles come and go. He threw the sheathed knife as far upriver as he could.

“One more secret,” he said to the river. “You’ll have to tell your story from there,” he said to the knife. He walked back to the truck.

Albert John watched in the rearview mirror as Beck tossed the knife. He never spoke of it.

\* \* \*

She was a beautiful blonde. Her hair waved in the breeze like golden silk over rippled water. She was exceptionally well built. Solid, powerful, with strong maternal instincts and vigorous to the extent that her two weanling cubs had never spent a day hungry. Boars had challenged her, eyed her young as potential lunch. It did not go well for those that tried. They frolicked along as she strode through the great open alpine bowl.

The sow led them to a hump at the high side of the bowl. She stood there contemplating the basin in all of its summer glory. Alpine flowers of every design and colour imaginable mixed with carpets of green. The basin ringed with majestic snow-capped peaks. A heavenly place whenever a human did appear to say it was so. She dropped down then slowly worked her way to another lower hump. She knew exactly where she was headed. The cubs tagged along. She stopped. Faced the light breeze, then looked back at the cubs. A low rumble climbed her throat. They froze on cue. The smaller cub a blonde female like her, the larger cub a dark chocolate brown male. The impatient male stepped forward. He figured his mother was not watching, but she was, out of the corner of her eye, and like lightning she spun and swatted the cub and he rolled and she swatted him again to stay quiet, and he did.

The sow carefully walked toward the top of the hump, careful that only the top of her head and eyes slipped over for a look. They were there, as they always were. She could hear their startling whistles. She could smell them. Her eyes cleared the hump. There were several marmots cavorting on the slope below. She waited, and waited, knew that there were marmot holes just over the crest that she could not see. There it was, a loud trill just over the ridge. She crouched, slipped forward ever slowly. Her head about to break the skyline she lunged over the crest and in three great leaps her teeth snapped at a fat marmot and it squeaked its last squeak, its crushed spine and collapsed lungs beyond any complaint at all. She walked back over the hill with the marmot slung in her jaws, careful not to disturb the rest of the colony. Her cubs were there. The male halfway between her and the female cub, where she had left them. She turned and

walked several hundred yards straight down to the bottom of the bowl, the cubs in tow, the marmot dangling from her jaws. She stood on a rise and carefully surveyed all she could see. She walked over the rise and in a dip was a fine clear pond with a tiny streamlet flowing in one end and a tiny streamlet out the other.

She dropped the marmot and tore it to pieces, no mind to the hide and guts, feet and meat, shredded about. The cubs held off until the male dashed in to steal a chunk of liver and the sow batted him and he bawled then the sow took a share and walked off several feet and chewed. The cubs dashed in and grabbed chunks and gobbled as fast as they could. In five minutes only scraps remained, but not enough for two. The male pounced on the female who held a morsel in her mouth and he bit her neck. She bawled and the sow came and batted at the male. He jumped and her paw caught only a part of him and he skulked down to the water's edge with the morsel in his mouth that seconds before was in his sister's mouth.

He chewed on the morsel, his feet in and out of the water. His front paw prints were distinct in the mud. The left front foot... slightly turned in.

## *AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY*

Stan Walchuk Jr. was born at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He is common man who has lived a truly uncommon life. Stamped with a passion for wanderlust, his life was just naturally one adventure after another. Stan took his first solo wilderness trip at the age of thirteen. He left home at sixteen and hitch hiked up the Alaska Highway at the tail end of the 70's hippy movement, landing his first stint with Yukon horse outfitters. He has averaged more than three wilderness horse, canoe, or hiking trips a year for more than forty years. Along the way he managed Biology (Zoology) and Education degrees from the University of Alberta. He has been a gas jockey, car wash boy, chicken deliverer, construction laborer, surveyor, habitat improvement contractor, truck driver, teacher, writer, film maker, horse trainer and wilderness program instructor. His documentary of the rugged one-thousand-mile Cordillera! Expedition earned Best Documentary and Best Producer awards. The Cordillera! Book is a national best seller. He has written more than fifty articles for outdoor and equine magazines. Stan has had many experiences with bears. He has been charged by Grizzlies four times, two of these stories are in his adventure biography, Common Man/Uncommon Life. Stan lives with his wife and horses and dogs in McBride, B.C. Canada.