

THE FIRE
OF
OUR LIVES

GATHERING

1

WHENEVER A FIRE FALLS, it burns better. Having burned brightly for a while, flames die down as logs begin to burn through. They might even flicker out briefly. Eventually, but suddenly at the moment, the fire breaks through a log, and it falls into two pieces. Previously unburned surfaces bear down more closely to the heat of the coals. And the new angle of the broken logs lets in more oxygen, so the fire breathes better. The flames flicker hesitantly for a moment, and then they renew with vigor. The fire grows confidently, first to preserve and then to strengthen itself. Fuel, oxygen and pressure. It's a simple combination. It's all around us. It is us.

I've admired fire for as long as I can remember. Now I'm not saying that intelligence can't improve what a fire does on its own. For instance, you want to keep your fire in a circle. It's a little too good at its job if you let it jump into the surrounding forest. And god knows a well-contained fire can use a good poking every now and again, to improve on its natural efficiency. But it does a pretty amazing job all on its own once it's been nurtured up from a few sticks and a wad or two of newspaper.

I built this fire a few hours ago when we left the main fire circle for a little more privacy. It's now burning nicely on its own. Her head lies across my lap, face toward the fire, her torso extended out to my right, with her legs curled in a semi-fetal position on the blanket. Propped on my left elbow, I gently stroke the hair around her right ear. We've long since passed the point where we need words.

She readjusts herself slightly, keeping her eyes trained on the fire, but tilting her head ever so slightly downward so that it nestles more comfortably against my abdomen. She takes her right index finger and begins twirling my limp sticky dick, just like she twirled her hair around that same finger when we met earlier this evening. I let my right hand move down across her shoulder, gently along her flannel-shirted side, until there is no more flannel, and I reach the bare skin of her haunch. I cup her bare ass for a second or two and then find her sticky plump pussy again. She moans ever so softly as I slide my middle finger into her opening and begin gently massaging the nub at the top of her pussy.

She takes my dick between her thumb and index finger and twists the tip up to where she's staring right at it. Her new toy. She's played with it for a couple of hours now, and I've let her do whatever she wants with it. I pull my finger out of her pussy, and then plunge it right back in, working it around on the nub and in her tunnel. She sighs ever so softly and begins lollipoping my dick. And so we go for a couple of minutes until she's got me to a full woodie again and I've got her gyrating against my palm.

This time I lean back on my elbows and pull my legs together, woodie at full attention. She shows me her backside, straddles me wide and guides me in, all the while keeping her eyes on the fire. We pause at that moment of union, when two become one in the most intimate way, and then she slowly begins rocking back and forth on me.

She's blocking my view of the fire, so I lean all the way back on the blanket to improve my leverage for thrusting. I let her continue to lead for the time being. I'm just getting ready for when the time comes. Mostly she rocks back and forth, but every so often she drives me wild by moving up and down a little, too. God, what a sensation! Then suddenly it begins to build, and she's going hard on me. Her moans become more audible, and I can feel the cum rising in my shaft. As her moans pick up, I

begin thrusting upward into her, and each thrust draws an oh out of her. We're now in perfect time, my thrusts up meeting her grinds down.

And then it happens. My first shot, a primal scream of ecstasy from her, and a "Crack!" And on the second shot and scream, another "Crack!" And again on the third; each shot feeling better than the previous one. On the fourth thrust I can feel all that's left are the little dribbles that will play out as we wind down. We slow down, I stop thrusting, and now she's just rocking back and forth on me gently. I can feel little dribbles coming out into her every couple of rocks. We're almost done.

Just then, we both hear it. Crashing sounds coming through the forest. Harv breaks out of the trees into our clearing and says to me, "We gotta go." Then he adds, "NOW!", more loudly and with great emphasis.

I give her a big thrust and pop out as she's on the way up, catching her butt with my hands to set her down on the blanket in front of me. I scooch back, grab my pants and underwear, throw our baggie of coke in my shirt pocket, pop my shoes on and take off half-naked after Harv.

No words pass between us.



I've never really been in much trouble. I mean, push comes to shove, I'm pretty handy with my fists, but mostly that settles it and it's done. But this little shit is taking things to a whole different level. I mean, all I was doing was sucking face with the girl. I didn't even fuck her yet.

"Careful, Harv. He's got a gun," says Bob. "Just be calm, an' let's get outta here."

"That's right, mother fucker! I've got a gun, an' your buddy here's goin' nowhere. Thinks he's some fuckin' big shot city dude out here to just do whatever the fuck he pleases. Well, not today. An', god damn you Linda, I'll deal with you . . ."

And just as the little shit turns his head to scream at, as I now know, Linda, I kick my left foot hard into his right hand, loosening his grip on the gun. As my foot comes down and my center of gravity shifts, I drive my right jab for all I'm worth hard into the left side of his little shit face. He staggers back, then dives for the gun, and I'm on him. We struggle for the gun. For a little shit he's a lot stronger than I expected. We're both laid on the ground now, struggling over the gun between us. It must look like some fucked-up gay-ass foreplay or something, except it's deadly serious. I'm able to keep the gun pointed away from me, but he's got his finger on the trigger, with my hands wrapped around his.

I head butt him and hear the first pop. I keep the gun pointed away from me with all my might, and I hear the second pop. And in another second, the third pop, and his grip relaxes. I pull the gun out of his hand, kick him aside and stand up. I can see his buddies by the firelight. I train the gun on them. "Don't fuckin' move! Except you," I point the gun toward one of his buddies, "see how he's doin'." The other guy starts to move, I point the gun straight at him and say, "You move one more step an' I'll shoot." He stops dead in his tracks. To the first guy I ask, "How is he?"

"I . . . I don't know. He's bleedin'. It's pretty sticky."

"Bob, go get the car an' pull it about a hundred yards down the road that way." Then I say to the other guy, "You get down there an' help with your buddy, too. Nice an' slow." As they both kneel and begin to talk to the little shit, who I now know has the dork-ass nickname Buster, I hear Bob start up the Beamer and begin to ease it down the road. "Sorry to kiss and run, ladies," I say to the girls we picked up earlier that day, "but this is a little more than I bargained for." I grab up our baggie of pot, leave the beers and take off through the forest toward the flickering fire off in the distance.

I reach the fire in no time, and as I come crashing out of the forest into the clearing I see Rick with his boy buried in this sweet little thing, like she's riding a horse backward or something. So fucking typical. I say to him, "We gotta go. NOW!" And for once he doesn't give me any shit. Just grabs his pants and underwear, pops our coke in his shirt and off we go. He must have already cum or he wouldn't be so agreeable.

We sprint the hundred or so yards through the forest back to the road where Bob has the Beamer idling, and we jump in, me in front, Rick in the back. Bob hits the gas, and we tear off down the road.



The car belongs to Harv. It's a 1977 BMW 528i fuel-injected six-cylinder four-on-the-floor rocket. His dad bought it for him brand new for his 16th birthday, right after Harv got his driver's license. Really pissed Harv's mom off, because his parents had split up just after Harv's bar mitzvah, and she felt like Harv's dad was always lording his money over her and buying the kids off. Harv's always been careful with it, though. Treats it better than most people, and he's never had a wreck in it. He beat a guy to a pulp one time when the guy banged his door into Harv's as he was getting out of his car. Tough way to pay for a ding.

We've all been driving the car during the trip, taking turns to mostly even out the miles. The two who aren't driving get to sight see, get high and just generally enjoy a road trip to everywhere and nowhere in particular. The American West, what a place . . .

The front passenger door jerks open and Harv jumps in. The rear passenger door flies open a split second later and Rick jumps in, half-naked. "Drive!" shouts Harv. So I hit it and off we go down the dirt road we came in on earlier this afternoon.

I'm pressing the speed, but not too much, because it's dark now. The car handles nicely, so I'm able to make good time as we head back down to the main road. After about five minutes of riding in silence, I say, "Jeez, Harv. You shot him."

"What the fuck!" from the back seat.

"I didn' shoot him. We were strugglin' an' the gun went off. He was tryin' to shoot me, remember?"

"Three times?"

"Yeah, three times. Whadduhya think I'm gonna do? Say, 'Here, you take it'? I don' want a fuckin' bullet in me."

"Again, what the fuck? I mean, Bob an' I thought it was a bad idea to begin with, but shootin' somebody? That wudn' part a the plan."

"Oh, right. Like you're so god damn bummed. How many times did you fuck that girl, anyway? Bad idea, my ass. That little shit, Buster, pulled a gun on me just for kissin' his girlfriend. Who, if you ask me, probably idn' really much of a girlfriend if she's out pickin' up guys at a gas station on the edge a town. What was I s'posetuh do? Let him shoot me?"

We go silent again. It's clear we're going to have to talk more about what to do, but now isn't the time. After the gap of silence, I say, "I see the lake. That means we're not too far from the highway. Which way?" Normally we have a plan, at least for the day, but this detour was unplanned. We'd stopped at a gas station just outside of Lander. When I finished filling the tank, Harv came back over with three girls he'd just met, saying they knew a great place to party if we could bring along some beer.

So Harv bought a case of Bud and came over and announced to me and Rick that we're going up to Bear Peak. Just follow the ladies' pickup.

"I think we oughtta head away from Lander, back toward Yellowstone. Left when we hit the highway," comes the suggestion from the backseat.

"Whadduhyou think, Harv?" I ask.

"Fine."

"Left it is."

A few more minutes and we hit the highway. I turn left and get it up just a little above the 65 speed limit. Enough to make time, but not enough to get pulled. I look over at Harv and see that he's still holding the gun in his hand, finger on the trigger. "Uh, Harv. Maybe it's time to put away the gun."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." He opens the glove box and gently places it in.

From the backseat, "Maybe put the safety on?"

"Oh, yeah." Harv turns on the overhead lamp, fiddles with the gun for a few seconds and places it back in the glove box. "Good idea. Thanks, Rick."

"No sweat."

We travel along another 20 minutes or so, until we're approaching Dubois, the last wide spot in the road before we hit the National Forest. "It's about eleven, guys. How far are we goin' tonight?" I'm really asking Rick, because he's mostly found our campsites each night. He's got a real knack for looking at a map and finding isolated spots in the National Forest that are free, usually near a creek and with ample firewood.

"Whadduhyou think, Rick?" asks Harv.

"Why don't you pass me the Forest map an' the penlight? I'll see if there's somewhere across the pass that looks good."

Rick studies the map for a few minutes as we pass through Dubois and announces that it looks like we might find a place pretty close to the road if we take a right just after the Blackrock Ranger Station. We all agree that makes sense. Harv pops in a Foghat tape and in a second Fool for the City is blaring through the sound system.

The road gets a little more curvy after we get past Dubois. I have to slow down every now and then for a curve, but mostly I can keep up my speed. "I got some headlights comin' up on me, pretty fast," I say, as I look in the rearview mirror. And it's true, they're closing quickly.

"Take it nice an' easy," says Harv. "No need to get pulled."

I obey all posted signs, slowing down for curves, but the guy's riding my ass. Suddenly he pulls out to the left and passes me, then cuts back sharp into my lane and hits his brakes. I slam on mine and come to a stop just before crashing into the back of the pickup.

Harv snaps off the tape. "Jesus Christ!" he shouts. "Door opening. He's got a gun. Not a cop. Get the fuck outta here!"

But I'm already way ahead of Harv. I've thrown it into reverse and put a little distance between us. I hit the brakes, and as the gunman jumps back into the pickup, I work through the first three gears in about five seconds, rocketing past the pickup on his left, and getting fourth at about 70. The pickup comes screaming after us. He's taking more chances on the curves than me, because he knows I have to worry about any oncoming traffic before he does.

The road gets even more curvy as we climb toward the pass. And then I see it out of the corner of my left eye. A herd of antelope just off the left side of the road. I lean on my horn, and, as we zip past, they scatter in all directions. Including, as I see in my rearview mirror, right into the path of the oncoming pickup. He nails one and loses control, skidding off the road. We keep going on up and over the pass, slowing back down to the speed limit.

We ride in silence until we see the ranger station. We turn off the highway on the forest service road and after about 10 minutes locate a nice pullout near a decent-sized creek. It's cold out now, well past midnight. Nobody wants to set up tents. We dig two blankets and the poncho out of the tarps on top of the car, refasten the tarps, and pull the blankets and poncho over ourselves to sleep in the car.

2

CHET SOMMERS HITCHED UP his pants around his ample belly as he walked out of Judson's Funeral Home. He felt sorry for Bill, that his boy was dead, but Buster had been heading for a bad end for a long time. Three shots in the gut. Must have been the last one that traveled in an upward trajectory and clipped his thoracic aorta. He didn't have a chance. Bled out in a matter of minutes. Damn shame that kids were so hot-headed. Nothing could have been worth this. And now Chet was missing his fishing trip, too, because everybody in town expected him to be doing something. Because Lander's a nice town; no place for a killin'.

Chet started back into town to his office at the Fremont County Sheriff's Office. The call came in about 11:30 last night. Doc Tiller was on duty at the hospital. Linda Lu had brought Buster to the hospital around 11, with her friends Alex and Bonnie. He was apparently soaked in blood by the time they got him there. Doc couldn't get a pulse, tried to shock him back to life a couple of times right there in the ER waiting room, and then pronounced him dead. He cleaned up a little bit, and then he called. Doc said the body would be going over to Judson's.

He didn't get much out of the girls before they left. Just enough to know what had happened to cause the wound. Apparently Buster and some out-of-towner got into it over Linda Lu, and the out-of-towner overpowered Buster, took his gun and shot him three times. Nick and Charley put Buster in Linda Lu's pickup after the out-of-towner left, and told the girls to get Buster to the hospital. It was about 45-50 minutes after he was shot that they got to the hospital. When he couldn't revive Buster, Doc just left the bullets in him. Figured he must have died within about five to ten minutes of being shot.

The next call came in about two in the morning. Chet's deputy Eric informed him that there had been a wreck out on the Yellowstone highway a little shy of the pass. Nick Stanwood and Charley Lambert were pretty banged up, but they would be OK. Neither one was able to talk. EMT guys were on the scene. Looked like they must have plowed an antelope at high speed and then run off the road. A passing motorist saw the truck off the side of the road in his brights and stopped to investigate. When he saw the boys unconscious in the cab of the truck, he felt for pulses and then headed back to Dubois to call it in. Eric got that call around 12:30, got the EMT dispatched and then headed up to the scene. After looking around and helping the EMTs get Nick and Charley out of the truck, Eric had headed back to Dubois to call Chet.

Chet was a little grumpy about this second call. Car wrecks didn't happen every day in Fremont County, but on a Friday night in the summer, well, kids will be kids. Bea wasn't too happy, either, to be woken up a second time. They had lived in Denver for a few years after Chet got out of the service, and he had worked his way up to detective in the Denver PD. Calls came in at all hours, then. They came back to Lander in 1960, when a sheriff's deputy position opened up, in part so that Chet wouldn't have to take all those late night calls. And mostly it was that way. Particularly once Chet ran for sheriff and won in '68. The town liked him, he was one of their own, and they had re-elected him every four years since. And Chet liked the town, too. He'd grown up here, graduated in the Lander Valley High class of '49. Did his two years service in intelligence, then came back to Lander to marry his high school sweetheart, Bea. She was class of '51.

They had moved to Denver shortly after getting married, because it got old real quick living with Bea's folks. Chet scored high on the Denver PD application exam, and it didn't hurt that he was 6'5", 230, when it came time to decide who to admit to the academy. Chet was a beat cop for a few years before he got his first break. He was detailed to a re-canvass of a murder crime scene. He noticed a

couple of oddities that the detectives had overlooked and found the murder weapon in the knot of a tree. In another three months he got promoted to detective. More money and a new house for his growing family, which by now included a toddler son and a newborn baby girl. His other boy was also born in Denver a couple years later.

Chet Jr. was only eight when they moved back to Lander in '60, so he really didn't remember Denver much. Pat and Donnie even less. Lander had been a good, wholesome place to raise kids, even during the '60s and '70s when there were so many problems everywhere else. The kids were all gone, now, though. Chet Jr. and Pat in LA, Donnie in San Diego. Sometimes they would visit for a week or so over the summer, but mostly they led busy lives in the city. No grandkids. Chet and Bea had grown used to the empty nest. He had his fishing and hunting. Bea liked to paint, and she played piano for the church. Chet would go to listen to her play, but he wasn't much for the reverend's sermons. Seemed to him the reverend was a little too sure of too many things. That's how you bungle a case, when you decide what happened up front, and then try to make everything else fit in that box.

While stopped at the light, Chet looked at his wristwatch and decided to make a quick stop at the Valley Diner. He pulled his SUV into the parking lot and set the brake. 9:30. The hens would still be there, and he could plant a seed with them. Chet swung open the pane glass door and saw them in the back corner, three tables pulled together. The usual group of 10, and a couple of faces Chet didn't recognize.

"Coffee, Sheriff?" asked Alma.

"Don't mind if I do. Black. No sugar." Chet walked over to the counter and picked up the brown faux-ceramic mug Alma poured out for him. "Thank you, dear."

"Need a menu?"

"No, thanks. Bea made some scrambled eggs this mornin'. I just wanted to go chat with the ladies for a few minutes." Chet walked over to the back corner, stood back a few feet from the tables, took a light sip of his coffee and announced himself, "Mornin' girls."

The backs that had been facing him turned to look up at him, and the murmurs died away. The hens were Fremont County's collection of trial attorneys, so-called because every Saturday morning they got together to cluck over their cases with each other. And because they did all the suing and defending in Fremont County, their clucking was essentially discussing everybody else's dirty laundry. "Mornin' to you, jelly belly. Ain't you s'posetuh be fishin' or somethin'?"

Chet wouldn't let too many people get away with that, but he'd grown up with Ned. They'd hunted, fished, swam, smoked, drank, gotten into trouble together. "Ned, you crippled old bastard, you really know how to make a guy feel welcome."

"Hey, don't bring my mama's virtue, or lack thereof, into it." Ned paused for just a second, then continued, "So you gonna pull up a chair, or do we haftuh keep our necks craned around like there's somethin' to look at?" There was muted laughter around the tables.

Chet pulled up a chair. "Can only stay a couple a minutes." He took another sip of his coffee, this time a longer and fuller draw. It was cooling off fast. He let the silence hang for just a moment. "Had a killin' last night. Bill Lyle's boy Buster took three rounds in the gut; probly dead in five or ten minutes."

"Holy shit!" It was Ned. "Any idea who did it?"

"Nothin' concrete. Buster's girlfriend, Linda Lu Willis, an' a couple a her friends brought him in to the hospital last night. He was D O A. Said an out-a-towner got into an argument with Buster, took his gun an' shot him. Three times."

"Jesus. You got an A P B out on 'im or somethin'?"

“Well, not yet, seein’ as I don’ know what he looks like, what kindeh car he drives or what his tags are. I’m lookin’ to interview the girls today.”

There was a short pause as the hens took in the news, and Chet looked them over to read their reactions. Then one of the faces Chet didn’t recognize spoke up, “Pleased to meet you Sheriff,” he extended his hand across the table, kind of half standing up to reach for Chet’s hand. They shook as he continued, “Will Bowman, over from Riverton. You lookin’ to charge this boy with murder?”

“Well, damn, Red Hawk,” said Ned, “don’t beat around the bush.”

“No, no, it’s OK,” Chet said to Ned. “Right now I don’ know. All I’ve got is a dead body an’ Doc Tiller tellin’ what he remembers a few upset girls tellin’ him last night when they brought Buster’s body in. I’m pretty sure I’ve got a homicide, but I imagine I’ll haftuh talk to Jimmie about the specific charge. But I’m curious, you asked whether I’m lookin’ to charge this boy with murder. All I said was he was an out-a-towner, nothin’ about age. You have any information that might be helpful?”

“Nah. I just figured little girls bring in a dead boy who usetuh be one of their boyfriends, an argument with the out-of-towner led to the shooting. Just seems to me that they were probly arguin’ over the girl. Which makes me think he’s probly around the same age as the dead boy, give or take a couple years. But I’m curious, is there somethin’ you’re tryin’ to tell us?”

“Well, I guess there is. I imagine anybody who’s involved in a killin’ might wanna discuss their,” Chet paused a second for emphasis, “uh, situation, with a lawyer.” Chet took a drink of his coffee. It was losing all of its heat now. “I was just hopin’ it might be one a you fellas who gets that call so you can try to persuade the boy to turn himself in. Like I said, I haven’ made up my mind how the killin’ll be charged, an’ the County Attorney’ll ultimately make that call. We haven’ had a killin’ in a long time, an’ I aim to resolve this peacefully, without townfolk thinkin’ the law’s movin’ too slow.”

Ned spoke next, “Chet, you know any one of us would always advise a client that the best thing to do is turn yourself in an’ let the justice system do its job. We’re all officers of the court, after all. But we can’t make anybody do that. I suspect if you committed to tellin’ us what the likely charge would be—if one of us were to call in on a client’s behalf—we’d all probly be inclined to at least make that kindeh inquiry.”

“That’s fair. But what I’m sayin’ is the boy might actually be safer in custody than out there. Last thing I want is a rerun a the mob justice folks screamed for back in sixty-seven. That’s more than fifteen years ago now, an’ I’d justuh soon have people start thinkin’ about that as ancient history, not the way justice gets served in Lander. I think it’s in all our interest that our community’s viewed in a favorable light. That Fremont County’s a place where the criminals are caught, treated fairly, an’ we have law an’ order.” There were brief murmurs of agreement around the table. Chet downed the last of his coffee and put his mug on the table as he pushed his chair back to get up and leave. “Well, gotta go. Pleasure to meet you Mr. Bowman. I look forward to seein’ you over at the courthouse sometime.”

“Good to meet you, Sheriff. And please, call me Will.”

“Thanks, Will. I’ll do that. See you boys later.” There was a chorus of good-byes from the other hens as Chet carried his mug over to the counter and set it down in the busing bin. “Whaddo I owe you Alma?”

“A quick response when we call, that’s all. Have a good day, Sheriff.”

“Thanks, Alma, you too.” And with that Chet walked out.



Chet pulled into his parking spot at the Fremont County Sheriff's Office. As he stepped out of his SUV, Jimbo stepped out of his pickup, parked a couple of spaces away in visitor parking. "Chet, can I have a word?"

"Sure, Jimbo. Come on in." Chet pulled out his keys and opened up the front door. He walked through first and Jimbo followed him in.

Jimbo, James Randal Wagner, Jr. to the state, was as close to royalty as Fremont County had. He regularly donated to Chet's campaigns, and just about any other political campaign in the state of Wyoming. His daddy had taught him well how to stay connected. The Wagners were a long-time family in the Valley, homesteading with an influx of German immigrants after the war—the Civil War, that is. The Wagner family's prominence in the Valley began in the 1870s. That's when a lot of the other German homesteaders picked up stakes to go to Denver and Leadville, where people were making a lot of money mining. The Wagners stayed put and bought out the departing homesteaders for pennies on the dollar. The exodus accelerated in 1876 when Colorado got statehood and Custer got slaughtered at Little Bighorn. The Valley was the frontier, then, and the relative security of Colorado, together with the opportunity to strike it rich, looked pretty good by comparison. The Wagners bought up all manner of parcels during the years from 1876 to 1878, dirt cheap, so that in a matter of 10 short years they had become far and away the largest landholders west of Casper. The Wagners' foresight was rewarded in 1878, when Chief Washakie negotiated the reservation in exchange for peace. The Wagners had to cede a little bit of their western lands to the tribes, but it was well worth settling their title to everything else, particularly since they held most of the prime land along the creeks and rivers.

The Wagners weren't particularly prolific in the procreation department, so by the teens all of the Wagner holdings were concentrated in one surviving heir, Boris Wolfgang Wagner. World War I was a dangerous time for the Wagner legacy. What Germanic descendants were left in the Valley were generally sympathetic to the Kaiser and thought the British were bullying Germany to block its legitimate imperial ambitions. But the vast majority of Valley residents, many living on land they resented renting from Wagner, favored the British. When 1917 came around, Boris had to choose between his family ties to Germany and his land in the new country, because the blood was so bad between the rival camps there was almost a pitched battle.

So Boris supported US entry into the war, turned his back on Germany for good. And when he married, she was a good American girl. And when he had a son, in 1922, he gave him a good American name, James Randal Wagner. Jimbo's dad. No more of that hint of German. No more Boris, no more Wolfgang, no more Franz. Jimmy was going to be American through and through. Because Boris's land wasn't just good for cattle anymore. The war had seen to that. Oil. First found in Wyoming just outside Lander in 1883. The great machines of war had an insatiable thirst for it. And so the development began. It would explode in the latter half of the 20th century, when all the transport infrastructure was finally in place. But even during the war some oil was pumped out. And demand just kept on increasing after the war, as an America at peace boomed.

The Great Depression affected Boris's income a little, but the Wagners did not know hardship during those years. In fact, Boris aggressively bought up land and mineral rights using his own credit when the banks wouldn't supply it. And when World War II happened, Boris led the charge. He was an ardent supporter of lend-lease, including the oil-supply contracts he got. Jimmy volunteered in 1940, when he turned 18, and by the time the US entered the war in late '41, he was a lieutenant on a destroyer. Jimmy served with distinction in the Pacific, ultimately captaining a destroyer. He was honorably discharged in '46, married his high school sweetheart who had waited for him and promptly had a son in '47. That was Jimbo.

When they reached his office, Chet again took out his keys and unlocked the door. "Come on in, Jimbo." Chet walked around behind his desk to his chair. Motioning to one of the two chairs across his desk, he offered, "Have a seat." He would let Jimbo talk first.

Jimbo settled his corpulent six-foot 240-pound frame somewhat uncomfortably in the wooden straightback captain's chair across the desk from Chet. Chet had removed the upholstered chairs the office originally came with, because too many people felt comfortable talking too long when they came on business. He purposely got some sturdy chairs that weren't comfortable, so that people would get down to business. His chair, of course, was leather-upholstered, with upholstered captain's arms, on wheels with swivel and rocking features. He wanted it clear who ran this office.

Jimbo began, "I take it you heard about what went on last evenin'?"

"I got a couple phone calls, but I haven' had time to investigate anything yet."

"Well, when you catch 'em, I want that bastard violated my Alex locked up. Some drifter trash thinks he can just pull into town an' force himself on a little girl. It ain't right. I want justice."

This was the first Chet had heard that more than one out-of-towner was involved. "What exactly are you sayin', Jimbo? I haven' heard anything about a sexual assault."

"There was three of 'em. One of 'em lured Alex away from Linda Lu an' Bonnie, an' he raped her four times. She couldn' talk about it at first when she got home, but I saw her clothes while she was showerin', an' I could tell. Eventually she told me about it."

"He have a weapon?"

"I don' know. Didn' ask. But he was big, Chet. An' strong. Taller than me, weighed a little less, but all muscle. He didn' need a weapon. Alex idn' even quite five an' a half feet, an' she maybe weighs one twenty-five soakin' wet. She didn' have a chance."

"Now, Jimbo, I haftuh ask a question, an' I don' want you to take it the wrong way, but in a rape case there's always the issue a consent. You're sure he forced himself on her?"

"My Alex wouldn' go off with a complete stranger to do that, Chet. She's a good girl. She's all I got since I lost my Flo."

"Did she tell you he used force?"

"Dammit, man! She ain't even sixteen! Ain't even of age," which Jimbo knew was a bald-faced—though cleverly concealed through a well-entombed switch of birth dates—lie. "You gonna do somethin' about this or not? 'Cause I will have justice." Jimbo was leaning forward in his chair, and his face was turning red.

"OK, Jimbo, settle down. I need to talk to Alex anyway about las' night. I'll be gentle about this part of it, but there's other parts she mightuh witnessed, too. I need to talk to all three a the girls."

"OK." Jimbo settled back in his chair. "But I want action. I can't have this. Can't have some two-bit drifter violatin' my little girl. He's gotta pay."

"I've got a couple a things I need to take care of here before I conduct interviews. Can I come by an' talk to Alex at say, two this afternoon?"

"Sure, Chet, tha'd be fine. We'll see you then. Thanks."

"All right then. Lemme walk you out the front door." Both men got up and walked out of Chet's office, down the hall toward the front door.

"This is all wrong, Chet. Things like this don' happen in Lander. It's the drifters an' outside influences. We gotta put a stop to it."

"Nobody's gonna come break the law in Fremont County an' get away with it, Jimbo. See you at two?" Chet held the door open for Jimbo to leave the building.

"Two it is, out at the ranch."

“OK.” And with that Jimbo walked out. Chet closed the door behind him, locked it and returned to his office. Talking to the girls would be helpful to his case, but he really wanted to talk to Nick and Charley. He’d need to see if they had come to yet.

3

I AWAKEN TO THE sound of snoring in the back seat and a vague scent that smells a little like the caps I used to shoot off as a kid. The car windows are fogged up, but I can see that it's a sunny day outside. I open the glove box. Damn, it is there. It wasn't a bad dream.

I get out of the car, pull on my jacket and walk over into the woods a little ways from the creek. It feels great to empty my bladder. I walk back over to the creek for a look. It's a nice creek. Clear water, lots of stones in the bottom, about 12-15 feet wide, flowing swiftly. I reach down to touch the water, and it's very cold.

I find a nice boulder and sit on the bank, looking at the creek. Just like a waterfall, there are two ways to look at a creek. You can look at one ripple and follow the water all the way downstream with your eyes. You see the path of the creek this way. Or you can fix your gaze on one point in the creek, and watch the water flow by that one point, each molecule rushing by a moment frozen in time.

What the fuck did I do? Could I have done anything differently? I don't think so. Of course, Rick and Bob will say it was just a bad idea to begin with. But that's just going too far upstream. It's not like they said absolutely no, we're not going to party with the girls. And then, of course, once we got there, Rick decided to walk off with one of them. So how much did he really object?

Bob was more reserved about the whole thing. He never seemed to get into the spirit of the evening. I mean, he helped gather wood and everything, and he took his hits off the joints along with everybody else, but his heart didn't really seem in it. And he constantly had something else he needed to do to ignore the third girl when I started kissing Linda. So if anybody has reason to complain, it's Bob. Not Rick.

I guess Bear Peak must be a popular local hangout for kids from Lander, because I was initially kind of shocked when we heard the pickup pulling up after it had gotten dark. And, of course, our fire gave away where we were. First clearing right off the road.

Could I have done anything differently? Buster was such an inconsequential little shit, and Linda told him they were through, that he wasn't the boss of her. God, it sounds so juvenile, now. Did I really need to tell him to back off? For this girl I'd just met a few hours before? The things we'll do for a piece of ass when we've been dry for a while.

I hear one of the Beamer doors open and close. I just couldn't believe it when he pulled the gun. It was just unreal. Everything slowed way down, and I could swear my heart was going to jump out of my throat. And then Buster wouldn't listen when Bob tried to reason with him. Just got more excited, and when he turned to scream at Linda, well, there was only one way out at that point.

He's probably OK. I'm sure they got him to a hospital. Maybe it'll take him a little time to recover, but nothing serious. So what am I looking at? He started it when he pulled the gun. He was armed, I wasn't. He went for the gun when I kicked it out of his hand. He had his hand on the trigger each time it went off. I'm not seeing that I'm guilty of anything but self-defense. I mean . . .

"How's it goin'?" It's Rick.

"It's goin'."

“Yeah.” We sit in silence for a few minutes. I pitch a small stone into the creek. It splashes, subsumed in a bit of a whooshing sound, and you can see it getting dragged along the bottom a few feet by the current before it comes to rest. Rick asks, “Whadduhyou think?”

“About what?”

“Seriously? About what? Harv, you shot a guy three times last night. He could be dead for all we know. That’s some serious shit.”

“Fuck you, Rick. You weren’t even there. We were struggling on the ground over the gun. What would you do, try to talk it out? Give him one more chance to point the gun at you? Oh wait, I know what you’d do. Go fuck a chick while your buddy’s havin’ a gun pointed at him. Nice touch, my friend.”

“Look, Harv. I thought it was a bad idea from the start . . .”

I break in, “Until you got your boy up inside that chick.”

“I’m not saying I didn’ go with it once we got there. I did. I can’t change that. But what I’m talkin’ about is the here an’ now.” The car door opens and closes again, as Rick keeps talking. “We gotta figure out what we’re gonna do. This could really be a problem. An’ not just with the law. Where those three guys came from, all of ’em at least hurt now, there’s probly more. We gotta think hard about this.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t want you doing my thinking for me. I mean, you weren’t there when I needed you. They outnumbered us three to two, and Bob’s not nearly your size. So I’m thinkin’ you don’t have a whole lot to say about a situation you weren’ around to help prevent.”

“Oh, for Christ sake, Harv. Who the fuck do you think you are? OK, so we didn’ say no at the gas station, because we’ve had you pull the ‘Whose car is it, anyway?’ shit before. We knew we were goin’ when you walked up with ’em. An’ let’s face it, you would’nuh minded if Bob went off with the third girl, leavin’ you alone with the one you liked. The problem is the townies who showed up, an’ you can’t blame me for that.” We sit in silence.

“Mornin’, guys. What’s up?” Bob pulls up a spot on a rock nearby.

“Rick here was just explaining to me what an asshole I am, an’ how I got us into a mess.”

“Come on, Harv. What I’m sayin’ is we have a situation here that we haftuh think through very carefully. We don’ know how any a those three boys are doin’. We don’ know if the law is lookin’ for us. We don’ . . .”

I’ve had enough of him, “Shut up, Rick. Whadduhyou think, Bob?”

Bob shifts a little uncomfortably on his rock. I can see I’ve lost him before he even opens his mouth. If we’re going to hit the road and just go, I’m going to have to tell both of them to fuck off. And that’s probably not a good alternative. “Well, I’m a little worried about the guy you shot.”

“Buster. Little shit dork-ass Buster.”

“Him. I mean, when his buddy got down to help him, he said he was pretty sticky. I’ve never been around a shooting before, but it sounds like a lotta blood to me. An’ when you guys were struggling, it looked like they were all gutshots. There’s a lotta stuff in there that can go wrong.”

I know he’s right about that. I’ve taken enough anatomy courses to fully describe not only all of the organs, but the various systems that connect to them, particularly the rich system of veins and arteries running through the torso. He’s right about the sticky not being good. “Go on.”

“Well, what’s done is done. An’ to me, it looked completely like self-defense on your part. He pulled the gun on you. He got all crazy when I suggested we just back off an’ leave. I mean, it was a pretty ballsy maneuver kickin’ the gun out of his hand . . .”

Rick interrupts, "Wait a minute. This guy . . ."

I clarify for him, "Buster."

". . . is pointin' a gun at you an' you kick it out of his hand? Holy shit!"

"Stop interrupting, Rick. Go on, Bob."

"Like I say, what's done is done. But we gotta think about what to do now. I mean, it's not quite like an engineering problem, but the damage is done. What we hafta do now is figure out how to fix the damage. An' the main damage I see is you could possibly be a fugitive until we go back an' get our side a the story on the record. An' the collateral damage is that Rick an' I could possibly be aiding a fugitive to escape. Not that you are one, but we hafta assume the worst to make good decisions."

"Whadduhyou suggest?"

"Well, it's about eight A M on Saturday morning. We're pretty much outta food, an' we're a good ways from a town in any direction. I say we go find a lawyer for you on Monday, so you have somebody local on your side, an' in the meantime we keep outta sight as much as possible. Now, I think we need to make a food run, an' it wouldn' hurt to gas up, either, but after that we find a good place to spend the weekend. Out of sight. Just in case."

That's the problem with Bob. Engineering degree. Logical as a fucking Vulcan. And, of course, I know he's right. "All right. So we go back down to Lander on Monday. Where do we go for the food run today?"

"I don' agree." Jesus, Rick is such a prick. "I don' think we should go back into Lander. Let's pick a town close by, where they're likely to have a lawyer, but let's stay away from where we picked the girls up. People could be lookin' for us."

"I kinduh hafta agree, Harv. There's bound to be a decent-sized town somewhere near Lander, in the same county, where we could find you a lawyer."

"OK."

Rick isn't through. "In the meantime, let's go over to Jackson for the food run. It's on the other side a the mountains from Lander, an' at least none a the locals'll be lookin' for us. We should go now an' get back up here outta sight as fast as we can."

I pick up a stone and pitch it into the creek. "Alright then. Let's go to Jackson. We've been there before, so we know where everything is. We can talk about Monday on the way, 'cause I'm gonna need more money for a lawyer."



I open my eyes and see the light filtering through the yellow and sky blue panels of my North Face three-man tent. It's comfortable in my down bag, laid out on top of my inflatable Thermo-Rest mattress. My sleeping bag stuff sack, tent stuff sack, jacket, shoes and flashlight are stacked near the tent door. Three-man tent is really a misnomer, because really there's only enough room for two people and then about a half space for stuff. I keep my clothes in the sleeping bag with me, so they're warm in the morning when I put them on.

Condensation from my breath during the night formed all over the inside of the tent. That means it got pretty cool. We've been in colder, though. In the Sierra Nevada I woke up one morning with ice

crystals frozen to the inside of the tent. Even there, though, my goose-down mummy bag kept me warm. That, and sleeping with socks on.

I can hear somebody rustling around outside. The sound of the valve on the propane one-burner being opened, the strike of the match and the whoosh of the flame lighting. Then the hiss as the flame is adjusted. After almost two months on the road I know these sounds well. I start by pulling on my underwear while I'm still full inside my sleeping bag. I put on my shirts sitting up with my torso outside the mummy bag, while my bare legs stay in. My legs are still mostly in my bag as I pull on my pants. Since we'll be bugging out today, I stuff my sleeping bag into its stuff sack. I deflate the Therma-Rest by opening the auto-inflate valve, folding it over on itself several times and sitting on it to force out most of the air in it. I close the valve. Then starting at the head of the Therma-Rest, away from the valve end, I roll the Therma-Rest into a tight cylinder, squeezing the leftover air down toward the valve end. Once the remaining six inches of the Therma-Rest have that inflated look, I reopen the valve and squeeze out the remainder of the air by completely rolling the Therma-Rest into a cylinder, quickly closing the valve again when I'm done. I maintain the tautness of the cylinder using two straps with cinching clasps. I collapse my camp pillow back into its football-type shape, tightening it with its attached cinch cylinder. Then I put on my shoes as I exit the tent door, leaving the tent stuff sack, my sleeping bag, Therma-Rest, pillow and flashlight right next to the door opening.

It's immediately colder outside, so I put my jacket on. We're higher than we were Friday night, probably by a couple thousand feet elevation, so that explains most of the temperature change. I see Harv watching and waiting for the water to boil. I walk away from the creek 50 yards or so to relieve myself. I have a semi piss hard-on, but out in nature you don't have to contort yourself to get the pee in the toilet. If there's a little arc to the flow, who cares? By the time I'm done, it's mostly deflated and easy to put back in place. I walk back over to where Harv is using the one-burner.

We carry three five-gallon buckets with us. We nest them inside an aluminum 20-quart pot lined with a plastic trash bag while we're traveling. Inside the top bucket we pack a hatchet, folding camp saw, collapsible shovel, nylon rope, plastic whisk broom with dustpan, spare flashlight, camp gloves, dish soap and sponge in a ziploc, and a waterproof sack for the matches and fire-starter. Right now Harv has the buckets sitting on the ground serving as supports for the two pieces of half-inch plywood we specially cut to serve as a table top. Each piece of plywood is 15" x 33", and they fit nicely in the trunk on top of our other gear once it's stowed properly. The middle support has two of the 15" edges butted together, so we have a 15"-wide table that's about five and a half feet long. Harv has kept the one-burner down at one end of the table. "Tough to sleep?" I ask him.

"Yeah. I've been up for about three hours. After tossin' an' turnin' I decided I might as well just get up an' eat. You really think this is the right way to go, Rick?"

"Yeah. I do, Harv. You know what time it is?"

Harv looks at his watch. The water boils. "About seven thirty."

"Hey, Bob. Let's get a move on. Breakfast." I've raised my voice a bit, so I'm pretty sure he hears me. I walk over to the trunk, which Harv has left open while we cook breakfast. Most times when we break camp, we have the same meal: a couple of packets of instant oatmeal, doused with a little milk; instant coffee, cubed sugar and milk available in the coffee if you want it; and a cup of orange juice. I fish out a trash bag and take it back over to the far end of the table. I slip one side of the lip of the trash bag underneath the edge of the table but on top of the bucket support, so that it hangs open at the end of the table. I go back to the trunk and collect the breakfast ingredients out of the cooler and one of our two dry goods bins. I bring them over and set them toward the middle of the table, but not on the joint. Made that mistake once. Then I go back over to get some styrofoam cups and plastic spoons, and set those at the far end of the table in two rows. Three 16-ounce cups for the oatmeal and three eight-ounce cups for the coffee. Each of us gets one spoon. We use our coffee cups for OJ after drinking the coffee.

Harv starts working on putting his oatmeal together just as Bob exits his tent. “Mornin’ guys.” We both respond, as we all take turns emptying packets of oatmeal into our large cups and spoonfuls of instant coffee crystals into our small cups. We set them all back down on the table after using our fingernails to etch our marks in them: a “b” for Bob; an “H” for Harv; an “r” for me. Harv slips the universal handle into the clasp on the large nested pot and carefully pours the right amount of water into each of the six cups while Bob slips away to pee.

Harv and I then add milk to our oatmeal and milk and sugar to our coffee, using the spoons first to stir and then to eat with. Bob returns from peeing and does the same. “How you holdin’ up, Harv?”

“Had a hard time sleepin’. I was tellin’ Rick, I was tossin’ since about four thirty, an’ finally got up around seven to start cookin’.”

“Well, I really think this is the right thing to do.”

“I know Bob, thanks.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes, as we listen to the creek rush by and the birds sing. Which we’ve decided is really a pretty stupid thing to call it, because from what we’ve seen the birds are mostly warning each other to keep the fuck away. Or looking to fuck another bird. Now that I think about it, maybe it is singing. We’ve got our national anthems, saying keep the fuck away. And there are plenty of songs about love, well, sex really. Then of course you’ve got your country PWT songs that manage to combine the two. Hang down your head Tom Dooley. Bob pipes up, “So, are we forgetting anything?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about that.” I continue, “It’s a long shot, but it’s possible the cops search the car. I think we oughtta leave the pot an’ coke out here somewhere. Then we come back an’ get it after we get this cleared up.”

“I can’t argue too much with that. Whadduhyou think Harv?”

“Let’s leave the gun with it, too. If anybody asks, I threw it out somewhere along the way Friday night.”

“You sure about that, Harv? I mean, if the kid was the one who had his finger on the trigger, maybe that helps if your prints aren’t on it.”

“No. I came away with the gun after the struggle, an’ I needed to use it to control the other two guys after I got up. My prints would be on the trigger. I think it’s better to leave it.”

“OK,” from Bob.

“I don’ wanna know where the gun is, so I can answer truthfully if asked. Harv, why don’t you load the gun an’ the drugs in the bear canister an’ take the shovel an’ bury it somewhere while Bob an’ I clean up breakfast?”

“That works.” And so Harv goes over to the trunk, packs the bear canister, seals it shut, puts it in a clean plastic trash bag and ties a knot in the top of the trash bag to make the inside waterproof. Then he walks off into the woods with the shovel to bury it. At the same time, Bob and I clean up breakfast and prep the stuff for packing in the car.

I go over to take down my tent. I begin by taking out the stuff I left by the tent door when I exited the tent this morning and setting it on the floor of the back seat, to keep it as clean as possible. I leave the tent stuff sack on an exposed corner of the tarp that I use as a pad underneath my tent. I remove the one stake that guys out the fly door. Then I loosen the fly grommets that slip under the ends of the poles that form the superstructure of the tent. I undo the velcro clasps that stabilize the fly to the outside of the poles and pull the fly free. I lay it on the hood of the car for the time being. It’s a little damp, but that’s just how it’s going to have to be. We’ll get a chance to dry things out later. I go back over to the tent and remove the clips that suspend and stretch the tent beneath the pole superstructure. As the tent

slowly collapses on itself as the air rushes out, the poles fall in their preset pattern on top of it. I remove the pole tips from the grommets at the edge points of the tent floor, and fold them up. They have shock cords inside, so they end up forming three pieces of uniform length that fit into an interior stuff sack nested in the tent stuff sack. I stuff them in the interior sack, cinch it closed and place the interior sack in the tent sack. I then remove the stake sack from the tent stuff sack and, using the fly guy stake I already pulled, pull the remaining six stakes holding down the floor of the tent, placing each stake in the stake sack as I go. I tie off the stake sack and place it in the tent stuff sack next to the pole sack. I make sure the tent sides and top are all above the floor, and then I fold the tent in thirds. Beginning from the foot of the folded-over tent, I tightly roll the tent into a cylinder, taking care to keep the tent on top of the clean tarp, compressing out any remaining air as I go. I slide the cylinder into the tent stuff sack. I then go and retrieve the fly, placing as much of it as possible on the tarp, folding it over roughly in fourths, because it's slightly bigger than the tent, and accomplishing the same cylindrical compression as with the tent. I place the fly in the tent stuff sack as well, cinch it up and set it on the back seat floor with my other gear.

Bob finishes his tent at just about the same time I finish mine. His is a Kelty, not as nice as a North Face, but serviceable. Same general procedure, but with a couple of variations. We pick up his tarp first, open it completely and grab the four corners, two each at the head and foot of the tarp. We then vigorously shake the tarp to shed water, pine needles and anything else that might have accumulated on it. After clearing the bottom side, we flip it over and repeat. We fold it into an approximately 18" by 18" square, and place it on the hood of the car. We do the same to my tarp.

Harv appears out of the trees, carrying the shovel. He places it near the trunk and carries his stuff from near his tent door over to the back seat floor. While he's in transit, Bob and I pull down the fly on his REI Camp Dome 3, a new design from some store based in Seattle that supposedly gives you more room inside the tent, although you can't quite stand up. Bob places Harv's fly on the hood of the car, and we begin to let down his tent. Same basic procedure, except Harv's helping, and his tent's packed away in no time. Tarp included.

We're a well-oiled machine when it comes to this part. Engineer Bob packs the trunk. It contains the cooler, the dry goods bins, a collapsible five-gallon water jug, the 20-quart pot with the nested buckets and their contents, the nested pots and some other essentials. In other words, all of the heavy stuff. The custom cut plywood boards fit on top so that the trunk can close with ease. We use two 16' by 20' tarps as the covering for our roof rack storage system. We lay one of the tarps completely open on top of the metal roof rack we've affixed to the rain gutters. We place all of the soft stuff, including our luggage, sleeping bags, tent sacks, pillows, tarps, blankets, the poncho, dirty laundry bags, and other sundry stuff, in the tarp, which sits on the roughly four- by six-foot storage area formed by the rack. When it's all stacked, it's two and a half, maybe three feet high. We fold the tarp edges up all along the sides and use four short shock cords, two horizontal, two vertical, through the grommets to hold the tarp together. We finish by placing the other 16' by 20' tarp over the cinched lower tarp. We pull the edges taut down under the rectangle formed by the roof rack runners. Then we use four longer more heavy duty shock cords, which we run across the tarp and attach to the rack—again, two horizontal and two vertical—to anchor the gear in place. We double the four tarp edges back up toward the middle of the gear stack, and use another four shock cords to cinch the tarp taut, two vertical and two horizontal. During our entire trip, we have never lost a piece of gear on the road, and nothing has gotten wet, not even in a downpour.

We leave at 8:05. It usually takes us only 30 minutes, but Harv doesn't usually have to go bury something.

HARV GETS IN BEHIND the wheel. Rick sits in the front passenger seat with the map, and I'm in the back. This wasn't our best campsite, but it was pretty good. Nice creek, fairly level ground. Easy to find firewood, and a huge boulder served as a hearth at the back of the fire circle. It did a nice job of radiating heat at us as we sat around the campfire at night.

Today's the day we go into Riverton. On the way to Jackson on Saturday we looked at the map and saw Riverton was the nearest town to Lander of any size. It made it pretty easy to decide it's the place we'll go to find Harv a lawyer. Harv was able to get ahold of his brother Jake, who's going to send him \$1,000 through the Western Union in Riverton. It's supposed to arrive today by 10 AM. Jake's an investment banker at Alcheman Sax in New York, so he's a couple hours ahead of us on the clock. Stanford undergrad and a Harvard MBA. His last year at Harvard was Harv's freshman year there.

Harv didn't want to call his old man for money. Afraid there'd be too many questions. Jake's just loaning it to him. They have an interesting relationship. You get them together and they really don't seem to like each other at all. But here they are separated by 2,000 miles and Jake spots Harv \$1,000 no questions asked. Go figure.

"Which way?"

"Take a right here. Down the road about three or four miles we should come to a fork where you bear left. That'll take us out to the highway."

Rick's navigating for Harv. Like he usually does, he found the campsite we used the last couple of nights. Rick loves the outdoors, and it seems like he's been studying maps most of his life. He was really the main driver behind putting the trip together. We definitely decided to do the trip when we got together over Christmas break. Rick made a few trips out west as he was growing up, so he had a good general idea of a lot of the places we should go. He talked it up to Harv and me, and we thought it sounded like a pretty cool idea. Once Harv agreed we could use his car, everything fell into place.

We left Northern Virginia on June 4th, a couple of weeks after each of us graduated. Rick went to UVa. I went to Tech because it had a better engineering program, but I got into UVa, too. We all got back home to Northern Virginia by Memorial Day, and we spent the balance of that week pulling our gear together, getting the roof rack, getting maintenance all up-to-date on the car and figuring out how to make everything fit. We left so soon after graduation because Harv will be starting med school. He has to be at Harvard August 27th to move in, so we're targeting being back to Northern Virginia sometime the middle of the week of August 22nd. That gives us about four more weeks on the road. Rick and I start our jobs in September.

We're on the highway now heading up to the pass. Once we cross it we'll be back in Fremont County. And back on the Atlantic side of the Continental Divide.

We started our trip heading out the southern route. We took 66 out to 81, and headed south down to Knoxville. That's where we picked up I-40, which was our mainline across the country. We made it to Albuquerque in three days, where we took a right on 25 and stayed outside of Santa Fe for a few days. Santa Fe was an absolute blast. We spent one afternoon in the bar at the Bell Tower that turned into watching the sunset and having a late dinner, celebrating the real beginning of our trip. I'm still amazed we were able to find our way back to our campsite that night, but we did.

Santa Fe's at a pretty high elevation, though, and we ran into snowpack real quickly in the mountains outside of town, so we decided we'd try to see as much stuff at lower elevations as we could during the month of June. Try to get up into the mountains maybe in July, once the snowpack melts a little more. Of course, here it is late July and we're still running into snowpack at the higher elevations. We've been told that the West generally got a lot of snow this past winter.

So we headed north out of Santa Fe up to southwestern Colorado, through Durango and on over to Utah. We bought our National Park Golden Eagle Pass at Arches. We decided to stay in the park there, because it was so far away to find anywhere to camp and travel into the park each day. Behind the campground was this awesome fin of sandstone. The first evening there we climbed up it and relived some fun times Rick had as a kid. The next evening we explored the fin all the way to its end at the entrance to the campground. Part of getting to the end was jumping a 10-foot chasm. We're all pretty good athletes, played football in high school and all. In fact, Harv played in college. But it's a little different when your ass is truly on the line. You miss your jump and you fall 60 feet onto rock. It was an awesome rock scramble.

"OK, we're coming up on Riverton." Rick brings me out of my daydream. "Why don't we see if there's some sorta Visitor Center or something?" Harv drives into town, right down the main drag. Mostly low buildings, a couple two or three stories. "Look, right over there. There's a Western Union label on that door. I think you can park on the street here. Bob an' I'll go over to that phone booth an' look for lawyers while you go get the money."

And so that's what we do. Rick and I go over to the phone booth and pull out the Yellow Pages. There's one page of lawyers. Rick rips it out, and we head back to the car. Harv's not back, and he has the keys, so we sit on a bench and wait for him. "Which one do you think?" I ask.

"I don't know. It's really Harv's decision. I figure we can just give him the page an' let him decide."

"He'll probly at least wanna know what we think. Lemme see the page." Rick hands it over to me, and I look through it. Out of 15 lawyers listed on the page, six are in Riverton. And of those, only two claim to be criminal lawyers. Doesn't look like this will be too hard a decision. One is Fred Wilcox. His address looks like he's only a couple of blocks away, here on Main Street. The other is William Henry Bowman. Sounds like a pretentious bastard. He's just a couple of blocks away, too. "Who would you rather have for a lawyer? Fred Wilcox or William Henry Bowman, asshole extraordinaire?"

"Quite frankly? In Harv's circumstances I think I'd prefer to have the asshole on my side, if he's smart. We're not lookin' to go drinkin' with him or anything. You want him to fix a mess."

As I'm mulling it over, Harv walks up. "Jesus! When they were passin' out brains they skipped this fuckin' town. Idiot behind the counter couldn't even read my name off my god damn license. It took the manager to finally approve givin' me the money."

"You have it in cash?"

"Yeah. Minus the thirty-six dollar fee. Jake's a good brother, but he never takes off his business hat. I owe him a thousand, but I only see nine sixty-four of it."

"Should we go convert it into traveler checks?"

"No. I don't think so. Let's see the lawyer first. Probably better to pay him in cash. Avoid any more service fees until I really need to pay 'em."

I hand the page over to Harv. "Here you go, Harv. There's two criminal lawyers in town."

Harv looks the page over. "I'll give this Wilcox guy a call. Bigger ad, probly more successful." Harv takes the page and walks over to the phone booth. Rick and I watch him dial. We can see him talking to someone. Then he hangs up pretty quickly. He dials again. Again we can see him talking to

someone. Then he stands there with the phone to his ear for a couple of minutes, but he's not saying anything. Finally he talks again, scribbles something down on the page and hangs up. He walks back over to the bench. "Wilcox is on vacation for two weeks. Bowman can see us now. It's just a few blocks away. Let's go."

We get in and Harv drives over to the Post Office and parks the car in the shade. "It's where he said to park the car. Said it would be cooler than leavin' it in his lot or on the street."

We walk one block off of Main and find a nondescript one-story building that looks like it has four offices in it. On the door to suite 102, we see the lettering, "William H. Bowman, Attorney at Law". We push the door open and walk in. There's a lady sitting behind a desk off to the side of the entryway who looks like she's straight out of some black-and-white movie from the '40s. Her hair's curled back around her ears, almost a Donna Reed kind of look from *It's a Wonderful Life*, except she outweighs her by 25 or 30 pounds, has rolls of fat trying to bulge out of her dress under her pits and looks to be at least 30, if not 35.

"Can I help you boys?"

Harv speaks up, "Yes ma'am. I believe I just spoke with you. Harv Weinberg here to see Mr. Bowman."

"I'll let him know you're here. Please have a seat." She picks up the phone for a second, speaks inaudibly, and then adds, "It'll be just a minute."

We go over to a sofa pushed up against the wall on the other side of the entryway. It's kind of a puke green naugahide, with metal arms that have plastic runners on top of them. It looks like surplus from a 1950s hospital waiting room. There's a small rectangular glass-top coffee table in front of the sofa, with a few magazines spread out on it. Just what I was hoping to find, the latest issue of *Guns and Ammo*. As if we haven't had enough of that.

"Mr. Bowman will see you now. Please go on back through that door. Then the second door on the left." She motions to a door at the back of the entryway, in between her desk and the sofa. Fortunately we didn't have the opportunity to sit down.

Harv heads toward the door and looks back at us, "You comin' or what?"

"Sure." We both say in unison, and all three of us walk through the door, Harv first, then me, then Rick.

We find the second door on the left and knock. "Come on in. It's open." We open the door and walk in. Bowman's chairback is facing us as we walk in. He snaps shut a notebook or something, and it looks like he's putting it in a cabinet behind his desk. Then the chair wheels around, and, and . . . he's the biggest fucking Indian I could ever imagine seeing. He looks like the Chief in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Only he's dressed nicer. A white shirt with silver colored buttons inlaid with turquoise. He wears a bolo tie, with a turquoise clasp and endpieces made of turquoise and silver. When he stands, he's wearing black pleated trousers. He's bigger than Rick, and Rick is 6'3" and 220 pounds. Bowman must be 6'6" or 6'7", and a muscular 250. It's almost freakish. Maybe he could just beat the shit out of somebody for us. He offers his hand to Harv, "Mr. Weinberg, Will Bowman."

Harv shakes his hand. "Harv Weinberg. Good to meet you. This is Bob Johnson." I shake his hand, "and Rick Shifflet." Rick shakes his hand.

"Pleased to meet you boys. Have a seat." He motions to the sofa in his office, where we sit down next to each other. It's much nicer than the one out in the reception area. A flame stitch with blue and rose earthtones against a cream background. Very Indian-looking. "Now what can I do for you? Civil or criminal matter?"

"Well, I'm not really sure, but it could possibly be criminal I guess. You see . . ."

“Let me stop you right there. Now, until you’re my client, you don’t want to say anything to me about your problem. No attorney-client privilege. So first let’s see if you want to hire me. Anything I can tell you about myself?”

“Uh, what kind of law do you do?”

“I mostly do trial work. Cases in court. Most of the time down in Lander at the County Courthouse, although I do some Tribal Court on the reservation and some federal work, usually over in Casper, although sometimes I have to go all the way down to Cheyenne. About sixty percent of my cases are civil, forty percent criminal.”

“What’s that mean, civil versus criminal?”

“Well, the easiest way to think about it is that criminal cases mean you’ve been charged with a crime by the state. That’s a case against the prosecutor and the cops. A civil matter is when you get sued by somebody, or you sue somebody. Could be for a contract, could be a traffic accident, could be a slip an’ fall.”

“What kind of criminal cases have you defended?”

“Mostly assault and battery. Guys go into a bar, look at each other a little funny, both want the same girl, somethin’ like that. Somebody takes offense and then it’s on.”

“You usually get people off?”

“Interesting question. Let’s look at it this way. If you’re a mean drunk and you start the fight, winning is keeping you out of jail, it’s not an acquittal. On the other hand, if you’ve got a good excuse for what happened, I win more of those than I lose.”

“A lot more?”

“Harv. Can I call you Harv?”

“Sure.”

“And you call me Will. Here’s the thing, Harv. You’re kind of asking me to guarantee an outcome for your case when I know nothing about it. The thing is, each case is very different. The facts are different. Sometimes the cops do a good job, and sometimes they screw up. Sometimes a witness is good on the stand, and sometimes a witness who’s actually telling the truth is so terrified they look like they’re lying. I’ve been at this for ten years now. I’m probably in court as much as any lawyer in Fremont County. I’ve gotta think I wouldn’t keep getting there if I wasn’t doing something right.”

“So how does this work?”

“My minimum fee is two hundred and fifty dollars for criminal matters. I charge thirty-five an hour. Once I get to the two fifty based on thirty-five an hour, you pay the excess over two fifty. But if I don’t get to two fifty based on the hours, that’s still my fee. You also pay all my expenses related to your case and your own expenses. I take the two fifty up front.”

Harv reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. He pulls some bills out of it and counts and organizes them. “Okay, here’s two fifty.” He hands the stack of bills over to the Indian.

“Consider yourself a client. Now, Bob and, Rick, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Now I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you boys to go across the hall and sit in the conference room for a bit while I talk to Harv, here.” He picks up his phone, “Helen, could you meet two of these gentlemen in conference two, and see if they need anything? Thanks.” He hangs up the phone.

“She’ll be right over to see if you want anything to drink or need anything else. I’ll probably want to talk to you two some after I talk to Harv first.”

“Okay. I guess we’ll just hang out.”

Harv’s new lawyer stands up, walks over and opens up the door, “Thanks, I appreciate that.”

And so Rick and I walk into the conference room across the hall.



Will and I walk into the conference room where Rick and Bob are sitting around an oval-shaped table, with some sort of laminated fake wood veneer. Will’s assistant Helen walks in with the sandwiches and burgers we ordered earlier. It’s around noon and a good time for a lunch break.

“Let’s see. Bacon cheeseburger?”

Rick pipes up, “That’s me.”

“Regular cheeseburger?”

That’s my order. “Right here.” And as she hands it to me, “Thanks.”

“Let’s see, the tuna melt is for you,” she says as she looks at Will and hands it to him, “and that means the Reuben must be yours.” She hands it to Bob.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be back with the drinks in just a minute. Does anybody want water, too?”

“Yes, Helen. If you could bring us a pitcher of ice water with four glasses that would be great. Thank you.” Will walks over to one end of the oval table, puts his yellow pad and ball point pen on the table, and sits down. Rick and Bob go back to where they were sitting, and I sit to Will’s right, directly across from Bob and angled across from Rick.

We all start pulling our food out of the sacks it came in. The sandwiches are in little open-top waxed cardboard crates, wrapped in thin white paper. Each bag has fries to go along with the sandwich, even Bob’s Reuben. There are small little ketchup and mustard packages, a couple of napkins, a pickle and a towelette. As we’re all getting our food situated, Will looks over at Bob and Rick and begins to talk. “So, Bob and Rick, just so you know what we’re doing here, let me bring you up to speed. I’ve had a talk with Harv that’s protected by what’s called the attorney-client privilege. It means Harv has the right to tell me not to tell anybody else what he’s told me—or what I’ve told him. That lets him have confidence he can tell me the absolute truth about what happened, without having to worry that it could be used against him later.”

Just then Helen walks back in with four cups of soda on a tray. She sets them down on the table in front of us and returns momentarily with a pitcher full of ice water, also on a tray, with four glasses. “Thank you, Helen.”

“Need anything else?”

“Not right now, thank you.” She leaves, closing the door behind her. “Let’s see. Coke is for me.” Will starts sorting through the drinks, which have notations marked on the plastic lids indicating what’s inside, passing them out as he identifies each one. “Mr. Pibb?” Rick raises his hand. “Seven Up?”

“That’s mine,” I say. Will slides the remaining drink over to Bob.

“Okay. Well, eat up. So, like I was sayin’, Harv here has this attorney-client privilege thing with me. So he’s not going to talk with you about the discussion we had in my office, and neither am I. But you guys are witnesses, important witnesses for Harv, so I’ve got some questions for you.” Will takes a bite of his tuna melt. “Okay, so maybe you boys start wi’ tell’n m’ what brought you to Lander,” he loses a little clarity mid-sentence as he chews his food.

Rick starts talking, and Will starts taking notes, all the time continuing to eat using his free right hand. Rick explains how we had wrapped up our time in Yellowstone and were on our way over to Craig to go to the Flat Tops in Colorado. How we stopped just outside of Lander that afternoon, early evening to get gas. How I met the girls, bought a case of Bud and said we’d follow them to go party. How we followed them up to Bear Peak. How . . .

Will breaks in, “Anybody drink any beer before getting up to Bear Peak?” Bob and Rick both shake their heads no. “Bob, anything you want to add to what Rick has said up to this point? Anything you remember a little different?”

Bob says that Rick has it right, except he remembers thinking it was a bad idea. But he also lets Will know that he didn’t say anything to me about it. Bob then continues from there, in great detail about how we prepped the fire site, gathered the wood, built the fire, cracked open the beers, rolled and smoked a couple of numbers and just generally started getting to know the girls. He continues about how Rick and one of the girls left the fire for a walk and didn’t come back. When he gets to the description of what happened with Buster, Will slows Bob down and asks a lot of specific questions. About how things escalated, who pulled the gun, where everybody was standing, what got said after the gun was out, how the struggle started, and what it looked like up until the three shots went off. Bob answers each question specifically and in great detail. The engineer in him shines through.

“And where do you come back into this story, Rick?”

Rick then proceeds to tell Will how he and the girl walked off with a few beers and found another circle, where they decided to build their own fire. He conveniently leaves out the coke and fucking her, picking back up when he sees me crashing out of the forest into his clearing. How he left right away when I said it’s time to go and how Bob was driving the Beamer.

Bob then picks up the description of the drive, including the nutjobs in the pickup who tried to run us off the road. He says he didn’t know who they were, but he suspected it was probably the other two guys who were with Buster at the fire circle. No idea what happened to them. Bob and Rick then take turns talking about going to Jackson, coming into town today and other meaningless details.

Will circles back and asks about the gun. Rick and Bob both say they don’t know where it is. Which is technically true. They tell Will I’m the one to ask about where the gun is. Finally Will gets up and says, “OK, boys, if you’ll excuse me for a couple of minutes, I have a phone call I need to make. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Bathroom’s out the front door of the office and over in Suite One Oh One if you need to go.” He leaves the conference room, with the door open behind him. We can hear the door to his office close.

“So, Harv, what gives? Wha’d he say?” It’s Rick who’s curious.

“I really can’t talk about it.”

“What, all of a sudden this guy’s your best buddy an’ you can’t talk to us?”

“It’s a legal thing, OK, Rick? Like Will said, it’s the whole attorney-client privilege thing. Just take a pee break or something.” So Rick and Bob do just that. They head off to the bathroom together.

Jesus fucking Christ. Buster’s dead. Actually dead. And real quick, too. Funeral tomorrow. Will says it’s the talk of the county. First killing in Fremont County in 16 years. I was just kidding myself thinking Buster would probably be OK. Who better than me should know that three gut shots are

going to hit something that bleeds out? Fuck, why did that little shit have to die? This is just going to be a huge mess, and how is it going to affect medical school? Will they kick me out? It's almost too much. My life could be over.

Rick and Bob come back in first and sit back down. Then Will comes back in with a piece of paper in his hand. "Well, you boys are celebrities around here, even though nobody knows who you are. So here's what I want you to do. There's a little town called Arapahoe a little outside of Riverton, just off the highway down to Lander. You pass through Arapahoe and about a mile later you'll see a sign for the Honey Comb Ranch. Here's written instructions." He slides the piece of paper to me. "When you leave the office you drive straight there. Ask for Standing Bear, and tell him Red Hawk sent you. You'll need to give him a fifty dollar deposit. He'll know what to do."

"Should we stop to buy food, or . . ."

"No. Just go to the Honey Comb Ranch and get situated. I'll be there in a few hours and we'll talk more. Right now I want you boys off the map."

"Harv, you good with this?" It's Rick.

"Yeah. Do what he says." Rick gives me a look like who the fuck is this guy and why are you listening to him. But I've come to trust Will. He's very thorough. He already knew about Buster, and he knows the sheriff is looking for us. As well as some other people. Armed people. So he's right. We need to get off the map.

5

“THERE IT IS. HONEY Comb Ranch.” Rick points it out off to the right. I turn off the highway onto the dirt drive, and after about 300 yards of dropping down a gentle slope we come to a gate. There’s an Indian boy, looks to be about 12 or 13, sitting on a folding metal chair just inside the gate, off the side of the drive. He hops the fence and, as he walks toward the car, makes a motion to me to roll down the window.

“Whadduhyou want?”

“I’m here to see Standing Bear. Red Hawk sent us.”

“Wait here.” He hops back over the fence and picks up a bike that was lying on the ground next to the chair. He rides off.

“Well I feel warmly welcomed already.” Rick’s sarcasm drips off of every word. “The only way this could get any better is for some giant fuckin’ Indian to come start blastin’ away at us with a shotgun.”

I return the favor, “Do you really haftuh have such a positive fuckin’ attitude all the time, Rick? Did it ever occur to you that maybe if we’re gonna spend time here we don’t want it to be easy to get in?”

“I just wanna be sure I can get out if I want to.”

Just then a pickup comes barreling over the rise on the other side of the gate and skids to a stop. And a giant fucking Indian with a shotgun gets out and starts walking toward the gate. It’s like déjà vu. Except for the jeans and tee shirt he’s wearing, he could be Will. He opens the gate, walks through and closes it behind him. He walks up to my window. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Standing Bear. Red Hawk sent us.”

“I’m Standing Bear. You got the fifty bucks?” I pull out two twenties and a ten and pass them to Standing Bear through the window. He looks at them, folds them over and shoves them in the left front pocket of his jeans. “Follow my truck.” He walks back over to the gate, opens it up and motions for me to drive through. After I drive through he closes the gate and gets in his truck. The boy goes back to sitting in his chair. Only then do I notice the boy also has a shotgun, leaning against one of the fence posts, just out of our line of sight from the other side of the gate.

I follow Standing Bear’s truck on the dirt drive for about three quarters of a mile until we come to a compound of four buildings. Three of them are a cream stucco construction, with exposed logs sticking out that must serve as the joists and rafters. One of the three structures is two stories and substantially larger than the other two. There’s a circle in front of it where some cars and trucks are parked, and in the center of the circle there are three cottonwoods that provide shade. The other two stucco structures are off to the right as we approach the three buildings, and Standing Bear takes a right and drives over toward the stucco dwelling that’s farthest from the main building. Just beyond the last stucco building there’s a large barn, constructed out of faded silvery wood. It looks like it needs to be painted. It’s got two huge doors that are closed. Standing Bear drives past the last stucco building and stops just shy of the barn. I stop behind him. Standing Bear gets out and opens up the barn doors. It looks like an airplane hangar inside. I mean, I’ve never been on a farm before, but I always imagined horse stalls and a loft for hay or something like that. This barn, though, is almost the length of half a football field, and a good half of it is full of pickups, tractors, bulldozers, any number of vehicles, both for transportation and farm work. Standing Bear waves me forward and points to a corner of the barn. I drive the Beamer in and park it where he directs me. We get out.

Standing Bear walks over. “OK, so here’s the deal. For fifteen bucks a night you get to park the car in here, stay in the guest house next door an’ get three meals a day. If you need to drive somewhere, I can rent you a beater pickup for another five bucks a day. You fill it with gas while you’re out. You want beer, it’s three bucks a six pack. Fifth a whiskey is fifteen. When you eat up the fifty, you give me another fifty. No drugs, no visitors, no calls. We clear?”

Rick pipes up, “What if we wanna leave?”

“Nobody’s makin’ you stay. I’m doin’ Red Hawk a favor. I’m not your mamma. But my advice is you stick around ’til Red Hawk tells you to go. Get what bags you need outta your car, an’ I’ll take you over to the guest house.”

We each have one main suitcase with our clothes in it, which we get out of the tarps that sit on the roof rack. We re-wrap the tarps around our other stuff and reconnect the bungee cords to keep the tarps securely fastened. We each pick up our bag, and Standing Bear leads us out of the barn. Once we all walk out of the barn, Standing Bear turns and closes the barn doors.

We follow Standing Bear over to the guest house, about 100 feet from the barn. We walk up to the front door. It’s made of a series of six thick vertical dark wood panels, each about six inches wide. The door is about three feet wide until it gets to about six feet high, where the panels are then rounded off to a semicircle. At the center point of the semicircle, the door must be about seven and a half feet high. Standing Bear pulls out a set of keys, “This one here fits the deadbolt.” He slips it into the upper circular lock, and there’s a click as he turns it to the left. “This other one fits the doorknob.” He slips it into the keyhole on the doorknob, turns it to the right and shoves the door open. “Keys work the same on the side an’ back doors.”

Standing Bear walks right through the middle of the doorway without needing to duck. We follow him in, immediately descending six steps straight down into a large high-ceilinged central room that’s about 30 feet wide across the back of the house, and maybe a little deeper from the bottom of the steps to the back wall. Standing Bear’s boots echo off the stone floor with each stride he takes. There are four ceiling fans placed strategically around the room. About eight feet from the steps, set lengthwise to us, is a large table made out of dark wood that seats 12. Beyond that is a nondescript couch, with a couple of upholstered chairs sitting at right angles to it around a coffee table, made of the same dark wood. This conversation pit faces away from the table, toward the river stone fireplace on the back wall. It has what looks to be a rough sandstone slab for a mantle. Just above the mantle hangs an old gun that looks like it could kill an elephant. Standing Bear notices me looking at it. “Antique. Don’t work. There’s four bedrooms over there to the left. You can each pick your own. The kitchen,” he motions to the back right corner, “is over there, but we’ll bring your food over from the main house. Bathroom’s around the corner to the right. You can figure out the light switches.”

We take it in for a second. Bob walks around the corner to the right to check out where the bathroom is. I set my bag down and walk to the back of the house to look out the double-hung window to the left of the fireplace. About a couple hundred yards behind the house there’s a river. The bank’s been cleared on our side, but there are a bunch of cottonwoods on the opposite bank. Just outside the back door to my left is a circular wrought iron table with four chairs on a little stone patio. I turn and look back, and Rick hasn’t moved. He’s still standing at the foot of the entryway steps holding his bag.

“OK. Well, I’ll be back later when Red Hawk gets here. We let the dogs out at nine. Be in the house by then.” He places the keys on the table and walks out past Rick, pulling the door to behind him.



Aside from the general creepy factor of the whole situation, the guest house is kind of nice. And for 15 bucks a night it’s a real deal. I took one of the middle bedrooms on the left side of the great room,

Bob took the one closest to the back door, and Harv has the other one right next to mine. They're all pretty similar, about 12 by 20, with a queen bed and a chest of drawers. Each one also has a wooden straight-back chair, for getting dressed I guess. End tables on each side of the beds, near the heads, with lamps. One end table in each room has a digital alarm clock. Bob discovered a washer and dryer near the bathroom, and he immediately started doing some laundry. Harv has next dibs and then me.

"I feel kinduh like a criminal hidin' out from the law." It's Harv.

"Maybe it's because you are," and I immediately regret what I've said, because I know the next words out of Harv's mouth. But they don't come. He just remains silent, staring out the window. Bob doesn't say anything either.

Finally Harv speaks, "Maybe we should get a coupla bottles a whiskey from Standing Bear when he comes back. Get good an' drunk tonight."

Now Harv's kind of freaking me out. "Do you have somethin' you wanna tell us, Harv?"

"No. Will oughtta be here before long, an' we'll all have a better idea what's gonna happen."

Almost as if on cue the front door swings open, and Bowman walks in, followed by Standing Bear. "Thank you, brother. I appreciate all of your help." Then Bowman says to us, "Do you need anything before my brother leaves us alone?"

Harv speaks up, in a level matter-of-fact tone, "Uh, Mr. Standing Bear, we'd like to get a coupla those bottles of whiskey, please."

"I'll need another fifty to do that."

"But I thought we're only in fifteen so far."

"Brother?"

Bowman nods to Standing Bear and speaks to Harv, "Harv, at least some of you will have to be here through Wednesday night, so that's forty-five dollars right there, and you're probably going to need a car for at least one day. I'll explain more in a couple of minutes, but your fifty would cover that. If you want extras, I think Standing Bear explained how that works."

Harv walks over into his bedroom, rifles his chest of drawers for a moment and returns with two twenties and a ten, which he gives to Standing Bear. Standing Bear pockets them, and as his boots echo across the floor, says, "I'll be back in a couple minutes."

Then just as he begins walking up the stairs to the front door, Harv calls out, "And a couple of six packs, please?" Standing Bear waives his right hand above the side of his head in a gesture of affirmation, and we hear the door pull to.

Bowman walks over to the table and sets his briefcase down in front of the left head of the table. He unsnaps the latches on either side of the handle and flips open the top. He pulls out a pad of yellow lined paper and a ball-point pen and sets them on the table. "Excuse me for a second," he says as he goes over into the bathroom.

"Damn, Harv! Boilermakers? Drunk I get, but sick, too?"

"We don't haftuh drink it all, tonight, Bob. It's just I don' wanna run out. An' it sounds like we might have another night or two ahead of us here." The words sink in. It sounds totally goofy, but we actually are "holed up" in a hideout in the middle of nowhere, Wyoming. How much weirder could this get?

Bowman comes back out of the bathroom. "Please have a seat," he says to all of us, motioning toward the table with his left hand. We sit down, pretty much the same as in Bowman's conference room earlier today. Harv is on Bowman's right, the only difference is I'm sitting next to Bowman and Bob is

on my left. Bowman's left-handed, so I figure from here I can see anything he writes down on his pad. "OK, then. Rick, I need to ask you a very important question. Did you have sexual relations with one of the girls?"

"Uh, whadduhyou mean by sexual relations?"

Bowman cuts me a glare that says don't take me for a fucking idiot and rephrases, "Did you fuck her?", his voice raised not quite to a shout.

"Uh, yeah."

"Four times?"

"I think so."

"You're not sure?"

He's scribbling away now, but his left hand covers his notes as he writes. "Four times, yes."

"Which one?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand, which one of the four times, what?"

"Which girl?"

"The one I took the walk with."

"And her name would be?"

"Um. It didn't really come up."

Harv is snickering and clearly enjoying himself, "Yeah, but somethin' else did."

Bowman ignores him, "Then I guess you'll be my client, too."

"Say what?"

"You're wanted for rape."

"What? That's bullshit! She even played with my dick to start the last time. No way I raped her. She was ready, willing an' able."

"Ready and willing I believe. The able is your problem. She's underage. Fifteen. And her daddy owns the county."

I can feel my stomach drop out of my gut, I get a little light-headed, and, while it doesn't spin, everything in the room goes a little fuzzy for a moment. Nobody says anything, and then the door opens and we can hear Standing Bear walking down the stairs. As he walks past the table over to the kitchen he plunks down one bottle of whiskey on it. He sets the other on the kitchen counter and puts the beer in the fridge. He opens the cupboard and pulls out four six-ounce glasses with side beveling. He fishes an ice cube from the freezer for each one, pinches two glasses between the thumb and middle finger of each hand, brings them over to the table and sets them down next to the whiskey bottle. Jim Beam. The cheap stuff. But effective. Standing Bear leaves without saying a word. We listen to his steps echo out the front door and hear it pull to.

I look over at Harv. His jaw has dropped. His glee of a minute ago is replaced by a "Holy shit!" face that, for the moment, seems etched in stone. Bob is just taking the scene in, a mild look of disbelief on his face; almost as if he expects to wake up.

Bowman is next to speak, or maybe he was the last one to speak, too. "For now, the two fifty covers both of you. If you want some of your whiskey, now might be a good time."

Bob slowly reaches over for the fifth, breaking the seal as he unscrews the cap. He pours each of the four glasses about half full and passes one to each of me, Bowman and Harv. Then he gulps his entire glass down, leaving only the ice cube. He pours himself another.

Bowman continues, "Thank you, Bob. Drink up, boys," he says as he downs all of his whiskey, too. I take a small sip of mine, and the alcohol warms the inside of my mouth as it spreads across my tongue, and then I feel the tingle spread down the back of my throat. I take another, little bit larger pull, and the alcohol washes over the entire inside of my mouth. Then I down the rest of my glass. As that burning sensation spreads all the way down into my gut, the room comes back into sharp focus. I push my glass back over toward Bob and he refills it. Harv has yet to take a drink.

"So, um, here's the situation." Bowman begins to talk again. "There's a funeral for Buster tomorrow at two in the afternoon. Lot of the town will be there. I talked to the sheriff, and we agreed that during the funeral would be the best time for you to turn yourselves in."

"What? When did we decide that? What are our options?"

"You're a fugitive, Rick. You're right, you can run if you want. But my advice is to turn yourself in. There's a warrant out for your arrest, and until you get that cleared up, the law will be looking for you. It's just Wyoming right now, but soon it'll be neighboring states and then it'll go national. It's only a matter of time before those boys come to and remember your car and plates. Eventually they'll figure out who you are."

"How can there be a warrant if they don't even know who I am?"

"You know, we can keep discussing these silly little points of procedure, or we can get on with things. Are you really saying you want to think about running from this?"

Harv breaks in, "I'm going in tomorrow to turn myself in."

"Well, great! That's just fucking great. That pretty much seals the deal for me, then, dudn' it? Once they know you, they . . ." And then I just quit talking. Bowman gives me time. Because I realize I can't spend life on the lam. Why am I carrying on like this? Harv's in deeper shit than me, but he seems fine with relying on the system. Of course, he didn't shoot the prince of Fremont County, whereas I apparently did fuck the princess. Four times for style points. I collect myself, "I didn' know she was underage. I didn't ask her for her age, but she's, well, well-developed, an' I thought she was eighteen or nineteen. You know, a senior in high school, maybe out a year."

"That's relevant. But it won't get the warrant withdrawn. You have to go to court to do that."

"Yeah. OK, so what are we lookin' at?"

"Well, like I was saying, the sheriff and I agreed that tomorrow during the funeral would be the best time for you boys to turn yourselves in. Lowest probability that any of the boys lookin' for you will be around. Likely to be at the funeral. I'll call the sheriff later and let him know, and he'll stay at the jail rather than attend the funeral. Bob will stay here, out of the picture. He's not wanted. You'll need to be arraigned within forty-eight hours, where they read the charges against you and you enter a plea."

"What about bail?"

"I think you're better off in the county jail than on the outside. If you have to stick around here, you increase the likelihood that someone finds you. Better to keep your safehouse a secret until you really need it. Bob needs it now. The sheriff's a good law and order man. Don't get me wrong, he wants you prosecuted. But more than anything he dudn' want any vigilante justice. He takes that real personal." Bowman pauses for a minute to see if we have any more questions. Then he continues, "Standing Bear and I will drive you in tomorrow in a pickup. We'll escort you into the Sheriff's Office at the county jail. They'll take custody of you, read you your rights, photograph you, fingerprint you. Don't say anything to them. Follow commands, but otherwise keep your mouths shut. We'll leave here about

one thirty, quarter to two. Don't bring anything with you except the clothes on your back. No money, no wallets, no I D, no nothin'."

"So what's the plan at the arraignment?"

"I'm still workin' on that, but I have a couple ideas. Still haftuh pin a couple things down. Worst that happens is we haftuh decide whether to seek bail. Best that happens is we get the whole thing kicked. But I just don't know yet. Remember, you've been living with this since Friday. I just had it fall in my lap this morning." Harv and I nod our heads in agreement. Bob doesn't say anything. "Alright, then. Eat well these next three meals. They'll feed you at the jail, but it won't be as good as Standing Bear's food. I'll see you tomorrow after lunch."

And with that, Bowman gathers up his notes, stuffs them in his briefcase and walks up the steps and out the door. A free man, and our only hope to remain so.



"You're wanted for rape."

"What! That's bullshit! She even played with my dick to start the last time. No way I raped her. She was ready, willing an' able."

"Ready and willing I believe. The able is your problem. She's underage. Fifteen." The disclosure lands like a roundhouse right. "And her daddy owns the county."

What the fuck just happened? We came here to clear things up for Harv. But now Rick seems to be in even deeper shit because he doesn't have a defense. She's underage. Statutory rape. If Wyoming's anything like Virginia you don't get out of that unless you're within three years of her age. And Rick's 22. Jesus, he's going up. We're actually losing somebody on the trip. I thought our folks were just being worrywarts when they warned us to be careful. I mean, we survived college, where a whole lot crazier shit happened. Well, I guess nobody got shot, but that's not what Rick's going down for. Fuck, I might be on my own here. Two of my best buddies might be doing serious time because of one split-second decision to party with some country and western vixens. This can't be happening. I look back at the table and see a bottle of Jim Beam on it, along with four glasses, each with a cube of ice.

"For now, the two fifty covers both of you. If you want some of your whiskey, now might be a good time." I instinctively reach for the bottle. I twist off the cap, like so many others in the past. Very deliberately, I pour each glass exactly half full. A shot and a half. I pass the first glass to the right to Rick. The next glass I pass to Will, on Rick's right. The final glass, other than mine, I pass to Harv, diagonally across from me. I immediately down mine, and I feel better. And pour myself another.

"Thank you, Bob. Drink up, boys."

Will and Rick begin to talk some more, but I can't listen yet. I down half of my drink. The room swirls a little bit. I could be on my own to get back to Virginia. This is all too much too fast. We're out here in the middle of fucking nowhere, relying on people we met this morning, who have already lifted 350 bucks out of the 964 Harv got from Jake. We stay three days and we're broke. There's noise in the background. What are they saying? "That's relevant. But it won't get the warrant withdrawn." Oh, great! Whatever might have been a hope still won't work. How in the world are we going . . .

"What about bail?"

I take the last slug of my drink. I'm getting that warm relaxed feeling that comes from a few quick shots. My own private space. I tune back in. "Follow commands, but otherwise keep your mouths

shut. We'll leave here about one thirty, quarter to two. Don't bring anything with you except the clothes on your back. No money, no wallets, no I D, no nothin'."

"So what's the plan at the arraignment?"

"I'm still workin' on that, but I have a couple ideas. Still haftuh pin a couple things down. Worse that happens is we haftuh decide whether to seek bail. Best that happens is we get the whole thing kicked. But I just don't know yet. Remember, you've been living with this since Friday. I just had it fall in my lap this morning." Rick nods his head like he's come around to accepting things. "Alright, then. Eat well these next three meals. They'll feed you at the jail, but it won't be as good as Standing Bear's food. I'll see you tomorrow after lunch." And then Will just gets up and leaves. It's like he just came in and took a huge steaming dump on our table and just leaves. Pretending like there's no stink or mess. We sit in silence for several minutes. Harv finally takes a sip of his whiskey. I pour another drink for myself. The bottle's more than half gone and we haven't even had dinner yet.

Harv speaks up, "Hey, Bob, buddy. Slow down there. We don' wanna lose you before dinner." I look at my third drink, my right hand gripped tight around the glass, like I'm holding on for dear life. I force myself to loosen my grip, and then spread my fingertips and thumb across the rim of the glass, sort of like you'd do if you were going to open a jar. I give the glass a couple of twirls. The ice clinks around against the glass as the whiskey sloshes up the sides, but not quite over the rim.

"What are we gonna do guys? I don' wanna see you two go to jail. Are we doin' the right thing here?"

"Bob, I know the reality of this is harder than the theory of it was this morning, but yes, we're doing the right thing. I had a longer meeting this morning with Will than you an' Rick did. He's a smart guy. An' don't mistake his nice-guy act for bein' a pussy. When he saw I was tryin' to bullshit him on somethin' he came after me real hard. How he treated Rick just now is nothin' compared to what he's capable of. We're just gonna haftuh trust that the system'll work."

"Harv, if the system works you'll be in jail until your trial, where you maybe get off. Rick will go to jail. Statutory rape of a rich girl? I don' know . . ."

"Bob, we've just gotta play this out. Harv's right. Will's a smart guy, an' he's not gonna back down on anything. We've gotta trust he's gonna do his level best an' get us kicked."

"You've known this guy for seven hours and you're trusting him with the best years of your lives. Is he really the guy? I mean, shit Harv, he was your second pick. Outta two."

"Bob, the worst that happens on Thursday is we're still under arrest an' we don't get bail. If we're still in jail then, I probly call my old man. But Will is a pretty good shot to take for keepin' this whole thing under wraps. I'd justuh soon have this whole incident stay between us right here in Lander an' never get mentioned back on the east coast."

"OK. So when do we go to court?"

"Uh, maybe you were distracted, but Will covered that. You're stayin' here while Will an' Standing Bear take us to jail tomorrow. Your job is just to lay low for a coupla days. Stay off the map. I still have about six hundred dollars cash from Jake, an' Rick an' I both have our stashes of traveler's checks that you need to keep track of for us. We'll be leavin' all our stuff here, so you need to watch that, too. An' if you could do our laundry in your spare time, it would be great to start with everything clean on Thursday when we get back on the road."

"Harv, if anyone could believe he'll find a pony in a pile a shit, it's you. But I'll do your laundry, just to see if it comes true."

We hear the door open, and the sound of Standing Bear's boots falls down the steps. He's using both hands to carry a wooden crate that he walks over to the kitchen. He sets it on the counter and pulls

out a stainless steel eight-quart pot that he sets on the back burner of the stove. He pulls out a smaller pot by its handle and sets that on the stove, too. Next he pulls out a large round Tupperware bowl, which he sets on the counter. Then he pulls a paper bag out of the crate and sets that on the counter. “Big pot’s got chili in it. Small pot has rice. Tupperware has a salad. Bag’s got some stuff you might wanna put on the chili an’ salad, an’ some bread. Bowls, plates, forks an’ spoons are in these cupboards. Just load the dishwasher with the stuff you take outta the cupboards when you’re done. All the stuff that came outta the crate goes back in it. I’ll be back in a couple hours.” Then Standing Bear leaves, pulling the door to.

We have some of the beers with the chili. It’s actually really good. A spicy flavor without leaving a burning sensation in your mouth. The salad is so-so. It’s too cliché, but he left us ranch dressing. After dinner we clean up quickly, like Standing Bear told us to, and then we go sit out on the back patio, watching the river. Nobody says much. Friday night is when everything happened, but it’s all getting to be a whole lot more real each day.

I don’t even want to think about tomorrow.

6

THE LUNCH DISHES ARE all in the dishwasher, and the crate contents are put back and set next to the steps that lead up to the front door. It's 1:30. We've given Bob our money and other valuables for safekeeping. Rick and I now have no identity. No money, no ID, no nothing. And that's how we're supposed to keep it. I'm John Doe 1 and Rick's John Doe 2.

I hear the front door shove open, and we all look over to the steps. Will and Standing Bear appear in the great room. "You boys ready?"

"I guess so," says Rick.

"Won't be any more ready tomorrow. We'll see you in a coupla days, Bob."

Bob walks over and shakes Rick's hand, then mine. "Good luck, guys."

"Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks, Bob."

"All right, you got nothing but your clothes on you, right?" We nod in agreement. "You say two things at the Sheriff's Office when you get there. First, after they read you your rights, they'll ask you if you understand them. You answer yes. They ask you anything else, including what your name is, your answer is, 'I decline to answer because I might incriminate myself.' Course, if they ask you if you need to go to the bathroom, want something to eat, that kinduh thing, you can answer. We clear?"

In unison, Rick and I reply, "Uh-huh."

"OK, then, let's do this." We walk up the steps and out of the house into bright sunshine behind Will and Standing Bear. There's a shiny new crew cab pickup pulled up right in front of the guest house. "You guys get in the back seat. Standing Bear and I ride up front." So Rick and I get in. Standing Bear goes over to the house, where there are two pump shotguns leaning up against the wall just to the left of the door. He picks up the first and pumps it. Then he walks over to the truck, opens the front passenger door, and pops the shotgun into a tension bracket mounted to the dash over the hump. The gun barrel points up and the pump and trigger face us in the back seat. He does the same with the second shotgun, popping it into the companion tension bracket six inches closer to the passenger seat. He then walks around the front of the truck and gets in the driver seat. Will hops in the front passenger seat and hands each of us a large white towel. "When we get to town, you'll put these over your heads. I'll let you know when."

Standing Bear starts the truck, and we slowly pull away from the guest house. Bob has stayed inside. We pass the boy sitting at the front gate with his bicycle and shotgun, and he closes the gate behind us as we leave the ranch. We pull out onto the main road and make a right, which kind of surprises me, because we came in from the other direction, and on the map it looked quicker to get to Lander the other way. But they live here, so they must know where they're going. We ride along in silence for about 10 minutes, and then Standing Bear makes a left. A couple minutes later, another left onto a bigger road. He gets the truck up to 65.

In a few minutes more, I see the first sign telling us to slow down. It's the one that reduces speed to 45. Will asks, "Recognize that place?"

I look off to our left, just as Rick says, "That's where it all began." And he's right.

“OK, put the towels over your heads. You can hold ’em up so you have a tunnel to see through, if you want, but the idea is for you to be as unrecognizable as humanly possible when you leave on Thursday.”

When we leave on Thursday! Will said it like this is all a formality. He must have figured something out to get us kicked. “What’s the game plan for us leavin’ on Thursday, Will?”

“Whether you leave on Thursday depends on whether you do what I say while you’re in custody. If you go talkin’ to the cops an’ give ’em somethin’, you might not be leaving. Your job is to keep your mouth shut. My job is to do the talking. Like I said when we first met, every case is different. Do yourselves a favor and be smart.”

I take that to mean I should shut up, so I do. Rick just keeps looking straight ahead through his towel tunnel. I can’t see his face, but I know he must have a look that says, “I can’t believe this is my life!” I keep looking forward through my towel tunnel.

Eventually the truck comes to a stop. “OK, stay seated until I tell you to move.” Will grabs one of the shotguns and gets out of the pickup. Standing Bear grabs the other and gets out of his door. Will stands by his passenger door. The towel prevents me from seeing where Standing Bear is. I hear my door open. “OK, out of the truck, Doe One.” I get out of the truck, careful to keep the towel over my head. “OK, slide across the seat, Doe Two, and out of the truck.” Rick does what he’s told and falls in behind Will and in front of me. “OK, follow me.” And Will marches right up into the sheriff’s office with the barrel of his pump shotgun pointing straight up in the air.

As soon as we enter, I hear the command, “Freeze!” I stop immediately.

“We’re here to see Sheriff Sommers, he’s expecting us.”

“Sheriff!” The voice yells. “You expectin’ a couple a armed Indians?”

I can hear the sound of multiple sets of hard-soled shoes clacking across the linoleum-tiled floor. I’m not sure this is going so well. “Jesus! Eric, Billy, Frank, put your guns down. Can’t ya see he’s bringin’ some boys to turn themselves in? Will, please follow me back to interrogation. We’ll start gettin’ ’em processed there.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. Standing Bear, please lower your barrel.” And as Will lowers the barrel of his gun to point at the floor, we follow the sheriff back to interrogation.



I can make nine foot-lengths from the back of my cell to the bars, and then there’s maybe half a length left. I can make seven full lengths in the other direction, with a little more than half a length left over. My foot’s a little more than 12 inches long, so my cell must be eight by ten. There’s a bed bolted to the right 10-foot wall, as I look out the bars. The mattress sucks, but I didn’t have any problem sleeping on it last night, seeing as it’s softer than the ground, which I’ve been sleeping on a lot lately. On the opposite wall, a chrome metal sink and toilet. I have to ask for toilet paper if I need it. There’s a small window on the back wall, with bars in front of the mesh wire glass. It’s about 18 inches square. The sun comes in all afternoon, but no fresh air. There’s one bare lightbulb in the center of the ceiling. It goes out at 11, but the lights in the hallway stay on all night. The bed and the toilet are the only places to sit.

I walk over and sit on the bed, where I have a paperback copy of *In Cold Blood* for my entertainment. Very funny, har har har. These guys are regular comic geniuses. No pencils, no paper, no

nothing. You could go crazy pretty quickly in a place like this. I don't know where they're keeping Harv, but I assume his cell must be similar to mine.

Will was right about one thing. Well, actually he's been right about a lot of things. But one of the things he was right about is that the sheriff is a pretty decent guy. His deputies are morons. But the sheriff is OK. He was kind of pissed when we wouldn't tell him our names, but Will was still there, and when he explained the legalities of it, the sheriff backed off. Nobody is supposed to talk to us unless Will clears it first. And the sheriff has enforced that rule.

"Hey, Doe Two. You got a visitor." It's the idiot deputy who guards me. I swear I think he'd be out of brains if he blew his nose. Of course, he's the one sitting out there with a gun and I'm locked up in here. So maybe I'm not so smart either.

As I look up, my visitor positions herself in the hallway at the center of my bars and turns to face my cell. I can't believe it. What the fuck is she doing here? Come to gloat a little bit? See the trapped animal in a cage?

"Hey," she says, very softly, disarmingly.

I stand up, not slowly, but not quickly either, keeping my eyes on her the whole time, and as I take the couple of steps over to the bars, I return her "Hey."

She doesn't quite smile at me, but with a look that I can only describe as one of genuine concern, she asks, "How's it goin'?"

"Good. I," and then it occurs to me that I'm not talking to some chick on the Lawn at school. I'm behind bars talking to the reason I'm in here, "Actually, pretty shitty. In case you hadn' noticed, I'm in jail."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, well that part can't be too good. Are you OK? I mean, other than bein' in jail?"

What the fuck is going on here? I look at her and study her. She's right around five and a half feet tall. Sandy blond hair parted down the middle, mostly straight, but with just a little bounce, cut just below shoulder length. A nice face, I'd go so far as pretty even, but kind of angular. Very striking eyes, not big huge doe eyes, but gentle friendly eyes with pretty light blue irises. She's got makeup on; foundation and some sort of skin tone, particularly heavy around her left eye. Eye liner and lipstick, too, although the lipstick is muted, not some disgusting bright cherry crap. Her nose is narrow and symmetrical, no flared nostrils; it works well with her angular face.

She's wearing a white sleeveless blouse, not buttoned until the fourth button, so she's showing plenty of cleavage. And she does have a nice rack, restrained only by a very skimpy little bra. Her arms are tanned all the way up to her shoulders, with an ever-so-slight bit of muscle definition at her bicep. Pleasing to the eye, but not delicate. Her blouse is tied off below her tits, exposing her belly, which is flat and taut. She's got an outie. Her floral skirt hangs down to mid-thigh. Her thighs have definition; again, not delicate, but still pleasing to the eye. And just then she whirls around on one foot, flaring out her skirt so that I can see her underwear, as well as her taut pear-shaped calf muscle. "What? Are you reliving it?"

"What? I . . . no! I . . . I . . . What the fuck are you doing here . . ."

She cuts in just as I'm finishing the last word, "Alex."

"What?"

"What the fuck are you doing here, Alex?" She says it in such a plain matter-of-fact way, fuck included. "You're talking to me, right? You might as well use my name."

“So. What the fuck are you doing here, Alex?” I have a definite edge to my voice, to say the least, because she’s definitely messing with me.

“Like I said before, I came to see how you’re doin’.”

“Well not very good. I know you asked, other than being in jail. But I tell you, when you’re in here it’s pretty hard to think about how things are other than being in jail. Because I’m in jail!” I emphasize the last three words very deliberately and slowly, not quite at a shout, but definitely above a conversational tone.

“I get that. Well,” she pauses for a moment, “I ain’t gonna testify.”

“I’m not going to testify.”

“Course not. You’re the defendant. You don’t hafta.”

“No. How you say it is, I’m not going to testify.”

“Excuse me?”

“The best thing about ain’t is that it’s self-explanatory. Ain’t ain’t a word. I’m not. You aren’t. She isn’t. They aren’t. Ain’t no ain’t.”

“Well, now, ain’t that funny? The god damn grammar police is locked up.” She’s getting an edge to her voice, now.

“Look, sorry. You just gotta understand. I come from a long line of poor white country folk. I’m the first kid in my family, cousins included, who ever graduated from college. There are just certain things that get to me. And one of ’em is speech patterns that say ‘I’m P W T’.”

“Oh, well now I feel a whole lot better,” she’s dripping sarcasm. “Knowin’ I’m P W T, that is. An’ here I thought you were just insulting my English, not my existence.”

“No, no. I . . . that came out wrong. I didn’ mean it that way.”

“You alright back there, Miss Alexis?” It’s the moron deputy who’s guarding me.

“Mind your own damn business, Billy.” She’s turned her head and raised her voice enough to carry, but not quite shout. Then she turns her head back to me and lowers her voice, “OK, enough with the grammar lesson. Look, my daddy’s a mean prick. He bullied the sheriff into arrestin’ you. That’s why you’re in here. If your friend hadn’ shot Buster you’d be long gone an’ this never woulduh happened. But when everything got to be a public spectacle, well, my daddy figured he needed to protect my, meaning HIS, reputation. So I’m sorry about that. But I ai . . . I’m not . . . going to testify. So you should get outta here.”

I walk back over to the bed and sit down, my feet planted firmly on the floor, elbows resting on my legs just above my bent knees, so it’s almost a crouch. Just like you’d sit in a locker room. I take my right hand and run it along the right side of my head above my ear and back to the nape of my neck, where I pause to scratch for a minute. I’m not quite sure what to make of this. On the one hand, it’s good news that Alex doesn’t want to testify. On the other hand, I need a rich prick after my ass like I need a hole in my head. “Alex, I . . .”

She blurts out, “You’re my first.”

Oh, shit. An underage puppy dog. That’s what this is. She thinks she’s in love. And if I play this wrong, she’ll definitely testify against me. I run my hand across the side of my head again. I stand up and walk back toward the bars. “Alex, I . . .” but she doesn’t let me finish.

“Take me with you.”

“What?”

“When you leave tomorrow, take me with you.”

“What makes you think I’m leavin’ tomorrow?”

“Cause I don’ think you’ll be wantin’ to stick around here. An’ neither do I.”

“Jail.”

“You’ll get out.”

“An’ why do you think that?”

“Just do.”

“Alex, even if I wanted to bring you along, you know I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re underage.” I put great emphasis on the last word, saying it slowly and stretching out the last two syllables.

“So you do wanna have sex with me again.”

“No. Yes. I mean . . . look, that’s got nothing to do with it. I’m sure it would be kidnapping or somethin’ like that.” Why does she sound like the cool collected person driving this conversation when I’m the one who’s years older than her?

“An’ I’m not underage.”

“Then why the fuck am I in here?”

“Because I was underage last Friday.”

“Say what?”

“Sunday was my birthday.”

“Well happy fuckin’ birthday. But you’re still only sixteen. Not an adult.”

“Look, if you won’t take me with you because I’m askin’ you to, at least take me with you because it’s in your own interest.”

Jesus, not more of this. She’s running fucking circles around me. I back up from the bars, walk around in a circle and turn and face her from several feet away. “OK, I’ll bite. Why would that be?”

“Just take me as far as Denver. They have abortion clinics there. It’s a place my daddy can’t get to me. You’re a nice guy an’ all, but I don’ wanna have a kid with you. I mean, you’re my first, but that dudn’ mean you’ll be my one an’ only. So help yourself out.”

I am just getting my ass handed to me. She’s right. The last thing I need is a kid in west bumfuck Wyoming. And she doesn’t want that, either. I move back up to the bars, “Alex, even if I wanted you to come along, an’ I’m not saying I do, but even if I wanted you to come along, I can’t speak for my buddies.”

“I know. But you can tell ’em how important this is to you. You’re a smart guy. College graduate an’ all. They’re your friends. They’ll say yes. Whaddo I need to bring?” She’s smiling at me, now. She knows she’s won. God it’s annoying.

“No promises. I’ll talk to ’em. If you come, one sleeping bag, mattress or bed roll, one duffle bag for clothes an’ toiletries . . .”

She breaks in, “Ooooh, you guys have toi,” she stretches out the syllable, “letries? I’ll just bring some stuff to clean up with. But please continue.”

“Maybe some hiking boots an’ a canteen.”

“Got ’em.”

“Money, and that’s it. We’re already tight on space. So you haftuh limit what you bring.”

“Why, suh,” she says with an affected southern accent, “I do detect a hint of chivalry in yoiuh mannuh, that you would be willing to shayuh yoiuh tent with me.” She bats her eyelids and pretends to flutter a fan across her bosom.

“We have three tents already. We don’t have room for a fourth. We’ll figure it out.”

“Three three two. Six five eight seven. I’d write it down for you, except Billy would probly confiscate it. All you haftuh remember is the six five eight seven. Everything here begins with three three two. I’ll give you directions when you call. My daddy spends the day in Riverton on business every Thursday, so I’ll be alone at the house. He’s never home before midnight. It’s the perfect time to come get me. Say the number.”

“Three three two. Six five eight seven. No promises.”

She reaches through the bars, grasps my right hand, pulls it through the bars, into her blouse and rests it on her right tit underneath the skimpy bra. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then she pivots and walks away.

My arm dangles limp through the bars.

7

SHERM SHOT THE FRISBEE back to the ultimate pickup game using a right-handed outside wrist flick. It sailed long and true in the thin dry air of Paepcke Park. Sherm jogged over to the pay phone at the corner of Garmisch and Hopkins. He took out a quarter, put it in the slot, and began dialing: 0 1 1 5 2 5 5 1 6 8 4 2 6 3 1. A voice came over the line, "Please deposit one dollar eighty-five cents." Sherm dug in his pocket and pulled out seven quarters and a dime. He put each one in the slot. "You have three minutes."

A voice answered on the third ring, "Hola."

"Hola, amigo. It's Falcon."

"What can I do for you, Falcon?"

"I was wondering whether you would be bringing the Cessna or the Piper this time."

"Well, we have a large party, so I figured we would bring both."

"Excellent. And will you need to refuel before your return flight?"

"Yes. The Cessna will take twenty-five, and the Piper will take twenty-five also."

"OK. We'll have that fuel available for you. I assume the Cessna still uses high test at six point five and the Piper uses diesel at eight?"

"That is correct."

"We'll have everything ready for you at hangar nine. Please confirm your itinerary in the normal way."

"Gracias."

"De nada." Sherm hung up the phone and jogged back over to his ultimate game.

8

JIMBO PUSHED HIS CHAIR back from the conference table, “Let’s take a break, Gray Wolf.” He removed his glasses and used the sides of his index fingers to massage his closed eyelids. Lunch was settling with him very nicely. He liked Casa Nuestra. Their enchiladas were to die for, whether it was the sauces, the cheeses or the fillings. And the homemade refried beans were outstanding. Six enchiladas, four cold Dos Equis Ambers and three hours later, he had a controlled belch every now and then, but any repeat was still tasty the second time around.

Jimbo and Gray Wolf had spent the last two hours since lunch haggling over some new contracts for wells Gray Wolf would drill for Jimbo. Jimbo purposely did business with Bighorn Basin Drill & Pump Co. because it was Indian-owned. His daddy had taught him the importance of maintaining good relations with the tribes, and having an influential wealthy Indian as a key business partner fit that bill to a T. If Gray Wolf wasn’t the richest Arapaho from the Wind River Reservation, he was certainly in the top three. And, in turn, that was due in no small part to his business relationship with Jimbo.

Sometimes Gray Wolf got a stake in Jimbo’s wells, sometimes not. Most of the wells on the reservation were 51% owned by Gray Wolf, because it was easier that way. Jimbo effectively owned them, though, because he loaned all the money it took to pay Gray Wolf to punch the holes. But the optics were good on the reservation for both men. And for a lot of the older wells the loans had been paid off and Gray Wolf was actually making good money. The fact that Gray Wolf was the head of the committee of the Tribal Council that oversaw natural resources didn’t hurt their relationship, either. Off the reservation most of the wells were usually at least 80% owned by Jimbo, and Jimbo had other partners there sometimes. The small shares that Gray Wolf owned off-reservation still provided some return to Gray Wolf, but he mostly made his money from those on the drilling and pumping contracts.

Jimbo got up and walked around the windowless conference room. Gray Wolf asked, “You want somethin’ to drink, Jimbo? Got some cold beers or some harder stuff if you like.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Gray Wolf. You happen to have any a those Dos Equis we had at lunch?”

“You ask me that question every week like you don’ know the answer, my friend. Of course I have some. I’ll be right back.”

Jimbo pulled out his list of operations issues he wanted to go over with Gray Wolf. It was mercifully short. The only big issue was Steamboat VI Partners down in Sweetwater County. Jimbo had expected that hole to be punched more than a month ago, but every week Gray Wolf still encountered some permitting problem. Gray Wolf walked back in with two beers, and handed one to Jimbo, “To our continued success,” he said, as he clinked the neck of his beer bottle against Jimbo’s.

“Here, here,” said Jimbo. Gray Wolf sat back down at the conference table. “So what’s up with Steamboat Six?”

“We keep havin’ trouble with the permit. Somethin’ about sensitive areas or somethin’ like that. We’ve never had a problem like this in that area before.”

“Yeah, I know. Who’s holdin’ us up? They state boys or the federalés?”

“They’re state boys.”

“Shit. Go ahead an’ punch the hole. We get any blowback I’ll ride down to Cheyenne an’ fix it. I’ll give Herschler a call an’ bitch at him a little, too. Best defense, y’know.”

“Alright. I think everything else is on schedule. Klondike was a dry hole, but there’s one other location to try there. An’ we hit gas out at Crowheart Butte. No oil, though.”

“Let’s keep pushin’. Got one more thing to talk over. I need some domestic help. Last domestic I had was a little old an’ opinionated. Had to let her go. You know any younger?”

“Sure. An’ with good attitudes.”

“They good at cleanin’ up a mess, without havin’ to be told? ’Cause sometimes young ones haven’ learned the ropes.”

“All our hires been trained real well.”

“So whadduhyou have?”

“Well, we have one domestic who’s waitin’ in interview room seven right now. You wanna go on back?”

“What’s her pay grade?”

“Ten bucks an hour.”

“Sure, I’ll go on back an’ see her.”

Gray Wolf led Jimbo out of the conference room and down a hall to a door marked “Custodian; Employees Only”. Gray Wolf pulled out a key and opened the door, “Seven is the fourth door down on the left.”

“Thanks, Gray Wolf.” And so Jimbo Wagner walked on back to interview seven, where he spent the next eight hours raping a little 12 year old Shoshone girl for \$80.

9

“ALRIGHT DOE ONE, WE’RE comin’ in. Stand back against the wall under the window.” So I stand back against the wall, and Mayberry moron one puts the key in the lock to my cell, turns it, and then slides the opening to the right after I hear the click. Mayberry moron two has the handcuffs and leg shackles, both of which I think are completely ridiculous since we voluntarily turned ourselves in, but what are you going to do?

Moron one holds his baton at the ready while moron two begins by cuffing me, first my right wrist and then my left. There are about eight inches of play in between my two wrists after the cuffs are on. Next he kneels down and puts the leg shackles on. He leaves about 18 inches of play there. I’ll have to take short deliberate steps, but I guess that’s the point.

“Alright. Deputy Post” that’s moron two, “will lead you to the courtroom and I’ll be followin’ behind. We’ll go nice an’ slow so you don’ trip an’ fall or anything. Follow deputy Post’s path just the way he walks it. No detours. You make any funny moves an’ I use the baton. We clear?”

“Yes, sir,” and I silently complete the sentence to myself, “asshole.”

We wind through a series of hallways out of the jail, through the Sheriff’s Office and then down a long hallway to a large wooden door. Moron two opens the door inward toward us, and moron one grabs it and holds it open from behind as I walk into a large courtroom, following close behind moron two. Will is seated at a plain wooden table that faces a big raised desk about 20 feet away that has wood paneling all in front of it. Down below the desk, a little to the left as I’m looking at it, is a three-by-three area on a slightly raised platform. One chair sits in the area, which is behind a wooden picket-fence type gate that swings open and closed. Off to the right of the big desk, and also at a lower, though slightly raised level, sits a man hunched over a little desk with a funky-looking typewriter. He must be the court reporter.

Back behind Will is another one of those picket-fence type things with a gate in between Will’s table and a table off to the other side of the courtroom. At the other table, there’s some fat mousy-looking fucker shuffling some papers on the table. He can’t be much more than five and a half feet tall, and even though it looks like he might not even be 30, he already needs a hair weave. His cheeks are a little red, and he looks like he’s sweating a little bit. Back behind the picket fence are two bunches of rows of benches, sort of like church pews, with an aisle down the middle leading back to the double doors where the public enters. One set of benches is behind Will’s table, and the other is behind mousy fucker’s table. Rick is sitting in the very front row right behind Will. I nod my head up quickly toward him, and he nods back to me. He’s got cuffs and shackles on, too. Everybody else, except for one guy, is sitting in the benches behind mousy fucker. The one guy on our side is wearing a shirt and tie, and he carries a pad of paper and a pencil. On the side behind the mousy fucker, most of the crowd is boys and men, almost all of them dressed like cowboys. There’s an older lady sitting right behind mousy fucker giving me a look that could kill. An older guy sitting right next to her looks at me, too; not with hate, but sort of a smug you’ll get yours kind of look. They must be Buster’s parents. Nobody else sits in the first row with them.

Moron two leads me over to Will, “How are you doing, Doe One?”

“I’ve been better, but it’s good to see a friendly face.”

“Sit here next to me, in this chair on my left. I’ll see what I can do about the handcuffs when the judge comes in.”

Just then a big burly guy in a dark tan uniform walks through a door behind and slightly to the left side of the big desk. “All rise,” he booms out, and we all stand up, facing the big desk. An old guy wearing a black robe walks out of the door and up to the chair behind the big desk. You can see he’s probably got a suit on under the robe, because his button-down shirt collar and tie are visible just above the robe. He looks to be at least 50, maybe 60. His hair, what little there is, is completely white, and he wears some circular wire-rimmed glasses, sort of like John Lennon’s, except he doesn’t pull it off as well. The big guy continues, “The district court for the county of Fremont, state of Wyoming, is now in session, the honorable John Harvey Stoddard presiding.”

Everybody remains standing. Stoddard makes his way up to his desk and sits down. He shuffles a couple of papers briefly, and then announces, “Be seated.” Everybody sits down. “Now then, we have two arraignments today. Is the County Attorney ready?”

“Yes, your honor,” says the mousy fucker.

“And the defense?”

“Will Bowman appearing for the defendants, in each case, your honor. Before we get underway, I’d like to request that the handcuffs be removed from my clients. These boys voluntarily turned themselves in, and I’d like them to be able to take notes and otherwise assist in their defense. And with four deputies and the sheriff, all armed, here in the courtroom, I don’t see that they pose much of a threat or escape risk. They’ll still have the leg shackles on.”

“Does the County Attorney have any objection to removing the defendants’ handcuffs?”

Mousy fucker looks over at the sheriff, who nods his head no. “No, your honor, no objection.”

“Very well, then. Sheriff, could you please remove the handcuffs from the defendants?”

Sheriff Sommers brings the keys over and removes my handcuffs, clasping them to a loop on his pants. I rub my wrists a little bit, first my left wrist with my right hand, and then my right wrist with my left hand. They weren’t on very tight, but my wrists are still kind of sore. Sommers then leans over the picket fence and removes Rick’s cuffs, also placing them on the loop.

“All right, then. Is the County Attorney ready to proceed?”

“Yes, your honor. The defendant, John Doe One, whose identity we are still seeking, is . . .”

Will breaks in, “Excuse me, your honor. Before we proceed to a reading of the charges, I have a more fundamental issue that I believe requires the court’s attention.”

“Before you’ve even heard the charges?”

“Well, actually I’ve already read them, but it’s really a different point.”

“Any objection?” the judge directs his question to mousy fucker.

“No, your honor.”

“Proceed Mr. Bowman.”

“Thank you, your honor. Now, this point applies equally to both of my clients, so it’s as applicable to the next case involving John Doe Two as it is to this case. Now, as I say, having read the charges and the supporting allegations, I note that all of the conduct forming the basis for the charges occurred out at Bear Peak. That’s also consistent with my clients’ recollections of the location of the conduct, although they wouldn’t necessarily agree with how the conduct is set forth in the charging papers. Now I think that everyone knows that Bear Peak is on the Wind River Reservation, which is subject to a federal treaty concerning the rights of the tribes that live there. One of the key provisions of that treaty, and in fact all Indian treaties across the country, is that the tribes are subject to the ultimate sovereignty of the United States of America. And under laws passed by Congress, all tribes have limited

criminal jurisdiction on their reservations. Tribal court can only prosecute cases that will result in no more than one year of incarceration.

“Now, for any more serious crime, exclusive jurisdiction rests with the United States of America, acting through the US Attorney’s office and the federal district courts. Any arrest on a reservation for a crime involving more than one year of incarceration must be made by the F B I or federal marshals. In other words, Sheriff Sommers had no jurisdiction, and therefore no legal authority, to arrest my clients for conduct that occurred on the reservation. We encounter this problem on the reservation all the time, but from a slightly different perspective, in that it’s frequently difficult to prosecute offenders due to federal resource limitations. So, given that Sheriff Sommers had no legal right or authority to arrest my clients, I respectfully request that your honor order the immediate release of my clients.”

The spectators begin to grumble and talk amongst each other. You can tell they aren’t happy. One of them shouts out, “That’s a bunch a crap!” And others voice their agreement.

Judge Stoddard bangs his gavel several times, and shouts, “Order, order in the court!” God, it sounds so classic. I’ve heard it on TV a thousand times, but it really happens in real life. “Bailiff, I want you to remove the next person who has an outburst. Now, Mr. Campbell, I assume you have a response to this.”

“Yes, your honor. The conduct clearly occurred within the boundaries of Fremont County, where the state constitution gives us jurisdiction over all criminal matters.”

Will cuts in, “But the federal Constitution contains the supremacy clause, meaning that the federal treaty with the reservation, and laws made by Congress, including the one vesting exclusive criminal jurisdiction in the United States, trump the state constitution. And just to close the loop, the only possible conduct that could have happened off of the reservation was Mr. Lyle actually expiring, and according to the coroner Mr. Lyle most likely died within five to ten minutes of being shot, long before he could possibly have gotten off the reservation. And in the case of Mr. Doe Two, all of the alleged conduct also occurred at Bear Peak. So, again, I request that the court order the immediate revocation of all charges as beyond the jurisdiction of this court and the state of Wyoming, and release the defendants immediately.”

I glance over at Sheriff Sommers, and I see him send a deputy out of the courtroom very quickly. He has a slightly worried look on his face.

“Mr. Campbell, do you have anything? Because I’m inclined to agree with Mr. Bowman that I, the sheriff and Fremont County have no jurisdiction here.”

“Your honor, the defendants are being held on very serious charges . . .”

“For which you have no jurisdiction.”

“And the people request that you authorize the detention of these defendants until such time as a proper transfer can be made to federal authorities.”

“Are you saying you want me to hold these men in jail without any legal authority to do so? Do you have a warrant, or even an A P B, from the federal authorities to detain these men?”

“No, your honor.”

“You leave me no choice. You must be prepared when you come into a court of law, Mr. Campbell. Your carelessness today has let down the good people of this county. I hereby order all charges against the defendants voided ab initio, and they shall be immediately released.”

Will now piles on, “Your honor, if I might ask one more thing of the court. Given that the sheriff had no authority to undertake the arrest of these two boys, could you please order that all records of their

arrest be delivered to me, including their mugshots and fingerprints, so that I can ensure their destruction?"

"So ordered. We stand adjourned." Bang. The gavel comes down. And with that Judge Stoddard stands up and walks out through his door. Six bailiffs come piling through the door just as the judge departs, and, through the side door we came in earlier, another six sheriff's deputies appear, all armed with shotguns, hands on the triggers and barrels pointed up in the air. Maybe the hard part is just beginning.



Just as the gavel comes down, Will quickly slips through the gate that separates the lawyers' area from the spectator gallery and positions himself to block the aisle at the back of the first row of benches. "Through the gate, Doe Two. NOW!" He doesn't need to tell me twice. He follows me through the gate and closes it. "Both of you, over through the door you came in." Will quickly hustles us over to the door, where the deputies with the shotguns part to let us through and then reform a semicircle around the door, shotguns still at the ready, barrels pointed up.

The din grows louder as we're being led out. "It ain't right!" And, "We gonna get justice one way or another!" And, "Do somethin', Jimmie!"

In the hallway, beyond the closed door, we can't hear specifics of the racket on the other side. But it's loud. Will goes over and talks to Sheriff Sommers for a minute. Sheriff Sommers nods his head in agreement, Will shakes his hand and then comes back over to Harv and me. Sheriff Sommers brings over a key and removes each of our leg shackles without saying a word. He carries them off toward the Sheriff's Office. Will begins walking in the same direction, "OK, follow me." We walk down the hallway, this time taking a left away from the jail and over into the Sheriff's Office to a conference room toward the back of the office. Will opens the door, and, as Harv and I walk in, we see Bob, Standing Bear, and two younger Indians, somewhat similar in size and build to Harv and me. Will closes the door behind himself as he brings up the rear.

Bob, Standing Bear and the other two Indians are sitting around a conference table with a pitcher of water in the middle. There are no windows. Off to the side there's a credenza with water glasses and a phone on it. There's a white board with a couple of dry erase markers over on the far right wall, at the end of the conference table. Without sitting down, Will starts talking, "OK, Bob has been briefed on most of the plan in detail, but here's the thumbnail for you two. Standing Bear and I will escort my nephews out the front door of the Sheriff's Office with white towels over their heads. Just like the ones you two wore on your way in. The sheriff's deputies will give us an armed escort to the truck and tail us as far as the reservation. You don't need to know where we go after that.

"You boys wait here for fifteen minutes after we leave. Bob knows where the back exit is from the Sheriff's Office, and he has a beater pickup parked there. He knows the route to take back to the ranch, where you clear out your stuff from the guest house, get your car and hit the road. Again, Bob knows the one stretch of road you're not to drive on. My advice to you is to get out of Wyomin' tonight, but where you go and what you do is up to you now.

"Now, one more thing. There is the possibility of federal charges for what's happened. I don't think it's very likely, but the possibility is there. If you want me to keep an eye on that for you, I'll need another two hundred and fifty dollars. You can call me maybe once a week, just to check in, and I'll let you know if there are any developments. If you don't want me to keep an eye on things for you, that's fine, and we're done. The risk you run is that you might make a federal wanted list and not know it. You

don't haftuh decide right now, but think it over and leave the money on the table in the guest house if you want me to keep on this for you. Standing Bear, nephews, it's time."

Bob, Standing Bear and the two nephews stand up. Standing Bear walks over to Bob, stands directly in front of him, and puts his two huge hands on Bob's shoulders. He looks him right in the eye and says, "You're a good man, Bob Johnson. You are welcome at the ranch anytime."

"Thank you, Standing Bear. You're a good man, too. If you ever find yourself in Virginia, you'll always be welcome at my home."

"Come, boys. We go now." The two boys, young men really, place towels over their heads, and walk behind Standing Bear over to the door, where they wait for a moment.

Harv turns to Will and offers his hand. As they shake, Harv says, "Thank you, Will. I really appreciate all you've done for me."

"I hope you'll use your freedom wisely, Harv." Harv nods his head in agreement, and they release their handshake.

I walk the couple of steps over to Will as Harv steps back from his shake and turns to approach Standing Bear. As Will and I shake, I say, "I wanna thank you, too, Will. I'm truly grateful."

"You're welcome."

Harv extends his hand to Standing Bear, who does not extend his in turn. Harv draws his hand back and says, "Thank you, too, Standing Bear. I, we all, appreciate you letting us use the guest house at the ranch."

"The favor was to my brother. Our transaction was strictly business. I'm not your friend or enemy. That's how we part. Let's go." And with that, Standing Bear opens the door and leads his towel-shrouded boys out into the hallway, with Will bringing up the rear. Will closes the door on his way out.

After about 10 seconds, Harv says, "What the fuck was that?"

"What was what?" Bob asks.

"Standing Bear. Wouldn't shake my hand. Wouldn't accept my thanks. Who does he think he is, anyway?"

"He's his own man, Harv. He dudn' answer to anyone, an' he dudn' worry about other people or their feelings. He takes care of his family, an' he dudn' have much use for the white man. Like he said, you're not his friend or his enemy, so he's just leaving you alone."

"But he likes you just fine."

"I was at his ranch for a couple of days that you two weren't. I helped get a couple of tractors an' a few cars in his barn to run again. He appreciated that I had useful skills I was willing to share with him. He's really a pretty good guy. So's Will."

"Ah, what the fuck do I care? Whadduh we have, another twelve or thirteen minutes before we can get the fuck outta here?"

"Yeah, about that."

I break in, "Guys, I've got somethin' we need to talk about." I take a seat at the conference table.

"Yeah, I expect we both do. What was it like in your cell, Rick?" Harv and Bob take a seat, too.

"I got a visitor."

"What, Bob came to see you an' he didn't stop by my cell, too?"

“I never left the ranch. Will didn’ wanna advertise that there’re three of us.”

“It was Alex.”

“Who’s Alex?”

“She’s the girl from Friday night, the reason I got locked up.”

“Hoo-ee! I bet she’s gonna be pissed when she finds out Will got you off.”

“Actually, she thought I would get released. She wanted me to be released. Told me she wouldn’ testify if it came down to it.”

“Say what?”

“You heard me.”

“OK. So you had a visitor. So what?”

“She wants to come with us.”

Harv’s and Bob’s jaws drop almost at the same time. There are about 15 seconds where you could hear a pin drop, and then Harv breaks the silence, “You know, I’m not sure, but when Will said to use my freedom wisely, I think he kinduh meant it to apply to you, too. An’ throwin’ kidnapping on top of statutory rape idn’ sounding too wise to me.”

“Uh, yeah Rick. No offense, but this sounds pretty stupid.”

“I told her you two might not agree to let her come along. But I told her I would ask. She wants to go as far as Denver. She says there’re abortion clinics there.”

“You’re seriously considering this?”

“I am. And I’d like you to, too.”

There’s more silence. Finally Harv says, “You know, she couldn’ even possibly know yet whether she’s pregnant.”

“I think she looks at this as her best opportunity to escape from her dad. She’s afraid he’ll track her down if she leaves some other way. Staying off of buses, planes, that kinduh thing makes it harder for him to find her. And for my part, if she’s willing to get an abortion, I’d justuh soon get her to the clinic for my peace of mind. I’ll either know she isn’t pregnant, or I’ll know that the abortion has been done. Either way, I don’t have some kid hauntin’ my future.”

There’s more silence. This time Bob breaks it, “Rick, I still think it would haftuh be kidnapping or somethin’ to take a minor with us.”

“She turned sixteen this past Sunday. Apparently that means she’s now legal in Wyoming. Not kidnapping if somebody comes along willingly.”

It’s Harv’s turn, “Jeez, Rick. You’re really serious, huh?”

“I am.”

“Well, Bob, whadduhyou think? I mean, I think it’s a little crazy, but if Rick thinks it’s gonna save his future, well . . .”

“It’s not, as Will said, ‘wise’, but then we are young an’ stupid about a lotta other things, anyway. I mean, I’m assumin’ we still plan to go back to our last campsite to retrieve our, um, deposit. I mean, is what Rick wants any dumber than that?”

“Alright, Rick. She’s your responsibility. We change shares, an’ she kicks in a quarter. If she dudn’ have money, you pay the full half outta your money. We also go fifty fifty on the two fifty we leave for Will at the guest house.”

“That’s fair.” I walk over to the table where the phone is and pick up the receiver. I hold it up to my ear and punch 9. I still have a dial tone, so I assume it’s now an outside line.

“What the fuck are you doin’?”

“I need to call Alex to find out where to pick her up.”

“Calling her from the fuckin’ Sheriff’s Office? Are you outta your mind?”

“Seems like the best place to me. That way we don’ haftuh stop somewhere in town once we leave. An’ we’ll know which way to go.” I punch the number, 3 3 2 6 5 8 7. It rings. Once. Twice. A third time.

And on the fourth ring the call goes through, “Hello.”

“Hi, Alex?”

“Is this John Doe Two?”

“Huh, oh, yeah, it is. Um. I’m . . . I mean, we’re out. We’ll be leavin’ soon. So, if you still wanna go, now’s the time.”

“Good. I do. Do you have paper an’ pencil?”

I look around, but don’t see any. I open the credenza cabinet, and there’s the bonanza. Paper, pens, pencils, staplers, erasers, all kinds of office supplies. “Go ahead.” I take down the directions as she talks me through them, landmarks included. I repeat them back to her, and she agrees they’re good. “OK, so we’re leavin’ here in a coupla minutes, so it should be less than a half hour we’ll be there. We’ll be drivin’ an old pickup. Have your stuff ready.”

“I’ll be ready.”

The line goes dead. I hang up. “Well you’re a regular fuckin’ Romeo,” Harv is smirking at me.

“Look, it’s like I said. She’s willin’ to take care of a problem that concerns me. That’s all it is.”

“OK. Is it time, Bob?”

“Let’s do it.”

10

“I’LL BE READY.” AND then Alex hung up the phone. She had packed in the morning, right after her dad left for Riverton. She loaded her duffel with layers of clothes: three sleeveless tops and three pairs of shorts, six pairs of underwear, three bras, three pairs of socks, two pairs of jeans, a pair of sweats, one nice cotton long sleeve shirt, three tee shirts, two flannel long sleeve shirts, a sweatshirt, a bath towel and a face towel. Her toiletry kit was also in the duffel bag. She had her three-season Goretex jacket on the floor off to the side of her duffel.

She’d gone out to the shed to get a few things from her camping equipment: down mummy bag, camp pillow, foam mattress, ski mask, hiking boots, with her polypropylene liners and wool hiking socks stuffed into them, flashlight and canteen. Back inside she’d dug into the top drawer of her chest of drawers and removed all of her socks and underwear. In the back right corner of the drawer she slipped her index finger into a three-quarter-inch hole and pulled out the false bottom of the drawer. She counted out the money she had been stashing there for the better part of two years. Between her allowance and economizing whenever her dad gave her money to spend, she’d managed to sock away about \$2,000, mostly in tens and twenties. She carefully put the money, along with her driver’s license, a fake ID from Montana Tech and her checkbook, in a black leather wristlet. The zipper had a little strap on it that fit around her wrist. She put the drawer back together, like it hadn’t been opened.

These were her provisions for leaving home.

Fortunately Alex was an experienced camper. For years now her dad had taken her out backpacking and on stock trips deep into the mountains. So she was no stranger to camp life, and she had begun to camp with some of her friends the summer before. This was her plan for time to get away. She wrote out a note to her dad, telling him she had gone camping with friends up in the Bighorn Mountains near Granite Pass, and that she would be back on Monday. That would give her a full three-day jump on him looking for her. She had been to that area with her dad before, so she figured he wouldn’t be concerned about her camping in an area she was familiar with.

Now all there was to do was wait.



“There it is. Pioneer Ranch. Make a left onto this road,” Rick reads off the directions to me. It’s really convenient that Alex lives on the way back to the ranch. It won’t add too much time to our getting the fuck out of here. “I’ll get the gate; wait for me on the other side.” Rick hops out and opens up the gate. I drive through, and he closes it behind us and hops back in the cab of the truck. We continue down a slight grade for about a mile until we come to a nice flat plain by the edge of a river. Not nearly as much water as Standing Bear’s river, but more than just a trickle.

The house is a large two-story square. Including the covered and screened wrap-around porch, it’s probably 50 by 50. It’s painted white with black trim on the shutters. There’s the standard circle in front of the house with cottonwoods for shade. We pull up to the walkway in front of the house. Rick hops out and walks up and knocks on the screen door. I see the front door of the house open, and then she takes a couple of steps out toward the screen door, bends down and opens it. Then she goes back in the house, comes back out one more time, closes the front door behind her and walks toward the screen door.

In the meantime, Rick has brought her duffle bag and mattress over to the truck and thrown them in the bed. She closes the screen door behind her and brings over a sleeping bag and some other gear, looks like some boots, a canteen, maybe a flashlight. She's got her jacket draped across her arm, and she's wearing shorts and a tee shirt, with socks and sneakers. She puts everything but her jacket in the bed of the pickup. Rick climbs in first, and then she climbs in on his lap. Harv is sitting in the middle over the hump.

"Hi. I'm Alex. Glad to see you boys again."

Rick says, "Alex, say hi to our driver over there, Bob Johnson."

"Hey, Bob."

"Hi."

"An' this is Harv Weinberg."

"Hi, Harv."

"Hello."

"And who would you be, John Doe Two?"

"Oh, right, Rick. Rick Shifflet."

"Well, it's a pleasure bein' formally introduced to y'all. I'm ready any time you are."

Harv says, "Let's go, Bob. So, Alex, if you don't mind me asking, and just so I know we aren't getting into any deeper trouble here, when were you born?"

"Nineteen sixty-seven."

"On which day?"

"July twenty-fourth. I'm told it was a pleasant Monday evening. Would you like proof?"

"I'd feel better about that."

Alex fishes around in a black leather thingy she's wearing around her left wrist and produces a driver's license to Harv. "Here."

He looks it over and hands it back to her. "Thanks."

Alex puts her license back in her thingy. We pull up to the gate. Alex jumps out and opens up the gate. She waives me through, and I follow her direction. She closes the gate behind us and climbs back in Rick's lap. "Anything else I can help you with, Harv?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. What grade are you in?"

"I'll be a junior at Lander Valley High come September sixth."

"I see." I turn left on 789 as Harv continues, "And exactly how do you see this little trip with us working out?"

"Well, I don't intend to distract you boys from whatever it was you were doin'. I've backpacked an' ridden stock into the mountains since I was eight years old, so I know my way around a camp. I wanna get to Denver, an' that's where we part. But if you have plans to see other places before then, don't change 'em on my account. I'm up for a road trip."

"Uh huh. OK, here's the deal. We keep two funds in the car. One for gas, one for food. We replenish them when they get low. We all put in a quarter share. Rick pays for you if you don't have money. You work out with Rick how your sleeping arrangements will work. We have three tents, none

of 'em extra roomy. If you know your way around a camp, you won't have any trouble pulling your weight there. We're just car camping."

I make the left to head toward Arapahoe. "Anything else I should know about? Bob, Rick? Harv leave anything out?"

Rick speaks up, "No, that's pretty much the basics. We don't have a really hard an' fast plan, but Harv has to be back at school on August twenty-seventh, so we wanna be back in Virginia by August twenty-third or twenty-fourth. Other than that, we kinda look at the map an' make it up as we go."

"Cool. Where we goin' right now?"

Rick continues, "We're goin' to get Harv's car. Then we'll head up most a the way toward Yellowstone. We have a particular spot on the way picked out to set up camp tonight." I know exactly what Rick means. We're going back to get the pot and the coke. And he's right, by the time we get there, we might as well stay for the night. I make the left to head over to the ranch entrance. We ride in silence for a while now.

We finally come to the turnoff for the Honey Comb Ranch. As I pull up to the gate, Justin comes over, "Standing Bear said there would only be three of you."

"She's traveling with us, too. We need to get her stuff packed into our tarps on top of the car before we hit the road. It'll only take an extra five minutes or so."

"Well," and Justin pauses for a few seconds, "OK, but only because you're welcome any time, Bob."

"Thanks, Justin." He opens the gate for us. We drive through, and as we come up on the compound I park over near the barn. "I loaded all of our stuff into the car, but you guys might wanna go make one pass through the guest house, just to be sure I didn' miss anything. Alex, why don't you stay here with me, so I can ask you any questions I might have about your gear."

Harv and Rick head over to the guest house and walk inside. Alex stands next to the truck as I go open the barn. I pull the car out of the barn and park it a few feet away from the pickup. Then I loosen the bungee cords and remove the top tarp. I loosen the second set of bungee cords and open up the bottom tarp.

As she's sort of looking into the sun at me, Alex squints as she says, "That's quite a system you got there."

"It's worked pretty well. We haven't gotten anything wet or blown off the entire trip, an' it's pretty quick to load or unload. So, first question, any valuables like money, I D, that sort of thing, that you'll be wantin' to keep locked in the car? Because everything on top is unlocked."

"Just this little clutch purse, but it'd be nice to be able to get to my jacket quickly."

"OK, the jacket can go in the trunk. We can stuff it in on one a the sides. Start handin' me up all your other stuff, duffle an' sleeping bag first." I pack things into the bottom tarp as she hands them up. It adds to the top layer ever so slightly, but we still have plenty of room. She could have brought a tent, too, but maybe Rick didn't want that. Then I refasten the bottom tarp, pull the top tarp through the roof rack runners and seal it off with its set of bungsies. I pull the pickup back into the barn and close it up.

Harv and Rick walk out of the guest house. Harv says, "We need to leave money for Will. Do you have our money with you?"

"Yeah, I have it here in the glove box." I reach in and pull out an envelope for each of them, along with their wallets. "Welcome back to reality."

"Thanks, Bob."

“So, Harv, here’s what I’m thinkin’. I’ll give you one twenty-five in traveler checks, and you leave the full two fifty cash for Will. Then, as we replenish funds, you start by puttin’ my traveler checks up for your share. Make sense?”

“Yeah. I’m good with that. Fewer dollars I haftuh convert to traveler checks.” Rick hands the 125 over to Harv. “I’ll be back out in a second.” Harv walks back over into the guest house.

“So are you really gonna come back here to visit some day, Bob?”

“I just might, Rick. Nice breeze in the evenings. Antelope come by every now an’ then. They hunt a few times a year to put meat up. I could see makin’ a trip out this way again.” Harv comes back out of the guest house. “All right, let’s pile in. Who wants to drive?”

Harv makes the suggestion, “If it’s all the same to you, Bob, could you just keep with the driving for today?”

“Sure.” Harv climbs into the front passenger seat. I hop into the driver’s seat, and Rick piles in behind me. Alex sits in the right rear seat.

11

“YOU SURE THIS IS it?” I ask Rick, partially cocking my head to the right.

“Yeah, I’m sure. See over there, the big rock we used as a hearth? And the creek off to the side?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Mmph. Ughhh. Are we there?” Harv comes to. He fell asleep shortly out of Riverton. I guess he must not have gotten much sleep those two nights in jail.

“Yeah. Let’s get camp set up.”

“Hey, Bob. Can you get me out that shovel before we do anything else? I wanna make sure I have maximum daylight to go treasure hunting.”

I reply, “Sure thing, Harv,” as I pop the trunk and we all get out of the car.

As I head back to the trunk, Alex asks, “Can I help with anything?”

“Lemme get the shovel for Harv, and then you can help by settin’ up his tent while he’s off diggin’ up the deposit.” I pull the two boards out of the trunk and lean them against the left rear panel of the car.

Rick grins over at me, and Alex has a confused look on her face. “OK, now this is soundin’ a little weird. You pull into a remote camping spot, an’ the first thing you wanna do is go dig somethin’ up?”

Rick starts to explain, “You see, we weren’t sure how things were gonna work when we left here Monday morning . . .”

As I dig the shovel out of the buckets, I break in, “An’ we weren’t sure whether the car would get searched or not.”

Rick finishes, “So we, or rather Harv, buried our contraband here. Only Harv knows where it is, so that’s why he goes to dig it up.”

I hand the shovel to Harv and add, “An’ we start settin’ up.”

“I see. So you boys are practiced criminals?” She grins at us a little bit.

As he slings the shovel over his shoulder, Harv says, “You’re not that cute,” using his very best nasty sour tone, and then he walks over into the woods.

The air goes out of the campsite a little as the three of us watch Harv walk away. She’s just a kid, and she was just trying to fit in. Harv didn’t need to be so mean, but he always has had a bit of that streak in him. I’ve never quite been able to figure out why. I mean, sure, he’s got the whole divorce thing with his parents, but lots of people have divorced parents. That doesn’t make them mean. It’s not like he doesn’t have plenty of money, or at least he will one day. His dad pays for all of his school. He hasn’t graduated with 10 grand in debt like Rick and me. He owns a sweet BMW free and clear. He got to play football in college; actually made all Ivy League. He starts med school at Harvard in the fall. So where’s the meanness come from? What did life do to shit on him?

Rick breaks the silence, “Don’t worry about him, Alex. He’ll come around. He’s probly just cranky from the time we spent in jail. I’m sure he’s worried he’s still not outta the woods. He wudn’ crazy about me askin’ to bring you along, either, but he eventually said OK. Give him a little time an’ space.”

“Yeah. Harv’s really OK. He just gets in a mood, sometimes,” I add.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Rick begins removing the bungee cords from the top tarp on the roof rack. As he removes the last one, I begin to help him pull the top tarp free of the roof rack. We fold it carefully to make sure that it stays as clean as possible, and then we set it in the back seat. Rick then removes the bungee cords from the bottom tarp and opens it up to expose our gear. As he hands them down, he says, “Tarps for everybody.”

I pass one over to Alex, as I set the other two in the back seat. “Come on. I’ll show you where Harv’s tent was set up last time. You can pitch it there, again.” She follows me over to the spot, and, gesturing, I explain to her, “OK, so Harv likes to sleep with his head near the door, and he had the door about right here. So let’s unfold the tarp to use it as a tent pad right about this area here.” We unfold it according to my instructions, avoiding any dirt on the top side of the tarp.

Just as we finish, Rick shows up with Harv’s tent and another two tarps. “We try to keep everything as clean as possible, so after you pull the tent an’ stakes out, maybe set the tent bag on that tuft of grass or somethin’ to keep off as much dirt as possible. I think there are some instructions in the stuff sack for how to put it up.” He hands the tent sack to Alex. “Where do you want your tarp this time, Bob?”

He follows me as I start walking back to the same spot I used last time, “Same place’ll do fine.” We unfold one of the tarps to the dimensions that fit my tent, keeping the top side nice and clean.

“I’m gonna move us a little further toward that grassy area. I think the pitch’ll be a little less steep than last time. I almost felt like I was slidin’ toward the foot a the tent.”

I follow Rick over to the new spot he’s picked out. I can’t help but notice it’s about 100 feet further away from my tent and Harv’s than last time. And I don’t really see that it’s any more level than the last place he set his tent up, but I don’t bust on him. For all I know he might have lost his sense of humor, too.

“Hey! Can either a you guys tell me where I can find a hatchet or hammer to pound some stakes in with?”

“Yeah, look in the buckets in the trunk. It should be in there,” I say as I head back over to the car to get my tent and begin setting it up. Alex and I cross paths as I head toward the car from Rick’s tent site and she heads back over to Harv’s with the hatchet. She’s already gotten Harv’s tent attached to the pole superstructure, and as I walk over to my tent site with my tent I watch as she very efficiently stakes out Harv’s tent, making sure to pull tautly on opposing staking loops instead of just starting at one spot and going around the tent in one direction. She’s clearly done this before. It probably won’t rain, but you never know. You’d always prefer your tent be tautly staked. As I arrive at my tent site, I stop focusing on Alex and begin erecting my tent.

“EUREKA!” we hear from the woods.

Then Rick shouts back, “DON’T FILL IN THE HOLE! WE MAY NEED TO USE IT!”

Rick rolls out his tent on his tarp and begins setting his poles into his grommet holes, in preparation for attaching his tent to the pole superstructure. Before long I’ve used the hatchet to stake out my tent, as has Rick, too, and Alex is working on the finishing touches of attaching Harv’s fly. Harv comes walking out of the woods carrying the shovel and the trash bag, wearing a great big grin on his

face. “Well, well, boys an’ girl. What say we knock off for a few minutes and examine the contents of our haul?” As he makes for the car, dropping the shovel in the top bucket and unknitting the trash bag, which he deposits in the trunk, the three of us stop what we’re doing and walk over to the car as well.

Harv gets back in the passenger seat, and we all get back in the seats we were just riding in. “Well, let’s see what we have here,” Harv says as he opens up the bear canister. The first thing to fall out, of course, is the gun. “No use for that,” he says, as he picks it up off the floorboard and puts it in the glove box. “Let’s see, Mary Jane, check. Cocaine, check. Paraphernalia, check. All present and accounted for. I believe this calls for a little celebration.” Harv pulls out the coke spoon, opens the coke baggie and dips it in, then takes a snort in each nostril. He passes the spoon and baggie over to me, and I do the same. I pass it back to Rick, and he offers it to Alex. She takes the spoon and baggie from him, takes a snort in each nostril, and then passes it back to him. He does the same and passes it on to Harv. “Round two.” We ultimately do three rounds, and then Harv seals up the baggie, putting it and the spoon back in the bear canister. “I feel grrrr-reat,” he says, mocking Tony the Tiger.

“This is really nice. Thanks, Harv,” says Alex.

“It’s owned in common, my dear. Thanks to Bob an’ Rick, too. Say, Rick, why don’t you roll us up a couple a joints? We’ll take over settin’ up camp while you do.”

“Sure thing, Harv. Pass the canister back.”



“Hey, Bob, could you help Alex with gettin’ my stuff down from the top a the car? After she finishes puttin’ up my tent, she can lay out our stuff inside it. You can put your stuff next to the door if you like, Alex. Easier to get out an’ pee if you need to.”

“You just want me to protect you from the bears an’ other wild critters.”

“En garde, gelded boy.” Harv’s always ready with a quip at somebody else’s expense, but I have to admit Alex is quick on her feet.

“All right, all right. Very funny all around. Now get outta the car. Those tents aren’t gonna set themselves up. An’ it’d be nice to eat eventually.” They all get out of the car and go back to working on the tents, Bob and Harv on theirs, Alex on mine . . . uh, well, ours, I guess.

I dig into the bear canister, pull out our pot baggie and put it in my lap. It’s a gallon ziploc freezer bag. We started with a quarter pound when we left Virginia, and we’ve got about an ounce and a half left. We were pretty careful to dole it out slowly on the front end of the trip, but as we’ve gotten closer to the end we’re smoking more heavily. I decide to roll four joints, not that we’ll necessarily smoke all four tonight. It’s just that it’s always better to do things requiring hand-eye coordination when you have more light.

I reach into the brown leather paraphernalia baggie and pull out the ZigZag rolling papers. EZ Widens are definitely easier to use, because they’re double width, but I like the challenge of rolling a joint with a single. I pull a paper out of the ZigZag packet, setting the packet down on the back seat next to me. The paper has one length-wise fold running straight down the middle, creating two halves that are each a little more than one-half-inch wide by about three inches long. Along one long edge of the paper, on the side where the fold forms the acute angle, runs a narrow strip of glue. I hold the paper in my right hand, glue side facing me while resting length-wise against my middle finger. I support the other side of the folded paper with my thumb, creating a little paper valley in between my thumb and middle finger.

With my left hand I reach into the pot baggie and break up a couple of buds, using my thumb as a grinder against my first three fingers. After I've created enough fine pieces to use for a joint, I position the paper valley over the pot baggie. Then I carefully sprinkle pot into the paper all along the valley, trying to distribute it as evenly as possible initially, and then just before I get ready to roll, I add a little more at either end of the valley. Then, keeping the valley over the pot baggie, I use both sets of my middle fingers and thumbs to hold the valley. With the pot centered in the fold of the valley, I use my thumbs and middle fingers to manipulate the paper around the pot, first up on the non-glue side, then up on the glue side, always with the other side moving in lockstep. Using this rolling action, I tighten the pot against itself all along the length of the valley, and the pot begins to form into a cylindrical shape. Then comes the tricky part. I roll the cylinder of pot as far into the non-glue side of the paper as I dare and use my thumbs to tuck the non-glue edge of the rolling paper against the glue-side valley wall, all along the length of the valley. I use my thumbs to ensure that, all along the length of my nascent joint, the non-glue side stays tucked as I once again use rolling action to roll the cylinder I've created up against the glue-side of the valley. The extra pot I've put at the ends of the cylinder spills out a little bit, but that's OK, because the extra volume that I began with means the cylinder maintains its uniformity as I finish the rolling job. Then, just as the glue strip is about all I have left on the glue side of the valley, I gently use my tongue to wet the glue strip all along the length of the joint. I complete the roll, sealing down the glue strip, and, voila, a perfect cylinder out of a one-length paper. Which, by the way, means you smoke less paper than you would with an EZ Wider.

I'm really starting to feel the coke kick in now. It's a different feeling from pot. And actually better to start with, I think. Everything just seems more vivid, and immediate. I also get this feeling that everything is just, well, cleaner. Almost like you can touch your face and feel the smoothness and silkiness of the moment. Like nothing is wrong and you have the ability to do anything. And, let's face it, I've just rolled one bitchin' joint.

After I've rolled three more, I leave three of them in the top of the pot baggie, which I place back in the bear canister along with the paraphernalia baggie, and get out of the car with the first one I rolled. "Greetings, my fellow travelers, I bring great tidings of joy. Partake of these medicinal herbs and become one with the universe."

"Dude, just find a lighter an' get that thing goin'."

"You are a wise man, master Weinberg. That is indeed how to undertake the par-tay . . . kuh."

"Do we need to cut you off before we even get started?"

I go over to the trunk and fish out a lighter from our campfire supplies. I fire up the joint, draw a nice hit and inhale deeply. As I'm holding it in, I pass the joint to Alex. She looks at me, as my cheeks and chest puff out, straining to hold in the hit as long as possible, and follows suit, passing the joint along to Harv. Harv takes a hit, holds it in for a couple of seconds, then ekes out, "Shotgun." Bob walks over and stands directly in front of Harv. Harv takes the joint and puts the fire side in his mouth, closing his lips all around the joint, like he's making a partial fish-face, and blows smoke through the business end of the joint right up Bob's nose, as Bob inhales deeply. Harv then carefully removes the joint from his mouth and passes it on to me.

We continue passing the joint around as we stand there in a circle. Each time Harv gets the joint, he gives somebody else a shotgun, first me, then Alex, then back to Bob, and so on. On Alex's first turn, she can't handle it. The smoke irritates the inside of her nose too much, she gags and coughs, and the smoke comes billowing out of her mouth and nose as her eyes start to water slightly.

"Woo hoo! Excellent dragon impersonation!" Harv is proud of his baptismal role. "Only thing to do is get right back up on that horsey an' ride again!" And Alex does better her second time around, knowing what to expect.

Nobody gives Harv a shotgun, because, quite frankly, neither Bob nor I have confidence we could do it without burning the insides of our mouths. And Alex is just learning how to be a recipient, so she's not going to give him a shotgun either. After five to ten minutes, we've finished the joint, including retrieving the roach clip from the paraphernalia bag to smoke every last bit of it. It's time to get back to work. It's probably 6:30 to 7:00 o'clock by now, so we'll be hungry before long and want a fire going for when the sun goes down.



Nothing would ever get done if we didn't have somebody to organize things, and that's almost always me. "Bob, do you wanna start cookin' while the rest of us get a fire goin'?"

"Sure, Harv. That sounds great."

"Hey, Harv, why don't you show us where that hole is, just in case, y'know?"

Fair request by Rick, "Bob, you wanna come along for a minute, too?"

"Sure."

So I lead them across the open space of the campsite into the woods. I locate the outcropping on the forest floor, "This is the first landmark," turn right until I come to the mossy patch, "This is the second landmark," and then walk along the edge of the mossy patch until I come to the hole. It's about 18 inches deep, dug mostly into the soil adjacent to the mossy patch, although I did hit a few rocks on the way down. The dirt from the hole is piled up on one side of the hole. "There it is. Just waitin' for nature's call."

"All right, I got it. I'm headin' back to cook." Bob leaves.

"Let's gather up firewood. There's a lotta downed branches all through these woods." And so we do. Some of the branches are pretty small and short, which we can use as kindling to get the fire going. Rick finds one that's about 20 feet long and six inches in diameter at its thickest point. It's pretty heavy, but he's strong as an ox, so he's able to drag it over to the fire circle all on his own. With lots of the larger logs we find, we'll use the fire to saw them into pieces. Just put the middle of the log over the fire and let the fire burn it into two pieces. Then throw the middle of those new pieces over the fire and keep repeating until the pieces are short enough to fit in the fire on their own. We pile our wood into two piles. The first pile is the short and small stuff. We'll use that to start the fire and get it burning good. The second pile is where we put all of the longer logs. Those we'll place across the fire to burn into smaller pieces, just as soon as the fire starts burning good. That way we have enough wood to last us well into the evening.

Alex actually finds the poker. It's a nice weathered piece of wood, about six feet long, tapered from a three-inch diameter at the thick end to about two inches at the business end. A very nice find. After about 10 minutes of gathering wood, we clearly have enough to get a fire started. "Say, Rick, you wanna put the fire together?"

"I could, but why don' we have Alex do it? I'm probly a little better at draggin' logs than her. How 'bout it, Alex?"

"You mean like a real live burning fire? You'd trust me with matches out in the woods? With such flattery, how could a girl say no?"

"Yeah, yeah. Bob'll show you where the newspaper an' matches are," I say. "Jeez, give 'em a little responsibility an' it goes right to their head." Rick and I keep collecting wood as Alex preps the fire.

She uses a rectangular construction of small kindling with balled newspaper in the center, with the next rectangular level covering the wadded up newspaper. Then around the rectangular center she builds a tepee of slightly larger sticks. She lights the newspaper with a match in three places, and as the rectangular stackings catch, she adds more to the outer tepee layer. All in all, very nicely done. Rick and I continue collecting wood for another 20 minutes or so, and by the time we're done Alex has a nice fire going, with flames licking up about four feet above the logs that have collapsed against each other out of the tepee. She begins to pull one of the longer logs across the fire on a diagonal to one edge of the hearth. She places a second one on a diagonal to the other edge of the hearth. And then finally, she places a third one parallel to the hearth, forming a very nice interlocking triangle where the three logs cross each other.

She's going to be handy to have around.



“What is this . . . stuff?”

“Ah, my dear Alexandra, you're just bein' polite. What you really mean to say is, ‘What is this shit, Bob?’ Course, it's not Bob's fault. These are just some a the things we've settled on that are quick and filling, with a little bit of nutritional value. This particular delight, we call tuna mac. The actual brand-name product was too expensive, so we're just mixing Kraft Mac 'n Cheese with a few cans of tuna, an' throwin' in some extra sliced cheese an' spices. The canned green beans on the side are what give the meal true panache. Wouldn't you say so, Rick?”

“Yes, Harv. I find the saltiness of the beans provides a lovely accompaniment to the saltiness of the cheese and the tuna. All in all, a lovely reinforcing of varied salty tastes across the palate. I believe Mr. Johnson has earned three stars from Zagat this evening.”

“The chef appreciates the compliments. The secret ingredient was adding some salt to the salt base of all of the raw materials. This way we'll all be well-preserved.”

“OK, OK. I get it, it's easy an' quick an' it's calories. But we are gonna splurge a little bit on real food every now an' then, aren't we? Oh, an' by the way, it's Alexis, not Alexandra.”

“You know, now that you bring it up, we oughtta talk about that. Bob, how much food do we have left?”

“We're pretty much down to the oatmeal. I didn' wanna go out shopping from Standing Bear's, so we'll need to do a grocery run soon.”

“Did you by chance check what the food fund looks like?”

“It's low. About twelve bucks, I think.”

“How about gas?”

“A little more, around fifteen. But both need replenishing.”

“Whadduhyou guys think? And by guys, I'm including you, Alex. Fifty a pop in each fund?”

“Sounds good to me, Harv. You good, Rick?”

“Yeah, that works for me. Good for you, Alex?”

“Yep.”

“Now, next thing. About tomorrow. I've still got three fifty in cash I'd like to get converted into traveler checks. Maybe we could bug outta here pretty early an' be to Jackson by nine. I'm assuming

that's when the banks'll open up. Then we can head south an' get the fuck outta Wyoming. Where was it you guys need to stop next, Rick? Crag, or somethin' like that?"

"It's actually Craig, like the name. It's in Colorado."

"Well thank god for that. No offense, Alex."

"Hey, I want outta here, too."

"Alright, so we're up early an' get packed for a long drive. Why don't we leave here around seven thirty? That way we'll be sure to be in Jackson by nine, maybe even get gas outta the way before the bank opens up."

"Good for me."

"Me, too."

"Yep."



The sun's been down for a couple of hours, now. We got out a camp tarp that we set on the ground around the side of the fire circle where the smoke tends to blow the least. After dinner, we burned our paper plates in the fire, and Alex offered to clean the pots Bob cooked in. She also washed the plastic forks. Bob put everything away, except the three buckets, which we filled with water over at the creek so we can put out the fire later. Had a joint after dinner, too, as we digested.

Now we're just sitting around, drinking water from our five-gallon collapsible plastic jug in our plastic cups. Helps to cut all the salt in our dinner. I get up off of the tarp and take my penlight over to the car. "One more joint before we call it a night?"

"Yeah, that sounds good, Rick," Harv agrees.

As I head over to the car, Alex inquires, "So who exactly are you guys? I mean, what's your story? You're out here, just kinduh drivin' around, livin' outdoors. I mean, I can tell you're friends an' all, but how?"

"Well, Alexandra, my dear. Excuse me, Alexis." Harv continues in grand fashion, gesticulating exaggeratedly as he goes, "The gentleman heading over to the car to retrieve more medicinal herbs for us, is none other than rammin' Rick Shifflet, tight end extraordinaire for the John Letcher High Rebels, class of seventy-nine. He could run over anybody an' open up a mean hole for a running back to scoot through. Gave it all up, though, to be a C P A. Coulduh played at the next level, just not competitive D one."

"I'm sorry. Did you say the John Letcher Rebels?"

"Yes, a most unfortunate name. Particularly for an institution with a principal bearing a striking resemblance to Aqualung. Don't think many haven't had a field day with that name over the years. The problem, you see, is that in Virginia we're just taking a temporary respite from the Civil War. We decided, in eighteen sixty-five, that strategically it made sense to lull the North into a false sense of security that they had won the war. See, we keep the symbols alive, so that the cause survives. Then one day, we'll turn the tide in the War of Northern Aggression."

"That's not quite what they teach in history in Wyomin'."

"God damn Greater New England Puritan bastards! Out filling your minds with drivel, like the Civil War settled something. Everyone knows the South will rise again. Well, at least everyone in the

South with no sense whatsoever. Anyway, the aforementioned Letch, uh, Mr. Letcher, was the governor of Virginia during the Civil War. What better name to give a high school right outside Washington, DC, than the name of a traitorous politician, and then give 'em a Rebel for a mascot, just to drive home the point of eternal struggle. But I digress."

"Yeah, Harv. You kinduh do. Have a hit," I say, as I hand him the lit joint. He obliges, then passes the joint along. It makes its rounds as we continue. "So, Alex, the gentleman who just regaled you with an impromptu history lesson is none other than Mortimer, don't call me Mort, David Harv Weinberg, always the smartest kid in the class, but never the smartest kid at his dinner table."

"Oh, so now you're askin' for it," Harv says to me playfully. We're having a good time.

"Mort came to be a Letch as a freshman. Through a spectacular fall from grace, he had to withdraw from the rather exclusive Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, and go slumming with the likes of Bob an' me in the Fairfax County public schools, a victim of that all-too-common social phenomenon known as divorce."

"Easy, buddy."

"I'm done there for now. Anyway, before school begins, we're all going out for the freshman football team, an' a kid named Randy Stipes gets ahold a Mortimer here's name, an' starts bustin' on him for it. He got about two or three cracks in before blood exploded out of his nose at the instigation of a fist, belonging not to Mortimer apparently, but to Harv, as he announced he was thence forward to be known, because, he would, in fact, eventually be attending college at Harvard. There was then general agreement among the players that, in fact, Harv was his name, not Mortimer.

"And so a legend was born. A star ascending to ever higher heights. Harv excelled in every way. Four point oh, sixteen hundred S A T, President of the National Honor Society, science fair winner, all district wide receiver, and, of course, admitted to Harvard at the end of it all, where he was an all Ivy wide receiver and academic All-American. Am I leaving anything out?"

Just before a snort issues from Bob trying to hold in a hit off the joint, he chimes in, "Just that he's damn pretty, too." But he can't pull it off, as we all laugh at Harv's expense, and the smoke from Bob's hit comes exploding out of his nose and mouth.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Well, the last member of our troupe is master Robert Kenneth, Bob, Johnson. A very industrious fellow. Always enjoyed tinkering and building things. His dad was an engineer. And now Bob's an engineer. Apparently a damn good one, because he got a bunch a crap in Standing Bear's barn to run. Anyway, Bob also played ball with us in high school. He was a safety. He could lay wood on you with the best of 'em. Just needed another thirty pounds of muscle to be really dangerous at his position."

"Jeez, Harv, don't hold back."

"Really, Bob? You want me to go on?"

"No. That's OK."

"What more is there?" Alex asks.

"Well, you might notice that both Rick an' I have football nicknames."

"Harv." I can see Bob getting a little antsy, because he knows what's coming.

"I mean, I essentially gave myself my football nickname."

"Harv." Bob says it a little louder this time.

"And you can certainly see where rammin' Rick comes from on the football field. I mean, just look at what a fine physical specimen he is."

“HARV.”

“But Bob, it took a couple of years to finally get his nickname down.”

“Dammit, Harv. Enough!”

“Stump!”

“Shit!” Bob gets up and starts poking the fire.

Alex looks perplexed, “What’s so bad about that? I get Stump. You can’t move him. He’s a good tackler, right?”

Harv and I both snicker. Bob looks away and pokes at the fire. Harv picks back up, “Well, that might work if in fact he played that way. But most of his hits, strong though they were, were based on great angles and capitalizing on his brains, not his brawn.”

“Then I don’t get it.”

“Fuck you, Harv. You guys put out the god damn fire. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Oh, Bob, come on, man. Lighten up. Don’t take everything so god damn serious.”

“I’ll say this one time, Harv, an’ then I’m goin’ to bed. It’s easy to joke when you aren’t the butt of it. But I’ve never liked that nickname. An’ you know why. You can be a real mean bastard, sometimes, y’know?” And with that, Bob lays down the poker and goes over to the trees to pee.

“Bob. Hey, Bob. Come on, man. Look, I’m sorry. Come on back over an’ have a seat.”

But Bob doesn’t come back. Eventually we hear the zipper on his tent go up. Alex seems to have the good sense not to push things any further. We sit in silence for a bit and watch the fire burn down. Eventually Alex excuses herself to go pee. As she walks over into the woods, Harv and I unzip and pee on the fire. Waste not, you know. We finish the fire off with the buckets of water, so that it’s drowned real good.

“Night, Harv.”

“Night, Rick. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

12

I JOSTLE AROUND, ACUTELY aware that I need to pee, a major piss hard-on in my sleeping bag. I unzip my bag so that I can get out of the tent, and I notice that Alex isn't there. I scooch over toward the tent door and try to run up the zipper, but it won't budge. God I have to pee so bad. Why won't the zipper work? I can't believe I have to pee and my tent zipper is stuck.

Just then I hear something stir outside the tent. "Alex," I say, "is that you?"

"Yes. Do you need some help?"

"Yeah. I do. The zipper's stuck an' I need to get outta the tent to pee."

"Oh. Well, here, lemme undo the zipper lock."

I hear the click of the zipper lock coming open. Then I hear the zipper unzipping and the tent door flap opens. I know I ought to put some clothes on, but I have to pee so bad I don't have time for that. I get right out in my stocking feet and stand up once I'm clear of the door.

"Here. Let me help you with that," she says. And as she stands to my left, she reaches out her right hand and, with her palm facing up and backward, wraps her hand around my fully erect dick, to where her thumb and fingers meet on the top side of the base of my shaft. "This way. We'll go over here." And in the moonlight she leads me across the campsite by my dick, almost like a kid pulling a wagon along. As we walk, I notice she's not wearing a stitch of clothing, not even socks to keep her feet warm. "We're almost there."

She leads me right up to the edge of the woods. Then she releases her right hand off my dick, squats down next to me and uses her left hand to grip the sides of my dick between her thumb and index finger. She pulls my dick down to where there's about a 30-degree angle between my shaft and abdomen, and says, "OK, now you can go ahead." So I pee. But because of the piss hard-on, I can't get it all out, so she lets my dick ride up a little bit as I squeeze out as much pee as the first squirt will allow. "That was good," she says as she resets the 30-degree angle, "now go ahead and try again." And so I do, with her again letting my dick ride up a little bit as I squeeze out all the pee I can on this squirt. We repeat this a few more times, and my dick begins to soften, making it easier for me to finish draining my bladder. And when I look around again, Alex is gone.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is two tits flopping forward and back eight inches from my face. I can feel my dick softening inside Alex as I hear the squish suck of her pussy thrusting on top of me. I must have already cum inside her. The dream, when I peed. I look further up, and I see Alex's throat, her head tossed back, jaw clenched, eyes clamped shut, hair bouncing up and down around her tits as she moves up and down, all silhouetted by the yellow and sky blue panels of the tent. In a purposefully hushed throaty tone, she growls, "Just," squish suck, "couple," squish suck, "more," squish suck, squish suck, squish suck, squish suck, and then, still purposefully hushed, but even more primal, "ahhhhhh," squish suck squish suck squish suck, "unghhhhhh," squish suck squish suck, "unhhhhh," squish suck squish suck, "uhhhhh," squish suck squish suck, "ahhh," squish suck, "ohh," squish suck, "mmmm," squish suck. And then she slows down, and the squish suck sound stops. I can feel warm goo spreading all over my pelvis around the base of my dick. A little dribble runs down the left side of my balls. Her pussy just gently caresses my quickly softening dick. She lays her head down on the left side of my chest, looking off to her right, as she ever so slowly keeps caressing my dick with her pussy, splaying her arms out to either side across mine. We lie like this for at least a minute, during which she stops her caressing and just lies completely still.

Then she suddenly props up with her arms on the tent floor to either side of me, just above my shoulder level, opens her eyes, looks into mine, smiles widely and says, “Good morning.”

I’m stunned. I mean, theoretically, this is supposed to be every guy’s dream, in fact his wet dream, right? Waking up to a hot chick banging the shit out of him. But it doesn’t feel that way. Then I can see my lack of response is about to wipe the smile off Alex’s face, and I blurt out, “Mornin’ back at ya.” Oh, that was priceless. Where’d I dig that pearl up? That’s the problem, you don’t dig pearls. You find them in oysters, or clams, some god damn shellfish. Wait a minute, she’s doing it to me again. Here she is six years younger than me, and she’s owning my ass. Not even any bars this time to separate us. “You know, you coulduh woken me up. I’d at least have been able to enjoy it when I came.”

“Well, I debated that. But after last night I didn’ wanna take a chance on being told no again. And when I saw the bulge under the middle a your bag, an’ could unzip it without you wakin’ up . . . well, imagine seein’ such a fine soldier standin’ at attention an’ just achin’ for the call a duty. I figured chances are you’d wake up at some point. I didn’ count on you bein’ such a sound sleeper.”

She stays propped on her hands over top of me, tits dangling in my face, pussy still barely holding onto my limp dick, which, by the way, really needs to pee now that it’s not hard anymore. “So you didn’ at some point think, now that we’re goin’, maybe I should wake him up?”

“Kinduh got carried away. Oops.”

And so that’s it? Oops? “Hey, nothin’ personal here, but I haftuh pee so bad that if you don’t let me up in the next five seconds I might explode all over you.”

As she bends her right arm, pushes off with her left, releases my dick and rolls off of me, she says, “Darlin’, we’re gonna haftuh work on your sweet nothings.”

I quickly scan the tent and find my underwear. My pants are still underneath me, so I pull them on quickly. Then I put on just a tee shirt and unzip the tent. Where the fuck did I come up with an external zipper lock? What a fucked up dream! I pull on my shoes without tying them and run over to the woods real quickly, fumble with my zipper, whip out my dick and let the relief begin. There’s still that little bit of blood vessel blockage you get when you try to pee right after having sex. It comes out in a stream, it’s just that the strength of the stream oscillates a bit, until I get toward the end, when the flow becomes steady once again.