



Hear Him Roar

A Novel

Andrew Wingfield

2005

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A Novel

ANDREW WINGFIELD

Utah State University Press
Logan, Utah

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To Tania, for seeing

RUNNING WITH THE DEER. This is what she called it, because her dark hour was their hour also. They spent their days bedded down along the river. They would come up into the neighborhood after midnight to feed on lawns, shrubs, unfenced gardens. Each night they traveled great distances, eating every green, tender thing they could find. Before dawn they would turn toward the river again, gliding through the neighborhood like a host of spirits, dissolving back into the brush. She was the only one on the block who didn't mind their ravenous eating. She understood that they were in trouble, multiplying as fast as the tracts and malls that were devouring their habitat and funneling them into the narrow greenbelt along the river. She understood that they were a public menace, not just for the yards they pillaged but also for the cars they wrecked, the arms and legs and skulls that cracked when people plowed into them on the roads. Every day at the insurance company she processed the claims, she heard her bosses moan about the deer, the money they were costing.

She was a good employee, reliable, efficient, smart—too smart to challenge her bosses on the matter of the deer. Anyway her understanding with the deer was secret, never acknowledged openly to anyone but her boyfriend. She knew them. They knew her. She told him they ran *with* her, not away from her, and he believed it. She told him it wasn't discipline that got her up and out an hour before dawn each day. She told him it was greed. For quiet. For unrestricted movement. For the sliver of each day that didn't belong to anyone. Having that sliver helped her share the rest—with her kids, her bosses, him.

The reporters asked if it had made him uncomfortable, her going off into the dark like that, alone. When he said of course,

they thought he meant *Of course, I feared for her safety*. Because her safety is what they were asking about. But maybe he meant something else, or something more. Maybe he was talking about the way she would remove herself from his heavy, sleepy grasp and slip away into the darkness, going off to seek something she didn't find with him, leaving the bed as eagerly as she'd entered it five hours before.

He was glad she told him about the deer. Somehow this made it easier to have her leave his bed. He didn't tell the reporters that, but he did tell them he took her seriously the two days before it happened, when she said something was different out there, something she couldn't put her finger on, a feeling down by the river, an uneasiness she sensed in the deer, in herself. If she had been superstitious, she'd told him, she would have thought it was a ghost.

That had to be what she thought at the moment of the attack. What else could she have thought? Did she think it was a person? No, people make noise. She would have heard a human attacker coming. She was well into her run by then, a good three miles upriver from her home, and deep into the runner's trance. The muscles and the tendons all loose and warm. Heart pumping strong and steady, lungs feeling free. Eyes adjusted to the darkness, which was barely beginning to thin. By now she was getting what she came here for, the thing that always lured her back, the opening of pores, of glands, of emotions, the honing of senses that was also a kind of opening, a dissolving of boundaries, a blending with the darkness no one owns. Running with the deer, sharing this shadowy element that their presence defined for her. So of course she sensed it, as the deer did, or because they did. Something different, a presence faint but definite, like a word on the tip of the tongue, a sound on the very edge of human hearing, vague, so subtle as to be almost nothing, and for all this exciting, stimulating, and never more elusive than in the instant before it struck.

It came from her right side, from far enough behind that she never saw it. The blow was so fierce that she didn't touch ground

again until she hit a spot twenty feet down the sloped embankment to the left of the trail. The force carried her another twelve feet down the slope, and her too-zealous attacker ended up seven feet beyond her. The hard landing broke her left arm.

When the attack resumed she raised both hands and both knees and began to fight. For her children, not herself. Because she knew she was dead. Almost immediately, long before she quit fighting, she accepted that. She had been selected. She had been watched. And now she had been struck by a killer so skilled, so discreet that in the seconds before it hit her she had imagined it was far away. The fighting was awful—vicious, bloody, long. She fought for the children, so they would know she fought. But she didn't mind dying this death. He would understand this. Maybe that was why she'd let this one move in with her. She had chosen to run with the deer. And now, as the sky brightened beyond the canopy of branches, like a deer she dissolved.

PART ONE

COUGAR COUNTRY

IF YOU'RE NOT BORN IN THE SACRAMENTO VALLEY, it takes a few years for you to know the first day of fall when it comes. I've lived here for over thirty years, about half my life. By now I've learned to read sights like the one that greeted my eyes when I walked out the door that morning—a dozen or so yellow spade-shaped leaves that had dropped from the fruitless mulberry that shades the driveway. We were well into Indian summer at the time. Here that means chilly mornings and warm afternoons, a sky full of tawny light, and very little wind. Those leaves hadn't blown down. They had let go.

The temperature that morning was well above freezing, but still low enough that my old Pontiac Vera needed a little time to get warm. I got her running and left her to idle while I gathered up the fallen leaves and placed them around the base of one of my rosebushes, not thinking that those leaves might have some message for me about letting go, not thinking any such thing as I got my bike out of the garage and strapped it to the rack on Vera's back bumper. By then she was ready to go.

I live in one of this area's middle-aged neighborhoods, close to the west bank of the Sacramento River, opposite downtown. Within seconds of the merge into sluggish traffic Vera and I rose to cross the river. The view from the elevated freeway bridge was wide open, but I was galled this morning, as I had been for a long stretch of mornings, by what I couldn't see. A decade before, when Jean and I had agreed to shack up at her place, I'd started making this commute. Back then I would look left from here, toward downtown Sacramento, and glimpse the white dome of

the Capitol. That old beauty was blocked now by a group of garish glassy towers bankrolled by the Hackenbills and the Venuttis, two local families who started competing in the seventies to see who could make the most money selling flimsy houses and good weather to water-guzzling, road-choking, air-polluting suckers from everywhere. As a non-native, my only claim is that I showed up here when there was still plenty of room. Back then, on a sunny morning like this, I'd have seen the Sierras bulked up along the rim of the eastern sky. Today the mountains were hidden behind the dingy veil of smog that thickened with each windless day.

My commute took me twenty miles east of the city, out where the land begins to wrinkle and tilt, climbing its bumpy way from the flat valley floor to the rolling hills above. The traffic on my side of the freeway thinned out once I was past downtown. I gave Vera plenty of gas and gripped the wheel tight, pulling left to counter her drift. Meanwhile, across the divider, the westbound lanes were crowded with newcomers all crawling in from the east. Yesterday a mountain lion had thinned their ranks by one. I confess that as I whizzed past them, I exulted a little. Such blatant poetic justice is hard to resist. Especially when your own prediction has come true, as mine had.

For years I'd been warning Jean that voting to protect mountain lions would have its consequences. So who could blame me if I'd been a little smug in bed that morning, as we were sipping our first cup of coffee and reading about the attack in the *Bee*.

When Jean saw the news she gasped. "Son of a *bitch*."

Son of a bitch, she was saying, *what a grisly way to go*. But also: *Son of a bitch, Charlie was right*.

"What do people expect?" I said.

She was quiet a minute, skimming the article over my shoulder. "So what happens now?"

"I suspect they'll fix what's left of her up so all her friends and family can get a last look. Then they'll put her in a hole and say she's gone to a better place."

“Cut it out, Sayers,” Jean said. “What happens to the lion, I mean.”

“Oh, he’ll have to be shot—he’s unsocial. Not to mention ungrateful. Doesn’t he remember how you and a bunch of other folks voted to protect him?”

I reminded her that the protection wasn’t unconditional. “A lion steps out of line, he pays the price.”

“Pays how?”

I explained that some of my worthy colleagues at the Department of Wildlife were calling up the tracker right now. He would put his hounds on the scent and they’d track the killer down so he could be shot. “Later on the lion and the jogger will probably meet at the gates of heaven,” I said. “Unless the lion goes to hell. Which is where he belongs, I guess.”

“Or maybe their souls will transmigrate into each other,” she said, teasing me back. “The jogger will become a mountain lion. The lion will turn into a gal who jogs. Mother of two. Claims adjuster, doesn’t it say there?” She tapped the paper with her fingertip.

“Yes sir,” I declared after a minute, “this’ll get the Friends of the Mountain Lion scrambling. This is their biggest nightmare.” I was about to launch into a lecture on the shortsighted folly of the people I called the pumaphiles, who hadn’t foreseen this kind of trouble when they started campaigning to protect the beasts they adore. It was a diversionary tactic, and Jean saw right through it. She cut me off.

“The thing is, Charlie, it’s perfectly natural.”

“What is, protecting mountain lions so they can attack women who jog?”

“Charlie, I’m talking about death.”

“So am I.”

“*Your* death.”

“What, have you seen it lurking around?”

“No, I’ve been *listening*. To *you*. Talking about death all the time, and what comes after. It’s natural, you know.”

“What is?”

“Both. Death, and thinking about what comes after. Hoping something does.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, letting the paper fall in my lap. “Here I thought we were going to have a nice argument about wildlife management, a subject I know something about, and instead you want to discuss the unknowable.”

“It’s only unknowable if you let it be.”

“Says you, and which of the experts on the shelf in there?” I jerked my thumb towards the library across the hall from our room. A few months back I had relaxed a long-standing quarantine and let her assign me some books by a couple of the bestselling sages she reveres. I had been tickled by the reading, but not renewed, and this was still a sore point between us.

“If you want to be sarcastic, that’s your choice.”

“Sarcasm is one of the more hurtful mechanisms of defense,” I said, aping one of her pet authors.

“Another option is to control the situation.”

“Hey, now *there’s* a plan. Hello Mr. Reaper, glad to meet you. Charlie Sayers is the name, and I’m here to look you in the eye. You know what? You’re not as big and nasty as I thought you were.” I faked a sigh. “Gee, now I feel fine.”

Jean peeled the covers back and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She plucked the phone off her nightstand and punched numbers. “Just me,” she said to Nora, her mentor across the street. “Remember you told me to be on the lookout for the Aging, Raging Male? I think he’s here.”

It was true I’d forgotten how to satisfy her, but not how to make her mad. Maybe there was something hopeful in that. *Who knows*, I thought now, eyeing the traffic jam on my left, *maybe there’s something hopeful in the lion attack too. Maybe it’ll wake them up. Maybe they’ll see it’s their own damn fault.*

“Why?” I said aloud. (I often addressed this parade of enemies as I drove past them.) “Why is it your own fault? Because you wanted Eden, but no snake. You thought you could have it.”

I was getting into one of my prophetic moods. It was easy, the scene my windshield gave me was like something from a Hollywood Bible pageant, the technicolor caravan pouring down out of the brown hills as if to escape some scourge or plague. And I, all unheeded, took my bitter pleasure in remembering how it started. In the beginning was the army of earthmovers that rolled across the empty undulating spaces to flatten big patches out. When that was done they headed for the hills, blitzing the draws and canyons and clearing away the brush. Reinforcements swarmed in behind them to run pipe, lay pavement, string wire, and cut down inconvenient trees. Houses went up and these auto pilots to the left of me, after buying them, set to work beautifying their lots, putting lush lawns down, planting all kinds of young trees and shrubs. They marveled at the deer when they started to arrive. Beautiful creatures! What could make their garden more delightful? But deer must eat. And deer will be eaten, especially if you vote to protect the deer's natural predator, the mighty mountain lion. I had no beef with the big cats. What bothered me was this other species, *homo dingus dongus*. In their natural state those hills were cougar country. The cougars had little really good habitat left, but plenty of food, so long as they didn't mind keeping company with *homo dingus dongus*. But wait, why fault him? He means well. He bears no grudge against the cougar. Hell, he voted to protect the damn things. But did he ever think that cat might come back to bite the hand that shielded him? Of course he didn't. For he is a near-sighted animal. His vision rarely reaches past the edge of his fastidious front lawn.

"HEY!" I shouted as I charged past, "WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THOSE BIG BROWN KITTIES NOW?"

The Aging, Raging Male. Hear him roar.

THE LATEST VERSION

I WAS THROUGH ROARING AND ready for some distraction by the time I pulled into the Department of Wildlife's regional headquarters, a ten-acre compound on the south bank of the American River. The compound sits less than three miles downriver from the spot on the bike trail where the lady jogger went down. I'd been stationed here for most of my thirty years in the department so I knew what the place looked like when something special was cooking. Green Wildlife trucks were all over the place, starting and stopping, roaring around. Little groups of guys, most of them rank and file, wearing the department's green pants and short-sleeved khaki shirt (too macho for sweaters or jackets even on this chilly morning), were standing around explaining to each other what should be done about the mountain lion, glancing over their shoulders to see if they would be called upon to prove their courage and guile.

To those guys the lion attack was pure excitement. To me it was a sign of the times, Mother Nature exacting her revenge for decades of neglect and abuse. Another sign was Charlie Sayers driving past the beige aluminum building he used to park in front of. A storage site by this time, it once housed the lab where I had worked as biologist. I passed the second and third beige buildings, then turned in and parked before the fourth. This one was home to the department's Office of Community Relations, where I'd worked since my lab closed down.

I went inside and followed the hall toward the offices of Hooked on Fishing. As soon as I saw my assistant Emilio I observed that lion fever was in full swing.

“You know it,” Emilio said. “This is one sick bunch of people. It’s like, celebration time. The big event, you know.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. The phone rang. Emilio picked it up and I stayed put through the short conversation, gathering from what he said and the way he moved his face that one of our volunteers was backing out.

“Somebody standing us up?” I asked after he’d hung up. I talked to his black, slicked-back hair because he was bent over his desk writing.

“You got it,” he said.

“For tomorrow?”

He looked up. “Right again.”

“Well, who are the alternates? Guess we’ll have to call one of them.”

Emilio shook his head. A tolerant smile creased the perfectly clipped lines that ran between his mustache and goatee. “This is the Sutter Heights kids, Charlie. Lot of people are scared to teach a little welfare kid to fish. We can barely get enough volunteers for this group in the first place. We never get extras.”

I pondered the problem a moment. “Why don’t I do it?” I said, surprising us both. “Make myself useful for a change.”

“Hey, Charlie. All right. Now, if I was you I’d take the day off. You’re not going to get nothing done.”

“What else is new?” I said.

Letting this pass, he announced that the day’s two meetings had already been canceled. Nobody wanted to miss a chance at being in on the mountain lion action.

Nobody but me.

I crossed the hall to my office, and after closing the door went straight to the big window behind my desk chair. Standing there, gazing out across the fish hatchery’s rows of rectangular cement ponds, two acres that teemed with trout, I started trying to remember some of the phrases I had come up with in the latest version of my resignation letter. After a minute I reached for the cord and flapped shut the slats of the venetian blind. I glanced at

my shut door and then unlocked the bottom right-hand drawer of my desk. Beneath a stack of virgin Department of Wildlife letter-head lay the envelope I was after, addressed to the department's regional supervisor. I tore it open.

I had labored over this version of the letter all through the week. Yesterday evening, Thursday, I'd stayed late to type it out on Emilio's machine. I remembered being pleased with it, thinking I'd come closer than I had with any of the other dozen or so drafts to saying exactly what had to be said. But as I read it over now I saw I was badly mistaken. The problem was as plain to me as it would have been to my old grandpa. He'd have taken one look at this letter and told me to quit my bellyaching. He'd have been right.

I didn't actually start to complain until the bottom of the second page. Before that it was just a lot of winding up. I guess I was trying to tenderize the supervisor by showing him I knew his point of view, I understood all his arguments, had thought them over carefully, and now wanted to advance some ideas of my own. The first paragraph was polite enough to make a person sick. There I acknowledged the budget crisis the department gave as its reason for closing the lab. I didn't dispute for one minute that there had been a crisis. Sales of fishing and hunting licenses, our main source of funds, had been falling for years. I assured the supervisor I was aware of this. I chalked it up to social change, rods and guns losing favor to skis and racquets and balls and boards. "The pioneer spirit flickering out," is how I put it. How cute.

In the second paragraph I turned to a couple of years before, when department coffers were so low they could barely get salaries paid. After making payroll they had little left to cover the costs of operating. I reported that in my fish disease lab we were spending a lot of time sitting on our hands. No good for the department, no good for the biologists. Next I reviewed the drastic measures the department started taking—a swipe here, a slash there. I'd been disappointed my lab would fold, I admitted, but I told the supervisor

I appreciated their offering me a choice between early retirement and a change of positions.

Next I lied, saying how delighted I was when they sent me to Community Relations, where they named me head of Hooked on Fishing, a brand new program. The truth was I couldn't have cared less about fishing than I did right then. But it wasn't the department's fault I'd gone sour on fishing. And they couldn't help it if I had no head for administration. What upset me was the way they'd sacked the lab. The whole thing had gone down in secret: they'd excluded me and my colleagues from every single talk. Which is what I wanted to gripe about in my resignation letter, if I could ever figure out how to do it without the lengthy preamble. Send this draft, and the supervisor would die of boredom before he finished unwrapping the bomb.

I took a pen from the jar on my desk and started working back through the first paragraph, crossing most of it out. I was on my way into the second paragraph when I heard a familiar voice out in the hall. Before I could stow the papers safely Don Mackey had barged into my office and was thundering toward me, his big purplish head making me think as usual of a hippo's, the eyes small and set back, the nostrils large and thrust forward, a collar of tough loose skin sagging around the neck.

"Sayers," he rumbled, "I hear you got pussy problems out this way."

Anyone else I would have scolded for not knocking. But Mackey and I had worked in the lab together twenty-five years. We'd never been big on manners over there.

"Big ones," I said.

One thing I'd always enjoyed about Don was how deeply laughter altered him. Right now it set his neck-skin waggling. It made his shoulders rise and his eyes disappear and his purple color darken fiercely.

"Well what are you doing just sitting there?" he said when the eruption was over. "I thought this frigging cat would have

you people jumping in Community Relations, earning your damn keep for a change.”

If the last part of this came out sounding more bitter than funny, that was because Don had been wounded deeply when the lab closed down. He’d gone for early retirement and it shocked him when I made the shift.

“Peg give you time off for good behavior,” I said, “or did you finish building that bridge across the fake creek she had you dig in the back yard?”

When Don hits you, it’s best to hit right back. This much I’d learned in twenty-five years. I also had a pretty good handle on his limited assortment of looks. First he showed me a thinking expression, the eyes withdrawn like a pair of shrinking black beads, the nostrils flaring as he weighed the wisdom of swinging at me again.

“Did we not predict this?” he said, sitting down across from me as he dropped a meaty hand on my desktop. Under the hand was some kind of document, a newsletter or brochure. The part the hand didn’t cover showed me a frontal view of a mountain lion’s head done in blue ink, eyes slit, jaws unhinged, fangs bared and ready to chomp.

Don said he could remember talking about this very thing, back before the referendum passed. “This is exactly what we said would happen.”

“Only we thought it would happen sooner.”

“And further up in the hills. Not right *here*, for shit sake. But it just goes to show you. Something’s got to be done, Sayers.”

I opened my top desk drawer and slid the papers into it. “Let me guess. We have to repeal the lion law, let a bunch of rich guys start hunting the hell out of them.”

“Damn straight. These lions are the only wild animals in the state the department doesn’t manage. You know who’s in charge of them?”

“The Friends of the Mountain Lion wrote that law.”

“You know who those people *are*, Sayers?”

“Not biologists.”

“Who needs biologists when you got a few slick lobbyists down at the capitol and a bunch of money ponied up by movie stars and save the whales fanatics? I’m telling you Sayers, if it’s left up to those nuts we’ll have a lion in every backyard in the state before long. It won’t be safe to go outside.”

“You know what I wish?” I said. “I wish we could manage all these new *people* back to wherever the hell they’re coming from. Too many backyards—that’s the main problem.”

“Yeah, but the people aren’t going anywhere.”

“Let a few more of them get attacked. Their minds could change.”

He rolled his heavy shoulders, shrugging off my joke. He assured me he was just being practical, he had no special feelings for rich guys who get their thrills shooting mountain lions off of tree branches. As if I had to be told this. Don is a real outdoors-man, not the kind of poser you’d see riding in a jeep out to shoot a lion treed by some paid tracker’s hounds. He grew up right around here. In the valley and in the mountains that enclose it, nobody could give you a more complete catalogue of the wildlife that’s been sacrificed over the last thirty years to what developers call development. Whenever I felt sickened by what was happening around here, I’d think how much worse it must be for a native son like Don.

“If I were you I wouldn’t be so level-headed about it,” I told him.

“Yeah. Well.”

“Unless I had some ulterior motive,” I said, reacting to a faint flicker of mischief that played around his chin. In answer to my veiled query his nostrils flared a little. The beads of his eyes shrank again, receding.

I leaned forward and planted my elbows on the desk. “Since when is a fish biologist so interested in mountain lions, anyway?”

Thoughts and feelings passed across Don’s face like rapid weather. “Sayers,” he said after a little, “this isn’t just about mountain

lions. We've come to a crossroads in this state, and it's time to decide who's going to manage the fish and wildlife. A state agency staffed by experts, or a bunch of bird-brained agitators who know a lot about brainwashing voters and diddly squat about anything else."

If you'd told me retirement would turn Don Mackey into a philosopher I'd have said you were nuts. When I mentioned this he reached up and rubbed a floppy ear-top between his finger and thumb—an old and oddly endearing habit.

I said, "You know, if they legalize hunting lions again they'll be able to charge those trophy-hunters a nice chunk for the license. That chunk will go to the department, of course."

He was purpler every second. "So...?"

"So if I was a disgruntled old fart fish biologist who'd been put out to pasture, that might interest me. Especially if my wife had me doing hard labor out in the backyard. I might be thinking, Shit, maybe if they get enough money off those licenses, they'll open my lab up again."

"Jesus," Mackey said, "if I'd known you were going to cross examine me I'd've thought twice about stopping by."

I leaned back and turned up my palms. "You're right. One more question, then I'll leave you alone."

He nodded.

"I know you didn't come all the way out here to see me."

He slid that heavy hand across the desktop toward me, then lifted it to reveal the document I had glimpsed before. A newsletter. COUGAR ALERT! printed in bold blue across the top. On either side was the blue fang-filled cougar head.

"This attack will be the main thing in the next issue," he said. "I'm just making sure we get the whole story."

I whistled and wagged my head. "Not just a philosopher, but a reporter too."

He winked at me. "I'll save a place for you, old buddy. Just let me know when you're ready to *really* serve the community."

"What, and give up all my perks?" I pointed at my open door. A minute before I'd started hearing voices through it.

"Is that...?" Don snapped his fingers, searching for the name.

"Shirley," I said. "From Public Safety."

He shut his eyes and flared his nostrils wide. "Jesus, what a can she's got. I still dream about it."

We got up and crossed the hall to Emilio's office. Shirley was standing across from my assistant's desk talking to him. I paused in the doorway so we could admire her a little before she knew we were there. She had black curly hair and soft, quick-blushing cheeks. She was almost forty, but the round cheeks made her look younger. My eyes dawdled their way across Shirley and then hopped over to Emilio. He met my glance and I cocked my head ever so slightly, communicating my admiration to another male. Face it, men are going to do this kind of thing. The big change between now and the old days is that most of us have learned to be sneakier about it. Most of us.

Emilio answered my nod with a little half-nervous smile. Shirley turned to face me and said hello.

I asked her if she remembered Don.

"From the lab?" she said, eyeing him. "You do look familiar."

Don said, "Yeah, so do you. I never forget a, uh, face."

"That's right, from the lab," I said.

"*You* know," Don told her, "the one they closed down two years ago, about the time they expanded *your* unit."

The smile stayed on Shirley's face, but its temperature dropped.

I told her she'd have to excuse Cro-Magnon, who didn't get out of the cave that much anymore. Then I apologized for interrupting.

"That's okay," Shirley said. "Emilio just asked me what you're supposed to do if you find yourself face to face with a mountain lion, and I was filling him in."

I asked if she minded filling us in too.

"Not at all. This is what they pay me the big bucks for." She shot a sharp smirk at Don and then smiled, looking suddenly official, highly polished. "Number one. Do not run away. Running

may stimulate a mountain lion's instinct to chase. Number two. Don't crouch or bend over. A person squatting or bending over looks like a four-legged prey animal. Three. Do everything you can to appear larger. Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you're wearing one. Wave your arms and speak firmly in a loud voice."

Sometimes when I look back over my life I think it would have gone much smoother if I'd timed my exits better. I've had a tendency to stick around longer than I should, and usually I'm staying to fix something that a person with any sense would have left alone. This was one of those times. When Shirley finished her little presentation I told her she wasn't giving a thing away to Kim Stanley on channel thirteen.

Don nodded. "Yeah. I wouldn't mind getting home every night and seeing a pretty gal like you. On TV, I mean."

When he finished laughing, I said, "Whoa, careful there. You don't behave yourself we might have to toss you on the dung-heap."

"What for?" he said.

"He doesn't realize he could get in trouble these days," Shirley said, "talking like that to the wrong person."

Don flicked his hands out to his sides. "Hey, that's the idea, isn't it."

She was quiet a moment, looking him up and down. "Then again, at your age..."

"Believe me dear, at my age the idea's trouble enough."

Don's laugh filled my ears as I moved my eyes from Emilio to Shirley, from his snicker to her broad, blushing grin. It looked like old hippo-head had self-deprecated both of us out of a tight corner when Shirley said, "Even so, you'd better watch it."

But then her grin tightened into a kind of cold snarl and shame rose up and hit me like a strong gust.

As she passed through the door Don said in my ear, "Oh, I'll watch it. You bet I will."

I wanted to wheel and kick his prehistoric shins. And then have him kick mine.

HAUNTS

AFTER DON LEFT TO GATHER THE INFORMATION he'd come for things were fairly quiet. I tinkered with the resignation letter a bit and started looking forward to having lunch with my daughter Sadie. This was a Friday ritual with us. Around eleven she called to find out how I planned to get to her place.

"I heard on the radio they closed the bike trail where that woman got attacked," she said. "That's just up from where you are, isn't it?"

"Yeah, good thing I'm not riding that way."

A pleading tone crept into her voice as she suggested that I drive over.

"Now *that* could be dangerous," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that I have a much better chance of getting into a wreck on the road than I do of getting attacked by a mountain lion on the bike trail."

"Still," she said.

"Still what?"

She was quiet a minute, debating whether to fight me or not. "Just be careful, okay?"

What I'd said about the odds of a lion attack was true. And yet as I headed out along the bike trail I noticed I was riding a little harder than usual. The morning chill was gone by now and I had my sweater off. The trail follows the course of the river, threading through dense patches of oak and cottonwood and underbrush, all of it strung with vines. Each time I passed through one of these clumps of cover I half-expected to go down in a snarling blur of

fang and claw. It didn't help that the trail was deserted, as if every one of the bikers and joggers and walkers I usually saw on my noon rides had already been killed and dragged off into the weeds.

I stayed surprisingly calm. Or seemed to. I kept my sails full of stubbornness and my eye on the horizon, refusing to look down at the jagged reefs of fear as they passed just below my thin and vulnerable hull. The most startling thing that happened on that three mile ride was the pang of elation that stung me the moment my front wheel touched the wooden planks of the old iron bridge that was my link back to more homey threats.

When the bridge ended I adjusted my gears and settled into the long gradual climb up from the river-bank. This part of Bridge Street is canopied by tall oaks and walled with vine-embroidered brush. The natural tunnel goes on for half a mile, so there was plenty of time for the unreasonable relief that had carried me across the bridge to evaporate. That left me to draw off the deep tank of disdain that usually fueled my passage through Old Olives, the neighborhood at the top of the hill.

Old Olives is set on the site of the area's original agricultural village. The ranchers and growers who settled the region used to go there to get provisions and exchange news. What Old Olives supplies now is a feeling of history and character, an oasis of quaint tastefulness in the midst of a vast desert of housing tracts, condo complexes, parking lots, and malls. The houses I passed were aged, individual, refurbished with an eye for charm. From their prim porcheaves hung windchimes, colorful flags, ferns.

In one front yard I spied a pair of the chickens that have always nested in Old Olives and run free on the sidewalks and streets. A couple of healthy Rhode Island Reds, the rooster scratching and strutting under an orange tree by the front lawn, the hen searching the edge of the grass for seed. The rooster took a few jogging steps toward me as I approached, looking for a handout or a fight, but I aimed my front tire right for him and sent him clucking back the way he'd come. These chickens had always bothered me. Sure, I understood that they helped connect Old Olives to its rural

beginnings. But I failed to see the charm in a neighborhood where feral poultry ran amuck.

Bridge Street took me to Old Olives Park, the heart and center of the neighborhood. The park is more or less rectangular, ringed all around by river-rock walls. Between its two broad lawns sit the Olives Community Center and an open-air theater where summer Shakespeare plays. Back in the seventies, when I still lived nearby, they never showed any plays in the theater, but movies—every Friday night in summer, for free initially, later for a quarter a head. In those days Old Olives was a wilder place. At the Friday night films I would sit with my former wife June and our two kids on one of the theater benches, the four of us squeezed cozily in among other families, while twenty yards behind us, up on the grassy bank outside the fence, joints glowed like a hundred orange eyes in air sharpened and thickened by their smoke. We were welcome to visit, but the people passing joints ruled Old Olives in those days. All the houses were more tumbledown then. Most of their lawns were left to nature, though some had been tilled into hippie gardens. Their porches were crowded with castoff furniture and long-haired kids.

To figure out who's in charge of Old Olives now you only have to look at the dolled-up houses or check out the businesses that face the park. These used to cater to the people living within walking distance. There was a corner grocery, a pharmacy, a hardware store, a liquor store, a tavern, a Mexican restaurant, a vet. Today's locals don't walk to get anything but exercise. They drive elsewhere for basic supplies. Businesses here don't deal much in basics, and they don't cater to the locals only. For in a strange kind of way, things have come full circle. Old Olives is a destination once again. People come in for gourmet meals and manicures, for facials, massages, all kinds of pamperings and therapies. They buy handmade objects and clothes, art and rugs and antiques. Or they come to scheme with the lawyers and realtors who have bought houses just off the park and converted them discreetly into offices.

But on this day I'd only come because it was on my way. I didn't intend to stop. I tried to get past it all swiftly because there was a chance I'd be accosted by June, whose shop faces the park. I pedaled past a café called Sufficient Grounds, past Wax Poetic, a book and candle store, and when I came even with the bakery called Muffin Fancy I saw June waving at me from the doorway of Whole Grain Antiques.

I've never been much of a golfer, but I've played enough to know that the prettiest things on the course—the lakes, the sandy bunkers, the big old trees and the long grass—are the things to avoid. In the dozen years since our divorce I'd learned to treat June like one of those hazardous beauties. But there she was waving at me, fresh and beaming, impossible to miss. I pulled up to the curb and let her walk out to me. She came over uttering the usual pleasantries, piling them on as if she believed she could kill me with kindness. Sometimes I wondered if June's therapist wasn't behind this endless onslaught of good cheer. As if she'd mapped out for June a journey on the high road to mental health, telling her that each smile, each gracious remark would help her pay the tolls. Whatever the program, June was nice to me every chance she got, like she won points that way. First, the smiling wave. Next, the greetings. And this loaf of bread she was handing me? Sadie had forgotten to get bread for our lunch. She'd called June minutes ago, asking her to buy a loaf from next door and hand it off to me when I passed. Bonus points, for sure.

I took the bagged bread and read the words Muffin Fancy aloud, asking who the hell made the law requiring every business in the neighborhood to have a name that punned. If I thought I could offend her that easily I was grossly mistaken. She just beamed at me, saying I was right about the shop names, and she'd never even noticed.

The end of that encounter was good for a little breath of relief. But like the relief I'd felt when I hit the bridge earlier, this cool draft got swept away before long by the prevailing wind, which

was hot, steady, and strong. For I was crossing now from Old Olives into the part of Olives proper where June and I toiled to make the home we'd dreamed about, and then failed to keep it from coming apart.

She was five or six months pregnant with our boy Edward when we first drove out here to look at the house. Sadie was just a little thing, light enough to carry on my shoulders all day. I'd been working for the department for a year or so, and I'd decided I liked it well enough that we ought to leave the bungalow we were renting closer to the city and find ourselves a permanent place to nest. It was an afternoon in early March, the tail end of a good wet winter, and all the pastures out here were full of fresh grass, the almond trees and fruit trees were heavy with blossoms, and the air smelled sweet. The area won us over before we ever saw the house. We were charmed by the two, five, and ten acre parcels that held all the homes around here. People didn't lawn this land, they gardened it, they tended orchards, grew grapes, and cleared hillsides for horses to graze. By the time we drove off that first day, Sadie was asking for a horse of her own, June was mentally redecorating the old hilltop house we'd toured, and I was laying out my future garden row by row.

Our first phase in Olives went pretty much according to script. June and I scraped and painted the outside of the old house and we gutted everything inside, replaced rotten boards, patched leaky ceilings, put down new carpets and tile, hung fresh paper, installed good cabinets and appliances. I had sheep keeping the weeds down on the hillside, I had a pony for Sadie, I had chickens giving us eggs. I was growing enough vegetables and fruit for five families. What we didn't eat ourselves or give away June would put up in jars. I harvested almonds and olives by the bushel. I took honey from six hives. Every couple of weeks June would haul some monstrosity home from a flea market or estate sale. She'd assure me that under all the ugly paint were panels of pure wood begging to be uncovered, and she'd set to work bringing the beauty out. Our rooms steadily filled.

We did our best to turn the clock back those first years, while all around us time was running on. It started when the ranchers in the area began selling off vast swaths of their rangeland to the builders and pavers. As they sold out the area grew, and as it grew property values shot up. Our neighbors started to carve up their parcels. The new buyers built, and built, and built some more. So that now, whenever I rode over here I imagined myself in a low-flying plane, peering down on my former stomping grounds and seeing something that looked like a Scrabble board late in the game, at the point when you can't get a word in edgewise.

Sayers' Law states that if irony can find you, it will. How's this for irony: my family had fallen apart, but our lot was one of the few that remained intact. June and Sadie were behind this. After the divorce, June got busy and bought my half of the place as quickly as she could. She held onto it until just a few years ago, when she moved into the apartment above her shop and sold the house to Sadie and her husband Boyd.

The private road leading up there was getting tougher for me to conquer every year. Turning onto it, I shifted into my easiest gear. Even so my thighs were burning at the halfway point and I was seriously considering getting off to walk. But I thought of Sadie up ahead, of how impressed she was on the days when she happened to see her graybeard dad ride up. That gave me the burst of energy I needed.

When I reached the flat gravel parking area I found it empty of cars. I wheeled my bike across the gravel and leaned it against a tree. I was still breathing hard, the blood was knocking behind my knees and in my neck. I walked around the end of Boyd's fastidious woodpile, reached out to knock a couple of logs off, and turned onto the flat half-acre rectangle of space that used to be my own garden plot. Boyd had turned it into a giant lawn. Where I used to raise tomatoes and beans, melons and peppers, squash and eggplant and corn, people now played frisbee and volleyball, and dogs now crapped. I walked to the edge of the grass, to a sunny place at the foot of the pool fence, planning to check the progress

of my young rosemary plants. But the plants were gone. In their place was a sterile patch of decorative bark. Good old Boyd. A while back I'd noticed that this spot at the foot of the fence seemed empty. I thought some rosemary would look good there, would do well with all the sun, and one day I brought the young plants over and put them in while Sadie fixed lunch. She was delighted with them, but evidently Boyd wasn't. He preferred his bark. His miserable lawn.

I heard a motor and went back out to the parking area just as Sadie pulled in. She shed her baby fat when she was ten or eleven, and she's been thin ever since—too thin, I thought as she approached. Maybe it was the shorts she had on, the sleeveless shirt. She seemed to be all limb.

She motioned toward my bike with one of those tan slender arms. "You rode, then."

"And lived to tell about it." I tipped my head toward her car. "Out making deliveries this morning?"

"Yeah, I helped Claire out with one."

"Anything exciting?"

One of her dark brows dipped. "Isn't birth always exciting?"

"I guess so. But I was thinking about that kid that was born in the closet. Or how about the one who came out on the kitchen table? Anything like that?"

Six months back Sadie had given up her nursing job and started apprenticing with Claire, a seasoned midwife. The week before, she'd told me about some of the weird places she'd helped Claire deliver babies. Claire's attitude was there *were* no weird places to deliver, every mother must feel free to choose where, when, and how she wants to foal. I confess I hadn't quite gotten used to the idea. I was no fan of hospitals. Still, birth is one of those events that can get complicated in a hurry. Why not save the kitchen table for meals, and have babies someplace where modern medicine is handy if you need it? This was my point of view.

"You're the one who had the exciting morning," Sadie said, passing up the bait I'd dangled.

“You mean the mountain lion?”

She nodded. “I’m supposed to get the skinny from you on that. Sylvia wants to know what you do if you’re riding on the bike trail and one jumps out in front of you.”

“That’s unlikely,” I said. “Not typical behavior.”

“Well, you know what I mean. What do you do if you encounter one out there?”

“It all depends on how you act.”

“Well what are you supposed to act like?”

“Whatever you do,” I said, “don’t act like prey.”

While we ate the soup she’d made I satisfied her curiosity about what prey act like. Then I filled her in on the department’s response to the lion attack. But I admitted I was a little tired of the subject since everyone at work this morning was buzzing about it. I mentioned I’d finished reading the book about reincarnation that she’d given me and told her I’d gotten a real rise out of Jean the other night, talking about it like it was real.

“Does that mean you think it’s not real?”

“Science,” I said, “that’s been my religion for as long as I can remember. You know, the Church of Natural Selection.”

She looked down at her bowl and I saw I’d disappointed her by being honest. She’d hoped that book would turn me on the way it had her. She was riding a wave of inner change, after all, one of those waves that feels so good and so powerful you can’t believe it doesn’t sweep everyone else up the way it’s sweeping you.

“How about yourself?” I said. “Seems like that stuff has struck a chord.”

“I’ve found it really valuable,” she said.

“In what sense?”

“Well, not to be critical of you Dad, or of Mom, but I reached adulthood without ever getting to know my spirit-self. I think that’s just the way of our society right now. It’s all focused on the worldly self.”

“The day to day, you mean?”

“Yeah, that. And always on the surface. Never looking into the fire, you know.”

I didn’t know, not exactly, but I nodded anyway. Then I got heavily involved with my soup. It was mushroom soup, very good. The morning’s banter with Jean had stirred my stomach to the point where I’d had to skip breakfast, so I was hungry. I ate as much as I could get with my spoon, then mopped the bowl with bread. When I finished I pushed the bowl away and looked up. Sadie’s dark eyes awaited me.

She said, “The best part of knowing my spirit-self is that I have a relationship with Eddie again.”

It was as if she’d pressed some hidden button and set my stomach churning. I tried to look natural as I changed positions in the chair.

“I’ve been thinking about him a lot,” Sadie said. “Especially this week.”

This week. As in the week Edward died. I hadn’t realized.

“You didn’t know?” she said.

“I don’t keep track of these things.”

“At least not with your worldly self.”

“My dear,” I said, folding my hands on the table, “don’t be too disappointed in me, but I think that’s the only self I’ve got.”

She gave me a tolerant smile. “Dad, you’ve got a spirit-self whether you acknowledge it or not. All of us do. In that self you’ve known very well what week is coming.”

“Oh I have. How can you tell?”

“When did your stomach start acting up?”

“What makes you think my stomach’s acting up?”

Her look told me it was no use pretending.

“What,” I said, raising my hands, “am I wearing a *sign* or something?”

“When?”

“I don’t know, a while ago. Jean’s on my case to see a doctor about it.”

She glanced away. "That's an option."

"Sounds like you know of others."

She reached over and grabbed a pen and paper from the stool near the phone. "You know my migraines?" she said while writing something down. "Until last year I had one of those things every week. Now I never have them."

"Is that right?"

"No doctor could make them stop. The pills they gave me helped with the headache, but they didn't get to the root of the problem. The headaches kept coming back."

"So what happened?"

"I met Val," she said, sliding the slip of paper toward me. "Maybe you should pay him a visit."

I glanced at the paper and saw an address in Old Olives. "Why, what does he do?"

"He does a lot of things, and he's really wise. In this case he took me on a kind of healing journey."

"That's not like a trip to the pharmacy, is it?"

She blinked my jest away. "Dad, try to be open, would you?"

"I don't know, I doubt this Val would be keen on journeying anywhere with an old guy like me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just guessing you're the kind of companion he likes."

There was pity in her smile. "That's just your worldly self talking."

"That's right," I said. "And this Val, I'll bet he never even noticed what a cute vessel your spirit-self travels around in."

She closed her eyes. "Think what you want, but he helped me find the way back to where the migraines originated. No doctor could have helped me get there. That's not what doctors do, you know."

I said your checkbook was the only thing doctors could help you find the way to, and that made her giggle. During her nursing career I'd ruffled her feathers a few times by badmouthing

physicians, but now it looked like doctor-bashing was an activity we might share.

“Hey,” she said, “I’ve started going in the living room to sit after lunch. It’s kind of odd. Like I only just realized I’m allowed to use it if I want to. It’s nice in there. Kind of *apart*, you know. You want to try it out?”

When we got to the living room Sadie sat down on the floor with her legs crossed and I went over and sat on the couch. The way she’d said the word *sit* before, the weight she gave it, I’d gotten the feeling it meant something different to her than it did to me. I didn’t know if this sitting she was doing was the same as meditation, but it looked like that to my untrained eye. She had her eyes closed. Her back was straight, her hands rested on her knees. She was breathing deeply, rhythmically. Meanwhile my stomach was still rumbling. Talking about Edward had stirred things up in there, and being in here wasn’t settling them down any. It was spooky how little the room had changed since my early years on the hill. All around me was the pecky cedar paneling June and I had nailed onto the walls almost thirty years before. Sadie was sitting in the middle of one of the two big kilims June had found for the vast wooden floor. The chairs and tables and settees that loomed around the edges of the room were treasures she’d exhumed.

Back then we did most of our basic lounging in the family room next door. This had always been our special room, where we put the Christmas tree, where we entertained our guests and where Sadie and Edward sometimes entertained June and me. In one of the closets upstairs June used to keep costume jewelry and scraps of exotic fabric for the kids to use in their dress-up games. Sadie would dress herself and Edward and June would paint Oriental eyes on both of them, and darken their lips and color their cheeks and do strange things to their hair. Usually all of this was timed for my return from work, so that I would walk in, pop open a beer, and be led to the living room to see the show. These theatrics never pleased me that much. It was more June’s idea of fun than mine.

Usually I did my best to appear entertained. But now, as I sat there across from Sadie, I was remembering the time when my true feelings got out. I think I'd had a bad day at work. I was grouchy. I sat down in the living room with my beer and waited for the show to start. As usual, Sadie came out first. She was done up in lots of silky fabrics, looking exotic and queenly, with the Oriental eyes painted on and lots of bangles and fake pearls around her neck and arms. Our job while she pranced and preened in front of us was to ooh and ahh a little, and generally be thrilled by her queenly beauty. When Edward came out the show turned a bit burlesque. He had this curly blond hair that June trimmed now and then but refused to cut. It was teased up in some girlish do, with glitter in it, and his face was girlishly painted. He was wrapped in a bunch of pastel scarves, wearing a pair of big fake boobs, with all kinds of bangles and beads hanging off him, and when Sadie announced him she put some feminine spin on his name, calling him Edwina or Edith or something like that. This wasn't the first time they'd done this to him, but as soon as I saw him I decided it would be the last. June and Sadie laughed as he took a couple of passes in front of us, shaking his hips and batting his eyes, but I stayed silent. That threw a wet blanket on the fun. Before long nobody was making any noise, and then I noticed all three of them were looking at me. But then we were all looking at Edward again because he'd wet himself and started bawling. That was when I got up and started doing a little dance of my own, with a lot of stomping and flailing in it. While I danced I was barking orders at June, telling her to get Edward cleaned up and put him back in his regular clothes. When I was doing that dance she usually gave me what I wanted. But I didn't just want the kid out of those foolish clothes, I told her. I also wanted him to have a real barbershop haircut. I didn't expect her to take care of that. When she had him ready I took care of it myself.

It's events like this, a handful of them, that make up my entire memory of Edward. My memory of Sadie has always come in stages, she lives in my mind as a continuum, a work in progress. But after

we lost Edward my mind held onto him as a series of things that happened, each of them a point that was as precise and indelible as the points on a map. If you connected these points with a mental line you could trace his movement away from me. Your line would begin on the day I'd been remembering, not in the barber shop, when I had them cut off his curls, but right there in our living room, when I infuriated and embarrassed him. It would meander along for awhile, this line, making a stop on a baseball field, another in a boat, another on the porch of a beach house, and after a few more stops it would end abruptly high in the Sierras beneath a surprise October snow. He was eighteen when he froze to death at the timberline. He'd gone up there to survive for a month on his own, to convince us he was a man.

VAL

A FEW DAYS LATER WE learned the mountain lion that killed the jogger was a female who had given birth a couple weeks before to a single kitten. Once she'd been killed and the kitten had been captured, there were all kinds of theories about why she'd done what she did. The correct one was that she was hungry, that she was hunting not just for herself but for her kitten, and was therefore less choosy than usual about the species of prey she attacked. Parenthood will make you do the damndest things.

What it made me do, after I left Sadie's, was pay a visit to Val. I had whipped myself into quite a froth, thinking about Edward. After that, desperate for distraction, I'd turned my attention to Sadie, deciding that I would watch her sit. Her face surprised me, pleasantly at first. When she was a child I used to see it at rest every night when I checked the kids on my way to bed. But I hadn't seen it that way in years. It had gotten longer, I noticed, the chubby circle of childhood chiseled into a womanly oval. Her cheekbones stood out strongly, her eyes were set fairly deep, there was a charming bump halfway down her narrow graceful nose. She really had changed. And as I sat studying her there crept upon me this disturbing feeling that she was still changing, right before my eyes. She *was* changing, of course. She wore her dark hair straight now, where it used to be permed. She had thrown out all her make-up. Also her perfume, which she gave up in favor of the essential oils I was still trying to get used to smelling in her company. But what I saw now made a more immediate statement than the new look and smell, the new job, even the new beliefs. This was right on her

face. *Her* face? If so, then this was a *her* I didn't know. When I'd started watching her there had been a pair of shallow wrinkles mussing her brow, and a tightness to her mouth that marked her as the daughter I knew, responsible Sadie, concerned, care-taking Sadie. But those places loosened as I watched, as if under the skin thousands of tiny knots were being untied. Her forehead turned smooth as an eggshell, her lips curled into a delicate smile, and she looked not just restful but positively beatific. I sat there stunned a minute, and then I started grasping for some kind of explanation for what I was seeing, the cause behind this effect. The first thing that came to me was Val—the way Sadie's voice had lifted when she'd spoken of him in the kitchen. I heard that in my mind's ear and I knew I must go and have a look at him.

So after I left I rode back into Old Olives and found his place on a shady little street a couple blocks off the park. All the other houses on the street had been quaintified, but this one was unredeemed. I walked up the shaky wooden porchsteps and found the front door open. I reached in and knocked on it, but got no answer. I knocked again, then yelled hello. Nothing stirred, so I stepped into the little entryway and paused for a minute looking around.

The walls of the entryway were bare and needed paint. The wood floor was dirty, but recently swept. Straight ahead of me was a staircase; to my right was a shut door, and to my left a doorway that had no door to shut. I stepped across to the open doorway and hovered there, looking in at the bare wall on the other side of the room. The room's light made me aware of the air between me and that bare wall. Not bright, not dim, it had some kind of body to it, some of that palpable quality humid air has.

I leaned across the threshold. Looking left, I noticed the blind hanging over the large street window. It was made of a heavy paper that reminded me of the rice pancakes they give you when you eat Chinese. Sweeping right, my eyes traveled the length of the empty rectangular room and lit at last on a man sitting in

Sadie's posture on the floor near the back wall, facing the window across the room. His eyes were closed, his feet bare.

"Hi there," I said, "I'm looking for Val."

The head seemed to dip forward slightly.

"That you?" I said, and walked toward him, my nostrils filling with Sadie's new scent. Approaching him was a little like driving toward a distant mountain. Arriving takes longer than you expect because the mountain's massive size makes it seem closer than it is. This Val was built on a monumental scale. Although he was sitting down his head came up past my waist. The skull was completely bald on top, but the face was mostly covered by a bushy red-blond beard. The skin was pale, on the blue side of white.

The lids lifted off eyes the startling color of the sky seen from high altitudes.

"Hi there," I said. "Charlie Sayers." I lifted my hand, but let it drop before it got into shaking range. For the first time it struck me that I had no idea what I was going to do. I couldn't just tell him I was Sadie's dad and I'd come to look him over. The truth was not an option. Unfortunately I hadn't armed myself with a lie. So like a dope I just stood there.

After a minute he unfolded his legs and stood up also. He must have been six and a half feet tall. His white trousers were cut like surgeons' pants, but their fabric was different. Its texture made me think of whole wheat. His T-shirt was made of the same fabric. It was big, but not so big it hid the contours of his splendid upper body. A strange kind of excitement seized me as I gazed at the broad shoulders and the deep chest, at the pale powerful arms and the great veiny hands that seemed made for doing legendary deeds.

"Undress, please," he said in an ageless tenor. "Leave your underwear on if you like."

What I did next seems to throw a shadow of doubt over my stated motives. If I had really come there to play the protective father this was the only opening I needed. *Oh*, I could have said in a voice lacquered with righteousness, *I'll bet that's just how you*

started things off with my Sadie. And what was your next move, Mr. Healer Man? Did you have her sit on your lap and tell you where it hurt?

But I said no such thing. I didn't speak a word. I simply swung my head back to the left and right, making sure I hadn't overlooked a bathroom or screen or some other facility a person might use to undress in private. Then I bent down and took off my shoes and socks. Next came my pants and shirt, which I folded atop the shoes. I felt oddly hopeful as I stood in my shorts next to the pile of what I'd shed.

Thanks to Jean, the walls of our house are heavily reflective—hardly a room in the place lacks a mirror. So I could imagine all too vividly what Val's eyes were taking in as he began to look me over. He moved to my left and instantly I inflicted upon my inner eye the perspective he was getting: the sixty-two-year-old vessel covered with its grey moss of body hair, the limbs slim and sinewy but the belly surprisingly soft, bulging the way a snake's does after a meal.

He paused a while at my left side, now squatting, now standing, like a sculptor checking a stone he wants to carve. The pale giant worked deliberately, but I worried that at any minute he might spring into violent action. I could see him finding the spot he was looking for, lifting me up, flopping me over one knee and folding me into a shrieking pretzel.

When one of those great hands lit upon my left shoulder every muscle in me clenched, every organ seized up. "Sorry," I said after a second, letting my shoulders drop.

Val didn't answer. The hand stayed on my shoulder and it wasn't heavy, wasn't painful in any way. It wasn't like any hand that had ever touched me before. I considered turning, to make sure it *was* his hand I felt, but I decided to be still. I closed my eyes. Now I had the feeling something was radiating heat where his hand touched—heat and light. It was as if a lamp hung close to my skin. The warmth left my shoulder after a minute and I could feel it moving past my neck to the other shoulder, then down and

around my back, across my buttocks and along each leg in turn. At the back of my right knee it paused a while. As it rose from there my curiosity got the better of me and I asked Val what he was doing.

“Paying attention,” he said.

I opened my eyes. “To what?”

He was quiet a minute, not touching me, but evidently concentrating on me. Finally he said, “Tell me about your right knee.”

“What about it?”

“How was it injured?”

“Oh, you noticed that. I wrenched it pretty bad in high school, playing football. They told me if I wanted to play again I’d have to get it operated on. That was the end of a very mediocre football career.”

“And your left shoulder,” he said, “what happened there?”

This was strange. The knee injury I remembered clearly, that knee had bothered me off and on over the years. But I never had any trouble from the shoulder. Until he asked I’d completely forgotten Irene, the old cow that kicked me when I was trying to milk her. That was a very long time ago, when I first went to live on my grandparents’ farm and was still a novice with the animals. I told Val about it.

He stood quietly in front of me then, not speaking but evidently concentrating.

“So tell me how it works,” I said. “You feeling tissue damage in those places?”

For a moment he stood there looking preoccupied, like a man listening to the last part of a song he likes. Then the blue eyes returned from where they’d been and rose to meet mine. “I pay attention,” he said.

“Yeah, but to what? You must be feeling for something, some kind of damage.”

“Do you think I should be?”

“Well,” I said, feeling more undressed than I had at any moment since taking off my clothes, “I *hope* damage is what

you're looking for. You won't find much else in this old sack of bones."

He just stood there, erect but easy. "May I touch your abdomen?"

"Sure."

One of his hands came at me, palm first. Just before it reached my belly I slapped it away.

"Sorry," I said. "Go ahead."

"No, not right now."

I insisted.

"There's no need," he said.

"What? You found out all my secrets already?"

Val lowered the hand to his side. "The only way I would know your secrets is if you told them to me."

"Is that what this is about?" I said.

"Is it?"

I looked down at my clothes, missing them. "I don't know. I have no idea what you're doing here."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"What are you doing here?"

For a second I felt he was making fun of me. I checked his eyes for signs of mischief, but they were totally limpid and still. "Look," I said, "I've been feeling really...I don't know, bad. Anxious. Maybe I'm sick. Maybe I'm...Hell, I don't know."

I bent down for my pants and started to put them on. "Anyhow, what do I owe you."

Val was sitting again. "What has it been worth to you?"

"I don't know," I said, buckling my belt. "That's an honest answer. I've never done anything like this before." I reached for my shirt.

Val said, "I don't think you should pay anything this time."

This time? I pretended deep involvement with my shirt, trying to work out my next move. I wanted to give him some money, a fixed sum that would square things between us now and forever.

How much? I had no idea. Besides, Val didn't seem the type to refuse payment out of politeness. Which made me think it would be the height of crassness to whip out my checkbook now.

When I had my shoes and socks on Val thanked me for coming in.

"Sure," I said, held still for a moment by the stunning blue of his eyes.

"See you," he said.

DINNER

JEAN AND HER SON KYLE WERE IN THE LIVING ROOM when I arrived. They were sitting on the couch together, she was drinking bourbon and he was having a beer and I could tell by how quiet they got when I walked in that they must be in the middle of one of the heavy pow wows they'd been having a lot of lately. I went into the kitchen and fixed myself a bourbon with ice. When I came back to the living room they invited me half-heartedly to join them, but I said I needed to return Don Mackey's call. Jean had left me a message by the kitchen phone.

I dialed Don's house from the den. He picked up after the first ring.

"Jesus," I said, "you must be sitting on that thing."

"Sayers, hey." He sounded keyed up.

"How goes the lion hunt?"

"Not so good. Turns out they had homicide detectives working this thing at first. They found that gal half-buried and all torn up and assumed some nut did it to her."

"A pretty reasonable assumption."

"Maybe, but before anybody suggested a predator kill those cops had made a mess of the whole area. The dogs were at a loss today. But tomorrow's supposed to be better."

"Why's that?"

"The lion only ate part of her. They figure it'll come back soon to finish up. They killed a deer today and put it in the stash spot. They're hoping for some fresh tracks tomorrow. That's what I called you about."

I waited.

"Yeah," Don said, "you know Cliff Carter, he's heading the capture team. He invited me to come along tomorrow and said I could bring you."

"You're going to drag me into this one way or another, aren't you."

"Hey, an office jockey like you? I thought you'd jump at the chance for some action."

"As it happens I've got a little action lined up for tomorrow already."

"That right?"

I told him I'd be taking the Sutter Heights kids out to fish.

"Sutter Heights?" he said. "Watch out they don't mug you in the frigging boat."

"I'll try my best."

"Sayers, tell me truly. You think these welfare kids will fall in love with fishing?" From the searching sound of his voice I gathered he had wrestled with this question privately before.

"Haven't even met them yet. How would I know?"

"It just seems like a dubious proposition to me. Smart fellow like yourself, outdoorsman, seems like your talents could be put to better use."

"Don't tell me. I should be going to the barricades with you?"

"Hey, I'm not the only one who sees the size of this thing. Those lion lovers are shitting their britches right now. They know what something like this does to public opinion. This is big stuff, bud. We play it right, this time next year we could be voting to overturn the hunting ban."

"Even if I wanted to go I couldn't. Somebody crapped out at the last minute and I promised Emilio I'd fill in."

"Okay, suit yourself. And Jesus," he said, laughing a little, "be careful."

As soon as I hung up I started getting edgy about the fishing trip. Up till now I'd been too dazed to consider how unprepared I was to go out in a boat with a couple of probable delinquents from

Sutter Heights. What if they *did* pull something? I was inching my way toward serious agitation when it dawned on me that I could maybe take Jean along. For twenty-five years she'd been teaching third grade in the next neighborhood over, which was going to pot. She made a living handling disadvantaged kids. I could look after the fishing end of it while she made sure the boys behaved. The more I thought about the idea the more I liked it. Here was a chance for us to collaborate on something besides dinner.

God knows such chances had gotten scarce. According to her this was entirely my fault, and even in my own mind I was eighty percent to blame. Six months before, after a long and reasonably slow decline, I'd started neglecting altogether my bedroom duties. This in itself was not such a major problem. Jean likes nothing better than a crusade, and for a while there reviving my moribund passion looked like a campaign we could wage together. In her mind there are two classes of ailments, those aspirin will cure and those it won't. My problem was of the second sort. That meant it could be traced back to some slipped disk in my emotional backbone. I was avoiding something, failing to reconcile myself to one of life's grim truths. No one could identify the problem for me, I had to do this myself—it was the crucial first step on the road to recovery. That didn't mean Jean lacked a diagnosis, however. Oh no, she knew very well what was wrong with me. She had been reading up on it for several months. She would give me the books I needed, with key passages highlighted, but that was all. It was up to me to connect the dots.

When I connected them a curious picture emerged. If a cartoonist were to draw it he might show me wearing saggy shorts and boxing gloves, sitting on the stool in my corner. Out in the middle of the ring, dancing around, acting tough, was a little guy with an R on the front of his shorts—R for retirement. My coach couldn't understand why I wouldn't just go out there and hammer the little bugger. I could take him, easy. But my coach couldn't see what waited for me in the next frame. This match here was only the semi-finals. If I won it, then I'd have to fight the defending

champion, the heaviest hitter of them all, the one who wears a big D on the front of his shorts—D for you know what.

Jean wasn't so amused by this routine when I tried it out on her. She just told me my wisecracking was another means of avoidance. I admitted she was probably right but asked her to bear with me for a while. She did, for a while. Eventually her patience ran out. It ran out on the day when she walked into the bedroom and found me lying there with her blindfold on and her earplugs in. She gave me a shake, and when I was all unblocked and unstoppered she asked what I was up to. I reminded her of a chapter in Doctor Sell-a-book's treatise where that shrewd student of the human mind turns the tables on us cowardly menopausal males, claiming that of the two routes we have to choose from, death is the easier and more pleasant road, while life is the steep rocky track. This had struck me as an interesting notion, I told her, and I was now taking an imaginary trip down the death road, to test the good doctor's claims. In case she had forgotten it, I quoted Wholeness Tip Number One for her: *Study the situation by entering into it.*

When it dawned on her that I was using her gear for my experimental journey, she got mad. She started hollering at me and I hit her with Wholeness Tip Number Three: *Go conscious, not crazy.* That didn't help much. Neither did bringing up her dad, which was my next smooth move. I never met the guy, but by all accounts he was a first-class turd, worse even than Jean's ex, who disappeared when Kyle was only five or six. The last turdish thing her dad did was to die suddenly, before Jean got a chance to tell him off. She wasn't about to let me pull off such a caper. No, I told her, you only want to keep me around so I can take what the old man deserved.

That was a turning point. I didn't know whether I was absolutely right in what I'd said or absolutely wrong. Either way I had to suffer for it. From that moment on she started treating me like a third-grader who'd stepped out of line. She couldn't give

me detention, but she found other ways to isolate me while I took time to decide if I wanted to spend the time I had left clowning around, or if I was going to come back to class and apply myself.

That approach would have worked all right if I knew *how* to apply myself, but in this area I didn't have a clue. I honestly didn't. So for more than a month I'd stood with my nose in the corner while Jean turned her full attention to Kyle, who seemed to be soaking it up. I could hear the two of them up the hall right now as I sipped away at my drink. Jean was walking Kyle to the door, and though I couldn't make out actual words her tone told me she was sending him home with plenty of advice to sort through this evening, and enough encouragement to keep him on the task.

When the door shut behind him I headed out to the kitchen. I arrived there just as Jean was pouring herself another bourbon. She poured me one too, and we worked through these drinks at about the same pace as we prepared dinner. I put a salad together, then went over and leaned against the island so I could fill her in on the mountain lion news as I watched her peeling and crushing garlic, chopping herbs and tomatoes, building a sauce for the lamb shanks we would eat. When she gave me the word I opened the zinfandel so it could breathe.

During dinner we talked mainly about the wine and food. First we commented on each of the flavors by itself, and then on the relationships among them. After that we tried to remember each of the other eleven bottles in the case this one came from: when we drank it, what we ate with it, how that meal had compared to this. We managed to recall half-a-dozen dinners, all of them excellent, but none quite up to the mark we'd set tonight. "The last best," I said. "It's fitting."

"And on Friday night. It should be a little special."

"Hey, you're reminding me."

"Of what?" she said.

"Tomorrow's Saturday. I took the liberty of making a plan."

"Hope it doesn't involve me."

I'd been leaning back, cradling the last half-glass of wine against my chest, but now I leaned forward and set it on the table. "You busy?"

"I just promised Kyle I'd go with him to a careers seminar. It's all day tomorrow and Sunday."

She asked what my plan was and I told her about the fishing trip.

"That sounds like a hell of a deal, Charlie. Sorry I can't make it."

"Me too."

"You'll be okay without me," she said breezily, and then looked up at me. "Won't you?"

"Sure," I said, unsure.

She set her glass down. "Charlie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." I looked straight ahead, through the arched doorway into the living room. I felt her studying me. "Charlie," she said in a soothing voice, "there's nothing to worry about. You know all there is to know about fishing."

"The fishing part doesn't worry me. You know how to handle these kids. I don't."

"*These* kids?"

I waved my hands above the table, still not looking at her. "You know, the backgrounds they have. I'm not that familiar..."

"You're the one that volunteered."

"It was an *impulse*," I said, too loud. I lowered my voice. "I guess I liked the idea of teaching disadvantaged kids to fish. You make teaching them sound so fun—like a person can, I don't know, get through." I folded my hands on the table. "I just wish you could be there to help."

"You can handle them, Sayers."

"Sure, I bet it's easy."

"It's not easy working with kids, whatever backgrounds they have. They're all tough, but not the way you think." She paused. "Look at me, will you."

“Why can’t Brenda go to that seminar with Kyle?” I said, turning to her. “She’s his wife, for godsake.”

“Is that a joke? She’s never done a single thing to encourage him. He’s ready to get out of a demeaning work environment and take control of his life, and she could care less.”

“I guess I’ll have to cancel.”

She covered my hand with hers. “Just go out there and be natural, that’s the number one thing. Kids are like animals. They sense when you’re nervous, and they take advantage.”

“Natural?”

“That’s right, treat it like a fishing trip, not a...” She twirled one hand in the air.

“Not a what?”

“Not some big meaningful *thing*. Some good deed or something. Just bait the hooks and get ‘em in the water. Just fish, for pete’s sake. That’s what you’re out there for.” She got up and cleared our plates.

After a minute I got up too and headed into the living room to sit in my chair. Pretty soon she came in with the decaf. I wasn’t sure our conversation was over until she cuddled up on the couch with her novel. And then I just sat there sipping, wondering how it was that she could be on the couch like that, lost in her book, and somehow still manage to communicate that if I was interested, she *could* be just as lost in me. I had to hand it to her. She was not the type to let my lack of interest drag her down. If she had run to fat or quit tending to her appearance in some other way I would at least have had an excuse. But she was still the compact woman I’d fallen for, as fiery and fit as ever. Her breasts were on the small side and still had plenty of spring. Her legs had all kinds of shape. I could see how good she looked but couldn’t feel it anymore, not where it counted.

So I endured this silence, a monster of my own making. Of course a shout would have destroyed it, something dramatic, I could have gotten down on my knees and pledged to try harder. But I felt too old, or too tired. And I guess too content to sit

brooding over my decaf, resenting Kyle, wondering how in the hell I'd manage to be *natural* tomorrow out in the boat. I didn't say anything out loud until I stood up and announced I was ready for bed.

When she arrived I was in my pajamas already, lying back on a pile of pillows. I gazed at the ceiling, breathing in the scents of her facial creams and wondering vaguely how they managed to make those products smell so hopeful. She put the earplugs in first. But then she took them out.

"Hey," she said, "I hope you called Doctor Rhodes about your stomach."

"You must think I'm pretty far gone, urging the doctor on me."

"At least he'll deal with the symptoms."

"Yeah, well you don't need to worry. I'm taking care of it."

"Do I dare ask what that means?"

"Probably not," I said, flicking a hand at her. "Go ahead."

The eye-roll she gave me was broad enough to encircle the big empty place where my sense ought to be. She reinserted the plugs. Before sliding the blindfold down from her forehead she leaned across and kissed my head, then waved both index fingers around hers and told me she was checking out.

Eclipsed, black as anything in her fake night, I reached over and turned my light off. In the darkness my mind turned immediately to Val—as if he'd been waiting there all evening, patient as a stone. Tentatively, I placed my hands on my belly. Stillness. Utter quiet.

And I hadn't even paid him.

THE LEAP

THE FISHING TRIP WAS OUT AT MIWOK LAKE, a dammed section of the river just upstream from the Department of Wildlife compound. The lion attack happened on the north shore of this oblong reservoir, where the bike trail runs through a brushy area half a mile in from the bank. While the lion hunt went on that side of the lake was closed to the public. But on the opposite shore, where the boat rental operated, it was business as usual.

When I got there a dozen other adult volunteers had already gathered, and two dozen future anglers, and a good number of parents and guardians. I wasn't sure how to find Troy Muse and Darryl Ballard, the two boys I was supposed to take fishing. Nobody was wearing a nametag. I milled around thoughtlessly for a couple of minutes. Then, just when I was getting ready to hatch a plan, my dilemma was solved. There is a big gaggle of ducks and geese that loiter around the boat ramps at Miwok waiting to be fed. When they started making a racket I barely paid attention, since geese are contentious by nature and when they get bored they like to stir up trouble and make noise. What caught my attention was a human voice that rose above the clamor of the fowl.

"Troy!" it yelled. "Troy! What did you do? What did you do to them geese? I want an answer. Darryl, what did he do? You better answer me. *Darryl*. I swear to God."

I knifed through the crowd until I had a clear line of sight to the woman who was doing the yelling and the two boys who had triggered it. She was a skinny, pallid person with hair a shade of blond that nature doesn't do. Her blue jeans had ragged cuffs and her short-sleeved denim shirt left her hugging herself against the

morning chill. Her stringy body was bent at the hips in a scolding posture.

The victims of her discipline were two boys about the same size. I gathered that the one with the freckles had been bitten on the butt by a goose. He claimed the attack was unprovoked. The other boy, who had green eyes and hair like lambswool, backed the freckled boy up on this with a slow, steady nod, but no amount of talking or nodding could convince me the freckled one, Troy, hadn't done something to arouse that goose. Sparks of wicked glee were jumping all over in Troy's dark eyes. *Something* had kindled them.

Troy's grandmother warned me about him as soon as I stepped up to introduce myself. She said I could just concentrate on keeping Troy in line, because Darryl was kind of slow and wouldn't give me any trouble. Her name was Gina and her discomfort at being outdoors this morning went well beyond the chill she was getting in her shortsleeved shirt. Shine a light on a possum, bring a mole above ground at midday, and you will see the kind of strained bewildered look I saw in her. It was obviously tough on her to be out here, which meant that someone had put her up to it or she felt it was important. Either way, I appreciated her effort. It made me feel fondly toward her.

Fortunately for me this Gina was a talker. Before I could think of a crafty way to broach the topic she was swinging me from limb to limb on the family tree. She had grown up in Sutter Heights, she told me, and back then it was pretty crummy but it still hadn't gone totally to hell. Her father had been an airplane mechanic at the base. He'd died way before they closed it down. He had been a big fisherman, and it was because of him that she thought a man ought to know how to fish. Her dad had never been in the service, but the men she and her daughter had fallen for had all of them been stationed at the base. Her husband? She didn't want to talk about him. Her daughter? It killed her to say so, but the girl must have been last in line when they were passing out morals. Responsibility was something she just did not get. Troy and Darryl had been sired

by two different enlisted men within fourteen months. Gina called them by their last names, Muse and Ballard. Darryl's dad, Ballard, smoked way too much dope. After she told me this she stepped to one side, as if she were dodging an oncoming train, and wagged her head several times, making her earrings clank. "I'm no expert on it," she said at full volume, "but I'd bet a dollar that's got something to do with this one here being slow." Darryl's dad had been shipped out when the baby was a few months old and Gina's daughter had followed him, leaving the boys behind.

"I don't have that much energy," Gina told me, "but I'm doing my best." She plucked the leashed reading glasses off her pushed-up breasts, cackling. "Just call me Granny."

I watched the boys as she hit them with a volley of threats about what would happen to them if they misbehaved. Troy's freckled face showed not the slightest glimmer of fear. It was impossible to read Darryl's green eyes, which were large and gelid, each with a small dark speck in the center—like magnified frog eggs.

After Granny left we got the boat and the tackle together and pushed out onto the lake. Troy and Darryl sat up in the bow as I revved the little outboard and pointed us to the spot I wanted to try, forty or fifty yards off the opposite bank. Troy grinned widely as we crossed the lake. He twisted and turned, pointing at things and shouting to Darryl over the engine. Darryl sat quietly, his green eyes squinted against the wind.

When we reached the spot I dropped the anchor and told Troy to stay up in the bow. I took the middle bench for myself and sent Darryl to the stern. The rods were already set up with the tackle they needed. I handed each boy a rod and gave a little lecture about carelessly flung hooks. Then I showed them how to stick a worm on securely and how to work their reels.

The department keeps Miwok well stocked with fish, so there were plenty of bites—and so much work for me that I didn't have time to worry about keeping order. Sitting quietly in the stern, Darryl liked reeling the fish in after watching the bobber plunge, but he had no interest in touching the slimy flipping bodies of any

fish or impaling his own worms. I baited his hooks and freed his caught fish for him.

Up in the bow things were different. “I don’t need help,” Troy kept telling me. “I can do it easy.” He spent most of the first hour snared in two magnificent tangles, so when I wasn’t helping Darryl I was working to get Troy loose.

But after that first hour he seemed to make peace with his line. He was pretty much tangle-free through the second hour, and fished contentedly even though most of his worms never reached the water still on his hook. He wasn’t sticking them on right and he wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to instruct him. “I can put worms on,” he assured me. “I can do that easy.”

Not that I cared whether Troy listened or whether Darryl got up the courage to bait his own hooks. That was the big surprise for me—my indifference to such details. When we’d headed out my mission had been to make sure they finished this day knowing how to fish properly. But as I got into the swing of it I dropped that plan like a bad apple. I sat back and let my brain be bathed in Hooked on Fishing propaganda. The main thing is just being out here, I silently chanted. The three of us, together. We’re neighbors in a sense, citizens of the same metropolitan area, but in every way that counts we’ve been strangers until today. Now here we are—in the same boat.

Sayers, you poor dope. Were you really thinking these things?

I admit I was. And this was quite a change, since up until I’d shoved off on this excursion it had never crossed my mind that Hooked on Fishing could have some clear positive value, not in the world, and certainly not in my own life. Before, the only plus I could see was that it gave me someplace to go five days a week. This in itself was not that great, since I resented being there and had zero aptitude and zero affection for the work.

But now you were beginning to wonder, weren’t you, Charlie boy? You were starting to hope. What if Hooked on Fishing was not, as you’d thought before, just some desolate refuge you’d crawled into to keep the sun off your shoulders and the wind off

your face, a place to put off for a while your inevitable expiration? What if this little lean-to happened to be sitting on a mother lode, a vein deep enough to turn the rest of your years golden?

Don't deny it, you really were thinking this.

Okay, so I won't deny it. Nothing clouds your vision the way desperation does. Only desperation could have made the whole thing seem so sweetly simple to me. How simple was it? To mine that golden shaft, I didn't even have to abandon *Hooked on Fishing*. All I had to do was renounce my professional status.

I'd never been the type to turn down yesterday's bread before today's is out of the oven. But this volunteering sure smelled like a fresh loaf to me. I didn't need money, after all. I just needed something to do, something to make me feel useful. After a couple of hours on the lake, I felt sure I was doing as well with Troy and Darryl as an old guy could be expected to do. And I felt more useful than I had at any moment since the lab closed down. I felt plugged in. I cared. It thrilled me when Troy finally managed to get a worm to stay on. And when his bobber disappeared and his rod bowed, when he jumped up to fight the fish, when he swung it into the boat and flopped onto the bottom to wrestle it into submission, when he clasped it between his hands and started to whoop, he couldn't have felt any better than I did.

I could have watched Troy catch fish all day. I did get to see him catch a few more, and though none was as thrilling as the first, all of them were fun. This Troy was a sharp kid. After that first fish I watched him bait his hook. He remembered how he'd made the worm stay on the time before. He had taught himself, like he seemed to have taught himself how to avoid tangles after that first hour. So I sat there glowing and gloating while he perfected his method, catching three or four more fish. But then the magic wore off, the spell dissolved for him, he dropped his rod to the bottom of the boat and started turning this way and that. He was ready to cast his mind into something else. Unfortunately, I was still busy having visions of the golden years to come.

"Didn't catch that mountain lion yet," Troy said after looking around for a minute or so.

"Nope," I said, "they sure didn't."

"It was right by here. Ate that lady up."

"You heard about it, did you?"

He nodded. "They showed a map in the paper. Right by Miwok Lake is where it got her. The bike trail. Grandma was scared to bring us out here."

"You weren't scared?" I said.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I'll take care of myself."

"Sure you will." I pointed to his rod. "Why don't you put another worm on there."

"I'm through fishing," he said. "Sir, could we go see where it happened?"

"Mr. Sayers is fine," I told him, thinking, *Hell, Charlie would be fine too*. "Where what happened?"

"Where the mountain lion ate her. In the paper it said Miwok Lake."

"Not here, though. This is the bottom end of Miwok. That happened way up at the other end."

He was quiet a minute, looking off in the direction I'd pointed. "Sir, could we go look at it?"

I shook my head. "Not much to see now. Besides, the whole north shore's closed off."

He was still looking up toward the head of the lake. "Sir, can't we go up there in the boat?" he said after a minute.

"We're here to fish," I said, "not to see the sights."

As I turned to the stern I seemed to roll back across the twenty years that had passed since the last time I was out in a boat like this with my son. Not a successful outing, that one. I hadn't thought of it before now, but it must have been working on me. No wonder I'd been so reluctant to come out here today. And no wonder that long-ago trip rose up to the surface on me now, as the present one threatened to turn sour.

Darryl was looking way past his bobber, up to where Troy's gaze was set. I checked my watch. "Almost twelve," I said. "No wonder I'm getting hungry. You guys ready for a bite to eat?"

Darryl gave me his green eyes. Again I asked if he was ready for lunch, and when I started nodding he did too.

"Well reel that line in and we'll have some sandwiches," I said.

Darryl started reeling and I turned back to Troy, who was taking off his shoes. His shucked life jacket lay in the floor of the boat.

"You fished hard this morning," I said. "You must be hungry."

"I'm not hungry. I'm going swimming. I'll be back."

No more sir.

"Bank's kind of far away," I said, visoring my eyes to emphasize the distance. "And once you get to shore you've got a three-mile walk before you get where you want to go. And the trail's closed. You could get in trouble."

His shoes were off.

"Tell you what," I said. "Why don't you have some lunch with Darryl and me, and afterwards we'll take the boat up that way and see what we can see."

"I ain't hungry."

"Well your brother and me, we need a bite to eat. Looks like you're outnumbered."

I watched him think about that a second, and then his eyes closed for a second, and when they opened I saw danger in them. "You all can have lunch," he said in a voice that sounded too calm. "I'll be back." He lifted his arms and slipped off his shirt. His torso was all ribs, extremely slight. This surprised me. He seemed like such a sturdy kid.

"It's a long way up there," I said.

Troy stood up. Maybe Jean had swayed me, claiming that kids are like animals, but what I saw in his face made me think of a dog

or horse or cat when it's about to do something rash. If he was any of those animals his ears would have been back. Clearly he felt cornered. He meant to go through with this if I didn't cave in.

Though it galled me a little, I decided to let him have his way. Maybe three hours of fishing was enough for the first day.

To keep up the pretense of democracy I turned from bow to stern to get Darryl's permission for a change of plans. White flashed all around his irises just as I heard Troy's splash. I turned then and jumped to my feet, letting go of a growl. I rammed my fists against my hips and waited for the boy to surface and swim, resolved in my anger to let him go as far as he could. Let him learn a lesson, the brat. Let the little fucker swim.

Several seconds passed and Troy didn't surface. Suspecting a trick, I clambered up to the bow and leaned over the gunwales on both sides, thinking I'd find him hiding out below the edge, trying to scare me. I checked everywhere, not seeing the boy—but beginning to think I understood him.

I raised up and wheeled toward Darryl. "He can't swim, can he?"

The eyes glistened like fat green grapes.

I stepped up onto the middle bench, and there I hesitated—not for very long, certainly for a much briefer time than it will take to explain what was happening. But explain I must.

Once when I was a kid, I was thumbing through a book in the schoolhouse—it must have been a history book—and I came across a picture of some martyr or criminal from a past century being tortured, his arms and legs tied to two mules pulling in opposite directions. The image burned itself instantly into my brain. Ever since, I've carried with me a picture—it's more than just a picture, it's also a feeling, a wrenching sensation—of the man torn by those two surging mules. It comes back to me at moments like this one, whenever I myself am pulled apart by the two mules that live inside me. One of these beasts has grazed heavily over my darker side. All that rotten fodder has made him suspicious, downright mean. On this occasion he wanted to keep me in the

boat. He still didn't believe the boy wasn't playing a trick. And, what was bleaker, even if it wasn't a trick, even if the kid really couldn't swim, this mule was content to let him drown. But the other mule was against that. This beast is lean from feeding on the sparse crop of goodness that has managed to grow in my polluted soil. He's never been any stronger than his foe, but on a good day he can be steadier, and more patient. Just now he wasn't wasting his energy kicking and braying and nipping. He stood fast while the other had his fits, and then he began placidly to pull. The bad mule was too tired by then to put up a serious fight. Before long the good one wore him down.

At which point I whipped off my glasses and dove.

The water was cold and green and I moved through it easily, as if in deciding to dive I'd tapped a well of hidden energy. It was like some dream of flight. I streaked straight downward several feet, then began to circle in search of the boy. I circled till my lungs threatened to burst, then came up for a second gulp of air and quickly dove down again, swimming beneath the boat to see if Troy had somehow drifted to the other side. I searched and searched, but didn't see him. I surfaced for a third breath, still strong in my resolve, but when I glanced up at the boat I thought I saw two blurred boys' heads where there should be only one. I have a bad astigmatism. When my glasses are off the world's edges dissolve. I treaded water for a moment, trying to make sense of what I saw. One head stayed perfectly still, while the other seemed to bob up and down. The bobbing was in sync with a sound. The sound was a kind of cough, not the cough a boy makes, but the one a small outboard motor makes when it's trying to start.

The little bastard.

By now that fresh energy reserve was tapped out, and I was a good forty yards from shore. I started to slog my way over, the clothes tugging me down like leaden shrouds. I had to call on some muscles that I'd long since forgotten, and a few I'd never known about. A tough trip, but I kept myself going by sharpening the verbal arrows I looked forward to launching when I landed.

Eventually I did land. The bank was steep and weedy where I washed up and I lacked the strength to heave my whole body up onto terra firma. So I flopped over and planted my elbows beneath me and let my legs dangle in the drink. Slowly my breathing settled down. I let it settle way down, thinking I'd need full, rested lungs to put sufficient wind behind the curses that were coming.

Well, the wind came, but the curses never did. Why? Not because it seemed undignified. Not because it seemed futile. And not because I'd forgiven Troy for tricking me. No, in my exhaustion I had lifted my elbows and let my head and shoulders fall back into the shoreline weeds. I had folded my hands across my churning belly, gazing up into the blurred bowl above me, and before I knew it I'd drifted to that other day, that other lake. Edward was nine or ten. We were up in the Sierras together, out fishing on one of the pretty glacial lakes that are set like jewels among the rugged peaks. A clear summer day, no breeze, the mountain sun beating down brutally on our shoulders and heads. It was early afternoon. The fish had been biting all morning, but an hour before they had stopped, and Edward was getting antsy. If June were there he'd have started to whine, but with me he knew better than to try that. He was just fidgeting. I could see he'd stopped having fun. And now it was time for him to learn one of those little lessons about patience and perseverance that he could never learn at home, not with his mother's wings fanned out to shelter him from every difficult thing. Sure the sun was hot. Sure the glare off the water was fierce. Sure it was boring out there, with no fish biting. But what kind of guy would he turn out to be if he couldn't tough it out through times like this? Such was my line of reasoning.

So there we sat, father in the stern, son in the bow of a baking aluminum boat. At that age Edward never used defiant words, at least not with his grim dad, but he had a way with gestures. The eloquent act was a specialty of his. On this occasion it was quick, and utterly apt. I was looking off toward the bank when I felt the boat jiggle a bit. I glanced toward the bow and Edward already had his feet on the bench, his body coiled for the jump. Next he was

bobbing in the water like some tender sprite, his face garlanded by clipped blond curls, his striped T-shirt floating up under his treading arms, and his eyes locked on mine. There was a playful glint that sometimes skipped into those light eyes of his, a look I liked, one he had learned or inherited from June. He was giving me that flirty look, beckoning and challenging, prodding me to give up my lessons and my sternness, to come over the edge and be refreshed. If it had been only that I might have managed to do it. But there was something else in his face, something grave and terribly sober under the sweet naughtiness of his eyes, a look that challenged me in a different way, announcing with a wisdom and a firmness far past his years that we had reached the edge of something, he and I, and if I couldn't make myself let go of my petty program, if I couldn't come laugh and hoot and splash with him now, then there would from this moment onward be a new distance between us.

Well, I couldn't. Though I do remember knowing I should, and I remember being torn inside, the good mule putting up a fight, but the bad one winning out.

When Edward understood I wasn't coming he ducked his head under the water and swam away from me. He paddled around for a while, cooling off, before he came to the edge of the boat and reached a hand up to the gunwale, asking me to help him back in. This was tough to take because there was pity in his asking. Maybe even contempt. I had failed him, and now he would let me do something I could. It was easy to pull him in, but hard—too hard—to resist pushing him right down into the muck that slimed the bottom of the leaky boat. I pressed his head down there for several seconds, long enough to let him know it was no accident, but his reward for rubbing my nose in my own weakness. Like him, I didn't always need words to get my point across.

How I yearned, as I lay there on the lake bank, wet and worn out, to have crimes like that one erased. How I wished I could believe, as Sadie seemed to, that he was here with us, in some other body, watching it all. Wouldn't it be something if that was

him out there yanking on the motor cord, the kid who'd finally pried old Captain Sayers out of the boat, not by flirting or by grave urging but by trickery—the only way to crack a nut as tough as me. For a minute the pain in my stomach combined with the pain of my failure and loss, the whole load pressed down on me and I sensed a sob coming. But I wasn't ready for that. Instead, I made myself believe in transmigration for a minute, made myself be tickled by the thought that after twenty years, Edward had finally seen me dunked. Up from my clammy chest came a little croak of laughter. The first one tripped off another, and that one another. Soon all the wind I'd mustered for curses had been squandered another way.

When I was through laughing I collected myself enough to scramble to a level spot higher up the bank. There I set to work putting myself in order. I wasn't surprised when I heard the boat start up and drone away. To me it was a foregone conclusion they'd get it going eventually, with Troy on the task. And with that little sharper in charge they could look after themselves. I wasn't going to worry about them.

After emptying out my shoes and wringing my socks and shirt, I started walking in the direction of the dam, figuring I could find someone down there who would run me back to the boat rental. I wasn't too worried about it. The dip I'd taken had cleansed me, I felt, and worry was one of the impurities it had washed away. My naked eyes looked out on a skewed fuzzy world where planning and fretting seemed silly. Besides, I wasn't suffering much. It was sunny out and fairly warm, so I wasn't too badly chilled. My stomach churned on, and as I squish-squashed along a pretty nasty rash started burning between my thighs, but even that I welcomed the way you do the painful prickles that riddle thawing feet. Are feelings ever gentle coming back?

I traveled half a mile or more before I heard motors behind me. I stepped off to the right side of the bike trail and paused, watching a convoy of melted-looking vehicles approach. From their size I took them to be pickups, from their dark green color I could tell they belonged to the department. The one in front stopped when

it pulled even with me. I gazed at the person in the passenger seat as through a fogged window.

“Sayers, what on earth happened to *you*?” It was Don Mackey.

“Nothing on earth,” I said.

“It was those Sutter Heights kids, wasn’t it?”

When I didn’t answer he asked where I was going.

“Well, eventually I’ll need a ride home. No glasses.”

“You mind sharing the bed with a dead lioness?” he asked.

“Got her, did you?”

“Not me. It was old Seth back there, the tracker.” I could hear Seth’s dogs celebrating in one of the other trucks.

Don opened his door, saying he’d ride with me in back over to the compound. We climbed over the tailgate together. “Pretty big girl,” he said when we were squatting side by side in the truck bed. “Nearly a hundred pounds.”

I nodded, seeing nothing but a light brown arc stretched along the opposite side of the bed. There was something feline to the shape. The lion seemed to be lying on its side the way cats do, with its back curved in a long semi-circle and its legs bent and drawn together.

“So,” I said, “we’re safe again, eh?”

“Hell if we are. You see that gate?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll have to take my word for it. There’s a hornets’ nest waiting up there.”

“Reporters?”

“Them, and a bunch of demonstrators who’ll be pissed off we killed her.” The truck lurched forward and his voice softened. “Wait’ll they find out she’s got a kitten or two still out there. Then they’ll really go nuts.”

“How do you know about the kittens?”

“Seth checked. She’s lactating.”

“So what happens to them?” I asked.

“We go out there and hope like hell we find ‘em before they starve to death or get eaten. Can you imagine? Those lion

lovers'll have a shit fit if a kitten or two dies. Then it'll be mass murder."

When the truck stopped I heard things that put us at the gate where the reporters and demonstrators were waiting. For a moment it was just like on TV, when questions are flying at some politician or sports star, so many that no particular one can be made out. Then I heard the voice of Cliff Carter, Don's buddy, speaking into a bullhorn. He announced that the mountain lion had been taken. He said he would be glad to answer any questions the press might have and asked that people move to the sides so the front truck could pass by.

The truck lurched forward again. For a moment I could imagine what it might be like to ride on a parade float down some street lined with attentive anonymous faces. They pressed in on us from both sides, with gasps and curses and camera flashes, and then we were past. The truck's rugged tires sang a peppy song as we whizzed across the bridge, then they shifted to something throaty and sad as we slowed to turn into the compound. When we came to a stop I asked Don if he'd be able to run me home at some point.

"That depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On whether you're prepared to do *me* a favor in return."

I waited.

He said, "I figure we'll start searching for those cubs tomorrow morning, and we're going to need every body we can get. You're a Wildlife guy, so they'll let you come along if you tell 'em you want to."

"What if I say no?"

"If you say no I'll run you home anyway."

I thought a moment. "In that case, I'll say yes."

"Hey, there you go. Now, Sayers, I'm going to ask you once more. What the hell happened to you?"

I told him I'd explain it on the way over to the boat rental.

"The boat rental?"

"I need to report a runaway."

THE RESCUE

THE NEXT MORNING FOLLOWED A certain protocol, established through hundreds of repetitions stretching back over three decades. I rose a little earlier than usual and got dressed by artificial light. I went to the kitchen and started putting some sandwiches together for myself and Don. Once in a while I'd glance through the window, out to the street where I expected his pickup to roll in soon. Across the street, Al and Nora's little rancher darkened as light welled up into the sky behind it. This light was slow and blue and soft, with none of the chalky yellow I'd grown used to the last several months. Would the rains begin today? The possibility gave me a lift.

By the time Don's headlights slithered across my rosebushes and bounced up into my fruitless mulberry I had the lunch all made and packed. I stepped out the front door, smelled the air, and went back inside for my rain jacket and hat. My feet were lighter than usual, knees a bit giddy, my whole gait affected by the promise of a shower. California will do that to you. It's not just the five or six month dry season that gets you, it's also the memory you carry from past years when the rains never came, the fear you have of going through another drought. You never admit to this fear until the rain comes, and then you don't admit it directly but with a liveliness of feet and shoulders and knees.

I took my time getting to the truck, inhaling like a pearl diver the whole way. I kept up this greedy breathing even after I'd climbed onto the high seat and closed the door on the dawn air. The atmosphere in Mackey's cab was just as distinct as the one out there, and in its way just as precious. Ever since I'd known him

Don had driven this pickup. In that time the color of the vehicle had changed, and so had the model, the make, the year. What hadn't changed was the way it smelled of an early morning. This was a many-layered odor, with dust and sawdust and WD-40 at the bottom of it, and on top of that the stale minty smell of Don's Lifesavers, and on top of that the aromas of the coffee and doughnuts he'd picked up on his way over.

It had been at least two years since we'd headed off like this together. Those last work trips had been pretty tense, the lab's fate was being decided then and we passed the time speculating about our bosses' maneuvering and, in the quiet stretches, privately brooding or plotting. We both knew there weren't many trips left, but the climate just wasn't right for nostalgia. That had changed. A two-year hiatus was long enough to make the thousands of hours and tens of thousands of miles we'd logged together appear more meaningful than they had at the time. And because our relations had been cool since Don retired, this morning's outing carried some of the bittersweetness a reunion should have.

Not that any of this was openly discussed. Hell no, talking about it would have ruined everything. I got busy tearing a sipping hole into the plastic top of my cup and then started fishing around in the doughnut bag. As always the radio was on, the same all-talk station that Don played continuously but never heard. He rolled slowly through my sleeping neighborhood, then gunned it up the freeway on-ramp and kept on gunning as the pickup drifted out into one of the middle lanes. We ascended the empty curve of bridge with the sky unfolding above us like an umbrella. The close dome of purple storm clouds stretched from the coastal mountains behind us to the Sierras up ahead. Beneath it a few white wisps scudded. To our left downtown Sacramento looked like its own shadow. To our right the river was a curving ribbon of reflected purple bordered by black levies. Raindrops started to smack the glass.

That was our cue to start talking. And what did we talk about? Water, of course. To talk of anything else would have

been unnatural, like shooting off fireworks on Thanksgiving. The rains had come. To us that meant it was time to compare the predictions we'd heard about the kind of winter we had in store. We had to agree that it probably wouldn't be another dry son of a bitch like '94. We had to hope it would be wet, but not *too* wet, like '81. We had to discuss the levels of the major reservoirs and the flow rates of the rivers. We had to gossip a little about the latest big battles in our state's never-ending water wars. It soothed us to do this. We were like a pair of old priests mumbling through the liturgy we loved.

We mumbled all the way out to Miwok Lake, pausing now and then to watch the morning develop. A warden stood guard at the gate where the crowd had been yesterday. Don stopped to chew the fat for a minute, then gave the guy some coffee from his thermos before we carried on up the bike trail. We traveled east along the lakeshore for about two miles. Near the head of the lake the trail veered left, climbing up over the hump of a little oak-covered hill. After that it wound through some fairly dense cover, rising and falling and curving with the contours of the bumpy younger brothers of the foothills farther east.

The meeting place was a little clearing tucked between two small hills. The attack had happened seventy or eighty yards up the trail from here, Don told me, and yesterday the hunting party had treed and killed the lion less than a mile away. There were two green department pickups in the clearing when we arrived. Within the next half hour a dozen more vehicles appeared. There must have been thirty people out there. Some I recognized from the department, but many I didn't. Almost all the unfamiliar faces looked out from beneath blue ballcaps that bore the same fang-filled logo I'd seen on Don's COUGAR ALERT newsletter a couple of days before. There wasn't a woman in the bunch.

Standing in a pickup bed, Cliff Carter called us all together to hear instructions for the search. I recognized his voice as the one that had addressed the crowd at the gate the day before. With my backup glasses on I also recognized the tan, chiseled face

that lurked in the shade under the bill of his green department-issue cap. I didn't know Carter the way Don seemed to, but I'd certainly seen him around the compound and across the table at various meetings. He stood out among Wildlife people because he had some polish to him. Most of the folks who end up working for the department find other animals more interesting than the human kind. They'd rather be outdoors than indoors, much rather be wading in a stream or tromping through the woods than sitting at a meeting or talking to people from the press. This Carter seemed different. For one thing, he was a good talker. I'd noticed that in meetings before, and it had come through even more clearly yesterday. The way he'd handled the demonstrators and reporters had been smooth.

This morning he was also smooth, but in a different way. Much that had been cinched down or buttoned shut yesterday was opened up now. "All right," he began, with scorn and mischief meeting at the corners of his hard mouth, "if I wasn't an employee of a state agency dedicated to providing equal service to all citizens, I might be inclined to say this is the opportunity we've been waiting for. Hell, I might even say we had the Friends of the Mountain Lion by the short curly ones." Here shoulders jumped and faces opened and laughter tumbled out to fill the clearing. Carter showed us his white teeth as he waited for the laughter to subside. Then he explained how concerned he was that none of the momentum gained from the cougar attack be lost. The Friends were on the defensive now—it looked like the law they'd written had cost that jogger her life. To take the heat off themselves they'd be looking for something to cry foul about. A dead kitten or two would be just the thing. We couldn't give them that kind of opportunity, not when we had them on the ropes.

And so on. Carter harangued us for a couple more minutes, making sure we grasped the importance of bringing back a kitten. Then he started talking tactics. He explained that we would use the attack site as a reference point, since it was obviously part of the mother cougar's hunting range. Her den was likely to be

somewhere in the general vicinity, though not necessarily too close. We would walk up the trail a ways and then fan out. Half the group would search the area to the north of the trail and the other half would take the area to the south. Each man would be responsible for a strip of terrain twenty yards wide. Carter recommended moving forward in a tight zig-zag pattern, crossing from one side of your strip to the other, looking for anyplace that a lion might den. We should keep our eyes open for rock overhangs, spaces between rocks, pockets in the brush. "It's a fine-toothed comb operation," he said. "There's no quick way to do it."

Which was fine with me. On the first rainy morning of the season it was a pleasure to be outside. The land reminded me a little of myself the day before, just after my dip in the lake. It was like a hard shrunk sponge suddenly sprinkled with water. All around me things were opening, expanding, softening. The anise couldn't have been more pungent if I'd crushed the seeds with a pestle. The dead grass underfoot reminded my nostrils of damp hay, and the oaks gave off an odor like cured leather. My strip of terrain had a few pines mixed into its oaks. Their scent made the air smell as clean and fresh as this cool rain made it feel.

The ground I had to cover was rarely flat. Besides the hills and hummocks that had been there a few million years, there were big mounds of the river rocks dredged out and dumped by the gold-seekers of the last century. Being loose, and big as loaves of bread, those rocks were no fun to walk over, but they were something to see when the rain relieved them of their chalky summer skin and set them darkly glistening. Against their moist greens and grays the scarlet leaves of poison oak glowed, and the green lichens on the oak limbs and the boulders glowed also, but paler.

I was no more stirred by all of this than the birds were. Crows filled the treetops with their harsh goadings. Through the lower limbs a gang of jays swooped and shrieked. A couple of big magpies worked lower down, yacking through their yellow bills as they hopped about on big black feet. I've got a soft spot for the Corvidae. They're like the clan down the street whose business

everybody knows. Their racket was a fact of the neighborhood, and I didn't mind it.

But as I picked my way back and forth, my eyes alert for potential lion dens, I kept my ears open for the quieter songs that played beneath the Corvidae's noise. For a while I caught intermittent snatches of a nuthatch yank-yanking from some hidden limb. Ahead of me a quail laughed. Of course every clump of brush was alive with sparrows back from their summer in the mountains. It was good to have them here, good to know my company by voice alone. Like most birders I take a certain smug comfort in blind sightings, and nothing rankles me more than a bird whose call I don't know. In unfamiliar places you expect this, but when you're on your home turf it simply shouldn't happen.

Well, it was happening now. The awareness had come over me slowly. There was so much noise and music in the air that for a while it was hard to confirm the alien notes. At first I thought I was imaging things, and then, when I decided to try and isolate what I thought I'd heard, it kept getting drowned out by the shrieking of the crows and magpies and jays. Then too, I was trudging along over loose rocks and past swiping bushes, I was making noises of my own. But finally I decided it was serious enough to postpone the search and just stand still a while, to see if I could get some kind of reading on the sound.

It took some time. The sound—it was a kind of chirp, though not like any bird's I knew—didn't make any kind of melody, and there would only be three or four chirps at a time. It seemed to be coming from somewhere ahead of me, probably on the right hand side of my strip of terrain. I pushed slowly onward, poking around any spot that seemed remotely denlike, all the time rack-ing my brains for some clue about what kind of winged visitor I could be hearing. When I ran out of candidates among the wild birds I knew, I started running through alternative scenarios. It crossed my mind that a pet store fugitive could be hiding out here. Was it a parakeet or a cockateel? I didn't think so. Those birds' calls are quick and high, while what I was hearing had something plaintive in it, a softer kind of music.

As I nudged my way forward I determined that the sound was coming from somewhere to the right. And whatever kind of bird it was, it was sitting tight. It would let go of three or four chirps, then shut up for five minutes, then chirp again from the same spot. What *was* it? I sped up, putting the fine-toothed comb away. I was traveling downhill on the back side of a rock-heap. Quick but cautious, I picked my way along, careful not to cause any avalanches that might spook my chirper. When I got to the bottom I paused and waited until I heard it again. I stood in a small clearing. The next chirp came from beyond a boulder that was half-obscured by the thick brush at the right side of the clearing. I went to the brush and followed its edge, circling around the boulder when I came to it and then stepping softly on, pausing now and then to listen for the chirp. After half a minute it came—not from the brush beside me, but from somewhere behind.

I think I knew right then it was the kitten. But I wasn't quite ready to deal with that, so I played dumb for a minute. I turned back to that boulder I'd passed, thinking maybe the strange bird had made a nest there. The boulder was as tall as me, all lichen-covered. The part that jutted into the clearing was triangular, narrow at the top and wide at the base. From a few steps away it looked like a giant nose. I snooped around the exposed part of it, then poked my head into the brush to check around the back. There was more of the boulder back here than I'd imagined. I leaned away, and saw that this part behind the protruding nose was like the rest of a giant head. There was a forehead that rose a few feet from the bridge of the nose and a cranium that curved back. I stepped deeper into the brush to follow the arc of the cranium. When I got to the very back of it I discovered a piece missing down low, the part under the occiput, that deep protected pocket where the old brain resides. I squatted to see into this low space scooped out of the rock.

A mouth full of fangs greeted me. The kitten—there was only one—stood as far back as the rock would let it, arched into the classic posture of the threatened feline—tail up, ears back, blue eyes blazing. He had chirped me in to the rescue, but he clearly

didn't plan to make the operation easy. I didn't blame him. My knowledge of orphan instincts came firsthand. Whatever I'd forgotten from my own training, Troy Muse had reminded me of just a day before. So this time I didn't hesitate. Hands first, I dove.

The struggle was brief and a little bloody. When it was over I lay on my back on the porch of the den, my torn arms rigid above me, my scratched, gouged fingers clutching the writhing kitten. His claws stood out like sixteen tiny daggers. His heart drummed wildly on my thumbs. His whole livid skeleton raged against my fingers and palms.

My grip was at least as fierce as his resistance, and it stayed that way even after he conceded this first round to me and started saving his energy for the next opportunity. The whole way back, my hands didn't relax at all. Partly this was to keep the kitten from getting any ideas about escaping. And partly it was to keep myself from losing hold of the gift I'd just been given. Here in my hands was the lesson none of Jean's books could make stick. Here was a truth I could touch. Here was the pure and unforgettable fierceness of one who wanted life.

Eventually I had to give the kitten up to Cliff Carter, but even then its current stayed in my hands. It buzzed on as Cliff and Don and the rest of the searchers took turns congratulating me, as we loaded up the trucks and drove back over to the Department of Wildlife compound. It was still buzzing when I slipped away from the scene and walked over to the Hooked on Fishing office. There I sat down at Emilio's typewriter and beat out a concise resignation.

PART TWO

KYLE

IF I NEEDED FURTHER PROOF OF CLIFF CARTER'S SLICKNESS, I got it the day after we rescued the kitten. The front page of that morning's *Bee* ran a picture that someone standing close by had snapped just as I was getting ready to hand over the kitten. I had my hands around the ribs of the little critter and I was holding him out away from me, waiting for someone else to take him. But you couldn't see that someone else. You could just see silver-bearded Charlie Sayers, looking elderly and careful and unofficial in his rain hat and clunky backup spectacles. He was keeping his cool while the little predator in his hands bared claws and fangs—frightened, probably, by the guy who had crowded close to take this silly picture. *To the rescue!* the caption read. *After careful search Department of Wildlife's Charlie Sayers found killer cat's cub and brought it back to safety.*

The phone rang constantly for a couple of days. Friends and neighbors wanted to know if it was really true, and they wanted to congratulate me—not for what I'd done, I think, but for being on the front page of the paper. At the end of the week I received an invitation to visit the cub I'd rescued in the zoo that had adopted him.

Closer in there were also strong reactions. Sadie was first. Had she noticed that I'd stumbled upon the little cougar within ten days of the anniversary of Edward's death? You bet she had—and her talk was heavy with correspondences and omens. Mackey's reaction was just as predictable, in its way. If there'd been any doubts about whether I could contribute to COUGAR ALERT (in his mind there had been no doubts), those were wiped away now. I had a knack for this game. I was a natural, clearly.

All of this was interesting, but it didn't change my feeling that rescuing the kitten was the second most momentous of that day's happenings. Jean and I shared the view that my resignation was number one. Yet we had different interpretations of the event. To her it meant I would most likely keel over one day soon. She had all the evidence she needed to back her up on this. After all, hadn't her own father cashed in his chips a mere three days after his retirement? And hadn't Doctor Sell-a-book convinced her that what happened to her old man was no fluke, but exactly what he'd bargained for—and what *I* was in for also by retiring before I had even begun to figure out how I was going to *redirect*?

For my own part I didn't expect anything in particular. I just knew I was in for something strange, something unprecedented in my experience, since I had no notion of a life without work, no memory of one. Probably that's why it seemed so crucial to me to stay busy—and not just any old way. A lot of retired guys find peace in long days of puttering, but I knew I wouldn't. I needed novelty, and I needed some field of action beyond my own yard. COUGAR ALERT promised to meet both those needs. Even so, I might not have tried it if Jean hadn't convinced me I couldn't afford not to.

This happened a week or so after my resignation. I came home from the market one evening and found Jean's son Kyle on the living room couch. Right off, the grin he flashed set me wondering if I was invited to this evening's pow wow. Jean erased any doubt of it when she came around the corner from the kitchen and sang a big hello to me before popping onto her tiptoes to give me a kiss. She shoved a tall condensation-covered glass at me and told me to drop the bags I was carrying.

"Sit down and have a drink with us," she said, serving Kyle a glass like mine. "I'll put this stuff away and be right there." She grabbed the grocery bags and headed back into the kitchen.

They had caught me off guard, asking me to join. Before I could devise a getaway I was playing the role they'd scripted, sitting down in my reading chair and taking a sip from that cold glass. Lemonade. Pink.

Kyle had jogged here, judging from his flushed cheeks and from the clothes he was wearing—t-shirt, sports shoes with ankle-high cotton socks, a pair of those pocketed polyester shorts that coaches and gym teachers wear. Everything in the outfit was either green or white.

I leaned forward to set my glass of lemonade on the fireplace bricks and Kyle glanced toward the kitchen, anxious for Jean to come along and get things going. Then he lifted the glass to his mouth and threw his head back, his Adam's apple starting to bob. Like the jogging, this passion for a boozeless beverage was a bad sign. Every year or so Kyle went in for big reforms. These always coincided with showy re-dedications to health and fitness.

"Hey," he said, lowering the glass, "saw your picture on the front page, holding that little mountain lion. Me and Brenda put it on the fridge. Did Mom keep a copy?"

"We had fish for dinner that night," I said. "She wrapped up the scraps in it."

"I did *not*." Jean swished in carrying her own glass of lemonade and sat down on the couch next to Kyle. "I cut it out and put it in the album, and you know it. Anyway," she said, slipping her feet out of their flats and lifting them up to the edge of the coffee table, "what do you think of the gismo, Sayers?" She gestured vaguely at the coffee table.

"I was just getting ready to tell him about it," Kyle said. He pointed to a blue and gray object that lay on the coffee table. "Charlie, know what that is?"

"No idea."

"It's a PNS."

"Is that right?" I chuckled. "Unlike any I've seen before."

Jean ignored my jest. "Personal Navigation Systems are one of the hottest things in electronics." She brought it over to me.

I reluctantly took the thing from her. It was a touch larger than a cellular phone, with a screen above and various buttons below. "EnCompass" appeared in bold letters across the top.

Kyle said, “EnCompass is a Big Sky Electronics product. They’re located in the Bay Area.”

“So what’s it supposed to do?” I said, my skepticism aimed not so much at the gismo itself (what did I know about electronics?) but at the way these two were behaving with me.

Kyle said, “Imagine a world where nobody gets lost, ever again. Nobody has to write down directions, ever again. And if you need to locate your loved ones, you can do it by pressing a button.”

Jean stood near me nodding. “*One button, Charlie.*”

Kyle lifted up his meaty little hands and began to wave them like a wrestler at the beginning of a match. He started to give me some song and dance about Global Positioning Systems, handheld personal computers, the projections for this and that, and how two technologies could be combined to make a super-efficient navigation device that fits on your belt or the dash of your car. He stood up and raised his shirt to show me how his gismo clipped to the waist of his shorts.

“Individuals who use the EnCompass will always know where they’re going, no matter where they are. That’s guaranteed. And by creating a private PNS network, people on a Big Sky Clan Plan can maintain peace of mind through ongoing real-time location monitoring of all clan members. Charlie, did you know that stress is one of the largest health hazards in the United States today? EnCompass eliminates two major sources of stress, the fear of getting lost and the fear of losing track of the ones you love. This is technology that creates calm. EnCompass users feel better.”

“That’s their motto,” Jean said.

“Catchy,” I said, not yet knowing what they wanted from me but understanding that they were willing to play up to me to get it. Let them play, was my attitude. “So, you planning to sell these things in your spare time?”

Kyle glanced at the floor. “I’m planning to sell them full-time.”

“What, is the Postal Service going belly up?” In the past, when they’d included me in career brainstorming sessions, I had

always reminded Kyle that if not the perfect employer, the Postal Service was at least a solid meal ticket.

He sat down heavily. "I'm telling you Charlie, they're in trouble over there. Communications are changing and the Postal Service is getting obsolete in a lot of ways."

"They're handling less and less letters all the time," Jean said.

"But your department deals with freight, doesn't it Kyle?"

He conceded that he had nothing to do with letters.

"Hey, I'm the first to admit I know zip about computers," I said. "But even I know they don't have a computer that sends packages. For that you need trucks, planes. People."

Kyle balled his fists. "But the Postal Service—they're the shits to work for."

"So you've told us."

Jean said, "You don't have to listen to Kyle to know that, Charlie. Look at the papers. Seems like every other week some goofball goes back to the post office to gun down his old boss and whoever else happens to be standing around. There's something wrong with that outfit, if you ask me. They're making people crazy. Aren't they Kyle."

Kyle's hands were up in front of him again, waving combatively, as if he were trying to spot a weakness in language and bend it to his will. He started to report to us about management philosophies, strategizing within the workplace environment, the need for a positive motivational technique. He built up a little momentum and then rumbled clumsily along, hacking and clawing his way through a hodgepodge of imperfectly received ideas. Poor kid. If his mind moved with one tenth of the agility and confidence that his body had spent so freely on the high school football fields of ten years before, he'd have been sitting pretty by now, at the top of one of the professions that takes brains. He was an all-city halfback his junior and senior seasons, so fun to watch that in those two years, my first with Jean, I hardly missed a game. Kyle had all the football instincts, his cuts were sharp, perfectly timed,

he knew when to juke or to bowl a tackler over, he had a knack for following blockers. The kid's spirit was a football spirit. He was harmless off the field but ate up the physical fierceness of the game. He was born to football as to nothing he'd done since the game ceased to have a place for him. The pity of his life, as I saw it, was to have been too small for a career in the sport. Kyle had his mom's terrific compact build, that solidity and spring, but to play for one of the big colleges, then for the pros, he'd have needed a lot more size and a little more speed.

"I don't know," he said. He'd come round by now to complaining about the shiftless brutes they paid him to prod and hound. "It's probably not safe working with some of those flunkies. I'm not kidding, some of those guys are scary."

I nodded without enthusiasm as Jean explained how Kyle could work for Big Sky on a commission basis, how it would take a while to get started, but once this thing was up and running, look out.

Kyle pointed the bottom of his glass skyward and finished off his lemonade. "Well, I better get going. Want to get a couple more miles in before dinner."

Jean walked with him to the entryway. I heard them exchange a few words with lowered voices, then Kyle yelled back to me, "Later, Charlie."

I picked up the gismo from my chair arm and shouted, "HEY, YOU FORGOT THIS THING!" But the door shut anyway.

I took my lemonade into the kitchen and dumped it in the sink. Jean walked in just as I was pouring bourbon over the ice cubes I had dropped in one of the heavy tumblers. "Fix you a drink?" I said.

"Why don't you have another lemonade with me? It's easier on the stomach."

I took a gulp of bourbon and eyed her across the top of the tumbler. "I thought you weren't getting involved with that."

"That's exactly right. If your stomach melts down, it won't be from anything *I* served you."

“Is that why I haven’t gotten near a piece of meat in the last week?”

She walked over to the stove. “I’ve been interested in experimenting with a vegetarian diet for a long time. Meat is really hard on the system, you know.”

“I guess it is a good time to experiment,” I said. “I’ll be out of your way soon, then you can change back if you want to.”

She did her best to ignore my quip, saying we’d be having rice and lentils tonight. Then she went to get her apron off its hook. “Isn’t it good to see Kyle so excited? I think the seminar really helped him.”

“Seminar?”

“The one we went to a couple weekends ago, on careers. He’s really turned on about this Big Sky thing. Isn’t it great?”

“It’s good he’s upbeat. The big thing’s the product, though. Do people want to buy it is the question.”

“Well it seems like a heck of a deal to me.”

I washed the lettuce and carrots and celery. After shutting the faucet off I turned to her. “So when you going to tell me where I fit in?”

“I just thought you’d like to hear Kyle’s plans,” she said, heading to the fridge. She acted like she was busy looking for something, but I could tell she was stalling.

I watched her walk from fridge to stove and start peering into the pots she had going. Still peering, she said, “There’s also this space issue that has to be addressed.”

“Address away.”

“Kyle’s going to need an office to work out of. It doesn’t make sense to start paying rent someplace before he even sells the first EnCompass.”

I understood instantly that she aimed for Kyle to have an office in our house, and I knew very well I had no way of stopping it. On matters touching the house, I had zero leverage. The house was hers, she had finished paying the mortgage off three years ago. To gain veto power over what went on in it all I had to do was marry her, which she’d been waiting ten years for me to do.

“He and Brenda have an extra bedroom,” I said, pretending not to see her plan. “Why doesn’t he work from home?”

“That’s what he says.”

“But you say different?”

“Charlie, this is more than just a professional opportunity for Kyle, don’t you see that? It’s a chance for him to escape from a degrading work environment and take control of his own life. Home would be the worst place for him to work right now.”

“Because...?”

“Because of Brenda. Do you think she’s backing him up on this? No way. If he tries to get started over there he’ll be swamped in her negativity. I swear to God, it’ll sink him. Charlie, I know Kyle better than anyone. He has to have a positive environment.”

“Let me guess. Our library is about to become a sales office.”

“I *knew* you’d agree,” she said, clapping her hands once.

“Did I say I agreed?”

“I can tell you see the logic of Kyle being back in his old bedroom as he gets this new thing going. And Charlie,” she said, cocking her head to one side, “I know he could use all the help you have time to give.”

“Me, help peddle the PNS?”

“Or lend a little brainpower, help him strategize maybe. It’s just a thought.”

“I think I’m starting to get this,” I said. “It’s two birds, one stone—or one nest.”

“What do you mean?”

“Give Kyle an office, and give Charlie something to do—keep the old fart from hanging himself with all the slack rope he has now.”

“Would it be so taxing to help him out a little?” On the list of her perennial disappointments, my failure to take Kyle under my wing was second only to my avoidance of marriage.

“I notice you didn’t reject my analysis,” I said.

“You’re going to think what you want, no matter what I say. Why should I argue?”

“Anyway,” I said, “I’m going to have to pass on helping Kyle out. I have a prior commitment.”

“Oh?”

I told her about COUGAR ALERT. “Mackey’s been after me to help him out. Since that thing happened with the jogger, everyone has a lion sighting to report. They’ve got him jumping.”

“They’re the ones who want to repeal the hunting ban, aren’t they?” I could tell from her interested tone she didn’t intend to argue lion policy with me, or lean too hard on me to collaborate with Kyle. It relieved her that much to learn I had something to do.

COUGAR ALERT

EVERY DAY SINCE THE JOGGER'S DEATH a handful of cougar sightings or incidents had been reported to the department, most of them bogus. Cliff Carter's outfit had nowhere near the manpower it would have taken to check out all these calls. At the same time, they couldn't afford not to follow up. To overturn the hunting ban they needed evidence of the mountain lion infestation that politicians from a lot of the hill counties were starting to clamor about. Each substantiated lion incident was evidence the Friends of the Mountain Lion couldn't dismiss.

Don's job was to scout for Cliff Carter. He would drop in on the people who called in lion sightings and decide whether or not they were legit. If they weren't, the department hadn't wasted its time or money investigating. If they were, the department looked into it, and Don had a scoop for the COUGAR ALERT newsletter.

The first time I went out with Don I produced the EnCompass and asked if he would mind holding my PNS for me. Don was susceptible to gadgets. His distaste for my lewd remark was easily overpowered by his attraction to the EnCompass. He mounted it on his dashboard and let it direct us to the homes of those who had called in lion sightings.

The first call we answered together came from a guy who lived deep in the heart of an apartment complex named after the false lake the pricey units faced. From Chet Burns' place, one row off the lake, you could peer between the two units beyond the carports and see a vertical strip of the unnaturally blue water. But there was plenty of consolation for the eyes inside Mr. Burns' home. Handsomely photographed birds perched all along the walls

of his apartment. In the entryway I saw a California quail, a cedar waxwing, and a pair of rosy finches, all of them captured in vivid detail and many times larger than life. This Burns was finchlike himself, little and fidgety. When I complimented the photographs he nodded avidly and explained that pictures were his passion.

How do you hold the camera still? I felt like asking him. *And why don't you do something about that breath?* For such a little man, he had big breath.

He left a trail of it for us to follow as he zipped down the hall toward the living room, explaining along the way that his passion had always been for still images only. Video had left him cold. It was to prove this to himself once and for all and to settle an ongoing dispute with a technology-slave friend that he agreed to borrow the friend's video camera, just to try it out once and show he had an open mind. Yesterday he had gone down to one of his favorite birding spots, on the south bank of the river, to see what the machine could do.

"I wasn't even that sure I wanted to go," Burns admitted to us. "Not after what happened to that jogger. But this individual loaned me the camera two weeks ago. I'm not the sort of person who borrows something and then just keeps it."

Don and I sat on the sofa, and Burns hunkered down near the TV, telling his tale. "So I drive down there and leave my car in the lot. I go walking down the bike trail maybe fifty yards. Then I go off the trail toward this spot where I've gotten some of my best shots in the last couple of years. Okay," he said in the lowered voice of a kid nearing the scary part of his story, "I'm just getting settled on the edge of this clearing when I notice a movement out of the corner of my eye. A *mountain lion*! I turn around, see what it is, and I swear to you the hair stood up on the back of my neck." He cupped his hand over the spot in question. "I never knew that really happened."

Don cleared his throat. "How come you didn't run?"

Burns flicked his chin from side to side, flapping his arms once. "I don't know? Call it a photographer's instinct. I must be

crazy,” he said, but I could tell he meant brave. He’d lived through his own Marlin Perkins moment. He was proud.

“Slowly, I lift up my binoculars and get it in focus. God, what a beautiful cat! So graceful. Just walking along, really slow, and *graceful*, you know. Gosh, what a sight!”

“Is that when you started taping?” Don said, his voice thick with skepticism.

“I realized I had to. It was my duty to get this footage, even if I had to risk my neck for it. So,” the little man said, lifting the control pad, “I lowered the binoculars and took hold of the camera.” The blue TV screen turned brown and green and wavy. “I was still really nervous at this point. That’s why it’s so unstable.”

Gradually the picture stabilized, and as it did poor Burns’ credibility crumbled to pieces. His cat did have the right color hide; it even had the dark tail tip mountain lions have. And there was a family resemblance in the fluid feline walk, in the pointy shoulder bones poking up with each step, in the tail that moved like a wand of thought, in the way it lay down and licked itself and yawned. But when this cat did lie down it was more than half-concealed by the ankle-high autumn grass. To reach cougar stature, it needed magnification to the tenth power. Between them, Burns’ fear of being eaten and his hunger to be noticed had probably doubled that. He’d been primed by two weeks of mountain lions in the media, after all. One look through his birding binoculars was all it took to inflate this house cat into a wild cougar, and his own measly self into a safari lord.

As the tape rolled on my desire to look over at Don warred against my certain knowledge that if I did look, and he happened at the same time to glance at me, our hero would be buried under an avalanche of laughter. So I busied myself trying to figure out the best way to describe this image to Jean when I got home. To duplicate the occasional jolts and sways set off by Burns’ excitable hands, it would be best to set your camera up in a boat on mildly choppy water. Then you’d need to find a tawny tabby to film, give it a can or two of catfood to eat, and leave it to laze in the sun on shore.

"I'm *so* glad it stuck around for a while," Burns said after five minutes or so of footage. "Gave me a chance to get settled."

"How long is the tape?" Don asked.

Awed by his achievement, Burns had stopped fidgeting. He spoke to the screen. "Twenty-seven minutes."

Here I braced myself, waiting for kid-gloves Mackey to ask this Burns if he had considered the probability of a mountain lion, one of the most shy and stealthy animals on earth, dawdling out into a clearing in broad daylight and then sitting still for half an hour of close-range videography. But the old bone-crusher surprised me, saying only that we didn't have time to look at the whole tape, and asking Burns to give it to us so we could show it to the experts back at the department.

Burns paused the machine, hopped up, and handed Don a copy he'd already made. "I know this is a public safety issue, and I want to cooperate fully with the authorities on it," he said. "But as photographer I retain the copyright on this footage, of course."

"Sure," Don said.

Once again Burns flapped his arms. "I figure I risked my life, I might as well make something out of it, right?"

Don shrugged. "It's only fair."

Back in the truck, after we'd had a good laugh, I asked Don why he'd left the wool over Burns' eyes.

He said, "That little zero? Let Carter pop his bubble for him. We're just volunteers."

"I'm not even that," I reminded him.

"Oh, what are you then?"

"Just a bored old guy along for the ride. Unaffiliated."

"Unaffiliated. Is that right?"

"Yeah, for the first time in about forty years. Thought I should try it out a while, see what it feels like."

I recognized his nod as the one I've given to people, almost always younger than me, when they have no idea what they're talking about. "How's it feel so far?" he said.

"So far, so good. I'm having fun."

Don jerked his thumb back in the direction of Chet Burns' apartment. "That kind of fun I can do without."

Too bad for him, since there wasn't any other kind of fun on our menu that week. The second call we answered together was from a fleshy, pink-faced woman who had been riding out on the bike trail, had seen a cougar move in the bushes and then had lowered her head and ridden for her life all the way home, sure that the cougar was right behind her. By the time we got to her house her ride had been over for two hours at least, but you wouldn't have known this by looking at her. Her cheeks were flushed as if with exertion, her dull blond hair was gathered up in some kind of spring-loaded clamp, and black biking shorts peeked out from under the tail of a big white T-shirt that said BE NICE on the front in black letters. She gave us her report on the front porch, in a voice too urgent for breath.

Her husband had warned her against riding on the bike trail by herself. He would be home before long, she told us, glancing up the street. He would throw fits if he found out about this. *Fits*. Here her pale eyebrows lifted like the halves of a drawbridge as her face filled with dismay. He'd warned her and she'd gone out there anyway. That, she told us, was the story of her life.

I was ready and willing to hear some of the life story, and I believe she would have spilled it if Don hadn't pulled out his notepad and started quizzing her about the cougar.

Would she describe it, please?

Hmm. Well, she'd been so busy trying to get away, she hadn't stuck around to get a close look. It was mainly a sound, a commotion in the bushes.

Had she seen the animal at all, some part of it? The head, for instance?

Well, she didn't remember seeing the head—not clear enough to say what it looked like.

Had she seen *any* part of the animal? Fur, tail, paw? Anything?

No. Well, hmm. Maybe she hadn't.

I wondered about the words on her shirt. Command, or plea? Either way, Don did his best to comply with them, noting on his pad the exact spot where she claimed the thing had occurred. He told her he'd report everything to the department and have them get back to her if they'd heard about anything else happening in that vicinity.

"You think I'm making it up, don't you," she said, the eyebrows drawing up again. "You know what? It wouldn't surprise me if I was."

At this Don started to back off the porch. I would have liked to stay a bit, give the woman an ear to pour her troubles into. But Don had caught a whiff of leaked emotion. Nothing in the world could make him flee faster than that. If he was getting out of there, I felt I ought to go with him. Anyhow, it would save her some explaining if we disappeared before the husband got home.

My mood was pensive as I ambled down the steps and along the front walk, thinking about the four people (three of them still living) who knew enough to comment on my own way of reacting to the woes of others. Whatever their differences, Jean, Sadie, and June would all agree that emotional pain is a thing I choose not to be near. At least the pain of those closest to me, pain I worry I might have caused. But it's different with strangers' troubles. When I see someone like this woman on the porch, wobbling under too much baggage, I'm likely to step up and offer to carry some of it for her to the curb.

Which means that like a lot of my other flaws, my aversion to intimate things looks mild next to Don's. I've always thought the comedian had good advice for those who want to look thin when he told them to hang around fat people. My own advice to anyone wanting to feel lighthearted would be to go on the road with Don. The feeling I remember more than any other from twenty-five years of road trips with him is my almost constant compulsion to joke and tease. This didn't come from any deep vein of mirth in me, it was part of my job description, my moral duty to try and tickle Don down off the lonely rock he was always climbing on

to stew. Maybe it was the lying hatchery manager in Eureka, the virus killing the fish in Spoon Lake, the lame ass new guy they'd hired at Yountville. Whatever it was, Don darkened it, which always set me searching for ways to let in light.

I did a little searching as we walked in silence back to the truck. And after we took off I told him I wanted to thank him.

His glance was mistrustful. "For what?"

"Not because I'm learning about mountain lions," I said. "Haven't learned squat in that department. But Jesus, Mackey, I never had any idea how fertile the human imagination can be."

His great head slowly wagged.

"I'm starting to wonder if real mountain lions even exist," I told him. "Who needs the damn things, with all these imaginary ones roaming around?"

"There's real ones."

"For me it's been two calls, two false alarms. When was the last time you had anything real?"

"It happens. I wish it would happen more."

"Yeah, like we need more cougars mucking around down here. What the hell do you care, anyway? You stay busy either way. Isn't that the main thing?"

He shook his head. "The main thing's getting the law changed. That killed jogger really turned the wind in our favor. We've got Dick Beech ready to take this thing to the state legislature. We need to keep the heat on. We can't let it die down now."

"What *is* it with you and this law?" I said. He started to answer and I told him not to bother with the speech about who is going to manage the wildlife in this state. He'd already tried that on me at my Hooked on Fishing office, I reminded him, and I wasn't any more convinced now than I had been then that he would be doing all of this on principle only.

He sat there in silence, a red tide of annoyance washing up past rings of loose neck skin.

"Come on, Mackey," I said. "Do you really think if they started making money off lion hunters they'd channel one cent of

it to our old lab? You know how things work in the department. Lion money does not go to fish guys, fish money does not go to lion guys.”

“I know how things *used* to work in the department,” he said, suddenly looking smug as a fed toad.

“What, I work there thirty years and things move at a glacial clip, I’m gone two weeks and they suddenly change? What’s changed?”

He drove on, his lips clamped down on the secret that buzzed around inside.

“Anyway,” I said, “be sure you tell Elsie about Mrs. Be Nice.”

“That head-case back there? Why?”

“Her husband tells her there’s a lion in the bushes, she believes it. Does Elsie pay that much attention to what you say?”

“No,” he said, his shoulders jumping as his eyes clamped shut. “Not by a damn sight.” He laughed for two blocks.

That was the last laughter I heard out of him for as long as our string of dry runs continued. Not that I didn’t try. Like they do at some ballparks, I started to tally our strike-outs. I drew K’s on little squares of paper and taped them to the visor in a row. I told him to hell with the department, we’d have a second career as authors. Our first book: *The Town That Cried Lion*. The more dour he got, the more merry I became. He grumbled, he reddened, he puffed—and I told him to keep it up. Soon he’d convince me I was a truly happy guy.

His engines started to really sputter as we neared the end of our first week together. It was at Mrs. Frazier’s house that they cut out completely, sending him into a tailspin. Mrs. Frazier had to be pushing ninety. Her body was frail, but not her vocal cords. Her imagination was in great shape. But strongest of all was her hunger for company. Don and I spent most of one afternoon sipping weak coffee in her musty living room, leaning back against her sofa doilies and being regaled by colorful accounts of the mountain lion that had taken to stalking her house at night, looking for ways

to get in. She'd heard it walking about on her roof, checking the chimney. A couple of times she'd peered out the window and seen its horrid eyes glowing at her through the glass. The noises it made were appalling, the yowls and screeches and such. She was scared silly. Petrified.

No more petrified than her listeners, surely. I would probably still be sitting there if not for Don, who at some point deep in the third hour threw off the chains of his traditional upbringing and interrupted this venerable matron's train of thought—stood up in the middle of one of her seven-page sentences and stopped her cold, saying we'd be glad to take a look around the house and tell her if we saw any cougar sign.

When we got outside I staggered around on the porch a minute, waiting for the feeling to return to my legs. Don headed straight for the truck.

"Where you going?" I said.

"You want to go through the motions, go ahead. If not, let's take off. I'm ready."

"Was it something she said?"

He didn't even look up.

When my legs were game I took a solitary tour of the Frazier residence, including a visit to the roof. As far as I could tell, the main varmint operating at ground level was the gopher who had made a putting green of the back lawn. Up above, the chimney hole seemed secure. The lion would have a tough time getting past the sparrows who'd built their nest in it.

I went back to the front door, made some assurances that fell on deaf ears, and disentangled myself as gently as I could when Mrs. Frazier started trying to line Don and me up for dinner. I told him about the invitation as I climbed into the truck. He was too steamed to even thank me.

He drove away in silence while I whistled a frisky tune, taping another K in place. I stopped whistling and counted the K's out-loud. "We ought to check the books," I said. "We might be closing in on some kind of record."

His eyes stayed on the road. "Sayers, what's wrong with you?"

"If I knew that, you think I'd be *here* right now?"

"You really are having a good time, aren't you?"

"Are you kidding? I feel lucky."

"Why's that?"

"I keep thinking where I'd be if I wasn't on this wild goose chase with you."

"Yeah, where?"

"At some home improvement place picking out stain for the gazebo I don't want to build, probably. Or home drinking lemonade and eating soy bean tacos and brainstorming with Kyle. Think about that, and tell me this isn't fun."

It *was* fun that first fantastical week. And then I got a taste of the real thing.

CORY

THE FIRST REAL CALL CAME from a house on the east side of Olives, one of the older neighborhoods where most of the original parcels of land had been carved up and built on. But like Sadie's place, on the other end of town, this house still sat alone on its several acres. I got a good feeling from the front porch as soon as I stepped onto it. It was pleasant but not quaint. The paint on the wicker furniture wasn't too fresh; the pillows on the chairs and couch looked cozy and well used. The doorbell was an actual bell, a little cast iron number that Don reached up to pull.

The guy who came to the door was young—late teens, maybe twenty—and needed a haircut.

"Morning," Don said.

The kid studied us for a minute, scratching at his thin beard. "Department of Wildlife?"

"We represent Wildlife, yeah," Don said. "Answering your call."

"Not *my* call," the kid said, and as if on cue a woman's voice came to us from the back of the house. A slow voice, on the deep side.

"Cory, is that the Department of Wildlife? Let them in, will you babe?"

While we walked through the house's front rooms I looked Cory over from behind. He needed a belt more than a haircut.

His mom was in the kitchen talking on the phone. The bathrobe or kimono she wore was blue and white, batiked. In one hand she held a great bunch of her thick hair, keeping it off her ear and

out of the way of the receiver. Dark, pretty hair, more pepper in it than salt.

"Yes, I'll tell them," she said into the phone. "They're standing right here. No, I don't think you need to talk to them. You have work to do. Don't worry, I'll tell them. Listen, babe, can you hold on?"

She put her palm on the mouthpiece and smiled at us, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. "Cor, take them down to the pasture and show them Theresa, would you. I'll be off in a second."

Cory led us through a sliding glass door out onto a big back deck that overlooked their sloped pasture. Beyond the pasture stood a dense wall of live oaks, and beyond those a landscape of dredged rock-hills stretched half a mile across flat floodplain, almost to the river. We followed Cory down two flights of wooden stairs, the goat-odor sharpening with every step. Just inside the gate he stopped and pointed to a lump of beige fur that lay a few feet away from an old metal washtub.

"There she blows," he said, and passed us on his way back through the gate.

Don watched him climb the stairs. "Nice lad."

He had explained to me on the way over that this was most likely a dog kill, by far the most common cause of livestock loss in this area. But as soon as we were standing over the goat he ruled dogs out. Except for the gory hole the lion had torn to get at the nutritious inner organs, the goat's body didn't look too bad. Its face was unmarked and the death wound, the place where the fangs had sunk in to sever the spinal cord, wasn't visible until you took a close look.

"No sir," Don said, pushing the hair away so I could see the puncture wounds, "a dog kill is a hell of a lot messier than this. Struggle makes the mess." He showed me the claw marks where the lion had raked the goat's shoulder so I could recognize them on future corpses. Then we puttered around the crime scene awhile, checking out prints, piecing together the sequence of events before we headed back up to the house.

At the foot of the stairs Don patted my shoulder. "Well Sayers, at long last."

"What a relief."

Through the sliding glass door I saw that the mother was off the phone and sitting at the table. Cory sat on the counter across the kitchen from her. His feet in their heavy hiking boots hung down like two buckets of cement.

We passed through the door and the mother, Susan, introduced herself. As she was handing me a cup of coffee she asked if we'd met anywhere before.

"Think of the *Bee* a couple weeks ago, front page," Don said to Susan. There was more excitement in his voice than the occasion called for. The dead goat had him jazzed.

She took a long look at me. "The little mountain lion. You're the one that saved it."

Don slapped his knee. He was still wagging his head and giggling about my fame when the kid asked if I lived around there.

"No," I said, "but my daughter does. We haven't met, have we?"

He had seen me ride through Old Olives a few times.

Susan said to me, "You wouldn't have actually met unless you went out to the picnic table in the middle of the park to bum a cigarette and play hacky sack." The look she gave her son was more playful than chiding.

I liked her face and so I kept watching it, saw it go a little grave as the reason for our being here displaced the pleasure of teasing her son. "Sorry I was on the phone before," she said. "My husband's out of town on business, and he's sick about this. He's sure a mountain lion killed Theresa. When I called the Department of Wildlife this morning they said it was probably dogs."

"A lot of times it is dogs," Don said. "But not this time."

She squinted. "You mean?"

"Yeah, that's a lion kill."

"Cool!" Cory said, coming off the counter with a heavy clomp of boots.

His mother scowled at him. "Oh, *Cor.*"

Cory said, "Come on, it serves him right."

"Serves who right?" Don asked.

"My husband bought Theresa a year ago, to help keep the weeds down out back. Cory has never been that enthusiastic about having her."

Don asked the kid what he had against goats.

Cory leaned back against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. "Goats are fine, in their place."

"In their place?"

"I don't have anything against wild mountain goats," Cory said. "There's pastoral cultures in some parts of the world that still depend on their goat herds for subsistence. That's totally fine with me."

Don's face was beginning to darken. "So?"

"So the mountain lion is a native here. The goat's not."

"Cory's into native species," Susan explained.

Don didn't say anything. A quick glance at that darkening face told me there was a fight going on behind it. One voice urged him to give this little pipsqueak a good chewing out while another reminded him of his semi-official position and counseled restraint. Susan took advantage of the lull to nudge the discussion back onto the main track.

"So it definitely was a mountain lion," she said. "Where do we go from here?"

Don told her a couple of people from the department would have to come over and snoop around for a while, just to make sure he and I weren't imagining that a lion killed her goat. "After that," he said, "it's up to you."

"So we do have choices."

"That's right. There's a depredation allowance in the law that gives you the right to have this one taken since it killed your goat. You can, but you don't have to."

Susan tilted her head and ran a hand back through her thick hair. "Taken *away*, you mean?"

“No, killed,” Cory said, and Susan’s eyes swung from Don to Cory, then back to Don.

“That’s correct,” Don said.

“There’s no way to remove it without killing it?”

Don told her that had been tried, without much success. “There have been a couple cases where a lion wandered into some neighborhood and treed, and they managed to hit it with a dart. Problem is, they take the thing up into the little bit of wilderness that’s left in this state, they let it go, and within a day or two it’s either been killed by the cat whose territory they let it out on, or it’s been chased onto the next piece of territory, where it either gets killed or driven off again because all the territory is spoken for. That’s why the cat was walking through the suburbs in the first place.”

“Because he has no territory?” Susan said, her eyebrows drawn together with sympathy and concern.

“That’s right, yeah. This cat that killed your goat, I guarantee it’s a young male, too old to stay with his mother anymore and too young and weak to take a piece of turf from some dominant male. There’s just not enough turf to go around. The voters have decided to protect mountain lions in this state. At the same time, people are crowding into the animal’s habitat.” Don pointed out back with his thumb. “This cat? He wouldn’t be hanging around so close to people if he didn’t have to. So let’s say you move him. Chances are he’s dead in a week. But what if he survives, what if he keeps bouncing around like a pinball until he reaches the suburbs again? He’s got to eat. So maybe he goes after another goat. Maybe a sheep or a dog. Maybe a little boy or girl. You don’t know.”

“I say let him kill all the goats and sheep he can,” Cory said.

“Why not?” Don said, sneering. “And all the joggers, too, eh?”

“Hey, sure. Make people think twice before they move here. Keep down the crowds.”

The smile appeared on my face before I could think to fight it back. In my office the day after the jogger died, I had made the same remark to Don. The smirk he slid me showed that he remembered too.

I could have sworn that Susan was also suppressing a smile when she told Cory to quit stirring the pot. Then she turned to Don. "Now, how soon can someone from the Department of Wildlife get here?"

"An hour or so," Don said. "They'll want to get right on this. If you want it taken, I mean."

"We don't," Cory said, looking at his mother, who had turned to the sliding glass door and was gazing out. "Mom, tell him we don't."

For half a minute nobody said anything. Then Cory clomped over to Susan. "Mom, what are you *waiting* for? You don't want to have the mountain lion *killed*."

Susan spoke to the sliding glass door. "Personally, I would like for it to be taken away. But Mr. Mackey just explained that that's not really an option."

"Great," Cory said, "so bring in the hounds. Let's have us a big ole lion hunt," he said in a broad hick accent.

Don's color plunged toward deepest crimson. "In point of fact, hunting dogs wouldn't be used in this situation. There are too many homes packed in here, too many roads."

Cory threw his hands in the air. "So poison it, then, whatever. There's a lot of ways to skin a cat."

"Cory," Susan said, turning back to the middle of the kitchen, "*please*."

Cory stepped up and spoke right into her face. "You just said we had to call these guys to check things out. You never said anything about killing the mountain lion."

She closed her eyes.

"Wait a minute," Cory said, taking hold of her shoulders. "*He* told you to have it killed, didn't he? That's why he called back, the dick."

She didn't open her eyes or move.

"He *told* you to have it killed," he said in a quiet, marveling voice. "Mister Dickhead lost his fucking goat, and he wants the culprit to pay."

"Cory," she said, "don't call him that."

"You know what makes me sick?" Cory said, his pitch and his volume climbing now. "What makes me sick is it's his own fault for bringing the miserable goat here in the first place. Do you think he'd ever admit that? Of course he wouldn't. He's never wrong. He's never guilty. But somebody has to be, don't they?"

He let go of Susan's shoulders and began to laugh. "Wait!" he said, then broke up laughing again. "What am I doing? I should be thankful, shouldn't I? For once it's not Cory, the lazy shit. For once it's not Cory, the spoiled turd, who's to blame for every single thing that goes wrong in this fucking house. Thank you, Mr. Mountain Lion! Thank you!"

Susan stood absolutely motionless, her eyes still closed, as her son wheeled and stormed out of the kitchen. After the front door slammed Don and I exchanged glances, shrugged our shoulders at the same time. Then I pulled the pad out of my breast pocket and scribbled down the number of the department. She already had the number, but it was all I could think to do.

"Here," I said, stepping over to Susan. "Maybe you'd like to think things over a while. Give the department a call if and when you're ready." She took the paper from me and apologized for Cory.

When we reached the front door, she apologized again, thanked us for coming. At the bottom of the stairs I turned to look at her. I guess I was expecting embarrassment to show on her face, some kind of shame for the private things we had just witnessed. But as she stood at the top of the porch steps, looking off in the direction Cory had gone, her eyes were steady and dry. Their corners crinkled as she observed that some extra territory would be a big help.

Don was talkative for the first couple miles after we left the house, sharing with me a few of his personal views on how Cory

might be better managed. I listened patiently until his color lightened to a shade of red that I judged to be less than lethal. Then I asked him to pull into the next 7-11 we saw. I needed something pink to pour into my stomach. It had begun to boil again.

WEATHER

MY STOMACH WAS STILL ACTING EVIL when Don dropped me off at home. It was lunchtime, but all I wanted was to lie down awhile. Kyle had the bad luck of complicating this plan. The door to his new office faced the door to the bedroom, and as I passed he gave me a cheerful hello, asking how I was getting along with my EnCompass. I confessed that I'd loaned it to Don.

"Good thinking," he said, leaning against the doorframe. "Next he'll be wanting to buy one." He asked if I wanted company for lunch.

"Actually, I was going to lie down awhile."

"What, your stomach giving you trouble?"

He answered my look of annoyance by explaining that Jean had told him about my stomach problem. What he wanted to know was if there was anything at all he could do to help me out with it. He'd be glad to bring me something to drink or eat. If I wanted he could get in touch with his mom.

I told him not to do anything for me and then shut the bedroom door in his face.

Sometimes you get caught in the rain without an umbrella or a waterproof jacket. When that happens you turn up your collar and hunch your shoulders and maybe hold a newspaper above your head, trying to protect yourself. But if there's anything to the rain, and if you have any distance to go, you soon reach a point where these meager measures become useless. And then it's best to just accept that you're going to get wet.

There was no kind of gear to protect me from the personal weather I knew would be coming after what I had just witnessed

at Cory's. And so it was in a spirit of acceptance that I now lay down and let myself steep in Edward's last summer.

He was eighteen. He had just finished high school, he was "taking time off" before applying to college, and it didn't look to me like hanging on at home was doing him any good. All summer he'd been running around with his high school pals. He would turn up at home every few days to sleep off the last party and bum money from his mother for the next one. He had no job, no real plans, and (I felt) no right to expect us to feed and fund him while he avoided the future and shirked present responsibilities and squandered all his energy having a good time. On this, as on most things touching our son, June disagreed with me. Lying there, I could hear our old bedtime arguments, as familiar as the catechism to a Catholic.

Charlie, he's been in school for twelve straight years, or thirteen. Let him play.

He's been playing since he could crawl. Shouldn't he be ready to try something else?

You act like it's all fun and games with him. It's not. He'd like to have a plan. He'd like to know what he wants from life. I'm sure he'd like to have a father who didn't think he was worthless.

One day he might wish he'd had a mother who expected something from him.

Right, then he'd be perfect—a tough guy, just like his dad.

It's not about being like me. It's about being himself. Who is he? What is he?

Try asking him. He might tell you.

How can he tell me if he doesn't know? How can he find out if you don't let him?

If I hadn't known this track so well I'd have expected to hear myself start bragging about the five miles I used to walk to school every morning. I admit I could be boorish. And yet I did have evidence to back up the arguments I made that summer. Between Edward and me things had been strained for ages, but that didn't mean all was harmonious between Edward and his

mom. She claimed I was blind, and maybe in some ways I was. But not so blind I failed to see the way he rolled his eyes when she asked what he was thinking. The way he would stand up and walk out of the room when she was in the middle of telling him something. And once, when she was hovering over him trying to stick a thermometer in his mouth, the way he barked and batted her hand away.

I confess I felt somewhat vindicated, and not all that surprised, when at the end of the summer he appeared at the dinner table one night and told us about his plan to go up to the Sierras for a month.

At first I thought he was talking about another party, one of his gang whose family had a ski cabin they were going to use. "Who you going with?" I asked him.

"No one. I'll get somebody to drop me off up there."

"Where'll you stay?"

"I'll figure that out once I get up there. I'm going to make a shelter and forage for all my food. I got this book that explains all about living off the land."

First I fought to keep down a loud chorus of I-told-you-so's—some aimed at June, whose clinging had driven him to devise this caper, and some at Edward, who for years had been turning down my invitations to do outdoor things together. Then I set about silencing my more serious doubts, reluctant to quell the kid's initiative—even if it did seem misguided.

"You sure you need to go for a whole month?" I asked him.

"What's the use of going for a shorter time than that?"

"You could take a week to try it out, see how it goes. If you like it, go for a longer time later on."

"A week is nothing. It's too short."

"When you're foraging, seven days probably seems like a hell of a long time."

June said, "What if you couldn't find anything to eat?"

Edward rolled his eyes.

I said to June, "That's what the book's for."

“But going out into the woods with nothing to eat, no tent. That’s dangerous. Isn’t it, Charlie?”

Dangerous, maybe. Dumb, definitely. But I didn’t say it. I had started to get a feel for what was happening here. It was a new thing, Edward and I on one side, June on the other. For as long as I could remember I’d been the odd one out. Let June read those lines for a while, I said to myself. See how she likes them.

“Dangerous?” I said. “It’s dangerous to drive your car to the supermarket.”

“At least I know how to drive. And if I get hurt, or sick, God forbid, I can drive myself to the doctor.”

“Mom,” Edward said, “how can I learn anything without *doing* it?”

I kept a straight face. “He’s got a point.”

“I don’t expect it to be *easy*. If it was, I wouldn’t want to do it. Everything I do is easy. I’m sick of it.”

She opened her mouth to answer but he stood up and threw his napkin on the table. “I’m sick of this town. I’m sick of this house. I’m sick of you thinking I’m sick.” He wheeled and stormed out of the kitchen.

“I don’t care what you say,” June told me later on in bed, “I know it’s dangerous. What if he got hurt all alone out there? What if he got sick?”

“Those are legitimate questions. They’re not reasons to stop an adult from doing what he wants to do.”

“He’s no adult. He’s a kid.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the draft board.”

Over the next couple of weeks I lowered my shoulder against the doors of her mind and tried to open them to what Edward was doing. I think my persistence surprised her a little. In all our years together I had thrown a few fits like the one I threw during the dress-up show, but most of the time I deferred to her when it came to raising the kids. She had convinced me early on that growing up motherless had left me with a skewed sense of things. Fair enough. But if I lacked expertise on how mothers ought to behave

with young kids, my grandma left me with some very definite views on how they ought *not* to behave with grown ones. When I arrived at my grandma's house, at age seven, two of the four adults living there were sons in their thirties. Neither of them ever lived anywhere else. One night before we went to sleep I reminded June about my uncle Norman, the nasty hypochondriac she'd met a few times before we moved west. "He was Grandma's favorite," I told her. And then I told her about Uncle Dale, who had drunk himself to death by the time I was twelve. "Dale was the baby."

"Don't compare them to Edward," she said. "That's a whole different world."

"Yes and no. The point is, sticking around home has its dangers too."

I considered reminding her of some of the hostile sparks Edward had been giving off in recent weeks, but when I looked at her I saw I didn't need to. Her eyes had filled up with tears. "He hates me, doesn't he? I know it."

I took her hand and held it on my chest. "He doesn't hate you. It's like when Sadie was two and she used to push us away and say, 'I can do it *myself*.' Only now it's an eighteen-year-old doing the pushing, so he pushes harder." She turned toward me and lay her cheek on her hand on my chest. This sent a wave of warm feeling all the way down to the soles of my feet. When the wave came back up it carried the idea that Edward going away might be good for us, some practice for what lay ahead. It was the first time I'd seen that side of this thing. I mentioned it to her.

The way she said, "Oh, *Charlie*," and the way she opened up and clung to me showed that she too had glimpsed the change that awaited us, had been stirred by the size of what she saw. Stirred, and I think torn. She liked the idea but was scared of what it might mean after all the years we'd spent cobbling together a relationship that was not pretty, not at all sound in structure, but known—and in that sense safe. Edward's adventure would be ours also, the first steps into unknown territory. Making love that night, we were as awkward and excited as a couple of novices.

The rest of the time Edward spent getting ready was good time, time I couldn't help but remember fondly, in spite of what ended up happening. Edward was around the house a lot, studying up on his survival skills and gathering the gear he needed. After work I'd help him with the packing and we would pore over maps together, looking for the place most apt to put him to the test he wanted. Later on, in bed, June and I would discuss his plans—she would list her doubts, I would try my best to assuage them. And then like a couple of giddy alchemists we would lie there combining our fear for Edward with our hopes for him, we would mix that with the hopes and fears we had for ourselves, and it seemed every night what we came up with was a powerful love potion.

By the time Edward was ready to head out October was right around the corner, and I'd started to worry a little about the weather. In general the early fall is a lovely time in the Sierras. But some years the hard weather hits ahead of schedule—as the Donner Party found out in 1846. Weather wasn't on June's list of worries, and I didn't bring it up with her—I'd thrown my weight behind this expedition and it was too late to back away now. Anyway the risks didn't seem all that drastic to me, weighed against the potential rewards. Injury and sickness I refused on principle to worry about. In my opinion Edward wouldn't have needed to prove himself like this if June hadn't used injury and sickness as excuses to keep him from doing things she thought were dangerous his whole life. I figured he would last a week at the most. Foraging sounds like a neat idea until you bust your ass all day scratching around for a bunch of roots and seeds that don't taste very good and don't fill you up. If hunger didn't drive him back to civilization, the tedium of finding food would. Either way, I planned to do all I could to help him look on his time in the woods not as a failed bid for independence, but as the start of something he had the rest of his life to build on.

The afternoon of his departure the three of us were oddly fond and tender together. That evening June and I made love more

gravely than ever before. There was a grim kind of zeal, a fierce patience in this loving, as if with each thrust of our bodies we were hoisting a heavy stone together, placing it in some magical wall we believed would protect our son. It was fervent, if not really intimate. It was like prayer. And it kept on that way. During the day I would try to talk her out of her worries, doing all I could to convince her my predictions were right—he'd be up there a week, I told her, and when he came back we'd have to do our best to make him feel like he'd achieved something. In the evening we would go to bed early and set to work on our wall.

Between the talking and the loving, it looked to me like we were getting somewhere when at the end of the first week June started speaking about Edward as though he would be home soon. She turned down a couple of tennis games because she was planning to get a call from him saying he needed us to drive up and get him. When I came home from work, or inside from the garden or yard, she would tell me he hadn't called before I even had a chance to ask.

But that first week ended and no call. In the middle of the next week October began. I did my best to stay upbeat, saying to June that we'd sold Edward short, ten days and still not a peep from him.

I was looking at the weather page one day at the end of week two and saw a chain of storms tracking toward us from out in the Pacific. This was at breakfast. I showed June the satellite picture and said it looked like the kid was going to get wet. "Good thing I convinced him to take rain gear."

She said what I'd been trying not to think. "What if it snows?"

"It won't. Winter's a long way off."

"Anything can happen up there, you always say."

"So what do you think we should do? Send him a telegram and tell him to come home?"

When the six o'clock news came on that day we were both in front of the TV. Announcing the first storms of the season, the weatherman was jolly and smug, as if he had ordered them.

He jabbered away for a while without giving us any clear idea of whether the storms would be cold enough to drop snow on the mountains: the first one was still a couple of days offshore, and he probably didn't know yet. That's what I explained to June.

"What if it does snow?" she said.

"We know the general area where he is. We can call the rangers up and tell them to go in and get him."

"Why don't we call them up right now."

"And say what? There's a storm coming, go find our son?"

"Charlie, it's dangerous."

"Not if it's a rainstorm. Then it's just wet. They don't send out rescue parties for wet campers."

Which is basically what they told me a day and a half later, when to soothe her nerves I called. I told the ranger on the phone that my concern was not rain but snow. He said snow wasn't likely, but even if it did snow, it wouldn't snow much—not enough to keep the kid from walking out. This turned out to be true. That first storm only dropped six inches of powder. It fell at night.

It was the second storm that scared me. This one was as chilly as the first and far fiercer than they predicted. It rode roughshod across the valley, dropping two inches of cold rain on us before it slammed into the Sierras and bellied there from Friday evening to Saturday night, too heavy to crawl over the jagged peaks. Most of that Saturday it was clear in the valley. I was out in the yard gathering up the leaves and twigs and other debris the storm had tossed around when June came out and went to the edge of the fence to gaze east. From our hilltop we had an open view of the Sierras. I went over to her and we stood together watching the heavy bank of clouds that brooded over the mountains like God Himself deciding our fate.

June looked ragged—her face as gray and creased as a piece of newsprint that's been wadded and then smoothed.

"Shall we try calling again?" I asked her.

"It's no use."

“We might get through, you can’t tell. It might be letting up enough for crews to start working.”

“We can’t do anything.”

“June.”

Our bedroom rites had darkened the past two nights, to the point where in the light of day we had been avoiding each other’s gaze. But now she looked me square in the eyes. “We had eighteen years to do something, Charlie. We didn’t do it.”

“What are you saying?”

She looked off toward the mountains. “Don’t pretend we can wash our hands of it because he’s legally an adult.”

I reached for her wrist but she pulled it away. “Who’s to say he’s not perfectly safe and sound right now? I’m sure he is,” I lied.

“Maybe he is, maybe he’s not. That doesn’t change anything between you and me.”

She looked me in the eyes again. “How did we manage it so long?”

The third storm passed over us three nights later. It was warmer than the first two storms and its rains melted away a good deal of the snow that had fallen in the mountains. By the time the call came from the Nevada County sheriff’s office it was clear again and colder, and Sadie had come home from Long Beach, where she was going to college.

The three of us drove up to Truckee and identified Edward’s body for the medical examiner. Then a stooped, skinny sheriff’s deputy told us what had happened, based on what they’d been able to piece together. The first storm hadn’t caused Edward any problems. Probably he’d slept through it in the shelter he’d built by heaping pine boughs across the open space between a boulder and a fallen tree. The deputy said that had been a pretty snug spot. When he woke up the next morning and saw the snow, Edward had sense enough to know that he should break camp and cut his adventure short. He started to hike out. By the time the next storm started to boil up over the ridge behind him, he was too far from

the shelter to think about going back. Anyhow, he was making good time walking through the powder, he figured he could get out to the road before the new snow had enough time to slow him down. That's where he was wrong.

The blizzard whited out everything from noon that day till late the next night. No rescue party could go out while the snow fell because it was too thick to see or even move through. When it finally stopped falling they spent a long time digging themselves out. So that Edward had been exposed more than twenty-four hours by the time they started looking for him, and more than seventy-two by the time they spotted the red bandana I'd given him to dip in water and wear around his neck if he got hot while out foraging. He had tied it to a limb above the boulder he had taken shelter under.

Whenever I look back on that afternoon in Truckee (I looked back on it at least twenty times a day the first year after it happened), I can't remember seeing Edward's body laid out on the metal table at the morgue. I remember the table, I remember the medical examiner with his handlebar mustache, and I remember the sheriff's deputy describing how they found Edward curled up around himself, frozen in his fight to keep warm. That's how I've always seen him, huddled deep down in a womb of rock, wrapped into a final fetal ball.

Sadie withdrew from school that semester. She and June and I spent a couple of months wandering around the house, three molecules missing the one element that would bind us into a compound with some solid identity and purpose. Christmas came and grimly went. Against her will, we sent Sadie back to school. That freed June and me to draw up papers and divide the spoils. It was with immense relief, and more immense shame at feeling such relief, that I went bouncing about for the next two years, doing my work but otherwise courting oblivion, letting myself drift through a sonless universe.

PAYING ATTENTION

WHEN I FIRED VERA UP AND HEADED FOR THE FREEWAY, I had no clear idea of where I was going. I just had to be out of that bedroom. If I stayed there, I knew I would be taking another trip down the stretch of memory lane that I'd just traveled. Once was enough. If Kyle hadn't been on the premises I might have opted to roam around the house awhile. But he was there, and his company was about as welcome to me right then as a kick in the ribs. To avoid an accidental encounter with him I slipped out through the bedroom's sliding glass door.

The afternoon rush was still more than an hour away and the traffic moved well. I reached Old Olives inside thirty minutes, pulling up in front of Val's house without ever announcing to myself that I had decided to go there. Without thought or hesitation, like a salmon going back to the source, I climbed the front steps and passed through the two doorways between the outside world and the inner sanctum. I found the red-bearded colossus seated in his usual spot, paler, bigger, and balder even than I remembered him. I walked over to him and waited, standing still, staring across at two eyelids that looked like dried apricots. They seemed to be staring back.

When the lids lifted the blue of the eyes surprised me, as if I hadn't seen it before.

"You may not remember me," I said after a moment of stunned silence. "I was here a few weeks ago..."

"Yes?" His tenor surprised me too, the pure intensity of it—like the sun shooting free of the clouds at the end of an overcast day.

“Yeah,” I said, “one of the things that happened that day, you went to touch my stomach and I batted your hand away.” The eyes gave no sign of recognition or memory. “Well, I’ve been thinking about that ever since because my stomach—it’s been bothering me.”

“Bothering?” he said.

“Sharp pains, cramps, flutters—not all the time. The thing is, I’m ready for you to lay hands on it, if you think that’ll help.” I undid the top three buttons on my shirt and then stopped. “Should I take my clothes off?”

“As you wish.”

I stripped down to my shorts, folding my clothes as I took them off, stacking them in a small pile to one side. “What can you do about a stomach like this?” I said. “I’m wondering about the options.”

“There is always a doctor,” Val said.

“Doctor? I thought you were against all that.”

The apricots dropped, then rose. “You did.”

“Doctors give you pills,” I said, pointing a thumb at my stomach. “I don’t think they’ve got one to deal with the commotion in here.”

I gave him a moment, but he didn’t say anything.

“That’s why I came to you. I’m curious what you can do for me.”

A full minute passed, maybe more. It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut. Finally he said, “It would be useful to know the source of the trouble.”

“Look,” I said, “no offense, but I hope you don’t mean spirits. Hocus pocus, black magic, that’s not my cup of tea. My background’s in the sciences,” I explained. “I believe in rational inquiry, objective analysis, all that. I just don’t trust doctors. A bunch of bandits, the whole tribe.”

Again I waited, wishing he’d nod or something, egg me on a little. I watched his chest, checking for signs of respiration. God, did he sit still. His quiet changed the very pressure of the air

around us, creating a vacuum that seemed to suck the words right out of me.

“No, I don’t trust the doctors with what I’ve got here. I go in there, they’ll give me some pill. Who knows, they might decide to cut me open. None of that’s going to cure it, if you ask me. Not all the way.”

He waited, not even blinking.

“You mentioned the source,” I said. “Well, what do you make of this? It seems like lately, whenever it acts up, I’m thinking about my son. Or I end up thinking about him, remembering him. He died twelve or thirteen years ago. I know you’re supposed to deal with these things, but I didn’t.”

I could have sworn that he swayed forward slightly. Encouraged, I asked if he thought there was anything to that.

“Your thoughts are the important ones,” he said. “It’s your stomach, after all.”

“Maybe, but you’re the one with the trick hands. I was thinking you might be able to feel around a little bit, tell me what’s what.”

“You can do it,” he said.

“Sure I can.”

“Simply pay attention.”

“Hey,” I said, “easy as that.”

“Paying attention is easy?”

I shook my head. “All right, *touché*. So what am I supposed to pay attention to?”

“What you notice.”

“What I notice. Should I close my eyes?” I asked.

“As you wish.”

I closed them. Luckily I didn’t pause to think how dumb I looked, standing there in my undershorts with my hands spread out on my belly and my eyes shut tight. I tried to pay attention.

“What I notice, eh. How about a gurgle?” I said, feeling playful all of a sudden. “How about another gurgle? How about a long kind of a groan?”

I opened my eyes. “How we doing?”

Val said, “Have you ever paid close attention before?”

“Sure, I guess I have. How do you define *close*?”

“How would you define it?” he said.

“Let’s see. I used to do laboratory work, my training’s in microbiology. I had a kind of knack for seeing things through the microscope, tiny things.”

This time he did sway forward—I was sure enough to bet on it.

“Okay,” I said, “*close* attention.” I closed my eyes again. I saw what I usually see before falling asleep—a bunch of bright shapes against a dark background. I began to pay attention to these but then I noticed something going on with my feet, and Val had told me to pay attention to what I notice. They felt warm, clammy, cramped—like my shoes were too tight. Should I report this to Val? I thought I would but then I noticed something else, a feeling like clothing on all my limbs, as if I were all dressed again. Overdressed, in fact. I was hot. Cramped. Uncomfortable, but it seemed very important to keep still, stay in the same position and pay attention to what I was hearing. An outdoor noise, the sound of wind in the trees, strong wind tossing the branches back and forth, pulling a gate loose from its latch, rattling the windows in their frames. What I listened for was in that wind, under it, using the wind for camouflage, hiding its own sounds under the sounds of the wind. What I listened for was a lurking thing, it was a killing thing and I was the next one to kill. It was patient. It knew I was listening, knew I was all dressed and ready to run. And so it lurked, waiting for its chance, waiting for me to stop listening, drift off, let down my defenses. Or maybe it knew about the terror, the way the terror trickled thickly into my blood, the way it gummed my joints, molding me into this stiff listening shape, this shape that felt more permanent every minute, like plaster drying, like a fossil forming, so that even if I did hear it now, even if it did come after me, I might be too stiff, too stuck to flee, the easiest of prey.

DINNER

ONE OF THE MANY THINGS THE DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE does for the citizens of California is to stock certain of the state's lakes with trout. This stocking is a mundane business in the big lakes that are easily accessed by trucks. But there are small mountain lakes that have to be stocked by plane, and that operation is interesting enough that I've gone along for the ride a few times just for the experience. Imagine you are a fingerling trout. One day you and a bunch of your contemporaries are scooped up out of the cement pond you've lived your whole brief lives in and transferred to a dark, crowded, vibrating tank for a couple of hours. And then with no warning this tank opens, drops you and your brothers and sisters and cousins into an element you can't swim through. You just flutter. Light is all around you. Strange currents carry you and you can't breathe. Though you don't know this, your small fish brain is a blessing to you now, because if you could actually contemplate what is happening to you the fear and the strangeness would probably kill you. At length you splash down into new water. Breath comes back. You can swim.

Looking back on my drive home from Val's that evening brings those fluttering mid-air fingerlings to mind. I too was out of my element, moved by strange currents, helpless to comprehend what was happening to me. I was all dressed again, I was in Vera and heading down an all-too-familiar road, but part of me hadn't returned from the place Val had led me into. Although it felt very familiar I couldn't say where I'd been. And I still wasn't sure how I'd come out of there, only that my second session with the Bald

One had ended like my first, with me hurriedly dressing and anxious to get away.

So all the way across town I fluttered. And when I pulled into the driveway at home, Kyle was there to help me splash down. He was upon me before I had a chance to open the car door.

“Just wanted to warn you,” he said.

“About?”

“Mom kind of panicked when she came home and you weren’t here. I think it’s my fault. I told her I thought your stomach was acting up. She was sure you were in the emergency ward somewhere. She’s been calling all the hospitals.”

“Great.”

Kyle’s shrug of apology disappeared almost as fast as it formed. “This kind of stuff wouldn’t have to happen if you carried your EnCompass. Remember, you’re on our Clan Plan. Mom could have picked up your signal and she’d have known exactly where you were. Everything would have been cool between you and Mom hours ago.”

With each step I took between the driveway and the house my thirst for bourbon grew. When I walked in Jean was busy disengaging from the emergency room nurse she’d had hunting for me, so she couldn’t wave the lemonade pitcher at me as I fixed my drink. She didn’t acknowledge me even after she hung up. The silent treatment has its advantages.

Leaving her at the stove, I went over to my chair to enjoy my beverage, feeling for all the world like a sea captain granted a brief respite between adventures. There was much in my immediate wake that bore thinking about, and rough seas churned up ahead.

Dinner was a quiet affair. My guts had calmed considerably and I ate my stomach-friendly food without the slightest complaint. Jean applied her treatment continuously until the dishes were cleared away and the chamomile tea served. Then the treatment changed, or entered its second phase.

“So you weren’t in the hospital,” she said, gazing down into her tea. “You going to tell me where you were?”

“I went to see a guy. About my stomach.”

Her eyes rose, touched mine, then darted away. “A guy?”

“Not a doctor, if that’s what you mean.”

She blew at the steam rising from her cup. “I give up. What kind of guy is he?”

“I can’t say for sure.”

“Well, what does he do?”

“Sits, mostly.”

“He sits.”

“He talks, too. Not that much.”

“He sits and he talks.”

“The last time I went there he also checked me over with his hands.”

Jean was quiet a minute. Red flames of agitation licked upward from the base of her neck. “Charlie,” she said, looking at me again, “are you *trying* to upset me?”

“No, why?”

Her dismissive head-shake was what third-graders saw when they tried to give her the run-around. “This *guy* of yours, does he have a title?”

“No title that I’m aware of.”

“Are you *aware* of what I’ve been through this afternoon?”

“I saw Kyle on my way in.”

“Correction, not just this afternoon. This month. This *year*. Do you realize what you’re putting me through?”

“Dr. Sell-a-book says it’s not honest to blame others for our problems.”

“He also says that by taking responsibility for ourselves, we don’t burden those close to us.”

“Have I *asked* you to do anything for me?”

“No,” she said, “you’ve forced me to by doing nothing yourself.”

“What I do you consider nothing.”

The flames on her neck grew brighter. “Maybe if you told me about it I could credit it.”

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"You went to see a guy today. What guy? What happened?"

I gave this some thought. "I'm not sure."

"You're not."

"Look, if I could be more specific than that, I would."

"You *are* trying to upset me."

"I know you'd rather see me taking pills or letting them cut me open so they can look around."

"No, Charlie. I'd rather see you quit screwing around and confront this thing head-on."

"Right. Be self-enlightened, not frightened. Face fear's full bluff. It's that simple."

"I didn't say it was simple."

"Simpleminded, anyway."

"Charlie, that's not nice."

"No," I said, standing up with my heavy tumbler, "and neither is this." I threw the glass against the mirror on the opposite wall and it shattered, leaving an ugly diagonal crack that cut my reflection in two.

Again Jean fell back on her classroom experience. For two or three hours she'd been panic-stricken, all because she didn't know where I was. But when I started to damage property she played it perfectly cool, didn't even stand up or gasp.

"You know what else isn't nice?" I said, excited by my violence. "It's not nice being a Bereaved Bachelor, which is what I was when I stumbled into your life. Now I'm the Menopausal Male, or no, wait, the Aging, Raging Male. It's not nice having labels stuck on your forehead. I'm sure it was tough for you when Joe disappeared, when your dad dropped dead before you had a chance to tell him what a son of a bitch he was. Those kinds of surprises are the shits. But that's no reason to try and take away my ability to surprise you, which is what you do with all that freaking research. You're always a step ahead of me, always ready for the worst I can throw at you. Even this—I throw a fucking glass, break a mirror, and it's no surprise really. Just acting like

the Aging, Raging Male that I am. Christ, what's it to you if I *do* die tomorrow? You've been preparing yourself for two years."

I quit the dining room and stormed down the hall to the bedroom. I stomped around the room for a while like a man in the midst of a desperate search. What I was looking for was a way to surprise her. I felt like breaking a few more things, but that was no good; it would just be acting in character. I wanted so badly to flabbergast her that it seemed my life depended on it. I stalked and swerved, feeling more trapped every time I passed the foot of the bed. Finally I gave it up, went to my closet and pulled down an overnight bag, then to my chest of drawers and started throwing whatever I could get my hands on into the bag.

When it was full (of socks and underwear only, it turned out) I glanced at the door and saw Jean standing in the jamb.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Why don't *you* tell *me*. You're the expert on my behavior."

"Charlie," she said in a voice her pupils never hear, "I'm not trying to trap you. I wanted you to *want* to stay."

"Jesus, not the marriage thing again. I thought we were past that."

Her look said I knew very well we weren't.

"Jean, you and me? This was never about marriage."

"Oh yes it was," she said through sudden sobs. "It was about *your* marriage that failed, *your* son that died, and you would never let it be about me and you and Kyle."

"Kyle was your idea," I reminded her. "I told you from the start you didn't want me getting near him, with my track record. But you were going to make us all whole again, weren't you? Everybody would get what they were missing."

"I kept hoping you'd get over it if I helped you, but you haven't. You're just as stuck now as you were when we met."

"In that case," I said, "you'll be glad we never got married. That'll make this easier on both of us."

I picked up my bag and she took a couple of steps toward me, lifting her wet, streaked face up to mine. "Speak for yourself."

PART THREE

VERITY

WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN YOU'RE SIXTY-TWO AND SLEEP-DEPRIVED? When you've walked out on a woman for the first time in your life and then spent the whole night driving. When you've parked down the street from your daughter's house at dawn, waited for your son-in-law to leave for work, and then found out that she has no time for you this morning—has to deliver a baby, and baby's can't wait. Neither can old men, not very well anyway.

So what do you do, Old Man? Well, you go someplace and have a cup of coffee. You sort out your thoughts, consider your options. You kick yourself for retiring so rashly. On a morning like this it would be nice to have an office to retreat to.

So, you regroup, you assess, you regret. And then you go to the zoo.

I admit this was a desperate decision. Still, it made sense from a certain point of view. A few weeks before, I'd actually been invited to visit the zoo. The invitation had come in the mail on one of those days after I rescued the mountain lion cub, when people who'd seen my picture on the front page of the *Bee* were still calling me up to celebrate my fame. The cub had ended up in the custody of the Olives Zoo. Someone there had sent me a snapshot of it and had written on the back of the picture that I ought to come out for a visit. I would have done this sooner if not for my bad memories of that particular zoo.

When Sadie and Edward were small I used to let them drag me there once in a while. What a depressing place. It sat on the northeast corner of Old Olives, spreading down from the northern face of a little oak-covered hill across a flat acre of ground between

that hillside and the bank of a creek. The geniuses who designed the zoo had paved the whole hillside with cement. All the cages had cement floors; they used chain-link fencing for the ceilings and walls. Inside these sterile cells most of the animals sulked continually, dozing their days away. I could never decide if they were resigned to the life or just stupefied by the odor of their habitat, a grim mixture of bleach and dung that blanketed the hillside even on windy days. A black bear named Smoky was the main attraction back then, I guess because of his size. His personality was morose and his coat mangy. Big bald patches riddled his hide. They didn't have many other wild animals, just this wolf that trotted around the perimeter of his cage, whining constantly; some raccoons; an odorless skunk; a possum or two; maybe a bobcat. Down below, in the flat area between the foot of the hill and the creek, they had a little pasture with ducks and geese and chickens in it, also a cow and pony. I think we stopped going after I bought Sadie a pony of her own. That was at least twenty-five years ago.

What a difference a quarter-century can make. The first change I noticed, passing through the zoo gate this morning, was that the cement was gone. My feet trod on a soft layer of woodchips. Somebody had sprayed these with water recently; their smell was sharp in my nostrils, a strong evergreen scent. Gone too were all those yards and yards of chain-link fencing. The first cage I came to, which housed three gray foxes, had a frame of stout wooden posts and beams that supported walls of dark green wire. A honeysuckle vine grew from the dirt floor of the cage, winding its tendrils up one end and all the way across the roof. I don't know if these little touches made the foxes feel any better, but to me they were a pleasant surprise. The plaque at the base of the cage explained that Myrna, the three-legged fox, had been rescued from the trap that maimed her. She'd been pregnant at the time; the two other foxes in the cage were Myrna's pups, who wouldn't have survived in the wild without her.

With a peacock shadowing my every move I strolled about the oak hillside, past other wood-beamed, vine-shaded enclosures,

checking out the animals and reading the harrowing stories on their plaques. The two wolves were actually wolf-dogs, the fruits of a forced miscegenation that hadn't pleased the customers of some outlaw breeder. The coyotes were rescued orphans: they'd been found and saved after a sheep farmer shot their mother. The black bear, Alfonse, was the veteran of a failed circus. His coat was in pretty good shape. He was a dreamy bear. For the five minutes I watched him he lay on his back without moving, his hind legs spread wide.

From Alfonse I traveled uphill to the largest enclosure, where the mountain lions lived. Laurel and Joshua were brother and sister. Searchers had gone out and found them after their mother was run over on a desert highway. They were full-grown now, big and sleek. Near the middle of their enclosure was a little pond. They lay beyond it in the grass, not far from each other. Laurel, the female, was eating grass the way housecats will. Joshua was cleaning himself with a pink scaly tongue. He was a great big handsome beast. His coat was sleek and tawny all over, except for the belly, where the hair turned white and shaggy. Dark vertical stripes split the gold balls of his eyes. The tip of his tail was black. He was absorbed in his grooming, calm, but also keenly alert. His ears moved singly, as if each was following a different conversation. The last section of his regal tail waved almost constantly, tracing shapes that looked like the outlines of thoughts. Now and then he would lift his pink triangular nose and read the breeze.

This was a nice lair the lions had—up out of the fray. I decided to sit down on one of the two benches near their enclosure. It was a good spot, tucked under oak branches that let in just enough of the late October sun to warm me. The peacock, who had escorted me up here, perched on a low branch watching me for a while. Then he flapped back down to earth and walked away, his tale dragging like a rolled carpet behind him. I watched the mountain lions for a few minutes more, letting their lazy mood infect me as the sun soaked through my clothes. My eyelids got heavier and heavier...

I don't know how much time passed before I sensed something near me, another being very close by. I opened my eyes and saw a face facing me from less than an arm's length away. Too groggy to be spooked, I sat there and submitted to this looking over, the way you do when a child checks you out—not averting my eyes, but looking right back into a face all squares. Cheekbones broad and strong, just like the jaws. Nose thick, squat. Even the flecked green eyes were closer to rectangles than ovals. And when the face smiled it showed me two rows of small square teeth, perfectly straight.

A hand came at me and as I rose to shake it my numb legs buckled, throwing me forward. One hand grabbed the hand I'd lifted while the other jammed up against my lunging shoulder to buttress it. The grip was firm, mannish, the skin rough, but the bones beneath the calluses were small, even delicate.

I fell back into the bench, my sleepy heart thudding.

"Shouldn't sleep sitting up," the clipped voice said. "Cuts off the circulation."

I blinked once or twice but said nothing.

"Sorry I startled you, Mr. Sayers. Brook London."

In answer to my questioning look she explained that she knew my face from the picture in the *Bee*. "So you came to visit Verity," this Brook London said.

"Verity?"

"The cub you rescued. That's his name."

"I didn't know."

She stepped back and looked me up and down in that frank way of hers. Even her haircut was squarish, the dark bangs cut in a straight line across her brow, the sides like a hemline hanging an inch or so above the collar of her khaki zookeeper's shirt. Like the shirt, her dark green trousers were several sizes too big.

She squinted. "Mr. Sayers, you feeling all right?"

"No worse than I look," I said, giving candor for candor. "Kind of a tough night."

"Maybe you should lie down and get some shuteye."

"Maybe I should get a second opinion."

She showed me both rows of those square teeth. "Habit of mine. I give a lot of advice. Hey, at least I'm democratic about it. I have advice for everyone, regardless. Tell you what," she said, pointing off toward the foot of the hill, "I live in the cottage down there. My couch isn't half bad for naps."

As I opened my mouth to decline she cut me off. "Took you two weeks to answer my invitation. You think I'd let you just walk away, now that I finally got you in here? One way or another I'm going to put you through the wringer. I could do it right now, but I'd rather not have people saying Brook London deprived a prisoner of sleep."

"Prisoner?"

Again I saw the teeth. "A little zoo humor."

"Ah," I nodded. "About that invitation. How'd you get my address? It's not listed under my name."

"A source," she said, unclipping a big wad of keys from her beltloop and then wiggling one of them off the ring. She tossed a key toward me and my hand jumped to catch it. "Sweet dreams. And be careful down there—try not to break anything." She spun away and hurried off down the path.

The first order of business was to revive my blood-starved legs. A series of heaves and jerks left me standing on these two numb posts, clutching the benchback like the rail of a storm-tossed boat. I assessed the situation. The all-nighter I'd pulled had left me in grim shape. I never functioned well without sleep, not even in college. My system just isn't geared for that. Ever since I'd sat down on the zoo bench fatigue had pooled around me like thick mud. If this zookeeper was pushy, she was also right. I really needed to be supine.

She was also convincing. Clearly she had plans for me. To escape before she carried them out would take more fight than I had in me right now. Besides, where would I escape *to*? As I flipped through the options—Sadie's empty house, my own fouled nest, the side of some quiet road—the key in my hand started to seem

more valuable. When I had enough balance to stand unaided, I set off down the sloped curving path, still impaired, walking with Ahab's jerky gait. I stumped past Alfonse, still lying spread-legged on his back, past the bobcats, the wolf-dogs, the coyotes and the raccoons. Before long I arrived at a fork in the path. To the left was the zoo gate, beyond which the wide world gaped. To the right an empty couch beckoned. I went right, angling by the pasture and the small barn, those odors I remembered from my far-off youth. Down I went into the shaded hollow where the little ginger-brown cottage sat surrounded by cages smaller and cruder than those up at the zoo proper. Dried oak leaves crackled under my feet as I made straight for the door, not pausing to see what lived in the cages.

The air inside the cottage smelled of animal hides. Uncommon shapes lurked at the edges of the dim room I entered. As my eyes adjusted I made out shelves crowded with the skulls of animals, and their bones, tusks, teeth. I looked down and learned I was standing on a bear rug, head still attached. I moved closer to one of the walls and saw that pelts and skins were displayed on it, and the fanned-out tails of large birds. This didn't really alarm me. I was tired. Also, in my hunting days I'd often slept surrounded by the heads and horns of my hosts' trophies. The couch that I lay down on had a tawny hide draped over it. Probably, I thought, a cougar's.

Soon I stopped thinking.

Next thing I knew I was looking across a dim space to a much lighter one, a small room where a woman stood with her back to me in a knee-length terrycloth robe cinched tight around the waist. I didn't know where I was, didn't know whose round calves I was gazing at, but instead of panic I felt nostalgia, some unnamed longing that receded as soon as she turned toward me. Seeing the zookeeper's face, her helmet of dark hair sleek as oiled leather after her shower, I remembered where I was and sat up.

"You *were* tired," she said, flipping off the bathroom light.

"How long did I sleep? Sorry to be in your way."

"This is better, really. Zoo's closed now, so I can show you around with no distractions. Give me a minute to get dressed."

While she was gone I strolled around the room looking at all the feathers and furs and bones. Each item had a little tag affixed to it, bearing a name and number as in an archaeological exhibit.

"Is this the stuff you didn't want me breaking?" I asked when she reappeared in her zoo garb.

"That's right. The body of evidence. Some of it, anyway."

"Evidence?"

"It's not as easy to forget about them when they don't disappear," she said, heading for the door.

We stepped out into the hollow and it was chilly; the whole hillside lay under late-day shadows, which meant I'd slept several hours on the couch. I followed her up the path. In her oversized clothes she was slightly ridiculous, also possibly charming—like a kid dressed in her dad's shirt and pants.

Near the crest of the hill stood a shingled structure that was twice as big as the cottage in the hollow. The first room we entered had two stainless steel industrial sinks, a concrete floor with a drain in the middle, and a strong smell of dog chow and rotting vegetables. "Hold on a minute," she said, yanking open a walk-in freezer. She disappeared into freezing mist as I read from the animals' diets that appeared in columns on the zoo kitchen's chalkboard walls.

Laurel and Joshua, the two adult cougars, were slated for a snack this afternoon. Could this be what my hostess carried in the large plastic bag she brought out of the mist? The bag seemed to droop with the dull weight of frozen flesh.

She led me out of the kitchen and into a narrow, brightly lit room with a counter and a row of glass-doored cupboards on one side. On the other side was a waist-high plastic cage that rested on the floor. She dropped the bag to the floor and pointed at the cage. "Verity's in there."

"Sure," I said, "I'd know that chirp anywhere."

She opened one of the cupboards and pulled out a brown medicine bottle.

“Why Verity?” I said.

“That’s why.”

“What is?”

“Made you wonder, didn’t it?”

I walked over, squatted, and looked through the grilled window at the spotted cub. He opened wide and hissed at me. “I’d know that welcome anywhere, too.”

“Verity knows what he is,” she said, handing me a dropper. She opened the cage door and tossed in a good-sized panda that was bleeding stuffing from various wounds. She closed the door and watched through the grill a minute. “He loves that thing.”

“Tough love, from the looks of it.”

She glanced in again. “Already calming down.”

She stepped aside so I could watch Verity kneading the bear with his claws and fangs—in a very loving way.

When I got out of the way she approached the cage door again, her hands in leather work gloves. She opened the door, ducked through it, then backed out holding Verity, who was still clutching his mama bear. The zookeeper sat on her knees hugging cub and panda tight.

“All right, Charlie,” she said, “from here on out it’s first names. Hit each eye with a couple of drops. We’re fighting conjunctivitis.”

Grown cougars have golden eyes, but Verity’s were blue as a pair of cornflowers. Rage had clarified them on our first meeting, when I invaded his den, but now they were half-clouded with infantile pleasure. Half. And much less than half after I’d squirted them with medicine. He began to twitch and blink and struggle against Brook’s grasp. His jaws sprang open and took the measure of my bare wrist. His hot breath blew clean through my skin, sent through me a charge like the one that had electrified my hands the first time I touched him.

I glanced at Brook, who was smiling. “That’s a wild animal, Charlie.” She put him back in the cage and he began to punish the panda for the offenses I’d committed.

I told her it surprised me, how much he'd grown in a couple of weeks.

"He's a good eater," she said. "Just like his mom."

I must have let a smile escape because she asked if I found something funny.

"I thought you made a joke," I explained.

"I don't blame her for killing that jogger. Do you?"

"Not at all. Cougars will be cougars."

She took off the gloves and tossed them on the counter. "Do the people at COUGAR ALERT know you talk that way, Charlie?"

"What do you know about COUGAR ALERT?"

"Just that they want to repeal the hunting ban, so they're playing politics with what Verity's mother did, trying to convince everybody that mountain lions are greedy for human flesh. As if they gave a damn about public safety."

"What do you know about *me* and COUGAR ALERT?" I said. "What do you *think* you know?"

"I know what I know," she said. "I keep my ears and eyes open. Come on."

She grabbed the meat bag and led me out of the little room, down a hallway and through a door that opened onto the yard of the zoo. We followed the path up to the big lion enclosure and when we reached the bench where I'd fallen asleep before, she told me to wait there. She hiked up to the back of the enclosure where there was a suite of wood-walled rooms much smaller than the lions' main pen. Up there she started sliding wheeled doors back and forth and banging on feed dishes. That got the cats' attention. They jogged toward her.

After she got them closed into one of the smaller spaces, she appeared inside the big enclosure with her meat bag. Today Laurel and Joshua were going to snack on frozen quails. One of the quails she hid up at the top of a wood snag that stood in a front corner of the enclosure. Another she tossed into the pond. Laurel and Joshua seemed to know what was coming. They were starting to snarl and hiss at each other. One of them screamed, giving me gooseflesh.

When Brook was safely outside again she rolled the door back and the cats sprang forward, Joshua first. In a bound-and-a-half he had covered the fifteen yards between the back of the cage and the pond. He jumped right in the water and came out with the quail between his jaws. He sauntered a few steps away, his shaggy white belly swinging and dripping as he went. He was already chomping when Laurel, a more deliberate worker, leapt to the top of a ten foot boulder. She lay her long heavy tail out flat for balance and plucked her first quail off a snag branch. The bird bones cracked like sticks.

By now Brook was beside me again. "You're the only COUGAR ALERT person to answer my invitation so far," she said. "The Friends of the Mountain Lion are more responsive."

"You don't show them this, I hope."

"I feel it's my duty to show them. They raise all this money and do all this work to protect mountain lions from being hunted. They need to remember that mountain lions are hunters, too."

"You're starting to confuse me," I said.

"Why's that?"

"A minute ago you were bad-mouthing COUGAR ALERT. Now you're squaring off against the Friends of the Mountain Lion?"

"This is the way it breaks down," she said, as if she'd been waiting all day for this opportunity. "COUGAR ALERT looks at a mountain lion and sees a villain. The Friends look at the same animal and see a victim. I worry that what they're really seeing are their own reflections. Meanwhile, Charlie, I'm trying to see the true animal, the mountain lion itself. I'm on the side of truth." She smiled, but she wasn't joking.

"Ah," I said. "Verity."

Her smile warmed by several degrees. "Look out, I'm getting to you."

She explained to me that she'd been dealing with predators a longtime. Bears, wolves, mountain lions, hawks, owls, weasels—all kinds. Her theory was that the bigger the predator, the stealthier,

the less room for truth in people's thoughts about it. "Take the Friends," she said, "at least the ones doing the heavy lobbying. To them the mountain lion's a lot of things, but no killer."

"What kinds of things?"

"Threatened ones, basically. You know, it's nature's purity. The noble spirit of the wilderness, that stuff. Don't get me wrong, I agree with them on the hunting ban. They just make me nervous. Have you read the letters they've been sending in to the papers? To hear them tell it, Verity's mother killed that jogger because she made a mistake. She thought her baby was being threatened and she killed to protect it. But she didn't make a mistake, Charlie. She's no martyr. She was hungry, she saw meat, she killed. Altruism had zip to do with it."

Joshua was ready for another quail. He jogged tensely around the enclosure, his nose to the ground. His shaggy belly fur sagged and swung, but everywhere else he was tight, fluid, sure. He took a swing by the near corner. The breeze must have shifted just then, bringing news of the quail stashed at the top of the snag, because he stopped in the middle of a stride, rearranged his entire body, bounded once toward the corner, then flew the fifteen feet to the top of the snag and landed with absolute certainty, all four paws poised on a single branch. The maneuver itself had several parts, it was subtle and complicated as a lengthy sentence, but it took him as long to execute as a single syllable takes to say. He pinned the quail between his front paws and tore at it with his fangs. His tail danced and waved.

"What are you thinking?" Brook asked me.

Luckily, she hadn't asked what I was feeling, because although I was feeling something, something interesting, I wasn't sure what to call it.

"I'm thinking you're on to something with that theory of yours." I told her how I'd been tagging along with Don the last week. I mentioned Chet Burns and his apocryphal video, I told her about Mrs. BE NICE and the old lady with the lion on her roof. "Yesterday we had those people who lost their goat—it was the

real thing. Up till then I was pretty much convinced that the only cougars out there were imaginary ones.”

Brook nodded. “Some of the Southwestern tribes call the mountain lion Ghost Cat.”

I heard a noise and turned to see the peacock who had shadowed me earlier in the day. He was perched on the same branch he had watched me from in the morning, above and behind us. Beyond his streaming silhouette, through the dark pattern of leaves and branches, I could see the lavender sky. I looked down toward the bottom of the hill where an evening mist was starting to finger its way up from the creek.

“I don’t know what all you’ve heard,” I said, turning back to her, “but I’m really not a member of COUGAR ALERT.”

She squinted. “You’re not.”

“Look, when I rescued the cub, it was a fluke. I was only helping out with the search as a favor to a friend. That got me a little interested, I guess. I still am interested. I’ve gone on some of those calls under COUGAR ALERT’s auspices, mostly because I was curious. But I have no official tie.”

“Charlie,” she said, “either you’re in or you’re out. You think you can be both, neither, you’re bullshitting yourself.”

I didn’t say anything.

“But don’t worry,” she said. She was wide-eyed and smiling now, looking me over with the old disarming frankness, sizing me up once again. “I think there’s still hope for you.”

As if he agreed, the peacock on the branch above us let go of a shrill cry. From down in the barnyard somewhere one of his fellows answered. That set off a rooster, which got the coyotes yapping. One of the coyotes howled, and in a show of canine solidarity the dog-wolves started to howl, a deep, mournful noise that unleashed a great cacophony of animal sounds. The foxes barked noisily. Alfonse groaned. The raccoons chattered. The pony neighed and the goats bleated. The coyotes and foxes kept on, and the dog-wolves, the peafowl and roosters. For a full minute the whole hillside was wild with it, the sound was everywhere around

me and also *in* me, I could feel it continuing what the lions had started, working in the pit of my stomach like fingers trying to pull a cork loose.

Brook glanced up at the peacock and nodded. "Roy says it's time to stop the indoctrination."

We walked a ways down the path. When we reached the fork I pulled up, asking if I could use her bathroom before I left.

I followed her down the path and through the cottage door. Luckily, she pointed toward the bathroom because I'd forgotten I was supposed to make a pit stop. I didn't really have to pee. That was a pretext only, a stall tactic. In the bathroom I turned on the sink faucet and sat on the toilet seat. The broth of feelings that bubbled inside me was too complex to analyze, so I sat there gazing about the small room. It was clean but spartan. No animal parts were in evidence here, nor any of the usual decorations. After a suitable amount of time had passed I flushed the toilet and exited.

The main room was dark, so I walked toward the light coming from the kitchen doorway. Brook was busy at the oven. She turned toward me, holding a cookie sheet out in front of her. It took me several seconds to actually *see* the balls of yellow fluff that I was looking at: sixteen dead chicks arrayed like cookies in four rows of four.

"I put these in to thaw earlier," she said. "There's raptors to feed."

"Need any help?"

She motioned with her head toward a shelf near me. "I need that bowl."

I took the metal bowl down and placed it on the counter. Deftly, carefully as the most devoted homemaker, she scooped the little corpses up off the baking sheet and into the bowl.

I followed her out the front door and back along one wall of the cottage. Inside the cages, rowed on either side of us, there was much rustling. We pulled up in front of a tall one with a redtail hawk perched in one corner. No rustling here. Brook opened the

door and tossed a couple of chicks on the floor of the cage. She told me how this hawk (his name was Amos) had been grounded five years, ever since some kids shot him with a pellet gun and ruined one wing. Next we came to a golden eagle who had gone blind from eating the fish out of a contaminated pond. After that we went to feed a few more hard-luck raptors who lived out back, where another dozen cages were tucked.

“Jesus,” I said, “where do they all come from?”

“Oh, everywhere. People know I’m a softy.”

“So these ones here don’t belong to the zoo?”

“The zoo’s full. This is my private orphanage.”

“What would happen if you turned them away?”

“They couldn’t hack it in the wild. If they could I wouldn’t take them.”

She pointed at the great horned owl who watched us from a nearby cage, but before she could launch into another tale of woe I cut her off.

“What about humans?”

“What about them?” she said.

“Ever take in one of those?”

She turned rapidly and faced me full on. She studied me as if for the first time, matching the figure in front of her with the fellow who had hung around her zoo all day.

“Oh, Charlie. You’ve got no place to go.”

The weight of those words tugged my chin down to my chest. I stood a moment in silence, fighting back a flood of feelings. Eventually I raised my head, wanting to speak, but when I opened my mouth an odd inarticulate noise came out, a kind of yelp. Gratitude in the raw.

BACK TO THE BARN

BROOK ATE FOR FUEL, NOT FUN. Supper that evening was chili and creamed corn from cans with wheat toast on the side. I washed mine down with bourbon from one of the few dusty bottles mixed in among the cleaning supplies beneath the kitchen sink. Brook drank cranberry juice and briefed me on how Verity would help her educate people about living with mountain lions. She was especially keen to get to kids before they started gobbling up the misinformation fed to them by the news shows and papers. She was annoyed with the *Bee's* coverage of the goat kill in Olives, which she found inflammatory.

While I was drying the dishes she called me out to the living room to show me the sleeping bag, pillow, and towel she'd set out for me on the couch. I asked if she minded my sleeping in the barn.

She looked at me funny. "Something wrong with my couch?"

"Not at all. I'd just prefer the barn if you don't mind."

"Kind of stinks out there."

"I know."

"Might see a rat."

"I understand."

"Suit yourself," she said, raising her arms in a sleepy stretch. "I'm hitting the sack."

"At seven thirty?"

"I'll be up at midnight. Then three, then six or so." She yawned. "These orphans need a lot of attention."

I thanked her for putting me up and asked what I could do to repay her. She said we could deal with that later. For now I should

make myself at home, bathe when I wanted, eat whatever I could find, and not worry about asking permission.

The barn really wasn't that smelly because it was open at one end. None of the animals slept inside. They could stand under the overhanging roof when it rained, but mostly the barn was a place to store things and keep the feed dry. I found a stack of empty feedsacks and laid a few of them out end-to-end next to one wall. I unrolled the sleeping bag on top of the feedsacks, took off my shoes, and crawled inside.

You'd think I might have taken this opportunity to look back over all that had happened the last twenty-four hours, that I might have entertained thoughts of Jean, hatched some plan for getting word to her that I was still among the living. But I didn't. Instead I lay there working on a problem of subtraction, trying to figure out how many years had passed since I'd last slept in a barn. Forty-six was my best guess. That made me sixteen, took me to the end of a decade when I spent far more nights in my grandparents' barn than I did in my bedroom at their house. The room they gave me had been my father's room and I could never get comfortable there, largely because of Norman, the hypochondriac uncle who had never left the nest. I don't know what Norman did for entertainment before I arrived on the farm, but after I showed up his main form of recreation was to scare his seven-year-old nephew. My father had been a violent man, and Norman quickly figured out that death had not diminished the shadow he cast over me. Sickly Norman was no help at all around the farm. But he was diligent when it came to sowing seeds of uncertainty in my mind. Could we be sure my father was really dead? When they pulled the truck out of the river they found my mother's body in the cab while my father's body was never recovered. Who could tell where my father was? Shoot, maybe he was still out there and fixing to come back. When he got back and found me sleeping in his bedroom, he wasn't going to like it. No sir, Norman would tell me, my daddy never did like people fooling around his room. There was no telling what he might do.

Thus I slept in the barn. My grandpa didn't mind too much since I kept an eye on all the animals for him. I acted as an advance warning system, I sounded the alarm when one of the stock was ailing or when a labor had begun. Grandma didn't bother much about where I slept. When she wasn't fussing over Norman and his ailments, she stayed busy eavesdropping on the party line. The milk of human kindness didn't flow too freely on the Sayers farm. My elders made a place for me at the table, they supplied me with boots and overalls and flour sack shirts. No one had to tell me that what I got came not from love but in return for the work I did. The nearest kids my age lived several miles away. And so my closest companions were Red and Gray, the two wily farm dogs who shared my bed in the hay. I was also on intimate terms with Irene the cow. Sometimes of an early morning I would all but fall asleep tugging on her familiar teats, my head nestled against her warm side. Austin the plow horse was another of my pals. His nickering smile never failed to charm the apple from my hand. The pigs knew me as their slop-giver and were careful to stay on my good side. I was a regular in the chicken yard. The younger roosters revered me but old Gus, fierce prince of the pecking order, greeted me with slashing spurs whenever I came to rob his brooding hens. A nickel for every kick I planted on his warlike breast would have made me the richest boy in the county.

But tonight I recalled the stillness even more vividly than those bursts of fowl commotion. To me there was something strongly reassuring in the company of sleeping animals. The cow and horses drowsing heavily in their stalls. Red and Gray sacked out beside me, consumed by dreams that made them whimper and flinch, but alive in the canine manner to every outdoor sound, ready to guard me if an intruder approached. The active creatures made those nights seem even stiller. Only in true stillness, the stillness of heavy mammalian slumber, could you hear a mouse skittering along a rafter, sense a farm cat making his sly rounds. Once in while a sleeping horse would stamp, a strong quick sound, a deep *thump*. A nervous, forlorn boy, I took great comfort in that sound. It proved the ground was solid.

BEHAVIORAL ENRICHMENT

NEAR DAWN, AS THE ZOO STIRRED TO LIFE, I spent the fluid minutes between sleep and waking savoring visions of Brook's calves. The glimpse I'd had of them the day before, tapering down from the hem of her terry cloth robe, had apparently been working on me ever since—working like the incongruous clue that draws a detective's attention, like the odd bit of data that takes a scientist by surprise. What was she hiding inside all that baggy cloth?

Such mysteries make alarm clocks unnecessary. I rose eagerly and went to the cottage. Brook wasn't there to answer my knock, so I let myself in and walked around the edges of the main room, passing my eyes over pelts and skulls and bones, all of them carefully tagged. In the kitchen I opened up all the cupboards, finding more cans of chili and creamed corn, also tuna and assorted soups. There were packages of instant noodles and instant coffee and crackers, a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. The fridge had a multi-purpose character inside. Products for *homo sapiens* mixed freely and I feared dangerously with those for other species. The door racks were crammed with the orphans' medicines. On the shelves I saw a carton of eggs and one of milk, a jug of cranberry juice, and that was about all I could identify with confidence. It seemed wise to leave the rest of the containers alone. Remembering the chicks from yesterday, I opted not to open the freezer.

I breakfasted on eggs and toast and coffee, then set off up the path to search for my hostess, Roy the peacock on my heels. I found Brook in the zoo kitchen smearing peanut butter around the inside of a piece of six-inch PVC pipe.

"How was the barn?" she said.

"Got me in the mood. I'm looking forward to some chores."

"You shouldn't worry about that."

"I aim to earn my keep."

She was quiet as she jammed a head of iceberg lettuce in one end of the pipe. "You will."

"How?"

"I've got a job or two in mind. You'll see later on."

Brook stood the pipe on end and tossed carrots, celery, apples, and grapes inside, then stopped up the open end with another head of lettuce. Next she washed her hands. "If you really want to do some stuff, I could use you. One of my volunteers left for graduate school two weeks ago. The other one's mother got sick. She's out for the rest of the week."

"Don't you have any paid help?"

"There's money in the budget I could use for a helper. I wouldn't ask anybody to work for that amount, so I use it on other things."

"Is that how you made the zoo so nice?"

She squinted. "Are you kidding? You know the green wire on all the enclosures? Guess how much a square foot of that stuff costs."

"How do you pay for it?" I said.

"This Friday, seven o'clock. You'll see."

She told me to follow her and took off carrying the food-packed piece of pipe, explaining the strategy to me as we walked to the enclosure of Alfonse the bear. Alfonse, she said, was highly susceptible to boredom. By stuffing his fruits and veggies up the pipe, using peanut butter for glue, we would keep him entertained awhile.

When we got to the enclosure Brook lured him to the back with some tasty morsel she had brought along for that purpose. I hadn't seen Alfonse skip so lightly before. He rumbled toward her, groaning delightedly. She gave him his treat, closed him behind a sliding door, and let us both into the main part of the enclosure.

She got busy tying the food pipe to the ceiling of the cage near one corner while I went about scooping poop. Afterward she showed me how to change the water in Alfonse's pool.

"He's nuts about water," she explained.

When we were safely outside the main part of the enclosure Brook showed me how to let Alfonse back inside. He hurried over to where the pipe hung and stood up on his back feet, his forelegs out wide for balance and his doglike snout probing one end of the pipe. Next he removed his snout and stood a moment on his hind legs assessing the situation. He turned to the enclosure fence, took hold with his front paws, and climbed with eager grace to the top. Still holding the fence, he swiveled his head around and sent his snout deep into the near end of the pipe. The head pulled clear, one foreleg held fast to the fence while the other swung free and delivered a giant swat. The pipe swung on its tie-ropes, the whole cage vibrated. No food came out. Alfonse reached his paw out again, clasped the pipe's near end, and began violently to shake it, tilting it at a sharp angle that eventually sent the lettuce head tumbling out the opposite end. For such a heavy customer, he was terribly quick. The lettuce had barely bounced before he was on the ground and all over it, devouring his greens.

"Behavioral enrichment is the fancy term for it," Brook said, turning back toward the main building. "Lets him use his special talents."

Gilbert and Sullivan, the dog-wolves, were next in line for enrichment. While I collected their poop and changed their water Brook went about the cage stashing sprigs of fresh basil. The creatures were so excited when we turned them loose, they could barely stay in their skins. Silver blurs, they hurried around rooting out the alien odor, rubbing their noses on the basil branches, tossing them in the air, yapping and whining, maddened by the sweetness of it all.

Brook led me back to the kitchen and showed me how the walk-in freezer and fridge were organized, showed me where the various animal foods and supplements were kept, and led me off

to tend to some small mammals, Carol the odorless skunk, Phil the possum, Mick and Keith the raccoons. As the day progressed, as I learned the ropes, I began to fall prey to another of my retirement fantasies. I admit I should have known better, after what had happened to me on the fishing trip with the boys from Sutter Heights. But I was all adrift now, needier even than I had been just weeks before. I couldn't just enjoy the novelty and the nostalgia of this chore-filled day, but had to forge out of a few hours' absorbing labor an anchor I might weigh against the future's dark tides. And I have to confess that work wasn't the only thing on my mind. For who could tell what engagements might await me here? Full as Brook's ark was, maybe she had space for one more berth...

I didn't hurt my chances any when I volunteered to doctor the ugly cut Victor the billygoat had on one of his forelegs. Brook warned me that Victor was a handful, but I stilled him using techniques from my farm years and dressed his cut handsomely. Brook was too busy to watch me work with Victor, but she complimented me on the bandage late in the day when we teamed up to give Verity his drops. She stood still long enough to applaud my knack with the animals.

"If there's nothing else to do," I said afterward, "I need to run an errand."

She laughed. "There's *always* something else."

"You saying I shouldn't go?"

"I'm saying the opposite. Do what you need to now. You'll never do it if you wait for the work to be finished."

So I drove Vera over to the market and bought a bunch of groceries. I got back before five, which meant the front gate was still open and I made it down to the cottage without Brook seeing me. I was planning a big dinner and wanted to surprise her.

Maybe it was sleeping in the barn, or maybe the long day of animal chores had put me in the mood for my grandma's cooking. I had bought a couple of young frying chickens and a sack of potatoes to mash.

I floured the chicken and got the grease going in the pan, then poured myself a cocktail from the dusty bourbon bottle under the sink. The chicken was just starting to smell good when Brook came into the cottage. She stood in the kitchen doorway and watched me for a minute.

“Hope you’re hungry,” I said.

“Charlie, wow! That’s real food.”

I lifted my bourbon glass. “Can I pour you a drink?”

“No thanks. I don’t touch it.”

I pointed toward the cupboard under the sink. “You keep those bottles for guests?”

“Something like that,” she said, opening the oven and removing her tray of thawed chicks. She scooped them into the metal bowl and left to feed her raptors, saying she’d be back soon to help.

She returned a while later, freshly showered, her small body adrift in a clean set of outsized zoo togs. Her dark bobbed hair was wet and shiny and carefully combed.

I had washed the salad vegetables and we agreed she should chop and tear them while I sprinkled salt in the mashed potatoes and set about constructing a gravy.

I opened the chardonnay I’d bought and persuaded Brook to let me pour some for her into one of the four chipped mugs that comprised the cottage’s collection of glassware. We went over the events of the day, each of my comments or questions about a particular animal drawing me deeper into Brook’s good graces. Lion politics was the topic that heated her up, but talk of her creatures’ quirks and predilections warmed her, set her glowing like most mothers will when you show an interest in their kids.

We sat down to our meal beneath the savage light of the kitchen’s overhead lamp. Even in that bleaching brightness I could see the color coming into Brook’s cheeks, proof that the food and wine and conversation were working.

“God,” she said after a few minutes of purposeful eating, “I forget how good food can taste. What possessed you to do all this?”

“Your cupboards.”

She nodded. "Pretty grim, huh?"

"It doesn't get to you, eating like that?"

"It might if I let it. No time."

"What if you had more help?" I said. "Wouldn't that free you up some?"

"Volunteers aren't that easy to find, good ones anyway. Most of them mean well but aren't that sharp. They cost more time than they save."

"I wasn't really talking about volunteers."

"I told you I don't have the budget to pay anybody worth hiring."

"I'm not talking about hired help either."

"What other kind of help is there?" she said, spooning gravy over her second helping of mashed potatoes.

"Have you always been alone here?" I said.

She dropped her fork in her plate. She reached for the mug of wine, hesitated, put her hand in her lap. She squinted at me. "What is this, twenty questions?"

"Sorry, I was just curious."

"Maybe I'm curious about you," she said.

I waited.

"Maybe I'm wondering why you showed up here yesterday morning and haven't left."

"It's like you said before," I told her. "I don't have anywhere to go. You want to know why?"

"If you want to tell me."

"The woman I've been with the last ten years, she and I had an ugly fight."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, it was pretty bad. But it sent me here, and I'm not sorry about that. Today was the best day I've had in a hell of a long time."

Brook squinted again, but not at me. She was quiet for half a minute, thinking something over. "There *was* someone who lived here for a while," she finally said. "The bottles under the sink? They were his."

I told her I was sorry and she said I shouldn't be. "I was tough to live with. You know how much time these animals take? I'm up at all kinds of wacky times. I hardly ever leave this place, and when I do it's never for more than a couple hours. Plus I'm into all this political stuff. It's a bizarre lifestyle."

"And you don't get lonely?" I said, my heart thumping at a new rhythm.

"Not unless I think about it."

"What happens then?"

She sat there a minute looking at her plate. "I go out of my mind."

The words were barely out of her mouth when a buzzer went off and made me jump. Brook rose, crossed the room, and spoke into an intercom box mounted near the door.

"Hi Brook," said the unmistakable voice of my ex-wife, "it's June. I brought something for the auction."

Brook said she'd be right up to open the gate. I nodded when she excused herself, then sat there too stunned and chagrined to make use of the few moments I had to think. Thoughts of escape didn't come to me until I heard June's cheerful voice again, growing louder as she neared the cottage. But where could I go? Out the window? Under the sink?

Brook appeared in the doorway first and June was close behind, her cheeks flushed from the chilly evening air, her beauty almost too big for the humble cottage to hold.

June is a unique person. Almost any woman in her place would have been jarred by the sight of her ex-husband sitting at Brook's table. A handful of them would be able to dissemble it, would have the control to conceal their disturbance and pretend to be pleased to see me. The amazing thing about June is that she *was* pleased to see me; she didn't have to pretend.

She set down the stained glass window she was carrying and came over to shake my hand, bringing a fresh wave of outdoor scent with her. "It looks like Brook's invitation worked."

"My address," I said to Brook. "You told me you had a source."

“Didn’t I mention who it was?” Brook said, taking the teapot to the stove.

June sat down across the table from me. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Don’t worry,” Brook said—glad, I guessed, that June had rescued her from our talk. “We should go over the stuff for Friday night, don’t you think.”

“Growl, Howl, and Wine would never happen without June,” she told me.

“What, What and *Who*?”

“Growl, Howl, and Wine,” Brook said, pointing at the chardonnay. “That’s the name of our fundraiser. June caters the whole event. Plus she always donates some gorgeous piece from her shop.”

The window *was* beautiful, an old piece rescued from some house or church and mounted in a dark oak frame. I looked it over on my way to the sink. When the water was ready I served tea to the women and went to work on the dinner dishes. I finished those and then sat down at the table with my own cup of tea. Ever the includer, June reviewed the whole menu for me, from appetizers to dessert.

“Charlie’s not a bad cook himself,” Brook said to June. “Did you teach him to make fried chicken?”

“Has he baked anything for you?” June asked. “He’s an excellent baker.”

Brook turned to me. “What can you bake, Charlie? Cookies and stuff?”

“Cookies, sure. What kind do you like?”

“Can you bake peanut butter cookies?”

June waved her hand. “He can bake any kind of cookie you want.”

“I *dream* about peanut butter cookies,” Brook said fervently. “How about tomorrow, Charlie, after your chores?”

“Oh, are you working here now?” June asked me.

“Living, too,” Brook said, making sure my cover was blown entirely. “Sleeping in the barn.”

That news did shake June, but you had to know her as well as I did to see it. "I'll be darned," she said through a pleasant smile.

In the silence that followed Brook began to yawn, and June took that as her cue to leave.

When the door closed behind her, Brook turned and stretched. "June's great," she said. "Don't you think?"

"I did when I married her."

"You two were together a long time, weren't you?"

"Twenty years."

"I thought that's what she told me."

"So you two have spoken about me?"

Brook nodded. "When you rescued Verity. I don't remember how it came up. Maybe the picture in the *Bee*. That's right," she said, yawning. "The invitation I sent you? She gave me your address."

My second night in the barn lacked the nostalgia of the first. Instead of the early years I combed back over the latest little while, ruing Brook for blowing my cover, annoyed also at June for the moment she'd stolen. Brook was a tough nut, but she'd been about to crack when June arrived. Who knew how long before I could get that close to her again?

Why I wanted to get that close was not a question I considered. I guess I took that for granted, like I took for granted the pilot light in the battered furnace of my desires. After months and months, that blue flame was burning again.

SADIE

“AH, THE GRAPEVINE,” I SAID when Sadie appeared outside the fox enclosure next morning. “Flourishing, I see.”

Normally Sadie answers my smart remarks with one of two smiles, the genuine when she’s amused, the tolerant when she isn’t. The grapevine comment failed to elicit any smile at all, which forced me to lean my rake against the enclosure’s wire wall and search her face for signs. I saw circles under her deepset eyes, fatigue or worry patterns at their corners.

“Midnight delivery?” I asked.

“No.”

“One of the girls sick? You look beat. Everything all right at home?”

Now she smiled, but not in an encouraging way.

“I ever tell you about Sayers’ Law?” I said. “If irony can find you, it will.”

She just looked at me. The brown hair was pulled back off her slender unpainted face, revealing the contours of all the facial bones. I felt I was seeing the essential Sadie, my daughter laid bare.

“*I* asked *you* if everything was all right at home,” I said. “That’s a laugh.”

Apparently she didn’t agree.

Sarcasm and self-mockery had failed me, so I tried nostalgia. I swept my arms out wide, looking through the wire’s small squares and past her down the hillside. “I remember when I used to bring you and Eddie here. Can you believe how much things have changed?”

She didn't even glance at the vista I offered. "Some things haven't."

"Seen Val lately?" I said after a long silence.

"Every week."

"I was over there a couple days ago. My second time. I guess I never should have told Jean about it. She flipped."

"Oh," Sadie said, nodding, "so it's my fault."

"What is?"

"I sent you to Val, didn't I?"

"Jesus, Sadie. Give me a goddamn *inch*, will you." If this came out more sharply than it should have, that was because Sadie had me on my heels. She'd been one of those fragile children who crumple under harsh tones. Maybe my sharp words were probing for that child, trying to puncture the formidable front of the young woman who stood before me now, calling me to account. In a way it worked. As soon as I spoke, her head jerked back and a sob escaped. Then she crossed her arms and pressed her chin to her chest, clamping the feelings down.

"Sweetheart..." I said, and nearly ran into the wire wall as I moved forward to comfort her. She shied away when I poked my hankie through one of the squares. I stood grasping the wire like a jailbird while she composed herself.

"I haven't slept," she explained.

"Since when?"

"Since I talked to Mom."

"I figured she'd go right home and call you. What did you do after she told you?"

"Called Jean."

"Was she surprised I'm still alive and kicking?"

She turned her back to me and stood still a moment. "Dad," she said, turning back, "what are you doing here?"

"Seeking refuge, like the rest of the gang."

She waited. For the first time it occurred to me that Brook was a lot closer to Sadie's age than my own.

"I don't know," I said, "I'm confused right now, Sade. Jean makes it worse. I need some time to sort things out. I can't have her pestering me all the time, worrying I'm about to croak."

"Shouldn't you at least call?"

"She knows I'm all right, doesn't she?"

"Now she does. But it doesn't hurt to check in, let the person know you need some time."

"The person?"

She looked up at the sky, getting shaky again. "It's not like this is an isolated thing, Dad."

"What are you talking about?"

"This doesn't remind you of anything?"

"Looks like it reminds *you* of something."

She shook her head, looking at the ground. "How long do you plan on hiding out?"

"Hiding out? Christ, everybody knows where I am."

"We knew the last time too."

"What do you mean the last time?"

She stared at me as at some strange specimen.

"You mean—me and your mother? Is that what this is about?"

"You didn't call me. I was at school, all by myself, and you never called. I was home the whole summer and never even saw you."

"Look," I said, "this isn't the same. That was a terrible time, the worst. I let you down. I'm sorry. But this is different."

"You know what's different?" Sadie said. "I'll tell you what's different. I'm here. I'm not waiting around for you to get in touch this time."

Logic was all that shielded me from the withering truth of this remark. Sadie had delivered this indictment, and Sadie was my daughter. On the one hand, her words proved me a scoundrel. On the other hand, they proved me the father of a very perceptive person. Thank god for logic.

I turned back to look at Myrna and her pups, who were penned up at the back of the enclosure, waiting for me to relinquish their territory. Just then a mystery noise startled me—not animal, but electrical. I turned back to see Sadie pull one of Kyle’s gismos out of her jacket pocket, then return it as she pulled the ringing cell phone from her other pocket.

“Don’t tell me Kyle sold you a PNS,” I said when she had ended her short talk on the phone. I saw in her defiant eyes that he had.

“That was Boyd,” she said. “Ruth forgot to take her violin to school and the teacher called him at work. I have to run it over there.”

“Hey,” I said, “there’s this fundraiser here tomorrow night, some big party. Maybe you could come by.”

She looked at me like I had just announced my new invention, the wheel. “I’m helping Mom with the food, like every year.”

KYLE

I HAD CHECKED THE DRESSING on Victor the billygoat's foreleg and was turning to leave the pasture when I saw Kyle at the fence. The fancy clothes threw me off, but only for a second. Kyle is Kyle, no matter what he wears. Gray jacket and slacks, crisp white shirt, green tie, and black wing tips—all of it fit, none of it suited.

"Hey, Charlie," he said as I approached.

"Nice threads."

He nodded. "Project the positive, that's key. Personal appearance is where it starts."

"Is *that* working?"

"The suit? Haven't even worn it until today. Made my first bid on a corporate account this morning."

"Impressive."

"I didn't get it yet. But I'll tell you what, Charlie, people love the EnCompass. It's a quality product."

"Sadie and Boyd think so, looks like."

"They like theirs, yeah. Everybody who's bought from me so far is just super-pleased." He glanced at my belt. "Don still borrowing yours?"

"That's right."

We set off walking up the hill. "So what brings you to the zoo?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Mom."

I waited.

"I don't mean to pressure you or anything like that," Kyle assured me. "I kind of think I know what you're going through."

"Do you?"

“This is top secret, Charlie, it’s not public knowledge,” he said in low tones. “I’m trying to get some distance from Brenda right now, you know.”

“Distance.”

We had reached the top of the hill. Kyle stood in front of me, his hands caught up in the old wrestler’s motion, his volume on the rise. “Brenda’s just a total and complete downer when it comes to my career change. I mean, she’s so negative. I try to explain there’s a revolution going on in navigation, but she doesn’t want to hear about it. She doesn’t have any faith in me at all. The environment at our place is just shitty, you know. I’ve slept at Mom’s the last few nights, on the couch in my office.”

“So you and Brenda are separating?”

“It’s looking that way. And I’m thinking, what if I get this corporate account? I’ll be able to afford a place of my own. You know, a home office combo type thing.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it? But I have to tell you, Charlie, I can’t see leaving Mom all by herself right now.”

I waited.

“The fight, you leaving. She’s taking stuff pretty hard.”

“She is.”

“I think it reminds her of my dad taking off. Old demons, you know?”

“Better and better.”

“She talks like she’s mad at you, but I think she kind of blames herself.”

“What makes you think that?” I said, with new interest. This angle was unexpected. So was this kind of subtlety, coming from Kyle.

“She and I, we’ve been talking a lot about the Brenda situation. How I need to get out of that environment. So yesterday I said to her, ‘What about the environment here? What made Charlie leave?’ She didn’t answer me. And you know Mom, she has an answer for everything.”

I was still pondering that when Brook appeared and asked me if I'd made a friend. I introduced Kyle. Brook shook his hand and asked if he'd ever seen a baby mountain lion before.

"Only in the newspaper, with Charlie holding it."

"Want to see the real deal?"

"Could I?"

We headed toward Verity's room, Brook explaining to Kyle that the cub was being treated for conjunctivitis. Kyle asked if that was the same as pink eye and she confirmed that it was.

"Man," Kyle said, "I had that once. That sucks for the little mountain lion."

Brook tossed Verity's panda in the cage and then asked Kyle if he wanted to do the drops.

"Me?" Kyle said.

"Charlie will hold your jacket, I bet."

Kyle took off his jacket and handed it to me. He unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves. Brook gave him the dropper and then went in after Verity. Kyle bent his knees and lowered his butt like a halfback waiting for the ball to be hiked. Soon Brook emerged, hugging Verity and his panda. She coached Kyle through the procedure, making much of his excellent aim.

"His breath was so *hot*," Kyle said when the cat was back in his cage. "You think he wanted to bite me?"

"I'm sure he did." Brook smiled at Kyle, sizing him up with frank, eager eyes.

"Wow," Kyle said, shaking his head, "that was just... That was *awesome*." He bent down and looked inside the cage, where Verity was busy extracting stuffing from the panda. He turned back to Brook. "Will you let him go when he gets bigger?"

"He wouldn't make it without his mother to teach him. He'll have to stay here."

"Will you train him?"

"This is a zoo, Kyle, not a circus."

"Meaning?"

“We don’t make our animals perform. We just ask them to be themselves.”

That notion seemed to hit home with Kyle. He pondered it a minute. “That’s all you should ever expect, isn’t it,” he said with gravity.

Next Brook asked Kyle if he’d like to see some grown up mountain lions, and he said he would love to. Tired of playing the coathanger, I tapped him on the shoulder and gave his jacket back. We set off for the large enclosure, Brook all warmed up now, dishing out wisdom to her new acolyte. A lifetime spent on the receiving end of Jean’s endless teachings made Kyle a shoo-in for the pupil’s role. He followed Brook all over the zoo, nodding vigorously whenever she made a point, shaking his head in sorrow or disbelief whenever she told of some policy or individual act of cruelty that resulted in the suffering of wild creatures. Brook was amazingly patient with him. To every one of his dumb sincere questions she made a thoughtful response. I followed along wondering if I should ask Kyle to give me back his jacket. Then at least I would have something to do.

After much strolling and pausing we finally reached the front gate. If I thought Kyle would exit through it before whipping out his PNS, I was thinking in a wishful way. Brook had barely finished thanking him for his visit when Kyle brushed his jacket aside and flashed the EnCompass in her face.

“I noticed that before,” she said. “What is it?”

Brook’s routine was tolerable even on a second take, but Kyle’s hadn’t even grabbed me the first time around. I excused myself, saying I would see about dinner.

The first thing I did when I got inside was remove the thawed chicks from the oven and slide them into their metal bowl. I then scrubbed the cookie sheet vigorously and lined it with foil for good measure. I mixed some peanut butter cookie batter, made balls and rowed them on the sheet. The cookies were starting to smell good when Brook finally came in, but if she noticed she didn’t say anything.

I pointed to her chicks and apologized for Kyle. "He just started selling those things. He's all gung-ho."

"I can see why," she said. "What a neat machine." She turned so I could see the EnCompass clipped to her belt. "He's letting me try it out till tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?"

"He's donating it for the auction. Isn't that generous?"

"Sounds like good business to me."

Brook put the bowl under her arm and told me she'd be back to help in a minute. I heard her whistling some frisky tune as she worked her way back along the side of the cottage.

When she returned I was just pulling the first sheet of cookies out of the oven. She saw them and her eyes doubled in size. "That's what I smelled!" She grabbed the egg turner from the drawer and slid it under one of the hot cookies. She bit off half of it and started dancing around huffing, trying to cool her mouth. I said I hadn't heard her whistle before, but she was too involved with the cookies to hear me.

You'd think the heat of the first one would make her wait before trying a second. Not so. She ate three cookies without a pause and was going for her fourth when I intervened, complaining that she would spoil her dinner.

"Cookies for dinner!" she shouted. "That's what I want."

"You'll have cookies for *dessert*. For dinner you're having spaghetti with these meatballs I'm making. And salad, which you still have to fix."

"Toughy." She stuck her peanut buttery tongue out at me, giggling.

I got the vegetables for her and she began to wash them, asking me how I knew Kyle.

I told her.

"Was he out here on a peacemaking mission?"

"In a way, I guess."

"That's kind of him."

"Not really. He has an interest in me patching things up with his mom."

“Why’s that?”

“If I go back, he won’t have to worry about leaving her alone.”

“He lives with his mom?”

“Not usually. He’s feuding with his wife right now.”

“Hard to believe. He seems like such a kind guy.”

“You think so?”

“I wish everyone I talked to was that receptive. A lot of times people just humor me, but he was really listening. He cared about what I was telling him.”

“He does have a lot of enthusiasm. Too bad he doesn’t have more focus.”

“He seems very focused on selling the EnCompass.”

“Give him some time. If I know Kyle, he’ll lose interest. Something else will grab his attention.”

“Maybe he just hasn’t found the right thing before. You can’t just focus on any old thing, Charlie. It has to be something you care about. *The* thing, you know?”

“Like you and your animals.”

“Exactly.”

“Which reminds me,” I said, seeing my chance to expel Kyle from the conversation. “You heard anything about our goat killer?”

“I only know what I read in the *Bee*. The department’s up to something, what exactly I don’t know. I’m hoping you can tell me.”

“I don’t know any more than you do.”

“But you can find out.”

I waited.

“Don Mackey, your buddy at COUGAR ALERT. I’ll bet he knows exactly what’s going on.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I’ll bet he’s wondering where you disappeared to.”

“Yeah?”

“So maybe it’s time to let him know.”

“Are you asking me to spy for you?”

She showed me her small square teeth. “Didn’t you say you wanted to earn your keep?”

“Two days of mucking out cages, that gorgeous bandage on Victor’s leg—what’s that worth?”

“I appreciate all you’ve done, Charlie. You don’t owe me anything. I was kidding about that. You’re in a position to help people know the truth about what the department’s up to. I’m pointing that out to you, is all.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said, but even as I spoke the words I knew I would get the information for her. I wish I could say altruism alone made the task attractive to me, but that wouldn’t be the whole truth. What I liked most about the information Brook wanted is that no one else could get it for her.

DON

I HAD PLANNED TO CALL MACKEY first thing in the morning, but I was still at the breakfast table when I heard his heavy knock on the door. When I opened it he stood there speechless, rubbing his ear. Don's speechless moments are few and far between, so I let this one last.

I waved him in, sat him down at the table and poured him a cup of coffee. "Let me guess," I said after he'd had some time to soak in Brook's decorations, "Kyle told you where I was."

"I've been looking all over the last couple days."

I waited.

"How the hell'd you land here, Charles? You going to fill me in?"

"Answered an invitation."

"From the gal who let me in? She's invited me here a couple of times too." He smiled. "I wish I'd known what she had in mind."

It would have been easy to set him straight, but it was also easy not to.

"Seriously, Charles, are you and she...?"

"Shacked up?"

"That's what it looks like. You haven't been home in several days. And now here you are at the zoo gal's place..." He glanced over his shoulder at Brook's collection of evidence. "...pouring coffee for me at the kitchen table. I know what it *looks* like."

"Sometimes things are as they seem," I said, "and sometimes they're not."

I watched the muscles of his face move as he tried to read me right. "Anyway," he said after a minute, "you think I could drag

you away from the love nest a while? Ever since the *Bee* printed that story about the goat kill, they're running me ragged."

"They'll settle down soon enough."

"They will when we bring in a mountain lion."

"Haven't caught the goat killer, eh?"

He explained to me that that wasn't likely to happen. They couldn't use dogs in such a developed area, and the trap they'd set up in the pasture where the goat went down had been disabled by a saboteur the last two nights.

I snapped my fingers. "What was his name again? Cory, wasn't it?"

Don glowered. "Sneaky bastard."

"Looks like you're out of luck."

"Maybe not."

"Oh?"

Don sipped at his coffee a moment. "You hear about the kid who disappeared down by the river? Little boy. It was on the radio this morning."

"It looks like a cougar kill, then?"

"Haven't heard the details yet. I'm headed over to the department now. Why don't you come with me. Should be a lot going on."

"Sorry," I said. "Promised I'd help out around here today. Big fundraiser tonight, lots to do."

Don winked, the color rising in his face. "I get you."

"But keep me posted," I said. "Let me know what's going on."

PREPARATIONS

MY STOMACH HADN'T GIVEN ME THE LEAST TROUBLE since I'd landed at the zoo. Did I appreciate this peaceful interlude while it was taking place? Did I give a second's thought to the comforts that come with a quiet belly? Of course not. Good things never get noticed before they're gone. This particular good thing vanished not long after Don's departure, when I was visiting the bathroom and got my first eyeful of what Brook would be wearing for this evening's event. It hung from a hook on the inside of the door. Purple. Satiny. Sleeveless. Cut low in the back and slit high up one side. Before I could fully savor the prospect of Brook's body liberated from that khaki canopy, her true form finally revealed, on display in this racy dress—before I could be swept up in a wave of delicious anticipation a riptide of dread undercut me. For my eyes, I reflected, were not the only pair invited to this exhibition.

Belly achurn, I left the cottage and trudged up the hill to get my directions for the day. I found Brook busy in the kitchen, whistling once again. She greeted me cheerfully, observing that we had a fine day for the festivities. I followed her to the area near the gate where people would gather, a squarish open space floored with woodchips and roofed with the spreading branches of several of the zoo's fine oaks. She showed me where the band would set up, where the buffet table would be, where people would dance, and how the lights should be positioned. I gathered I was in charge of lights.

These came from a large chest in the main building. Strings and strings of tiny white bulbs to hang from the shrubs lining

the zoo's paths, and spotlights to clamp to the branches that hung above the area near the gate.

I ran the strings of lights first, and was up on a ladder working with one of the spots when June and Sadie arrived at the gate. I got the wheelbarrow and helped them haul all the food down the path to the cottage, where they would be in the kitchen all day. I was back working on the overhead spots when June appeared at the foot of my ladder to break the news that Joan, the woman who was supposed to help her and Sadie with the food, was out with a bad back. She wondered if I could give them a hand.

"Glad to," I said. "Better ask the chief, though."

"I already spoke with Brook. She said the food's the number one priority. The lights can wait."

To my surprise, the prospect of a day in June's kitchen didn't strike me as distasteful. But—and here was a sign of how screwy things were getting—I wasn't all that eager to spend the day in close quarters with Sadie. She had been tight with her greetings when they'd arrived, and hadn't loosened up any as I was helping haul the food. She didn't seem distraught or sleep-deprived, just chilly, unwilling to be amused by my wisecracks or warmed by my pleasantries. Her manner didn't do much to soothe my stomach, which churned like a cement mixer as the morning wore on, as I cut up carrot sticks and celery sticks, broke blossoms of broccoli and cauliflower into bite-sized florets, lopped off radish-ends, plucked mushroom stems, husked shrimps, squeezed lemons, cored cabbage heads, and stripped oranges of their zest.

June's effect on me was more salutary. She is one of those people who would rather give a party than go to one. When we were together she was always wanting to have people over and I was almost always against it. To me, parties meant the work before and after, which was often less taxing than the work in between, the social work that was not my calling. And yet it's thanks to June that I remember our parties fondly. Not only because they were fun (they *were* fun), but because they were the occasions when she managed to be most completely herself. Entertaining people

unlocked parts of her to which I lacked the key. If only for an evening, seeing her satisfied allowed me to forget for a while what I was unable to give her.

I suppose she developed her taste for big events in high school, around the time she and I fell for each other. I do not exaggerate when I say she could have chosen any fellow in the school. I think she liked me because I was the only one her beauty didn't tongue-tie. Like every other thing that made me nervous, her looks brought out the jokester in me, and she liked the way I made her laugh. That was in the fifties, a time of pageantry. June had grown up in the apartment above her family's gas station, but for the two years we dated, this Midwest Cinderella was the queen of homecoming, Christmas, spring, and any other occasion you care to name. She liked all the attention, but couldn't quite believe she deserved it. At how many balls and parades and banquets did I stand and sit beside a begowned and sparkling June in my rented tux, the wisecracks and one-liners and witty asides rolling off my tongue, keeping us both loose. If we could laugh at the fuss everyone was making over her, then the fuss seemed harmless enough.

We married just after graduation and my beautiful and much fêted wife followed me to the university. Through my decade of study she typed and filed to help pay the bills. Later I took her to California and made her a member of the middle class. Better than the gas station, better than the secretary's desk. But even on a white collar budget, housewifing is housewifing. It lacked the glamour of June's glorious coming of age. Not that she chafed or complained. It was nothing I noticed on normal days. What I did notice was the way her parties brought back the old shine, how the hostess was a close cousin to the belle of the ball. It didn't seem to matter that she was working harder than anybody.

In normal times June could be scatterbrained, she would forget to pick up Sadie from the skating rink or show up at the dentist's two hours late. She lost her keys all the time and couldn't keep track of the checks she wrote. She was brittle too, couldn't argue with me for more than a minute without quailing and faltering

and going all to pieces. But let her get going on an event and she was like some blurry image snapped suddenly and sharply into focus. She wrote no lists but had every detail in her head. She was orderly, cheerful, calm, equal to any crisis or catastrophe. Her priorities were always right, her timing perfect. She knew what people would mix, she could predict how much everyone would eat and drink, where they would gather, what they would want to do, and when. She wasn't the sort of hostess who rearranges and decorates for a party. She didn't need to, probably because she had arranged our house to absorb large numbers of revelers at any season and for any occasion. She liked to work large. Twenty was intimate to her, forty began to be fun. An hour's notice was as good as a month's. One morning I called from the lab to tell her a biologist from the coast had brought in a big load of fresh crab. Should I bring a few pounds home for dinner? That evening we and fifty friends smashed claws and legs on picnic tables covered with butcher paper and drank beer from kegs. It was a chilly February night and we ate outside, the tables set up around the pool, big fires burning in barrels to keep people warm.

June delegated masterfully, asking the right people for the right contributions and then staying out of their hair, trusting them to do their jobs well. Her unflappable confidence seemed to infect everyone involved in these endeavors, even me, so that I often failed to find the preparations as onerous as I'd feared they would be, and usually had fun at our parties in spite of myself. I was reminded of all this now as June stood in Brook's cramped, inadequate kitchen giving off an exuberant glow, as though the flawed facilities were not a nuisance but the kind of added challenge that made the job worth doing. Her pace was wonderful to watch. She didn't have to hurry because she didn't waste a single movement. She was mellow, efficient, and talkative, working on four things at once as she recalled last year's event and reviewed what various businesses and individuals had donated for the auction. She wanted Sadie and me to taste everything, to see the lovely color of the Japanese eggplants, the size of the peppers, some of the biggest she'd run across in a long time. Now and

then she would come by to see what we were up to and she never failed to be impressed—by my technique for slicing celery sticks, by Sadie’s garlicky hummus. She was a charming woman. And I confess that as I toiled away in that kitchen, chilled by the shadow of my daughter’s disapproval, pricked abdominally by my lust for Brook, I grew gradually more susceptible to June’s ways—I relaxed the old defenses a little and let her good rhythm carry me.

What a beauty she was—still! Her looks were never just a matter of surfaces. They’re the kind that last and last. Excellent bone structure. Rich skin. Also bearing, the way she has of holding herself, back straight, chin slightly lifted, her eyes and her whole face open, as if she accepts that the beautiful have a responsibility to be seen. Today she wore jeans and clogs and a soft brown sweater with a blue denim apron tied at the waist. Her sleeves were pushed up off her forearms. Her sand-gray hair was brushed back, her back was straight as ever, and even when she was looking down at the work in front of her she seemed to have her head tipped back slightly, at her characteristic, elegant angle.

One after another bowls and platters filled with what we made. Soon Brook’s fridge was taxed beyond its modest capacity. I began making wheelbarrow trips up to the zoo kitchen and opening spaces on the walk-in’s metal shelves. That cold capacious room couldn’t be walked in after I finished sandwiching the last dips and salads and finger foods in among the chunks of horsemeat and sacks of roadkill that pleased the palates of Brook’s carnivores.

By now the afternoon sun was filtering through the oak branches. Sadie and June bagged all the fruit and vegetable clippings and wiped off the counters, then went off home to rest and shower and spiff themselves for later. I returned to the lights.

I worked swiftly, the sense of urgency growing with the late-day shadows. I had gotten several spots clamped into place by the time I heard my name rising up from the bottom of the hollow. Once. Then again. Brook’s voice. I descended the ladder and hurried down to the cottage, my heart thumping eagerly.

And there she was waiting for me on the front step, wearing ratty thick socks and her purple dress. I'm not qualified to judge such things, but the moment I saw her in it I could tell the dress was not a very nice one—not a dress-lover's dress. A zookeeper's dress, rather, a dress for one who doesn't wear and doesn't know dresses. The purple was about as subtle as Roy the peacock's tail, and the cut of the dress was trashy in the harmless and comical way of certain adolescent girls who must make propaganda of their new curves. I trust my judgment because it was so instinctive. Along with excitement, the first thing I felt when I saw Brook was pity. That fond, protective pity you feel for one of your children when they unknowingly do something dumb. This didn't dilute my attraction to her but made us more intimate in my eyes, made me a party to her flaw.

Brook's body was thicker below than above, with strong round calves, athlete's thighs and dancer's shoulders, delicate collarbones, modest shapely breasts. And strong back, I soon learned, circling to oblige her when she asked if I would zip her up. That was why she'd called me down off the ladder. I began fumbling with the little zipper, breathing the scent of her freshly shampooed head, and she told me she regretted buying this dress whenever she put it on.

"Why's that?"

"The zipper. Not practical when you live alone."

"Is that an invitation?" I ventured.

"You don't need an invitation, Charlie."

Sometimes the meaning of a remark lives entirely in its tone. If hers had been less chummy, more flirtatious and encouraging, I might not have felt the need to file my first spy report.

"Had an interesting talk with Mackey this morning," I said when we were face to face again.

"What did you find out?"

I told her about the sabotage on the lion trap, and she said she couldn't think who did it. She hadn't heard of anything like that being planned. I mentioned Cory and she showed me both rows of her little teeth.

“Ballsy kid,” she said.

Next I told her about the little boy who had disappeared near the river. “Mackey was heading over to see what he could find out. I told him to keep me posted.”

She slapped me on the shoulder and told me good work, not in a grateful way, more like a coach who praises you for doing as you were taught. “How’s it coming with those lights?”

“Almost done,” I said.

“Great.” She glanced upward and took a deep breath.

“Hey, Charlie,” she said when I turned to go. “You think Kyle’s still planning to come?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

She shrugged her bare shoulders. “Thought he might have been in touch.”

As I trudged back up the hill it felt like falling, each step driving me deeper down on the freshly sharpened spike of pain that rose from the pit of my stomach.

JAMBALAYA

MY LAST NIGHT AT THE ZOO actually began the day *before* Growl, Howl, and Wine—at least by my reckoning. The precise moment would be the one when my gaze first landed on a pair of scissors. I was in the room that housed Verity's cage, holding Kyle's jacket while he and Brook medicated the cub. My bored wandering eyes were traveling across the counter opposite the cage when they spied what looked like a pair of barber scissors, the perfect tool for trimming my badly overgrown beard.

I remembered those scissors this afternoon, as soon as I had finished hanging the last light. I found and sterilized them, and brought them along when I went to the cottage bathroom to perform my toilet. A word of advice to bearded men who lack experience in the grooming of their own facial hair: Do not make your first foray into the fine art of beard trimming on a day when you have to appear in public.

I didn't begin growing my beard until a few years after I hooked up with Jean. She was already cutting what was left of my hair, so it made sense for her to keep the beard in shape as well. I wish she hadn't made it seem so simple. As with most things, balance presented a major challenge. I would snip away at one side, trying to bring it into line with the other. At first I would be too timid, not cutting enough, and the mirror would show me a man with silver icicles hanging off half his face. So I would go back to work and cut too much, the icicles would appear on the other side, the whole process would repeat itself. Ad nauseam. To complicate matters, the beard hair grew in capricious currents, full of whorls and shifts. I foundered quickly but paddled on nevertheless, trying

harder the worse it got, lining the sink with a thickening silver pelt. When I finally let the scissors drop I looked like a man who's spent the night in a gunny sack with a raging raccoon. I was too stunned to consider shaving off the evidence of my clumsy vanity. If not proudly, I wore that mess aptly, like a personal badge.

When I went up to the party area I found June and Sadie busy setting out the food. If I had showed up naked they couldn't have been more disturbed by my appearance. I might have offered them an explanation if I hadn't noticed Jimmy Banks passing through the front gate, a guitar case in one hand and a banjo case in the other. Jimmy is the leader of The Mossback Trio, a hippie country band who supplied all the live music for the revels of my Olives period. I hadn't heard them in years. I hadn't seen Jimmy, known universally as Otter because of the unctuous slippery way he has of cavorting on the stage. Otter's pot belly had grown some and his ponytail was as long and thick as ever, though grayer. He might and might not have recognized me—as always, he called me Man. In any case he seemed entirely unfazed by my badly pruned beard. Behind Otter came his willowy wife Halley, who played fiddle and sang harmonies. Behind Halley came Fred, a jockey-sized man dwarfed by his stand-up bass.

I saw Sadie on my next trip to the walk-in and told her I hadn't known The Mossback would be playing. "Think I can get them to do 'Rollin' in my Sweet Baby's Arms'?" I said.

Judging from her expression I might have named any old song, instead of the one and only song that she had first learned to dance to, the song she and I had always saved for each other when The Mossback played. "Try asking," she said.

I had hoped her shower might melt some of the ice from earlier in the day. No such luck. And no time to fret over it, really, since there was still so much to do. Following June's pleasant orders I trundled back and forth between the zoo kitchen and the buffet tables, I uncovered dishes of food and sliced loaves of bread and yanked the corks out of bottles and bottles of wine. Soon Otter started tickling little licks from his guitar, Halley bounced her

bow across the strings, tuning her fiddle, while little Fred rested his cheek against the curved flank of his colossal instrument. Guests started to arrive. As I studied some of these new faces it dawned on me that at least half of them were old—familiar faces, Olives locals, friends from a former era, aged but not beyond recognition.

The Mossback never believed in easing into anything; they liked to make things jump. Which is what they did with the first few bars of “Jambalaya,” the Hank Williams tune that kicked off the set. I happened to be approaching the party area when they lit into it. The guests were between me and the band, and I could see the way the music put the bounce into everybody. Halley sawed away on her fiddle, her long legs firmly planted and her taut wisp of upper body swiveling and swaying. Otter sang the gleeful chorus in a sweet, crackly, rascal voice that had only improved with age.

Jambalaya, a crawfish pie, and a filet-gumbo
 ‘Cause tonight I’m gonna see my machez amio
 Pick guitar, fill fruit jar, and be gay-oh
 Son of a gun we’ll have big fun on the bayou

Otter was a squat man, a head shorter than his wife. Once the music started he couldn’t be still. When he wasn’t dancing to one side or the other he was frolicking in place, cavorting in that joyful and mischievous way that earned him his nickname.

Old Otter. For me, he had hit the perfect theme song with “Jambalaya.” All those people, all that music, all the memories stirred up from the bottom of the pot. Time just wasn’t tough enough to keep all these ingredients apart, all these pieces of my life tossed together and simmered in music the same vintage as me. I heard Jambalaya and I was thirty-five again, cutting a rug with June at the Shire Road Pub. But also I was ten again and at the Pacific Café, with Hank Williams on the jukebox and my uncle Dale across the table, that sweet, wild, doomed alchy who once in

a great while would whisk me to town for one of those brief high times that stayed with me for weeks after on the farm, carrying me through the boring days and nights. Otter settled into his slippery groove and I thought of Edward who was Otter's biggest fan, who took up the guitar because Otter played it, who insisted we call ourselves Big Otter and Little Otter when we joined a father-son tribe of Indian Guides.

But the memories barely stayed on the palate long enough for me to taste them. Too much else was going on. There were old friends and acquaintances who recognized me, who worked hard not to notice my ravaged appearance as they inquired about my current life or mentioned having seen me in the *Bee*. There was Boyd who arrived with my two granddaughters. Kids are so honest. The minute Ruth and Sylvia saw me they burst out laughing. There was a moment of nostalgic eye contact between myself and June, who also must have been riding the music back to Shire Road. There was the surprise of bumping into the bald healer Val, come to do his part for the zoo. When I tried to pay him for my two consultations he suggested I give the money to Brook.

Then there was Kyle, who appeared in his absurd power suit bearing messages from the outside world. His mother, he told me, hoped to come and visit me at the zoo. Would I consider it? Also, Don Mackey had given him a message for me. Tomorrow morning, eight sharp, down at the Olives Bridge. Something about a press conference. Finally, he had just locked up his first corporate account.

I raised my glass to his success, but faked ignorance when he asked if I knew where Brook was. Not that he could miss her for long, with that purple siren ringing her body all around. She worked the crowd hard while the guests ate finger food and tapped their feet to The Mossback's opening set. Whenever I came close to her she was talking about Verity, about the cost of maintaining another lion, about all the interest he had stirred, the educational opportunity that must be seized.

All this lobbying paid dividends when she stepped up to the microphone after the first set. Auction time. Shrewdly, she had

sandwiched this between the finger food and the main dishes. By now most of the crowd had heard a set of music, downed a glass or three of wine, and swallowed enough hors d'oeuvres to whip the appetite into a froth. They were ready to consume whatever the auction offered up, eager to get the auction out of the way so they could resume their partying.

Brook and June ran the auction together, June showing the crowd each of the donated items and telling them why they couldn't do without it, Brook fielding the bids in her curt, businesslike way. She remained bare-shouldered in spite of the dropping temperature, legs apart, hips forward, mocking that awful dress with her oblivious tomboy stance. June wore a tan cowl-neck sweater that looked like cashmere and a long skirt made of the same stuff. Her hair was pulled back and wrapped in a plum-colored silk scarf. What a pair they made. Pearl and pebble, dandelion and rose, the great failure of my past right next to one I persisted in believing might be the great hope of my future. To see the two of them up there, weirdly linked by the contrast they created, made me weak in the knees.

So weak in fact that I welcomed the sight of Kyle when he joined them near the microphone. He changed the energy, diluted the potion. There was a species of relief in the sight and sound of him inadvertently clowning up there, pitching his product—hair combed, shoes polished, tie cinched tight, hands doing the wrestler's dance. I might have been even more tickled if Brook had showed less interest in what Kyle had to say, in this spiel she had already endured once, this muddy cascade of technical terms that was simply not engaging enough to account for all the attention she gave him.

Vanity is a remarkable thing. In this case mine excused me from facing the unpleasant conclusion about Brook's affections that I had already all but drawn. How? By reminding me of the press conference Don had sent word about, which must portend major developments on the mountain lion front. I couldn't have invented a better pretext than that. Duty dictated that I file a

report with Brook, the sooner the better. Maybe I could fill her in on the dance floor?

For that was the place to catch her. Now that the auction was over, the funds raised and the coffers filled, it was time for her to cut loose a little. She quit talking and started dancing. The Mossback returned, fortified with food and wine. Cheeks flushed, banjo out, fingers ripe for the picking, Otter launched the next set with a hot little bluegrass number that forced several couples to leave full plates on their tables. And the band built from there, they got people swinging and stomping and refused to let them stop. A clueless dancer, Brook passed from hand to hand, banging her partners' knees and bruising their toes as she clunked through song after song. I kept an eye out for her in the breaks between my catering chores. June and I worked by ourselves through this stretch so Sadie could dance with Boyd before he left to put the girls to bed. Those two I watched also. Tall, dapper, stiff, Boyd was made for waltzing and fox-trotting. He tried to give Sadie a proper country swing, but those moves just weren't in his genes. The dance floor might not afford me any chances to accost busy Brook, but it began to look like the place where I might find my way back into Sadie's good graces. Between songs I approached Otter and requested "Rollin' in my Sweet Baby's Arms," hoping to hedge my bet.

Boyd and the children said their goodbyes before long. Sadie went back to work, and I got June's permission to pull her away again as soon as they played our song. When it came on Sadie agreed to give me the dance and it took us no time to find the old form. I make no claim to be a dancer, but when I'm doing the single step I know, the step I learned when I was fourteen or fifteen, the simple country dance Jean calls the Okie One-Step—when I'm doing that I do all right. Funny how the body remembers. Lucky, too, since I was so busy thinking and watching and wondering that I had almost no attention to devote to the nuts and bolts of the dance. Was Sadie warming to me at last? Was she finally having some fun? Or was she just pretending, just indulging me the way she indulged Boyd before, submitting to my annoying wish

to do the same old dance? Where was Brook? Was she still dancing, was she maybe watching, was she maybe thinking that for an old guy I didn't do half-bad? The song ended sooner than it should have, before I could clear my head of all those questions and make room for the music. With a polite smile, Sadie left me and headed off toward the bathrooms. I watched her go and then scanned the floor for Brook. Suddenly it seemed urgent that I brief her about tomorrow's press conference.

The Mossback started playing a slow number, with Halley's soprano in the lead for a change, and I milled among the dancing pairs until I concluded Brook was absent. Next I searched the rooms of the zoo building, thinking she might have cornered a prospective donor somewhere inside. No luck there so I went back outside and set off up the path that led toward the lion enclosure.

The lights I'd strung this morning worked a wonderful change on this section of the zoo. The path I followed was dim and charmed, the thick shrubs hugging either side, the darkened cages where animals slept or waited adding a special spice. As I walked along the music and talk and laughter came to me clearly but felt very far away, as if the sounds traveled across water from another shore, from some mainland where all was bright and festive. Over here an island feeling reigned. The dimly lit path suggested secrets, romantic and furtive doings. No sooner had I thought this than I caught a scrap of human noise somewhere up ahead of me. Probably I knew it was Brook and Kyle. Still, I experienced it as a surprise when I rounded the bend and came upon them dancing close, billing and cooing next to the bench where Brook had awoken me several days before. They didn't see me but I blushed nevertheless, and nearly doubled over from the pang the sight of them sent through my rotting guts.

I was still reeling, pierced by pain and chagrin, when I rounded another bend and happened upon June. She was sitting on a recessed bench that looked down over the barnyard and the bottom half of the hill. Through the branches ahead of her you could see the setting half-moon. June was a great one for moonwatching.

On any given day she could tell you what phase the moon was in, when it would rise and set. I'd forgotten that.

I hovered there a minute maybe before she sensed me and turned. "Hi, Charlie."

"Catching the moonset?"

She patted the bench. "A little break before I pack up. Join me, why don't you."

I sat down and we watched the moon in silence for a while.

"I wonder what the auction brought in," she said. "This had to be the most ever."

"Everybody loved the food."

"You and Sadie made it easy."

"Yeah," I said, "I wish I could say we had fun working together."

June nodded. "I guess she's still upset."

"I keep trying to smooth things over with her, but it seems like I just make it worse."

"It's probably too soon for smoothing over. She's waited all this time to get mad."

"What about you?" I said.

"Me?"

"You still waiting?"

She rested her hand on my knee. "I got mad at you *years* ago."

"That's a relief," I said. "It's just strange, being on bad terms with Sadie. I can't remember it happening before."

"You two always did get along."

"Edward's the one I had trouble with," I said, completing her thought. "Seems like he was always holding some grudge against me."

"And vice-versa."

I glanced at her, then back at the moon. "What would I have been mad at him for? A kid."

"You were a kid too, once. Under different circumstances."

I waited.

"Your folks died when you were five," she said. "Edward's didn't."

"You think I held that against him?"

"Nobody ever abandoned *him*," June said. "What did he have to whine about?"

"Jesus..."

"You think I'm wrong?"

"I'm wondering what I was up to while you were figuring this out."

She lifted her hand from my knee and placed it on my hand. "It's not a race, Charlie."

"So how did you decide to start?"

"Start what?"

"You know, dealing."

She smiled. "Looks to me like you got started a while ago."

"Is that why my life turns into more of a wreck every day?"

"Why, that's not totally true." She leaned her shoulder against mine. "Look at the two of us talking like this. How long has it been?"

How long *had* it been? I didn't know the number of years, but I could feel the weight of them now, and the weight of the last few weeks, the last few hours—my fight with Jean, Sadie's anger, Brook's utter blindness to my foolish crush—all that combining with the weight of June's affectionate shoulder, pushing against the heavy, rusty door that guarded my emotions.

"I killed him," I said.

"Oh, Charlie..."

"He didn't have to go up there like he did. He was proving himself to me."

"To me too. Does that mean *I* killed him? I thought so for a while."

"You thought it was *your* fault?"

"Don't be a glutton, Charlie. You think you can hog all the blame?"

"When I deserve it, yeah."

She picked up my hand in both of hers. “Not all of it.”

At the top of the hill The Mossback was just finishing “Proud Mary.” I waited for the claps and cries and whistles to fade.

“Thought I saw him one time,” I said.

“Only once?”

“I was at a pool. God, how did I get there? That must have been in my wandering days, after you and I split up, when I used to just walk around a lot. Once in a while I’d look up and find myself somewhere, I wouldn’t have any idea how I’d gotten there. That’s how it was with the pool. A public pool, outdoors, the kind where we took the kids for their swimming lessons. People all around, a whole swarm of kids, and here was this boy, this towhead. It was crazy because the kid was nine or ten years old, a lot smaller than Eddie was when... He had these green eyes, you know, they had a spark like Edward’s eyes had, a glint. I don’t know what got into me. I went a little mad. I decided there must have been some mistake, a mix-up, and the body they showed us up in Truckee wasn’t really Edward. And here he was—I hadn’t killed him after all. All I needed was proof that it was him. You know what I thought of? The scar on his upper arm, the vaccination mark. Remember the shape of it? Always made me think of an almond.”

“I remember you saying it looked like that.”

“So I got up close to this kid, and I’m standing there, waiting for my chance, wondering how I’ll get a look at his upper arm. He has this sweatshirt on. Will I push his sleeve up or will I take his whole shirt off him? These are serious thoughts. And then I happen to look up and see this woman eyeing me, wondering what the hell I’m up to, and I realize. The kid’s mother.”

June’s shoulder stayed pressed against me as I told this, and as I went on that whole side of her seemed to fuse to my side, as if each word I said tugged another section of her to me. When I finished she threw her arms around me and embraced me tightly. She had handled losing Edward as well as anyone could. She’d done everything I shirked, the grieving and the talking and the reaching out. But she wasn’t finished yet. I could feel in the tension of her body,

the desperate energy that charged back and forth between us, that the mourning wasn't over for her, she had gone as far as she could go on her own. Having me here, hearing how Edward haunted me, hugging me as she did now—that completed the circuit, brought back a tide of feelings that had been out far too long, a great wave of sadness that frightened me with its force, as if at any second it would tear me off my moorings.

In a panic I searched for something to hold, found June's face and pulled it against my own, my mouth meeting hers in a great fierce kiss that fused us together for who knows how long, a kiss that only ended when we mustered enough simultaneous strength to force ourselves apart. Backs against the bench, we sat panting side by side, appalled, aroused, scared.

How I wish it could have ended there. How I wish we could have sat quietly for a few minutes, letting our lungs find their familiar rhythms, talking a little, coaxing each other back from the edge of whatever abyss we'd all but fallen into. But old engines take on minds of their own. The past few days had got my rusted crank turning again, and this close encounter with June was kindling enough sparks to kick my motor clattering back to life.

Within seconds I went at her again. She raised her hands and shoved me firmly back. As soon as her hands were down I lunged forward again, only to be rebuffed a second time. "*Charlie, stop.*"

I nodded my head, waited for her hands to drop, then lunged. I don't know if she planned this or not, but one of her hands shot past my shoulder this time and chucked me butt-first squarely on the chin.

By now the moon had set, but I saw stars.

PART FOUR

ON THE BRIDGE

I SMOKED MY LAST CIGARETTE WHEN I WAS TWENTY-FIVE. Still, on cool mornings I enjoy the smell of a cigarette burning outdoors. The morning after Grawl, Howl and Wine I was savoring some second-hand smoke as I passed one of the picnic tables out in the middle of Old Olives Park, when the kid doing the smoking said hey.

To me? Thinking that was unlikely, I walked on after a brief pause. But the kid said hey again, louder, so I stopped and looked at him. It took me a second to place Cory. The shaggy hair was familiar, also the big boots. The light finally went on for me when I remembered his mom saying he liked to hang around this park with his friends.

“Going to the bridge?” he said.

“That’s right. They’re about to start. You coming?”

He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Rush to judgment. I don’t want any of that.”

“This is about the kid who disappeared, right?”

Cory dipped his chin—a shorthand nod. “They’re saying a mountain lion did it.”

“Know what kind of evidence they have?”

He smirked. “Go down and hear for yourself. They’re getting ready to tell the TV crews about it. That’s why I’m up here.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m sure they wouldn’t say it was a cougar if they didn’t have some reason.”

“They have all kinds of *reasons*.”

“Don’t you want to hear them?”

He flicked his butt away. “Their reasons aren’t the kind you talk about on TV.”

“Not unless somebody makes you,” I said.

“What, you think *I* can make them tell the truth?”

“Who knows, if you don’t speak up?”

“I speak with actions,” he said, glancing away.

“So I gathered.”

His eyes swung back to me. “How do *you* speak?”

“Me?”

He looked me over as if I’d just appeared. “I don’t remember you saying much when you were at my house. Your partner did most of the talking. You agree with everything he says?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

He tapped a new cigarette out of the pack. “How far would you go?”

I watched him light the cigarette, inhale, then blow two thick streams of smoke through his nostrils.

“They want to string up a mountain lion,” he said. “You going along with that?”

“I need to hear the facts.”

“What if it didn’t touch any child? What if they just want to kill a mountain lion?”

“That’s wrong,” I said, “it’s against the law. Like it was against the law to disable the trap the department set for the lion that killed your family’s goat.”

“What if the law’s wrong?”

“If the law’s wrong, you change it. There’s a process for that.”

“Who has time for a process? Not the killed mountain lion.”

“*What* then?” I said. “If a law’s wrong, break it—is that the solution?”

“Your buddies seem to think so.”

“I’m not as sure about that as you.”

He jerked his head in the direction of the bridge. “Go down there then, see what the plan is.”

“I think I will.”

As I turned to go he said, “What if I’m right?”

“About the rush to judgment? If you’re right about that, I’ll speak up.”

The ballsy kid shrugged. “Maybe they’ll listen to *you*.”

By the time I reached the open air theater I’d mastered the urge to go back and ask for a cigarette. I passed the theater, then the community clubhouse. When I came to the edge of the park I turned right onto Bridge Street. My stomach was starting to hurt.

Bridge Street makes a long gradual curve, so I didn’t see the bridge until I was within fifty yards of it. But the line of cars parked on both sides of the street started well before that. TV vans filled the spaces closest to the bridge. On the bridge itself, out above the middle of the river, a big crowd had gathered. Booms and tripods and cameras and lights loomed over and protruded from the human cluster. Thick cables of many colors ran along the bridge’s wooden planks, bringing juice from the trucks to the cluster and sending sounds and pictures back. When I reached the point where these cables disappeared amid various shoes, I saw that everyone’s attention was directed to the upriver side of the bridge, where three men stood head and shoulders above everyone else, propped on a platform I couldn’t see.

The one I recognized was Cliff Carter, the smooth talker from the Department of Wildlife. On one side of Carter stood a law enforcement guy in a green outfit and badge. On the other side was a guy in a blue suit and red tie.

The law enforcer, a thickset, neckless sheriff’s deputy, was reviewing the facts of the case in that stiff way cops are taught to speak. The individual in question was a young boy, he announced, eight years of age, who strayed from the Gold Rush housing development adjacent to the river parkway with a friend the previous afternoon. At some point in time the two young individuals were separated. One found his way back home, but the whereabouts of the other remain unknown at this particular point in time. The

authorities were alerted as to this situation yesterday evening and have been engaged in a concerted attempt to ascertain the missing individual's whereabouts ever since.

Someone from the press asked if the child had been attacked by a mountain lion and the officer said at this point in time it would be premature to comment on that.

The reporter persisted. "If this wasn't a mountain lion attack, why is the Department of Wildlife here?"

Here Cliff Carter stepped forward. "If you don't mind, Deputy Davis, I'd like to remind the members of the press and the local families who have come out this morning that we lost a jogger to a mountain lion only two months ago, a few miles upriver from here." That day, Carter explained, they made the mistake of assuming the attacker had been human, which ended up complicating their investigation. "We just want to have our people on hand as this unfolds," Carter told them.

My, was Carter slick. Last time I'd seen him he had a ball cap on, but today he had his shiny black hair uncovered for the cameras to see. With that tan, chiseled face, that cleft chin, he was made for TV—the public's ideal protector.

"But do you in fact *suspect* a mountain lion of killing the child?" a reporter wanted to know.

"We know that a mountain lion is in the area," Carter said. "This animal has exhibited some very bold behavior." He told the crowd about Susan and Cory's goat. "That occurred pretty nearby. Close enough to have us concerned."

A murmur went through the outer rings of the crowd. A tall, red-haired man a few bodies in from me yelled out that he and his family lived in Gold Rush, and it was ludicrous he should have to worry about cougars attacking his kids. He wanted to know why the department let this mountain lion thing get so out of hand.

"That's a very, very good question," Carter said. "It's important for everyone to know that the Department of Wildlife is prevented by law from effectively managing the mountain lion population in this state. This law keeps our hands tied until *after*

something happens. Unfortunately sir, the people who should be answering your question are the leaders of the Friends of the Mountain Lion. They wrote the legislation I'm talking about and lobbied intensively to make sure it passed as a ballot initiative." He made a visor of one hand. "Unfortunately, I don't see anybody from the Friends of the Mountain Lion among us today."

Then, smooth as a running back taking a handoff, the guy in the blue suit stepped forward to say that the best thing right now was to let Mr. Carter and Sheriff Davis go ahead and do whatever they could within the framework of existing law. What really had to be addressed, he told this lion-fearing mob, was the procedure for nullifying a law that was about to be proven unsafe and destructive to Californians for a second time in just a couple of months. "We need to talk about keeping our kids safe," he told the crowd. "We need to talk about repealing a law that protects mountain lions but leaves mothers and children vulnerable to attack."

This was Dick Beech, I learned as soon as the questions started coming from the reporters. A state representative from one of the hill counties where they had voted against the hunting ban in the first place. He was here to inform these flatlanders that the problem was not just a hillbilly problem now, it wasn't just sheepfarmers who had to worry about mountain lions, but everyone. Just as everyone, by banding together, exercising their legislative rights, could eliminate this menace once and for all.

That was the basic message. After he repeated it a couple of times I stopped listening and busied myself with noticing all the craft they'd exercised in staging this event. Here we were on the old iron bridge built by Olives' original settlers. A landmark familiar to anyone who'd ever ridden or jogged the bike trail or rafted the river itself. People knew the bridge—it was part of their world, a symbol of what they'd soon be giving up to a bunch of bloodthirsty cougars. Or maybe the bridge signaled transition, a link between here and there. And these three musketeers up on the platform? They were *our* link, our connection to a predator-free future. Or so they would have us believe.

I, for one, didn't believe it, and I didn't like the way they were pulling people's strings here, using this family's misfortune to sell a political plan. My emotions were running hot, stoked by last night's excitements and further fueled now by the pains that pierced my gut.

I turned, ready to stomp away from this scene as Cory had before me, but Don Mackey blocked my path.

"Where do you think you're going, my friend?"

"I need something to eat," I grumbled.

"Well come on then, let's get something quick. We got a lion to catch."

SUFFICIENT GROUNDS

TEN MINUTES LATER Don and I strolled into Sufficient Grounds, a cafe facing Old Olives Park. I had never been here before, and I was only here now because this pain and commotion in my stomach had me wanting to eat something quickly, to see if that might settle things a bit.

We took a table next to one wall, Don facing the street door while I looked back toward the counter and kitchen. The counter was tall and stately, done up like a judge's bench, and the wall behind was painted to look like a row of ivy-covered columns. Between two of the columns a blind Dame Justice stood holding her scales.

From beyond the bench a girl approached us, skinny and ghastly pale. Except for her shoes, which had three-inch platforms and were candy-apple red, she was dressed all in black. For her parents' sake I was glad she had on the black tights: the black skirt was about as wide as a shirt-cuff. Her hair was twice as long on one side as on the other. It was closer to maroon than to any other color I can name.

She stood next to our table for close to half a minute before I decided to quit waiting to be greeted. I asked her if they served bacon and eggs.

"We serve the Subpoena," she said, and reached a twiggy arm across the table to grab one of the folded menus. She opened the menu and pointed with the end of her pen to the place where it explained that the Subpoena was two eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, and toast.

I ordered the Subpoena and Don, who'd eaten already, asked for a cup of coffee. After the girl walked away he pulled out a map of the area and spread it across the tabletop. I followed his thick index finger as it pointed to various spots, each marked with a red X, up and down the river parkway where the department was setting traps. When he saw my questioning look he explained that Seth, the tracker whose dogs had treed Verity's mother, refused to bring his dogs in again for fear the chase might take them across some busy road where they'd be in danger of getting hit. That explained why they would be using traps.

"That's not what confuses me," I said. "I'm wondering why the traps are being set. Nobody has any evidence a mountain lion killed this little boy, do they?"

The girl arrived with our coffees and plunked them down on the map. "You didn't see the tape," she said. She had a way of looking nowhere when she talked, so you couldn't be sure whom she addressed. Maybe she was talking to herself? Before I could decide, she was walking away.

"What tape?" I asked Don.

"Probably a tape *worm*," he said and turned back to watch her make her way to the kitchen. He wagged his head a minute. "I take that back. A tape worm would starve trying to live off a host like that." He took a sip of coffee and turned his attention back to the map. "Now you and me, Sayers, the trap we're going to set up is—"

"I asked you about evidence," I said.

He looked up at me and grinned. "That's the beauty of it, Charles. At this point you don't need much evidence."

"Why's that?"

"Because we got the public will on our side. People want action on this. We have to deliver."

I reminded him that the law forbade taking a lion before it had done anything wrong.

"Depredation on the goat in Olives takes care of that," he said through a shit-eating grin. "Gives us all the license we need."

Pretty soon the girl came with my breakfast.

I pointed at the map. "These traps are going in all up and down the river, on both banks. What guarantee do you have that the right lion gets caught?"

My question hit him like a low-hanging branch. But he recovered quickly. His smile was mischievous, lit with the hope that I was just being sarcastic. When I didn't smile back all the light fled his face. He spoke to me as to a desperately slow student.

"Any lion's the right lion, for our purposes. That's the beauty of it. The lion lovers have their heads in the sand. They're in no position to be crying foul about anything we do now. It's their law that put everybody in danger."

"At least as far as the public's concerned."

"What the public thinks is all that matters," he said with the strained patience of one explaining color to a blind man.

"The truth's irrelevant, I suppose."

Don had known me long enough to realize I was no dummy. He had only been talking to me like a dummy because he'd hoped it was a lack of brains, not an excess of scruples, that was blinding me to the beauty of the present situation. With that hope dashed, he sat quietly for a second and sipped at his coffee. I took the opportunity to work on my Subpeona, which tasted fine but didn't sit well at all.

When Don finally spoke again it was in his most level key. "Sayers, the truth is we have a lion problem here. If we have to use a little sleight-of-hand to make things safer for people, the ends justify the means."

Some of this attitude I recognized, the concern for people's safety that I'd learned over the years was a true part of Don's nature. One of our big responsibilities when we'd worked together had been keeping people safe from sick fish. Don had been zealous about it, even when that meant the two of us going toe-to-toe with rich fish-farmers like Willard Freely, who had a lot of pull at the Capitol. The sleight-of-hand business was new.

I was about to bring this up when the waitress caught my eye. She was standing near the counter, beyond Don, with her back to me. Her right arm was straight down at her side, but her left was raised like the arm of a clock at ten minutes before the hour. I was so struck by the grace and the strangeness of this pose that I didn't really wonder what she might be doing. Not until her head turned slowly to the left, all the way back till she saw me and confirmed I was watching. Then she turned her gaze toward the end of the raised arm. Following, I saw that she was pointing toward a television screen I hadn't even noticed, perched on a wall bracket up near the ceiling.

On the screen I saw the "mountain lion" from that videotape made by Chet Burns, the Marlin Perkins wannabe Don and I had interviewed the week before. They were playing it on the morning news. Don was talking again, but I tuned him out as I watched the brown tabby walking and grooming and lounging in the grass. Ghost cat indeed!

Of course it was possible that Chet Burns had acted on his own, that he had heard about this story and gotten in touch with the TV station himself. It was also possible that the tape Don and I gave Cliff Carter had been kept on hand for just such an occasion, that Carter had leaked it to the media in order to further his designs. I had both possibilities in mind when I interrupted Don and told him to check the TV. I knew where the tape had come from as soon as I saw how purple he turned.

Before he could say anything I excused myself and went to the bathroom, where I wavered briefly above my own dim reflection, then lost my breakfast.

BAITING

DON AND I DIDN'T RECOVER RIGHT AWAY from the newscast we'd glimpsed in the café. That acted like a wedge jammed into one of the narrow cracks between us. With every move we made through that morning and afternoon, the crack widened slightly, the wedge dove a little deeper. First, we went to set up and bait our trap. I thought I might ease things with a little joke, but Don didn't find it funny when I started pointing out that the mountain lion in that video would probably be able to crawl through the spaces in the cage's wire.

I had never worked with a trap of this size before, and in spite of the three-ring circus going on in my stomach I made him show me exactly how the thing functioned. I got only the grimmest kind of smile out of him when I explained that I wanted to master the trap's workings so I could come back and disable it later. I told him I also had subversive reasons for wanting to hold onto the map with the red X's while we drove to the other trap sites to see how things were going. When we were making these rounds, he kept looking for chances to pluck the map out of my hands. But I didn't let him.

Was he right to be suspicious? Probably. Did I mean the things I was saying or was I fooling with Don's head? My own head was light from lack of food and surplus stomach pain. Whatever my motives, the wedge between us deepened. Even so it still took several firm taps from my sarcastic hammer to finally drive our hostilities wide open.

"So, now all we do is wait," I said at the end of the day when we had finished making the rounds. We were sitting in the front seat of the truck beside a river access road. The engine was off.

Don said, "That's right."

"And we'll get a cougar tonight or tomorrow night, and everyone will be paying attention. And they'll see the Department of Wildlife is who really should be managing these cats, and they'll demand their representatives put it on the next ballot. And they will. And hunting will be legalized and the cougars will disappear and we'll all be safe and sound once again."

Don didn't say anything.

"Isn't that the idea?" I said.

"That's the *idea*, yeah."

"Do I detect a shadow of doubt?"

He eyed me a second. "Charles, what the fuck are you up to here?"

"Just want to make sure I'm seeing the whole picture."

"You know what I think?" He exhaled hotly through his nostrils.

"Go ahead."

He glared at me a moment, then looked at the windshield. "Ever since I walked into your office that day and invited you to get involved with this, you've been picking at it. You act like you think it's a bunch of bullshit, but you keep hanging around. I don't need you here. And I don't need you poking holes in every goddamned thing that gets done."

"I'm just asking questions."

Don sighed. "What do you want to hear? You want a guarantee that you're doing the right thing? Can't give you that, bud."

"But you always act so positive about it."

He wagged his head. "*You* know this stuff isn't simple, Charles. It's all kinds of complicated. Let's suppose for a minute we do kill a cougar and everybody's reassured. What does that mean? The hunting issue goes to the state ballot, that's more than a year away. By then most people have forgotten all about what's happening right now. So the law might not be changed. But let's say it *is* changed. How many lions will be taken each year? You know the Friends of the Mountain Lion will do everything they

can to keep that number low. Which means the population won't be affected all that much. And keep in mind that the hunting will go on in the high country, where there isn't any problem with mountain lions and people coming into contact."

"You've thought this through," I said.

"That's what we were trained to do, remember?"

"You've thought it through, and still you're gung-ho about it. Which means there are other angles."

"Maybe it's impossible to manage the mountain lions in this state," Don said. "I still think the department should be in charge of failing at it."

"And *I* still think there are other angles to this."

He was quiet, so I asked him to nod if I was right in thinking Cliff Carter had promised to funnel some of the money from lion hunting licenses toward a new lab. When his nod finally came it was speedy, uncomfortable. Even so I kept pushing. I asked him if he had counted the holes in this lifeboat of his. He didn't respond, so I started to count them. First, in his present position Cliff Carter had no say about how funds were allocated outside his own division. But hey, he was ambitious. A promotion or two, and one day he might actually be in such a position. It was true that if this lion hunt came off as planned, that might give Carter's career a lift. But then Don would have to hope Carter made good on his promise about the funds. Most likely he wouldn't, judging from what we'd seen so far. But even if he did, none of this was going to happen fast.

"By the time it all shakes out," I said, "you'll be one of two things—an old man left high and dry by a young hustler who used him, or an old man who can't profit from his own shady dealing because he's past the mandatory retirement age."

"Can I ask you one more thing?" I said, even though I could tell this was getting to him.

He nodded.

"Be honest. Does it bother you at all that a mountain lion's going to die tonight? Probably not the one that killed that goat.

Because it bothers *me*,” I said as Cory’s face flickered across my inner screen.

I told Don I’d been thinking earlier about Willard Freely, the rich fish farmer who tried to outmuscle us so he could sell the tainted trout he had raised.

“Come on, Sayers,” Don said, slapping the steering wheel with both hands, “you just kicked dirt in my eyes. What are you going to tell me now, I used to have *principles*? I thought you had some yourself, until you took that silly-ass job at Hooked on Fishing and left me hanging out to dry.”

“Still pissed about that, are you?”

“Yes, by god, I am still pissed about it. We were *partners*, Charlie. They decided to screw us and you bent over and took it. I couldn’t believe you took it.”

“You know what I did last night?” I said. “Tried to make out with June.”

He glanced at me, surprised. “Am I supposed to be impressed?”

“No, dumbass, you’re supposed to see that I’m all fucked up, just like you. I don’t know why you ever expected anything from *me*. My whole life I’ve failed at every important thing. My son died because of me. My marriage fell apart because of me. I’ve been miserable as long as I can remember, and now I don’t have a job to distract me from that, and I don’t have shit figured out, and I’m sick of pretending I do. My stomach’s killing me and for some reason I won’t go to the goddamn doctor. I’m fucking lost, got it?”

We were quiet for a full five minutes. Then Don said, “What about that young gal at the zoo? At least you’re making out with her.”

That struck me funny, and I started to laugh. So did Don. It killed my stomach, but I couldn’t stop because he was so funny to watch. That great head of his was all purple, like a big boulder shaken by a seismic event. It bobbed and shuddered as it sunk slowly down into the cavity that yawned between his rising, heaving shoulders. I laughed and laughed, clutching my stomach

in both hands, and I didn't stop laughing until I noticed somewhere in the middle of it all that Don had started fiercely to weep. Tears shot from his eyes like water from a fountain. His whole body shook and shuddered, and awful noises began to rise up out of it. He gripped the wheel in both hands and heaved back and forth, flung by spasms of grief.

I watched with the awe of one witnessing a natural cataclysm. I made no move to touch or reassure him, certainly not while the cries and fumes boiled up out of him, while the spasms wracked his hulking body, building up toward a final, furious outburst that set the whole truck bouncing on its springs. And I kept my distance even after this great crescendo, when shocks turned into aftershocks, brief rumbles and tremors, when shouts gave way to groans, and tears rolled and snot started to run. A pat on the back was not what he needed. I had pushed him to this point, or led him to it. That was the biggest—the only—favor I could do him.

HEAR HIM ROAR

IT WAS GETTING CLOSE TO DARK when Don dropped me off at the zoo parking lot, where Vera was parked. He seemed calm and cleansed after his eruption. He had turned solicitous about my stomach, urging me to let him run me to a doctor. I thanked him but said I had one or two things to do.

I had planned to pay Brook a visit, to update her on all I'd learned. But my stomach was starting to give me serious trouble. Before, there had always been more commotion than pain, and the pain was general and bearable. Today the commotion was a good deal worse and the pains were fairly awful. Every couple of minutes it felt like somebody was jabbing a hot icepick through one of the walls.

I decided to lie down a while, to see if things would settle. But as soon as I got situated in Vera's back seat, head propped on my rolled jacket, legs out straight and hands folded over belly, I began to be visited by thoughts of the previous night. Brook in her trashy dress, pitching the woo with Kyle. Sadie with me on the dance floor, going through the motions, still steamed at me for avoiding Jean. June and I at moonset talking about Edward, standing on common ground at last—until I pulled the rug out from under us. The disappointments and failures, as I counted them up, seemed really to be part of one larger thing, facets of a great flawed stone I'd been carving all my life, a ghastly and worthless ornament that would fit aptly on the lid of my tomb. Ah, my tomb, suddenly it seemed very close, its lid yawning, that dark mouth beckoning as I lay there corpselike in the chill.

Maybe I was improving as a payer of attention. How else make sense of the terror that overtook me now, the same terror I had

tasted the last time I visited Val? That day I couldn't place this familiar feeling, but this evening it was different, the terror swept through me and took me back to a specific night, one much colder than this, so cold in fact that my grandpa insisted I leave the barn and sleep in the house. I must have been seven or eight. There I lay in Daddy's old bedroom, pants buttoned, coat on, shoes tied in case I needed to flee. I dared not close my eyes. My body lay curled like a giant ear, sorting through the sounds of that windy winter's night, sifting for anything, the rattling window, the creaking stair that would be my signal to run. Uncle Norman had warned me he'd be coming, hot to catch me squatting in his room. But Norman only reminded me of what I knew already. Daddy was dangerous. He'd knocked me around plenty of times before, I'd seen him knock Mama, and I knew he had a history of killing little boys. Mama said so when my baby brother came out dead. Not right when it happened, not even at the funeral where we buried the little box. But later, one time when she was yelling at Daddy, saying he had killed my brother by beating on her.

So he got my brother and now he was after me, lurking out there, so patient, waiting for the fear to freeze me good. He had always been after me. Always. Even when I was too big to fear him physically, too rational to believe he was alive. Even when I had escaped his domain, when I had put three major mountain ranges between me and his old stomping grounds. Even when he vanished from my thoughts he figured in all I did, that fear staying with me like the ghost of an amputated limb. Even now, inside the car, inside my belly, and everywhere outside—I was steeped in fear, poached and pickled in it. No wonder I was falling apart. No wonder I had failed with everyone who mattered to me. The only surprise, really, was that I was still here, still able to see this and try to do something about it.

It was urgent that I act. Not someday. Not tomorrow. Now. It was probably better if I didn't go see Brook. What I aimed to do involved breaking a couple of laws. Probably little ones, but there was still no sense tangling her up in that. She didn't need

complications. My main reason for going down there would be to get a pat on the back. Under the circumstances that seemed silly. Brook had her deal with the mountain lions, Don had his deal, Cliff Carter had his, and so did Dick Beech, and Cory, and Chet Burns. This particular piece of it was all mine.

I thought I'd drive over and disable the trap Don and I had set first. Its location was fresh in my mind, I wouldn't even need the map. It was a short trip from the zoo parking lot across Old Olives and down to the river access road that led back to the trap site. But when I got to the access road I found the gate shut and locked. Hadn't figured on that. I left Vera and slipped through the gate's two big bars, setting off on foot.

What an evening. Chilly, clear, with the half-moon above my left shoulder and throwing down light enough to make the gravel road glow dimly ahead of me. My body was innocent of all food and my senses wonderfully keen. I smelled the dusty gravel underfoot, the anise growing nearby, even the river flowing swiftly beyond the mounds of dredged rocks. I heard the hiss of traffic on a downstream bridge. My stomach flipped like a fish.

The trap was a mile-and-a-half in. Thankfully, the last fifty yards the pains that stabbed my gut were sharp enough to eclipse any fear I had of nearing the baited trap. When I got there I worked swiftly. I used a branch to activate the trigger, dropping the metal door with a loud and satisfying clank. I allowed myself a moment to stand there smelling the deer we'd used for bait. Heart, liver, loins, hooves, hide. It made me hungry, sent a little wave of lust down along my thighs. I checked the map for the nearest trap, which was two miles farther down the road I had come in on.

And so off I went to tamper with another piece of government property. I kept my mind off my stomach by projecting myself into the next morning, when I would wander into the Department of Wildlife compound, worn out, dirty, and triumphant. I would go straight to Cliff Carter's office and defiantly confess my crimes. Or, better, I would call one of the TV stations and make my confession on the air. I would have to wait awhile for the TV crew to show,

which would give me time to drop by the Hooked on Fishing office and shoot the breeze with Emilio, who had replaced me behind the big desk. But pretty soon Shirley from Public Safety would come in and say she was ready for me. Didn't I know she was on the news now, working for channel thirteen? I didn't, but I congratulated her and said it came as no surprise to me, I always knew she'd get a break. She took my arm and led me out to where they had set up the lights and camera.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would say, squinting into the lights, I have a confession to make. First of all, pardon my appearance, but I've been running around all night through the countryside along the river. Why was I out there? Because I happened to know that as many as ten traps had been set to catch a mountain lion, any mountain lion. Now I know most of you are convinced a mountain lion killed that boy who disappeared, and possibly one did. The fact is there's not enough evidence right now to say one way or the other. And yet your Department of Wildlife is going right ahead, knowing they've got public opinion on their side, knowing that most people want to see a lion strung up for what happened to that boy.

Shirley said, Mr. Sayers, you mentioned something about confessing?

That's right. I want to confess to tampering with government property, and whatever other crimes they decide to charge me with. I went out last night and sprung all their traps before they could string up an innocent lion.

Wasn't that risky?

I guess I thought the alternative was riskier.

What alternative?

Before I could answer, a scream sucked me right out of my reverie. Not a person's but a mountain lion's, that fierce, chilling sound that I had heard Laurel and Joshua make several times during my days at the zoo. It brought the hair up all across my shoulders. I stood still a moment, getting my bearings, realizing I'd covered quite a bit of ground. I turned to my right and left the road, walking in the direction of the scream.

The moon gave me all the light I needed to read the uneven terrain. I tried to walk quietly, avoiding brushpatches and the high piles of loose rock when I could. When I had to cross one of the piles I would crouch down and let my hands help with the walking. There was no real pain in my stomach now, just pressure, a lot of it, and a kind of angry heat. I didn't even try to resist it. It had me, just as the lion had me, drawing me to it with a second appalling scream.

This one was louder, closer, out ahead of me and to the left. I set my course by it and tried to follow as straight a line as I could. I walked under a stand of oaks where it was very dark, then crossed a shallow dip. The next scream came from so close I almost thought it was behind me. I was making my way through another stand of oaks and I barely paused, pulled forward as if by fate's fingers.

The trees stopped at the edge of a small clearing where the trap had been set. I paused a moment and tried to put a lid over the building pressure in my stomach. Also I studied the cage, looking for the caught mountain lion, seeing for the first time that I had come here to free it, that if ever I were going to release this pressure inside me this was what I must do. To spring the traps, to prevent the crime was not enough. The deed was done and I must undo it. I was grateful for the chance.

The cat was full-grown, crouched so low it appeared to be a feature of the land, a long low rock curving up from the earth. I had taken several steps forward before I saw that it was not in the trap, but beside it. The ears were pinned back and it was looking right at me, about to spring. I stopped. My bowels loosened, my shoulders rose up toward my ears. I swallowed hard, pushing the heat and pressure back down to my stomach, glimpsing the cruelty of the joke I'd played on myself, and tasting the dark justice of it. As if I deserved a chance at redemption. As if I deserved anything but this. I pivoted on one foot, turning back toward the trees.

Number one, I heard Shirley say, do not run away. Running may stimulate a mountain lion's instinct to chase. Number two, don't crouch or bend over. A person squatting or bending over

looks like a four-legged prey animal. Three, do everything you can to appear larger. Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you're wearing one. Wave your arms and speak firmly in a loud voice.

I felt the cat behind me, locked into the pursuit now, creeping along with small steps. I felt myself shrinking, melting like wax in a fire, not heeding Shirley's words but obeying the law of an ancient dance, dropping to one knee, hunching my back over, raising my arms in some futile attempt to protect my head. All resistance was draining away. I was not really fleeing the cat, but inviting it. There was something delicious in this succumbing, like letting a wave pick up your body and carry it away, like finally getting what you deserve.

I turned back just as the cat sprang toward me, coming for the kill, and I stood up tall to embrace my fate, flinging my arms wide, standing on my toes as whatever had been building inside my stomach erupted. A dark, violent concoction, a witch's brew of terror and rage rose from some secret cauldron, surging up out of me and storming the clear cold air, forming the most fearsome sound I ever hope to hear.

PART FIVE

THE RESCUE

LUCKILY, DON TOOK ME SERIOUSLY when I was threatening to throw a wrench in the works of Cliff Carter's scheme. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here. The idea of keeping an eye on me came to him at the end of the day, he later explained to me, after he'd dropped me off at the zoo parking lot and started to head home. He was halfway home when his misgivings got the better of him and he decided to turn around and come looking for me. I'd worried him with the corrosive comments I'd been making since breakfast, the odd way I'd been behaving. Also my stomach troubles weighed on his mind.

So he drives back to the zoo parking lot, sees my car there, and decides to wait a while to see if I return. He parks around the corner, not knowing I'm in my car, lying down in the backseat. He waits half an hour or so. Next thing he knows my car is moving. He never saw me get in the vehicle but now I'm behind the wheel, going someplace. He follows me down to the river access road, where I park outside the locked gate. Then he takes off on foot after me, not needing to follow too close because he knows where I'm headed. He didn't intend to catch me red-handed or even to stop me. It seems I'd managed to shake his faith in Carter pretty badly. Enough that he couldn't convince himself what I was up to was wrong.

Good thing he *was* following me, and good thing I'd given him the EnCompass Kyle had given me. When that cougar started to scream, Don assumed, like I did, that the animal was already trapped. He saw me leave the road and figured I planned to free it. His idea was to overtake me and talk me out of it before I could

begin the job. So it came as a surprise to us both that the animal was still loose.

Not that he ever saw the cat. He was too far behind me to witness the big showdown. Still, the noise I made came through to him loud and clear. When I asked him about it, saying it was the last thing I could remember, he got very uncomfortable. He shook his head, looking like he might say something, but in the end he just released a big puff of air.

By the time he reached the clearing the mountain lion was gone, driven off it seems by my gruesome bellowing. I was lying in a heap on the ground, unscratched, but also unconscious and bleeding internally through the hole that chose this moment to bore clean through my stomach wall and unleash major havoc in my guts. Cleverly, Don activated the emergency signal on my EnCompass. This set off all kinds of bells and whistles on the PNS of everyone in our Clan Plan, and notified various authorities of my exact position on the grid. Like a hero, Don then hoisted me over his shoulder and carried me out to the gravel road. Don is mighty, but not too fit. When the paramedics arrived it took them a few minutes to figure out which of us was the patient.

He shared all this with me the second time he visited the hospital. The first time was shortly after my surgery, and I was so looped on pain drugs I could barely say hello. I do remember seeing his enormous head hovering nearby, framed and backlit by the window of the hospital room.

Of course things began to clarify after a couple of days, but it took quite a while to sort it all out. First I had to get over the disappointment of finding myself alive. This I seemed to view as some sort of failure, mission unaccomplished. Before long disappointment gave way to elation, the kind of giddy disbelieving amazement of a kid who finds himself locked overnight in an ice cream factory. But that too ended. Life, relentless and real, re-absorbed me eventually—it closed in all around me just as the new tissues did, growing tough and tender where the surgeons had opened my hide.

SADIE

MY FIRST STOP ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY couldn't be beat for aptness. Sadie invited me to convalesce in one of the two upstairs bedrooms in the house on the hill. My granddaughter Ruth may sleep in that room now, she may have filled it with her stuffed animals, her figurines and posters of shapely horses, but I doubt I'll ever stop thinking of the room as Edward's, since he slept there almost every night of his life.

I was grateful for the invitation. It bought me the time I needed to get clear of the pain drugs and ponder my next move. Also it gave Sadie and me a chance to talk. Initially we talked about mountain lions, a subject that interested her more than I knew. She had a curious take on these creatures. As far as I could tell the whole thing interested her mainly as it related to me. Ghost cat is certainly the best term to describe what mountain lions are to her. Ever since I'd found Verity in the den that day several weeks before, she'd been convinced that the mountain lion is a kind of totem animal to me. She believes firmly and literally in reincarnation and she saw that cat as our Edward in another form. All mountain lions were related to me in what she called the "spirit sense," which explained why I got caught up in the whole controversy in the first place.

In spite of all I've been through, this way of thinking remains pretty much alien to me. Her beliefs do have a kind of logic to them, I can see it, but I still can't buy into it as willingly as she does. I can't believe. Yet I think that in the past I was so quick and so content to disbelieve that I ended up cheating myself of something valuable. Brook pointed out to me that the mountain lion lives in our North American minds as both villain and victim.

I thought about that while I lay mending, about Edward's death and what it did to me after, the way it burned me with the villain's brand. Also I thought of the remoter past, the farm memories that visited me while I was bedded down in Brook's barn, the old fear of my murderous daddy that after all those festering decades had finally come to light. Was I a victim too? If so, didn't that mean Sadie had a point? My kinship with the cougar was strong.

We chatted about this and other matters when she came up in the mornings with my breakfast and the paper. On the second or third morning the paper was already open to an article she wanted me to see. I hadn't made it more than a few lines down before she'd started to summarize the thing for me, explaining how they found the boy who had disappeared by the river. Turns out it was a family drama. His mother had snatched him and hidden him away down around Fresno somewhere, striking back at the father and stepmom, who'd proved her unfit the year before in an ugly custody trial.

"Jesus," I said. "What a species."

Sadie wondered why I wasn't more pleased by the news. The child was not dead after all. This cleared the mountain lions and put Cliff Carter on the hotseat, didn't it?

I reminded her that Carter and Beech had already backed away from their original position. Carter knew better than to keep pushing when they didn't have any evidence. A couple of days before, the two of us had marveled over his exchange with a reporter who tried to pin him down on the bogus lion video. He dodged the questions like a pro.

"He *is* something," Sadie said, shaking her head.

"And he *did* get his lion."

She took the paper from me and started flipping through the pages. "That reminds me. There's a letter to the editor about that, saying they have no way of knowing if the lion they got was the one that killed those people's goat. They trapped it twenty miles up the river, on the opposite bank. Guess who the author is," she said, eyeing me.

I felt the blood coming into my face.

"Brook London," she read from the paper, "Olives Zoo. She's calling for a public necropsy."

“Sounds like Brook.”

Sadie’s dark eyes settled on me. “Dad, did you have feelings for Brook? Do you, I mean.”

My face answered for me.

She smiled. “I don’t know why I didn’t realize. I mean, I must have known at some level. Otherwise I wouldn’t have been so mad at you.”

“Because of the age thing?”

“That, yeah. But also the speed of it.”

“I was looking for a lifeboat, I guess. It was like you said when you came to the zoo and chewed me out. I was hiding.”

“Listen,” she said, her brow curdling. “About that...”

“Don’t apologize.”

“But—”

“No. I’ll bet I know the first thing you thought after you found out I was in the hospital and heard how I got there. You thought it was your fault, didn’t you? I did a crazy thing because you were ticked off at me.”

She glanced at me, then away.

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” I said. “You took me in because you felt bad?”

“You make it sound so cut-and-dry. That was probably *part* of it.”

“Just like you were part of what I did that night. A small part, really. A lot less than you think.”

I looked at her and she looked at her lap. “Anyway,” I said, “concerning Brook. You’ve got nothing to worry about. She’s hot for Kyle.”

Now Sadie looked up. “Jean’s really pleased. She met Brook at the hospital.”

“I didn’t know Jean was there.”

“She was keeping a low profile. Didn’t want to upset you.”

“That was considerate.”

And more than I deserved, I could hear us both thinking as she cleared the breakfast things away.

DON

I DON'T KNOW WHICH OF US WAS MORE AFFECTED by the sight of his old colleague and chum surrounded by stuffed animals and various pretty horses. My tender incision was all that kept me from laughing out loud when Don walked through the door and stood there like a hippo in a china shop.

Seconds before, when I'd heard him begin clumping up the stairs, I'd realized for the first time I had nothing for him to sit on. Sadie usually sat on the end of the bed while we visited, but if Don did that he'd turn the thing into a catapult and fling me through the window. By now I'd remembered the rocking chair on the landing. I told Don to go get it. He set it up to one side of the bed, a few feet away from me, and I waited for him to get situated before I confirmed that there was something heavy weighing on him.

Thinking a task might relax him, I said it would probably be a good idea for him to show me how to use the EnCompass. That way I'd be able to save my own ass next time.

He laughed in agreement and relief. Moving the chair closer, he started introducing me to the gismo's buttons and displays. Before long I became impatient. I reminded him I'd had stomach surgery, not a lobotomy.

"Actually, that's about all there is to it," he said, pulling the user's manual out of his pocket and dropping it on the dainty nightstand. "It's all in there if you get confused."

He laid the EnCompass atop the user's manual and I asked what news he brought from the mountain lion wars.

Sitting back, he folded his great hands in his lap. "Haven't been paying much attention, to tell the truth."

“No?”

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m trying to redirect.”

“Don’t retire, redirect. That’s one of Jean’s big slogans.” The second I said her name he winced like someone had stepped on his toe.

“Where’d you see her?” I said. “The hospital?”

His hands unfolded and fanned out at me. “Don’t get mad, Charles. She’s just concerned about you. I don’t know what you’re so touchy for. I didn’t say word one about you and that gal from the zoo.”

I gazed out the window across from the foot of the bed.

“Truth is,” Don said, “she’s dying for news about you.”

“She talks to Sadie, doesn’t she?”

“Sure she does. But last night I mentioned I was coming over here and she said to make sure and let her know how you’re doing.”

“Last night?”

“Yeah, I was over by the place.”

“What for?”

“Jean’s loaning me some books.”

“Well well,” I said, “you *are* redirecting.”

He tugged on his ear, looking at his lap.

“So what are you going to tell her?” I asked.

“I’ll say you’re getting better. Acting like your charming old self again.”

I smiled.

“I wish I could tell her you’d be getting in touch soon. She really is worried about this, Charles. I think she’s feeling—I don’t know, kind of responsible. Like she drove you away.”

Kyle had told me something similar, but it was somehow heavier hearing it from Don. He had no ulterior motive for getting me back over to Jean’s. He was the last person I suspected of taking me on a guilt trip, which meant his words caught me off-guard. It suddenly seemed important that I set the record straight about myself and Brook. I told him there had been nothing between the

two of us and admitted I might have misled him into thinking otherwise.

“That’s a relief,” he said then, shaking his head.

“How come?”

“Didn’t you know? She’s all hot and heavy with Kyle.”

JUNE

FROM THE DAY KYLE AND JEAN FIRST SPRANG THE ENCOMPASS on me, I had dismissed it as the latest in a long line of gadgets we could all do without, giving zero thought to the little machine as an actual asset. Since it had probably saved my life, and since I had a good deal of time on my hands, I now considered it.

The thing would obviously be useful to a person in unfamiliar surroundings, or to a chronically disoriented person who gets lost all the time even in his home town. It could also save a delivery driver or service person a lot of thumbing through old fashioned street guides. But for Charlie Sayers, who rarely strayed from his own deep and well-worn ruts, a plain old map was a perfectly satisfactory and much more economical navigation tool.

Then there was the gismo's other feature, the signal tracking technology that enabled the Big Sky Clan Plan. In the past, I would have felt nothing but scorn for a system that allowed other clan members to monitor my location simply by punching my initials into their machines. But now, immobile and isolated, I occupied myself by checking the whereabouts of various kith and kin who'd agreed to join our clan when they bought the EnCompass from Kyle.

Just now I was monitoring June's progress across Olives. I watched the pulsing asterisk that represented her leave Bridge Street and head out of Old Olives; watched it wait at the stop light before continuing down Sadie's street and turning up the private drive. The trip from the parking area up to my recovery room was too short to register on the system. So I just sat and watched that pulsing asterisk, my mind totally blank when it should have been

preparing for this encounter with the person who now knocked on the actual door.

I stowed the EnCompass and called for June to come in. She sat down in the rocking chair. As she was inquiring about my recovery I watched her looking around the room, noticing things and, if my hunch was correct, digging down to the decorative stratum just below the current one.

Seeing my chance, I asked if she remembered the dark brown carpet that used to cover the floor.

Of course she remembered it, like she remembered trying to talk Edward into something else. “He wanted shag,” she said. “I never liked shag. But it *did* go with the wallpaper.”

I’d been worried all morning about her visit, the first time we would meet since the night I tried to mash her at the zoo. But now here we were collaborating, rebuilding Edward’s bedroom from memory. With the dark brown shag went the wallpaper with its earth colors and safari theme, lions and tigers and cheetahs (oh my), also gazelles and antelopes. Hanging by its curled tail from a hook in the ceiling, the stuffed iguana we brought him from Mexico. On the dresser (to June’s perpetual dismay) the heap of nuts and bolts and nails and tin cans and whatever else caught his eye along the roadside between here and his elementary school. His junk collection, he called it. The globe. The desk. The fishtank. The closet stuffed with...what? (Neither of us ever really knew.) The stickers plastered over every square centimeter of the doorframe. And the posters—of sports stars in the early days, then of Farrah Fawcett and other chickies, finally of long-haired guys with guitars.

This excavation warmed us up a little, loosened my tongue enough to bring up my misconduct at the zoo.

“Listen,” I said, “the other night, after the auction. The way I behaved, there’s no excuse.”

June’s eyes widened. “I was going to say sorry to *you*.”

“For what?”

“The way I took off, that wasn’t very nice. I knocked you out and just left you there.”

"It was probably better that way," I said. "At least I didn't have to face you when I came to."

"Well, I want you to know I did come back for you, but you were already gone." She thought a moment. "It was so strange, Charlie. I think I really scared myself. I hit you and then I was off like a shot."

"Afraid I'd hit back?"

"Afraid of how *good* it felt," she said. "Too bad I didn't knock you out a long time ago. Might have saved the marriage."

We laughed together.

"In a way," June mused, "I feel like I've stayed married to you all this time."

"What way?"

"Well, I haven't remarried, that's obvious. I've met a couple of really nice men, but... I don't know. Something's held me back."

"What?" she said, reacting to my face. "Surprised?"

"Frankly, yeah. I thought I was the one who hadn't moved on."

"There are different ways of stalling," she said.

"But you've worked on all this stuff."

"I *have* made progress. Some."

"But you seem so upbeat all the time."

She nodded, and for the first time ever I saw in her face something of the old woman she would become. "Even when I'm not. That's a problem."

I didn't know what to say next. Little tremors of fear started moving through my nervous system, relatives of the larger dread that invaded me when June had embraced me on the zoo bench, when I'd felt the heavy pull of her sadness.

"What's wrong?" she said.

I shook my head. "Remember when we were standing in the yard that day, up here on the hill, looking at the storm clouds over the mountains?"

She turned to the window, which looked in that direction. "When I said it was over between us?"

“The way you said it I’ll never forget. You had such conviction. I knew it was true.”

Still she looked at the window.

“You surprised me,” I said.

“How?”

“The way you spoke the truth. The strength of that. I didn’t know you had it in you, but when I saw that I was relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Because Edward was dead, and that just bewildered me. It was up to you to mourn him properly. I knew you would. I’m not saying that was fair,” I added.

Now she turned back toward me. “Why do you think of this now?”

“It made me nervous, you talking about your struggles. That’s a part of you I haven’t wanted to see.”

She was right not to say anything, to let this moment unfold. As we sat there quiet and still I had the sensation we were moving, as if on tiptoe, gingerly, cautiously, like travelers crossing a rope bridge that spans something deep. That lasted until she reached out and gave the bedside a light slap.

“I really like Jean,” she said in a kind of confidential voice.

“You’ve met?”

“Spoke to her some at the hospital. She’s feisty.”

“She is. But the two of us together, I don’t know...”

“Oh, I think you make a good pair.”

“Based on what?”

“A lot in common.” She looked me in the eyes, nodding. “We had a pretty long talk, Jean and I.”

“And?”

“She told me about the way Kyle’s father took off. Also how her father died. I guess you pointed out to her that those things were affecting the way she acted with you—the stomach stuff.”

“She agrees with me on that?”

“Now she does. She only wishes you could have told her in a different way.”

"What do you think?" I said.

"I suppose the important thing is *that* it came out, not *how* it came out. And what you do now."

"Any suggestions?"

"I think you know how important this time coming up is for the two of you." Her eyes held mine long enough to confirm that I caught her meaning.

"I *would* like to know one thing," she said.

I nodded.

"Do you feel any different?"

"Different?"

"After all that's happened."

I reflected a minute. "I guess I do. I can't really explain it, though."

"I feel different," she said as tears flashed into her eyes.

"How?"

Emotions moved across her face like strong weather. "Charlie," she finally said, "were we *ever* friends?"

"Before now?" I said, taking the hand she offered.

"The other day," I said after a minute, "getting ready for the auction. I enjoyed that, being in your kitchen."

"I liked having you."

"It's your element," I said.

She nodded.

"The lab was my element," I told her.

"It was tough on you, losing that."

"I'm just starting to see how tough."

She squeezed my hand, feeling for me.

"Then again," I said, "maybe it was for the better."

"How?"

"Would I be here, would *we* be here, like this, if the lab was up and running? If I could keep my eyes glued to the microscope all day long?"

"That's a good way to look at things, Charlie."

"Maybe that's what's different," I said.

“What?”

“My way of looking at things.”

Even my way of looking at you, I thought, for her beauty was
no hazard to me now.

APPETITES

I HAD SPENT NEARLY A WEEK RECUPERATING in Edward's bedroom and in all that time I hadn't once wished I was anyplace else. But the minute June left me that changed. I had my first hunger pang since the surgery. Odd, since Sadie had fed me lunch only an hour before June's visit. Now Sadie was out, Boyd was still at work, and the girls were doing whatever they did after school. I was alone in the house and a long way from any food.

To distract myself I lifted the EnCompass and punched in June's initials. The screen showed me the streets around Sadie's house, the pulsing asterisk still parked up here at the top of the hill. Next I punched in Jean's initials, but the picture on the screen stayed the same. I laughed a little at this malfunction, hearing Kyle's exuberant voice talking up his "quality product."

The hunger reasserted itself, urging me to hazard a trip to the kitchen downstairs. The trip was not a long one. It might be good for me, I reasoned, to test myself on the stairs. A trial run seemed in order. After all, I couldn't camp out in Ruth's bed forever. The stitches in my belly were the only worry. I'd be fine as long as I didn't jostle them too much.

And so it was with great gingeriness that I extracted myself from the bed and set off toward the staircase. At the top of the stairs I paused to solidify my equilibrium. But soon a sharp hunger pang goaded me downward. At various points during my slow descent I imagined I heard voices below, but I was too concerned with my stitches to realize I was catching snatches of a conversation between June and Jean. The voices were only voices until I arrived at the kitchen and saw the two chief women of

my life talking like cronies or conspirators in the breakfast nook. This explained the picture the EnCompass had shown me just before.

"How's *that* for a coincidence," June said as I shuffled toward them. "I was on my way out when I met Jean coming in. I was just getting ready to come upstairs and see if you were up for another visit."

I sat down at the table. "She never could lie worth a damn," I said to Jean.

They both laughed, while I resisted on account of my stitches.

"What are you doing down here?" June said. "You're not supposed to walk down stairs yet, are you?"

"I got hungry."

"That's a good sign," June said, standing. "I'd be glad to make you something, but I'm supposed to meet a customer in a few minutes."

"I'll cook him something," Jean said, rising. "You go ahead." She walked June to the door. She had wool slacks on, dark blue, and a sweater of the same color. Under the sweater she wore an ivory silk blouse. Its collar lay open like some soft flower in the wide V of the sweater's neck. When she sat back down her nervous fingers began playing with the collar.

"Looks like you made a friend," I said.

She nodded. "June's a terrific person."

"You seem surprised."

Jean gazed at her lap a minute, then raised her eyes to me. "Maybe I am. She *is* a lot different than I imagined."

"Different how?"

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I never expected her to be rooting for you and me."

"You thought she was against you?"

"She was, in a way. I don't mean she disapproved of me or even thought about me. But she *was* against me."

"The way Joe was against me, you mean?"

She nodded, laying her hand on the table. "My father was against you too, in that kind of way."

My informants had told me Jean was thinking along these lines. Still, it pleased me to get this straight from the source.

"Can I ask you a favor?" I said.

"Right, your food," she said, popping up from her chair. "What would you like?"

"Make it something easy on the stomach," I said. We both got a kick out of that.

She stood in front of the fridge awhile, running through my options, and once we'd settled on scrambled eggs she set briskly to work.

"I don't know why I'm hungry," I told her. "Lunch wasn't that long ago."

"It's a good sign, like June said. Your appetite's coming back."

And not just my appetite for food, I was thinking as I watched her trim strong body reach into oak cabinets and flit along the tile countertop and bend over low drawers. Foolish as it was, my crush on Brook had served the vital purpose of priming my carnal pump.

"I hear you met Brook," I said, catching the first whiffs of olive oil warming in the pan.

Jean was busy at the stove but she gave a vigorous nod. "She's been just great for Kyle."

"He moving to the zoo?"

"I don't know what the plan is."

She stayed quiet while she beat the eggs and poured them from bowl to pan. Then she glanced over at me. "There's still a lot to sort out with Brenda."

"Sure there is."

I kept my eyes on Jean while she coaxed the eggs to fluffiness. She had been to the house on the hill a few times during our years together, but no more than was strictly necessary. She had certainly never assumed this kind of command over the hearth of my former family. As I relished the sight of her now, I also appreciated

the significance of seeing her *here*, so far inside my old defenses. I had thought we'd have a terrible load of hurts and angers to sort through when we saw each other again, but it seemed we had done much of the sorting separately.

She brought a steaming plate of eggs and toast and watched with obvious pleasure as I set to.

"You know what June told me," I said when my plate was clean. "We were upstairs talking, having a kind of heart-to-heart. She said she feels like she's stayed married to me all this time."

Jean nodded.

"Not literally, you know. Just that she wouldn't let herself get attached to anyone else. Not all the way."

That was out of my mouth before I realized where I was going.

"I don't know," I said, "I guess I had some of that too. I think our marriage is really over now."

In all the time I had known Jean I'd never been the first to bring marriage into a conversation. And once the topic had been broached Jean had always been last to let it drop. Today she never even picked it up, though I did see the temptation in her mouth, saw her debate with herself over whether to say anything, watched her decide to hold her tongue, saw her see I knew what she was thinking and answer my smile with a smile of her own.

Here she got up and came to me, put my head against her breast and told me how relieved she was that I'd survived. From the midst of that fragrant cuddle, survival did look like a hell of a deal.

LEAVING

AROUND EIGHT O'CLOCK THE NEXT MORNING I took my first steps outside the house on the hill. Doctor's orders prevented me from getting behind the wheel, so Sadie had to drive me over to the zoo.

She dropped me off at the main gate, which I unlocked with the key Brook had given me. I relocked the gate and turned to find Roy the peacock standing before me, his grand tail unfurled and quivering. I answered his greeting with a bow. Next I set off looking for Brook, with Roy in tow. The main building was locked up tight so I started down the nearest path, expecting to find her hard at work on the other side of every bend I entered. I passed Myrna the fox and her pups, the dog-wolves Gilbert and Sullivan, Alfonse the bear, and stopped to pay my respects to Laurel and Joshua as they munched their morning grass. It was good to see the old gang again.

But where was the boss? Not in the main building, not on any of the paths, not in the pasture or barn. That left the cottage. I was a little nervous knocking, since I'd seen Kyle's car in the parking lot. Could they be in bed at this hour?

No, but it was almost as surprising to find Brook at the kitchen table this late in the morning. Usually she had several hours of work behind her by now. She was in her zoo clothes, Kyle in a robe, and the breakfast dishes were still on the table. My arrival seemed to spoil some kind of lovers' trance. As soon as I came in Kyle glanced at the clock and started fretting about how late he was. He flew off toward the bathroom and Brook, also shifting into a different gear, asked me if we could walk and talk.

I accompanied her up the hill, trying my best to keep up. I answered all her inquiries after my health and said I'd seen her letter in the *Bee*.

Verity's conjunctivitis had pretty well cleared up, but he was still getting his drops. As on our first meeting, Brook held him while I squirted. It amazed me how much he'd grown in such a short time. When we got him back in the cage I told her I wanted to ask a favor.

"Shoot," she said.

"I'm interested in volunteering here, on a long-term basis. Think you could use me?"

"You're always welcome here, Charlie. I've told you that before."

"I won't be able to start for a while."

She gave a curt nod. "You just concentrate on getting better. We'll be here when you're ready. But you have to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"No more hero stuff. You're lucky to be alive, you know."

She spun then and darted off toward her next task. But after a few short steps she stopped and spun back. "I feel lucky too, Charlie."

"For what?"

"Lucky you showed up here in the first place."

"Why, because I brought you Kyle?"

"Yeah, but even before that. I'd forgotten how good it is to share meals." She darted back toward me, popped up on her toes, and kissed my cheek. "Get better fast."

My heartrate was back to normal by the time I reached the cottage. Kyle was out of the shower and hustling to get dressed. No suit today—just jeans and a sweater. When he said he was heading back to the house for some desk work I asked if I could bum a ride.

"Hey," he said, "sure thing. You know Mom's teaching today, right?"

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I thought maybe you were planning to talk to her.”

“Just chucked my plan. I’m improvising.”

“Okay then,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind if I do some business on the road.”

Actually, I preferred it. I could use a little time to think before I had to face the implications of my recent snap decision. I was in no hurry to get to the house, so the traffic didn’t bother me at first. I didn’t fight the slow pace of the heavy, viscous stream. Instead I reflected on our Sacramento traffic, how it had always irked me so deeply even when it didn’t impede me, how I would rail against this horde of hill-dwellers as I whizzed past in the opposite direction on my morning commute. Kyle knew perfectly well how to go with the traffic’s tarry flow. He worked his phone incessantly, wheeling and dealing as the car inched forward.

His busy energy made me aware for the first time all morning of my own fatigue. Last night I hadn’t slept much at all. Jean’s visit had bothered me profoundly. I had spent a perfectly peaceful week in little Ruth’s bedroom, but when I returned there after bidding Jean goodbye, the whole setup suddenly struck me as deeply embarrassing. I cast my gaze about the room and it all seemed absurd to me, a grown man in a child’s bed, seeking solace amid stuffed animals and dainty things. Grown man? Scarred child, scared lover, regretful father rooming with his son’s ghost. The only way I could convince myself to get into the bed again was by vowing that this would be my last night on the hill. In recent weeks I’d given my past a good going over. The time had come to knock some kind of future into shape.

It took me about five minutes to decide I wanted to work on a regular basis at the zoo, and another five to be sure I wanted Jean to be my wife. The rest of the night, when I wasn’t tossing and turning and watching the clock, I entertained a long series of erotic scenes, all of them set in the kitchen downstairs and featuring myself and Jean, her silky collar unfurling...

My plan had been to call Jean at the end of this day, once she'd returned from school, and arrange my relocation. But when the prospect of riding over with Kyle suddenly appeared, it seemed too convenient to pass up. Now, as we sputtered along with the sun at our backs, Kyle stopping and starting, conducting his frenetic business by my side, I let my bleary eyelids dip, let my chin get heavy, let my mind lift all the other cars off the road so we could whiz without pausing to our destination. The ride I dreamed us was pleasant as could be, but the arrival was different. When we pulled into the driveway of the house I knew instantly something was wrong.

"Wait a minute," I said, wondering why the driveway seemed so awfully bare. "The fruitless mulberry. It's gone."

"That tree?" Kyle said. "Mom had me chop it down."

"For godsake, why? That was a pretty tree."

"Those leaves were a mess on the driveway. Besides, Charlie, it was fruitless."

"So *what* if it was fruitless," I protested. "That tree gave great shade. The leaves were pure gold in the fall. I used them to mulch my roses."

"Yeah," Kyle said, "about your roses..."

"What about them? What did you do?"

Kyle's phone rang and he winked at me, asking me to hold on a second. Exasperation rose in me like the froth in a boiling pot as I waited for Kyle to finish his call. The phone rang again, and then came a hand on my shoulder. I awoke to Kyle shaking me, saying that Sadie was on the phone.

I shook my head vigorously, fighting off that ugly nightmare, quelling my desire to sock the dream-Kyle in the jaw.

"She checked her EnCompass and saw you and I were riding together," Kyle said. "Does that mean you don't need her to get you from the zoo?"

I nodded and Kyle relayed the message to Sadie.

The sky was all clear and scoured for the second day in a row. Yesterday a stiff breeze had brought a first taste of winter and

chased the haze away, promising views of the coastal mountains from the bridge over the Sacramento. I looked forward to this sight. But about what lay beyond it I was not so sure. That little dream had left me with a queasy feeling, like when you see that first tuft of mold on a loaf of bread. Doubts and questions spread through me now like colonies of green. What was I doing going back there this morning? I hadn't even consulted with Jean. Yesterday's meeting had felt like making up, but no specifics had been discussed. If she wanted me back, wouldn't she have invited me? Maybe she wasn't ready to have me back. Was I really ready to be there?

My incision began to burn a little as I peered past car roofs into the backyards of developments that bordered the highway, the half-bare branches of the deciduous trees bringing to mind the fruitless mulberry from my dream. By now half its yellow leaves might have fallen. Kyle would never notice them. Jean probably would, but I doubted she had raked them—not this soon. She was enough of an optimist to leave them for me.

Or was she? Did she expect me to come back? Did she really *want* me back?

Now I hoped very strongly Jean *had* left those leaves. They would be my omen. I could read the leaves like gypsies do after they drink their tea. Also, gathering them up would give me a nice solid chore to place at the top of the day's agenda. I would have to find a way to do it without strain. How about this? I would rake them onto a tarp and have Kyle haul the bundle out to the compost heap. Except for a few, which I would use to mulch my rosebushes.

Once again, my rosebushes! Had anybody thought to water them? My incision stung worse at the thought of how dry it had been since I left, the stitched wound flared as I inventoried all my thirsty plants. Ten years of planting and tending—could all that be undone by my recent lapse? An awful thought, not the kind of thought you want when sitting in traffic, especially when the person next to you is getting a great deal accomplished.

I interrupted Kyle's work, asking if sales had increased any since the *Bee* article mentioned that Don had used the PNS to direct the paramedics to me.

"That's hard to track," he said. "But hey, every bit of advertising helps."

"What if I wrote up a testimonial?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, I could tell the story of how your gismo saved me. Promotional material."

"Why not?" Kyle said, his tone tepid, but still warm enough to put another task on my day's agenda. One, rake leaves. Two, water everything. Three, write out my story.

As we oozed along I pondered how to tell it. Where would I begin?

The EnCompass saved my life. I was out in the middle of the night trying to disable a mountain lion trap, and...

How could anyone appreciate that without knowing how I'd gotten there?

I wanted to do this crazy heroic thing because I blamed myself for my son's death...

Because my daughter was angry with me...

Because I'd made a big blunder with my ex-wife...

Because I had a crush on a young zookeeper...

Wait a minute. A zookeeper?

I met her after this big fight I had with the woman who wanted to marry me...

You see, I had rescued this mountain lion cub...

What mountain lion cub?

Its mother was killed by the authorities because she attacked a woman, a jogger, on the bike trail just upriver from where I used to work...

Who was this jogger?

A good question. I had no idea, I didn't even know her name. That seemed wrong to me. After all, she was the first link in the

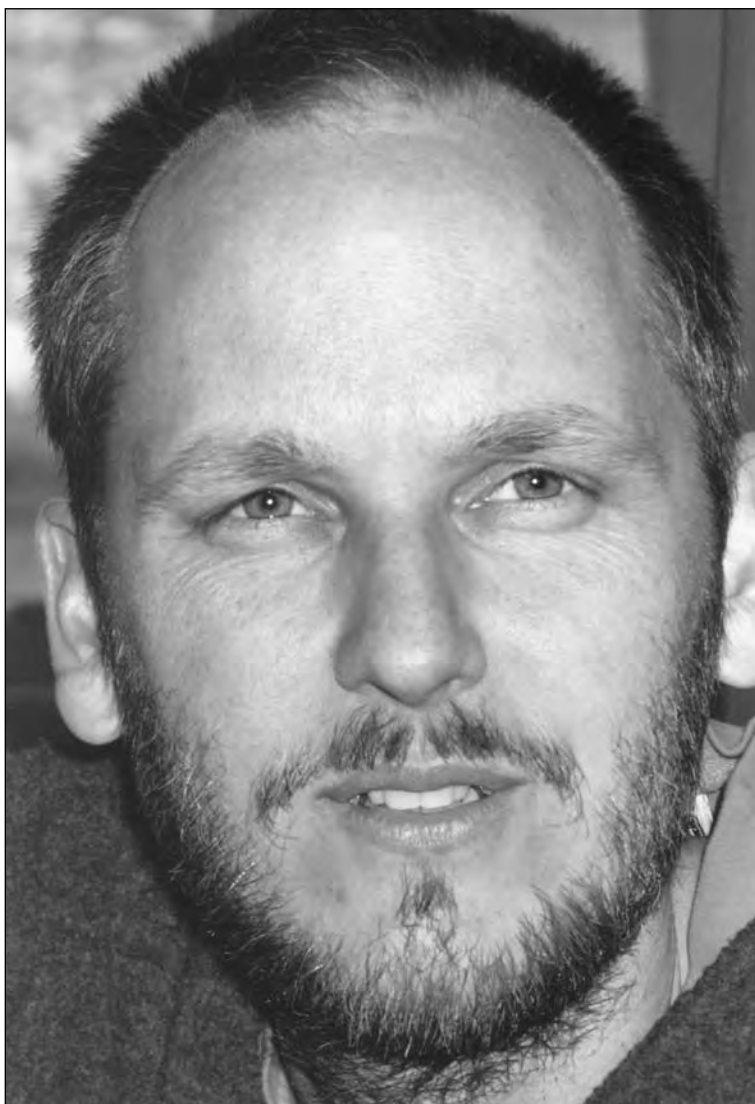
chain of events that had brought me to where I was now, to this place that was precarious as hell but also quite an improvement on where I was that day several weeks before, the day after the jogger's death, when I was all alone driving the opposite way on this road, hurling scorn upon deaf ears, pickling in my own bitter words. That woman had died and I had come more fully to life. It didn't seem fair, but what could I do?

At the very least find out who she was, what exactly happened to her. Don had been on the beat at that time. He would have the information I needed.

And so the agenda filled...

I settled down a bit, the traffic thinned as downtown exits began to siphon off cars. We sped up and soon my stomach was dipping against the rise of the river bridge. To my right the downtown buildings, hugging the river's shore. In the distance up ahead the coastal mountains, their rounded humps crisply outlined against the definite sky. Closer in our neighborhood, the house, hazier prospects.

Here was our exit. Here were the lights, the stops and yields, the turns I knew by heart. Here was my heart, its rhythm picking up with each intersection we put behind us, skipping lighter and lighter as we left the last crossing, as we rounded the first bend and the second, as we coasted, curling into the mouth of the driveway where the leaves lay yellow and thick, ripe for the reading.



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