

**"Griffith—and his very engaging hero, Sam Rivers—
both know the Minnesota wilderness inside and out."**

—BRIAN FREEMAN, *New York Times*
best-selling author of *The Deep*, *Deep Snow*

COUGAR

A SAM RIVERS MYSTERY

CLAW

CARY J. GRIFFITH

Author of *Wolf Kill*

PRAISE FOR *COUGAR CLAW*

“In this highly anticipated second novel in the Sam Rivers series, Cary J. Griffith delivers another finely researched and compellingly written thriller. Both the beauty and the savagery of our natural world form the heart of a Griffith story. In this case, it’s the predatory habits of cougars. When the killing of a Twin Cities man in an apparent cougar attack brings Sam to the Minnesota River Valley to investigate, what follows is a gradual and fascinating revelation of not just the predatory nature of cougars, but that of humans as well.”

—William Kent Krueger, Edgar Award–winning author of
This Tender Land

“Griffith—and his very engaging hero, Sam Rivers—both know the Minnesota wilderness inside and out. But be careful. After staying up all night to devour *Cougar Claw*, you may find yourself listening for a low growl the next time you’re alone in the forest.”

—Brian Freeman, *New York Times* best-selling author of
The Deep, Deep Snow

“A deadly threat from the wild comes far too close for comfort when an urban bicyclist is found mauled to death by a cougar. In this second book in the Sam Rivers mystery series, Cary Griffith takes this U.S. Fish & Wildlife special agent on a hair-raising hunt to find the cougar—and the truth. Mixing deep knowledge of the natural world with the twists and turns of the best suspense novels, *Cougar Claw* is a thoughtful and thrilling story.”

—Mary Logue, author of the Claire Watkins mysteries and
The Street

PRAISE FOR *COUGAR CLAW* (continued)

Cougar Claw, the second installment in the Sam Rivers series, sends the U.S. Fish & Wildlife special agent to the scene of a grisly cougar killing on the outskirts of the Twin Cities. As usual in Sam Rivers's world, all is not as it seems. Griffith doubles down on his strengths in this series, giving us another vibrant cast of allies, suspects, and a misunderstood predator, while navigating a path between animal rights and human fears of the natural world. I can't wait for Sam Rivers's next assignment.

—Mindy Mejia, author of *Everything You Want Me To Be* and *Strike Me Down*

"From the first page to the last, *Cougar Claw* blends high suspense with the quiet observations of the predator's predator, Sam Rivers. Between Griffith's descriptions of Minnesota's natural beauty and the human nature of his characters, this is a book you won't want to end."

—Debra H. Goldstein, award-winning author of the Sarah Blair mystery series

PROLOGUE

September 2, Savage, Minnesota

Marlin Coots, McGregor Industries' gap-toothed, splay-footed nighttime security watchman, was making his morning rounds at the company's remote shipping facility. He loved this part of the day, when he could step to the edge of the minimum-maintenance road and gaze down into the Minnesota river-bottom woods. Sometimes he'd see a raccoon scurry into brambles, or an opossum's slow climb up a tree. You never knew what the Savage woods would give up, which is why Marlin always took a moment to pause and look down.

The perimeter road was always empty, particularly here, where a huge oak anchored the landward side of the pair of dirt ruts. The other side of the road dropped 15 feet to the bottoms. On this morning, Marlin was startled to see a large brown animal lying on its side, its neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

A white-tailed deer. The kill was too primitive for a poacher.

Marlin backslid down the embankment. The carcass was barely cold. Its chest cavity had a clean incision from neck to belly. The ribs were parted and its heart and lungs were gone. When he looked around, he noticed a paw print the size of a fry pan.

"What the . . . ?"

His dad had told him there were serious predators in the Minnesota River Valley. Marlin's father had spent most of his adult life hunting and fishing this wild stretch of river, from Mankato all the way up to Savage on the edge of the Twin Cities. Marlin didn't share his dad's enthusiasm for shooting game, but he loved seeing the animals in his neck of the woods. So he rigged a motion-activated game camera with an infrared flash, setting it up near the deer kill.

The next day, Marlin's camera confirmed the presence of a cougar, one of the images clear enough to print. Since this part of the valley was considered an outlying Twin Cities suburb, the local media picked up the sighting. "Big Cat Returns to Minnesota," the *Star Tribune* reported. One of the more dramatic TV news channels asked, "Are you safe in Minnesota's woods?" The coverage reported that over the last 10 years, out West, there had been dozens of human-cougar encounters, "and in some instances people were stalked, killed, and eaten."

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources tried to place the sighting in perspective. Though cougar attacks were known to happen—even some in which humans were killed—in Minnesota people had a better chance of being struck by lightning.

The DNR suspected this cougar was someone's rogue pet, though no one came forward. If it was wild, they surmised, it was extremely rare for Minnesota, with only a handful of confirmed sightings in the last 50 years, none near the Cities.

In any case, there was no need to worry. A big cat's customary food source was deer, which could account for why this cougar had come to Savage. Along the suburban section of river, the

white-tailed fattened on Kentucky bluegrass, backyard hostas, and tulip greens. Deer hunting was irregular or nonexistent, and the deer herd was prodigious.

The kill, the tracks, and the photo made for good TV, which is why, three days later, one station ran a follow-up piece on cougar hunting habits, noting they often returned to feed on kills a second, and even a third, time, sometimes several days later.

“So if you’re heading into the Minnesota River Valley,” warned the anchor, “be careful out there.”

CHAPTER ONE

September 23

Jack McGregor pumped hard through the bike's lowest gear, his thighs burning. He neared the top of his quarter-mile climb, maintaining his bike's progress up this last steep grade. The black coffee he had finished before 6 a.m. was finally taking hold. He glanced at his heart monitor and watched the numbers spike from 156 to 157. Sweat dampened his tight yellow bike shirt.

Twenty yards, he thought, which was about all he could manage, trying to keep his ragged breathing steady. He rabbit-pedaled through the last short rise and finally crested the hill.

He appreciated the quiet half hour before dawn when the world slept and the second-summer air hung still and pungent. His heart rate peaked at 164 and he managed a stiff grin.

He took in a long breath and smelled witch hazel, he guessed, the odor of weeds heavy with seedpods and a faint wisp of river more than a mile below. It was a wet metal smell. And maybe there was the trace of something fetid beneath it; a car-struck deer decaying in a ditch, or a snake flattened across the blacktop? *Something. . .*

Over the last couple days, Jack had felt uneasy. He assumed it was his pending business deal. But there was something else, the vague feeling he needed to be vigilant or wary or just plain cautious. And it was annoying because Jack McGregor, the 51-year-old owner, president, and chief executive officer of McGregor Industries, was a stranger to unease.

Chester Drive formed a T at the top of Wannamake Circle. The hill dropped down into Savage and the Minnesota River Valley, where it connected with Highway 13 more than a mile below. In another hour, the blacktop would be busy with morning commuters, emptying the exclusive neighborhoods up on the hill. But from Jack's acme, at this time of morning, he had the road almost entirely to himself.

He turned onto Chester and crouched low, reducing his wind resistance so the air coming out of the valley wouldn't pick him up like a sail. Not that there was much of a breeze a half hour before dawn. Jack liked to feel aerodynamic. He liked to travel fast. As his bike picked up speed, he put his nagging doubts behind him and peered ahead, grinning down the dark thoroughfare.

Jack's Cannondale RZ One Forty mountain bike had been a 51st-birthday present. Carla accused him of a midlife crisis before finally accepting and then indulging his effort to stay fit. She bought him the most expensive bike she could find, making a big deal about its carbon alloy frame and phenomenal suspension. And no doubt about it, the bike could fly. His best birthday present came later that evening.

Carla was 37, and a mix of fortuitous genes, hard exercise, and no children kept her in the kind of shape Jack liked to see and feel in a woman. And the seasoning she'd experienced through her 20s, when she'd married one creep and then another, helped cultivate a particular appreciation for Jack.

The speedometer hit 22. He looked up and saw the road empty all the way to 13, not a car in sight. When he glanced down again, the speedometer read 25.

It was still too early for predawn light, which was why Jack squinted down the path in front of him. At this speed, traveling near the tree edge, it was foolhardy to look anywhere but directly in front of you. Deer frequented the wilder parts of Chester Hill. And plenty of nocturnal animals chose this final hour of darkness to hunt for a safe place to bed down and sleep for the day. Or to search for one last unsuspecting prey.

The wild country was one of the features that had charmed Jack and Carla about Savage. They could have chosen a big house in Edina, Excelsior, Shorewood, or just about any other place they wanted. But Carla liked the unpretentiousness of Savage. She appreciated the secluded, country feel of Wannamake Circle and their remote cul-de-sac, where she wouldn't run into anyone from the Club and where she could buy milk at the local Cub grocery without having to dress up or put on.

Speedometer: 27.

Up ahead something stirred. Under a sumac patch. Not a deer; the movement was too furtive and close to the ground. At his current speed, he would hit it head-on in a matter of seconds.

Jack yelled, the dark creature froze, and Jack hurtled by in a blast. He glimpsed a skunk hunkered down in the grass.

Just a few seconds either way, rodent or man, and Jack might have been a stinking pile of . . .

Focus on the tree edge, he reminded himself. It was a brief part of the hill, and he watched as its shadows flew by and opened onto empty pasture. His near brush with calamity rocketed his pulse. His bike speed climbed to 33. He glanced in front of him. The pools of light from the gentrified streetlamps were clear all the way to the bottom, and Jack flew.

The white Ford Focus—a rental out of Brooklyn Center—approached the entrance to the dirt road.

“Here’s the turn,” Benedict said.

“I know,” John said, tired of taking orders.

They wore dark camo, head to foot. John wore a camo baseball hat with CABELA’S emblazoned above the bill. Benedict wore a bucket hat. They were edgy in the predawn.

John did what he often did, knowing there was bad business ahead. He put himself past it. *In 2 hours, I will be back at my place . . . showering . . . getting ready for work. Just another day.*

But given the task ahead, focusing on what came after was difficult.

This stretch of Highway 13 was mostly open country, separated by occasional remote storage facilities and grain elevators. Farther north, Savage gave way to Burnsville and single-family homes, apartment complexes, and a string of busy retail outlets crowding either side of the highway all the way to Interstate 35W.

Travel south and you passed more open country until the Valley Fair Amusement Park and Shakopee, the next suburb over. But here, in between the park and Burnsville's stores, the river bottom was vacant and wild, except for McGregor Industries and its pot-ash and fertilizer facility.

John glanced in his rearview mirror. He saw one pair of headlights, a quarter mile behind him. At this hour, there was nothing up ahead. He signaled, turning onto the narrow dirt lane. It was empty and dark and rose to a pair of unmarked railroad tracks. On either side, the weeds were high and overgrown, and the car rumbled over the rails, leaving a faint cloud of dust. The car dropped over the hill and John turned onto the frontage road, pulled over beside a stand of river maples, and cut the engine. The headlights darkened.

They each glanced at their watches. They would sit in the car for exactly 5 minutes, waiting for the dust to settle and the crickets' *screeedle-screeedle* to return in the dark.

The first time John met Benedict was a week ago Saturday at the Black Angus truck stop on 169 outside Mankato. That was before any of them had names.

John thought driving 60 miles south when they could have met anywhere in the Twin Cities was a stupid precaution. He'd entered the truck stop, glanced at the handful of customers, and recognized Benedict as the guy sitting at the end of the counter, sipping coffee.

Benedict said he would be dressed in green khaki camo, like others in the diner—a hunter getting a jump on the grouse season. He wore his hat and dark aviator sunglasses and a bristly

mustache John guessed was fake, but a good fake. His hair was loose and wild under his hat. John thought it, too, might be fake, but he wasn't sure.

John sidled up to the nondescript counter, keeping a seat between them. He was hungry for eggs, hash browns, and buttered toast with maybe a side of medium-hot salsa and some extra bacon. His normal custom would be to slip into some easy conversation, probably talking about the best-looking woman in the café, though this morning the selection was poor.

Benedict stared straight ahead into the mirror behind the counter. "You're late," he whispered, harsh.

A waitress approached.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Why, thank you . . . Nancy," John said, reading her name tag and flashing a smile. John had perfect teeth. His brown hair was short and carefully trimmed. He wore slick warm-ups and black tennis shoes that marked him as not from around here and not interested in fitting in. An old girlfriend once called him *smarmy*. After he looked it up, it ticked him off because it was true.

Nancy smiled and poured his coffee. "Hey, sugar."

He had that effect on women of a certain kind. Normally he would have told her his real name, which wasn't John. But the man sitting one stool over was making him edgy.

She passed him a menu and shoved off to fill more cups.

"Now get this," Benedict whispered. "Next time you're late, the deal's off. I call the shots, and if you don't like them, you know what you can do about it. Understood?" This was all said through lips that barely moved, staring into his coffee cup.

John thought about telling him to fuck off, but he'd been told you didn't tell the guy to fuck off. Benedict was opaque, a man of few words, a planner, a nitpicker, a detail guy . . . and when the plan wasn't followed, a very bad man with a dangerous temper. So John shrugged (the way he'd seen Tony do it on *The Sopranos*).

"Got a name?" John asked, into the mirror.

"Benedict. You're John. Our employer's name is Urban. From now on, those are the only names we use. I don't know your real name and I don't want to. And you don't know anything about me. We've got this job, John, and then after, nothing. After, if we run into each other on the Vail ski slopes—not saying I ski in Vail; that's a for instance—don't even look my way. Understood?"

John hesitated. It was a turning point. Continue, or get out. Everything in him screamed, "Turn and leave and don't look back." But he was in too deep.

So he just shrugged, Tony-like.

After that first day, John was punctual. And he was careful about everything else, too; the gray-green camo khakis, the hat, the cheap digital watch . . . everything.

Like now.

John popped the trunk and they got out of the rental car and walked around to retrieve their tools.

The car was a nondescript rental, nothing that would draw attention—part of the reason John had been ordered to choose it. He'd also been ordered to remove the trunk light, so it wouldn't flash when the trunk was opened. The guy thought of everything.

John guessed he should have felt happy about it, but all he wanted was to be done.

In the dark trunk, there was a small, zippered travel kit along one side. John picked it up, reached around, and tucked it into the back of his pants. Then he hefted out a 20-pound sandbag and the oddly fashioned pair of jaws. The jaws were bound shut with a bungee cord, the substantial fangs carefully fitted, as though they were still embedded in the large cat's skull. Benedict leaned in and pulled out four footpads. The large feet were attached to the ends of cedar poles using a spring-loaded industrial hinge. The poles could be easily swung and carried. The sharp claws extended stiletto-like out of the pads. The one time they'd tested the claws, Benedict had swung them across the leather face of a punching bag. The hinges sprang out like switchblades, leaving four evenly spaced, deep lacerations. Perfect.

Awkwardly, John positioned the sandbag so he could push the Indiglo on his cheap wristwatch. 6:12.

Benedict did the same. "Let's hustle," he said.

They turned and started off through the dark, walking along the dirt road beside the railroad tracks. They walked in silence, thinking about what must be done. The eastern light was hardly a trace, but it would come on fast. They hurried 50 yards to the minimum-maintenance road with a rusted gate. There was a shot-up NO TRESPASSING, PRIVATE PROPERTY sign wired across the bars. There was a small path around the right side of the gate and they stepped around the post, quickening their pace.

"Keep an eye out," John said.

"Just keep your eyes on the prize," Benedict said.

Like most of his partner's comments, it ticked John off. But he shut up and kept walking through the dark and told himself, *In 2 hours, I'll be someplace else and Pope Benedict'll be gone.*

It took less than 2 minutes for Jack to rocket down Chester Drive. At Highway 13 he pedaled easily across the blacktop, biked 50 yards up the shoulder, and turned onto the frontage road.

He was still a mile from the plant and a little farther to the minimum-maintenance road. He could see the faintest start of light in the eastern sky, barely a shadow. He liked hitting the river bottom in that special half-light of dawn. Judging from what he saw off the horizon, he was right on schedule.

Jack pedaled easy during this part of his morning, saving himself for the hard exercise of the river bottom. He had paid Mountain Cross Bikes to build several private bike trails down by the river. The trails wound through McGregor Industries' low-hung trees and up and down the small ravines leading into the river. Once you entered them, staying on your bike on the trail required unwavering concentration. If you weren't totally focused, you could end up facedown in the dirt or with your torso wrapped around a tree trunk. It was the kind of challenge Jack liked because it kept him feeling alert and alive.

But here, along the quiet, flat dirt road, he could ease up and contemplate his day.

It had been an intense six months for McGregor Industries. In less than two weeks, his sale to Garkill United would be final and he'd have a lot more time for mountain biking. And just about anything else he'd postponed because of work, which was plenty. Best

of all, the sale of his company was on his terms. He was getting out from under a business that had occupied 60-plus hours a week for almost 30 years. And Jack wasn't looking back. First up: a round-the-world trip he'd been holding so close to his vest not even Carla knew about it. They were going to become reacquainted in some of the finest hotels and biggest beds across five continents.

Jack kept his bike centered on the poorly lit gravel road. The insects chirruped in the dark. The frontage road was bordered on two sides by heavy autumn bush and occasional trees. You never knew what critters might scamper out of the weeds—could be another skunk or a deer, so it was best to keep to the road's center.

Only five insiders knew about the company's pending sale, and none of them liked it. CFO Spencer Higgins and Treasurer Phil Traub had to know. No way around it. Jack had needed their help. They would both benefit from the sale, Spencer more than Phil.

Madeline Baxter, the company's vice president of human resources, had to know. Maddy had been around since Jack was a kid. He suspected she had been his father's plaything, though he was only guessing. Jack kept her around because it had been a promise to his father. But once he was out from under the business, she'd have to fend for herself, and Jack was pretty sure Garkill would cut her loose.

A year ago, Jack asked Spencer to give Susan Connelly a better job title and more money.

Most people knew Jack had a problem with women. Sometimes he made bad choices and worse passes, and when Susan threatened a lawsuit, he'd reached out to Spence and told him to

promote her. You could do that kind of thing when you owned the company.

Spence made the long-haired blonde a financial analyst. She was good with numbers. After Spence requested several out-of-season profit-and-loss statements, Susan figured out the pending sale and had to be brought in on it.

The only other person who knew about the transaction was Angie Sweet, assistant treasurer under Traub. Like Susan, she discovered the pending sale because of her acumen with numbers. When there was a lot of excited financial work out of season, she made a rare visit to Jack's office and confronted him.

You had to admire Angie. If she wanted something, she pursued it. Jack misread her ambition and made a play for her in the corporate boardroom. Angie let him know less discreet women could use that kind of thing to file a lawsuit or make a stink. Jack let her know it would be her word against his. But to placate her, he'd brought her into the fold, with assurances she would benefit like the others from the sale. Not much, really. But enough to purchase cooperation and silence.

Business.

If Carla knew about Jack's indiscretions, she was too savvy to say anything. On the other hand, Jack had been lucky: in the instances he was fortunate enough to find a willing partner, and eventually needed to end things, he'd never had to deal with troubled tears, incriminations, or finger-pointing. And especially not with confessions to a spouse, a boyfriend, or his own wife.

The truth was, Carla had all the right curves in the best places, and even after seven years of marriage she still set his limbs on

fire. That was why they were going to celebrate her 38th birthday in Bali. It seemed a fitting place for the woman who had agreed to be his permanent concubine.

Jack kept pedaling easy.

None of the five liked the sale because they all feared the repercussions, and the only one making serious cash on the transaction was Jack. Spencer, Phil, and Maddy would all lose their jobs once Garkill took over. Angie and Susan were both too good-looking, too young, and too competent to do anything but land on their feet. But they'd no longer be thinking they were the heirs apparent to becoming officers of the company. Besides, Garkill wasn't interested in the business end of the operation. It was clear that what they wanted was McGregor's storage capacity and distribution network, particularly down on the river.

He couldn't blame the five for not liking it. He'd tried to be sympathetic, though it wasn't his nature. Two of them would make good money from the sale. Not enough to carry them into retirement, but certainly enough to tide them over. Maddy was old enough she might retire. He had no idea how she'd managed her money, and frankly he didn't care. For an HR vice president, she'd done what was expected: smiled and forced objectionable policies onto a disgruntled workforce. And whenever the occasional employee with a backbone made a ruckus, she had a knack for cutting them loose.

He reached the intersection and turned onto the minimum-maintenance road. There was a gate up ahead. It was getting light enough to see the shot-up sign, but Jack had been around it so

many times he dodged right along the worn rut, turned around the steel post, and kept pedaling.

“Hurry up,” Benedict hissed.

“Just a minute.” John stepped onto the tree limb, unsteady in the near-dark. Above him three huge oak branches stretched over the road.

“Give it to me,” John said.

Benedict reached up to hand him the 20-pound sandbag. John took it and tried to get situated.

They knew their rider would be coming from the southeast, down the road they’d just hiked. There was a quarter-mile stretch before the rarely used ruts curved to the left, approaching the river. The road ran for another 200 yards before ending near the loading dock and river pier and the start of the mountain bike trail. The pier was remote and at this hour unoccupied and quiet.

Across the road, the land dropped to the wooded river bottom. If you pushed through the briar and maple trunks another 50 yards, you’d hit water. The late September foliage kept the river hidden, but they could smell the wet metallic odor and the faintest trace of rotting deer.

Once John was situated, he nodded. “Ready.”

It was growing lighter. Benedict looked up and said, “Just make sure you hit him.”

“Get down and stay out of sight,” he answered, trying to make it sound like an order.

But they both knew Benedict was in charge.

Now that John was in the tree, he worried about everything that could go wrong. The rider could be too far over for a clean drop. If the bike was coming fast, timing the drop would be difficult. And what if he missed? The jerk was fit and muscular and his temper was legendary. There were two of them, so he felt confident they could finish the job—if it came to a stand-up fight. But his partner would have to be careful, coming in from behind. And it would be hard explaining unnatural contusions on the victim's body.

They had all discussed it. There could be no stand-up fight. Not with Jack McGregor.

He reminded himself the plan was a good one—they'd been over it a thousand times. He knew there was plenty of risk, but the reward was worth it. He watched Benedict move up the road another 20 or 30 feet before hustling across the narrow dirt rut and disappearing over the ravine edge.

Less than 2 hours, John thought, trying to focus beyond the bad part, when this would be behind him. But it faded like a whisper. Because now he was on edge, nervous and watching . . . and trying to think about nothing.

Now they were both in position.

Now they waited.

Jack came around the bend and was startled by a flock of grackles. They rose squawking from the tree edge. The birds were starting to gather. The overhead geese were beginning to assemble for their southern migrations. As Jack came around the bend, the dawn was light enough to discern the pier's creosote pylons, more than 200 yards distant. He was still mulling his morning and his

day, which was going to get busy with one meeting after another. He wouldn't be home until after 7 tonight, so he reminded himself to enjoy the ride.

The start of his mountain bike trail was just this side of the pier. From the loading dock it turned right, into the trees, dropping fast to the river bottom before making a snakelike oxbow through the woods.

He pedaled easy, trying to prepare himself for that first precipitous drop to the river, 15 feet straight down, when his stomach lifted and the air hung in his chest. He approached the huge oak and for the faintest second, in the half-light of dawn, he felt something out of place, something wrong about the morning . . . something.

Then he was hit hard on the back of his neck and shoulder. He veered and started to go down, and for one startled moment, dropping, he wondered what the hell hit him. The road seemed to rise up and smack his head like an anvil.

Then the world turned black.

But only for a few seconds.

The ground twirled like a whirligig and he started rising out of vertigo, suddenly nauseous. He couldn't move. He thought he might throw up, tasted bile and black coffee, but didn't retch. The side of his face was pressed against gritty earth. His eyesight was starting to clear and he saw something that didn't make sense. He watched a man climbing sideways down a tree. He blinked, still coming around. He blinked again and realized it was the big oak almost 15 feet behind him. Then he remembered where he was

and what happened, but he was still unclear about what hit him, and he was having trouble getting up.

The figure dropped to the ground and bent to retrieve a bag. The bag appeared heavy as the man labored with it. And then Jack realized if he wanted to live, he'd better get up. Fast.

The man was as startled to see Jack rise as Jack was to manage it. The fit CEO caused the killer to pause, for just one second, uncertain, long enough for Jack's vision to clear and his head to shake off the blow, and he eyed the man in front of him holding the 20-pound sandbag.

"You!" Jack managed, recognizing him.

Jack wasn't going to wait for the man to speak. He was going to teach the man a lesson. He'd spend a little time getting him to talk, provided he could check his rage long enough to keep from killing him. He took one step forward, like a fighter, raising his fists.

And that was the last thing he remembered.

"Good thing he didn't hear you," John said, coming forward.

"Shut up! He's still alive, you idiot. Get the jaws. Let's finish it."

CHAPTER TWO

When Sam Rivers, special agent for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFW), stepped down from the witness stand, the defendant, Angus Moon, tensed his manacled wrists and ankles. In retrospect, the only one who noticed the convicted murderer's edginess was Gray, the wolf-dog hybrid Sam had rescued from Moon's illegal breeding operation.

Sam wasn't testifying about Moon's operation. It was an extradition hearing. The crime Sam helped solve seven months earlier, up on the Iron Range, helped the Canadian Royal Mounted Police solve a 2005 double homicide in the Quetico woods. The Canadian crime had been stale until Angus's DNA fingered him as the executioner. Today, Sam's testimony was sending Moon to the bottom of a Canadian prison cell for the rest of his life.

But Sam should have known Moon would not go easily into his dark night.

For the entire 10 minutes Sam was on the stand, Moon's fiery gaze focused on him. Sam appreciated the tension.

On his return to the table, Sam answered his gaze with a look that said, *You deserve lethal injection, but we will settle for a 9-by-6*

cage. And that's what must have triggered him (though you never knew with Moon).

When Sam neared the defendant's table, he turned to Gray, tucked beside fellow USFW agent Mac McCollum, who held Gray's leash. Sam watched the big hybrid grow suddenly tense. And then the leash flew out of Mac's hand as though it was some kind of magician's trick.

Sam turned and glimpsed Moon halfway over the table, his cuffed hands sailing straight for him. Sam dodged left, too late. The woodsman caught his shirt, raging like a rabid wolverine, all guttural sound, not a clear word in it.

Sam twisted as he went down, spinning Moon, though he still held on. Then Sam hit the floor, hard, shirt buttons popping like firecrackers. The force of his twist flung Moon to the side and tore one of his hands loose. Sam rolled and kicked and heard the air blow out of Moon like a bellows. Then Gray was on top of Moon, all tooth and claw. Moon rolled, covering himself with his arms, protecting his head and neck, howling beneath Gray's lupine fury.

In the background, the judge was hammering, "Bailiff, bailiff, bailiff!"

The bailiff stood near, uncertain how to break it up.

Sam was on his feet and for a split second Sam thought Gray deserved a little payback. Wolf dog breeding operations weren't illegal in Minnesota. Moon's had been closed because it was cruel and inhumane.

Finally, Sam reached in and grabbed the back of Gray's neck.
"Gray!"

He pulled, but Gray was in some other place, trying to free himself so he could finish what he'd started with Moon.

"Gray!"

When the bailiff finally saw the hybrid pause, he danced in quick and put a knee in Moon's back. But Moon was spent, his breathing ragged.

"You're a . . ." he wheezed from the floor, "dead man . . . Rivers!"

Mac sprang up beside the crowd and started to pull Sam back. Sam grabbed Gray's leash. Gray was still focused on Moon, hoping for another chance at revenge.

The judge was hammering her gavel. "Order, order . . ."

But the fight was over.

In the adrenaline aftermath, Sam turned to Mac and said, "Looks like Gray got some back."

Mac looked pale. So did the overweight prosecuting attorney Charlie Carter.

Moon was disappearing through a side door, cussing like a devil. His only legible words were "dead man, Rivers . . . and that dog too!"

And then the door made a sucking sound behind him, like the surface of the River Styx.

The courtroom settled into an uneasy calm.

His testimony finished, Judge Stalter told Sam Rivers he was free to take Gray out of her courtroom, so they could both get some air.

Charlie tried to read the judge's response, but she was opaque. He hoped Gray's fury hadn't damaged their hearing.

There were still some motions to address, but Moon wouldn't be listening.

The judge decided it was time to call a brief recess. She stood up, shaken, and returned to chambers.

Sam's shirt was torn and, after he'd settled down, Mac said, "One second I was holding on, and the next Gray ripped that leash right out of my hand like it was spring loaded." Mac was excited and still a little pale. "Sorry," he added.

"I'm just glad Gray got his chance," Sam said.

Now that the judge was gone, Charlie said, "I think we're OK. Moon started it, so I can't see how she can rule against us." Charlie was whiter than Mac, but excited too.

"Nobody likes a dog beater," Sam said.

Mac turned to Sam and said, "Your elbow's bleeding."

Sam turned his arm to examine it. It was a scratch, but oozing blood. He'd need to tend to it.

"I can finish up here," Mac said. "I'll call you when it's over."

"Sounds good," Sam said, for the first time feeling his elbow throb.

"That was a little more than I bargained for on a Monday morning. It's never dull with you, Rivers," Charlie said.

"It's good for your circulation, Charlie."

"I take pills for my circulation."

When Sam turned to leave, he noticed a reporter in the back of the room.

Diane Talbott had her notebook out, writing with fury. Diane was the *Vermilion Falls Gazette* reporter who had covered his work seven months earlier on the Range. She'd gotten a lot of mileage out of the story. Out of Sam, too.

She looked good.

CHAPTER THREE

On his way out of the courtroom, Sam, with Gray, paused in the aisle and Diane looked up from her writing. She wore a long-sleeved, fitted T-shirt with a latticework of tree saplings silk-screened across its front. Her salt-and-pepper hair was tied back into a long, thick braid. She smiled and set her notebook on the bench beside her. It was a favorable sign.

As she stood, Sam appreciated her familiar substance; it had been more than six months, but it was easy to recollect the intimate moments they'd shared. Diane was more than 10 years older than Sam, but she was fit and strong and, other than a few streaks of gray, showed no signs of aging. She wore blue jeans cuffed at the bottom and a pair of hot-pink Converse sneakers.

Sam wasn't sure what to think when he saw her because their parting had been abrupt. By rights, she could have been cold; he hoped she would be something else. When she approached, smiling, he was heartened. But then he noticed her eyes focused on Gray, whom she hadn't seen since he was 6 months old.

"Gray," she said. "You sweet, sweet, grown-up boy."

In spite of his recent encounter with Angus Moon, Gray's attitude suddenly shifted and his tail started wagging. For thousands

of years, wolves learned to be skittish around humans. But for Diane, Gray was all malamute.

Diane bent down, rubbed Gray's cheeks, and put her face to the big hybrid's nose.

Gray whined.

"I believe you just gave me the title for my article," she said. To Gray, not Sam. "Dog Finds Justice in Courtroom."

Finally done smooching Gray, Diane stood, tempered her smile and extended her hand to Sam.

"I'd love to read it," Sam said. Diane's eyes flashed brown and green and her grip felt strong and good in his hand, but cool.

"That was some kind of courtroom drama," she said.

"That was Angus Moon."

"That was Sam Rivers," she said. "Did you say anything to piss him off?" She turned to retrieve her notebook.

Always the reporter, Sam thought. "I was *thinking* he deserved lethal injection. But I suspect it was my grin that triggered him."

"Gray was getting even," she reached down and patted the big head. The dog was still breathing from all the excitement, his tongue hanging out. "This guy looks magnificent."

Gray stood beside Sam, obedient, maybe even regal. He had an oversized head, pointy black ears, substantial incisors, peculiar bicolored eyes, and a white muzzle mask. He weighed 90 pounds and stood almost 36 inches at the shoulder, medium-sized for a large breed of canine. Gray was living proof you could survive the torture kennels of Angus Moon and live to fight and thrive another day.

"He never ceases to surprise me," Sam said.

“The service letting you keep him?”

“It’s a provisional trial. Magdalen says if I can get him up to speed as a search and rescue dog it would help his status. But she knows there are plenty in the service who think a wolf-dog hybrid sends the wrong message.”

“Carmine Salazar?”

Carmine Salazar was an influential USFW accountant who had moved in with Sam’s ex-wife. Sam thought Carmine was trying to get rid of Sam, too, and thought the best way to do it was to suggest that his overattachment to a wolf dog was a sign of undercommitment to the service.

Sam looked at Diane and remembered he’d shared a lot back in February. “Especially the bean counter. I think he’s behind some kind of effort to get Gray blacklisted before he can prove himself.”

“It’d be a shame.” She gave Gray’s big head another rub and Gray’s eyes squinted. “I’ve got to get to the bathroom before the judge returns,” she said. She peered at the bloody elbow. “You should tend to that.”

She reached over and touched his arm, holding it carefully and turning it.

Her touch felt good, but there was an ache where the skin was bloody.

“Looks manageable,” she said.

“Maybe we should have lunch later?”

She thought about it. “That might work.”

Then they turned and Sam and Gray followed Diane out of the courtroom. Sam told her he’d call her around noon and they could figure out where to meet.

Once outside the courthouse, Sam and Gray walked around to settle down. The sun was high and the day warming. There were few places where a second summer was more appreciated than in Minnesota, where all the residents knew snowfall and a deep freeze were only weeks away.

He turned on his phone, and once it found service there was a beep, a message from his boss, Kay Magdalen.

“Rivers. Call me. It’s urgent.”

Sam wondered if she’d already heard about the courtroom scene. While he appreciated Gray’s assistance in the fight, some would use it as proof Gray was out of control. Magdalen had more contacts than the National Security Agency, but Sam couldn’t imagine she already knew about the outburst.

There was only one way to find out. He speed-dialed her number and waited.

Now that he was done testifying, she’d want him back in Colorado, just when he was starting to enjoy the beautiful Minnesota weather . . . and was looking forward to lunch.

Magdalen answered on the second ring.

“Rivers,” he said.

There was a pause. “Do I hear traffic?”

Plenty of cars and trucks were pulsing along Robert Street.
“Yeah, traffic.”

“I thought you were testifying?”

“I’m done.”

“How did it go?”

“Angus Moon tried to get a piece of me.”

“Really? What happened?”

Sam explained the woodsman's table leap and near success and how Sam subdued him by placing a boot in his diaphragm. He left out Gray's rabid assistance.

"Glad to hear you kicked his butt."

"Well, the bailiff helped a little," Sam said.

"When will it wrap up?"

"Moon should be heading north later today. Tomorrow at the latest. Mac's still tracking it and will keep us informed."

"Good," Magdalen said. "Something's come up that needs your attention. You need to head over to a place called Savage."

"Savage?"

"Savage, Minnesota. It's a town. Suburb south of the Twin Cities. Looks like southwest of Minneapolis."

"I vaguely remember the name. What's up?"

"A mountain lion just killed some guy."

"What?" Sam said. "A pet?"

"No. They think it's wild. Some guy was mountain biking this morning down near the Minnesota River Valley, in Savage, and a mountain lion picked him off."

"A wild mountain lion?" Sam repeated.

"That's what I said."

That was unexpected. "Have mountain lions suddenly gone on a rampage?"

Last September, Sam and Gray investigated a lion kill of livestock at Mable Swenson's cattle ranch, 2 hours outside of Denver. It was dusk and the lion, protecting its kill, appeared out of nowhere and might have killed Mable if Gray hadn't interceded.

"When it rains it pours," Magdalen said.

“That’s bizarre,” he said. “Something like that happened out West with a mountain biker. In the Santa Monica Mountains. But there are a lot more lions in California. They’re almost unheard of in Minnesota.”

“Is that mountain bike incident in your report about that lion out at Swenson’s place?”

“A footnote.”

“Fascinating,” she said, without conviction.

“So what do you need?”

“We need you to go over and have a look. The sheriff called the Minnesota DNR, looking for an expert. Got hold of a guy by the name of . . . just a sec.” Papers shuffled. “Tom Bennigan. But Bennigan told him Minnesota hasn’t seen a lot of mountain lions. So the DNR called the local Fish & Wildlife office. The local office said the same thing; none of those Minnesotans have ever seen a lion. But they checked the service database and found your report. So they called us. They wanted to speak with someone with a little background, who would know how to hunt down this killer. When they found out you were in Minnesota, they wondered if they could borrow you.”

Apart from being genuinely interested, this could also work in Sam’s favor. He was sure to miss lunch with Diane, but he thought, given the circumstances, maybe dinner was a possibility.

“Give me the details,” he said.

Magdalen told him Sheriff Russell Benson wanted someone who knew wildlife to help them catch this killer. The victim was some kind of corporate bigwig, and the sheriff knew it would get plenty of publicity. And that would bring out the crazies. People with guns who hoped to shoot the man-killer. And others who

would feel threatened and start calling local law enforcement, the DNR, and probably their congressman, looking for protection.

“Savage,” Sam said, noting the address. “I think that’s west of here.”

“I guess. Along the Minnesota River Valley. Who in the hell names those Minnesota towns? Defiance? Savage?”

Until he was 17, Sam Rivers had lived in Defiance, Minnesota, the name of which prompted some ribbing from his boss.

“Norwegian bachelor farmers,” Sam said.

“They had some kind of sense of humor.”

“It was probably akvavit-induced,” Sam said.

Magdalen also gave him the number for DNR Conservation Officer Bennigan, Chief Deputy Leif Anders, and Deputy Ole Sorenson. Sam could bring Mac up to speed when he was done in the courtroom, provided the sheriff would be open to more assistance.

On the drive to Savage, Sam tried to recall everything he could about his most recent encounter with a cougar. Mable Swenson had reported the predation of one of her calves and needed Sam to review and bless the kill, so she could file with the Department of Agriculture for reimbursement.

Sam and Mable had hiked with Gray out two dirt ruts that bent around Mable’s barn. Mable cradled a lightweight Remington 700 AWR .30-06 with a scope, and she knew how to use it. She was a small woman, wearing worn jeans and a work shirt. There was a pack of Marlboro reds in her breast pocket. It was early September, still plenty hot around dusk. Mable had sweat

spots under both arms and dirt on her jeans. She wore a tattered straw cowboy hat over scraggly shoulder-length gray-brown hair. A pair of weathered black cowboy boots completed her ensemble, like a fashion statement for the working, undersized cowgirl market.

There was a gulch a quarter mile back that cut through her property in a jagged north-south diagonal.

"It's out there." She pointed in the distance to where a huge cottonwood grew near an outcrop of rock.

Sam and Gray followed her through the cattle-grazed field.

It had been a dry summer. The grass was thin and crackly. Wisps of dust kicked up around their feet. Gray walked quietly beside them, scanning and sniffing the terrain.

"For a young one, he's damn quiet," Mable said.

"He doesn't say much," Sam agreed. "But when he does, he's serious."

Black Angus cattle grazed off to the right. Gray looked up and followed them with his eyes, intent, but keeping his patient stride next to Sam.

As they neared the rocky outcrop, Sam peered over the huge, rounded boulders that formed the near edge of the gulch. Just beyond and to the left of it, the branches of the cottonwood towered over the gulch, its canopy stretching above the big rocks.

"Cougars get a little possessive about their kills, Mable. Particularly at dawn and dusk, when they return to feed."

"This one killed yesterday at dusk, I think," Mable said. "Looked like it leaped down from those rocks, broke the calf's neck, and then dragged it to the bottom of the gulch to feed."

“Killed and fed last night, and you found it this morning?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you find anything other than tracks?”

“Just the tracks. You’ll see. And what’s left of the calf. It ate most of its insides—heart, lungs, some gore.”

“Good. Let’s be quiet. Maybe we should split up and take both sides of that outcrop.”

“Suits me.”

“You head left. Gray and I can turn around the right side. If you see something, stay still.”

“If I see something, it’s dead.”

Sam knew she had the right. “Just make sure you know where you’re aiming.”

“Damn straight.”

Sam hated to see a magnificent animal shot, but if it was killing livestock, there were only two alternatives: capture it alive or kill it. And at this point, even Sam Rivers wasn’t going to lasso a cougar. They were lions, and they were accomplished, aggressive killers. Unlike their African cousins, cougars didn’t gather in prides and share in the hunt. Neither did they share their kills. After cougars grew old enough to leave their mothers, they lived a solitary life, only coming together to mate. They were one of North America’s most lethal predators. “Did you know you can scare off a cougar by windmilling your arms and screaming?” Sam said.

“Did you know you can stop one with a bullet?”

“I’m just saying they’re easy enough to scare away,” Sam said. “They’re not like grizzlies.”

“My daddy taught me how to shoot before I could read. Taught me anything pestering our cows gotta be stopped.”

Mable’s perspective was typical of ranchers. Sam suspected if it were his livestock being killed, he might feel the same way.

“We’ll meet at the bottom,” Sam said, starting to veer toward the right side of the outcrop.

“At the bottom.”

They split apart and started walking in opposite tangents. The rise of rock ran along the gulch edge for 40 yards. The highest boulder climbed to more than 15 feet, but there were plenty of different-sized rocks marking the cliff face with dark crevices. In the dusk, the tan-colored stone was a beautiful yellow-gold. The crevice shadows were accentuated and growing darker. Sam scanned the boulders, but in the dusk light, the rocks were solid and still.

Sam and Gray made a wide arc, starting to circle the right side. Mable walked to the left. As they approached either end of the ridge, they turned and signaled to each other through the waning light, then disappeared around the outcrop.

Picking his way along the rock edge, Gray suddenly appeared edgy, tense, at full alert—as though he smelled something. The only thing Sam’s dull nose detected was a whiff of carrion. In the day’s heat, the calf carcass had decomposed, sending an acrid odor out of the gulch. Sam peered down into the ravine and spotted the remains tucked into a shallow grave under a creosote bush. Two ravens were pecking at a protruding leg. The black birds must have heard his approach. They paused and cocked their heads, peering at the intruders.

The ravine's sides weren't more than 10 or 15 feet, gradual and covered with sparse bunches of mountain mahogany and scrub oak. Sam paused and brought Gray to heel, waiting for Mable to appear along the other side. As soon as the ravens saw the big hybrid, they rose squawking into the dusk light.

Sam turned to watch them, then turned to look for Mable.

Then he saw it.

On the far end of rocks, there was one large boulder. Near the top, Sam glimpsed something peculiar. It had too much symmetry to be part of the boulder wall. It was the outline of a feline head. With sickening comprehension, his vision assimilated two pointy ear spikes and brown fur. The head was still, intent and focused—Sam guessed on Mable. The head remained watching, while the rest of the animal's body coiled tight as a spring.

It all happened in less than an instant: the sudden realization that it was a lion and was probably getting ready to leap on the unsuspecting Mable, and his scream.

"Mable!"

Then a dark blur shot away from Sam's side. Sam watched in horror as a denim mound toppled into the ravine. Gray's shape fired along the gulch edge like a rocket, closing the distance between him and Mable's tumbling body. Sam saw Mable's rifle tumble into scrub oak. The cougar materialized out of rock. It must have leaped and either knocked Mable to the ground, or Mable tripped and fell at the moment the lion was ready to pounce. The diminutive woman was sliding headfirst down the hillside. The lion paused at the edge, recognizing vulnerability, beginning to recoil, getting ready for another leap, this one lethal.

And then Gray hit it broadside. There was a tumble of fur and howling and a bone-clattering death growl. The cougar let out its own curdling scream.

The big cat leaped out of the brawl like something fired out of a cannon. It took two steps before springing into the lower branches of the cottonwood. And then Gray started baying.

The mountain lion, 10 feet aboveground and in the safety of the tree branches, scooted up a few more branches, curled around, turned, pushed one big paw out of the leaves, made a quick swipe into the empty air, growled once more, spit a little anger, and then grew still, watching Gray intently. Gray turned, bayed, and turned again to get another look before finally settling down and focusing on the big cat.

By the time Sam reached the tree, the cat realized its predicament. It was outnumbered. It moved a little higher into the branches, trying to conceal itself, focused on the business below. Sam retrieved Mable's gun from the scrub oak bush. Mable managed to climb to the top of the gulch at the same time Sam arrived with her rifle.

"Goddamnit . . . goddamnit!" She was sputtering and out of breath, but otherwise looked OK. A little shaken.

Sam stared at her, looking for damage. He still didn't know if she'd tripped, or if the big cat had knocked her down. Now she was breathing hard. It was a lot of excitement. Mable Swenson's face was tomato red, and once she collected herself, Sam knew, she'd be ready to tear something apart with those calloused hands.

"You OK?"

"I'm gonna kill that motherfucker!"

She was OK. “No, you’re not,” said Sam.

“Fuck if I’m not.”

Sam whistled Gray into a sit. The hybrid backed off and came to heel but never took his bicolored eyes off the creature he’d chased up a tree.

Before Mable had a chance to turn ballistic, Sam opened the Remington’s bolt and checked to see it held a cartridge and was still operational. Other than a little dust, the rifle appeared unscathed. He snapped it shut, flicked off the safety, and raised the rifle to his shoulder, steadying it in the dusk light. He peered down the scope’s magnification, scanning to the right, then to the left, until he found a patch of brown fur. Then he moved carefully up the animal’s flank until he was staring at its eyes. The cat peered back out of two black pupils set in a pool of iridescent gold and green, startling and beautiful.

“Sorry,” Sam said. Then he moved down to the animal’s heart and fired.

The Colorado cougar fell out of that cottonwood like a bag of hammers. Gray was on it, but Sam quickly pulled Gray off. Sam hated killing such a magnificent animal, but it had killed livestock and attacked Mable, so he didn’t have a choice.

As Sam drove toward Savage, he considered how bizarre it was to encounter a mountain lion–human predation in this state, where there were very few of the big cats. Colorado’s lion population was around 5,000, sizable enough to support a hunting season. But Colorado had only one recorded lion–human predation, and a few minor encounters, like Mable’s. Still, if the mountain lion

was too old or enfeebled to hunt its usual prey—in Minnesota, white-tailed deer—it might search for easier quarry. But a man on a mountain bike?

There *had* been an incident involving a mountain bike on a trail in the Santa Monica Mountains, outside Los Angeles. But it was unclear if it was actually predation. The man had a heart condition and some investigators wondered if he died of a blown ticker before the big cat found him. Mountain lions could also be opportunistic feeders.

On the other hand, a mountain bike racing through a big cat's territory could be mistaken for a running deer. Lions were also territorial. The cat could have lashed out at what it considered an intruder.

Regardless, in the Santa Monica Mountains, a man had been downed on a mountain bike and partially eaten. And then, within 24 hours, a female mountain biker near the same location was attacked and was being dragged by her helmet into some scrub oak when her friends caught up with her and beat the lion off.

In the wild, mountain lions were nocturnal and incredibly reclusive. But near urban areas, their behavior could be unpredictable. A couple years ago, Sam had read David Baron's *The Beast in the Garden*. It was ostensibly about an Idaho Springs, Colorado, high school senior who was attacked, killed, and partially eaten by a mountain lion while jogging in the foothills at the edge of town. But it also discussed incidents that Boulder, Colorado, residents had been having in the days and weeks leading up to the high schooler's death. When the deer began frequenting Boulder backyards, mountain lion behavior changed. The lions became

emboldened and there had been some scrapes between people and the dangerous cats. And then the jogger in Idaho Springs had been attacked and killed.

Like the predation to which he now drove, it reminded Sam that regardless of how civilized and settled we had made America, once you stepped off the grid into places where predators still roamed, you had better cultivate a wary eye. And no place was as dangerous as the wild-urban interface, that zone where people enjoyed the wilderness but were still close enough to civilization to be lulled into a false sense of safety and security. Or worse, they were so firmly planted in the civilized world that the idea of a wild predator exercising its position on the food chain was beyond imagination.

Sam was glad Gray, with a proven mountain lion nose, was along for the ride.

He stopped once to get gas and change. Then he called Diane. When he got her voice mail, he said, "I'm afraid lunch is off, but I'm hoping you're free for dinner. I think it might be worth your while." He paused, suddenly realizing she might take that the wrong way, and added, "I'm working on a bizarre emergency I know you'll want to cover. I'll call you as soon as I can. Dinner's on me."

He hoped that was recovery enough. He also wondered, briefly, if dinner might lead to something more, but he wasn't sure he was ready for it. Not yet.

Almost 14 months earlier, Sam's seven-year marriage to Maggie Caldrot ended in divorce—her decision, not his. Three months after the papers were signed, he'd still hoped for reconciliation.

Then he heard Maggie had moved in with that weasel Carmine Salazar, and it finally put a stake through his heart.

Last February, Sam was called back to his boyhood home on northern Minnesota's Iron Range, where his work investigating a wolf kill of livestock had brought him face-to-face with his estranged father, who he'd thought was dead, and his father's lawless friends, including Angus Moon. The truth was, recovering his childhood and putting Moon and the others behind bars had helped Sam regain his emotional center. He and Diane had paired up to investigate what happened on the Range. But that was months ago.

They'd had their moment, and it had passed. And then he'd had to return to the Denver office.

Sam had no experience with reunions with old girlfriends. So he tried to put it out of his mind. But it was hard not thinking about Diane, who had on more than one occasion stood in front of him wearing only woolen socks.

In this outdoors mystery, natural history writer Cary J. Griffith brings back Sam Rivers, the predator's predator, to investigate an unexplained cougar attack.



A cougar sighting in the Minnesota River Valley is incredibly rare. A deadly cougar attack on a human in this area is about as likely as getting struck by lightning—twice. Yet when wealthy business owner Jack McGregor is found dead, the physical evidence seems incontrovertible.

The sheriff brings in Sam Rivers, a special agent with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFW) and a wildlife biologist, to examine the scene and sign off on his conclusions. But Sam has a penchant for understanding predators, and he uncovers details that challenge law enforcement's open-and-shut case.

To find justice, Sam must take matters into his own hands, enlisting the help of his wolf dog, Gray, who's in training to become a working dog for the USFW. Gray's nose leads the investigation in unexpected directions, and the more rocks Sam turns over, the more motives slither out.

“Both the beauty and the savagery of our natural world form the heart of a Griffith story. When the killing of a Twin Cities man in an apparent cougar attack brings Sam Rivers to the Minnesota River Valley to investigate, what follows is a gradual and fascinating revelation of not just the predatory nature of cougars, but that of humans as well.”

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