

"The twisty plot delivers a chill down your spine."

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

WOLF

A SAM RIVERS MYSTERY

KILL

CARY J. GRIFFITH

PRAISE FOR *WOLF KILL*

"In Northern Minnesota, winter is full of dangers that can kill: hard cold, hard men, and hungry wolves. Cary J. Griffith brings the menace of all three into play in his riveting new thriller. Returning to the childhood home he fled 20 years earlier, Sam Rivers finds himself battling a group of scheming reprobates and struggling against an avalanche of painful memories. Griffith's intimacy with the territory he writes about comes through in every line. I loved this novel and recommend it highly. But I suggest you enjoy it under a warm blanket. Honestly, I've never read a book that evokes the fierce winter landscape of the North Country better than *Wolf Kill*."

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—Peter Geye, author of *Northernmost*

Also by the author

Gunflint Burning: Fire in the Boundary Waters

Opening Goliath

Lost in the Wild

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For Nicholas Tristan and Noah Alexander, keepers of the flame

WOLF

A SAM RIVERS MYSTERY

KILL

PART I

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.

Matthew 7:15

CHAPTER ONE

The farmhouse stood 12 miles outside Defiance, Minnesota, at least as the common raven flew. The house was a compact two-story peaked square with peeling clapboard sides and a tar paper roof. Behind the house, a stand of red pines marked a short ridge and the start of wilderness that stretched 20-odd miles to the Canadian border. To the right of the house was a barn where three feeder calves huddled, protected against stray wolves and the deep cold. The field beyond the barn lay blanketed in fresh snow. It was January 26th, one of the coldest nights of the year.

Sheriff Dean Goddard and Deputy Smith Barnes turned into Williston Winthrop's farmhouse drive. The house was lit up like a Chinese lantern. The drive was long and narrow, and they pulled up and parked behind two trucks, an SUV, and Bill Heins's patrol car.

"Looks like a damn party," Barnes commented.

"That it does," Goddard agreed.

As they got out of their cruiser, Heins opened the farmhouse door, stepping into the cold. He was dressed for the weather, which was well below zero. Thankfully, there was no wind and the nearly full moon was high and clear. While Heins walked up the plowed path, the sheriff watched him zip up his policeman's jacket, then his down parka over the jacket. He flipped its hood over his short-cropped gray hair. The sheriff guessed Heins was near retirement; he hoped so, anyway.

"Sheriff," Heins nodded as he came forward.

"Heins," Goddard said. "You know Smith Barnes?"

“Sure,” Heins said, nodding at Barnes.

The three men were tense in the cold. It wasn't just the weather, or the corpse beyond the house and barn. Heins, Defiance's town cop, had long made an effort to keep the sheriff out of Defiance's law enforcement affairs, which was fine by the sheriff, who had the rest of the county to patrol. The sheriff's office was 10 miles east of Defiance, in Vermilion Falls. There had been times a crime crossed borders, requiring the two men to work together, which neither did well nor enjoyed.

From the sheriff's point of view, Heins had never quite passed the smell test, and that was one reason why small-town cops were best limited to the narrow confines of their own town's borders, particularly when it was a Minnesota Iron Range town like Defiance. On more than one occasion, the sheriff had received complaints about the graying lawman. But he had been forced to back off when Winthrop interceded. Now that he thought about it, the only thing Goddard appreciated past midnight in cold like this was being rid of that son of a bitch Winthrop, if the reports were true. He would no longer have to worry about pulling his punches with Heins, providing Winthrop hadn't shared their little secret. What made the sheriff edgy was his doubt that the dead man had kept his word.

From up the road, another pair of headlights came over the rise. The three men watched a red Explorer approach and turn into the drive.

“Coroner,” Goddard observed.

“You have headgear?” Heins asked Barnes. “It's over a quarter mile to the site.”

“I got it,” Barnes said.

Goddard was much taller and younger than Heins. He was also a better politician, having just won his second four-year term in a landslide. Barnes was long and wiry, lined in the face and lean in body. He still moved like a man half his age. He was the best investigative deputy on Goddard's staff, which is why he was the first person the sheriff contacted when the call had stirred him out of bed.

"Sounds like a hunting accident at Williston Winthrop's place," Goddard had said, still coming awake. "Not sure I know how to get there. You know the place?"

"I know," Barnes said.

Didn't sound like Barnes had been sleeping. It was almost 11 p.m.

"How bad?" Barnes asked.

"Winthrop's dead," Goddard managed. "I'll be over in 10 minutes."

The second person Goddard contacted was Dr. Susan Wallace, the coroner.

"Dr. Wallace?" he started.

There was a pause. "Hi," Wallace said, surprised and sounding sleepy.

"Business," he said, low. Belinda, Sheriff Goddard's wife, lay in the adjacent bedroom. Although it was late, she sometimes stayed up reading the Old Testament.

Then he told Wallace about Winthrop's accident.

"You don't think he . . .," she started.

"No goddamn idea. Hard for me to believe a man like Winthrop would take his life. Even with the assistant DA breathing down his neck."

"I'll follow," she said.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought she sounded pleased.

Now Dr. Susan Wallace parked her Explorer behind the squad car. The three men waited while she stepped into the cold and zipped up her heavy down coat, pulling the hood over her head.

"Who's in the house?" Goddard asked.

"The club," Heins said.

"Card club?"

"Gun club, but mostly we play cards."

The sheriff nodded, remembering. "Remind me who's in it," he said.

"There's Hank Pederson, Hal Young, and Angus Moon. We were supposed to play cards tonight, over at Moon's place. Williston hasn't missed a game since I can't remember when. And no one heard squat. So after a couple hands of poker, we decided we'd better come have a look. Found his trail in the snow, his shotgun missing. Followed the trail out to the slough," Heins pointed. A well-trodden path turned around the barn, disappearing into the dark.

Wallace approached as the men looked toward the trail.

"Doctor," Goddard nodded.

"Sheriff," she said. "It's a cold night." She looked at Heins, then Barnes, nodding to each in greeting.

"Yes, it is," Barnes agreed. "You dressed for a hike?"

She nodded. "I guess."

"Let me take that," Barnes said, stepping forward to shoulder her bag.

"Thanks," she said with a smile.

Wallace had been an Iron Range doctor her entire professional

career. A year ago Goddard recruited her to be the county's coroner, an effort he came to appreciate more than he'd expected. What he saw, when she wasn't bundled up and looking like a marshmallow, was a fit blonde just past 40 with a professional demeanor he had taken some time to crack. Goddard was still surprised by the absence of judgment that had, over the last six months, put him in the doctor's bed (or, at least on numerous occasions, a bed in the Vermilion Falls hotel), where they had finally decided they had something they could not live without.

The other club members decided to remain in Winthrop's farmhouse. The sheriff asked them not to leave; he'd have some questions later.

Past midnight the crime team hiked out to the narrow slough. Barnes brought along a sled they could use to return Winthrop to the doctor's Explorer for transport to her makeshift morgue. First, they would have to make a cursory examination of the scene and take some photographs.

Moonlight helped, though by the time they reached Winthrop's body, Goddard was ready for a rest. Barnes was barely breathing hard. Goddard noticed Wallace was in the same shape as Barnes, proof you could work 60 hours a week and still have time for exercise, providing you had the doctor's energy. Goddard was comforted by Heins's heavy exhalations, much like his own. Goddard wasn't Vermilion County's only out-of-shape law officer.

"Should have used the Cats," Goddard remarked, thinking snowmobiles would have made hauling the body back a hell of a lot easier.

"It'll be OK," Barnes assured.

Heins explained the scene. Winthrop had been hunting

snowshoe hare and approached the slough after last night's snowfall. There'd been a clear, solitary path to the heavy cover of this ravine, trampled over now by Heins and the others. They'd followed it to the fallen birch, searching for their poker partner. Just this side of the birch, Winthrop's body lay with his back in the snow. The front of his head was a bloody, grisly visage, frosted over and staring faceless into the night sky.

"That's a damn unfortunate accident," Barnes observed.

"Awful," Goddard agreed.

Wallace, familiar with death, had never before seen this kind of massive gunshot trauma. But she didn't look away.

Goddard took a minute to examine the scene. There was a wide area of trampled snow. The shotgun lay on the ground near the fallen birch, in front of Winthrop's body. Winthrop wore a heavy orange-camo down coat with orange-camo coveralls underneath, both frosted over in the cold. Goddard recognized the shotgun and coveralls. He'd seen both hanging in Winthrop's office last Sunday, when they'd had a meeting. Before Winthrop told him why he'd asked the sheriff to visit, Goddard had asked about the shotgun, which was oversized. Winthrop told him there were two, nicknamed the Decimators: 10 gauges handcrafted near the start of the 20th century, one of them missing, though the dead man claimed he knew who had it and swore he would get it back. Now Goddard guessed it didn't matter.

The sheriff didn't like to remember their meeting, where he had betrayed one friend to protect another. Now he might not be losing any more sleep over the dead man, providing Winthrop had kept his secret to himself. Goddard had been robbed of revenge, but under the circumstances he was willing to accept it.

“Did you check the pockets?” Goddard asked.

“We didn’t touch anything,” Heins said. “Once we saw there was no point.”

The sheriff patted down the pockets, felt the outline of four shotgun shells. He felt inside, pulled them out, put them back. He unzipped the heavy down coat and saw a billfold bulge in the top right coverall pocket. He unbuttoned the pocket and extracted the billfold. Deputy Barnes held out a plastic bag and the sheriff dropped the billfold in. The rest of Winthrop’s pockets were empty.

The entire scene looked like they’d walked into some kind of deep freeze. It was laid out exactly the way Heins had described it.

Goddard used a pair of heavy tongs to lift the shotgun out of the snow. “Damn big gun,” he said.

Barnes helped him crack open the double-barrel and look inside. One shell fired, one ready. He sniffed around the opening. An acrid burn. The safety was set to off.

“One hell of a gun for snowshoe,” Goddard observed.

“That gun’s been in Williston’s family for years,” Heins explained. “You get anywhere near a hare, it drops it. The spray’s so big only a few pellets usually hit, but it’s plenty, coming from a gun like that.”

“It’s a wonder anything’s left of a hare after a shot from a gun like that,” said Barnes.

They retrieved what was left of the orange-billed hat from behind Winthrop’s body. Barnes took the necessary photos, the brilliant flash illuminating the carnage and the trampled snow.

“You could have been more careful with the scene,” Goddard said, turning to Heins.

“Sorry about that, Sheriff. All of us came out to find him. We

were practically on top of him before we saw him. Then we rushed to his side before we knew what happened,” Heins explained. He wasn’t looking at Winthrop. He was contrite and solemn, which Goddard understood, given the presumed accidental death of one of Heins’s oldest and closest friends.

There was no reason for Goddard to doubt the events, but it was hard not to feel they were peculiar, given what he knew. It wasn’t only the hour, the cold, and the accident. He wondered if his disclosure of the subpoena’s contents might have precipitated Winthrop’s demise. He wasn’t sorry to see the man dead. He was sorry to see the man escape justice. Winthrop, the sheriff guessed, had paid the ultimate price. But Assistant District Attorney Jeff Dunlap would be disappointed. Given the markings the heavy gun made as it slid along the birch bark and Winthrop’s bulk lying frozen in the snow, Goddard wasn’t going to push it. It was too damn cold, too late, and he was too tired. And when he stared at the body, he could not help but feel some measure of reprieve.

The hat’s bill had been torn clean off. Barnes also examined the fallen birch and saw where the barrel had been leaned against the tree before Winthrop stepped over it. The dead man must have jostled the birch, causing the gun to slide across the bark and discharge. Looked like it, anyway. “Damn odd,” he said.

“What?” Goddard asked.

“Man like Winthrop setting down a gun like that with the safety off.”

“Probably saw a hare jump. Wanted to be ready,” Heins suggested, reasonable enough.

“I guess,” Goddard said.

“Can we turn him over?” Wallace asked. “I should at least try and figure out when this happened.”

Goddard and Barnes bent over the frozen body. It turned over stiffly and awkwardly in the snow, as though they were flipping a fallen log. The dead man fell over with a heavy *whump*.

Goddard checked the back pockets and found three of the dead man’s business cards—Williston F. Winthrop, Attorney at Law, with his office address in Defiance. There was nothing else on them. No writing. Nothing. Goddard added them to the bag with the billfold.

Wallace worked a long thermometer needle out of her bag. She tried to insert it through his lower back, trying to probe an internal organ so she could get an accurate temperature reading. She could use the dead man’s internal body temperature to determine the approximate time of death. But the body was already frozen.

“Can’t get it in,” she said.

“Seem reasonable?” Goddard asked.

“In this cold?” she said. “Seems like the body’s been here for more than 5 hours. It’s like a deep freeze out here. That’d be enough time.”

Goddard looked back to the body. “All right. Let’s get him in that bag and put it on the sled.”

The scene was clear enough. By the time they returned to the farmhouse, it was just after 2 a.m. When they approached, they noticed a Datsun pickup added to the covey of cars.

“The *Gazette*,” Barnes said.

“That Diane’s truck?”

“Looks like it,” Barnes replied.

Diane Talbott, the *Vermilion Falls Gazette* reporter, was already inside the farmhouse interviewing the other members of the club. She'd just about finished when Goddard entered the house.

"Diane," he nodded.

"Hi, Sheriff."

"How'd you find out?"

"Couldn't sleep and I was out. Saw your patrol car. Then I saw Dr. Wallace's car. Looked official. Just a hunch," she said.

Over the last few months there had been too many hunches, Goddard thought. He suspected Diane was monitoring their official radio channel. Scanning wasn't illegal, but if the office knew she was scanning, they'd probably return to a stricter adherence to the use of codes, or start scrambling their signal. "You could get in trouble, following me around."

"Sorry, Sheriff. Just couldn't sleep." She managed a weak smile that told Goddard he'd have to keep an eye out for Diane Talbott.

Diane was one of those women Goddard's father described as "built like a brick icehouse," which meant she was strong and attractive, and had some style and a body that easily fired the imagination. For a woman around 50 who had spent most of her adult life on the Range, she was still surprisingly unaffiliated, which was to say without a man. Not that there weren't plenty of men who had tried. Some said she'd been known to party when she was young. But now she spent most of her time at her job, either for the *Gazette* or writing freelance, covering wilderness issues.

"OK if I take some notes?" she asked.

Goddard thought about it. "Winthrop have a next of kin?" he asked Heins.

"Not really," Heins said. "There was a son, some years back.

Disappeared. And you know Miriam died two years ago. Just us,” he added, indicating the four club members in the room.

“All right,” Goddard said, turning toward Diane.

Goddard spent the next 10 minutes taking the club members’ statements. Hal Young was the local insurance agent. He was the same height as Angus Moon and Heins but different in stature and temperament. Heins was mean, but savvy enough to hide it. Moon was like a wolverine, wild as the woods he hunted, with a temper that could turn on a dime, the few times Goddard had crossed him. Young was a businessman, and other than being a member of the Iron County Gun Club, he was about as foursquare as a white cardboard box. Hank Pederson, an aging, self-professed ladies’ man, owned the Ford dealership in Defiance. The four gun club members filled in the details—solemn, perhaps a little nervous, Goddard figured, because their lifetime friend had just met his grisly end, maybe from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, though none of them betrayed that suspicion. Regardless, incidents such as this one were sober reminders of one’s own mortality.

They’d assembled for poker. When Winthrop didn’t show, they came looking. And found him. They were quiet and grave in the poorly lit front room of Winthrop’s farmhouse. They looked tired.

While Goddard spoke with the men, Heins and Barnes loaded Winthrop’s body into the doctor’s Explorer. Once he was finished in the house, Goddard gave Diane the details she’d need.

“Hunting accident,” he said. “Massive head trauma. I’m sure you’ll say it using more words, but that’s the sum of it.”

Diane nodded. “Thanks, Sheriff.”

He nodded and turned away.

Once outside, Goddard approached the doctor’s car.

"I can drive with you to the office, help you unload him and get him squared away, providing you can give me a lift home."

"No problem, Sheriff."

He thought maybe she sounded a little too eager, if anyone was listening. "Barnes," Goddard turned to his deputy. "Can you take the squad car and follow us over? You'll have to help me with this cargo, at least to unload it. Then you can take the cruiser home and the doctor'll give me a lift."

Barnes nodded. "See you there."

"Get your truck out of the road, Diane. Go home and get some sleep."

But she was already too preoccupied to think about sleep, contemplating the story she was about to write. Goddard knew he'd be reading about Winthrop's accident by morning.

Goddard knew Dr. Wallace hated icy roads, so he offered to drive. They got into their cars and started their engines in the cold. Then they turned toward Vermilion Falls.

For the first mile Goddard and Wallace rode in silence, following Diane's truck. Barnes followed them in the squad car.

"That was a horrible accident," Wallace finally observed, careful not to turn her head, so if the reporter glimpsed them in her rearview, she would think they were driving in silence. "But it could uncomplicate things."

Goddard exhaled as though trapped air were being let out of a bag. "Could," he said tersely, but clearly pleased.

"You think he mentioned it to anyone? Shared that video?"

"No way to know," he remarked, eyes carefully focused on the narrow lane in front of him. They were traveling over back

roads. Winthrop's farmhouse was in one of the most remote areas of the county. On either side, dense wilderness closed in on the narrow lane.

"What are we going to do, Dean?"

"You're not going to do anything. I'm going to find that video." He paused, thinking. "If I know Winthrop, it's someplace safe. I'd bet his office or the farmhouse. But it's not going to be easy finding it."

"What about his house in Defiance? Miriam's old place?"

"Could be," Goddard guessed. They drove another half mile in silence. "I guess I'm going to have to sleep on it," he said, his hands gripping the wheel of the doctor's Explorer.

The doctor stared ahead, peering to where the edge of headlights disappeared into darkness. Goddard thought she was pondering the location of Winthrop's evidence when he felt her hand inch over and graze his right thigh.

He could feel the heat of it through his jeans.

"Maybe we should sleep on it together," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Sam Rivers arrived at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife office, Judy Rutgers's message had already been broadcast to a half-dozen coworkers needing a Monday morning chuckle. Rutgers was a sheep rancher who lived over 2 hours southeast of Denver, Colorado.

"This is Judy Rutgers," she blurted. "Last night one of my ewes was taken. A wolf! I got all the proof you'll need. And I'm sitting here with my rifle, hoping the cocksucker shows its ugly head. When it does, I'll be blowing it off."

There was a pause, during which Maureen, the office assistant, said, "Wait. She's not finished."

Sam's coworkers paused over Maureen's speakerphone.

"I'll give you 'til sundown to get out here and look, Rivers. Then I'm settin' traps." The line went dead.

"Sundown!" Maureen repeated, parroting Rutgers's rasp. The office broke into laughter.

Sam Rivers's appearance caused his coworkers to fade back to their desks.

"Morning, Sam," Maureen nodded.

"Maureen," he nodded back.

His sallow-rimmed eyes told her all she needed to know about his weekend. She'd keep it to business, but like the rest of the staff, she was waiting for an end to Rivers's depression. Or maybe for his transfer back to national field operations. "Judy Rutgers has issues again."

"I heard."

“What should I tell her?”

“Tell her I’ll be out after noon. First I need to talk with Kay Magdalen, then finish some paperwork.” He had received another troubling email he hoped Magdalen could help him track down. The anonymous emails came from a region and a past Sam thought he’d put behind him a long time ago.

“Should I see if Kay’s in?”

“Her Outback’s in the lot.”

Maureen’s ears tracked gossip like a pair of Doppler radars, and she had a mouth like a satellite radio, which is why Sam never shared anything with her. Maureen might have been the one to overhear the news about his dog, Charlie.

“That’s two Kay Magdalen visits in less than a week,” she said. “You sure you feel OK?”

Maureen was fishing. He almost never visited his old supervisor. “Clarence is a Rockies fan, and I have a lead on some tickets,” he lied. When she didn’t recognize the name, he added, “Clarence is Kay’s husband. He and I go way back.”

Truth is he and Kay Magdalen had worked together for more than a decade—when he was a national field agent—and he had never met Clarence.

Maureen nodded. “Oh. OK. I’ll let Judy know you’ll be there this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Maureen.” Then he turned and disappeared into his cubicle.

Charged with protecting and managing the nation’s wildlife, the USFW had taken Sam Rivers, one of its best national field agents, into places no sane person would want to go. That is until a year ago, when his failing marriage and then his failing best

friend—his dog, Charlie—prompted him to step down from the national spotlight to take a job in local investigations.

Five years earlier the *Denver Post* ran a Sunday feature on his work at the USFW, “Saving Endangered Species One Animal at a Time.” The article recounted one of his most recent cases. Rare Florida deer were being annihilated from a section of the Florida Keys. Their total disappearance from an area they’d previously inhabited was suspicious. Sam investigated, and after some digging and a few lucky breaks, he discovered a small group of developers who believed concern for the Key deer, which the USFW estimated to number around 800 animals, was negatively impacting their development plans. They’d hired a south Florida hunter to rid the proposed development site of any trace of the small, endangered deer. And they would have succeeded, if the hunter hadn’t begun selling Key deer skins, hooves, horns, and venison on the black market.

The article called Sam Rivers “the predator’s predator,” a moniker that stuck, at least within his office and the USFW. There was a picture of his 6'2" frame standing in front of the south Florida bulldozer he had single-handedly idled. His square shoulders and 195 pounds looked small in front of the huge shovel blade. But his greasy black hair, disheveled undercover clothes, and four days’ beard growth made him look like the swamp rats he’d hunted. The article recounted how before it was all over, Sam had to fight his way out of a backwoods bar.

His then-wife, Maggie, had been proud of the *Denver Post*’s coverage. She cut out the photo and taped it to their fridge.

Magdalen was as surprised to see him as he was to be there. “You’re coming back,” she opined.

“Not exactly. Still thinking about it.”

Magdalen was heading up the new interagency task force, and she wanted Sam back on her team. Magdalen had the demeanor of a truck driver and the appearance of a fullback, and she could bull her way through USFW law enforcement bureaucracy unlike anyone Sam had ever seen, which was a rare quality and just one of the reasons he liked her.

“It would do you nothing but good, Rivers.”

“I suspect you’re right. I just need a little more time.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, passed it across her desk. “Got another one of these last Friday.”

Magdalen opened it. Another email from *canislupustruth@yahoo.com*. This one was short. “Soon,” it said.

“Soon what?” she asked.

“Good question.”

Sam had been receiving these messages for the last two years, spread out at least a month apart. They’d started after his mother died. The first he’d almost mistaken for spam. He still remembered it, because it was brief and personal. “Clayton?” it asked, in the subject line. The text of the message repeated the question using his full birth name: “Clayton Evan Winthrop?” That was all.

No one had called him Clayton Winthrop in years. He treated it the way he treated everything else from his childhood; he highlighted the message and pressed Delete. But the email address was interesting. *Canis lupus*, the scientific name for the gray wolf.

And then a few days later he’d received a second message. This one contained a single phrase in the subject line: “Seen this?” There was an attachment with the email. It was a copy of

his mother's will, which he had never seen. It left everything to the old man. There was the house, car, the proceeds from a large life insurance policy, and the money Sam's mother had managed to save, a little over \$179,000. Sam was surprised, both by his absence from her will and the size of her estate, which he'd always assumed would be meager.

He'd spoken with his mother just weeks before her end. He was comfortable with their parting. Sam always remembered her as an old-school wife. For years she had been largely estranged from the old man, living in separate residences. But there had never been talk of divorce. There was logic to her leaving everything to the old man. But Sam was still surprised.

Over the last two decades he and his mother had seen each other only a handful of times. But the absence of visits hadn't diminished their connection, such as it was. Though she'd been unable to stand up to Williston Winthrop, Sam considered his mother a positive influence in his life. He assumed he would be a beneficiary in her will, though they'd never discussed it. He wondered who had sent the will, and why. He immediately considered the old man, but then excluded him. Coy wasn't the old man's style. There was no good reason for the old man to be secretive or to send him a copy of the will. Why invite trouble, should Sam want to contest it?

Twenty years earlier Sam had fled west, changed his name, and disappeared. It had taken him more than a year to reach back out to his mom. And even then it was only by phone. Eventually he shared his new name and whereabouts, but he made it clear she should keep it in confidence.

He had not seen or spoken to Williston F. Winthrop since the

day Sam had wreaked havoc in the heart of his farmhouse, letting the old man know how he felt about the Winthrop family heritage. Then he fled. But not before stealing one of the old man's precious Decimators.

There had been other cryptic messages. He began to wonder about them, so he recovered the first email from his deleted folder. Then, he'd created a folder—named Defiance, the name of the closest town to his childhood home—and dragged the messages into it one by one over the intervening months, where they remained unanswered.

This message, like all the others, was typically cryptic. He had printed off a copy to share with Magdalen. He wanted her to find out whatever she could about the sender. She had solid contacts in the USFW information technology group and he didn't want to draw a lot of attention to it. He just wanted to know about canislupustruth@yahoo.com. Where did he/she live? Where did the message come from?

"Sorry, Rivers," Magdalen said. "Another bizarre message isn't going to change anything. I'm sure it's annoying, but until something more specific happens, like maybe a threat, there's nothing IT can do about it."

She told him what he'd expected. Yahoo guarded the privacy of its members like Fort Knox gold. Truth was, given the ease with which Yahoo email accounts were set up, a person could easily register an email using a bogus name and address.

"IT tells me the only thing that they might be able to tell you," Magdalen added, "would be the identity of the computer from which it was sent. But that would take some work, backtracking through code, IP addresses, proxy servers, and plenty of email

traffic, whatever that means. Nothing they'd even think about without a warrant."

"I thought these people were your friends?"

"Colleagues, Rivers. We don't have friends. I know them well enough. And if I wanted to push it, I could probably get them to look into it without a warrant, see what they could find out. But this is personal," Magdalen said. "You know how the service is about using resources for personal stuff."

Her answer was bullshit and they both knew it. The flash of a badge enabled an agent to cut to the head of a line or get some free doughnuts and coffee, and Sam had seen it used countless times, had occasionally used it himself. Magdalen knew what he was thinking.

"The last time I checked," she said, "personal annoyance wasn't enough for a judge to grant a warrant." Then, "What's keeping you from coming back?"

She was dangling a carrot. If he told her he was coming back to national field ops to be part of her interagency task force, she might spend a little of her IT capital to help him.

"Not ready."

She considered him for a long few seconds. "You know what you need?"

"No idea."

"You need to take some time off. Maybe head over to Las Vegas. It's probably been a while since you've had your . . .," she paused, wondering how to say it. "Your pipes cleaned out. You should take some time. You've got plenty of vacation built up. I've seen your file. If you don't take it before the end of the year, you'll lose some of it."

“Are you telling me I should buy a whore?”

She looked away, a little miffed by his crass characterization. “I think it’s more of a rental fee. Personally, I find it morally repugnant. But men feel different about these things.”

Truth was, his appetite for sex had left with Maggie. He knew it would return. But hiring a hooker was about as far from his mind as vacationing in Cancun.

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Just saying,” she said, but left it there. Then she handed the paper back.

Sam returned it to his back pocket and stood up. “If I came back on the team, would you use your IT contacts to find out what you could about canislupustruth?”

Magdalen looked at him, considering. “Who knows? Teams are funny things. If a team member is going through a rough spot and it impacts the organization, then from my perspective it makes sense to do whatever you can to help out.”

Sam thought about pushing it, but he had his answer. She could get IT to look into it if she wanted, but until he decided to come back and work for her, she wasn’t going to expend the capital to get it done. He turned to leave, and then remembered.

“If you happen to run into Maureen down in local investigations and she asks, Clarence and I are old friends and I got him tickets to the Rockies game this coming Saturday,” Sam said.

“Rockies? Clarence has never been to a baseball game in his life. You’ve never even met him.”

“I know. And I’m not taking it personally.”

She grinned. “Whatever, Rivers. I’ll cover for you. Just get your head on straight. We can’t wait forever.”

CHAPTER THREE

The “dead” man walked out of the cabin and paused, listening for Moon’s approach. In his right hand he held a .45 caliber pistol. The first thing he noticed was the cold, probably 20 below in the shadow of these trees. He listened carefully but heard nothing. Maybe a little wind through the pine tops, but you could never tell—they were bunched so tightly here, the cabin hidden in their midst.

The man knew he would hear Moon’s approach along the swamp edge. Now he hustled down the path, searching for a place to hide.

Almost 24 hours earlier the man had snowshoed across Skinwalkers Bog. It was a 2-mile hike, and unless you knew where you were going and how to get there, the trip would probably be your last in this kind of cold. He had reached the cabin after dark, let himself in, shook out the cold, and fired up the pot-bellied stove. Then he switched on the CB radio and scanner but heard nothing until the call to dispatch around midnight, from the sheriff’s cruiser. There had been two calls: one by the sheriff telling dispatch where he was headed and why, and one on the way back, from Barnes, telling the office they were finished and returning. That was around 2 a.m., but the man only half heard it. By then he was dead drunk, celebrating with three-quarters of a fifth of rye.

Damn good thing Moon was bringing more supplies, he thought.

Now he stepped carefully over yesterday’s tracks, weaving through the thick wood for a little more than 100 feet until he

stopped again to listen. Nothing. Just wind, at the tree edge. He could see the intense afternoon sunlight through the perimeter's boughs. He stepped forward, using the pistol's barrel to part the branches, and peered across the frozen swamp.

No sign of Moon . . . yet. He leaned back, concealing himself, and waited. It was a full minute before he remembered to cock his weapon. If he waited until Moon passed through the tree edge, the wary woodsman would hear it and be warned. He pulled back the trigger until it clicked and held. Then he listened again, but it was still quiet. Now he just tried to remain still.

The appearance of the vagrant James T. "Jimbo" Beauregard happened less than a week ago. Jimbo's entrance triggered a series of events that happened so quickly that the dead man's head still spun. Since then, he'd been looking forward to spending some time alone at the club's cabin.

The cabin was in the heart of a remote tract of wilderness the Ojibwe had always avoided, probably because it was so covered over by swamp, bush, and mosquitoes that it was no place to hunt. Even deer had trouble navigating there. The Iron County Gun Club managed to build a secret, remote cabin in the center of it. And to keep it secret the club members promoted the name Skinwalkers Bog, reporting that the American Indians stayed out of it because within its 10-mile-square tract of swamp, strange things occurred. Never mind that Skinwalker was actually a Navajo myth from the American Southwest. The club thought Skinwalker sounded a whole lot better than Wendigo, an Ojibwe evil spirit. So they appropriated the name for their own purposes, and it stuck.

In the summer the terrain was impassable. In the winter, not much better.

But by early afternoon the man started feeling stir-crazy. The morning hadn't been a complete waste. He'd spent some serious time contemplating future moves, and he'd come up with something so compelling and perfect that it was an inspiration, in keeping with their latest spate of good fortune. No one had seen Jimbo coming. He'd stumbled into Defiance, broke, freezing, and ready to do anything for a meal and a warm bed. Heins took one look at him and recognized the opportunity.

But no one else would see this opportunity. Jimbo had been a sacrificial lamb. It would take some work and getting the other club members to recognize that his feeder calves could also be sacrificial. What he needed was to make one of them believe it was their idea. And he thought he had figured out how.

Now he stood hidden at the tree edge, his pistol raised and ready, waiting for Moon. Finally, he heard movement across the snow.

Moon snowshoed through the brittle sunlight, skirting a rare stretch of open swamp, searching among the ancient stumps for the dark entrance where the path turned off into tree-covered shadows. Moon didn't like hiking into the bog in the middle of daylight. He preferred coming late in the day, or under cover of darkness.

The club members were careful about approaching the cabin. Starting in the full light of a clear afternoon, even though the temperature had only climbed to -15° , was risky. Someone might see where Moon had turned off the highway onto an old logging road. If they followed the tracks, they'd find his truck more than a quarter mile up the path, concealed in a stand of black spruce. But they'd have to hike it, Moon thought, since he was always careful about relocking the heavy-gauge chain that stretched across the

logging road entrance, padlocked at one end. Someone'd need a bolt cutter to remove it, Moon knew, which is why he wasn't too worried about it.

He was more irritated about Winthrop's goddamn calves. Now that Winthrop was gone, the chore of tending his livestock fell on Moon. He had to check on them twice a day. This morning he'd fed them and made sure the propane tank heater was still on and operational. The arctic wind sometimes blew it out and froze the tank solid. He would have to check on it later, on his way back, and Moon didn't much care for the extra labor. Tending to his own dogs was about as much work as the old woodsman wanted.

Few people knew it, but Moon's most ambitious venture involved hybridizing wolf dogs. He'd brought a powerful Arctic wolf down from Canada. The wolf killed two malamute bitches before he took one for a mate.

In some states, breeding wolf dog hybrids was illegal. But in Minnesota, breeding and selling them was a legitimate business, though there were few who pursued it because wolf dog hybrids could be problematic pets, if not outright dangerous. Moon didn't care. He charged the out-of-state breeders \$1,500 a mutt but made sure the transaction was confidential. He was careful about his work and happy for the supplement to his meager income. But he chafed against even the minimal work his breeding operation required. Now, for instance, he would have to drop off supplies, have a drink, and then gather himself for the hike out. Calves and dogs, they were pissing him off.

He was familiar enough with the cabin path to snowshoe without thinking. His short, bandy legs knew the way. Besides, he was damn close and getting thirsty. Whiskey'd take the edge

off. Now he pushed through a swale of pine boughs, pausing just beyond its edge to let his eyes grow accustomed to the shadows.

When the waiting man heard Moon approaching, he positioned himself carefully amid the tree boughs. He raised the gun in both hands, holding it straight out in front of him. Moon came through the tree edge and stopped.

The man adjusted the pistol's aim so that it focused on the center of Moon's hood-covered head, less than 3 feet away. Then he pulled the trigger.

The hollow metal ping made Moon jump like a snowshoe hare startled by a lynx. He jerked, grunting, and then turned to see Winthrop aiming the pistol at his head.

"You're a dead man, Angus Moon," Winthrop said, laughing.

"You could get killed, pullin' a stunt like that!"

The pistol dropped to Winthrop's side. "I'm already dead," he said.

For half a second Moon's eyes flashed.

Winthrop saw it, and added, "Take it easy, Angus. I was getting bored and needed a little fun."

Moon looked away, still pissed.

"Let's go get a drink," Winthrop said.

Once inside the cabin Winthrop poured them both a full tumbler of cheap rye. They drank it off in one long swallow and Winthrop refilled their glasses.

"So how'd it go?" Winthrop asked. He could see the whiskey was working.

"The paper's out," Moon finally said. "Already got a story."

"The paper's already covered it?"

"That Talbott bitch was at the farmhouse last night, askin' questions."

"With the sheriff?"

"Came after, when the sheriff was out lookin' at the body."

"That's interesting."

"Talbott must've seen the patrol car," Moon guessed.

"Maybe. But that's good. We're ahead of schedule."

Moon pulled the *Vermilion Falls Gazette*, followed by three cans of chili and two more bottles of whiskey, out of his bedraggled pack. Moon got settled and had another good long drink, feeling the pleasant burn.

"Who all checked on the body?"

"The sheriff, Heins, Barnes, and Doc Wallace."

"Sounds like a goddamn convention."

"Heins said everything went off like clockwork."

"Did they take the Decimator?"

"Took the shotgun back to the morgue with Jimbo's body."

Less than a week earlier, Heins had found Jimbo holed up in the abandoned rail station on the outskirts of Defiance. He was a bum, on his way north to work in his sister's café, somewhere up in Canada. Heins liked rolling bums, but the first thing he noticed about Jimbo was his look; except for the face, he could have passed as Winthrop's twin. The face was definitely different, but the club finally figured out how to fix it, and they did. Moon had pulled the Decimator's trigger, removing the front of Jimbo's skull.

"You make sure to get the Decimator back," Winthrop said.

"Course," Moon said.

“Did they check the pockets?”

“Heins said so. Took your wallet and some business cards from a back pocket.”

“Perfect. I won’t be needing that license anymore. Or the cards,” Winthrop laughed. Then he picked up the paper. It was column one, front-page news in the *Gazette*.

Local Attorney Dies in Hunting Accident

Diane Talbott

Vermilion Falls Gazette, Jan. 27

Vermilion Falls—Williston Francis Winthrop, 62, of Rural Route 3, died Sunday evening of a single gunshot wound to the head, the victim of an apparent hunting accident. Winthrop was hunting alone on his rural acreage when he leaned his shotgun against a fallen tree. As he straddled the tree to step over it, the shotgun slid down the log and discharged.

The shooting was reported to the sheriff’s office at approximately 11 p.m. Sunday by friends of the deceased. The friends, all members of the Iron County Gun Club, went searching for the late attorney when he failed to appear for their scheduled card game.

Vermilion County Sheriff Dean Goddard and coroner Dr. Susan Wallace said the full coroner’s report would be released pending further investigation and consultation with the county attorney’s office.

Winthrop was a well-known Iron Range attorney and hunting rights advocate. One of his recent high-profile efforts was ardent opposition to Minnesota’s Wolf Management Plan. In several public comment hearings Winthrop argued that wolves had returned to the state in sufficient numbers to have them removed from the List of Endangered

and Threatened Wildlife. He noted that wolf depredation of livestock and pets was on the rise, and he believed it was only a matter of time before wolves attacked a human. His most controversial recommendation was to reinstate wolf bounties, a population control method not used in the state since 1965. His suggestion was never seriously considered.

Williston Winthrop was preceded in death by his wife, Miriam Winthrop, also of Defiance. He is survived by a son. Funeral services pending.

He smiled when he reached the end. "Goddamn," Winthrop said. "I'd say she just about nailed it. Except for the part about my suggestion to return to wolf bounties."

Moon had read the article, but quickly, just to make sure there was nothing worrisome. "What?" he asked.

"She got the stuff about being opposed to that goddamn wolf-management plan about right. But she says here my 'suggestion to reinstate wolf bounties was never seriously considered.'" Winthrop scoffed, smacking the paper with his hand. "There are plenty who think it's a good idea. And if I'd lived long enough, I would have seen it through."

"Damn straight," Moon agreed.

"I forgot Talbott knew my son," Winthrop said.

"We wondered about it."

"Nothing to wonder about. The kid doesn't matter. He won't do anything. It's been 20 years. Even if he found out about my death and returned, there wouldn't be a goddamn thing he could do about my estate. Heins'd take care of the boy."

The two men sat for a while, sipping whiskey, talking about plans.

"We still have scores to settle," Winthrop finally said.

Moon grunted, already thinking about his hike out. The afternoon light was starting to settle, and those goddamn calves would be waiting for more feed.

"You tend the calves?" Winthrop inquired, knowing the woodsman hated the job.

"Course," Moon said, displeased.

"They still fat 'n' happy?"

"Big," Moon said. "Eat too much. Sooner we sell 'em, the better."

"They're not quite ready."

In years past Winthrop sold off the animals and used the butchering proceeds to keep the club in beef. But this year was going to be different. "It'll be a while," he answered, reminding the woodsman his labors would not end soon. "Meanwhile you'll need to check on 'em. Twice a day."

"I know it," Moon snapped.

"Morning and night," Winthrop said. "Now that they're just about ready, I don't want wolves coming in to take them."

"Wolves?" Moon knew wolves, and they'd never enter a barn.

"Wolves," Winthrop mused. "Now that no one's around, those vermin might see opportunity."

"No wolves gettin' into a barn."

"Just because they haven't done it yet doesn't mean they won't. You sound like the DNR. Wolves don't give a rat's ass where their meal comes from. If it's easy and available and there's nothing to stop them, they'll take it. They're vile opportunists."

"You know damn well I'm no friend of the DNR. But Williston, wolves don't go into barns and take cows. Just don't happen."

"Yet," Winthrop returned. "If wolves came in and took 'em, one thing's for damn sure. It'd shake up the DNR. And Fish &

Wildlife. Teach 'em these vermin are getting out of control."

"Like to see that."

Winthrop paused. "What if there was a way to lure some in and set 'em loose? We'd teach every tree hugger in the state these wolves are hell-bent on destruction." He waited for the woodsman to catch on.

"Wolves don't lure. Not into a barn."

"It's only a matter of time."

Winthrop let Moon think about it. It didn't take long.

"We should let my dogs have at 'em," Moon said.

And that was Winthrop's plan. Moon's hybrids looked and acted enough like wolves to be the real thing. And Winthrop had witnessed the wolf dogs' work, tracking down wounded deer and keeping them pinned until Moon gave the signal. They were accomplished killers.

Moon considered. "I know damn well what we gotta do." He stood up and moved over to pull his coat off the nearby peg. "First, I'll make sure those fatlings are fed and watered. Then I'll get back to my place. And nail every one of my dogs into their houses. Give them nothin' but water for a couple days. Get them good and hungry."

"Radio forecasts a big storm Wednesday night," Winthrop said.

"Good night for poker," Moon said.

"We could crate them up at your place and take them over to the farm. Then let them loose . . . after poker. If it's coming down as hard as they predict, nobody'll be out in it."

"Except us," Moon said. "And our wolves."

CHAPTER FOUR

Just after 4 p.m. Sam pulled into Judy Rutgers's gravel drive. The sky was clear, with the sun starting to drop into the distant mountain ridge. Sam recognized the woman's large silhouette in her living room window.

Sam and Rutgers were both members of a citizen wolf-management committee. The USFW created it to provide a platform for ranchers to air their opinions and be heard. Rutgers wasn't shy about sharing her perspectives. But she was disappointed that few of her arguments were sufficient to move anyone at the USFW, or to change service regulations.

Her front door swung open and the substantial Ms. Rutgers, cradling a Marlin 336, stepped out. She wore a faded work shirt over an anemic red T-shirt. The work shirt hung blouselike over her large, barrel-shaped middle. There was nothing fragile about Judy Rutgers. Her arms were as stout as stove wood and her oversized legs disappeared into a pair of well-worn cowboy boots. Carrying the rifle, she looked menacing. But Sam knew it was more bluster than blow.

Sam turned to the cargo space of his Jeep and extracted his camera bag.

"Bout time, Rivers," she said, her voice like a distant chain-saw. "I called your office this morning."

"Judy," Sam replied, nodding. "Came out as soon as I could. I was under the impression you had plenty of evidence. And we both know a wolf, if that's what it is, wouldn't return in daylight."

"If it was a wolf!" Her round face started to turn crimson.

“Goddammit, Rivers, you know me. You know I wouldn’t call if I wasn’t 100% certain it was a wolf.”

Sam had his doubts, but that would heat her blood to a boil. “You’ve read the latest wolf population report. U.S. Fish & Wildlife made a careful census of Colorado.”

“Don’t tell me about that goddamn report,” she interrupted.

Sam paused, turning to look at the distant Front Range, hazy in the late afternoon. From here the mountains looked far off, inviting. Rutgers needed time to cool.

The report he referenced was USFW’s annual Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Report. Since Sam had relegated himself to remaining local, he’d spearheaded the effort to research and write the new report. It detailed Colorado’s wolf population, which was practically nonexistent. There were a few places on the western fringe of the state where wolves were starting to repopulate, but those were far from Judy Rutgers’s ranch.

Like many livestock owners, Rutgers had an expert’s eye for tracking and sorting through the remnants of a kill to determine what had done it. It was possible a wolf, one of those on a walkabout from a western pack, had come into her flock, though its appearance this far east would be unusual. A lone wolf’s range could carry it hundreds of miles in just a few days. If she had read the report, she would have noticed that just last year a wolf was struck by a car 30 miles west of Denver. It had been collared, and the most recent tracking data indicated it had covered 446 miles in less than two weeks. Wolves were marathoners of the highest order.

“The report’s pretty specific,” Sam finally said. Even though her tongue was as coarse as a truck driver’s, he liked Judy Rutgers

but didn't care for how she felt about his reportorial efforts.

"Goddammit," she said, this time a little softer. "Don't mess with me, Rivers. I've got enough to deal with just runnin' this place."

True enough. A sentiment that plenty in wildlife management were reluctant to admit.

Rutgers stepped around the corner of her house. "Let's go have a look, Rivers."

They hiked out to the gulch. Sticking close to the house, paddock, and barn, sheep grazed in the waning sun. At the ditch's edge Rutgers pointed, then started down toward a small hollow rimmed with scrub oak.

They rounded a bend of head-high brush. They were still 20 yards above the hollow. The side of the hill was open and there were clear signs of a struggle.

"Here's where he took her." Judy pointed to the dry ground.

There were few things that could focus Sam Rivers's attention like a prey site. The grass was broken and the earth torn up in two or three places. There was a dark splash of something that looked like axle grease. Sam stepped carefully to the stained ground and peered at it, suspecting it was blood. He dabbed two fingers onto the spot; it was dry, but sticky. He smelled it. Wet iron. Five feet downhill there was a scrub oak thicket, the perfect hiding place. Sam imagined the predator waiting in the brush until the ewe grazed close, then springing. A big wolf could finish the job in less than 10 seconds. But so could a cougar. He looked for other signs, but found only dirt from the scuffle and blood. "Tell me there's more than this."

"Oh hell yes." Rutgers turned and started down the hill toward the bottom of the gulch. They bushwhacked through heavy scrub oak. When they pushed through the brush edge, their racket

startled three birds that rose squawking in the dusk light.

“Ravens,” Sam said, watching them rise into the afternoon light. He paused to watch their loping wingbeats carry them over the ridgeline.

“Goddamn scavengers,” Rutgers said.

The ravens were a good sign. Ravens were sometimes known to follow wolves. And it meant there was still evidence.

In the narrow opening they found what was left of the ewe. Her gaping throat had the look of a wolf kill, Sam thought. Something had fastened on and tore. Coyotes dart and nip, usually at the flanks or hindquarters. They seldom made frontal attacks, particularly on a full-grown ewe in a flock. Cougars dropped or leaped onto their prey, raking its back while trying to break its neck. This ewe had her under throat torn away in one deep gash. Wolf. He was pretty sure. The hindquarters and entrails were largely missing. Last night's dinner, Sam guessed. Or a very early breakfast.

Rutgers made a wide sweep around the ewe, carefully picking over the ground. “I think you'll find some good prints over here,” she said, pointing to the bush edge.

Sam looked down, pulling his camera out of the bag. He took off the lens cap and bent over the prints. There were two pairs, the front and hind paws. The pairs overlapped, as though each foot attempted to step inside the footprint made in front of it. Coyote prints were similar in position, but much smaller: 2.5 inches in length or less. Wolf prints were 4.5 inches in length or more. Certain large breeds of feral dog could approach the size of a wolf's print, but they were usually set much farther apart. Sam had seen hybridized animals, wolves crossed with dog breeds that made them practically indistinguishable from full-blooded wolves. But

these prints appeared to be the real thing.

Affixed to the camera was a 200-millimeter macro lens. He paused over each print, focusing the lens. He was almost certain it was a wolf. But he noticed the prints were a little small, and the observation caused his pulse to increase. He reached into his bag and pulled out an 8-inch photo scale. He placed the ruler next to the print, then bent over, focused, and snapped. These prints were just over 3 inches in length, including their claws. He took a couple more shots and placed the ruler perpendicular to the print, repeating the action with the camera.

"That's interesting, Judy."

"What?" She didn't like his tone.

"Any hair?"

She turned around the carcass and pointed to where a tuft marked the sharp end of an oak branch. Sam closed the space between them, reaching into the satchel and extracting a plastic ziplock bag.

"Let's step careful. I think we want this one to return. Any other prints?" he asked.

"Just these. But they should be enough," she said defensively. "We want him back so we can shoot the sucker," she added.

"Take it easy, Judy. I'll issue you a shoot-on-sight permit, no questions asked. And if it's a Rocky Mountain wolf, you have the government's blessing to take the animal down."

"It's a wolf, Rivers," she affirmed.

Sam paused, absorbed in his work. "Yeah," he finally said. "It's a wolf." But he was intent on the hair.

He bent down with the camera, focused the lens on the hair tuft, and took several shots in rapid succession. Then he placed

the tuft into the bag, careful to keep it clean. "I have good news and bad news," he said. "Which would you like first?"

"The good news better be full reimbursement. The bad news is the bastard got away."

"That is the good news," he said. "You'll receive full compensation. The evidence is substantial. Prints too big for a coyote, and this hair," he said, holding up the bag in the fading sunlight, examining it. "It's got some red in it.

"Unfortunately, that's a disturbing feature. That, and the prints over there," he said, pointing to the wolf prints.

"What about 'em?"

"A typical Rocky Mountain wolf, particularly a lone hunter on walkabout searching for a mate to start a pack, would have a paw length over 4 inches. Coyotes aren't even close to 3 inches. This one's right in between. Could be a coyote-wolf mix. There is a remote chance it could be a Mexican wolf, slightly smaller than the Rocky Mountain or Great Plains subspecies. A very rare Mexican wolf," Sam said.

Rutgers was just happy it was a wolf. "So what's the bad news?"

"It may be a Mexican wolf."

"You said that."

He looked at her carefully. "There are around 150 of them throughout the Southwest, at least that we know of," he explained. "One this far north and east would be unusual, but not impossible." He continued, watching her. Clearly she didn't understand. "This subspecies isn't threatened," he said. "It's endangered."

There was a pause before recognition and outburst. "Oh for Chrissake!"

"Judy," Sam started.

"I don't give a shit. If that wolf takes another ewe and I'm anywhere near it, it's a dead wolf. A dead Mexican wolf."

"That could be a problem, Jude."

"I don't give a rip, Rivers. And you know I'll do it." She was blistering, her fists clenched.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife was doing everything it could to cultivate Mexican gray wolves. Sam had never heard of one this far north and east. Never in Colorado. But given wolves' loping gaits, long legs, ultrathon capabilities, and drive to find a proper mate, it could happen. Judging from the animal's morphology, it looked promising. But morphology, the art of discerning a species from its physical characteristics, was always dubious. He would have to send a hair sample to the USFW forensics lab in Ashland, Oregon, just to be sure. DNA tests would give him a definitive answer. But it would take time. And meanwhile Rutgers would be waiting with her Marlin 336.

Sam knew Rutgers could cross the line. She didn't give a damn about Mexican wolves, only that they were taking her stock. He liked her, but her perspective on wolves was shortsighted. "You shoot it, you pay," he said evenly. "Might even do some time."

"You mean he gets to live?" she asked, incredulous.

"If he's a Mexican wolf, he's too rare to kill, Judy. We've got to keep him alive. We can use him."

"To make more of these ewe-killing devils?"

"I've got a claim form back in the Jeep," Sam said. "No question about compensation," he added. But Rutgers wasn't mollified.

Before Sam left, he completed the USDA's Wolf Depredation Compensation Claim form. She'd get a check in the mail in just

a few days. It would probably be a few days after that before she calmed down enough to thank him. This time Rutgers needed a little extra time to cool.

One of Sam's favorite aspects of fieldwork, particularly when it involved a prey site, was how investigations engaged him. His absorption was instantaneous. His senses calmed and he focused, his blood coming alive. The act itself was one of forgetting, of putting the pain of his recent past behind him, of ignoring headache and heartache until the details of an investigation totally absorbed him.

By the time Sam returned to Yellow Rock, it was after dark. He walked into his unlit townhouse, tired and hungry. After pouring himself a glass of wine, he fired up his laptop and started checking emails.

He read more than 30 messages, mostly office work to be addressed. Then he found two messages that focused his attention like a face slap: an attachment from canislupustruth@yahoo.com and something from dianetalbott@gmail.com. He recognized the name of his mother's friend, but the subject line—Williston Winthrop is dead—sucked all the air out of the room. The old man was dead?

"Sorry for the blunt message. In the event anything happened to your father, your mom wanted me to tell you. She gave me your email address . . . hope it still works.

"It's been a long time, Sam. I'm sure you remember the times you and I paddled your mother into the Boundary Waters for some R&R and a good fish dinner. I have missed her these two years. She was a great friend with a heart the

size of a kettledrum and enough kindness for the whole world and everything in it—even, inexplicably, your father.

“Before she died she made me promise that if anything happened to Williston, I was to let you know. She knew you wouldn’t come home if he was still alive. She wanted me to remind you about the things you left in her house, things she wanted to make sure you recovered.”

Sam remembered. His mother had told him as much before she died. And it was true. He would never return home as long as the old man was alive.

“She said she’d added to them since you’d left, and you must come home and get them. I wish I could tell you more, but I think that was the sum of it.

“For what it’s worth, Williston was never able to sell her home and it’s still sitting vacant.

“Your mom told me some of the details of why you disappeared and changed your name. I didn’t like your father before I learned about it. Afterward, I liked him even less.

“Now you can come back for a visit, Sam Rivers. When you do, please stop by. Here’s a link to the business about your father.

“Oh, and his funeral will be at 3 p.m., February 1, Defiance Lutheran Church. Interment 4 p.m., Defiance Cemetery, in case you wanted to attend.

“All the best,

“Diane Talbott”

Sam remembered every detail about what he and his mother had hidden in her house, minutes before he fled. And she’d added

to it? He couldn't imagine what, wasn't really sure it mattered, though he was definitely curious.

He clicked on the link and opened an article to the online version of the *Vermilion Falls Gazette*. He'd forgotten Diane was a reporter.

Local Attorney Dies in Hunting Accident

Diane Talbott

Vermilion Falls Gazette, Jan. 27

Sam stared at the screen and reread the article twice, in disbelief. A hunting accident?

He remembered his mother's friend Diane. She was closer to Sam's age than his mother's. When they canoed into the Boundary Waters, Sam was around 15 and Diane probably in her late 20s. He had been impressed by her ability to paddle and by her appearance. He couldn't help admiring the woman, who was both wilderness savvy and attractive.

After his last battle with the old man, Sam stayed away from Defiance because you never knew when a man like Williston Winthrop would make good on his promise to charge him with attempted murder and make it stick.

Sam returned to his email and opened the message from can-lupustruth. This time there was no note, only an attachment. He opened the PDF and read "Will & Testament" printed across its top. It was a copy of the old man's will. The list of items included the 300-acre farm, all of the farm's machinery, three feeder calves still in the barn, one truck, a car, his mother's house (apparently vacant), and her car. And money, lots of it.

The old man had over \$2.3 million in various TD Ameritrade accounts, and over \$50,000 distributed throughout money market, checking, and savings accounts at the Vermilion Falls State Bank. An additional \$2.5 million term life policy was listed in his father's name. Everything else was tied up in personal property. Winthrop's signature was dated almost two years earlier, not long after Sam's mother's death. At the line marked BENEFICIARY(IES) he had written: "The members of the Iron County Gun Club, to be divided equally: Angus Moon, Bill Heins, Hank Pederson, and Hal Young."

Sam was shocked by the size of the old man's estate. Maybe legal work on Minnesota's Iron Range was more lucrative than he'd imagined. More likely, the old man had figured out a scheme for bilking clients.

The absence of his own name on the list of beneficiaries was no surprise. Sam Rivers's connection to the old man had ended with their last disagreement, the one that broke three of Sam's ribs and knocked him sprawling into North Dakota's emptiness.

Why would the old man carry a \$2.5 million policy on himself? For the benefit of his club? They'd been that close? Sam remembered their frequent meetings, their out-of-season hunting excursions, even their talk of building a remote, isolated cabin in Skinwalkers Bog.

The man who'd suggested reinstating wolf bounties—that was the man Sam remembered. He could imagine the old man standing at a public hearing and arguing, vociferously, that wolves should be delisted, hunted, even exterminated. Bring back the bounties.

Winthrop's perspective was a minority opinion, but there were plenty who shared it.

Sam leaned back from the computer screen, contemplating

his mysterious messages from canislupustruth. After a while, he refreshed his glass of wine. Then he took a dinner out of the freezer—a bachelor's simple repast—and stuck it into the microwave. While the timer wound down, he leaned back against his kitchen counter, sipping more wine and recalling scenes from his childhood.

He remembered the way the old man cooked breakfast. He remembered his fixation on hunting, and the way he instilled in Sam, who did not have the heart for it, hunting's commandments.

"Surprise," the old man said, "is what you hunt. Not the animal. Look for the unexpected place they feel secure, where you can smell it in their blood."

"You've got to put it down," the old man told him, on one of the occasions he'd tried to teach him trapping. They were laying baits around foothold traps on the outside of a wolverine's den. The rancid meat smelled awful, and Sam turned up his nose and held it at arm's length.

"If you don't put it down, they won't come around. The worse it smells, the better. Distracts them from the traps."

It was one of many things the old man tried to teach him. And though Sam was a capable student and learned the lessons easily, he chose not to use them, at least for the kind of trapping the old man pursued. But he was surprised by how easily he recalled the lessons.

His father's death was sudden and unexpected. It was amazing how a single afternoon could change life suddenly, entirely.

The microwave's ding brought him back to his kitchen. He took out dinner and set it aside to cool. Then he returned to Diane's message.

"Thanks for the information," he wrote. He thought about what else to say. "I hope you're well," he concluded.

Then, "More, later."

"—Sam"

He dialed his supervisor. At the voice mail's beep he told her he needed to take some time off, but he'd make sure Rutgers's place was tended in his absence. He thought he'd be back in a week.

The funeral wasn't for four more days. He thought he might like to be there when the old man was dropped into frozen ground. He'd enjoy seeing the look on the club members' faces. If they were still the raw group of outdoorsmen he remembered, he would relish making them squirm. They had been the kind of men who would harass anyone they thought might threaten their claim to the old man's estate. If his father had ever filed an attempted murder charge against Clayton Winthrop (Sam's childhood name), Heins would have reason enough to give him trouble. But Sam never heard about any charges, and besides, the difference between Sam Rivers and Clayton Winthrop was 20 years and a lifetime.

Sam knew Northern Minnesota weather could be dicey this time of year. He checked his weather app. A major winter storm was forecast for Wednesday. That gave him plenty of time to drive to Defiance. And a storm in the middle of the night could be perfect cover. If nothing much had changed in Defiance, it could work.

For the first time in a long while, Sam was looking forward to first light.

CHAPTER FIVE

The five men walked out of Angus Moon's cabin into the woods where the dogs' houses stood. It was late Wednesday, January 29, and the weather was beginning to turn. Winthrop held the lantern. The others followed him up the ice-covered path through the trees. When they reached the houses, Winthrop peered into the black sky. A few thick snowflakes filtered down through the lantern's light.

"It's starting," Winthrop said.

"Gonna be a hell of a storm," Moon said.

"It just gets better and better," Pederson said, chuckling.

They'd spent the evening in Moon's remote cabin, playing cards and being liberal with the juice, waiting for midnight and the forecast onset of the storm. The wind-driven pines and the first light dusting of white told them it was time. Now Winthrop carried the lantern into the wooded enclosure. He lifted it to show the first dog's house, then turned to look at Moon.

"You sure they're ready?"

Moon nodded. He stepped up to the side of the closest house. The five houses stood at different angles in the narrow enclosure. They were fashioned out of scrap lumber. Large pieces of plywood had been nailed over each door. A thin opening at the bottom allowed a shallow bowl of water to be shoved through. As the men got closer, the pungent odor of the dogs' confinement was nauseating.

"Christ," Heins muttered.

"Jesus, Angus. Sure ain't the Duluth Radisson," Pederson said.

"That'd be for us, later," added Heins, smiling.

Pederson and Young chuckled, but Winthrop knew there was work to be done.

A small wolf head peered out from behind the nearest house. The visage startled Young and Heins.

"What the hell is that?" Heins asked.

"What's left of the last litter," Moon replied.

"Couldn't sell it?"

"Not yet. And gettin' a little old. Might have to keep it for breeding stock. But that one's got more dog than I ever seen come out of a match between the Arctic sire and malamute bitch. Not sure the others'll accept it. Might just have to cut the little shit loose. Or use him for target practice."

The youngling cowered behind the house.

"Git," Moon snarled, and the dog disappeared, its chain jangling into the dark.

Moon brought his steel-toed boot back and kicked the nearest house. There was an explosive growl and the sound of teeth gnashing against the plywood wall. It captured Young's attention like a face slap. He stepped back, afraid the boards might break.

Moon turned and smiled, watching Young's retreat.

There was nothing in Moon's unshaven face, or in the intent focus of his gray eyes, that betrayed his role in what happened last Sunday night on Winthrop's farm, though all the club members knew it was Moon who had brought on the vagrant James T. Beauregard's doom. When the scheme was conceived, unanimous decision appointed Moon the executioner. Now, comfortable with his new stature, he spit across the path, sending a wad of brown saliva directly behind the tremulous Young. "They'll keep," he said.

"How long they been in there?" Young asked, more to make conversation than out of curiosity.

"Two days," Moon said. His tongue moved to resetttle his chew. He grinned, revealing two rows of stunted yellow pegs.

The five hybrids now penned and starving had been kept for breeding and the club's amusement. They could run down deer better than their wild brethren. And a hefty wooden club let them know Moon was their unchallenged leader. They touched no part of a downed animal until Moon gave them the nod. Now the prolonged absence of food had caused their lupine instincts to surface like an ancient muscle group.

In the growing snowfall, the first dog's howl triggered a chorus of low snarls. The other four houses vibrated with the noise.

"I think they're all just about ready for a little meat," Moon added.

He turned and stepped up to each house and kicked it, eliciting the same whipped fury of teeth and feral growls. Under the force of one of the dog's snapping fangs, a plywood board bowed out. Young stepped back. Winthrop heard his shuffle and raised the light to look at him.

"They won't get out until we let them out."

"No need to rile 'em, Angus," Heins admonished. "They're ready."

Winthrop raised his lantern. At the edge of the trees, there was a black tarpaulin thrown carelessly over stacked metal cages. Moon threw off the tarp and hauled a cage to the nearest house.

"Come here, Young. Give me a hand."

Young hesitated. Then he stepped to the opposite side of Moon. Young was 5'10" with a slight build. He wore a heavy down coat

that accentuated his flaccid pudginess. Over his right breast, stenciled yellow letters declared HAL YOUNG INDEPENDENT INSURANCE.

Standing across from Moon, he appeared to be the same height and build. But where Young had narrow shoulders and an upper body molded to the contours of his desk, Moon, who spent most of his life outdoors, was weathered, compact, and powerful.

“All of them part wolf?” Young asked, distractedly.

“Half wolf. Every one of ’em. But some of them act more wolf than others.” He nodded toward the cages and said, “Grab a couple of those pine poles. We don’t want our hands to get bit off.”

The others watched Young retrieve the poles, and he and Moon inserted them into the cage’s top metal squares.

Winthrop knew his death was an unusual accident for a man with his hunting expertise. Unusual, but not unheard of. Once the estate was settled and the insurance claim paid, they’d divvy up the shares. Winthrop was taking half. Given the money he’d squirreled away into Belize banks—client trust money he knew he would eventually be at pains to explain—Winthrop figured he could be generous.

Over the next five years the club had planned two more staged deaths. Moon would go missing in the wild; he would be easy. They’d need to wait a year, settle with the insurance company for a lesser amount. But Winthrop knew they’d clear a million. Heins would be more difficult. But Winthrop hadn’t funded club members’ life insurance policies to assist insurance companies with their bottom lines. Only Young and Pederson would be left to live out their natural lives. The club needed contacts back on the Range. They couldn’t lose complete touch, though on paper

Winthrop, Moon, and Heins would be desiccating corpses.

Identifying his own corpse had been routine. The front half of “Winthrop’s” head was entirely removed. Witnesses could only identify his clothes and the shape of his body. The coroner knew Winthrop well enough to recognize what was left of his white hair and the orange hunting cap’s torn-away bill. The sheriff had his identification. Besides, Goddard had seen the corpse’s outfit only a week before the accident. And he recognized the weapon. What was left of the grisly countenance was the worst hunting accident any of them had ever seen. And while everyone spoke of it as an accident, Winthrop assumed the sheriff told the coroner about the sheriff’s investigation into Winthrop’s legal practice, and that Winthrop knew about it. Williston Winthrop would not be the first aging lawyer to choose death over a prison cell. And the truth was, they were all anxious to cover what was left of his gruesome head. And they were all thankful to be rid of him.

Prior to staging his own death, Winthrop’s brief meeting with the sheriff had been necessary to find out how close the county DA was to Winthrop’s illegal activities. And he’d been damn close, closer than Winthrop dreamed. In his own way ADA Dunlap had sealed Jimbo’s untimely end. And Sheriff Goddard had been the messenger. Everything about Winthrop’s accident had happened perfectly. Goddard’s relief, the intense cold, a tough hike, the black middle of the night, and the grotesque wound that made Goddard’s investigation perfunctory.

Come Saturday, Winthrop would be laid to rest in the grave next to his estranged wife.

Moon and Young placed the cage in front of the dog’s house. Once the plywood was pried loose and slid away, the dog was

expected to leap into the cage and the wire door slam shut. When everything was in place, Moon pried the plywood open. There was a low snarl.

“Get ready to drop the door,” Moon ordered.

Young slipped off the catch and pulled it open. In the dull light, his face appeared tense and worried.

“Ready?” Moon asked.

Young nodded.

Moon slid back the board and the dog charged out. Young dropped the door. The dog reached the end of the cage, spun around, and bit between a thin wire square, trying to get a piece of him. Young fell back, sitting down in the snow. Moon began laughing.

In the same way, they caged the other four dogs. They used the poles to carry the cages out of the woods, loading each of them onto Moon’s pickup. As they worked, the snow began to come down more heavily. By the time they finished, the trail was disappearing beneath a thick film of white.

“You should go first,” Winthrop told Heins. “Stay on the radio. You see anyone going or coming, give us a couple of clicks on the CB.”

Heins turned and started walking toward his car. He was as medium in stature as Young and Moon, but he moved with an authoritative air.

“Angus and I will be 5 minutes behind you. You others follow us, but give us some time. We don’t want a caravan.”

“We’ll be careful,” Pederson said. “Just don’t start the show without us.” He was a big man. The skin on his face and belly sagged in alcoholic puffiness. His face was clean-shaven and his

eyes were bloodshot. "I've got a hundred on the she-devil to draw first blood," he said.

"That's a wager I'll take," Winthrop said. "You always pick the bitch, Hank. That big Arctic will take the lead."

"I guess it'll take a hundred to see who's right."

"I guess," Winthrop agreed.

"It's turning into a pretty good night's work for a dead man and four stiff's." Pederson smiled and turned away.

Winthrop laughed. He and Pederson had known each other since they were kids. When things were tense, Pederson had a way of making him grin.

Heins had been gone over 5 minutes before Winthrop and Moon pulled out of the woodsman's long, narrow drive. There was nothing on the CB. Winthrop sat up, watching the snowfall intensify. Then he motioned and Moon turned onto a side road that disappeared in a rough diagonal through the trees.

For the remainder of the crossing they drove in silence. Winthrop was careful to stay out of sight. There was little chance anyone would be out on roads like these at this hour in the middle of an intensifying storm, but when it came to the law, Winthrop took no chances.

Since Heins had first found Jimbo, the other members of the club had quickly seen what could be done. Everyone except Young, who had reservations. But they needed Young's insurance angle to make it work, so they bullied him.

Winthrop didn't like it. They had bullied Young the same way Moon had forced him to help cage the dogs. Moon was acting on his instinctual dislike for cowardice, but it was the exact thing Young needed to force his participation. Still, Young was the

weakest link, and Winthrop worried about him.

In a few short days “Winthrop” would be buried. Into the ground with him would be laid all the unpleasantness from the investigations into his illegal law practice. There had been three investigations, none of which amounted to more than a mild wrist slap. The real crimes, of course, were right under their noses—three client trusts Winthrop had been bilking for years. That was the fourth investigation, recently begun. He needed Moon to clear up one last thing, an office fire engulfing every piece of wayward paper and incriminating computer file. All record of his clients’ trusts would go up in flames. And without evidence?

It was a detail he had not shared with any of the club members, because there was no need. Just like the other reason for the slaughter of the calves in his barn.

In a matter of weeks the dead Winthrop would resurrect himself, someplace warm to start, one of those countries south of Mexico, where the dollar ran on forever and no one inquired about your past. He would miss the Range, but he’d spent time south of the border and knew there were places a man with his particular talents could thrive.

As he looked back on it, it had been a satisfactory life. He regretted his dead wife, or perhaps more specifically the \$179,000 she drained from her accounts in the months preceding her death.

The day Miriam died, Winthrop went over to her house, located her will, and altered it, forging her signature. She was going to leave everything to the boy. It was a simple matter, changing the will. Young was a notary public. Young notarized the revised document and predated it a month before her death.

After Miriam’s death the will was probated. There had been

two inquiries: one from the sheriff and one from that bitch Diane. Diane claimed, so Goddard told him, that Miriam said she was leaving everything to the boy. But Miriam's notarized signature was legal proof they could not refute. And where was the god-damn boy? No one had heard from him in years. Winthrop hoped they might bring him forward. He had a score to settle. In the end the flap over Miriam's 11th-hour change of beneficiaries blew over like a northwestern squall.

When Winthrop finally inquired about her accounts, he found out about the missing cash. Winthrop knew people at the bank. They'd worried about her, about her state of mind. She was frail, and withdrawing that kind of money in \$100 bills over the last six months of her life was worrisome. But Miriam knew Bill Radcliffe, the bank president, and convinced him it was for a variety of worthy causes, including her estranged son, Clayton. Radcliffe agreed to keep it quiet. No one at the bank said anything to anyone until she died. When Winthrop found out, he exploded inside Radcliffe's office like a detonated propane tank. But Radcliffe showed him the withdrawal records, and again everything was legal.

In the days following Miriam's death, Winthrop had turned the old house inside out, searching for the cash. He assumed she'd somehow gotten it to the boy. But he'd checked with the post office, checked with all her friends. None of them remembered anything about a series of large stuffed envelopes or boxes that might be used to ship stacks of bills. Or they weren't talking. He thought about trying to track it from the other end, going after Clayton, but finally decided it would be safer to let it alone. There was still the life insurance money. And he needed her house

and share of the farm, no questions asked. He and Clayton had accounts to settle. But he didn't want the insurance money or the farm to be part of them.

If Clayton had another copy of the will, there could be complications. But he suspected the kid would stay away rather than risk his arrest for attempted murder. It was doubtful Heins could make the charge stick, but the boy wasn't stupid. A tree-hugging chickenshit, as Winthrop remembered, someone who wouldn't want to risk his luck, particularly in a Northern Minnesota court. Clayton had been more Miriam's son than his own. But that made it all the more likely the boy wouldn't show his face to enter into a contest over something he would just as soon forget.

After 20 minutes the pickup turned onto the snow-covered ruts that took them down to Winthrop's house and barn. The buildings were dark and barely visible through the snow. The gray outline of Heins's police car waited at the bottom of the drive.

"Go around to the side door," Winthrop ordered, pointing to where a pair of ruts disappeared behind the barn. "It's pretty well hidden. And if wolves came, that's where they'd get in."

Moon backed the pickup to the side door. The intensity of the driving snow was starting to swirl around them. When they got out of the cab, Heins appeared out of the white like an apparition.

"Startin' to come down pretty heavy," he shouted.

"Perfect," Winthrop shouted back.

A gust of snow whipped across them in a horizontal slant.

"Couldn't have asked for a better storm," Winthrop added. "An hour after we leave, there won't be anything left to track."

The entry to the barn had a small holding pen where the dogs were corralled. The cages were hoisted down to the side entrance,

their openings set flush to the door. The cage lids were slid away. When the barn door opened, the starving animals charged into the confined darkness.

While they worked, Pederson, and then Young, came down the drive and made their way to the barn.

“Better get started,” Winthrop yelled over the wind. “It’s gettin’ pretty wild.”

Winthrop led them around the barn corner, up the rise to the loft door. He was the first through the small opening. He came out above the barn floor. The rest of them followed, leaving the storm outside, shaking off the snow and cold as their eyes grew accustomed to the dark. From the loft Winthrop turned on the overhead light. They could hear the dogs beneath them. They watched the vague shapes of the feeder calves jostling at the other end of the barn. The young fatlings made worried sounds in the dark, low and plaintive.

Winthrop looked down, excited by his front row seat at the timeless spectacle of predator and prey. The men stared over the edge, transfixed by the scene. Winthrop double-checked everything, making certain there would be no doubt that the wolves forced their entry and slaughtered the animals while no one was there to prevent it. Pederson hauled up three hay bales, squaring them like park benches. “Come on, she-devil,” he called, whooping for his chosen fiend.

The dogs were jostling in the narrow confines, anxious to be free. The calves, all less than a year old, were ululating fear.

Outside, the winter storm increased. The snow buffeted the roof and the north-facing walls. The barn blustered and creaked.

“Come on, Williston,” Heins said. “Let ’em out.”

Winthrop reached down, opening the door less than a foot before the first dog exploded through the narrow gap. Then all the dogs were through it, roving in a pack of fast-moving whines toward the cattle stalls, recalling instinctively the methods by which wolves chase down and kill.

CHAPTER SIX

Sam crossed into Minnesota around 9 p.m. The first heavy snowflakes drifted down through his headlights. Over the next 4 hours, as he traveled first down US 2 and then up US 71, toward Minnesota's Iron Range, the weather worsened.

By the time Sam neared Defiance, heavy snow gusted over his Jeep and covered the highway in broad patches of white. The radio DJ warned listeners about the first bad winter storm of the New Year.

"We have 4 inches," he barked, "but I'm here to tell ya, that's just the start! We're going to see plenty more. Isn't winter land wonderful?"

Sam flicked off the jocular DJ. He recognized the crossroads he was approaching, east of town. In the tight interior of his car, the heat was turned on full blast, but the icy gusts whipped at his windshield and doors.

He peered ahead, replaying his planned entrance into town, imagining his Jeep's tires speeding and banking over the snow. As he hit the deeper patches of white, he imagined the car making solid *whumps* in the dark. Given his postmidnight stealth and the reason for his return, he couldn't have planned better weather.

He paused at the intersection, considering how little had changed. Even through the driving snow, he could see the crossroads still crowded with black spruce and poplar. He looked to his right, down the dark tunnel of highway disappearing into blowing snow. No vehicles. At this hour, in this storm, he didn't expect to see anyone, hadn't for the last 20 miles. Perfect.

When he glanced left, peering up the northern stretch of highway, he thought he saw headlights. Then they disappeared. He waited, hoping he was mistaken or they'd turned off. Then they crested a far-off rise and shown like a pair of carnivore's eyes. The car was a quarter mile distant, driving slowly over the snow-choked blacktop.

He accelerated across the intersection. It would be better if no one saw his Jeep. He tried to remember some place to turn off. He searched along the tree-lined road and saw a mailbox marking a drive opening. Erickson's field!

Well beyond the drive, a gap in the treeline revealed the narrow entrance to a pasture lane. Twenty years ago old man Erickson hired him to help cut a narrow road next to the highway. Between the road and blacktop stood a solid stand of black spruce. If that car turned toward Defiance, the spruce wall would provide the cover he needed.

Sam turned into the narrow lane, steered left, and parked behind the stand of trees, cutting the Jeep's engine.

He flung open the door, stepped into the snowy tree branches, snapped off a 5-foot branch, and carried it, running, back to the lane opening. He found the place where his tracks left the road and used the tree branch to sweep them clear. By the time he was nearly finished, he saw the muffled glimmer of oncoming headlights, carefully rounding the bend.

Sam tossed the tree branch behind him and ducked into the wall of black spruce.

The car crawled along the highway, searching. Suddenly high beams flashed along the wall. Sam remained motionless, well

concealed. As the car approached, he peered through the branches and glimpsed a small outline of overhead lights and a passenger door that read Defiance Police.

Sam wondered if it could still be Heins. He watched the car pass the lane's entrance. It traveled another 10 yards and then pulled onto the shoulder and stopped.

After 15 seconds a second pair of headlights rounded the bend. The police car waited while a new blue pickup crept up beside it.

The two drivers rolled down their windows and yelled over the wind gusts. "Thought I saw something," the policeman said.

"Like what?"

"Thought I saw a car cross that intersection."

"At one o'clock in the morning? In the middle of a storm like this?"

Their voices sounded familiar, but Sam wasn't sure.

"Could have sworn I saw something."

"It's your nerves, Heins. Maybe you need a little more remedy."

"You know I don't drink and drive," Heins chuckled. "Let's wait a minute. If I did see someone, we'll give him plenty of time to get home."

"Suits me."

"It's one hell of a storm," Heins said.

"Nothing like back at the farm."

"We couldn't have hoped for a better snowfall."

"Just so they don't get caught in it."

"With Angus's truck? They're back at his place by now." Then, "It's not like you to worry, Hank."

Sam recognized the names: Angus Moon and Hank Pederson.

“Not worried,” Pederson said. “Got the law on our side.” He chuckled.

They waited in silence for another minute. Then they both started off down the road.

Sam waited until their taillights disappeared. He stood up and shook the snow off his coat. He wondered what he’d overheard. Angus Moon and someone else. Hal Young? At the farm? The old man’s farm?

Sam returned to his Jeep. From the glove compartment, he pulled out a black-handled flashlight. The butt of the flashlight was solid steel, heavy enough to break a window, if it came to that. Or Heins’s head. He switched the light on to make sure it worked. Then he flicked it off and tucked it into the lower front pocket of his coat.

When Sam was young, Moon’s menacing gaze was enough to make him avert his eyes. Moon noticed the boy’s furtive turning away. Sometimes he stared at him just to watch him squirm. Unless it involved cards, hunting, or fishing, Moon had an instinctual distrust for anything civilized. Sam hoped he’d have another opportunity to stare into the rugged man’s face. This time he wouldn’t turn away.

Pederson owned the local Ford dealership. Or at least used to. He was a big man who 20 years ago drank whiskey like water. Pederson had a reputation for hunting women the way the old man hunted deer. Only for Pederson the season never ended. And instead of a deer head mounted on his wall, he’d pull an undergarment out of his coat pocket, grin with boyish pride, and tell the story of how he’d acquired his trophy with so much lewd embellishment

that even some of the gun club members turned aside.

Young's independent insurance agency was attached to his house, not far from Sam's mother's place. Sam had often enough walked in front of it, when he was staying at his mother's. He'd even nodded to the man on occasion, who at least nodded back, more cordial than the others.

Heins, Moon, Pederson, and Young. They were the only friends the old man ever had, if you could call them friends. Now the four of them shared almost \$5 million and what was left of his parents' property. "But who's counting?" Sam wondered aloud. It was a lot of money, but he didn't care about the cash. Sam Rivers had come to recover his things.

He stared into the snowy darkness of the road. He would give Heins and Pederson time to settle into their beds.

Sam reached into the back of the Jeep and pulled open his gray metal toolbox. He felt for his crescent wrench and a plastic case of small screwdrivers. He didn't believe he would need them, but he wanted to be prepared. He folded the wrench in a thin wool scarf and pulled a stiff chamois from his glove compartment, wrapping it around the plastic case of screwdrivers. Then he slid them both into the lower front pocket of his coat, arranging them so they would not rub or clank.

Sam knew he would have to be careful. He didn't know what Moon was doing, or with whom. But this storm would give them cover. Sam appreciated it for the same reasons. After he was finished, he'd blow out of town before anyone knew he'd arrived, drive south to Brainerd, establish an alibi, and then—after the

storm blew itself out—revisit Defiance, the closest place to a childhood home he'd ever known.

But if he wanted to avoid getting stuck, he would need to move quickly. He put the Jeep in gear, backed down the narrow pasture road, and edged up to the highway. Then Sam Rivers turned toward town.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Outside the barn there were occasional gusts of straight-line winds. The truck's headlights illuminated a wall of white. The windward side of the truck was already drifting with a high bank of snow. After another half hour of watching the storm and seeing no abatement in its fury, Winthrop started to worry.

He turned off the truck and cut the lights. He opened the door and fought his way into a semi-upright position.

"Angus!" he yelled. The wind tore the words out of his mouth. There was no way Moon would hear him through this howl. If they hoped to make it out to the cabin before dawn, he would have to climb to the loft and fetch Moon.

He pitched forward, feeling along the barn wall. He worked around to the back upper side. He went in through the loft door. A dim light glowed from the rafters.

"Angus!" he yelled.

"What?" Moon finally snapped.

The hybrids were still feeding, their dark shapes shadowy in the poorly lit barn.

"They finished?" Winthrop asked.

"Not yet."

"Can we get them out?"

Moon kept staring. He called to one of the hybrids, but there was no response. He picked up a wood chip and tossed it into the center of the feeding dogs. There was an immediate snarl.

"Not now," Moon said.

The wind blustered against the barn.

“When?”

“When they finish eating.”

“How much longer?”

“Don’t know.”

“When do you think?”

Moon considered. “Hard to say. They’ve been two days without anything but water. They’ll have to satisfy their appetites.”

Winthrop peered down at the dogs. For the first time his careful sequence of events was taking an unexpected turn. He began to realize the animals might need to be left behind.

“Goddammit! You think they’ll run when they’re finished?”

“Leave them?”

“You want to be stuck here with them?”

For the first time since the dogs began, Moon listened to the storm.

“What do you think they’ll do?” Winthrop asked.

“Hard telling. Probably stay here until the storm ends. There’s plenty of food.”

“You think you can catch them?”

“They’re my dogs. They’ll come.”

“Not that we have a choice,” Winthrop muttered. “We gotta leave them.”

He didn’t think the sheriff would come out tomorrow, given the storm and how busy the sheriff would be with emergencies in and around Vermilion Falls. But Winthrop couldn’t risk being found here with Moon’s animals. They needed to get back to the

cabin. Then tomorrow Moon would return to the farm, cage the dogs, and hustle them back to his place before anyone discovered them. Once they were safely stowed, Moon could return to the farm as if to feed the cattle, discover the carnage, and report it.

“Let’s get the hell out,” Winthrop said.

They fought their way down along the edge of the outside wall. At the bottom Moon noticed the door slightly open. He tried to pull it shut, but the storm had whipped snow into the hinges, widening the 6-inch crack to a foot, freezing it there.

“Come on,” Winthrop yelled, getting into the cab. “They’ll stay put!”

Moon wasn’t so sure. He kicked the door, but it was solid. Then he turned and fought against the wind, leaving the door ajar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sam's Jeep skittered over the highway, approaching the edge of town. He watched for any sign of Pederson or Heins, but there was no one. He turned north on Beacon, his mother's street, accelerating up the long incline. As he crested the rise, he cut the Jeep's engine. His headlights faded, and for a moment there was only his car going 40 mph through the darkness of the Defiance town street.

He remembered a dead end at the bottom of Beacon. The Jeep dropped off the pavement and jolted through two large banks before plowing into a black spruce tunnel and braking.

Sam breathed in the darkness. He'd expected at least some of the roads to be different, but nothing had changed.

He had walked halfway up the street when he crossed in front of Young's independent insurance office. There were fresh tire tracks up the driveway, just beginning to drift over. He looked up at the old house-office complex, but its windows were dark. Sam wondered about it, remembering Heins's and Pederson's comments. He had thought Young was with Moon. But if that was the case, Young wouldn't be back at his house so soon. Maybe Mrs. Young had returned late? Or it was someone else out at Moon's. He hurried over the fading tracks.

His mother's drive and walkway had not been plowed all winter. Her bushes were rounded over with high banks of snow. The force of several winter storms had almost buried the front porch.

He felt suddenly nostalgic for the decent part of his childhood, the part of it that redeemed him. Whenever he thought about his mother, he did not like to use the last name she adopted after

marrying the old man. When Sam was young, Miriam Samuelson showed him the kind of unconditional love he had come, finally, to appreciate. Time away helped clarify what had been good about his childhood.

He rounded the garage and came up to the snow-covered back steps. Even if the house had been occupied, Sam knew its occupants would never find the articles he and his mother had hidden.

The rear entry was covered like the front. He reached up, found the doorknob at the top of a drift, and turned it. Locked.

He remembered a cellar window to the right of the back door. There was no sign of it now, buried under a high bank of snow. He recalled its approximate location and tunneled into the drift. Near the base of the hard-packed powder, there was a hollow where a small cave had formed. Sam reached in, felt for the window, moved down the pane to its bottom, grabbed the single-handled latch, and tried it. Locked.

The storm and hour prevented anyone from seeing or hearing him. He pulled out the steel-handled flashlight and used its butt to break the frosted glass.

He placed one arm through the broken pane, the other against the front. In one heavy effort he pushed and pulled, and with a sudden jolt the window broke open. Glass sprinkled onto the basement floor and Sam's wrist passed over a shard edge. He could feel the laceration, knew it would bleed, but it was a small cut. He returned to the window, pushed it open, and locked it upright.

He turned around and backed feet first into the wide window well, lowering himself through the tight enclosure and dropping to the floor.

It was quiet in the basement, out of the storm. Quiet and warm. His flashlight pierced the darkness like a blade. Against the far wall he saw a lamp, a sofa, and a table covered in plastic. He turned the beam on his wrist. Drops of blood beaded along a narrow line, but it was only a scratch. He walked over and opened the preserve room door. His light flashed off dozens of stacked jars, everything covered by a heavy patina of dust. Seeing all the jars put up by his mother's hands was like stepping into a mausoleum. He had not eaten since dinner. He hadn't thought of food. But when he saw the jars of pickles, jams, beans, corn, and every other kind of vegetable and fruit, his hunger surfaced like a cork.

He took down a jar of pickles. A piece of masking tape read DILL in his mother's awkward script. Sam set the jar aside and kneeled in front of the bottom shelf. He took a minute to remove the shelf's contents, setting the jars on the floor beside him. Then he tapped under the front lip and the shelf loosened. He lifted and slid it out from its mooring, setting it aside. He flashed the light into the floor-wall crevice and could barely see the heavy wires. He reached in and teased them out, making them taut. They were steel wires, and though they were blackened from being against a basement wall for 20 years, they felt solid. He pulled on them, carefully, and a pair of foundation bricks nudged forward. Once loosened, he brought them all the way out.

He flashed his beam into the dark opening. Tucked into the cave there was a large bag. He reached into the black space and dragged it out. It was heavy and covered in dust. He kneeled in the basement storage room, lifted the heavy canvas bag, and shook it. The air filled with a light cloud and he coughed. He hoisted the bag to his shoulder, picked up the jar of pickles, and turned toward the

basement stairs. At the top of the stairs he flicked off his flashlight and let his eyes grow accustomed to the dark. A muted back alley light filtered through the kitchen window. It was enough to find his way down the near hallway. He examined the dining room, living room, bathroom, laundry, and bedrooms. He entered his old bedroom. He could see the windows were covered over with snow.

He closed the door and the room went dark. He flicked on his flashlight and set it on the pillow so it faced down his childhood bed, illuminating the room. The bed was still covered in familiar white chenille. Beside the bed stood the old wooden spindle and faux birch-bark lampshade, the white bark faded to yellow. His rectangular pine dresser was still in the corner. There was a pair of closet doors that opened into a recessed wall space.

After his mom moved to town, the old man refused to let Sam stay here more than a few nights every month. But his mother had made it nice for him, and they had both endured the old man's control. All those years and she'd kept his room exactly as it had been when he was a boy.

He wondered what she felt as she passed it, after he had left for good, maybe waiting for him to return, suspecting and then knowing he would not. He wished things had been different and that he'd been able to breach the chasm between them, to let her know that on occasions her remembered kindness reached out of the past. He recalled her hands preparing a meal, washing clothes, cleaning the house, canning preserves. His mother's heart was simple. She'd loved him without measure, abatement, or conditions, done what she could to raise him right. She'd lived with a kind of purity, and he wished now that she were here and he could tell her how he felt.

He turned to the duffel, loosened the drawstring, and peered inside. Near the top was a thick envelope addressed to him. He set the envelope aside, returning to the bag. He found the 10 gauge shotgun, one of his father's precious Decimators. The old man once told him it would be his, but Sam had never lived up to the shotgun's promise. So the old man hadn't kept his word. Sam felt happy now to see it.

The bag also contained the army-issue camo parka, pants, and boot coverings Sam had used for stalking in snow. And there was a full box of shells, also dusty and old. Sam guessed they were still operational. If powder remained dry, it could hold its charge for decades.

Under it all was a plastic-wrapped shoebox, with the heft of a brick. When he peered through the plastic, he saw the blurry face of Benjamin Franklin. There were four of them, set side by side on what appeared to be thick stacks of bills.

If the entire brick was \$100 bills, it was a considerable sum. The unexpected treasure made his pulse spike.

He set it aside, opening his mother's envelope. There were several handwritten pages and another legal document. The legal document was a copy of her will. It was a long letter, dated just days before she died. He angled it to pick up the flashlight's beam and read it in the half-light.

She talked about her health. She didn't know how long she would live. She was starting to feel her age and she didn't think the end was far off. She had spent the last few months converting her retirement accounts to cash, gradually withdrawing the savings from her account, over \$179,000. If she had drawn a cashier's check and mailed it, and then died, she was afraid Williston would

have found Sam and figured out a way to claw back the money. If she mailed it, she would have to insure it, and Williston might find out where it went and why. "Your father knows a lot of people," she explained. "People who owe him favors."

Neither did she trust Williston about the will. She expected he would alter it, since everything had been left to Sam. So she'd taken the money and hid it in the bag believing, knowing, someday Sam must return. And she knew Williston would never find it, not in their secret place. She'd made sure to leave a second copy of the will, this one dated to be her last, "and notarized in Brainerd, so if the older copy is altered, you'll have proof."

She reminisced about Sam, when he was a boy, their lives together, about everything that happened to them. And she warned him about confronting Williston, if he was still alive.

"Get your things, but be careful about it."

She told him to share nothing with Williston Winthrop, advice he didn't need.

She ended the letter with an apology: "I am so sorry for everything," she said. Then, "When you read this I hope everything finds you well. And please remember that I always loved you—more than you can possibly imagine—and always will."

As Sam grew older, he wondered why his mother never divorced the old man. The first time Williston raised a fist, she should have drawn up legal papers and taken him for every dime he had. There was no excuse for accepting the years of belittlement and abuse. But it was his mother. He recognized her optimism in the face of despair, how she refused to let the old man's wickedness tarnish her goodness. And it was true; his father knew people. It would have been difficult to find justice on the Range.

When he was 12, his mother left the farm and moved into this house, to get away from the old man, not her son. But Sam recognized Williston Winthrop held the power. After a summer spent with his mother, he returned to the farm. Sam was a boy and wasn't expected to live outside his father's rule. When he reread the last lines of her letter, he knew she had lived her life according to her convictions. They weren't his convictions. Never had been, never would be. In the childhood room she'd prepared for him, he regretted not fighting harder against the old man's rule. But he had been a boy, and the old man was his father and a powerful son of a bitch.

He picked up the brick of money and felt its heft—\$179,000 and change, a considerable sum, particularly by weight. It must have pissed off the old man. Sam smiled to think about it. He knew his mother smiled too.

Outside, the storm was still howling. He would have to leave soon, or risk getting stuck, maybe even discovered. He carried the jar of pickles into the kitchen. He placed the jar in the bottom of the sink and twisted the lid open. He heard the vacuum seal pop, and the fragrance of dill and vinegar, his mother's special blend, was overpowering. He pulled a pickle out of the jar and tasted it, remembering in a sudden rush the pickles he loved as a boy. It had been a long time since he'd had hunger for anything. The pickle tasted salty, pungent, and remarkable.

He recapped the jar and returned to the basement. He extracted three more jars from the preserve room and slid them with the pickles into his bag. He replaced the bottom shelf and moved the contents on the floor back onto it. Then he crawled out the window, leaving the basement as he'd found it. He piled

snow into the window well, covering the broken entry with a bank of white. Then he slung the bag over his shoulder, struggled back over the Defiance streets, and returned to his Jeep. He started the cold engine and in the early-morning darkness managed to back out and plow past the dead end of the street, returning the way he'd arrived, with stealth through the widening winter storm.

Eventually the town cop would discover his break-in. But by then the snow would cover his tracks. Weather reports indicated the heavy blow would drop a few more inches before it was done. That would mean it might be a while before Heins discovered the broken cellar pane.

He thought about his mother's letter and the money. Her hope and heart strength were her best epitaphs. And his mother's will had been altered. The proof rested in his breast pocket, where at the right time he would enjoy making it known. He wondered what the statute of limitations was on probating an estate. He'd have to find some legal counsel. And he would need to do so with care. How he had acquired the will and when to make it known would require some planning.

For the moment it was enough to have the old man's precious Decimator in the back of his Jeep, nestled beside her \$179,000 and four jars of her excellent preserves.

PART II

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Matthew 10:16

CHAPTER NINE

“Are you getting anything?”

“Nothing,” Moon answered. “Not a goddamned thing.”

Moon sat in front of the cabin’s CB radio console, trying to call out. “This is Woods Weasel calling the Defiance Star. Are you reading? Over.”

Around them the dawn was just starting to break, bright and frozen. The snow banked to their windows, covering the front door. It lay in piles in the woods, along the few hidden trails leading to the cabin and the remote, abandoned logging roads leading to the trails. The pathways were impassable, and both of them feared it would be more than a day before Moon could snowshoe the 2 miles back to the truck and then dig himself out and return to the farm. Which meant the dogs would be alone in the barn for another day. With the goddamn door open.

“Just keep trying,” Winthrop said. “We need to get word to Heins.”

Moon peered out of bloodshot eyes. “I know.” He was growing weary of Winthrop’s repeated demand.

“He has to go over and tend them,” Winthrop continued, ignoring Moon. “Heins has to find the kill and report it. And get your dogs,” he added.

“I know,” Moon agreed. When Winthrop was edgy, it was best to go along.

Winthrop hadn’t stopped mulling plans since they’d been forced to leave the farm. Now he was trying to work through all the alternatives, tracking consequences, considering steps. He didn’t like where his options led, but he didn’t have much choice. The

dogs unsettled him. Before anyone could be notified, they'd have to be caged. And what if someone else found them? What if they ran? The goddamn wolf dogs were a nasty loose end, difficult to explain and threatening to unravel his plan. He reminded himself that it was unlikely anyone would visit the farm, particularly after a storm like this one, especially given the roads. But he'd feel a whole lot better if they got word to Heins.

"There's only one answer to this," Winthrop finally blurted.

Moon looked at him, waiting for the next directive.

"Remedy," he said with a smile. "A little remedy in our morning coffee."

It was an unexpected remark. "Now you're talkin'," Moon agreed. "Hair of the dog that bit ya," he grinned.

As Winthrop walked across the room, he heard Moon place another call into the ether. "Woods Weasel to the Defiance Star. Come in, Star. Is anyone out there? Anyone listening? Come in. Over?"

Winthrop was still stunned by the night's random misfortunes. They had been forced to leave the dogs. They had driven at a crawl through blinding snow and were damn lucky to find the entrance to the abandoned logging road. When Moon went to unlock the heavy chain, he'd disappeared in a slantwise fury of snow. It reminded Winthrop of farmers getting lost in blizzards only yards from their front door.

In the dark, the truck's headlights illuminated a sideways howl of white, obliterating his view. At the point where Winthrop was certain Moon had been gone too long, was possibly lost, he saw fingers reach out of the blizzard. Moon's gnarled, weathered

hand, accustomed to storms, groped and pulled himself through the blow. He struggled forward in a stumbling lurch. He fought his way into the cab.

“Did you find it?” Winthrop asked, inquiring about the lock and chain.

“Jesus Christ,” Moon heaved. “Almost got lost out there.”

“Where are your gloves?”

“I had to find the chain by feel, then the lock. Then the wind tore the gloves from under my arm. Had to let ‘em go.” He was breathless and shaken by the storm.

“Did you get it open?”

Moon nodded, catching his breath. “But I’m not sure we want to drive into it.”

After Moon dropped the chain, they had no other choice but to inch forward. Normally Moon would have gone back and reaffixed the chain and lock, but after almost getting lost, he refused to try.

They’d spent well over an hour edging toward the trail point. Fortunately, the abandoned logging trail was narrow and overgrown. In most places a healthy canopy overgrew it and afforded some protection against the storm. It provided them with enough visibility to find the trailhead. And once in the bog, the trees helped lessen the blow. Still, they took an extra hour struggling along the narrow trail to make it to the cabin. Almost immediately they’d started calling out on the CB.

Now the radio crackled and sparked.

“It’s the atmosphere,” Winthrop observed, returning with whiskey. “That goddamn storm choked the roads, the country, the whole fuckin’ Range. Now it’s whipping around the air waves, sucking every particle into a black hole.”

“Must be right over us,” Moon agreed. “I can’t get a god-damn thing.”

Winthrop topped Moon’s coffee with whiskey. After Moon picked up his cup, Winthrop raised his own. “Here’s to making mayhem pay.”

Moon raised his cup and sipped, still peering at the knobs and dials. He flipped a receiver switch and started moving the volume dial. As he did, a crackle faded into someone’s voice. Words. They were barely discernible articulations, vowel sounds and consonants. They couldn’t pick up anything clear, but it was a man’s voice.

“There’s something,” Winthrop observed.

Moon tweaked the dials. He edged it left and the voice disappeared. He tried the microphone. “Hello,” he said. “This is the Woods Weasel,” he began, giving his call sign. “Just trying to find somebody. Anybody there? Over.”

The voice came back, still muffled.

“Things are starting to clear,” Winthrop said.

Moon barely touched the dial and out jumped a man’s voice.

“This storm is not the work of Satan, but the Hand of God! If anyone believes for one moment that God is unaware of the devil’s pernicious habits, his unyielding effort to turn men’s minds to evil, then it is he who does not know God. For God knows all things. He is all powerful, able to see into your heart, and mine. And yes, He can even peer into the black depths of Satan’s puny muscle.”

It was some religious nut, Winthrop guessed. Using the airwaves to preach his own personal sermon. And judging from the reference to the storm, it had to be somewhere on the Range, someplace near. “Turn that asshole off,” Winthrop snapped, which was fine by Moon.

CHAPTER TEN

Somewhere far out in the woods, the dawn's orange patina began to glow. Last night's storm left a high bank of snow against Diane's northwest walls. Snow covered her driveway in alternating drifts. Snow buried her old Datsun pickup so only the hood and wheels on one side were visible. Snow banked high on her front porch all the way to her bedroom window, which was only now beginning to show the morning's first crimson light.

Diane had gone to bed early because there was nothing to be done about the storm. She was 47, and in addition to hot flashes and mood swings that swept across her like siroccos, she sometimes awoke in the middle of the night. She had friends who had been through it, so she knew what to expect. She'd had two checkups with Dr. Susan Wallace, who told her she could soften the effects with hormone therapy. Diane hated the idea of using a drug to ease a natural aging process. But she was tired of a poor night's rest. So she gave hormone therapy a try, and it had worked. But a side effect had been slightly swelled breasts and an uptick in libido, neither of which did Diane, who had been single and unattached for more than five years, much good.

When she shared her symptoms with Dr. Wallace, Susan told her to keep doing whatever she was doing because all her vital signs were excellent. "You must have inherited some very good genes."

Diane laughed. Longevity ran on both sides of her family. But so did tipplers. "It's good to know that eating like a chipmunk and this exercise regimen is having a positive effect. Now all I need is a loaner."

“Loner?”

“A man.”

“You want a man who’s a loner?”

“L-O-A-N-E-R,” she spelled it out. “A borrowed boy. Someone I can spend date night with. The whole night. He can leave in the morning.”

Dr. Wallace grinned. “I don’t know any loaners. But like I said, whatever you’re doing, keep it up. You look great. And your blood work is perfect.”

“I feel pretty good too.”

So last night, when the skies around her small cabin were howling like a banshee, she had to pee, regular as clockwork. When she returned to bed, the inside of her small bedroom felt like a cocoon, and she enjoyed just lying in the dark, listening to the storm and thinking.

Finally, she rolled out of bed still groggy and managed to get herself robed and in the kitchen. She flipped on her scanners and started filling a coffeepot, listening. The scanners were a recent addition to her professional life. After speaking with a colleague in the Cities, she’d acquired two of the devices. One she kept tuned to local law enforcement frequencies. The other she used to rove the CB band. The police scanner alerted her to Winthrop’s accident, so it had already paid for itself. She was also enjoying the periodic conversation she overheard on the CB, one of which started as she readied her coffee.

“Woods Weasel to the Defiance Star. Come in, Star. Is anyone out there? Anyone listening? Come in. Over?”

Who the hell were Woods Weasel and Defiance Star? Diane listened, thinking the voice sounded familiar. But she couldn’t place it, and then it stopped.

When she looked outside, she was startled by the snowfall. It was warm in the cabin, but she could see orange sunlight rising on a frozen world of snow and ice. Her outside thermometer showed -7°F .

“That was one hell of a storm,” she said.

She waited for the coffee to brew. She doubled its strength because she still felt the effects of deep sleep, almost like she had drunk too much wine the night before. Deep languor settled into her bones. But there was something else. An old desire: The need to stare into a blank screen and fill it with words. Coffee, she thought. I need coffee.

She kept on the scanners, heard Woods Weasel make one more unanswered entreaty, and then both scanners fell silent.

That’s the other thing she believed about staying young, given her age. Diet and exercise helped. But there was nothing like having a purpose and rising to it every morning, anxious to begin anew.

She drank her first cup of coffee. She let the caffeine work. Today, she decided, she would begin by finishing her article. Then dig herself out. Today was one of those surprises given to you when you were both thankful and knew what to do with it. It was like being a kid on a snow day.

After high school Diane attended the University of Minnesota down in the Cities. She had the feeling she would like to write, but she was a poor hand at it. She tried one writing class and then another, but only managed average work. Then her sophomore year she took a Women in Literature class. One of the assigned texts was Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a novel she had trouble setting down. The story struck her like a freight train. In the past she had been entertained by novels. Atwood’s made her

look at her own life with a sudden care she had never before felt. She began to cultivate a sense of defiant independence.

Nothing else moved her like writing. And at the university she was exposed to everything, finally settling on journalism as a more practical degree than creative writing or literature. She also began to enjoy the occasional party with friends, the periodic surfeit of wine, the pleasant afterglow of a good joint. She also learned that defiant independence was a kind of aphrodisiac, when—on the handful of occasions she took a lover—she appreciated as much pleasure as she gave. And that's when she moved back to the Range.

After finishing her degree in journalism, she worked odd jobs, mostly with newspapers doing photography and layout, occasionally penning a story. There was a time she spent two or three years in a party blur, working just enough to scrape by, familiarizing herself with most of the region's Northwoods bars. And people liked her, particularly men. She was almost 5'9", with curves in the right places and an engaging smile. And after a couple of sloe gin fizzes, her laugh was, according to one of her friends at the time, "as seductive as a leopard's."

She got on well with the Range men, careful about her occasional companions. In spite of her reputation, taking a partner happened less frequently than the barmen believed. But the last time, one of those trysts took, at least biologically. Her partner had been a fun, capable lover. But to Diane it was clear as a deep-water lake that he would never be a father. Her miscarriage was painful, but fortunate, considering her options. She lost the baby and was never forced to decide between a loveless marriage and the rest of her life. The stark choice made her reconsider her

participation in the Range bar scene and occasionally what happened after they closed.

Not long after Diane's miscarriage, her aunt died, leaving her this cabin and enough money so that for six months she did nothing but write. She also read, heavily, which is how she first met Miriam Winthrop. Over 20 years ago Miriam befriended her and introduced her to a local women's book group, every one of them rabid readers.

The group gave her a social outlet. And the reading improved her writing. She finally took a job reporting with the *Vermilion Falls Gazette*.

When she peered out her kitchen window, she realized it would be a while before she dug herself out. She phoned her boss. It was still early. The office would be empty.

"I'm working from home today," she said. "I'm finishing up that long obit on Winthrop, and if I'm reading your mind properly, I bet you want 7 column inches about this storm, which you'll have by this afternoon."

She hung up. She'd wait for the thermometer to climb to zero before breaking out her snowblower. Meanwhile, she needed to finish that obit. She'd barely known Williston Winthrop. But her research had turned up plenty. Dunlap, the assistant DA, alluded to an investigation, but she couldn't get corroboration or any sense of what it was about. And regardless, the *Gazette* wouldn't have run it in an obit. The *Gazette* believed you should never speak ill of the dead—even though Winthrop deserved every ill word she could conjure. The only people she could get to go on record with a positive remark were the members of that club. And they were the beneficiaries of the man's estate, something that prick

Pederson was quick to point out, when she'd spoken with him at the farm. He was coming into some money. Diane still couldn't believe how the man stared at her breasts the night of Winthrop's accident. There had been times Pederson had more or less propositioned her, but so had a score of men across the Range.

She needed a few more details to finish her obit. She'd try Young first. If Young couldn't help, she could always turn to Pederson, who was clearly willing. She didn't like the idea of calling Pederson, but her other alternatives—Bill Heins and Angus Moon—made her skin crawl. At least she had been able to joke with Pederson, because Pederson was a player. She was hoping she'd have better luck with Young.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By 8 a.m. Sam was returning to Defiance from the east side of town. He had driven all the way south to Brainerd and made sure he bought gas and had something to eat at a local restaurant, keeping the dated receipts in his car, just in case. He'd come in behind the storm, not in the middle of it. The receipts would support his alibi.

The steeple of the Lutheran church rose above frozen birch and pine, its pinnacled cross encrusted with a thick layer of ice. Sam imagined the view from the cross. He remembered a handful of stores, the lumberyard, the school, Pederson's Ford, the Winthrop Building, the Naked Loon Bar, Opel Grady's Café, and more churches than God had any right to expect in a town with these dimensions.

Defiance was settled when Northern Minnesota was the Northwest Territory and people came here in search of timber, fur, gold, and the absence of any laws but their own. They cut down the original pine forest, and the fur lasted until the fur-bearing animals were slaughtered to near extinction. Instead of gold they discovered iron, much more costly and laborious to extract. But as long as anyone could remember, iron sustained the string of Northern Minnesota mining towns across the Range. Until recently.

For the last two decades Sam had read about the decline of the iron mines. Chinese and foreign imports had gutted the American steel industry, drying up the need for local ore. In the wake of foreign competition, the old pit mines were abandoned, replaced by an effort to eke out a living in the tourist trade during

the warmer months, at least for those who stayed.

More recently some of the mining companies had begun to restart their iron mining efforts, while others had begun to develop nonferrous metal deposits. The region was starting to come back, but slowly, and not in Defiance.

At the edge of town Sam was pleased to see Erickson's gas station still open. He pulled into the station and topped off his tank. The clear sky wasn't helping with the cold; the station thermometer read -7°F . He'd blown in with a cold front.

Behind the counter a high school kid looked up from his textbook, waiting for Sam to pay. He had green eyes and a compact frame. Under the boy's insulated shirt, Sam noticed broad shoulders and plenty of muscle. His hands were deft and capable, and his face could have graced a box of Wheaties.

Sam imagined the kid gliding over ice, smashing a hockey puck in Northern Minnesota's greatest pastime. It was the eyes that suggested he might be an Erickson, one of the progeny of the clan Sam worked for as a kid.

"Your name Erickson?"

The boy looked friendly enough. "Yeah."

"That your dad who owns the spread outside of town?"

"My Uncle Paul," he said. He took Sam's card and swiped it through the register's reader.

"Do you know a Diane Talbott?"

The boy placed Sam's receipt on the table, waiting for his signature. Sam watched him glance at the cardholder's name.

"Sam Rivers," he said, referencing the name on the card. "My mother was a friend of Diane's."

"Uh-huh," the boy nodded.

“Sometimes Diane would take my mom and me fishing.”

The kid nodded again, guarded.

“If I remember right, Diane loved catching snakes, just for the fun of it.” *Snakes* was the local term for the long, aggressive northern pike, one of Minnesota’s hardest-fighting fish, but also slimy and difficult to fillet.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” the boy said, smiling. “She lives outside of town, on the Old Road.”

The boy gave him directions while Sam returned the card to his wallet. When he looked out the window, he saw the Ben Franklin five-and-dime closed up. The old painted ads were peeling from its windows. The sidewalks in front of the store were choked with snow. Farther down the street he saw a tavern closed and a church with its windows boarded up. The doors to the old Defiance Library were chained. Beyond it, peeking from around the corner, he caught the edge of the Winthrop Building.

“Defiance Hotel still open?”

The boy nodded.

“It’s a wonder anybody’s still here.”

“I’m gettin’ out. Soon as I’m done with school.”

Sam noticed the kid’s sincerity. He thought about telling him a story, about growing up and getting out. But Sam wasn’t ready. Not yet.

He thanked the boy and left.

On the edge of town the Defiance Hotel stood like a sturdy brick fort in front of the abandoned Iron Rail depot and the woods that went on forever beyond it. The depot had been used to haul timber and ore when Defiance was still a boomtown. Now its windows stood broken and empty. The old depot door was padlocked.

The ground around the dilapidated structure was thigh high with new snow.

The hotel's sign was faded and almost unintelligible, but its walks were plowed clean. A faded yellow VACANCY was taped to the window. Sam pushed through the door.

Behind the desk a television blared from a back room. Sam slapped the old-fashioned desk bell. He heard a chair creak, and in a moment an old man stood in the door's threshold.

"Yeah?" he said, eyeing Sam with suspicion.

"Have you got a room?"

The old man's head looked like a cue ball, its most prominent feature a pair of antiquated black plastic-rimmed glasses. He wore a work shirt and gray khaki work pants with black suspenders. His clothes were threadbare, but clean and well pressed. His belly pushed over his belt like a distended watermelon, bulging his shirt buttons and parting the suspenders. Judging from the hotel's quietude, he had plenty of time for meals.

"Got 16 of them," the man finally answered.

"Good."

"I taped that VACANCY sign up over 10 years ago. The only times I come close to bringing it down are hunting season and fishing opener."

Sam smiled. "I'm looking for something with a view," he said.

"You can have whatever room you want, but don't expect a view."

"How about a room that overlooks those train tracks, facing the woods?"

"That'll be seven. Right over my place."

Sam signed his name and completed the registration form

with his Yellow Rock address and phone while the proprietor reached down and pulled a key off an inside cupboard. He handed the key to Sam, glancing at his name. "Rivers?"

"Sam Rivers."

"Elwyn Baxter," the man said, reaching over and shaking Sam's hand. "From around here?"

"A long time ago," he said. "It's been a while. I left quite a few years back."

"Any kin?"

"All dead."

"Seems like all the young ones leave," the proprietor mused. "Can't say I blame them. Nothing for them around here. Everything closing up. I don't remember any Rivers."

"None of them live here anymore."

"Figures."

"Does seem like a ghost town."

The old man laughed. "It's a ghost town all right. Plenty of old ghosts like me still hanging around." The old man leaned on the counter, settling in, and added, "If you don't want much, it's a nice place to live. A person couldn't want for better fishing or hunting, or more beautiful scenery than our lakes and rivers."

Sam nodded.

Outside, a car came down the icy street. They turned to watch Heins's police car slow in front of the hotel, then pass by.

"Wonder what he wants?" the old man asked with unguarded derision. "Not in any trouble, are ya?"

"Nothing anybody knows about," Sam said.

Baxter smiled. "That's Bill Heins, Defiance's police force. Not sure what a town this size needs with a police force, but he's it.

Had the job for years. He likes harassing strangers and rolling bums. Saw him just last week. He was out back.” Through his rear office window, he motioned to the abandoned building by the tracks. “Picked up some bum. Big fat old man. Now don’t get me wrong, no way I’m for vagrants filling our streets. But if you’re down on your luck, the only free shelter in town is that abandoned depot, and Heins is out at dusk harassing him. Made him get into his squad car and carted him off.” The old man looked at Sam. “What’s a dying town like this need with a cop?” he repeated. “I expect Defiance is keeping Bill Heins around for 50 grand a year when everyone else is out of work. But it’s not likely to last.” The old man smiled. “What’s he gonna do when there’s nothing left in the Defiance treasury? And from what I hear that day isn’t far off.”

The old man continued for a while: mostly talking about Heins’s uselessness, though his derision wasn’t limited to the town cop.

Sam imagined Heins harassing the homeless. From what he remembered, Heins would appreciate a vagrant’s vulnerability. Heins had a predator’s instinct for finding the weakest animal in the herd.

From the look in Baxter’s eyes, Sam knew he was ready to speak at length about any subject Sam cared to discuss. But Sam was long overdue for a warm bed and rest. A long drive and larceny were exhausting work.

He thanked Baxter, excusing himself with an apology, and went out to his Jeep to recover his bag and the duffel. As a source of information the proprietor might be useful, Sam thought. But he recognized a small-town gossip and knew whatever he told the hotel owner would be fodder for the next guest.

Room seven was as austere as a hermitage. The bed was narrow and flat, and the mattress was as hard as slate. But he was too tired to care.

A nicked-up dresser stood to the side of the window. On the opposite wall there was an old picture in a natural birchwood frame—a Northwoods trapper checking his trapline, the setting not much different from what Sam could see out his window. The bathroom, sink, and shower were behind a door at the end of the hall. Sam, more tired than he could remember, set down his bags, took out his Dopp kit, and went down to brush his teeth.

The simplicity of the place was fine by Sam. He planned on resting here, nothing more. And truth is, he preferred his mattresses firm. Sam lay down on the unyielding spread. His watch said 9:30 a.m. He lay flat on his back with his clothes still on. He lifted his wrist, setting his watch alarm for 4 p.m.

He thought briefly how good the last 24 hours had been. Good, and with unexpected windfalls that left him with more questions than answers. If the next day was anything like the last, he was in for an interesting ride.

Then he closed his eyes and instantly fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At the Vermilion County Courthouse, Sheriff Dean Goddard stepped into ADA Jeff Dunlap's office.

Dunlap looked up and said, "Hey, just a second," and then returned to his papers.

Dunlap's office was a 10-by-15-foot rectangle with a window overlooking the parking lot. The long wall was lined with file cabinets. The cabinets were topped with archive boxes. His table was covered with several neat piles of paper, each pile an open case. Illuminating the piles was a green glass desk lamp Goddard figured was standard issue for everyone passing the bar. Other than the desk lamp and files, nothing about Dunlap's demeanor or appearance would have indicated he was one of the best prosecutors in the state.

Dunlap had feather-short brown hair parted on the side. His mustache looked like the frayed end of a worn toothbrush. He wore round, wire-rimmed glasses with tortoiseshell enamel. The sheriff had known him for almost a decade, but the man's appearance never changed.

The assistant county attorney and the sheriff had been friends since their first days in local government. Goddard was born and raised on a small farm outside Worthington, Minnesota, a rural community in the southwest corner of the state, about as far from Vermilion Falls as you could get and still call yourself a Minnesotan.

Dunlap was raised on a small acreage outside Defiance. His parents hunted, fished, guided, subcontracted lumber with the county and local sawmills, and cleared over 4 acres on which

they planted Christmas trees. Dunlap had grown up with a cabin roof over his head, and plenty to eat, much of it wild. But it was a season-to-season existence. They survived. He loved his parents, but when he was young, he swore he was going to have more than a pot to piss in, and so he did.

He was one of the county prosecutor's top attorneys and was considered the heir apparent to take over when Percy Lange, the current county attorney, strode into the sunset. And those in the know suspected Lange's departure wasn't far off.

"I believe if Jedd Connors has one more DWI, I can put him away for six months and force him to go through treatment for the second time this year."

"County would be better off," the sheriff observed.

"Think it'll help?"

The sheriff shook his head. "But we can hope."

"I guess." The two men were in agreement on most county law enforcement matters. Dunlap closed the folder, leaned back, and put his feet on the only open corner of his desk. "And I suppose the county's better off without that old crook Will Winthrop, though damned if I'm feeling good about it."

When Goddard entered, he'd noticed a familiar yellow file in the middle of Dunlap's desk. It was the folder containing the draft subpoena he was going to serve Winthrop until Winthrop's untimely accident.

As far as Goddard knew, the only person aware of his relationship with Susan Wallace had been Winthrop. There was a time he'd considered turning to Dunlap for advice, just to have a confidant who could advise him on how best to clean up his

awful mess. But instinct told him his good friend would give him advice he wasn't willing to follow: end the affair. Given Winthrop's demise, he was thankful he'd kept his mouth shut.

"What's his death mean for your investigation?" Goddard asked.

"Our investigation," Dunlap corrected.

Goddard was glad to hear it. The best way to search Winthrop's properties was to have the investigation remain open. He needed to find that video and destroy it. The ongoing investigation would give him legal cover.

"It preempts justice," Dunlap quipped. "I wanted to make that old man swing by his thumbs. From what I can figure, that guy wasn't only a crook. He was a cruel SOB capable of just about anything a criminal mind can conjure."

It was a familiar subject, though they only broached it with each other. Rigorous in their pursuit of criminals, they were fair and just, above all else. And that made the sheriff's infidelity all the more painful.

"I guess he got what was coming," Goddard observed.

"I guess," Dunlap said, staring off at the filing cabinets lining his wall. "But that doesn't mean his beneficiaries should enjoy the fruits of his illegal labors."

The file in the middle of Dunlap's desk contained much more information than the names the sheriff had shared with Winthrop, well ahead of actually serving him the paper. The fourth investigation into Winthrop's law practice involved three widowed pensioners: Betty Jo Kalumet, Mary Slavenoh, and Gertie Wendell. The three had been housed in an assisted-living foster-care facility called Pine Grove Estates, just outside Hibbing. Betty Jo

died two years ago. Mary had been dead less than a year. Gertie was still alive, but had extreme dementia.

The three women shared several characteristics. The first and perhaps most important was their mental status: impaired. They slipped in and out of history with the ease of time travelers, rarely visiting the present. And they were a little fuzzy about particulars. Their own names, for instance, had been as elusive as everyone else's. They had no living next of kin. And in the sense that a pensioner is someone who lives on a small stipend, generally from a qualified benefit plan, these three only appeared to be financially stressed senior citizens in need of a safe home.

Pine Grove Estates was a Delaware corporation. Beneath the corporate veil of Pine Grove Estates was a Minnesota corporation called Iron County Care. Iron County Care had two limited partners and one general partner. The limited partners were Bill and Matty Harris. The general partner was the general counsel for Iron County Care. Everyone was paid by Pine Grove Estates, which had a corporate address in Delaware, but a working address, a PO box, in Virginia, Minnesota. Beneath Iron County Care there were some additional limited and general partners that made the entire structure holding up Pine Grove Estates one of the most sophisticated and byzantine corporate shell games Dunlap had ever seen. He'd retained a friend in corporate law down in the Cities to help him sort it all out.

Over the years the spinsters not only managed to accumulate considerable estates, but also once they entered the comfortable foster care and assisted living provided by Pine Grove Estates, their stipends, and eventually their entire estates, had cascaded down through several corporate entities until they had finally

been signed over to attorney Williston Winthrop, general counsel. Dunlap was still trying to figure out all the angles of the complicated scheme.

Everything had continued to operate well below the radar until less than a year ago. Gertie Wendell had a brief bout with pneumonia, and her regular physician was unavailable. Wallace examined her. What Wallace saw made her wonder if Pine Grove Estates' care was adequate. She mentioned it to the sheriff, who drove over to have a look. He found the place clean, filled with plenty of sunlight, the air smelling antiseptic. And Gertie looked as reasonable as one could expect, considering she seldom got out of bed and was recovering from a nasty respiratory infection.

Still, the sheriff wondered about it, mentioning the place to his friend Dunlap, who started digging. After almost three months of to and fro with the Minnesota Secretary of State's office, and the assistance of his corporate law expert in the Cities, Dunlap had finally figured the broad outline of the scheme.

"So this doesn't end it?" the sheriff finally asked.

"No way. But it complicates how we proceed. God knows we're not going to get any answers to our subpoena."

"Dead men don't talk," the sheriff agreed.

"Not in so many words. But we might yet hear something from his grave." Dunlap said. "For starters, I obtained a copy of Winthrop's will. It's a large estate, considering how he lived. He kept his net worth well under the radar. There's plenty, and those buddies of his are going to make out like bandits."

"Bill Heins?"

"He's one of them. Along with that mongrel Angus Moon. And Hank Pederson and Hal Young. You know them?"

"Moon's an outdoorsman. Lives pretty far out. Off the grid, far as I can tell."

"That's the guy. A hunter, trapper, not particularly pleasant. Tell you the truth, it surprises me Williston Winthrop had anything to do with him. But a lot of things about Winthrop surprise me. Did you know he had a son?"

"Where?"

"Nobody knows. He was ahead of me in school a couple years. He was a quiet kid, kept to himself. Then one day he just disappeared."

"Anybody look into it?"

"Nope. No reason to. He was old enough. Apparently the mother knew where he was. Rumor had it that the old prick beat him up pretty bad and Clayton—that was his name—bolted. Didn't come back, and I don't blame him."

"What about Pederson and Young?"

"Respectable enough. But it's a curious thing about Winthrop's estate. Over \$2 million comes from a term life insurance policy. Who in the hell keeps that kind of insurance for a bunch of his buddies?"

Goddard shrugged, but agreed that carrying that much life insurance was surprising. Particularly considering his beneficiaries.

"I've learned a little about that business," Dunlap added. "Life insurance companies do a lot of research to make sure they understand a client's total life insurance picture: the companies, policies, amounts, dates of ownership, beneficiaries, that kind of thing. When people buy life insurance, they're entered into databases. If some guy takes out 10 \$50,000 policies on his wife, making himself the beneficiary, they want to know about it."

The sheriff wasn't surprised. Insurance companies were hesitant to part with money, so they took precautions.

"And any policies less than a year old are subject to pretty intense scrutiny," continued Dunlap. "For obvious reasons."

"How old was Winthrop's?"

"You can be Winthrop's age and get a \$2.5 million term life insurance policy for a little more than \$3,000 a year, providing you took out the paper almost 10 years ago."

"He's been paying on it for 10 years?"

"About eight. Not cheap, but for a man like Winthrop, benefiting the way he did from these lady's estates, it would have been chicken feed."

"But he wouldn't gain anything. Just his beneficiaries. What's the point?"

"That part bugged me," Dunlap agreed. "The policy's beneficiaries are the four men mentioned in this will. I double-checked on who paid the annual premiums. It was Will Winthrop, out of an account set up for gun club expenses."

"Maybe they had something on him? Or he was a better friend than we give him credit."

"I don't for a second believe he was a good buddy. And here's the real kicker. That club has been paying premiums on the same policies for every one of its members!"

The sheriff didn't understand. "You mean every club member has a \$2.5 million term life insurance policy?"

Dunlap nodded. "For almost eight years Will Winthrop, through that club, has held paper on every member. The listed beneficiaries for each policy are the same, the members of the gun club. It looks like Winthrop, through the club, has paid the

premiums all along. That's over \$15,000 a year."

Goddard was surprised. "That's a load of money. You think he was just gambling?"

"First of all, the cost was minimal, if I'm right about how much he bilked out of those pensioners. Second, it could have been an incredible gamble, if any of them died before him."

"Maybe he was thinking about offing one of them? Maybe a couple?"

"Maybe the whole damn group," Dunlap agreed. "Though it'd be tough to get away with it."

"Car accident," Goddard suggested. "House fire during an all-night poker game. Boating accident." He thought about it. From what he knew of Winthrop, anything was possible. "Maybe they got him first?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe it was just something the club decided to do for its members?" Goddard said. "The more I think about it, the more I think it was just a gamble. From what I hear, they were all players. Maybe Winthrop and the other club members were figuring one of them would knock off before the end of the life insurance term. Didn't Percy tell you he'd seen Winthrop down at the Black Bear Casino on more than one occasion?"

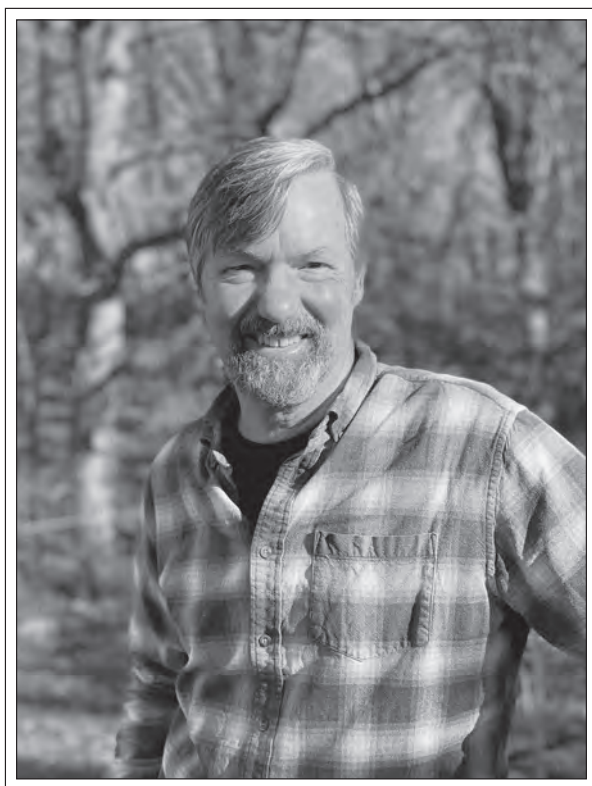
Dunlap nodded.

"I guess his old buddies hit pay dirt."

"Two point five mil," Dunlap mused.

"Damn. That's a lotta jack."

After a few moments of silence, during which both of them briefly wondered what they would do with that kind of money, Dunlap said, "I'm not sure there's a whole lot we can do about that



photographed by Anna McCourt

CARY J. GRIFFITH

An award-winning author, Griffith has a bachelor of arts in English from the University of Iowa and a master of arts in library science from the University of Minnesota. He lives with his family in a suburb of Minnesota's Twin Cities.

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“I’ve never read a book that evokes the fierce winter landscape of the North Country better than *Wolf Kill*.”

WILLIAM KENT KRUEGER —Edgar Award–winning author of *This Tender Land*

WOLVES Aren’t the Only PREDATORS in TOWN

A decades-old promise haunts Sam Rivers, but the wildlife biologist refuses to return home—not while his estranged father is still there. Sam has built a respected career as a field agent for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. His experiences have given him a penchant for understanding predators, a skill he must put to use.

After his father’s mysterious death, Sam is lured back to his hometown in Northern Minnesota to fulfill his mother’s dying wish. But all is not as it seems. Sam breaks into his childhood home and discovers something sinister. His suspicions are heightened after a bizarre wolf attack on local livestock. The events lead the agent to a series of clues that could change everything he knows—or thinks he knows—about the town, his family, and himself.

Sam must unravel the wolf kill and learn what really happened to his father—a man Sam has hated for most of his life. His knowledge of frigid winters, wolves, and wilderness will be put to the test, as he tries to solve the case—and stay alive.

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