

TAL BAUER

HELL
and
GONE



HELL AND GONE

TAL BAUER

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*To Misty, Maria, Loretta, and Trisha.
This one is for you.*

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*What if the breath that kindled those grim fires,
Awaked, should blow them into sevenfold rage,
And plunge us in the flames; or from above
Should intermitted vengeance arm again
His red right hand to plague us?*

— JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST

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INTRODUCTION

Stock Detectives, Range Detectives, and Brand Inspectors are full-time law enforcement officers and criminal investigators. As sworn peace officers, they are authorized to stop vehicles, serve search warrants, collect evidence, make arrests, and independently conduct felony investigations. They may be called upon to assist in any federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies' investigations or arrests.

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CHAPTER 1

“SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS SECRET IS WORTH NOW?”

Rope bit into his neck, cutting skin. Blood wept like slow honey, pooling in the hollow of his throat and sliding past his collarbones.

Carson stared into the dark bore of the rifle’s muzzle. His breath hitched.

The rope creaked, the noose tightening as his horse, Banshee, snorted. She stamped her feet, snorting hot air as she whickered. “Easy, girl,” he whispered. “Easy.”

If she darted, he’d hang.

“I asked you a question!”

“It’s worth your fuckin’ rotten soul, you son of a bitch!” Both of his hands clawed at the noose. His fingernails tore, rope splinters sliding into his skin. Blood ran hot down his fingers, seeping into his callouses, his work-worn hands.

Beyond the black hole of the rifle, Carson saw his captor’s lips quirk upwards.

Another man jerked the end of the rope in his hands, the same rope looped on the cottonwood branch over Carson’s head.

The noose circling his neck pulled tight.

Stars exploded in his vision, black holes dancing in the sunlight. Rainbows burst and bled down his eyeballs as he gasped for air that wasn’t there. He kicked, struggled, strained. Banshee started forward.

Carson clenched his knees on her sides, begging her to stay.

The rope slackened, fractionally.

He dragged in a wet, rasping breath, closing his eyes for a moment.

“I told you once before, Carson Riley. There would be a reckonin’ for what’s been done. There would be hell to pay one day. That day has come.”

No. Stilling, Carson swallowed, and the noose rose and fell as his throat moved. His lips thinned. His eyes narrowed.

He knew this man. He’d known him for years in that small-town way everything was known about everyone else. He knew *this* man, though, better than he knew others.

Never, in all that time, had he thought this would be how they’d meet their end: one of them at the end of a rope, staring down a rifle the other man held. “I’ll help you,” he whispered. “You can use me. I swear, I’ll help you.”

The man’s jaw worked, and his eyes cut into Carson’s soul. “No,” he drawled. “You’re just desperate.”

“I’ll leave. I’ll run, as far as I can go. I’ll leave the country. You’ll never see me again.”

The man sighed. He shouldered his rifle, squinting at Carson for a long moment. Sunlight slanted through the trees, falling across his broad shoulders, his wide-brimmed hat. Shadows crisscrossed his face, hid his eyes from Carson.

If he could just see into his eyes...

“Carson,” the man said, his name like a fallen leaf in the autumn sky on his smooth voice. He always liked how his name sounded from this man, full of warmth and with enough space between the letters to fit a smile inside. That smile used to be like the sun for him, and he’d glow inside, go warm to his fingers and toes, whenever it was given to him. His captor wasn’t smiling now, though. “You can’t run from this kind of trouble.”

Ice slicked down his spine, spread through his arms and legs as his chest went tight. This wasn’t just for show. This wasn’t just to scare him. He was going to die today.

The man stepped forward, each boot carefully placed on the springy leaf-strewn forest floor. Banshee turned toward him, nosing his shoulder, snuffing in his gloved hand, searching for a treat. He chuckled, patting her neck and ruffling his fingers through her mane and behind her ears. She pushed into his touch, seeking something sane, something known, as she shifted in the dirt beneath the cottonwood.

He stroked one leather-gloved hand down her neck and over her shoulder, making soft noises in her ear, whispering sweet nothings.

“This isn’t the time for leaving, or for runnin’,” he said, quirking a slight smile up at Carson as he ambled past the saddle. Behind him now, he ran his hand again down Banshee’s flank all the way to her thigh. She snorted. Felt the familiar touch. She trusted him. “Least, it’s not for *you*.”

Carson whimpered, his fingers grasping the rope at his throat again. He stared straight ahead through the forest, the tangled branches, to the range, the high pastures of the ranch nearest Crazy Peak. These mountains were pristine country, untouched from the moment of their creation. Land scraped the stars and canyons yawned into the bowels of the earth. Vast fields of golden grasses, grazing land that spread down from Crazy Peak like gold dust scattered from God. And emptiness. So few people, so much land.

It was a place to die for.

I’m sorry. I wish—

“It’s time for debts to be settled,” the man growled. “It’s *past* time.”

His hand came down on Banshee’s hindquarters. She squealed and lurched, bolting forward in a wild gallop through the trees out to open range.

Carson twisted on the end of the rope, his empty legs kicking and searching for purchase as the air punched out of him and didn’t return. He kept his eyes open as long as he could, drinking in the country and the setting sun bathing the meadows in spilled paint, in all the pastel colors man had ever named. A thousand regrets flashed through his mind, days and nights he’d never live, dreams he’d spun out under the big sky that would never unfurl from his mind. His life had seemed open once, unburdened, a wild emptiness ready to be filled with every daring thought he’d ever had.

As the darkness closed in, one thought rang through his mind, one thought sharper, harder edged, more filled with regret than all the others. It was the beginning, he realized, of it all. Of everything.

I wish I’d never met you, Law.

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CHAPTER 2

ALL ROOTLESS THINGS ARE GRABBED BY THE WIND, AND SO WAS EVERETT Dawson.

Gusts tumbled down the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, battering his pickup truck. The engine growled, chewing miles of asphalt beneath the humming tires. Ahead of him, prairie stretched from horizon to horizon.

Shadows loomed on his left. Mountains jutted for the sky, jagged teeth screaming at the sun like a drowning man gasping for air before he was pulled beneath the waves. Pine and cottonwood draped over the peaks, ash and poplar and elder scattered up and down the lower slopes. They seemed unbowed, unmoved, even in the punishing Montana winds.

Everett stared hard at the mountains. Google told him they were haunted, filled with the rage of an old Native American woman who'd gone crazy after a vision quest went wrong. As punishment from her gods, she'd roamed the hills for the rest of her life, her mind broken, her rage unchecked. Outlaws and then bootleggers used to hide in the mountains, undoubtedly using—probably even creating—the legend of the old woman for cover.

He slapped his blinker down, signaling a left turn. There was no one on the highway. There hadn't been for hours.

He pointed his truck at the range, letting the engine open up as he floored the accelerator along the last flat stretch of road before the foothills swallowed up the asphalt. False dusk fell over him, and he pushed his sunglasses onto his forehead as the mountain's peak eclipsed the sun.

The radio, already scratchy and fading in and out ever since he'd turned off the state highway an hour before, fell away. Soft static filled the cabin,

mixed with the rumble of his engine. The wind died. Everything was still in the mountain's shadow.

His truck began the climb.

Everett Dawson arrived in the Crazy Mountains.

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CHAPTER 3

LAWRENCE JACKSON DROPPED THE CORPSE ON THE FRONT DESK OF THE Timber Creek Sheriff's Office. "Now, will one of you *finally* take this situation seriously, for God's sake!"

The young deputy manning the front desk, so fresh he still had pimples dotting his jawline and the shine hadn't rubbed off his badge yet, flew back, tipping his chair over as he scrambled away. "What the *fuck*?" His tan cowboy hat rolled off his head and hit the ground, right before his ass did.

"You," Lawrence growled. "You graduated high school up in Lone Pine last year, yeah? Go'n get me a real deputy!"

The kid scowled as he slowly picked himself up, grabbed his hat, and shoved it on his head. He didn't move.

"*Now!*" Lawrence barked. "Or should I leave this here with you?" He rocked the corpse toward the kid. Bloat had started to set in, and the man's face was hideous and disfigured, mottled with ugly purple and violent green turning black, the color of rot sinking deep into dead flesh. Deep rope cuts ate into the corpse's neck.

The deputy scrambled away, running into a desk and a rolling chair before tearing to the back office and leaving Lawrence alone.

Sighing, Lawrence relaxed his hold on the dead body and straightened him out, lying the corpse on his back as best he could. He tried, and failed, to make it seem like he was resting, only closing his eyes. Napping.

The frozen face, twisted in panic, and the ravaged throat screamed the lie.

His heart squeezed, and he ran his fingers down the side of the cold face. He couldn't look at the neck, at what had been done.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” a deep voice boomed from the back of the bullpen.

Lawrence snapped up his gaze and met the stormy eyes of Sheriff Darby Braddock.

Darby Braddock was a bear of a man, sixty years old, as old as the mountains themselves, the young kids joked. He laughed at the kids’ jokes and then whipped their asses at each of the county’s high schools in annual Wrestle the Sheriff matches. Even with a full head of silver hair and deep lines creasing his face, Braddock was strong as an ox. Timber Creek and the Crazy Mountains were his, and he’d kept the law there since he was a deputy fresh out of school at the ripe young age of seventeen.

Lawrence had grown up in Braddock’s shadow. Braddock had watched him at his first school rodeo, cheering the school team on. He’d been there when Lawrence was suspended from high school for fighting, and then there again when Lawrence dropped out. “This isn’t the path you wanna take, son,” Braddock had warned.

“I ain’t got any other paths.”

Their paths always crossed through the years, Braddock jerking Lawrence’s reins back when he got too wild and when he bucked too hard against laws and “civil society,” as Braddock said.

One night, when Lawrence was cooling his heels in Braddock’s jail cell, Braddock had leaned into the bars and passed him a flask. They drank together in silence for a few minutes, and then Braddock told him he was a wild bronc that needed a firm hand to get him under control. Teach him a few things.

“You gonna be that man?” Lawrence had asked.

“You cross the line, Law, I will have to be. Don’t put me in that spot.”

He was walking that line now. He saw it as Braddock approached, the shock hitting him, the spark of rage igniting in his eyes. “What the hell are you doin’ now, Law?”

He snapped his hand away from Carson’s cheek before Braddock could see. “Figured I’d bring you a present, Sheriff. Since you refuse to take me or my complaints serious.”

“I ain’t refusin’ anythin’,” Braddock growled. “I got two thousand miles of land to cover, and you and your complaints ain’t on the top of my list.”

“How’s about this for a complaint, then?” Lawrence stepped back and waved to the corpse.

Braddock sighed, taking in the dead body slowly from head to toe. “Carson Riley.” He shook his head, and his eyes narrowed as he peered at the deep rope cuts, the way Carson’s neck looked like ground beef left out to rot. The broken and bloody fingernails. “Where’d you find him?”

“Swinging from a branch on the edge of my north pasture.” Lawrence tossed a bloodstained noose onto the corpse’s cold chest. “Cut him down with that ‘round his neck.”

“You already put your hands all over it? You know that’s evidence. Now we can’t get fingerprints off—”

“I wore gloves.” Lawrence held out his gloved hands, cased in black leather that ended at his wrists. “I ain’t stupid.”

Braddock snorted. The look he gave Lawrence called him a liar. “That’s wild country up there north of your range. What made you look?”

“Other than the fact he was missin’,” Lawrence said slowly, “was the buzzards led me to him. Got there before they could get to his eyes.”

“How long was he missin’?”

“He didn’t come back to the ranch last night.” His voice was tight, almost strangled.

Braddock peered at him. “He come back to your ranch every night?”

Lawrence stared. His fingers curled, made fists as he clenched Carson’s cold jacket.

Braddock moved on. “You cut him down?”

“I did.”

“You know that’s a crime, Law. Interferin’ in a crime scene. You don’t know how this man died, but there you go, trampin’ on a potential crime scene and destroyin’ whatever evidence there might be, ruinin’ anythin’ me and my boys could have done out there.”

Lawrence held Braddock’s glare. “Sorry, Sheriff,” he said, his voice taut. “You know, when I found him, all I could think ‘bout was gettin’ him down—” His voice went rough, words tangled and torn as his voice failed him. He looked down.

He couldn’t look at Carson, not like this, not with the fear, the panic, the agony scrawled across his features. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breathe.

Braddock gave him the time, waiting as the silence built, save for the wet, quick rasps of his hitched breaths.

All he smelled was death.

“Son—” Braddock started, his voice soft.

“Sides,” he said, finally looking up and glaring at Braddock. He shook Braddock’s care off, squared his shoulders. “It’s like you said: that’s rough country. Didn’t think you and your boys were gonna make your way up there, not for li’l ole me?”

“He was *supposed* to leave town.”

Lawrence hesitated. “He was helpin’ out for a time. We had an understandin’.”

Braddock *hmm*ed. His eyes softened, though, as he held Lawrence’s stare. “You know he was supposed to get gone,” he said quietly. “No matter what he had to leave behind. It was the only way.”

His temper spiked, anger rushing through him until his fists clenched. “Like those boys from Heart’s Rafter had to get gone?”

“Law, those two were told to get gone, and they got. What you think happened to them other than that?”

“They’re *missin’*, Sheriff. They’re gone all right, but they ain’t gone by themselves. They left everythin’ behind—”

“They didn’t leave everythin’ behind. They took their cell phones and wallets, Law. That’s what folk do when they skip town. They take what’s important and get.”

“In the middle of the damn night?” Law shook his head, his hands on his hips as he paced away from the front desk. “Bill’s pulled out, ya hear? He’s cut ties and left the mountains. Walked away.”

Bill Warner owned the Heart’s Rafter ranch and, after the troubles last year, he’d gone and hired on Dell and Aaron when no one would touch them, when they’d been told to get out of town, light a shuck and get gone.

“Every man deserves a second chance,” Bill had said. “Look what a second chance did to you, Law.”

But Dell and Aaron had vanished off the face of the earth.

“Bill got spooked, and it is no wonder he did, not with the rumors you keep spreadin’ ‘round, Law. You keep huntin’ trouble, stirrin’ up folk, and now here you are droppin’ dead bodies on my front desk. I’m ‘bout ready to throw you in my cells right now. I’d be within my rights what with you disturbin’ the dead and interferin’ in a crime scene. Maybe these damn mountains will settle the hell down if you’re coolin’ your heels.”

“You’d have come on out to see him? You’d have done a real investigation?”

“I would, if you’d left him the hell alone.” Braddock waved his hand over Carson’s corpse. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this, Law? This ain’t a crime scene, and my office ain’t a dumping ground for dead bodies!”

“’M sorry, Sheriff. You’ve been so attentive to my complaints in the past. I figured you’d be just as attentive here.”

“People dyin’ are serious business, Law.”

Lawrence snorted.

Braddock’s bushy mustache twitched. He spread his hands on the desk and leaned forward, pushing into Lawrence’s face. Carson’s body stank between them. “What is it that you want?”

“I want you to do your *job*, Sheriff. The ranches are missin’ stock. Our cattle are disappearin’. These mountains keep swallowin’ up men. Those Heart’s Rafter boys are *gone*, and now Carson’s been murdered—”

“Murdered?”

“Look at him!”

“Looks like he hung himself.”

Lawrence snarled. Rage shimmered through him, alongside the bone-deep pain. “Carson wouldn’t have done that. He never woulda killed himself. *Never.*”

“After last year?” Braddock’s thick eyebrows crawled up his forehead. “You know he took it hard, much harder than the others. You know he lost everythin’.”

Not everything. Lawrence swallowed slowly. “He had no cause to go’n kill himself.”

“You’re sayin’ someone hung him, then? Someone got the drop on Carson Riley, a man six feet tall, more’n two hundred forty pounds. Someone got a noose around his neck and hung that man without restrainin’ his wrists? I don’t know about your *fine* investigatory skills, but I don’t see rope burns ‘round those hands, Law.”

“What about his fingers?”

“I seen that before in all my suicides. They panic. Some regret their choice, but by then, it’s too late.”

“This is your fine investigatory work is it, Sheriff? Glancin’ at a body and decidin’ it ain’t murder?”

“I could’ve done a better job of it, Law, if you’d left the scene well enough alone,” Braddock growled. “As it stands, we’ll get this body

autopsied and we'll see what we can find out, beyond the obvious, that is. You want a death investigation? You'll get one. We'll see what we dig up, every corner of this man, no matter where it leads." Braddock's eyes narrowed. "You ready for that? For what you're askin' for?"

"That's *exactly* what I been after, Sheriff. That's *all* I been after. And maybe you can do somethin' about the missing stock while you're at it!"

"Law, I swear to God—"

Braddock's words were cut off as the Sheriff Department's front door opened. Wind whipped through the lobby, blowing up the edges of papers held down by river rocks and ruffling through everyone's hair. Carson's corpse lay stiff and unmoving.

Daniel Howell and Jim Burke strode inside, stopping in the entrance and staring.

Howell's sun-tanned face went pale, his eyes widening, jaw going slack. Dan Howell was the biggest landowner in the mountains, and one of the youngest cattlemen in Montana. He owned the Endless Sky ranch that nearly straddled the whole of the Crazies, the mountain range carved off from the northern Rockies like a forgotten child. Timber Creek lived in the mountain's shadows.

Years on the range, working the land and his herd, gave Howell a lean and hardened body, wind-weathered and whip-strong. He wore the cattleman's uniform: boots, slim jeans, a checked shirt, and a sleeveless vest zipped to his chest with his ranch brand—a Crazy A, an A upside down—over his heart.

Jim Burke, beside Howell, cursed under his breath and looked away from Carson's corpse. He pulled his tan hat off and stared at the far wall, his jaw set. Ever since Endless Sky was only a barn and a tiny little house, Jim Burke had been the ranch's foreman. Over twenty long years, he'd built the ranch as much as Howell had, staking out every new pasture, running fences, building the herd, pushing the cattle back and forth through the hot summers and long winters. He'd worked every inch of that ranch, knew every blade of grass, every tree and where its roots lay.

Once, Lawrence had wanted to be him, had idolized that fierce loyalty to the brand and to the man. He'd looked to Jim Burke, one of the only old men in the Crazies with a sensible head on his shoulders next to Sheriff Braddock, and saw a man he could try to become.

Now, Lawrence couldn't look him in his eyes. He stared at the floor, the edges of his eyes taking in how Burke's hair had gone completely gray, how his watery blue eyes floated deep in his lined face and seemed rocked on the waves after seeing Carson's ruined corpse.

"We heard," Howell said breathlessly. "But we didn't want to believe it."

God damn small towns. Lawrence glared at the young deputy hovering behind Braddock. "You? Or someone else back there who is paid to call Endless Sky with all the news? You got orders to tell him when you take a shit, too?"

"Law, shut your trap. I told him to call, and they was in town already. Carson was Dan's hand for years and he deserved to know from me, not through the rumor mill."

Lawrence kept his mouth shut, sucking his teeth as he swallowed what he wanted to say. *Carson could have still been at the Endless Sky. If he'd still been there, maybe he wouldn't be dead now.*

Howell stood over Carson's body and pulled off his hat. He shook his head and rested his hand on Carson's cold, still chest. "Darby, we've got to do something."

"I agree, Dan."

"Oh for God's sake!" Lawrence cried. He'd moved back, keeping a wide berth from Howell. "Endless Sky says jump and you get to leapin', huh? Ignore me and my complaints, my missin' stock, my God damn people turnin' up dead!"

Howell's cheeks flushed, but he refused to look Lawrence's way.

"If you wouldn't try'n fight every single thing I say, Law, we coulda talked it through sensibly. You're a man who hunts trouble every second of the day, and I got exactly no time for that, not with dead bodies being dropped on my desk and cattle missin' from every which way. You wanna come back and be sensible, we can talk. Until then!" Braddock pointed at the door. "Out!"

"Sheriff—"

"I *said* out!"

"You take care of Carson, you hear? I wanna know what happened to him!" His gaze lingered on Carson. He didn't want to walk away, not yet. He'd driven down holding onto the man, trying to pretend he was just

sleeping, it was just another day they were driving around and Carson had fallen asleep in his truck.

“Law!”

Sometimes a man had to do what needed to be done no matter how much it hurt. His eyes went watery, and he squeezed them shut. *Carson... God damn it.*

He didn't want to leave, but he did, storming out, his boots echoing on the aged hardwood in the lobby.

He heard Braddock's voice over his shoulder. “Now, I put in a call to Helena last week about the missing stock in these parts and the troubles we've been havin'. They've agreed to send a man—”

The doors slammed shut behind Lawrence, cutting off Braddock's voice.

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CHAPTER 4

“WELCOME TO THE CRAZIES, SON.” BRADDOCK SMILED ACROSS HIS DESK and folded his hands together.

Everett sat ramrod straight in the chair before Sheriff Braddock’s desk. He wore his jeans, as instructed, brand-new roper boots, and his Montana Department of Agriculture bomber jacket. He’d taken off his *STOCK DETECTIVE* ball cap and set it on his thigh, perfectly centered and parallel to the floor.

He felt underdressed, but that was how he’d felt ever since taking off his Army uniform for the last time.

“The Crazies, sir?” Everett frowned.

“It’s what we call these mountains. That’s Crazy Peak up there.” Braddock pointed to the highest peak in the mountains looming over Timber Creek outside his office window. “Supposedly, way back when, some woman on the wagon trains headin’ west went crazy at the sight of the mountain. Or another legend says some Indian woman went out of her mind after a bad vision quest. Yet another story says a man in Lewis and Clark’s expedition wandered into the mountains and was never seen or heard from again. His journal ended up back in St. Louis, though, and he’d written about all kind of ghosts and demons and hauntings in these here mountains. People been askin’ ever since: was he crazy to begin with? Or did those mountains make him go crazy?”

Everett stared.

Braddock chuckled. “Just stories, son. Can I get you a coffee?”

“No, sir, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Donut?”

“No, sir, thank you. I’m fine.”

Braddock peered at him. “You *are* fresh from the military, huh? Ag usually hires up old cowboys to be their stock detectives, but Dan Howell’s been barkin’ at his lawyers and his boys in Helena to hire up some real tough ones. Said they was needin’ to get some young ones. Ag thought the military was where we’d find what they wanted, I suppose. Some brilliance brought to the area.”

“I was in the Army, sir. Military Police.”

“And from the big ole Army, you found yourself all the way out here in the Crazies?” Braddock’s eyebrows arched, and he waited, watching Everett. “What brought you to Montana?”

Silence lingered in the small office. Everett clenched his jaw. Braddock’s expression slowly shifted into a frown as his mustache twitched.

“Well, you’re here now.” Braddock smiled wide, moving past the silence. “And we need you. I’ve got five ranchers in the Crazies who are about ready to blow. Endless Sky, Howell’s ranch? That’s the biggest. He’s got nearly the entire range, but the Rocking H and the Flying Joker have land on the eastern slopes. Heart’s Rafter butts up against Endless Sky on the north slope at the head of canyon country, but they’ve had a river of troubles, and Bill Warner’s pulled out. Then there’s Lawrence’s ranch, the Lazy Twenty-Two. Covers the high pastures and triangles Crazy Peak along with Endless Sky and Heart’s Rafter.

“Somethin’s going on in the Crazies. Stock—cattle—been disappearin’ off everyone’s ranches. Stock disappearin’ usually means rustlin’, and rustlin’ always means trouble. Modern rustlers, they like to grab stock and shove them in trailers, get them as far as fast as they can. They rework the brand and slide on up to a backwater auction where they can offload the stolen beef. One stolen head can bring as much as five grand at one of them black-market auctions.”

Everett nodded. He’d had a crash course in range law enforcement from his supervisor at the Department of Agriculture in Helena. He’d shadowed Buck for three weeks, trying to soak up everything he could in this new world he’d blown into. It was a whirlwind, a tornado of information. He was still getting his arms around everything.

“Now, the Crazies ain’t like the open range. Rustlin’ out on the front, or on the eastern prairie, is easy. It’s flat land, and thousands of miles of it. You drive onto some unlucky bastard’s pasture, you rustle up a few head,

you light a shuck and you're gone. Millions of dollars are lost out there every year. That's where you fine folk at Ag have been tryin' to make a stand." Braddock's lips pursed. "Up here in the mountains, though, there's only so many ways in and out. Most of the land is privately owned ranch land split between those five ranches. There are mighty few public trails up into those hills, and of those, they're difficult to maneuver through. Unmaintained, mostly."

"You think trespassers, then? Thieves coming in from the public lands?"

"The ranchers do. Howell's been up my ass about keeping more men watchin' the trailheads and watchin' every boot that collects dust from the Crazies. Trouble is, I've got two thousand square miles of land to protect and only one little department of six deputies. I can't devote my entire force to watchin' trails." Braddock pulled out a manila envelope and passed it across the desk. "I did send a few boys up several days ago. See for yourself what they found."

A stack of enlarged photos showed tracks through a muddy patch of rough backcountry. Tracks left by a heavy horse with thick shoes. The remains of a primitive camp. Trash lay strewn and cluttered at the base of thick tree trunks. A scorched circle in the dirt revealed an old campfire.

Evidence of drug activity, too. Repacking. Plastic gallon-size bags lined with white powder were half burned under the blackened dirt and white ash.

"Meth is Montana's biggest problem. Whenever you got poverty and unemployment, you find meth. Boredom's easiest—and worst—solution. People lookin' for an escape from their lives. It's also cheap to make, and it's an easy business to get into if you don't blow yourself up, that is. Industry has a way of weedin' out the ones who can't make it. It's comin' up from Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming. Ain't nobody here that's able to make it, that's for sure. But them Wyoming nutjobs—" Braddock's eyes went wide as he shook his head. "They push it north across our border. Whenever we think we get a hold on where the meth is comin' from, five more supply chains pop up. It's a tide we can't seem to stop. Eighty-six percent of all drug busts in this state are meth."

"You think there's a new smuggling route through the Crazies into Montana."

"That's my theory." Braddock nodded. "The pieces seem to fit, at least roughly, for now. Think they're movin' drugs up from Wyoming and across from Idaho. It'd be a rough passage, but it's a route we'd have a damn hard

time bustin'. Someone goin' through the Crazies is smart. They know how hard it is to navigate, but they *also* know how hard it is to bust 'em."

"To be successful and with that level of knowledge, it would have to be locals doing the smuggling. Someone who knows how to move through the mountains."

"I'm concerned 'bout *exactly* that. Good to know we're gettin' what we're payin' for in that big ole military brain." He winked, smiling kindly at Everett.

"Look, son, if this is drug runners moving through our mountains and they'd just stuck to shippin' their meth, we probably never woulda found them. I haven't sent a deputy up those trails in almost fifteen years. But whoever it is, they musta got greedy. Started stealin' stock. And stealin' stock, now *that's* a crime in Montana that will get you noticed. And they got the attention of the biggest ranch in town."

"Why would drug runners and meth dealers want to steal cattle off the ranches?"

"For eatin' on the trail, maybe?" Braddock shrugged. "Or for sellin' at the black-market auctions for some quick cash. Meth sells, sure. So does stock. I've realized most criminals diversify in their efforts." He leaned forward, pursing his lips as he studied Everett. "Speakin' of. Just this mornin', Lawrence Jackson, man who runs the Lazy Twenty-Two, dropped a corpse off on my front desk. Fellow named Carson Riley, an associate of his, was found dead on his range."

Everett's eyebrows rose. "How did he die?"

"Looks like a suicide, and there's reason enough to suspect he decided killin' himself was the way to get out of the trouble he found himself in. There's history behind that corpse, lots of it, and I can't say I was surprised to see him dead with rope burns on his neck. But, be that as it may, I'm having him examined by the coroner. Coroner's out of state right now, but he'll be back soon. We'll find out what happened."

"You think there's a possibility of foul play?"

Braddock sighed. There was an exhaustion deep in his eyes, but he managed a small smile for Everett. "Son, I'm not sure what I think right now 'bout that corpse. That's why I'm sendin' you in."

Everett, if possible, straightened further. His spine cracked. "What are my orders?"

“Orders?” Braddock laughed out loud. “You haven’t dusted the Army off you yet. You gotta shake that loose. This isn’t federal country here. You were loaned to me by Ag, and that’s about as large as I like my government. I get twitchy when too many state officials start crowdin’ around.” He winked. “I’m chargin’ you with assistin’ in my investigation of what’s happenin’ in the Crazies. Be it rustlin’ or murder, drug runners or simply men gone crazy: you find out what’s happenin’, you hear?”

“Yes sir.” Everett nodded once.

“Good. I want you checkin’ out where Carson Riley was found dead. We can’t do a true scene processing up there since ole Law decided to muck it all up and bring in the body. See what you can find up there. It looks like a suicide, but we’ll keep all options open, least for now. Also, while you’re out on the mountain, I want you checkin’ some of the rustler hidey holes up in those parts. See if you can pick up a trail or find somethin’ we could use to identify whoever has been up there makin’ drug camps.” He passed a sheet of paper to Everett with coordinates. “My boys will check out their share, but these here are all near where Carson Riley was found.”

“Yes sir.”

“Now, I been told you have been trainin’ with Buck Williams up in Helena, but you’re still a new hand to ranchin’ and ridin’. You figured out which end of the horse is the front yet?”

Everett’s cheeks flushed. “Yes sir.”

“Well, that’s good. But you still need to learn, Buck says, and so I’m sendin’ you out to the Lazy Twenty-Two. Lawrence Jackson is a spitfire pain in my ass and he’s a damn son of a gun. He’s also the Crazies’ best cowboy. He’ll get you up to speed on what you need to know. There’s no place to learn ranchin’ like in the Crazies. No place a’tall.”

Everett breathed in slowly, deeply. Everything seemed to tumble around him, like the world was upending, blown over. This wasn’t what he’d expected, but then again, nothing ever was. “Is Mister Jackson expecting me, sir?”

“Aww, I’d pay money to see Law’s face when you call him ‘Mister.’” Braddock laughed hard. “Naw, I threw him out of my station this mornin’ ‘fore I could tell him you were on your way. He was bein’ belligerent. He’s coolin’ his heels up at his ranch. You head on up there and tell him I sent you. That should ease his troubled mind for a spell.”

Braddock passed his business card over. “My cell number is on this. Radio is a wonky mess up in the Crazies and cell reception ain’t any better. We’re about to wire the whole place up for tin cans and twine since that’d be more reliable. But until then, if you need me, best way is to come off the mountain. If you can’t, there’s cell signal at the Endless Sky ranch house, ‘cause Dan Howell can pay to have a cell site set up for himself, and a few old hard lines scattered around. Other than that, once you’re up in it, you’re in it. It’s easy to get lost up there, son.”

He peered at Everett for a long moment. “You be careful, you hear? You look like you can take care of yourself, but still. Don’t go trustin’ nobody. Not until we figure out who’s makin’ all this trouble.”

“Yes, sir, I will be careful.” Everett typed Braddock’s number into his cell and slid his card in his wallet as backup. “And I’ll let you know everything I find, sir.”

“I appreciate that. And can you do me a favor?”

“Yes sir?”

Braddock grinned. “Drop the sir, son. You’re makin’ me feel old.”

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CHAPTER 5

TIME SEEMED TO SLIP AROUND EVERETT, A WHIRLPOOL HE'D FALLEN INTO, spinning around him as he made the drive to Lawrence Jackson's Lazy Twenty-Two ranch. His truck rumbled along the dirt roads, spitting dust and gravel in every direction. The engine roared, growling at the steady climb with each foot he crawled toward the sky.

The Crazies were massive, magnificent, and raw. Nearly empty and isolated from humanity, the mountains swallowed time and space, pulled on the soul. He could easily see how the immensity of the land, the vast solitude, the echoing way his soul seemed to fall out of him and disappear into the canyons and peaks and ravines, could drive someone crazy.

Everett blinked, and for a moment, he wasn't in Montana, wasn't in the Crazies. He was back in Afghanistan, and it was his Humvee chewing dust and spitting gravel as he climbed in a convoy toward the village. They were going to secure the opening of the school they'd helped build, and Holt was beside him, cracking jokes over the radio. Vasquez was in the hole, manning the fifty-cal—

Everett slammed on the brakes, skidding out on the gravel. Knuckles white, his hands shook on the steering wheel, squeezing so hard the leather creaked. He glared, breathing out hard and fast. Dust covered the hood of his truck, billowing and obscuring the view. He waited, his breath hitching.

What would he see it when it cleared? The convoy? The village?

Wind whispered the dust away. Scattered sunlight beat between the pine and poplar branches. Somewhere, a bird called out and another answered, twittering across the still canyons.

Montana. The Crazies. He was a world away from Afghanistan. A world and a life away. He breathed in. Tasted blood.

He pushed open the driver's door and spat a blood-stained wad into the dirt. *Blood in the dirt, flecks scattered across the dust, a trail, leading to—*

A world and a life away. He slammed the truck's door and jerked the wheel over. Eased off the brakes. His engine rumbled as he slammed down on the accelerator.

Miles later, he turned off on a drive that took him halfway up the second tallest peak, winding through a series of switchbacks and s-turns that dropped off to nothing on one side as the land fell away beside the road, opening up to the empty spaces, the canyons, the end of the world and time itself, it seemed.

Finally, as he came out of the final switchback, a broad valley tucked beneath Crazy Peak opened up, miles of shivering green and golden grasses framed by clusters of pine and cedar, ash and poplar and elder. Rolling hills sloped upward toward a tree line, the edge of the forest, and beyond that, the rising face of the peak. Pastures spread to the right and left and timber ranch fences crossed the land as far as he could see.

Over the gate, a sign read "*The Delaneys: Lazy Twenty-Two.*"

Everett frowned. Wasn't this Lawrence Jackson's ranch? He'd never heard the name Delaney. This was the place, though. He turned into the gated entrance and shifted into park. Blew his truck horn three times.

He didn't have to wait long. A man appeared around the back of the barn astride a large chestnut stallion. He wore a black cowboy hat pulled low and dark sunglasses, a flannel shirt, and dark jeans. Black leather chaps covered his legs. He trotted his horse toward the gate, one hand on the reins. His right hand stayed loose.

A shotgun lay tucked into a saddle scabbard on the man's right side.

Everett rolled down his window and kept both hands on the steering wheel. He waited until the rider pulled back his horse at the gate and stared him down. "Mister Jackson?"

The rider's face twisted like he'd taken a punch to the stomach or downed a shot of sour whiskey. "Don't call me 'mister,'" he growled.

"Are you Lawrence Jackson? Is this the Lazy Twenty-Two ranch?"

"S'what the sign says." Even through the sunglasses, Everett could feel the man's hardened stare. "And that's my name. Who's askin'?"

"Everett Dawson. I'm a stock detective from Helena. I'll show you my creds." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his leather bifold holding his credentials and license as a state law enforcement official above

his new, shiny gold star badge. Emblazoned across the badge, it read *STOCK DETECTIVE*. He held the bifold out his truck window.

“Finally,” Lawrence snapped. “We got all kinds of trouble up here. Been waitin’ for you folk to get here for ages. How many detectives did you bring? What’s the plan to sweep the Crazies? Are you wantin’ to set up base camp at my ranch? This is a good spot for it. You just let me know how many bunks to clear for your team—”

“It’s just me, Mister Jackson.”

Lawrence froze, and his expression went ugly. His jaw dropped, then closed slowly. “Just you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then what is ‘just you’ doin’ here? Ain’t much good ‘just you’ can do.”

He wanted to fight, that was for sure. Braddock’s words echoed in his mind. *Spitfire pain in my ass and damn son of a gun*. “Sheriff Braddock sent for our help last week. I was sent down from Helena to help with your rustling problem.”

“We got a murder problem here, too.”

“Sheriff Braddock mentioned you dumped a body on his desk this morning. Would you like to tell me about that?”

Lawrence snorted. He looked away.

“Mister Jackson, I served eight years in the Army as an M-P. I’ve done my share of investigations and caught my share of killers. Montana hired me for my investigative experience. I am here to help you and I was told you wanted that help. If I was told wrong, I can turn around and go back to Sheriff Braddock and tell him you’re doing just fine on your own, and then I can keep going back to Helena. You called for me, Mister Jackson.”

Silence. Wind rolled down from the peak, shadowing over the pasture and making the grass wave. A dust devil kicked up, dancing gently between Everett’s truck and the gate.

Lawrence punched a button on the inner gate’s panel and the heavy wrought iron swung back. He rode up the drive without waiting for Everett, whistling at his horse and taking off, leaving Everett behind in the dust. He was back in the horse corral before Everett parked and swinging off his stallion when Everett climbed down from his truck.

Lawrence never took his eyes off Everett as he peeled an apple and fed his stallion in the center of the corral.

Everett waited. If Lawrence wanted to waste his time, that was his choice.

After, Lawrence dusted his gloved hands off and strode to the corral fence, leaning against the rail and lacing his fingers together. He thrummed with a casual kind of arrogance, a rugged *fuck you* aura pulsing off him that could slap a man silly upon meeting the man. It washed over Everett, one of the thousand things he didn't react to anymore. That he couldn't feel anymore.

Still, Lawrence Jackson had an attitude that barely fit in the Crazies, barely fit in the state of Montana. Everett was a product of the United States Army, though, and he excelled at investigating crimes, three-hundred-fifty-yard takedown shots, and being a stubborn mother fucker. When he dug his heels in, the earth rotated around Everett.

"You ain't from 'round here." Lawrence said, one casual wave of his fingers calling Everett to the corral. There were canyons between those vowels, lingering spaces where Lawrence's voice lengthened and spread like warm honey. His accent was as thick as the forest on the mountains and rolled like the wind, on and on.

"I'm from Texas."

"Texas, huh?" Lawrence peered at him, his head tilting just so. The way he stood, Everett could finally take him in, get the measure of the man. He was tall, six feet or so. His shoulders were broad, axe-handle wide, tapering slightly to a barrel chest. He had a rugged strength built up from years of manual labor, and the body to show for it. His flannel shirt clung to his chest and his arms and was tucked into jeans covered in shotgun leather chaps. Everything was well worn and practical. No fringe, no finery.

"And you was in the Army?"

"82 Airborne out of Fort Bragg. I did three tours in Afghanistan."

"And you left?"

Everett nodded.

"You ever investigated a murder before?"

"I have."

"Caught the killer?"

Everett nodded again. "I thought this was your ranch. The sign says 'Delaney Ranch.' You aren't Lawrence Delaney."

"No, I'm not." Lawrence peeled his sunglasses off. "I'm the manager and the cow boss of the ranch. The Delaneys, they're a Silicon Valley

family. Tyler Delaney made his millions on a start-up, bought this property on a whim, n'then found a woman to marry him. His wife had twins, and after that, they ain't been back in years. This is his play ranch. I manage the place while he's gone, and long as the ranch remains above water, I got a job and a place to lay my head."

"How many hands do you have working for you?" Everett surveyed the ranch, as much as he could from the corral. The ranch home overlooked the road, white paint and a wide porch wrapping all the way around the squat log cabin frame. The corral Lawrence was in led to a horse barn and stables, and behind the stables, there was a bunkhouse for the hands that lived and worked on the ranch, and another smaller log cabin set back in the pines.

"Four, now," Lawrence snapped. "And I keep bleedin' more. Murders got a way of spookin' people. This'll be a ghost ranch soon." He pushed back from the railing. "So when do we get started? What's first? You wanna see the murder scene, or—"

"Why are you certain he was murdered? Sheriff Braddock says it looks like a suicide."

"Carson wouldn't kill himself." Lawrence ducked under the corral railing and strode toward Everett, got up in his face. "I knew him, better'n anyone else. Carson wouldn't have killed himself. Not ever."

"Sheriff says there are reasons he might have done it."

Lawrence glowered at Everett. "And *I* say he don't have those reasons."

A long moment passed, sunlight beaming down on them, birds calling from the aspen behind the bunkhouse. They were in a standoff, one Everett could make last as long as he wanted.

But he had a job to do. "Braddock sent me up here to work with you because you were the best cowboy in the whole range. I'm a damn good investigator, Mister Jackson, but I still have things to learn. Braddock said you were the best man up here that could show me to where Carson Riley died."

A kicked look punched into Lawrence's face. Lawrence's lips pulled back, shock warring with something else on his rugged face. He hadn't shaved that morning, and a rough shadow dusted his square jaw. "Braddock said I was the best cowboy in the Crazies?"

"He did." Everett nodded. There was animosity between those men, so thick he could breathe it in. But at least there was a measure of respect, too. The sheriff could compliment Lawrence, recognize his skill—

“That son of a bitch,” Lawrence growled. He shook his head and set his jaw. “Bet you think that’s a compliment?”

Everett stilled. He’d stepped on a mine somewhere in this conversation, crossed a tripwire of history and relationship and small-town blood. He said nothing.

“You got a lot to learn, Army. Cowboys are sons of bitches. Good-for-nothin’ saddle tramps. They drift from ranch to ranch, work what they want to work. Most will steal from you. Most will lie to you. Most drink their pay up in one weekend, then stumble drunk through Monday, are hungover on Tuesday ‘n cranky on Wednesday. Sour and sassy on Thursday and lightin’ out of the ranch early Friday to go drinkin’ again. You can get rid of any of those romantic notions you might have had about cowboys, anythin’ you thought you knew from movies or books. The truth is mighty different.”

“So you’re a good-for-nothing, then? That’s what the sheriff was trying to tell me?”

Everett spread his legs and squared his shoulders. Lawrence Jackson had been pushing for a fight from the moment he’d driven up, and if he wanted to go now, Everett was ready. He held his fists loose, muscles twitching.

Lawrence tipped his head back and laughed. The sun caught the angles of his face, his jaw, his strong nose. Beneath his hat, the ends of his hair ran over his ears and shone burnished bronze in the sun. Everett’s eye twitched.

“I’m a born and bred cowboy. My daddy was a no-good cowboy who was run out of Cheyenne before I was five. My momma was a gin drinker and a pool hall hustler, robbin’ men blind when she wasn’ blind drunk herself. I could ride and rope before I could read. Montana dirt is my home. Ranchin’ is everythin’ I know in the whole world. So yes, I’m a good-for-nothin’ cowboy from a long line of good-for-nothin’ cowboys. But I keep this ranch runnin’, and I treat my hands, boys I’ve found through long, hard years of damn brutal trial and error, right. I’ve counted myself up a dozen different times, faced down my life. I know *exactly* what I am.”

Everett swallowed. His fists relaxed. He worked his jaw side to side, trying to loosen the tension, the pounding behind his temples. He looked at the barn, unable to hold Lawrence’s hard stare. There was something about the man, an intensity. It was like trying to stare at the sun.

He licked his lips. Tasted dust. Smelled horses and hay. “Well, that’s what I need, Mister Jackson—”

“You call me mister one more time, I’m throwin’ you off the ranch.”

“What do you want to be called?”

“My name is Lawrence Jackson. You can call me Lawrence, you can call me Jackson. People who know me call me Law. You don’t know me yet.”

Something flared inside Everett. “Is that because your word is the law or because you bring the law?”

“What if it’s ‘cause I disregard any ole law I think is full of shit? Or ‘cause I don’t much like me any officers of the law?”

That was the way of this part of the country, it seemed. Everett shook his head. “I’ve been learning how to ride up in Helena, but I don’t have much back country experience. I need to visit the scene where Carson Riley’s died. I understand it’s out in the rough parts?”

“You could say that.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d guide me to there, Jackson, and outfit me with a horse from your stable that will do the job.”

Lawrence studied him. He felt the weight of his eyes, felt like his existence was being catalogued, like Lawrence could see through him, see into him, run his gaze over every bone and muscle in his body.

“You really caught killers before, Army?”

“I have. Many times.”

Lawrence nodded as he looked down, his eyes mapping the dirt. “You bring Carson Riley’s killer to justice, we’ll be all right,” he said. “So whatever you need from me to do that, you got.” He beckoned Everett to the barn. “Let’s get you saddled up.”

LAWRENCE PULLED A MARE OUT OF THE STABLES, SWEET-TALKING IN HER ear as he brushed and saddled her for Everett. She whickered and snorted, but let Everett stroke her neck.

“You’ll need chaps. We’re riding through rough country.” Lawrence handed him a worn and creased pair of leather shotgun chaps. They zipped

up the back, and, like Lawrence's, had no fringe or fancy add-ons. They were working chaps for a working man.

He nodded, shaking them out and adjusting the belt to fit his waist before sliding in his legs and zipping up the backs. He shifted his holster and his pistol forward. He had a backpack he'd pulled from his truck, too, and he hefted it up, snapped the straps over his chest.

Lawrence watched him silently.

"You need the step?" Lawrence finally asked. He held the reins in his hand and stood in front of the mare's head, stroking her nose and scratching behind her ears.

"No." He'd learned enough to get in and out of the saddle without needing the steps anymore. It was a delicate act, and half the time he still felt like he was going to tip entirely to the side, fall to his face, or pull the horse down on him. But under Lawrence's steely gaze, he stepped into the stirrup on the mare's left and hefted himself up.

He settled in, shifting his weight, adjusting until he felt right. Beneath him, his mare shook her head again, snorting at Lawrence as if complaining about the new rider she carried.

"I know, girl," Lawrence cooed. "You be good to this man, you hear?" He handed the reins to Everett. "You know how to get goin'?"

Everett nodded.

"Her name is Lantana. She's a sweetheart. You treat her right, she'll treat you right." He stroked Lantana's neck and then backed off, letting Everett walk Lantana out of the stables.

One mare was left stabled, forlorn and still in her stall. Her hay was full, and her water clean, but there was an emptiness to her eyes. She looked away as Everett rode by.

Lawrence jogged ahead to the corral and whistled for his stallion. "Here, boy." On command, his stallion trotted to him, whickering and hunting in Lawrence's outstretched palm for the treats he pulled out of his pocket.

"Where are the other horses?"

"Out on the range. I sent my boys to the line camps in the west and south pastures. They're goin' to keep a closer eye on the herd while they graze over summer. We'll run rotations until we figure out the hell is goin' on. Can't afford to lose any more head."

“How much stock have you lost?” Everett waited as Lawrence swung into his saddle. He moved like he was born to ride, like he and his stallion were extensions of each other.

“At last count, thirty head.”

Everett’s eyes widened. At five thousand a head, that was a loss of one hundred fifty thousand dollars. Hardly a minor problem, and if Lawrence wasn’t the only rancher affected, the total losses—and profits, for the rustlers—could be into the millions.

“What about the last horse in the barn? The mare left behind?”

Lawrence clicked and guided his horse to the corral’s gate. He wouldn’t meet Everett’s gaze as he held the gate for Lantana and Everett to pass through.

He didn’t speak until they were on the trail through the pasture, heading up the sloping hill that climbed toward the tree line and, beyond the woods, Crazy Peak. “That’s Banshee,” Lawrence said, his voice thick. “She was Carson’s horse.”

“I’d like to hear you tell what happened.”

“We got a lot of ridin’ ahead of us. No time for talkin’,” Lawrence growled. He squeezed his knees and called to his horse, and they took off down the trail.

Everett chewed his dust for the next three hours.

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CHAPTER 6

THE ROPE STILL HUNG OVER THE BRANCH, DANGLING WHERE LAWRENCE HAD cut Carson Riley free. The end was secured to the trunk, looped around and around before it was tied off in a constrictor knot. Broken tree bark lay scattered at the cottonwood's base, ripped off from the rope.

Scattered pine needles and fallen leaves carpeted the dirt, turned the forest floor soft and springy, years of moldering autumns lying one on top of the other. Beneath the dangling rope, a patch of leaves and dirt was scattered, frantic activity born out in the scramble and mess.

Lawrence hung back, standing outside the grove with both horses and watching as Everett slowly circled the tree and made his way toward the sliced noose. He crouched, peering at the fallen leaves, the tracks.

There was sign there, evidence, though faint. Everett could read the past through the sign, could almost picture it unfurling in his mind. At least, part of it. Horse prints, nervous ones. Then dug-in hooves, a horse bolting on command. "His horse took off from underneath him. He was strung up from her back."

Lawrence nodded, once. "Found her wanderin' in the pasture."

"She took off in a hurry. Either something spooked her or Riley gave her a kick."

"He *didn't* kill himself."

Everett held Lawrence's glare. "I'm going to find out what happened, Jackson. Whether it was a murder or a suicide, I'll find out." He stared until Lawrence looked away.

Standing, he sidestepped the depression of leaves, the man-shaped hole beneath the rope where Riley had lain after Lawrence cut him down. He backed off, searching the ground, the trees. He let what he knew play in his

mind, a scratchy film reel of a man on horseback, a noose around his neck. The horse taking off. Was Riley struggling? What made Banshee run?

He circled slowly to the left, taking everything in. He was searching for tracks, for more signs. The forest seemed to swallow everything, the leaves absorbing even his own boot prints, his own slow move through the underbrush and branches.

But it didn't hide everything.

"You sound sure of yourself," Lawrence called. "What other killers you say you tracked down?"

Everett didn't look back as he crept through the underbrush. He kept his voice low. He didn't blink, focusing on the broken branches at the base of a thorn bush thirty feet beyond the grove. "For one, Afghanistan," he said. "We tracked a group of Taliban fighters sixteen clicks and across two peaks in Kandahar province and then flushed them out of the cave they hid in. They'd been leaving bombs along the highway. My unit found their trail."

He ducked down, picking up one of the broken thorn bush twigs half covered in dirt and molding leaves. He scanned the forest floor. There, another twenty feet away. An ant pile. Uprturned dirt.

"You know what people never think of? It's the things they do that are routine. They can cover all their tracks except for the things they do without thinking. After we flushed the caves of those bombers, we had to process them like crime scenes. Fighting terrorists is like fighting crime. You have to figure out who is who, figure out what was what, what kind of weapons they had, what kind of gear. And try to find out who had been in the caves. These weren't just holes in the rock. These were well built. Fortified. They'd even been wired up with electricity run off of generators." He turned to Jackson, meeting his gaze. "You know the best place to pull fingerprints out of those caves?"

Lawrence shrugged. "I never been to Afghanistan."

"Off the lightbulbs. No one thinks twice about their fingerprints when they're screwing in a lightbulb."

Everett went back to searching for tracks, for signs, for hints that spoke to him, evidence of human hands where there shouldn't be. His thoughts went thin as he tried to force back the memories.

There had been another time he'd chased down a killer, had caught him, in fact. But that memory was twisted and broken, wrapped around betrayal and blood, and he couldn't go back to it without hearing the screams and

feeling the flames. Or tasting blood again, mixed with Afghanistan's dust and the stench of decay.

"What's any of that got to do with Carson?" Lawrence picked his way around the grove, giving the noose and the tree a wide berth.

"Do you see the game trail running through here?"

"Sure. Deer cross the forest all the time. In and out of the pasture." Lawrence called out the deer trails crisscrossing around them and through the trees.

Everett pointed to the bottom of the thorn bush and then to the ant pile. The thorn bush was behind the grove, clustered between the trees of the forest about thirty feet from the noose, and the ant pile was even further back in the thickness of the woods. "If you were trying to cover up a murder and make it look like a suicide, you'd have to leave no tracks. You'd have to use a slender horse, something light. Something that can move through the game trails like a deer would. But game knows their land. The deer know where the thorn bushes are and how to avoid them." He pointed to the broken branches around the thorn bush and the scattered twigs leading from the bush to the ant pile. "And they know where the ants burrow. Deer know to avoid them. They don't want to get bit." Delicate deer prints danced in the scattered spots of black dirt around them. None were near the ant pile.

Yet the edge of the ant pile was toppled and compressed. As if it had been stepped on.

And four feet ahead of the ant pile, pressed into a decomposing leaf stamped into the dewy forest floor, lay a single outline of a shod horse's foot.

Everett crouched over the horse print. "A rider came through here within the last three days." He held up the broken thorn bush twig. "This is a fresh break. Someone came through who didn't know the area, didn't sidestep the thorn bush. The horse moved quickly away, not wanting to get cut. They didn't look where they were going and ended up here. Trampling an ant pile."

He poked the ant pile with the thorn bush stick. A second later, the pile erupted with furious ants, scrambling upward, crawling over themselves to escape and attack, swarm whatever had disrupted their home.

"The horse was bit. And," he moved ahead to the single print. "Stamped off the ants here. Just like a man would. Something simple, something

automatic. Now, does that look like Banshee's print?"

"Banshee is a much bigger horse than this," Lawrence said. "She's a big girl, and she's got big ole feet. Big shoes, too."

"Any of your other hands have horses like this? Do you have any slender horses, almost foals? Based on the weight of this print, the shape, the size..." Everett squinted. "A young mare."

"We ain't foalin' horses on the ranch. All our work horses are full grown. And big. We got hard country and we need sturdy horses to handle it all."

"Then we have found a clue." Everett smiled, small and tight. He didn't feel it, though. He smiled because it was expected of him at times like this.

He hadn't felt like smiling for years.

Lawrence stared at the horse print, silent and still. Half the print was laid in a moldering yellow leaf, left lying in the mud from autumn, and half was laid in black earth. Three delicate pine needles had broken when the horse stamped off the ants. Their wreckage lay in the print, a whisper in the darkness.

"In this whole forest, you found one li'l print," Lawrence breathed. "I lived here for almost twenty years and I don't think I coulda done that."

"I can track." Everett stood, brushing his hands against his thighs.

"I can see that."

Was that a measure of respect in Lawrence's voice? "I've hunted men my whole adult life." He turned back for the horses, for the backpack he'd left by Lantana. Lawrence waited, seemingly not wanting to lose the print now that it had been found. He stared at it, as if he could burn it into the backs of his eyes, memorize the fold of leaf and dirt and broken pine needle, the imprint of the shoe, the arch of the hoof.

He was still there, hovering, when Everett came back. He dropped his backpack and unzipped it, flattening out an evidence kit. He'd figured out through trial and error what worked best for him in the Army. Whether it was tracking the Taliban or processing an on-base crime scene, the techniques were generally the same. Track, locate, secure, preserve.

Prosecute. Through the law or through a bullet.

He tasted dust, chalk that filled the back of his throat. Copper tinged his tongue, seemed to wet his lips. His hands, wet, slimy, soaked to the bone—

Everett pressed his eyes closed and exhaled hard.

The taste, the feeling of blood coating his skin, vanished.

“What’re you doin’?” Lawrence jerked his chin to the kit. “What’s all that?”

“Now that we’ve found the print, we need to preserve it. Bring it back to Sheriff Braddock. Hopefully we’ll find a trail out here, and if we do, we start following it, see where it leads and what we can find.”

He saw the hunger in Lawrence’s eyes, a fire igniting in his soul. If they found a trail, and if they found a man at the end of it, one who had done Carson Riley wrong, holding Lawrence back from the justice of a bullet would be the Devil’s work. He could read the thirst for vengeance in every line of Lawrence’s body, from his curled fists to his taut shoulders, the way his muscles trembled when he thought Everett wasn’t looking.

Everett knew—fuck, he knew—what that felt like.

That was another time, another life. Another world away. He grabbed a ruler from his pack and laid it out next to the shoe print, then pulled out his cell phone. His battery was draining, searching in vain for signal. Like Sheriff Braddock had said, reception in the mountains was nonexistent. He turned his cell signal off and pulled up the camera. Snapped pictures of the print, the ruler measuring every side, every angle.

Then he grabbed a bag of dental stone—casting material that was a fine white powder—and a bottle of water. He poured in the water and massaged everything together until he had a paste like pancake batter in the bag.

Lawrence watched every move he made as he poured the casting material slowly over the print, covering the edges, extending the cast into the dirt and leaves surrounding the horse’s print. “That’ll work?” Lawrence sounded skeptical.

“I’ve lifted from harder.” He bagged the leftover casting material in a trash bag and shoved it in his kit, then took a knife and etched the date, time, and location into the plaster as it dried. He took another photo, this time with his bifold credentials above the drying cast.

“While we wait, we search for a trail.”

THEY WERE AT IT FOR OVER AN HOUR, MOVING CAREFULLY THROUGH THE trees, tracking up and down every game trail and path through the brush. In

the end, all they were doing was chasing their own shadows. They came up empty-handed.

“Damn,” Everett cursed, his face sweat-stained and lined with dust. “That rider was careful.”

“Means he had somethin’ to hide,” Lawrence growled.

“Maybe.”

“I’m damn sure of it,” Lawrence snapped. “So what’s next, Army? We got his print. You lifted that sucker right out of the dirt. You found his horse all right, but that ain’t him. That ain’t the killer. So now what?”

“It’s a process. We work through the evidence piece by piece.”

“How long is that gonna take? Maybe you got all the time in the world, but I got a ranch bleedin’ men and cattle! How much more you want me to lose?”

He stared Lawrence down. The hotter Lawrence got, the more explosively he blew, the colder Everett felt himself go. He could be ice staring down Lawrence’s fire. It was easy not to feel, especially now. Hands on his hips, he stared. “As long as it takes to do it right.”

Lawrence snorted and paced away. His chaps fluttered around his legs, bowed from decades on horseback. Despite himself, Everett’s gaze drifted down each leather-clad, muscled thigh.

He tore his gaze up as Lawrence whirled. Cleared his throat. “Sheriff Braddock asked me to check out a few known rustling hiding spots and check for stolen stock or tracks at each. If rustlers are rounding up stock, they’re bunching them somewhere out of sight. They’ll get a herd ready and then move them out of these mountains in one drive. If we find where they’re holding the stolen stock, we can find them, or we can find their trail. Moving cattle overland leaves a big mark.” He pulled out the sheet of paper Braddock had given him. “Do you have a map?”

LAWRENCE SPREAD HIS WORN MAP OVER HIS STALLION’S THICK THIGH. HIS horse whickered and nibbled on Lawrence’s ear. “Easy, Trigger. Just borrowin’ your big ass for a min’.”

He grumbled as Everett read him the coordinates and plotted each. “Damn technology no good in these mountains. Everyone comes up here

with their fool ideas. ‘Bout the only thin’ that works up here is fire and guns.” Muttering under his breath, he calculated the first coordinate. “Aw hell, you don’t need GPS. That’s old Robin’s Roost up on the north face of Crazy Peak. And this one...” He moved down the list. “Is Wind Pass.” He scratched out Braddock’s neat scrawl, longitude and latitude markers, and rewrote the local name in blocky capitals. “And that last one is Cow Gap. While we’re at it, there’s another one not too far off down in the canyons. That’s Whiskey Gulch. I can take you to all of ‘em.”

Not a great idea. Lawrence was out for blood, and if they ran into any rustlers or his missing stock, Everett didn’t have a clear idea what Lawrence would do. How he would react. “I think I should go alone.”

Lawrence blinked. “By all means,” he drawled, folding up his map. “You go right on ahead. When you get to the falls on your way to Robin’s Roost, watch for the crossin’ as there’s some tricky parts where one wrong step’ll kill yourself and your horse and no one will be able to find your body. Oh, and it’s bear country on the north slope, so be sure you’re carrying your rifle in hand.” He patted his own saddle’s rifle scabbard, his rifle secured in easy reach. Everett did not have a rifle. “Not to mention there’s wolf, moose, and wolverine,” he said, counting off on his gloved fingers. “And be extra careful with the canyon down there by Whiskey Gulch. It’s treacherous.” He looked Everett dead in the eye and swung into Trigger’s saddle. “Let’s go, boy.”

Everett’s stomach sank. “Wait!”

“What?” Lawrence circled Trigger slowly, pulling him up before Everett. “Didja say somethin’?”

Everett glared. He held Lawrence’s stare as Lawrence circled him on Trigger’s back, smirking. “Fine. You’ll have to show me the way. But when we get to each camp, *I* go in. *I* check it out. Understood?”

“I don’t take orders from you, Army. But since you asked for my help so nice-like—” Lawrence clicked, and Trigger trotted off into the trees. “We’ll hit Cow Gap first. It’s closest.”

CHAPTER 7

THEY CAME UP EMPTY AT COW GAP, NOTHING BUT THE LONG-ABANDONED remains of a rustler camp, windblown cattle carcasses stripped to bleached bone, and dust. “Ain’t no one camped here in a long while,” Lawrence said. “And no one’s moved any cattle through here in that long, neither.”

“How many ways through the Crazies are there?”

Lawrence shrugged. “Depends. Few public trails. One long road. Or a million backcountry ways if you know how to find ‘em. A man managed to get onto my land, didn’t he?”

“About that.” Everett swung back into his saddle and followed Lawrence, heading for Robin’s Roost. The sun was fading from the sky, the light getting long and lean, shadows growing around them. “What abuts your north pasture?”

“Public land. Bureau of Land Management owns it,” he drawled. He slowed his horse, letting Everett come beside him, ride side by side. “Forest Service likes to tromp around up there, keep their claim by public easement open to the public. But most everything aside from the peaks are privately owned, so’s it’s a conundrum how the public can get to the public land without goin’ through private land.”

“The government requires a public easement in that case.”

“Sure, they require it. How often is it honored?” Lawrence shrugged. “I got no problem with good people wanting to hike and enjoy the mountains. It’s beautiful country.” He nodded around them, to the wild trees and untamed country, the towering pines mixed with poplar and ash, and the pastel sky unfurled over the mountains like a blanket shaken out on the wind. “This is raw land. Untouched since time began.”

“You can’t find places like this in the world. Not anymore.”

Lawrence tossed him a half smile. "We work hard to keep it like this." Warmth underlay his words, a careful, creeping pride.

"You do well."

"Trouble is," Lawrence said, after a moment of silence lengthened too long between them, until the early evening seemed to shiver. "It's not just nice hikers and families that want up into the mountains. Howell over at Endless Sky has been closin' up the access trails for years, denyin' public easement. If no hiker comes along a trail for one year, he locks it down. Says the public hasn't expressed its interest in keepin' the easement open, so he's takin' it back. Forest Service tries to fight him in court, but that's long and expensive." He patted Trigger's neck, ran his gloved fingers through his mane. "Makes you wonder, though. If drug runners and rustlers are gettin' in, should we just close everythin' up? Keep all this land locked up tight?"

"That seems like stealing." The Crazies were like lost jewels from a crown, emerald forests and sapphire lakes and rivers, gold-gilded pastures specked with riots of wildflowers, fire-red ruby poppies and amethyst lilacs and diamond-white daisies. It was hard to imagine this much beauty in the world still existed, if Everett wasn't riding through it. "Can't believe one man owns all this."

"Well, two," Lawrence said. "It belongs to Mister Delaney, least until the ridge back there." He pointed behind them, to the aspen and fir-laced slopes they had spent the afternoon climbing, the skies above the loping peaks ablaze with the fire of the setting sun. Tips of the pines cut black slices through the orange and spilled-blood sky. "And the land we're on now is Endless Sky range." He waved ahead of him toward the south face of Crazy Peak, wreathed in darkness as the sun sank below its tip. The peak was a claw grasping toward the sky, darkness stabbing overhead. "'Side from the peak itself, all this land belongs to Dan Howell." His face twisted.

"You want to tell me about that?"

"'Bout what?"

"The animosity you've got for Mister Howell." There was something there, some kind of history he'd waded into, undercurrents as swift as riptides, a suffocating sense that he was the odd man out in this world. Everyone knew something but him, it seemed. He was left to pick up the pieces in a mystery where no one was sharing clues.

“Nope,” Lawrence said. “I got nothing to say about Howell.” He guided Trigger off the trail, stepping him down into a meadow between two creeks that flowed off Crazy Peak. Above them, high on the rock face of the peak, a waterfall tumbled toward the forest, the pool concealed in the thick woods. Fallen trunks of long dead trees lay scattered in the meadow, and Lawrence dismounted off Trigger beside one rotted trunk. “We’ll camp here tonight. Should be at Robin’s Roost by ten in the morning if we’re up with the sun. We can get back to the ranch tomorrow afternoon.”

Everett hesitated. He hadn’t planned on camping on the range. He had basic supplies with him only.

Lawrence waited until he’d dropped out of the saddle. He tossed him a thin bedroll and compressed sleeping bag from a gear pack he’d stowed behind Trigger’s saddle. “You take the princess roll, Army. I can sleep on the ground.”

NIGHT IN THE CRAZIES WAS STILL AND COOL, THE WINDS DYING DOWN AS soon as the sun sank below the horizon. A thousand stars winked on, glittering so low in the sky Everett thought he could reach out and bat them down, scramble up Crazy Peak and cup one in his hands. In Afghanistan, they’d been on the roof of the world, so high up the air was thin to breathe, but even there, he’d never felt so close to the sky.

He sat in front of the fire, legs spread wide, stroking his thighs. Soreness wore through him deep in his muscles even three weeks after saddling up for a whole day in Helena. Buck had told him it would take a few months to get used to the saddle, really used to it, to where he could ride for days and not feel it in his bones.

It was all he could do to keep his eyes open, even though he hadn’t eaten yet.

Two skinned rabbits roasted over the fire. Lawrence had told him to build a fire pit while he’d unpacked one of his rifles and headed into the dark woods. Minutes later, there were two shots, and Lawrence came back with dinner. He’d skinned them and gutted them as he walked Everett through setting up the campfire spit he had in his gear pack.

Clearly, Lawrence had camped on the range before. This was not his first night away from the ranch.

Everett got the fire going while Lawrence finished preparing the rabbits. Crouching in front of the flames, Everett's thighs had screamed, fire racing down his legs from his hips to his shins. His back ached, too, a stiffness that rose from his ass and grabbed his spine. He'd rolled his shoulders, tried to arch and twist free of the soreness.

"Back achin'?" It had been the first words Lawrence had said in over an hour.

"Back, legs..." Everett sat back on the downed tree trunk, stretching out his legs, the soles of his boots pointed at the crackling fire. At least he had a good pair of boots. It was the first thing Buck had told him: *turn right 'round, go buy yourself the best pair of ropers that fit your feet. Don't come back until you do.*

Lawrence came up behind him and squatted down. He tried to turn, see what was happening, but Lawrence's hands were on him before he could spin. Solid, warm hands slipping under his jacket. Even though his shirt, he could feel the warmth of Lawrence's touch.

His thumbs kneaded into Everett's lower back, fingers splayed across his hipbones. Digging in, pushing against the tight muscles, rotating around through the knots that had formed. Everett groaned, the sound pushed out of him, and he sagged forward, tipping his chin to his chest.

"Takes a while," Lawrence said softly, "to get used to it." His voice floated over Everett's shoulder, gravely and thick, as his thumbs continued to knead.

Everett's mind abruptly swapped the comfort of the campfire and the gentle massage with another possibility, another night of hands splayed on his back, a man behind him, fingers gripping the skin over his taut hipbones. Everything shifted, changed in an instant, at least in Everett's mind.

He went rigid beneath Lawrence's touch, spine stiffening, head popping up.

Lawrence's hands came off him, and he stood smoothly, walked away. "That should help." He wouldn't meet Everett's gaze. Instead, he went to the rabbits, turned the spit, and stared into the flames.

"Thanks," Everett said, after a log shifted and spat sparks into the ink-spilled sky. "I appreciate you not giving me a hard time about me learning

the ropes.” It’s not what he’d expected, not from his first impression of Lawrence Jackson.

“You know, none of this is easy. Livin’ out here, workin’ the land. This life. Most mornin’s, we’re crawlin’ out of our bunks before the sun does, ‘n’we shovel down our coffee and our breakfast while we’re workin’ up the horses. We work the herd, cuttin’ and movin’ across rough country, up and down the slopes, in and out of canyons and gulches, under the blazin’ sun and into snow and ice. Work the land until you’re raw, and then do it all again, day in and day out. That ain’t easy, and it ain’t for everyone. It takes a certain kind of man to want to get out here every day, wrestle with Mother Nature and all her moods.” His gaze flicked over the flames to Everett. “Takes time to learn that, and you’re gettin’ along. That ain’t nothing to make fun of, a man makin’ his way.”

He didn’t quite know what to say. “Thanks.”

“Sides, you’ve got skills of your own. That trackin’ you did back there?” Lawrence shook his head, rubbed one hand over his stubble. “I been out here my whole life. Been huntin’ one thing or another just as long. Lost cattle, stray horses. Game. Scaring bears off from the herd. I’ve tracked just about everythin’ on four legs across this land and back. But what you saw? How you were able to get into the mind of the rider? That was somethin’ else. Was almost like you could see him.”

“Hunting a man and hunting an animal are two very different things.”

“I can see that.” He stared over the flames again, holding Everett’s gaze. “So you may not yet have the cowboyin’ all squared away, but you got a dangerous mind on you, Army. And I won’t make fun of you for either of those things.” His lips pursed. “But I will be makin’ fun of you for that awful hat.”

“My hat?” Everett pulled his ball cap off, the black one emblazoned with *STOCK DETECTIVE* across the front. “What’s wrong with my hat?”

Lawrence shook his head and looked down, sighing. When he met Everett’s gaze, there was laughter in his eyes. “No cowboy would ever be caught dead in a hat like that. It’s offensive to the eyes.”

“Seems to work just fine.” Everett pulled it back on. Lawrence grumbled.

They sat in silence, only the crackle of the flames, the spitting sparks, and the fat sizzling off the blackening rabbits splintering the night. It lulled

Everett, and he'd moved to the dirt, his back to the log, and stroked over his aching legs, his sore thighs.

Lawrence had him eat his rabbit off the spit. He took his own in his hands, pulling apart the meat and eating it with his fingers, sucking the fat and juices off his skin. Everett's eyes strayed across the fire, watching him, watching his lips move through the smoke. He forced himself to look away.

After, Lawrence checked on the horses, hobbled with a picket line and grazing to their hearts content on the meadow grasses. Everett heard his low voice rumble through the darkness as he sweet-talked them both and fed them treats. That deep timbre, that rich, rolling voice, reached back into the center of his chest and squeezed. He shifted, trying to ignore the heat in his blood.

It had been a long time since he'd let his eyes trace the lines of a man or had felt the prick of desire crawl under his skin.

He tried to argue with Lawrence about the sleeping bag, tried to pass it back when Lawrence returned to the campfire.

"This isn't the first time I've slept beneath the stars." Lawrence turned up the collar of his jacket and settled in against the fallen tree trunk, squaring his hat on his head. "You sleep with it, Army. At the very least you can use it to rest those sore muscles of yours."

We could share. It came into his mind like a bomb, a thought unbidden, unwanted. Everett shoved it away. There'd be none of that. Not anymore.

"What's your theory about what's going on out here?" he asked instead after a wolf howled somewhere in the distance. He gripped the sleeping bag in his lap, squeezed and unsqueezed the packed downy feathers.

Lawrence sighed again, long and hard. "As for the missin' stock, that's rustlers," Lawrence said. "It's always rustlers. Rustlers comin' through up the old trails or makin' new ones. There's been rustlers since the Old West days, and there will be rustlers still when we're drivin' flying cars."

"Sheriff Braddock thinks maybe the cattle thefts are drug-related."

"Could be."

Man of a million words, Lawrence Jackson was. Everett sighed. "Why isn't Braddock surprised Carson Riley turned up dead?" He could hear Braddock's worn voice, tobacco-rough and rolling over each vowel. *Looks like a suicide, and there's reason enough to suspect he decided killin' himself was the way to get out of the trouble he found himself in. There's*

history behind that corpse, lots of it, and I can't say I was surprised to see him dead with rope burns on his neck.

Lawrence looked up sharply. Firelight caught on his eyeballs, turned them to daggers that speared Everett. His lips moved, twisting tight over themselves, face going ugly with a scowl. "He mention the Heart's Rafter boys that are missin' or did he just shit on Carson?"

"He didn't mention anything about Heart's Rafter, other than where it was located."

"Where you from in Texas, Army?"

Everett blinked. The way Lawrence spoke, the changes in topic, the move from slow cadence to rapid-fire shots, gave him whiplash. "Dallas."

Lawrence snorted. "You ain't know nothin' 'bout small towns, then," he drawled. "I'm talkin' real small. Small like this mountain, this valley. Braddock likes to say he's got two thousand square miles to patrol, but you know how many people that actually is? Less than a thousand. And we're all alone up here, cut off from the world, wrapped all tight around this mountain.

"There's deep history in places like this. People *remember*. They remember when you was five years old in your first hat and boots. They remember when you got your first pimple, when you was just a dumb kid doing dumb shit. Everyone is connected to everyone else. You live your whole life with the same people, day in and day out."

"What's that got to do with Carson Riley? Or Heart's Rafter?"

Lawrence's face fell as he stared into the fire. "Endless Sky is the biggest employer of cowboys in these parts. Everyone wants to work for the big ole ranch, right? Better pay. Better livin'." He shrugged. "Carson used to work for Howell at Endless Sky, 'long with those two Heart's Rafter boys. Dell and Aaron. Fact, they were a range party. Carson worked there long enough he was trainin' Dell and Aaron, and they was bringin' in the herd from one of the pastures last summer together.

"They got their month's pay all in one big lump, as they was out on the range the weeks before. Cowboys are usual paid weekly. And Dell and Aaron had never had that much money at one time 'fore in their life. Sixteen hundred dollars. What are two young, dumb idiots to do? Well, they took themselves down to Gunsight, the pistown near the highway filled with bars and strip clubs and gas stations. And Carson, being Carson, went with them. Wanted to keep an eye on them." He shook his head.

“Story gets told different every time. But the way Carson tells—well, *told*—it, Dell and Aaron were senseless drunk and shovin’ bills in a couple strippers’ thongs when some local truckers got pissed they was hoggin’ all the action. Words got thrown, then fists. Then they all got thrown out.”

Lawrence breathed in deep. His voice dropped, his words rougher, dragged from him. Like each had to be clawed free of his throat. “Fore Carson knew what was happening, Dell and Aaron were trying to drive away and those truckers were shooting at ‘em. They was drivin’ an Endless Sky ranch truck they’d borrowed. Aaron was the one drivin’, and, well, he didn’t take to gettin’ shot at, and he threw that truck in reverse.” Lawrence’s eyes found his through the smoke. “Backed right up over those two truckers in that big ole ranch truck. Carson said he could hear their bones break, every single one in their bodies. Like timber snapping. Or watermelon exploding.”

“That’s murder.”

“Yeah, that’s what Sheriff Braddock said, too. Carson was in the truck, so he was arrested with the boys when the deputies finally got out there and put an end to the fight. It got ugly. Real ugly. But Howell’s a big name in these parts, and he has a real slick attorney workin’ for him. Got the charges dropped. Argued Aaron was justified in what he’d done. Self-defense. That kicked off a hornet’s nest of troubles throughout the winter. Endless Sky trucks got torched. Some of the Endless Sky boys torched a big rig parked at the gas station while the owner was eatin’ inside. Truckers across the state were refusing deliveries here. Long haul truckers were comin’ in and startin’ fights with any cowboy they saw. Felt like a war was about to start ‘round here.”

“If those three worked at Endless Sky, how come Dell and Aaron were at Heart’s Rafter, and why Carson was working for you?”

Again, that sour look. “The deal eventually was, accordin’ to Carson, he and the boys had to get gone. Get off Endless Sky, get out of the Crazies. All that shit would stop if they got gone. Some deal Howell’s attorney cooked up with one of the trucker’s representatives. So they was fired. Trouble is,” he said, sighing. “You can’t just banish a man from the land he’s always known. Takes a lot out of a man to leave everythin’ and everyone. Plus, it’s hard to run from the Crazies. Real hard. Carson was workin’ up to it. He took it hard. He was real down about it. But Dell and Aaron, they wanted to fight it. They wanted to stay. Bill Warner said

everyone deserves a second chance. But Carson, he was workin' up to leavin'. He was makin' his peace."

"And he was here? You two were friends?"

A pause. Hesitation.

Everett's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, we were friends. We had an understandin' between us."

"What kind of understanding?"

"He came to me when Howell threw him out. When he had nothin'. When he was broken down, and I helped him stand back up. That kind of understandin'."

He held Lawrence's gaze, held it until the log split and sparks blew up and the smoke billowed between them. Lawrence poked at the coals with a stick, the fire slowly running out of logs and limbs they'd thrown on hours before. He used to be able to see Lawrence's face, stare into his eyes, watch the way he shifted, the way he held himself. In the fading firelight, it was all Everett could do to map Lawrence's presence in the darkness, catch the firelight reflected off his pupils. Trace the curves of his face sliding in and out of the night.

It was too easy to read into what Lawrence was saying. Too easy to spin his own understanding, bring his own thoughts to Lawrence's words. But he was a world away from anything he knew, and one wrong step here could be a permanent mistake. He knew nothing about Lawrence Jackson. Certainly not enough to make assumptions about Lawrence's relationship to a dead man. For all he knew, they were hunting buddies. Or they smoked pot together. It didn't mean what he thought it meant.

"And now, six months later, these two men, Dell and Aaron, are missing and Carson is found dead." A whole different understanding of Carson's death was shaping up in Everett's mind.

"Would any of those truckers be able to get up into the mountains?"

"The local boys, course. I told you, everyone here knows everyone else. Bunch of those guys went to the same high school as all us cowboys did. We all dropped out at the same time, too. We all grew up in these mountains, ridin' horses and runnin' wild on the trails. You can't pull anyone in this valley out of these mountains."

"So you think this might be revenge?"

"I thought it. I been tryin' to get Braddock to think it, too. Braddock's been more concerned with the missin' stock 'cause that's what's been

botherin' Endless Sky and Howell. Missin' stock got value, more than a missin' man has. And besides, Dell and Aaron were supposed to get gone. If it wasn't for findin' Carson swinging from the tree, everyone woulda thought all three had left like they was supposed to."

"And you said Carson was upset about being told to leave? That he took it hard?"

"I know where you're goin', Army, but that ain't it," Lawrence growled. "I swear, he didn't kill himself."

"But he was depressed?"

Lawrence said nothing. He glared at the coals.

Looks like a suicide, and there's reason enough to suspect he decided killin' himself was the way to get out of the trouble he found himself in. There's history behind that corpse, lots of it, and I can't say I was surprised to see him dead with rope burns on his neck.

If it weren't for the cast of a slender-footed horse, tucked into Everett's backpack, he might have agreed with Sheriff Braddock: there was reason enough to suspect suicide, at least enough to investigate that angle further. *There's history behind that corpse.*

History that wrapped around Lawrence Jackson, too.

Why was Carson at Lawrence's ranch?

"M glad you're here, Army," Lawrence blurted out. He slid down the log he leaned against, tucked his black cowboy hat over his face, and folded his arms over his chest. "You'll find out what happened. I know it."

Everett watched him fall asleep, watched his jaw go slack and his chest rise and fall. The coals turned deep red, the color of boiling blood, as he unfurled the sleeping bag and crawled inside. The down smelled like woodsmoke and leather, sweat and a musk that, even after one day, Everett could say was Lawrence's. He closed his eyes and breathed it in, burying his face in the folds of the bag as his cock hardened.

Not here. Not like this. He crossed his arms beneath his face and rested his forehead on his wrist, counting back from one hundred. He hadn't felt a damn thing in two years, and now, in the middle of nowhere, investigating a murder, he had the first inklings of attraction again?

Fine time for that.

He couldn't deny there was a raw sensuality about Lawrence. He was rugged without trying, and that pure masculinity called to Everett, made him dizzy. Made him *want*, like he hadn't wanted in years.

Why now? Why Lawrence?

It was just a trick of the mountains, too much fresh air, too much wildness. He'd wrap this case up and go home, back to the motel room he was renting by the week in Helena, back to his duffel bag of belongings. Back to the nothing he'd made of his life.

Nothing was safe. Emptiness was safe.

He breathed out, cleared his mind. Kept counting back, down to forty-three now.

We've got a murder problem here, too, Lawrence had said when Everett drove up earlier that day.

One dead body. Two missing men. And a whole heap of troubled history.

One Lawrence Jackson, somehow deep in the middle of it.

And he couldn't get Lawrence out of his mind.

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CHAPTER 8

HIS HANDS WERE SOAKED, BLOODRED AND DRENCHED. HE'D DONE IT, HE'D fucking done it, but—

He couldn't breathe, staring at what he'd done, staring at his blood soaked hands, at his red right hand, his murderer's hand—

Morning dawned crisp and ready, a chill biting the air and waking Everett swiftly. His eyes popped open as he rolled his head, and the first thing he saw was Lawrence stoking the coals back to life and adding brush and twigs to get the flames jumping. He had a beat-up tin coffee cup nestled against the edges of the coals heating water. Everett watched him test the temperature with his pinky, then empty a palmful of coffee grounds into tin cup. They dissolved as he swirled everything together.

“Mornin’.” Lawrence tipped his hat to Everett. He held out the cup. “Coffee?”

The smell smacked him silly, like sticking his face inside a coffee grinder and inhaling deep. His stomach growled.

Lawrence chuckled as Everett took the cup, grabbing the rim to not burn his fingers.

Golden fingers of sunlight wavered against the lilac sky, darting behind the shadowed slopes. Crazy Peak was still shrouded in darkness and looming over their camp. Dirt crunched beneath Lawrence's boots as he moved to the horses, sweet-talking them and scratching their manes while he sliced an apple for Trigger and Lantana.

One sip of coffee and Everett's throat spasmed, clenching around the bitterness, the oil-slick tar that filled his mouth. He coughed, rolling to the side in case he couldn't keep it down.

Laughter hit him. Lawrence, brushing the horses. Trigger preened under his touch, shaking his head. “Cowboy coffee,” Lawrence called. “It’ll peel paint off a barn. But it will also wake you up, get you goin’.”

“Got that right,” Everett choked out. The coffee was stronger than anything he’d had in the Army, anything made out at the firebase or downrange. He used to shove coffee grinds from his MREs into his lip like chew, but even that didn’t compare to the sludge Lawrence made him.

He managed a few more sips before he couldn’t take it. His hands shook as he stuffed the sleeping bag back in its sack, and his stomach tumbled as he carried everything to Lawrence and Trigger. Lantana was grazing on meadow grasses, still picketed.

Everett searched for the end of the rope, the picket tied to a small birch at the edge of the meadow. *You know what people never think of? It’s the things they do that are routine.*

Lawrence had tied a constrictor knot around the trunk.

Same as the rope that secured Carson Riley’s noose.

His eyes flicked to Lawrence.

Lantana whickered as Everett approached. She tossed her head toward him, chewing on grass.

“Here.” Lawrence passed Lantana’s bit and bridle to him, pulling it from his open shirt. The flannel was unbuttoned down to his mid chest.

Everett’s gaze dragged to the furred pecs, the carved muscle peeking through the plaid.

He kept working on Trigger, cinching the saddle and adjusting the stirrups. He didn’t look at Everett. “Put that in your shirt. Warm the metal up. You’d be pissed if you got freezin’ metal in your mouth first thing, huh?”

He tore his gaze away from Lawrence’s chest and fumbled at his own buttons. The bit was already warmed from Lawrence’s skin, but still cool as he slid it under his arm.

He stared at the constrictor knot, his mind churning.

What else was there to find? What else might Lawrence reveal, slip up and let tumble loose while he wasn’t thinking?

Lawrence packed their gear and stomped out the fire while Everett saddled Lantana. She nibbled on his arm, his sleeve, as he tightened the cinch. He ran his fingers through her mane.

He closed his eyes, leaned into Lantana's shoulder. He was hovering over something inside of himself, suspended over a hole he'd thought he'd buried in his soul. Something about being back on his own and buried in the unpeeled world had brought back a rawness inside of him. Had opened up parts of his soul he'd long thought dead, cut out and thrown away. The last time he'd slept under the stars, he'd been a different man in a different life. He thought—

A single rifle shot broke the stillness of the morning. The shot echoed off Crazy Peak and bounced down the slopes, echoes slowly dying as the sound rolled on and on.

There was haunting sound to a lone rifle shot. One shot was out of place. One shot was never right.

"It's not huntin' season," Lawrence growled. He jogged to Trigger, swinging into the saddle and grabbing the reins.

"Do you have a poaching problem?" Off-season hunters in the back country, killing game out of the hunting season, was always an issue. Some places had it worse than others.

"Not here. This is Endless Sky range. This isn't public land." Lawrence pulled his rifle out of his saddle scabbard. He held it up, barrel to the sky.

It could be a hundred different things. A cowboy putting down a hurt head. Or putting his horse out of misery if a rider had an accident. Or shooting a predator. They waited, listening for more shots. Three in sequence was the universal request for aid. A man in trouble could fire three shots and anyone around would come to help.

But there was nothing. Silence, and an eerie stillness that had settled over the slopes, the peak. Even the animals had gone quiet, the morning birds halting their songs, everything within the forest holding their breath.

Everett met Lawrence's gaze. "Did that come from Robin's Roost?" They were still on the hunt for the rustlers.

"No." Lawrence shook his head. Trigger stamped his feet, snorting and pulling on the reins. He seemed to sense Lawrence's tension, strained against it. He wanted to ride. So did Lawrence. "That came from Endless Sky's north pasture on the other side of Crazy Peak." He pointed to the mountain with his rifle. "Their furthest range."

"They run cattle out there?"

Lawrence shook his head. His scowl never left the peak, the shadows just beginning to lift from the steep slopes.

Everett hauled himself into Lantana's saddle. "Let's ride."

RIDING DEEPER INTO ENDLESS SKY RANGE, TOWARD THE SOUND OF THE single shot, the air seemed to prickle, as if the sky itself was waiting. Danger whispered to Everett from the edges of the forest. Pine and aspen branches brushed down his back like fingers grabbing at him and crowded the trails he and Lawrence guided their horses down in a single file line.

He'd felt the prickle before, the way the earth, the air, seemed charged and full of expectation just before something deadly, something dangerous, was about to happen. The quiet before a battle in Afghanistan, or the hush that would fall over the platoon during their patrols. The waiting.

It was the worst feeling in the world, riding a hair trigger and knowing *something* was about to happen, but not being able to do a damn thing about it.

He'd thought getting as far from Afghanistan as possible would shake that feeling free from his bones, get rid of the failure that drowned him from the inside and clawed at the inside of his skin. Failure was a monster that lived inside of him, wore his skin in the world.

He wanted simplicity. He wanted quiet. He wanted no more complications.

Complication breathed down his neck and danger whispered in his ear. A pine bough shivered across his neck as Lantana plodded ahead, following Trigger and Lawrence.

Every part and piece of Everett was on guard, watching, waiting. Wary. If he closed his eyes, he could transport back to Afghanistan, Lantana's sway the rock and roll of the Humvee, the dust in his nose the same dust from the village, the taste of blood—

He shoved the memories from his mind.

Crazy Peak passed them on the right, close enough to reach out and brush, it seemed. They circled below the peak, stepping carefully over a pine-clad, narrow mountain pass. A ravine on their left plunged, sheer rock and the tops of pines the only thing Everett could see far, far below. He held his breath as Lantana followed Trigger, shadowing his steps.

Eventually, Lawrence guided him down from the pass and through a thick forest to the edge of a pasture, sloping golden grasses growing wild in a clearing on the rolling rise beneath Crazy Peak. Fir and pine ringed the meadow, the tips glowing with the rising sunlight and filtering sunbeams in spirals to the thick forest floor below. The grasses here were taller than the pastures Everett and Lawrence had ridden through on the Lazy Twenty-Two. No stock had grazed here in a long while. Everything grew wild, unbothered, untamed.

Lantana ducked her head to eat, though Trigger stayed alert, waiting for Lawrence's next command.

In the middle of the pasture, a lone stallion chewed on grass, his head down, reins hanging loose around his neck. An empty saddle waited on his back.

An Endless Sky brand, the Crazy A, read clear in the sunlight on the stallion's thigh.

Lawrence shot Everett a long look.

Everett pulled out his pistol. He'd practiced shooting from horseback with Buck for fun, shooting at bottles and pails and moldering melons on Buck's ranch. He wasn't great, not yet.

Lawrence hefted the rifle to his shoulder and laid Trigger's reins over the pommel. He clicked and nudged Trigger forward with his knees.

Following, Everett scanned the tree line, the empty spaces, the shadows. Movement, always look for movement. For anything out of place. Misplaced colors, misplaced lines. Concealment and cover. Or betrayal.

Nothing struck out at them as they crossed the pasture to the Crazy A horse. The stallion snorted at their arrival, tossed his mane, but otherwise seemed unbothered. He was content to chew his grass and ignore the world.

Wind ruffled past Everett, shifting the trees. Branches creaked.

"Here," Lawrence called. Everett twisted to him. Lawrence shouldered his rifle and hopped down from his saddle. He picked his way carefully through the grass and knelt, and Everett lost him in golden waves. He clambered down from Lantana and followed.

Lawrence knelt beside a dead man, lying facedown and flattening the field. A single shot had entered the center of the dead man's back, gone through his heart, and exploded out his chest. His hat lay in front of him, tipped off, his arms and legs splayed wide. He'd fallen where he'd been shot.

And he hadn't been expecting it.

"Shot in the back." Lawrence shook his head, his face twisting hard. "No way to go."

The world spun, mountains and time slipping around each other. Everett, in another time and place, standing over another man shot in the back, another man who hadn't been expecting it. Betrayal, the taste of it, weighed heavy on his tongue, stained his soul. He tried to swallow but choked on blood and dust. He blinked, and the cowboy's corpse in front of him shimmered, changed. Now it was a man in uniform, an officer, lying dead in the dust—

"Army?" Lawrence's voice, shaking him free from the back hole of his memories. "Y'alright?"

"I'm fine," he forced out. He holstered his pistol and knelt on the other side of the corpse. "You know this man?"

"By sight only. Name is Phillip, I think. He's a rider for Endless Sky. Been with them a few years, I think. I see him ridin' with the rest of the hands. He was young. Still learnin'." Lawrence sat back and ran his gloved hand over his face, exhaling slowly. "He was ambushed."

"What was he doing up here?"

Lawrence shrugged. "Could have been scoutin' or runnin' a range patrol. Checkin' the borders of their range. Usually you don't go alone when you do that."

"He wasn't alone." Everett nodded to the bullet wound. "He was shot in the back. That came from someone he didn't suspect." His throat closed around his words until he couldn't breathe.

"You gonna do your thing? Look for a trail?"

Nodding once, Everett pulled out his phone and snapped photos of the corpse, the meadow, the body lying on the ground. He drew back and started his search, looping back and forth in a grid pattern through the grasses. Thirty paces from the corpse, a shine of brass caught his eye. Bending, he snapped a photo of a thirty-aught-six casing. "Might have found the bullet casing," he called. "Can you grab my backpack?"

Wordlessly, Lawrence retrieved his pack from where Everett had stowed it behind Lantana's saddle. He held it open for Everett as Everett grabbed a pair of gloves and a plastic bag, then dropped the casing into the bag and sealed it. He stepped back as Everett continued his search, watching in silence.

Whoever had shot the young man dead had covered his tracks well. There weren't any prints, not through the pasture. Maybe the murderer had never come off his horse. Smart, then, to not leave any boot prints. The only evidence he'd left behind was the bullet casing and a dead body. And there were more than a thousand rifles that fired that kind of ammunition in these parts. If he couldn't find any other physical evidence, it would be near impossible to tie the murder to the murderer. He could hope there was some kind of evidence on the man's dead body, or something in his past that led to this bloody outcome. Circumstances sometimes lined up like constellations after the fact, roadmaps that were only obvious in the end. Destination murder.

Sometimes it was just a dirty shot in the back.

He'd almost given up, almost called it in. Sweat dripped down his neck, the sun hot above his collar. He'd ditched his jacket. His eyes pricked, stinging from the sun, the dust, and disappointment. He'd wiped his forehead, adjusted his ball cap. Stretched his neck—

And spotted the track.

A single horse print, like before. Slender, a small horse's footprint. A lighter horse, like before.

There was a rocky path out of the pasture, free of dirt or fallen leaves. A horse and rider could walk the path for miles, keeping to the rock-covered ground, the smooth stones, and leave no tracks or trail.

Save for where the slender-footed horse had shied away from a sloping rock, a sharp-angled slab of stone that ran into a patch of dirt. One small hoof had landed partway in the break between dirt and stone. The top left arch of the horse's shod hoof had struck stone. But the rest had compressed the dirt, creating a perfect, timeless print.

"I've got something!" he shouted. "Another print!"

Lawrence was by his side in a moment, jogging, crouching, breathlessly cursing as he shook his head. "You are one *fine* piece of work, Army."

"There's always something." Nothing stayed hidden forever. He'd proven that.

Lawrence opened the backpack for him again, and Everett put together another casting. He laid it carefully and waited for the plaster to dry. In the heat, the bright sun of the afternoon, it didn't take long. He bagged and tagged the casting, then nodded down the rocky path. "What's in this direction? Where does this trail go?"

“To the public lands. Off Endless Sky’s range and out into the wild.”

“So anybody could be out there?”

“Sure,” Lawrence said. “Hell of a time for anybody gettin’ this high up, though.”

“There’s a million ways into the Crazies, you said.”

“I did. And seems this rider’s found his own way.” Lawrence pulled out the first casting from Carson’s hanging and held it up, pulled the plastic bag tight across the imprint. He looked from one to the other, comparing.

The narrow hoof, the slender shape. The small shoe. The prints, the castings, matched.

“Two dead men and the same print at both sites.” Lawrence’s gaze flicked to his.

“There’s a murderer here in the Crazies,” Everett said. He held Lawrence’s stare as he spoke, watching for a reaction, for something, anything.

Lawrence’s eyes slid away as his jaw tightened.

IT TOOK THE REST OF THE DAY TO MAKE THEIR WAY BACK AROUND CRAZY Peak and down into Lazy Twenty-Two range, all the way back to the Delaney ranch home. Everett had argued for riding down to Endless Sky’s ranch, since they were on their range and the dead man was an Endless Sky hand, but Lawrence laid it out for him on the map. Endless Sky was truly endless, and riding down to their ranch would have taken two days from the high meadow abutting Crazy Peak and the public lands all the way back down to Endless Sky’s ranch in the basin at the foothills of the mountains.

“It’s faster to take him back to the Lazy Twenty-Two ‘n’ drive the body into town.”

“Like you did with Carson?”

Lawrence had glared. “You really think Braddock and his boys are goin’ to pack their way out here? Camp overnight on the way, do a nice li’l search like you did? You see him doin’ *any* of that?”

Everett hadn’t said anything. Braddock hadn’t become the sheriff through laziness, and he hadn’t held his post for decades by not

investigating cases. He was a better sheriff than Lawrence gave him credit for.

But there was something between Braddock and Lawrence, history that he hadn't unraveled yet.

He didn't know which man to trust. Not yet.

He'd pulled out a body bag from his backpack and tossed it to Lawrence instead of defending Braddock. The sheriff didn't need his help. "Help me bag him."

They laid the dead man over his horse's saddle and tied a lead to Trigger's pommel. The dead man's horse was used to riding in formation, and he fell into step behind Trigger without complaint. The pass back around Crazy Peak was ass-clenching for Everett, Lantana's hooves sometimes brushing the edge of the trail and the plunging ravine, but Lawrence managed both horses without even looking strained.

Hours later, another rider joined them when they dropped into the home pastures on Lazy Twenty-Two land. He was younger than Everett, but weathered, and he wore a big cowboy hat high on his head. Leather chaps with batwings flapped behind him as he rode hard for Lawrence.

He came abreast of them and fell in, eyeballing the body bag with cow eyes lined all the around with wide rings of white.

"We heard the shot this morning. Was that you?"

"Nah, wasn't me. Was whoever killed this man."

"Another dead body?" The cowboy cursed. "Hoss, it ain't right, all this killin'! Thought this was over. Thought we weren't gonna have to worry 'bout that no more!"

"Someone changed their mind, Terry."

"You think it's them truckers? I knew some of 'em from school, you know. They say Charlie killed a man down in South Dakota! What's to say this ain't him and some of the others come on up to have their revenge? They said they wanna murder some cowboys!"

"Terry—"

"Cause who is to say they won't start killin' any ole cowboy they see! They was already fightin' damn near everyone 'fore!"

"Terry!"

"Hoss, this is serious! You bringin' dead bodies down out the mountains now, twice in this one week!"

“Well, what the fuck you wanna do about it, Terry?” Lawrence kicked Trigger forward, cutting Terry’s horse off and facing him down. “You wanna complain or you wanna get some real shit done? Lemme introduce you to real shit. This here is Everett Dawson. He’s the stock detective down from Helena that’s gonna find this killer. He’s already got the son of a bitch’s trail. He pulled horse prints up off the fuckin’ dust. Now, I never seen anyone do that before, but this man *did!*”

“Yeah, all right,” Terry said. He backed his horse up, and Everett watched him set his jaw, square his shoulders. “But will he do it ‘fore any more cowboys get shot and murdered?”

Lawrence said nothing.

He’s not going to lie to his men.

Terry shook his head. “Hoss, me ‘n the boys were talkin’. While all this is goin’ on, while all this killin’ is happenin’... we’re gonna take our pay and clear out for a while.”

“You’re quittin’?”

“Takin’ a break,” Terry tried to protest. Lawrence snarled, waved Terry’s words away. “Hoss, you can’t say we won’t end up draped over your saddle in no body bag, can you?”

It hurt Lawrence to answer, to speak the truth, Everett could tell. “No.”

“Well, once you find this killer, you can call us back. But for now, we’ll be ridin’ into town tonight. Then we’re lighting a shuck out of the county tomorrow.”

“You wanna run? Go on then! Get gone!” Lawrence nudged Trigger forward, circling Terry and eyeballing him before taking off for the ranch. He still led the dead man’s horse, the corpse laid out over the saddle, belly down.

“We’ll set the herd up!” Terry shouted. “‘Fore we leave!”

Everett nudged Lantana forward, and they trotted after Lawrence, then broke into a lope. After two sloping hills and a wide-open meadow, they drove down the pasture toward the ranch house and the barn.

Lawrence was the Devil hard at work when they rode in, unsaddling the horses and washing them down, feeding them and shoveling hay into their stalls while Everett grabbed the corpse and hauled it to his truck, lying him out in the bed and strapping him down beneath the cover. He turned the engine on and powered up the cooler in the bed. The day’s ride had already been mean on the dead man, and he wasn’t getting any fresher.

After, Everett tried to help in the barn, doing the things Lawrence commanded in one-word orders and silent points.

“The house has a phone line.,” Lawrence finally said, breathing hard as he watched Trigger rest in his stall and munch on hay. “Delaney had it hard wired up the mountain when his wife was pregnant. Used it maybe twice the whole damn time it’s been strung up.” He wiped his face, the sweat drenching his undershirt. He’d unbuttoned his shirt down his chest again. Sweat dripped between his pecs, soaked the top of his chest hair and made the dark hairs curl. “You wanna call the sheriff, or you wanna drop the body on the front desk like I did?”

“I’m definitely calling the sheriff.”

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CHAPTER 9

THEY DROVE TO TIMBER CREEK SEPARATELY, LAWRENCE LEADING THE WAY down and out of the Crazies in his rumbling old truck. Everett followed, the cowboy's corpse chilling in the bed.

When they pulled up to the Sheriff's Department downtown, three hours later, the parking lot was packed, stuffed full of deputy sheriff cruisers, a bedraggled local photojournalist sitting on the hood of his faded Honda and smoking a rolled cigarette, and three Endless Sky ranch trucks. Cowboys loafed beside two of the trucks, leaning on the bed eyeballing Lawrence and Everett as they rolled in.

They kept on staring—scowling—as Everett pulled out the body bag and Lawrence came to help him. One of the cowboys, in mud-spattered jeans and an Endless Sky t-shirt that seemed molded to his hulking muscles, with dark shades covering his eyes and a wide-brimmed cowboy hat pulled low over his forehead, spat when he locked gazes with Lawrence.

There's history in these parts, Lawrence had said. Everett sneaked a glance at him, helping carry the dead man to the sheriff's side door. A deputy waited for them, stiff and square-jawed and trying not to stare.

Lawrence brought out strong reactions in people. There was a hell of a lot of smoke blowing around his name, around the history he carried. What was the fire that went along with all that smoke?

Braddock waited with a gurney inside the side door. "Nice of you to call *this* one in, Law."

"Was Detective Dawson here that insisted it be proper."

Everett kept his mouth shut. He nodded to Braddock before he spotted the man behind him. Tall and lean with deep brown eyes, like black honey

harvested too late in the summer. He felt Lawrence stiffen beside him, mutter “for fuck’s sake.”

The newcomer held out his hand to Everett. “Detective Dawson, I’m Dan Howell. I own Endless Sky and this is my man.” He spoke clearly, whatever drawl he’d ever had gone from his voice.

“I’m sorry for your loss, sir.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing what happened.” Howell purposely ignored Lawrence hovering behind Everett’s shoulder. “I want to know why these mountains are killing men.”

Braddock led everyone to his office, where Everett was offered a seat before his desk and Howell claimed the other. Lawrence scoffed and perched against the back wall, arms crossed, one boot heel kicked up on the wall. Everett could feel the pulse of his disdain across the office, the *fuck you* attitude he’d been slapped with when he’d driven up to Lawrence’s ranch.

Braddock and Howell ignored Lawrence, as if he didn’t exist.

He met Lawrence’s gaze as Braddock settled behind his desk and made a production of pulling together forms for witness statements, and while a deputy scurried to get Howell a cup of freshly made coffee. A clutch of deputies crowded the back of the office, and six more Endless Sky cowboys shoved their way in the doorframe, listening with tight faces.

They had probably been the dead man’s range team. They’d lost one of their own. Everett couldn’t begrudge them their pain, their anger. The murder of a friend had a way of unleashing a man’s demons, loosing the reins he held on his darkest nature.

Murder could unmake the man who’d survived, sometimes.

Lawrence stared at him beneath the brim of his hat before looking away.

“So,” Braddock said, a pained look creasing his lined face. “Tell me what y’all found in my mountains and why y’all come back down in just one day with a dead man.”

He told it all, starting with that morning and waking up on the slope of Crazy Peak after riding the day before with Lawrence. They’d come up short at Cow Gap but were on the way to Robin’s Roost when they’d heard the shot. Too far out to call for help, they’d rode in on their own. And found the dead man.

“I found this in the field by his body.” Everett pulled the thirty-aught-six bullet casing, sealed in an evidence bag, from his backpack. He handed it to

Braddock. Braddock's eyebrows crawled up his forehead.

"Good eyes, son," he said. Awe underlay his words and he smiled at Everett. "Finding a single casing in a field is no easy feat."

"I also found this." He pulled out the casting he'd made of the slender horse's print heading away from the high pasture and the murdered Endless Sky cowboy. "This was a fresh track from the morning. It was also the only track we found, other than the dead man's horse coming up through the forest on a known trail. I think this track was made by accident. Whoever the rider of this horse was, he was careful to use only the rock trails. He knew he'd leave no prints on the rocks. Aside from when his horse slipped."

Braddock studied the casting, frowning as he turned it over. "You pulled that out of the dirt?"

"Yes sir."

Braddock sent him a withering glare over the casting at Everett's "sir."

"Impressive." Howell held out his hand, and he inspected the casting closely, pulling the plastic bag tight to peer at the details on the shoe, the shape of the horse. "Small horse, looks like."

"Definitely a small one, sir. A mare, most likely. She's slender and, based on the depth of the print and the soil up there, I'd say the rider is heavy for the horse. They move slow, but they move carefully."

"This track you found. Where was it headed?" Howell set the cast down on the desk carefully. He turned his full attention to Everett.

Everett could almost fall into his gaze, into the hunger he saw there. Hunger for justice. Hunger to avenge his man.

"To the public lands on Crazy Peak."

Howell cursed and shook his head. He met Braddock's stone-cold glare with one of his own. "Public lands," he said softly. "We have to close them down, Darby. We've got a murderer coming off these trails and invading private land. Not to mention our rustling problem."

Lawrence cleared his throat overly loudly from the corner and behind the clutch of deputies. The deputies cast him a wretched look, like he'd vomited on their boots.

"This isn't the only murder," Everett said. The air went still after he spoke. Not a soul moved or breathed. "We went to Riley's hanging first."

"The coroner has signed the death certificate. He's sure it's a suicide."

"No, it wasn't!" Lawrence protested.

“Son, we got Riley’s cell phone,” Braddock said softly. He ignored Lawrence, speaking to Everett alone in a hushed voice. “He wrote a suicide note. Said he couldn’t live with all what been done and couldn’t go on. Not the way he had to, after everythin’.”

“That’s a God damn lie!” Lawrence bellowed. “He didn’t feel that way at all!”

“We didn’t find any evidence on his body that would say any different, Law!” Braddock hollered back.

Lawrence almost came through the line of deputies for Braddock, almost launched himself at the older man. Deputies held him back, and he shook off three like they were bugs. He quaked, his arms trembling, fists clenched until his knuckles were white. His eyes darted to Everett and then away.

“Annnnd,” Braddock said, drawling the word out slowly as he glared toward Lawrence’s corner. “Carson Riley sent a text to you, Law, askin’ you to meet him in that high north pasture the mornin’ you say he was killed. That pasture happens to be right next to where you also say you found Riley swingin’. I wonder why you didn’t mention none of that before. That makes you the last man to see Carson Riley alive. And concealin’ that —” Braddock shook his head.

Silence. Everett could sense the shifts, the flows of tension spiraling higher, the vicious poison seeping from Lawrence in his corner. *There’s history in small towns.*

There was enough hatred in this one office to start a war.

He’d stepped into a viper’s nest.

“We’ll talk about *that* later, Law,” Braddock snapped. “You need handcuffs, boy.” He turned back to Everett. Lowered his voice. His expression shifted, turned pained. His eyes went haunted. “There were other reasons for his suicide. Other things he wrote.”

“*Bullshit!*” Lawrence shouted.

“*Personal* things!” Braddock bellowed back. “How he *felt*, Law! You understand me? You get what I am sayin’? You want me to spell it out right now? Or give the dead—and maybe the livin’ if they even deserve it—some God damn respect and privacy?”

Everett’s gaze bounced from Lawrence’s corner and the scowling deputies to Braddock and back. The two were scowling at each other hard enough to murder.

Howell leaned in, whispering in Everett's ear. "Carson Riley confessed he was gay."

The whisper hit him like taking a bullet to his center chest, smack in the middle of his body armor. Closing his eyes, he felt the impact, felt himself fall back, knocked flat on the dirt. Felt the air leave his body. He breathed in, didn't move a muscle. Opened them. He was still ramrod straight, unmoved, unflinching, in Braddock's office.

Was any of it true?

He cleared his throat. "Sheriff, with all due respect, I have to challenge the coroner's findings. I believe Carson Riley was murdered. And if that's the case, there's reason to suspect that suicide note isn't genuine."

Braddock turned his vinegar glare from Lawrence to Everett. "Based on *what?*"

Everett passed the first casting to Braddock. "The scene by Carson's hanging was almost perfectly clean. There weren't any boot prints. I couldn't find trace evidence either, not that finding any in a wilderness environment is easy. I had hoped you'd find something on the body. Fingerprints or signs of a struggle. DNA?"

"We didn't find anythin' like that. No sign of struggle. It was a clear case of suicide."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to examine the coroner's findings, take a look for myself. Maybe there was something subtle that was overlooked."

Braddock scowled.

He doesn't like anyone stepping on his authority. He especially doesn't like any state, or worse, federal government interfering. Everett, if he didn't play this right, could end up Braddock's worst enemy. "Maybe I'm wrong. But another pair of eyes can't hurt. If I'm wrong, I'll be the first to say so in the morning."

Braddock's scowl shifted. He held up the first casting. "If the scene was perfectly clean, then what's this?"

"I said *almost* perfectly clean. This is what we found: the fresh track of a rider moving out of the grove Carson was hung in. The horse and rider kept to the game trails and he hid his tracks well. He used rocky ground, like the murderer did in Endless Sky's high pasture. Except, his horse stepped on an ant pile and then kicked them off in the dirt beside the trail. The horse left one perfect print behind."

Howell whistled. He beckoned for the casting from Carson's murder and laid both side by side.

Everett saw the understanding slam into him. "These are the same tracks!"

"The same rider was in both places, Mister Howell, and in both places, two men ended up dead. I think this rider killed Carson Riley and tried to make it look like a suicide. Maybe he forced him to write a note? Or maybe the whole thing is faked. But after Carson's death, I think this rider killed your man in your high pasture. And both times, the rider slipped out to public land that abuts both Endless Sky and Lazy Twenty-Two."

Silence.

"Now that I've got a cast of this horse's print from both of these deaths, if I find the tracks again, I can find the rider."

"You're sayin' you can identify the horse and rider based on this print? That you could recognize it if you find it again? Anywhere?" Braddock asked.

"I can."

Silence. Braddock nodded, a small smile curling his lips.

"And," Everett said carefully, "in light of all of this, I would like to officially recommend opening a missing persons investigation on the two Heart's Rafter cowboys. Dell and Aaron."

A rumble went through the crowd, from the deputies to the cowboys stuffing the Braddock's office door. Curses and bitten-off promises, exclamations and low whistles.

"You did all this in a day, did you, son?" Braddock said quietly. He shook his head, pursed his lips. Worry warred with frustration on his forehead. Fear shone in the back of his eyes. "If what you're sayin' is right, there's a murderer loose in my mountains."

Everett held his stare. *How many murderers has this old man seen?*

Did he know enough to recognize he was looking one in the eyes?

"It's the fuckin' truckers!" one of the Endless Sky cowboys in the doorway shouted. "They're back for more! If they want blood, they can fuckin' have it!" Cheers rose from the other hands, good ole boys hooting and hollering as they nodded to each other. Every man was armed, from the revolver on their hips to the knives on their belts and the shotguns and rifles slung over their shoulders.

Everett swallowed.

Howell stood, facing his men. “That’s enough!” he barked. “We are not turning vigilante! That’s how this mess started! I am not losing any more men to this madness! We have lost enough!” He waited until every one of his men looked him in the eyes and nodded.

“Darby,” Howell said, turning back. “We got a *real* problem on our hands.”

“That we do.” Braddock stood, his hands on his gun belt as his lips pursed. “Dan, I don’t have enough men to cover all the ground we need to cover. I can send my deputies to the highways and to the truck stop. Round up the local boys and start interrogatin’ the lot. Find out who among them is still talkin’ ‘bout revenge. Find out where they been, what their alibis are for these deaths. Check some stables, too. We gotta shake a few trees down there, knock some heads together.”

“And we need to clear out the public land,” Howell said. His jaw clenched hard, the muscles straining as he gripped his hat. “We need to close up this mountain. Flush out this murderer if he’s still up there. And flush out the rustlers stealing our stock.”

“And the drug runners.” Braddock scowled.

“Could all be one and the same,” Everett said softly. “Like you said, Sheriff. Criminals diversify. We could be looking at drug runners getting into cattle rustling and murdering anyone who gets in their way. We could be getting lost in the weeds.”

Braddock nodded. “Could very well be, son.” He frowned. “We need to follow the evidence, wherever it leads. I’ll get you the autopsy report. You look it over, tell me what you think.”

Everett felt eyeballs burning into the back of his head. He could feel Lawrence, feel the weight of his presence.

He didn’t turn around. He didn’t look.

“Dan, form up a posse. I’m deputizing you and anyone who rides with you,” Braddock said. “Get your boys to sweep the Crazies. Go through the public lands and round up any squatters, any rustlers, any drug runners. You find ‘em, you bring ‘em in, *alive* if you can. We’ll draw a noose around these mountains and strangle anyone hidin’ inside.” Braddock glared in Lawrence’s direction. “Law, you and your hands wanna ride in the posse?”

“My hands all quit,” Lawrence spat. “On account of the Crazies not bein’ safe under your protection.”

Braddock glared, but ignored Lawrence. “Any of the other outfits gonna ride with you, Dan?”

“Warner’s long gone. Heart’s Rafter is empty.”

“You already put in an offer on his ranch, Howell? A deal he can’t turn down?” Lawrence, from the corner, seemed determined to piss off both Howell and Braddock. This time, Everett turned and glared.

Lawrence wasn’t helping or doing himself—or anyone else—any favors.

Howell and Braddock ignored Lawrence again. Everett sensed a pattern. “I’ll call at the Rocking H. See what Martin has to say.” Howell tipped his hat to Braddock and turned to the door. “Boys, we ride for the ranch. We’ve got work to do!”

A parade of cowboys emptied from the office, escorting Howell like he was their king. Modern day cowboys who rode for the brand, who bled for the brand, who lived and worked on the land and built a loyalty that couldn’t be bought, were close to feudal knights from the Medieval times. The clothes and weapons were different, the range and the land, but as Howell strode out of the sheriff’s office with his men, it sank deep into Everett’s bones: Howell was a powerful man, not just because of his money or the size of his ranch. He had the blood loyalty of those men, and whatever he’d done to deserve their loyalty, he’d earned it the hard way.

Everett stood. “Wait, Detective,” Braddock called. “You stayin’ in town tonight?”

“I can.”

“Get a room at the hotel. I got to organize my men. Then you and I are goin’ to dinner at the steakhouse.”

“Yes sir.” Everett trailed behind Lawrence out of the office. In the hallway, he tried to catch up to the man, but a deputy crossed his path, and another wanted to ask him about lifting the horse’s print out of the dirt. By the time he told the deputy “later” and pushed his way through, Lawrence’s broad shoulders had disappeared through the side door.

He jogged outside in time to see Lawrence roaring down the road in his truck, leaving nothing behind but a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER 10

TIMBER CREEK WAS A ONE MAIN STREET, ONE HOTEL, ONE GAS STATION, ONE strip club, and five liquor store kind of town. The high schooler checking him into the hotel blew a bubble as she explained the Wal-Mart was twenty miles down the highway, and if he went thirty miles the other direction, there was a burger drive-through.

When he asked where the steakhouse was, she pointed across the street.

It might have harkened back to the mining days or had been the original saloon when Timber Creek first laid its foundations in the 1800s. Now, it was a dusty, tired kind of place, with creaking saloon doors and faded maroon wallpaper. Bulbs in the chandeliers were out, and the main waiter played on his phone at the bar when Everett walked in.

“Just one?”

“I’m meeting Sheriff Braddock.”

He was shown a booth in the back and left alone.

Braddock showed up half an hour later, pushing both swinging doors open like he was a lawman of the Old West.

Everett had gone over his little speech in his head during the wait, and he squared his jaw and looked Sheriff Braddock in the eye as he shook his hand. “Sheriff, I want to apologize. I don’t mean to step on your toes here. I didn’t mean to undermine your authority on the investigation. Certainly not in front of all your men.”

Braddock grinned. “Son, you ain’t steppin’ on any toes a’tall. You ain’t underminin’ my authority. I got forty years on you, and I’m not so fragile as all that. You don’t threaten me, same as those young bucks in these mountains don’t threaten me. I got long years of workin’ and trainin’ fine

young men under my belt. We can work together just fine, long as you don't got no problems with me."

"No problem at all, sir." Everett pumped his hand and squeezed again before letting go.

"Drop the sir, for the love of God," Braddock grumbled. "Call me Darby, son, please. We're workin' together. I'm not your father." He winked and threw Everett a warm smile.

Braddock was like his old platoon sergeant, a grizzly bear of a man who roared at them all, whipped them into shape until they were perfect, and then made them practice perfection until even their shits were sounding off in formation. He was a hard man to work for, but he was also the best man protecting them Everett had ever seen. When his platoon sergeant was proud, it felt like God himself was blessing the men.

It seemed impossible to call a man like that by his given name. Everett nearly choked on "Sure, Darby," as he fumbled while he sat down.

Braddock ordered giant prime rib steaks for them both and then accepted a beer sent from the bar. Everett declined, and they sat in silence, sipping their drinks for a minute while Sheriff Braddock eyed Everett. He didn't blink, and seemed to take all of Everett in, studying him like he was reading Everett's history, taking the measure of him in a sagging booth in a dusty saloon on the edge of town.

Everett stared back. He was nothing for Braddock to see. He had nothing inside of him, not anymore. There was nothing at all for anyone to see when they stared.

"How did you get along with Law?" Braddock finally asked.

Everett shrugged. "He's a handful. But you were right, he's a skilled rider." He left out the implied insult Braddock had paid to Lawrence, him being the finest no-good cowboy in the mountains.

Braddock spun his beer bottle on the wooden table top slowly, letting the condensation drip. "He didn't seem... odd at all to you?"

"Define odd."

"Explosive temper. Outbursts. Hiding things."

Everett arched an eyebrow. He'd certainly seen, and felt, all that, but that just seemed like that was Lawrence Jackson. The man lived out loud. He had a temper as quick as a Copperhead snake. He repelled the world, it seemed. If he felt something, something powerful, he said so. He'd never had a shy moment in his life, surely.

He'd carried two dead men off of his land and was also worrying about another two that were missing. That worry, and being a corpse deliverer, had put a strain on Lawrence Jackson's shoulders. Everett had seen it, the pinched look in his face, the tightness in his eyes. The clench of his rugged jaw. The way he held himself, looking for trouble and expecting it from every side. He recognized that readiness, that fear of what was going to blindsides you.

And he trusted that fear. It was a learned fear, born through experience.

"Lawrence Jackson is an intense man. He can be loud. He can be contrary. But I never saw him violent while we were riding."

Visions of the man sweet-talking Lantana and Trigger, hand-feeding them slices of apple and brushing them gently, scratching their manes or their necks, played in his mind. Making coffee for Everett and tossing over his sleeping bag.

Massaging his sore back.

"That's one way to put it," Braddock said, chuckling once. "Look, son, I didn't just send you up to the Lazy Twenty-Two to learn how to ride out into the back country and see where Carson was hung. I sent you up there to keep an eye on Lawrence. Take the measure of the man. Your boss in Helena says you got the huntin' instincts of a wolf. You've proven you can track, even when a man doesn't want to be found." Braddock leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "Tell me, what do those instincts of yours say about ole Law?"

"I'm not certain what you're getting at."

"It's like this, son. Everything that's been happenin' recently? It's all circled around Law and the Lazy Twenty-Two. He's connected to *everythin'*, every bit of this mess. You could say that these troubles start with him."

"I thought they started with Carson, Dell, and Aaron getting off for the murder of two truckers."

"Ahh, you heard about that. Well, they didn't get off free and clear. They were charged with negligent homicide and sentenced to time served."

"And what did that amount to?"

"Three nights in my cell, for Dell and Aaron."

"You can understand why there would be some anger after a sentence like that."

“Son, I lived through it. You don’t need to tell me how it was. Yeah, those truckers were pissed. Those truckers were local boys, went to the same damn schools as the cowboys and my deputies. Everyone fightin’ everyone else knew each other, was like brothers to each other. But then those truckers got their buddies involved, and the whole fuckin’ highway seemed pissed at the Crazies. I had cowboys and truckers brawlin’ all hours of the day and night. They wanted blood, both sides did, and they wanted Dell, Aaron, and Carson’s blood in particular. So those boys needed to get gone. It was the only way.”

“Howell fired them so they’d leave?”

“He told them what was what. They understood.”

“Then why did they stay?”

Braddock leaned back, shrugging. “Some people just can’t do what they’re told, can they? Dell and Aaron...” He sighed. “They hit their peak when they was children. Turned rotten as they aged. Cowboyin’ was all they were good for, and even that— Well, they weren’t going to be leadin’ their own outfits no time soon.”

“Why did Carson end up at Lawrence’s ranch?”

A flinch, barely there and then gone, and Braddock locked up tight. “That’s between those two boys. They had an understandin’.”

That phrase again. *An understanding*. These people talked in spirals, circles inside wheels inside barely comprehensible sayings, drenched in slow-moving molasses and vowels that stretched from horizon to horizon. “I’m not familiar with their understanding.”

Braddock leaned forward, lacing his fingers together, hands resting on the table between them. “It’s a private matter between them, and I’m not one to go blabbering ‘bout it, ‘specially since Carson ain’t among us anymore. I got more respect for him than that. But... lemme put it to you this way. When Carson and those boys were in my cells, Law came down from the mountains like the Devil himself was ridin’ inside him. I never seen him that fightin’ mad, not in his whole life. He got Carson out of my cell that night and put the entire Delaney ranch up as collateral for Carson’s bail. Between you ‘n’me, I don’t think he had Delaney’s permission to rightly do that. I didn’t peer too close at the authorization signature, though. I knew Carson wasn’t gonna run.”

“Lawrence pulled Carson Riley out and left the other two behind? So there was bad blood between those two and Lawrence?” Seemed there was

bad blood between Lawrence and everyone in the mountains.

“If he could have, he’d have shot Dell and Aaron dead that night. Accordin’ to him, they were murderers, good-for-nothin’ wastes of human beings, and they’d gotten Carson wrapped up in their shit. Took four deputies to haul Law out of my jail and throw him to the curb. But, Law did more for Carson than Dan Howell did that night. He did more for Carson than anyone ever did.” He tapped the table, lips pursed, holding Everett’s stare.

“Dan Howell’s attorney got the murder charges reduced. He made them free men. That’s not insignificant help.”

“Sure, after the fact. But the night a man is sittin’ in a jail cell, holdin’ his head in his hands and thinkin’ long and hard about his life? That’s a long, lonely night. Makes a man think, and think hard. And those boys were all alone ‘til Law came burstin’ in.”

“What does this prove? What are you trying to tell me?”

“On the surface, nothing, ‘cept Law and Carson had their understandin’. And Law likes to kick dirt in Howell’s face as often as he can. There’s no love lost between those two.”

“Why?”

“There’s history between them.”

Everett barely held back from rolling his eyes. There was *always* history, he was learning, history as old and twisted and bloodied as the land itself. Maybe the stories about the Crazies were true and everyone here was slowly going mad, viciously tearing each other apart across their lifetimes. “What kind of history?”

“History like Law gettin’ thrown off the Endless Sky ranch as a hand. Gettin’ fired by the foreman, Jim Burke, when he was nineteen, fired so bad he was told to never step foot on Endless Sky land again or he’d be shot dead.”

Everett frowned.

“Lawrence Jackson has a violent past, Detective. He’s got multiple assault charges against him, one just six months old. Soon as Dell and Aaron were free, and Bill Warner hired them at Heart’s Rafter, ole Law went and found ‘em drinking and celebratin’ their freedom down at the strip club. He hauled them out of there faster than the bouncer could stop him, had them by their shirt collars and threw ‘em in the street. He laid down the

law on those boys that night. Told them if he ever saw their faces again, he'd put a bullet in their hearts."

Everett's eyes went wide. Anywhere else, a threat like that would land a man in jail.

"He's spent many a night in my jail. He's a spitfire, a fighter. As fast as his mouth runs, his temper runs faster and hotter. Now, maybe his gun is movin' too fast."

"You suspect Lawrence Jackson in these murders?"

Braddock smoothed his hand down his face. His tobacco-stained voice was low, and he spoke slowly, dragging over each word. "I surely hope not. I know that boy. Watched him grow up. But you have to follow the evidence, like you said. For me, I look at his history. You may not get it or recognize it just yet since you're an outsider. But I *know* who Law is, son, down to his bones. I knew him as a child and watched him grow into a man." Braddock shook his head. "He's a wild bronc. He's got a fight in him that can't tamed, can't be broken. Not by nothin'. He'd charge Hell with a bucket of water, cussin' all the way, and then blame the Devil that he got burned."

Everett stayed quiet. He let Braddock's words pass through him. *Outsider*. He wouldn't get any information that wasn't dragged out, wouldn't know what he needed to know to put the pieces of this puzzle together. There were questions he needed to ask but he didn't know enough to ask them. And no one was overly chatty about giving up their gossip. Not to him, at least.

Even if no one wanted to talk to him, he could still understand crime. He understood hatred and what pushed a man to the brink, and beyond it. What drove a man to murder.

A constrictor knot and a reluctance to talk did not damn a man as a murderer, but it didn't help Lawrence's case, either.

Braddock laid out his theory, his fingers pushing into the tabletop as he listed each point against Lawrence. "Last year, we had a mite of trouble, and Law was right in the mix. He threatened to kill Dell and Aaron, and, lo and behold, those two are missin'."

"He's been the one pushing for a missing persons investigation for them."

Braddock held up a hand, asking for patience. "I know. And I'm willin' to take my portion of the blame on bein' slow on that. If you'd known these

boys, well, you might not have thought twice about them gettin' gone neither. They are no-good boys. Look, I hope they're gettin' drunk somewhere in Cheyenne or Coeur d'Alene. I truly do." He cleared his throat. "I gotta look to this town 'n'these mountains and their welfare. And when I look around, I got two missin' men threatened by Law, and now I got two dead bodies, both of them were brought in by Law. One was found dead on his land and no one but him saw the body hangin', did they? The second corpse you brought in, but it was on land directly adjacent to the Lazy Twenty-Two."

"Lawrence was with me when we heard the shot that killed the Endless Sky hand. It couldn't have been Lawrence."

"Public land stretches from Law's ranch to Endless Sky. A man could slip on and off both ranches and disappear into public land, get lost. It would be easy to get gone, and fast. Now, 'member those photos I showed you of those drug runner camps?"

Everett nodded.

"That camp wasn't far off the Lazy Twenty-Two. Not far at all. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it was suspiciously close. Within a day's ride of the Lazy Twenty-Two ranch house. Convenient if someone, say, needed to ride out and meet their fellow conspirators? Or *arrange* somethin', like takin' out troublesome cowboys on Endless Sky land?"

The wheels started cranking in Everett's mind, pieces of evidence sliding in and out of theories, turning over, flipping left and right. Drug runners making camp in the Crazies. A murder, a split-second decision in the heat of the moment. Rage that lit the blood on fire, that nearly pulled the mountains down. Blame to pass around, every way around. Cowboys fighting truckers, cowboys fighting cowboys. Promises of revenge. Hatred everywhere he turned.

Who benefited from everything? From murder, from theft?

"What about the missing stock?"

Braddock shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not certain about everythin', son. I have a hunch is all. I'm mighty suspicious, you'd say, of a man who brings me dead bodies and is connected to every one of them. And who threatened to kill our two missing men."

"Then why push for an investigation? He was damn glad to see me when I drove up."

“He might regret that,” Braddock said carefully. “You seem a man not hoodwinked easily. You’re on top of everything. Your reputation is well earned.”

Everett shifted. Nodded his thanks.

“You and I both know, as one law enforcement officer to another, that there are times when an offender, say, a murderer, likes to involve himself in the investigation. Out of some kind of sick sense of watchin’ the police, or to keep an eye on where the investigation’ is goin’. Some perversity that makes him want to be close to the law while underminin’ it.”

“What would Lawrence’s motive be for cattle rustling or running drugs? Or killing those three men?”

“The oldest motive of all,” Braddock said. “Money.” He pulled a folded paper from his jacket and passed it across the table. “This is a deposit statement from Law’s bank account. Stephen, town’s bank manager, tipped us off and passed it along. It’s on the up and up,” he said, reading Everett’s glare. “Any large deposit is subject to vetting under those big counterterrorism laws. Give it a look yourself.”

Everett scanned the deposits. His stomach clenched, lead weights trying to pull his belly button down from the inside, drag him through the floorboards.

There were multiple deposits for ten thousand dollars each, scattered like gravel over the past year. Lawrence’s regular salary was deposited in steady increments, too. Four hundred a week. He made less than twenty grand a year running that ranch. He was living barely above the poverty line.

“Now, where do you think he could have gotten this kind of money?”

Everett shook his head.

“Here’s what I think. Law’s been cookin’ something up. Bringin’ drug runners through the Crazies ‘n’helping them navigate the passes, get through the tough spots. He knows the land the hard way, real good and true. Not many men do, but he’s one of ‘em.”

When you get to the falls on your way to Robin’s Roost, watch for the crossin’ as there’s some tricky parts where one wrong step’ll kill yourself and your horse and no one will be able to find your body. And be extra careful with the canyon down there by Whiskey Gulch. It’s treacherous.

“Why kill Carson Riley, then? If he and Lawrence had this... understanding?”

“Maybe Carson was involved in whatever Law is up to. Maybe they was rustling cattle off Endless Sky together. Maybe Dell and Aaron’s troubles waylaid their carefully arranged plans. Or, maybe Carson didn’t have a clue, but then he found out. Remember, Carson’s phone has that text message on it. He and Law were supposed to meet in that high pasture, right next to where he was hung, and Law’s the last man to see him alive.” Braddock shrugged. “I think someone found somethin’ out and paid the price. And now they’re coverin’ their tracks.”

Braddock sat back as the waiter reappeared, setting their steaks in front of them with a flourish. “All I know is, everythin’—and I do mean everythin’—circles around that man.” His shoulders slumped, though, and he stared down at his steak, an almost lost look in his eyes. “I seen a lot of boys grow up in these mountains. Most turn out all right. Some go bad. Some have got this mile-high potential, so much inside of ‘em you can tell from when they was just in they first pair of boots that they was gonna be somethin’ big. I thought that of Law, once. I thought he had it inside him to be great.” He shook his head. “I worry about my people all the time. And I worry ‘bout some more than others. He’s one of those.”

“And you’re worried he’s involved in everything?”

“I’m terrified of it,” Braddock said quietly. “I can see it, and I don’t like it. I don’t like it one bit, but I gotta follow where the evidence is takin’ me. He’s too tied into everythin’. Is he workin’ with rustlers now? Workin’ with drug runners? Takin’ people out? Where’s this money comin’ from? Why’s he bein’ so belligerent, more so than usual?”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s a possibility.” Everett’s throat clenched. “Like you said, we have to follow the evidence.”

“I just wish Law’d find whatever it is he’s missin’ in his life and be happy, you know? He’s still searchin’ for somethin’. Or someone. I know it. He needs someone to come and bank those fires he’s got blazin’. Settle him some. Gentle the wild bronc that lives inside him ‘fore he breaks. And I thought that job on the Lazy Twenty-Two would be it for him. I gave him a good reference to that California man, Delaney, when he was checking up on hirin’ Law.”

“He loves that ranch. I think he lives for that land.”

“Yeah, that and bein’ a pain in my ass.” Braddock grinned, trying to lighten the mood as he cleared his throat. He changed the subject as he cut into his steak. “Now, you said you could identify the horse that was at each

place from the castings you pulled out of the dirt. You can use that casting to find the horse, match them up with those prints you lifted?”

“Definitely. I’m positive I can make a match.”

Braddock chewed slowly, scowling. “Do you think that horse will turn up in Lawrence Jackson’s barn?”

Banshee’s empty eyes flashed in Everett’s mind. Lantana’s shake of her head, how her ears would flick when Lawrence patted her withers. Trigger’s bond with Lawrence, his every movement attuned to Lawrence’s.

He closed his eyes.

Dust filled his nose next to the smell of blood rising from the plate, no, rising from the dead man sprawled before him. He was in the Crazies, he was in Afghanistan, and he was *always* drowning in dust and blood and betrayal.

“Son? Y’alright?” Braddock reached across the table, laying his weathered hand on Everett’s wrist. “You gone pale as a ghost.”

He looked down at his hands.

They were dry. They weren’t soaked in blood. At least, not today.

“I’m fine,” he croaked. He pushed his steak, the plate full of blood, away. “Sorry, my appetite is gone.” He closed his eyes again. Breathed in slowly.

“You one them vegans?” Braddock arched an eyebrow at him.

“No si—Darby.” Everett caught himself, just in time.

Braddock chuckled. “That’s good. Not much to eat ‘round here if you was.” He wiped his mouth and pushed his own plate aside, the steak barely eaten. “Let’s get some fresh air. I think I need a bit. How ‘bout you?”

Braddock’s hand drifted over the small of Everett’s back as he escorted Everett from the saloon. It was a warm touch, a comforting touch. Something that reminded him of when other people used to care for him, watch over him. He wanted to fall back into the ghost of those fingers for one moment. Only a moment.

He stiffened and stepped away as they walked out, the setting sun burnishing the mountains and shadowing the town in false darkness.

Braddock smiled at him, his face turning golden in the setting sunlight. “Let’s walk a bit, *hmm?* Fresh air always does a man good. I could use some.”

A mile down the road, they reached the Sheriff’s Department. “I’ve got a bottle of emergency bourbon in the back.” Braddock arched his eyebrows,

a playful light in his eyes. “Care for a shot?”

Finally, Everett chuckled, a single snort and a wry twist of his lips. “I shouldn’t.”

Braddock laughed. “Course you shouldn’t. But...”

Why not? This was how it had been before, hadn’t it? He’d had people in his life who cared about him, who befriended him. Who looked after him.

Not a single soul in the whole world cared about him anymore. Not the ghost of the man who’d lost everything.

He knew why not.

He hadn’t wanted friendship or companionship or anything at all, after. No friends. No connections. Nothing at all in his life.

There was nothing to feel if he had nothing at all.

But... this moment, the smile on Braddock’s face. It’s what his platoon sergeant would have done, too. Pull him aside. Offer his time. Offer distraction. Offer to help with the pain.

Braddock didn’t have to leave the restaurant. He didn’t have to take a walk or drag Everett along on a pretense for fresh air.

But it had helped.

And Braddock had known.

One drink.

“Sure. Lead the way.”

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CHAPTER 11

SLEEP ELUDED HIM, AGAIN, LIKE IT ALWAYS DID. THREE SHOTS OF BOURBON with Braddock in his office, sharing old town gossip and listening to his stories from the way-back years hadn't helped.

Despite himself, he'd enjoyed it. The echo of camaraderie, a world he'd once known. And freeing his mind, at least for a few hours, from everything else. He could hear his old platoon sergeant's voice echoing in Braddock's drawl sometimes. That care, the careful way he watched Everett.

History looped around him, and pulled on his soul.

Now he lay wide awake, staring at the ceiling like he did almost every night. He only slept after wearing his body down to the bone.

He'd slept wrapped in Lawrence's sleeping bag, though, lulled by the man's scent. Being in his bag had been like Lawrence's arms were around him, like he was wrapped up in Lawrence's hold. It had been torture, sweet, beautiful torture.

He should be sleeping now after another hard day of riding and work that scraped him raw. He ached all over, every part of his body.

Maybe it was just the weight of everything he'd heard that kept him up. Words churned in his mind, his inner voice already shifting into that slowed-down drawl, finding canyons and empty spaces between vowels while words dangled their ends. These people talked as if there was always another secret to be shared, even by the way they spoke, clung to their words.

He had more history to dig up, more skeletons to unearth.

Simple, he'd said he wanted. Uncomplicated. Far, far away from Afghanistan.

Tribal warlord alliances were simpler than this.

The coroner's report on Carson Riley's death lay at the foot of his bed. He'd tossed it away after chasing too many possibilities, too many ghosts winding through the pages. Carson had been hung, and he'd tried to scratch the rope free from around his neck. Physical findings in support of a murder.

But there were no defensive wounds, no signs of a struggle. His wrists hadn't been bound. Absence of evidence in support of homicide, and factors in support of suicide.

And then there was the note. Had he written it himself? If not, who had?

He had nothing to work with, save for a single slender-shoed horse print in the dirt and a text message to Lawrence asking him to meet in the pasture by the cottonwood grove.

Only someone he knew, and knew well, could have subdued Carson Riley and put a noose around his neck without a struggle. If it was murder, it came from someone Carson hadn't expected.

Just like the Endless Sky cowboy shot dead in the back on Crazy Peak. He'd been shot by someone he knew, too.

He listened to the night, to the quiet sounds of midnight. Trucks crunched gravel on the road, idly turned into the hotel's parking lot. He heard shocks squeal, heard boots stride carefully across the lot. A late turn-in, or a weary traveler pulling off for the night.

The town was lonely beneath the mountains and shielded from moonlight. Only the buzz of a flickering streetlight illuminated anything. Darkness hung outside his window, cracked open for fresh air.

Everett lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He'd ditched his shirt and lay in his jeans, his boots kicked off the end of the bed, his pistol on the nightstand.

Was there any truth to what Braddock had said? Were these murders, the rustling, the drug running... was it all Lawrence's design?

They'd know soon enough, he supposed. There was enough smoke to request a warrant from the county judge. Braddock was driving out in the morning. It was a two-day event, driving there, meeting the judge, and driving back. They'd execute the search warrant when he returned, tear apart Lawrence's ranch and turn everything upside down. Turn his life upside down, shake out whatever secrets he was hiding.

Because he *was* hiding secrets. Of that, Everett was certain. Dead certain.

Another truck turned into the parking lot. Gravel slid under tires. The engine cut off. Everett shifted. Exhaled and tucked one hand behind his head. Was this what he'd signed up for? Was this the life he'd imagined when he was imagining anything other than getting out of Afghanistan? He hadn't thought much beyond that, really. Get gone. Get lost. Get as far away as far can go.

Was he far enough, though, when every time he closed his eyes, when every time he tasted dust, he was right back there? Tasting blood with the dust and feeling the world fall away in pieces.

Watching him fall. Watching the blood spread.

He could still feel the rifle in his hands. Could still feel the way he'd boiled, the way his heart had melted down, his soul a nuclear reactor.

You tracked a killer before? Lawrence had asked him.

Yes. Oh yes.

He stared at the ceiling, refusing to close his eyes.

There wasn't anywhere far enough to get away.

Not from himself.

He kept his hands beneath the pillow so he couldn't see them. Couldn't see the blood flowing between his fingers—

Squeaking, the slide of metal on metal—*close*—made him roll off the bed, grab his pistol and crouch low. He peered over the mattress.

A man had opened his window, was crawling through it like a lumbering bear. Large, broad-shouldered, with a barrel chest, narrow hips, long legs—

The man grunted, rolling as he landed hard. "Army?" he whispered.

"*Lawrence?*" Everett hissed. He palmed his pistol, squeezing the grip. He kept it trained on Lawrence's center mass. "The *fuck* are you doing?"

"Army, we gotta go. We gotta go *now*. They're comin' for you."

"*What?*"

"They're comin' for you! Damn it, I shoulda realized this would happen. I shoulda warned you. This is my damn fault."

"Who is coming, Lawrence?" Slowly, Everett stood, his weapon up and ready. Lawrence stayed crouched on the floor, keeping out of sight of the open window.

Lawrence held up both his hands. "I know this looks bad. But I swear to you. I'm here to help you."

"Then answer me! Who is coming for me?"

“Keep your voice down! They’re already here!” Lawrence hissed. “Look, you said it out loud and in public: you said you could identify that horse the killer is ridin’. You said it in the sheriff’s office, and that place was stuffed with damn near half the town. And I said it, God damn it, to Terry, who can never keep his mouth shut, not to save his life. So *everyone* knows now. Everyone knows about your casts and that you swear you can identify the horse, lead everyone right to the killer.”

“So what?”

“So they’re comin’ for you.” Lawrence’s face was made of shadows, save for the gleam of his pupils. He looked crazed in the darkness as he stared Everett down. “They are comin’ to kill you.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen them before. Couple trucks been drivin’ in. They paid off the night manager. He’s gone. He left half an hour ago. There’s a group of guys on the other side of the hotel. They’re gettin’ ready. Loadin’ their guns.”

“Why would they kill me? What the fuck would that solve?” Everett’s hands shook as he stared Lawrence down. Not with fear. Ruby red rage thundered through him, lava hot, screaming scarlet wrath. Anger he hadn’t felt since—

“No one in a thousand miles can pull a cast out of the dirt like you did. Not a damn soul can swear they can identify a horse and rider based off a piece of plaster like you can. They kill you, they get rid of the man who can identify them. Who can lift their prints from the dirt. You made yourself a target, Everett.”

For the first time, Lawrence used his name.

“And I did too, and I’m fuckin’ sorry.” Lawrence held out his hand. “I’m here to get you out. Before they get to you.”

Finally, Everett dropped his pistol. His eyes flicked from Lawrence to the window, then to the hotel’s hallway door. “You couldn’t come through the fucking door?”

“They’re watching the other entrances. We’ve got to go, *now*. Get your boots on. C’mon.”

“Where to?”

“I’ll keep you safe.”

Which way to go? What to choose? Did he listen to Lawrence, dive through the open window, put his life in the hands of Braddock’s number

one suspect?

Was *any* of what Lawrence said true? There were a hundred murder cases that started with one man spinning a lie, convincing another to go with him under some pretense, some falsity. And then—

Was he walking into his own death?

I'm glad you're here, Army. You'll figure this all out.

Lawrence's smile, the few times he'd seen it. It had been genuine. It had been true.

Or was that just what he *wanted* to believe?

Maybe if Lawrence was the killer, he could find out more by being by his side.

Rationalization, he knew, was what came after a shitty decision.

Cursing, Everett shoved his pistol in his holster and grabbed his boots. He pushed his feet in, slung his jacket over his undershirt, and grabbed his ball cap off the nightstand. He followed Lawrence to the window.

"You could have left that shit hat behind," Lawrence grumbled.

"Shut the fuck up." Everett slid behind Lawrence, easing his way out better than Lawrence had. He'd gone through a thousand windows. That might have been Lawrence's first, judging by the grace he'd shown. Slowly, Everett palmed the window back into place until it clicked shut, automatically locking. He'd left the hotel door locked and chained, his wallet on the nightstand.

It should buy them a few hours, at least.

"Follow me," Lawrence whispered. They crouched in the bushes beneath the window, tucked into shadows.

"I have to get to my truck. I need my bag."

Lawrence winced. "I got bad news for you." He pointed.

Through the leaves, Everett spotted his truck. All four tires were flat, slashed with jagged rips through the rubber like they'd been murdered. One of the doors was wide open. All of his belongings were strewn on the gravel lot, shredded and destroyed.

"What the fuck!"

The hotel was a narrow building, rooms on either side of one long hallway. There was an entrance both sides of the building, and a gravel parking lot surrounded the place. In the stillness, the silent night, Everett heard the crunch and stutter step of a group of men moving through darkness on the other side of the run-down, one story building.

Six of them, he guessed. Moving across the lot on the other side of the hotel. Moving to the door.

Lawrence grabbed his elbow. "Let's go!"

Everett stared him down. This was the moment, he knew, when stories could go either way. When the end went from rescuing someone and talking them through the terror they'd endured over a cup of coffee and taking their statement, or finding their body, the mangled, battered corpse.

Which way was he headed?

If it came to it, could he take Lawrence on? Lawrence had him beat in strength and in size. He didn't like his odds.

He heard the hotel door creak open. Soft orders drawled in a voice he didn't recognize. Drug runners? Rustlers?

Did it matter?

"Lead the way," he whispered.

Lawrence stayed low and jogged across the parking lot, running from the shadows of pickup trucks to a low embankment, a drainage ditch behind the hotel gravel lot. He slid into the ditch on his ass, lying low at the bottom.

He caught Everett when he slid down, two hands on his waist. Helped him stand.

Behind them, they heard a door get kicked in, wood splinter. Heard gunshots, the crack of a shotgun and a rifle splitting the night. Shouts. Curses.

"Follow me," Lawrence whispered. "And move fast."

Lawrence led him through the ditch as it veered into a wide farmer's field. They waded through the run-off from the field. Crops rose on either side of them, wheat shafts swaying in the night breeze. Their boots sloshed in ankle-deep muddy water. Sirens sounded in the distance, and Lawrence picked up the pace.

The crops dead ended at a tree line, the start of a spreading woods that ran up into the foothills of the Crazies. Lawrence scrambled out of the ditch at a culvert, crawling up the embankment. He held out his hand for Everett, helping him up the slick sides, the mud and muck from the forest and farm. "This way," he said softly, guiding Everett into the woods.

A hundred yards in, two horses waited, picketed to a tree. They munched on grass and snorted as Lawrence approached.

Everett slowed. He hadn't seen these horses on the Lazy Twenty-Two. Were they horses his hands had rode before they'd quit?

No, these horses were smaller than what Lawrence said they'd had on the ranch. Work horses, he'd said. Rugged. Large.

These were slender horses, slight. Delicate. Young. They were small horses with narrow hooves. He searched for the horses' brands.

There were none.

Everett stared as Lawrence untethered both horses. Another constrictor knot looped their leads to the tree. "Where did these horses come from, Lawrence?"

Lawrence kept his back to him. He spoke over his shoulder. "Mustangs. Picked them up wild and tamed 'em."

One of the horses nuzzled Lawrence's palm. She snuffled for a treat, the exact same way Trigger and Lantana had. Lawrence rubbed her nose up to her forelock, scratched her neck with his gloved hands. He whispered to her, and she whickered.

Everett grabbed Lawrence and spun him hard. He shoved him against the tree trunk, both hands pinning Lawrence's shoulders to the rough bark. "That is the *last* time you lie to me, Lawrence Jackson. Where did these horses come from?"

Lawrence's eyes flashed. He saw Lawrence's fists clench, felt him tremble beneath his hold. Everett pressed, pinning him down. He bared his teeth.

If it came to it, he could take a punch or three before he got his gun. He didn't see a pistol or revolver on Lawrence, and the saddles didn't have rifle scabbards. He could take him, like this. He could put a bullet in the man if he had to.

Lawrence looked away. He sagged into Everett's hold, the flight bleeding out of him. "I have a stable," he said softly. "No one knows. I been raisin' and breedin' horses, sellin' them far away. These are some of mine."

"Why don't you keep them at the ranch?"

"Because this is *mine*," Lawrence hissed. "I saved for it, I bought the pasture and the horse barn. It's got my name on the land, and these horses belong to *me*. Not a God damn person expects a fuckin' thing out of me here, but I *did* this little bit, damn it! I'm savin' up my money. Tryin' to make somethin' of myself!"

Deposits in the bank. Cash. "How much do you sell them for?"

“Five thousand each. I sell them in pairs. They’re registered. Everythin’ is clean and above board. Their unbranded so whoever buys ‘em can put their own brand on.”

Everett backed away, exhaling. “Where is your stable?”

“We’re going there now.” Lawrence shoved past Everett. Fury flowed off him, wounded pride. He wouldn’t meet Everett’s gaze. “Saddle up. We gotta move fast.”

Everett stepped into the saddle as Lawrence took off, breaking into a canter through the trees. He nudged his horse forward, squinting as he tried to follow Lawrence’s shrinking form in the midnight forest, until Lawrence disappeared.

Instead, he followed the slender-shoed horse prints Lawrence left behind.

LAWRENCE’S STABLE WAS NESTLED IN THE FOOTHILLS, THE CRAZIES RISING overhead and snuffing out the stars and the moon, leaving an impenetrable black void all around. He had a few acres fenced in and a simple horse barn. The horses, five of them, roamed free in their corral. Several came to meet Lawrence as he and Everett arrived.

“Sorry girls,” Lawrence murmured to the two they’d rode, leading them to the barn. “I don’t have time to spoil you tonight.”

Still, he fed them both treats from his pocket, brushed them quickly after he stripped their saddles, and barked at Everett to fork more hay out for the horses. The other horses watched Everett, snorting at him while sweat dripped down his back. Even in the midnight chill, his face was drenched.

It felt like an hour, but was only minutes before Lawrence came out of the barn, leading Trigger by a simple lead. Trigger was unsaddled, only two thick blankets over his back. “I could only ride down with him. I couldn’t bring Lantana *and* move fast. And if we wanna get away and hide, we need to move on horse. Can’t be drivin’ nowhere.”

“Where did you ditch your truck?”

“Left it at Birch Creek, sixteen miles out of town. Rode back in with Trigger. Then came to get you.”

Gunshots in his hotel room. Flashes of light through the window. Lawrence pleading with him to follow. "Thank you."

Slender footed horses and small shoes. Constrictor knots around tree trunks.

"C'mon. Get on up." Lawrence held out his hand. "We've got to ride bareback together back to the ranch."

He flushed so hard and fast he thought he would combust. He turned his head down, staring at the ground as he pretended to fix his boot. Lawrence grunted and shoved his hand in his face. "C'mon!"

It was awkward, clambering around Lawrence. Especially suddenly keyed up and with *that* thought in his head.

Torn between his wandering eyes playing over Lawrence's body for two days, the uncoiling of a heat within him he'd long thought dead and buried, and the taste of betrayal burning in the back of his throat, Everett broke. He sagged against Lawrence's back.

"We can't go back to your ranch. Not if you want to hide." Damn him. Was he aiding and abetting now? In what? What was he a part of in these damn mountains?

"What do you mean?" Lawrence went stiff in front of him. He turned to Everett over his shoulder, wide eyes dark like a deep water untouched by the sun.

"Braddock thinks you're part of everything. He thinks you have a hand in what's going on. Maybe you killed Dell and Aaron. Maybe you killed Carson. Maybe you're running drugs through the mountains. He thinks that's why you have those big bank deposits."

Lawrence cursed, spitting fire as he hunched forward, his fists in front of his face like he wanted to rip the universe apart. His shoulders quaked. "Those are my horses," he growled.

"You kept that secret, though. And people made up their own minds about where your deposits came from." If he was going this far, he might as well go all the way. "Braddock is getting a warrant to search your ranch, and for your arrest. He thinks he can convince the judge there's probable cause. Especially with your history."

Again, that over the shoulder glare. Lawrence's eyes were lost in the shadow, and only his lips moved in the dim light cast off the mountain. "I warned you already: I'm a good-for-nothin' cowboy and I got the jail time to prove it."

“I know.”

They stared at each other. Everett felt Lawrence breathe, could almost hear his heartbeat.

“Are you stayin with me’? Or you wanna get gone?” Lawrence’s voice was a tumbling stone rolling downhill.

“I’m staying.”

“Slide closer, then. Put your arms around my waist,” Lawrence said softly. “You gotta hold on, ‘cause we’re gonna push it.”

Excruciating, torturous bliss. He clung to Lawrence, to his powerful body, his thick muscles flexing beneath his flannel button-down and his corduroy jacket. He tucked his face against Lawrence’s shoulder blade, keeping low and away from the brim of his cowboy hat. His blood sang, burning, *craving*.

It had been so, so long since he’d touched a man. Since he’d been touched by a man. It had been just as long since he’d felt this desire, even. Hadn’t that part of himself died? Hadn’t everything inside of him bled out? If he felt nothing, then where did this burning come from?

Did he hold onto a murderer? Did he crave the touch of a killer?

He closed his eyes as Lawrence guided Trigger through the trees, heading for a game trail only he could see in the moonlight. *There are a million ways into the Crazies.*

Proof he moved in the darkness? Or proof he was a damn good cowboy and knew this land, that he had the mountains in his bones? A good-for-nothing, damn good cowboy.

What was true? What could he trust?

For the moment, Everett trusted Trigger, and the sway of the stallion, and the heat against his cheek, his chest. Lawrence’s heat, and his body, solid, strong, and steady.

Time passed. They rode up the mountains, through thickened aspen and cottonwood, dense cedar, towering pine. Trigger clambered over rock and skirted boulders, forded nearly knee-high tributaries.

They stopped halfway up the mountains at a broad river, a collection of most of the eastern facing creeks and streams that tumbled toward the valley, filled with boulders strewn like scattered pebbles. Tiny waterfalls cascaded over underground rocks, and whirlpools swirled in the boulders’ shadows. The bubbling whispers called to Everett, the darkness of the water

a diamond-studded snake that reflected the starlight and cradled shivering shadows.

Lawrence slid off Trigger's back. He helped Everett down, holding Everett's waist as he came off, and held on even after Everett's boots were on the ground. They stood still, breaths mingling, chests brushing on each inhale. Everett could fall into Lawrence's eyes, into those dark depths. They burned, like the ends of coals in a fire pit, heat held so deep it was a bleeding ruby shine.

"Strip," Lawrence grunted. He pulled away, turning his back to Everett. Clearing his throat, he toed off his boots. Reached for his belt. "Gotta take everythin' off."

"What?" Everett blinked.

"They're huntin' me, and they're for sure gonna be huntin' you, too, now. That means we need to lose our scent. They might send the dogs to search for you. We gotta cross the river and ditch our clothes, send 'em downstream."

"And after the river? When we're naked and freezing?"

"We're near the eastern edge of the Lazy Twenty-Two. There's a line camp in the high pasture on the border. It hasn't been used in years. We don't push the herd out to that pasture no more. But it's still there, and it's a good place to hide. There's supplies there, too. Clothes, food. It's only another ten miles. Two hours' ride."

"Two hours soaking wet in this chill?"

"We'll wrap in the saddle blankets. And we'll be sharin' body heat."

Not what he wanted to hear. Everett turned away as Lawrence unbuttoned his shirt, stripped down to his unbuckled jeans. Damn it, his bad choices were piling up, shit choice after terrible decision leading him down the road to ruin. Again.

Fuck it. He ripped his shirt off, pulled it over his head, balled it up and threw it before he kicked off his boots. He pulled his pistol and holster off his belt and set them aside with his cell phone, then shoved his jeans down. His boxers followed, and he stood naked on the riverbank, the wind whispering over his skin. Goosebumps rose, falling down his back, his thighs.

"That shit hat, too." Lawrence held out his hand.

"A hat is a damn hat."

Lawrence snorted. He grabbed his and Everett's clothes and strode naked to the river's edge. He pushed them underwater, dunking everything and getting it all sodden, before wading out and throwing the clothes into the middle of the current. Plaid and jeans floated off, spinning in the eddies, tumbling over boulders. He tossed Everett's hat as far as he could into the waters. He pulled his own off and dunked it, then let it float away.

Lawrence faced Everett, buck ass naked in the river.

Everett's stomach seized. He couldn't breathe, and his skin felt too tight, squeezing his insides down to nothing, to his basest, raw particles. Until he couldn't move. Couldn't think.

The half-moon's glow outlined his body, carved Lawrence out of the night. Muscles swept in and out of shadows and stars. The hair on his chest was lost to the night, but his shoulders, his thighs, his muscles, were caressed by the glow. Everett's gaze drifted, taking him in slowly, every part, every piece, every inch. Every long, thick inch. His mouth ran dry.

"Go dunk in the river," Lawrence said softly. "Use sand from the riverbed. Scrub your skin. Your pits. Your crotch, as much as you can."

He moved on autopilot, walking naked into the river, Lawrence close behind him. *This is when he pushes me under. This is when he drowns me. I'll be a bloated, naked corpse on some river bank, half eaten by a bear and found by a hunter months from now. This is the end.*

It wasn't. Lawrence dunked himself, gasping as he resurfaced, shaking his head to clear his eyes. He ran his hands over his hair, smoothing back the long strands. His hair curled at the ends and stray pieces fell into his eyes without his hat on, came free from being tucked behind his ears. Wet and with everything slicked back, the cut of his jaw looked like it could cleave Crazy Peak right off the mountain.

As Everett dunked himself, Lawrence grabbed river sand and scrubbed his arms and legs, his underarms and his crotch. All the parts where he could leave a scent trail. Everett mimicked him, stealing glances as often as he could.

Minutes later, they waded out, soaking wet. Now the midnight breeze was cold, chilling Everett to the bone. He shivered.

Lawrence pushed past him and shook out a saddle blanket. He draped it over Everett's soaked and naked shoulders. "Here. Grab your boots and get your gear. We gotta move quick." He held out his hands to boost Everett up to Trigger's back. "You ride in front his time."

He didn't have it in him to argue. Not anymore. Everett grabbed his pistol and cell and clambered onto Trigger's back, the blanket just barely covering his ass. Lawrence settled behind him, also wrapped in a blanket, and with a nudge of his knees and a click, he guided Trigger into the river. "C'mon, boy," Lawrence whispered. "You know where to go."

They forded smoothly, Trigger snorting his way across, throwing his head and whining when he stepped on something he didn't like. Lawrence calmed him, and Everett stroked his neck, ran his fingers through his mane. He settled and hauled them both out of the river.

"To the high camp, boy." Lawrence pointed Trigger up the mountain.

Trigger set off on a trot, skimming through the forest and following trails he seemed to know by heart. Trails he seemed to have traveled before, many times.

What was up and what was down? What was right and what was wrong? What was true? What was fact? What did those instincts, those instincts he had been praised for and that had failed him so spectacularly, so fabulously in Afghanistan, say?

What did Everett believe?

He didn't know anymore.

Trigger, and Lawrence's warmth, and the sway and rock of the ride lulled him, and before he knew it, Everett had leaned into Lawrence's chest as his eyes dropped low, and finally, shut.

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CHAPTER 12

HE WOKE SWEATING, BUNDLED IN A COCOON OF BLANKETS, AND STARING into flickering flames.

“You’re up.” Lawrence crouched by him, almost as soon as his eyes opened. “You passed out on the ride up. You were blue when we finally got here. You need more meat on you, Army.”

His throat was dry, ragged and torn like he’d crossed a desert instead of forded a river. “Water,” he croaked. Lawrence passed him a bottle. “Where are we?” he asked, after he drank. He was greedy, and water ran in rivers down his chin, cooling his fire-hot skin.

“At the high camp, like I told you.” Lawrence pointed across the fire. A sagging single-wide trailer squatted in the dirt, the paint flecked and missing in patches, the wood around the base rotted away. It had become one with the mountain a long time ago. “It’s not much, but it’s just a camp. Place to shelter if the weather turns, back when this pasture was used.”

“They’re looking for us by now for sure.”

Lawrence nodded. “I heard a few sirens on the ride. They echo up here sometimes. But we’re so far away we won’t hear anythin’ no more.”

“They’re going to arrest you when they find you. Or shoot you.”

The flames licked into Lawrence’s eyes. He stared at Everett. “You believe I’m a killer?”

A breath, a moment. A lifetime. The space between an exhale and the squeeze of a trigger. Everett searched inside himself, carved up his thoughts, set aside his traitorous body, the ribbon of desire that had unspooled within him and fogged his thoughts. Cleaved muscle from bone and looked deeper inside himself, down to his raw instincts. He sought the truth.

He wanted to trust himself again. He wanted to, so fucking badly.

"I don't know," he finally said. "You've got the means, motive, and opportunity for it."

"Do I?"

He counted it off. "Motive: you've got reasons to want Dell and Aaron dead and there's a lot of history between you three." Fuck, he was sick of history, sick of small towns and the way they got their claws in a man, clung to him for his whole life. Lawrence was more than all the gossip the town made him out to be, more than being ignored and bellowed at. Wasn't he?

"Means and opportunity? At any time you could have shot and killed Dell and Aaron in the back country and no one would know. There are drug camps in these mountains, too. Braddock sent his deputies up and they found a few, took photos. Could you be working with drug runners? Could you be trying to make some extra cash the easy way instead of the honest way?"

"You accuse me of that again, you better be standing, and you better have your gun in hand, Army."

"High noon duel, Law? Really?" He held Lawrence's stone-hard stare. "Which proves my final point: I know what happened between you and Endless Sky. You are a violent man, Lawrence Jackson."

"I already told you that last bit," he growled. "And you'd need all your fingers and toes to count up how many hands Endless Sky has thrown off their ranch. There's a dozen cowboys who have split out of town cursing Endless Sky, damnin' them all the way to Cheyenne. Burke and Howell are hard men to work for, but they inspire a twisted loyalty in the men they get to stay. It's a brand of loyalty though. I never understood it, or why Carson was so devoted to 'em. Nah, I'm glad I was thrown out when I was younger. I'm no maverick to be broken to Endless Sky's brand. I'm my own man."

"That you are," Everett breathed. "But is that man a killer?"

"If you think that little of me, why'd you come along?"

"Killers behind me and you in front of me. What choice did I have?"

"I'm *no* murderer," Lawrence whispered. His words tangled with the flames, rose like smoke to the stars. He breathed like he was confessing, the words drawn from the center of his soul. "I've *never* killed a man."

"Ever caused a man to kill himself? Hang himself?"

Lawrence's eyes flashed. "I had *nothin'* to do with Carson's death." He looked away. His eyes pinched. "I thought I could save him, when I saw 'im through the trees. He didn't come back the night 'fore, and I stayed up all night, till the first hint of light. Rode out, searchin'." He shook his head. "When I found him, I grabbed his legs and lifted, as hard as I could. Yelled at him to hold on, just hold on, I'd figure somethin' out. But his hand was cold 'n covered in mornin' frost when it touched me. Knocked my hat off. I can still feel his fingers, like ice, runnin' through my hair."

Lawrence's eyes, filled with firelight, met his again. "I was just holdin' dead weight."

"Why did he ask you to meet there?"

"I don't know." Heaving a sigh, Lawrence shook his head, flicked his eyes from Everett's and stared into the flames. "I thought—" He cleared his throat. "I thought he was sayin' goodbye. I thought he was gettin' ready to leave. We had an understandin', and it worked, for the most part—"

"What the *fuck* does that mean?" Everett exploded. He sat up, pushing the blankets off his naked shoulders until they pooled at his waist. The night's chill bit into his skin. "Why the fuck does everyone say that? You two had an *understanding*?"

Lawrence stared at him for a long, long moment.

And then he lowered his eyes, dragging his gaze over Everett's shoulders, his naked chest. He traced the heave of his breaths, the swell of his pecs. Fell lower, all the way down until they stopped at Everett's waist, pinching like they wanted to keep going, look deeper. Lawrence's hands closed into fists, and he swallowed. Licked his lips. Finally, looked away, down into the dirt.

Oh.

Everett's breath hitched. "You two were lovers."

"We—" Lawrence laughed bitterly. "Had an understandin'. Cowboys sometimes will help each other out on the range, you see. It's a hard life, and you only see a woman when you go into town or if you can convince one to marry you and she wants to saddle up to that kind of life. Me, I never was for women. Knew it all my life. But there weren't many cowboys who wanted to go as far as I did. Or who looked at things out there as anythin' other than gettin' some relief."

"And you wanted..."

“What anyone wants. Someone special.” Lawrence shrugged. “I just wanted that someone to be a him.”

“And you and Carson?”

Nodding, Lawrence said, “We figured it out slowly. Met up in town, drank some beers. Fooled around in the back of our trucks. We were too shit scared to bring it up to each other, but we just kept slowly doin’ more, until —”

That’s why Lawrence had unloaded so much fury on Dell and Aaron. That’s why he’d come for Carson.

“After Howell fired them all, Carson came to me. We thought...” He sighed. “We thought maybe we could make a go of it, I guess. Keep it secret. Turns out we wasn’t all that good together. I mean, good enough. But... It didn’t feel right, us together. And Carson was still wrestlin’ with gettin’ fired, havin’ to leave Endless Sky. Yeah, he was depressed all right.” His expression twisted, fell. “We both knew it. We both felt it. We wasn’t goin’ nowhere together. He’d packed his things up already. We used to ride up to the northern pastures together, just gaze over the hills, the fields. It was so fucking beautiful up there, before—” He swallowed hard. “He texted me to meet him up there when we was both in town runnin’ errands, and I was too chicken shit to go when the time came. I didn’t want to hear it, even though I knew what was what. He was endin’ everythin’. He was leavin’. I didn’t need him to tell me that.”

The fire crackled. A log split in half.

Lawrence’s hands fisted, trembled in front of him. “You think there’s *any* possibility that Carson really killed himself? You think... I coulda stopped it?”

He’d been agonizing over the same question, the same thought. Was it a murder or was it a suicide? What about the note? Where did the slender-footed horse come from? Why was the same track at the second murder?

He closed his eyes. Felt his way through to the truth. “No. I don’t think he killed himself.”

Lawrence paced to the other side of the fire. His face was carved from the night, half shadow, half flame. “I didn’t kill Carson,” he growled. “I got history here, and every time someone looks at me, all they see is my past. Gettin’ thrown off Endless Sky, fightin’ until my knuckles are raw, gettin’ in my own way more times than not. Now some people are thinkin’ that

makes me a killer. I'll ask you one more time, Everett: are you one of them?"

Their eyes met over the flames. Everett's skin prickled, like he was prey exposed to the circling hawk.

"No," Everett said. "I'm not."

Lawrence breathed out slowly. He tipped his head back, the long line of his neck, scratchy with stubble, rising and falling as he swallowed. He stared at the star-strewn sky, the velvet river over their heads. "Thank you," he said, looking down again. "It's nice to have one person believe in me."

"I don't think you're a killer. I didn't say anything else."

A sad smile smeared across Lawrence's face, like an echo. "You know, I envy you. You get to ride on out of here when this is done. You'll be nothin' more than a memory passed around the bar soon, five seconds of someone askin' someone if they 'member the time that Stock Detective from Helena poked around. You won't linger here. You won't be remembered, not really."

"Why don't you leave?" Everett's breath hitched. "Why don't you run? If you had nothing to do with this, then get out of town. Leave and never come back. Start over somewhere else."

"I can never leave. This land, it's in my bones. Once you come to the Crazies, the Crazies get inside of you. I'll die in these mountains, I know it." He pursed his lips, stared at the flames. "I just hope I don't die this week."

Silence. The fire spat sparks.

"Odd advice, a lawman tellin' me to run." Lawrence peered at him, the kind of stare that could see inside a man. "You know, since you came here, I ain't been able to figure you out. Not one damn bit."

"There's nothing to figure."

"Now *you're* lying to *me*." Lawrence frowned. Searched Everett.

Everett held his breath, holding in his scream. His teeth bit down, molars scraping so hard they almost cracked. *There's nothing to see. There's nothing to find. There's nothing for anyone to see, not anymore, because I left everything I was in the blood and the dust a world away—*

"You're runnin'," Lawrence said. "Runnin' from something or someone, I can't tell. But I do know you're runnin'. You're all stiff and stone, tryin' to unmake yourself, rip out all the parts of you that hurt. You'll

keep doin' that until there's nothin' left, you know. Shit, I've done it, Everett, I can see the signs."

"You don't know what you're talking about—"

"I bet you a hundred dollars you can't look into your own eyes in the mirror."

Enough of this. He didn't have to answer to Lawrence, not for a damn thing. He pushed to his feet, swaying with a head rush. "Where are my clothes?"

"Inside." Lawrence nodded to the trailer. Everett felt his gaze between his shoulder blades as he reached for the trailer's door.

"You're nothing but a wild mountain wind, Everett," Lawrence said softly. "You're whippin' around up here, all lost and alone in these mountains. You ain't got nothin' and no one in this world, do you? And now you're here, graspin' at the dark and tryin' to make somethin' out of the nothin' that's your life. What do you care about the Crazies? About Carson Riley? Or about me? You're not here for any of us. You don't care about this murder, or this case. No, you're tryin' to fix a *different* murder, ain't you? You're relivin' your past."

His hand went white on the doorknob. His hand, his arm, shook. Fury started in the depth of his soul, bubbled up his chest. His blood boiled, and his bones cracked, split apart under the fires of his wrath. Everything in him burned. Finally, he could *feel* again, and it was exactly like *that* day, the same wrath saturating his soul, coloring his entire world red.

Ash and dust on his tongue. Blood staining his hands, soaking through his skin, down to his bones. Deeper, even.

"What happened to you, Everett?"

He spun. Saw Lawrence flinch and take a step back. His eyes went wide as Everett stalked around the fire, striding for him. What must he look like, striding toward Lawrence, fury filling him so completely? He couldn't control his body, not anymore. He was quaking, trembling. He'd dropped the blanket sometime behind him. He didn't care anymore.

Lawrence held his ground as Everett faced him. "You don't know *anything* about me," Everett spat. He didn't recognize his own voice. "You don't know a *God damn* thing."

"Who was it?"

The world swam, the mountains and stars wavering, their shapes shifting, swapping places across time, across continents. No longer the

Crazies, it was Kandahar, it was Afghanistan, and it wasn't Lawrence in front of him. It was Lieutenant Holt. Wise-cracking, always smiling, always laughing Lieutenant Holt. No matter how horrible their mission was, no matter how shitty their patrol, no matter how exhausted, how strung to the bitter end they all were, Holt had a way of making things lighter. He'd been their leader, their platoon's soul.

He'd been Everett's lover.

In secret. In the spaces between missions, in quick kisses in the darkened motor pool, in the backseat of Humvees. Stolen moments. Stolen love. An officer and an enlisted man. He'd broken the rules. And he'd paid the price.

He could almost see him there, lying facedown, blood surrounding him, the pool growing and growing, so much pouring out of him so fast. He'd thought, at first, he could save him. But not with that flood.

He'd stumbled, fallen to his knees—

Lawrence caught him, held him up. "You're seeing ghosts, Army," he whispered in Everett's ear. "Come back home."

Ricochet, and he snapped back, a rubber band *twang* as he was jerked back into his body, into his mind. Into the Crazies and Lawrence's arms around his fire-hot back.

"I'm the murderer," Everett breathed. "I killed the man who killed my lover. I hunted him down."

Lawrence's lips thinned. "Well, he didn't stand a chance against you. I seen you track a man." His hands stayed on Everett's back, rough palms ghosting over Everett's skin. Fingertips played in the valley of his spine.

"I chased him for days. I was AWOL. They thought I snapped when he—when my lover—died. And I think I did. I think I'm still broken."

He saw eyes widen, felt his breath stutter, as Everett revealed his lover was male.

"I hunted his killer across half of Afghanistan. I never stopped. And when I found him—"

Neither man blinked.

"I'll find Carson's killer," Everett vowed. "I swear it. I'll do it for you."

Lawrence's Adam's apple rose and fell. He breathed in, and his eyes traced Everett's face, his look painting his skin like a caress. "And what can I do for you?"

"You already saved my life—"

“Because I been there, Everett. I been staring at the bottom and beggin’ for the end. I been screaming at the night, hatin’ that I just stubbornly keep on existin’. I know this song ‘n’dance,” he whispered. “It took someone else to get me out of that pit, and I bet you ain’t got no one around you helpin’ you right now. You push everyone who knows you away? Or did you run as far as you could?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Everett hissed. “You don’t know me—”

“I know a bit. I know enough to know what you need.”

“And what the fuck is that?”

Lawrence stared. Firelight flickered over his skin, danced in his dark eyes. “When’s the last time you felt *anythin’*?” he whispered.

It had been too long. Two years and eight months and fifteen days too long. Since he’d kissed a man, since he’d touched another man the way he wanted. Or since he’d been touched the way he wanted.

Since he’d stolen a kiss and a wink from Holt after the mission brief before they’d climbed into the Humvees and made their way up the mountains to that God damn village.

Lawrence cradled him in his arms, his hands stroking his skin, playing in the small of his back. His skin was flushed, sweat pricking the surface, overheated from the fire and the blankets, but Lawrence’s touch burned hotter, left trails of sparks where his fingers ran down his skin. Every point of contact was a brand done on the inside of him.

His eyes traced Lawrence’s face, from his open mouth, the soft pants falling from him, to his eyes. Lawrence’s pupils were so wide and dark they swallowed the burnished mahogany of his eyes, the color of the deep woods. With the firelight dancing in their gleam, his eyes looked like the forest set ablaze, the whole world turned to flame. The Crazies were inside of Lawrence, had shaped him, had made him into the man he was.

And Lawrence *knew* himself, the very center of himself. He was everything Everett was not, solidity made flesh, certainty shaped into a man. Everett chased ghosts and steered clear of shadows, flickered away from the past like a candle shying its flame. Meeting Lawrence was like meeting an immovable force of nature. He was the mountain, the peak, the steadiness. And Everett had blown up against him, wind-torn and ravaged, a broken thing thrown away, discarded from life and everything he’d hoped for.

Once the Crazies get in you, you can’t get them out.

Lawrence waited, his fingers tracing the knobs of Everett's spine. One palm slid down. Hesitated. Cupped the curve of his ass.

His touch was a promise. *I'll make you feel somethin'*. He heard it in his mind in Lawrence's drawl, his swaying accent. He was already inside of him, already the voice in his mind.

Groaning, Everett captured Lawrence's lips, tasted him, pulled him close with both hands. Lawrence wrapped him up, Everett's body almost disappearing in his massive hold. Everett was no small man, but Lawrence was almost double his size.

He had to feel Lawrence, touch him. Touch a man again, and be touched.

He needed some crazy in him.

They kissed as Everett stripped Lawrence's shirt, undoing buttons and shoving the flannel down Lawrence's arms. Lawrence shook the shirt off and then wrapped his arms around Everett again, pulling him until their skin touched and their chests rubbed together.

Everett threw his head back. He was burning. Lawrence was going to burn him alive.

Lawrence ran his hands over all of Everett, his back, his ass, up to his shoulders. He rolled his hips into Everett's, the jeans and his belt buckle rough against Everett's naked skin. Everett hissed. Lawrence pulled back. "Sorry," he whispered. His voice shook.

"Take them off." Everett reached for his fly. "Get them off, now."

Lawrence fought with his belt, his fly, his jeans. He toed off his boots, thumbed his waistband. "What do you want, Everett?"

"Make me feel again. Feel *something* again. I haven't felt anything until I met you."

Lawrence pulled down his jeans and stepped out of them, left them on the ground as he grabbed Everett and pulled their bodies together from head to toe. Skin rubbed against skin, golden in the firelight, warm from the flames and the heat of their blood. Their cocks pushed against each other, twin lengths hard enough to cut wood. Lawrence shivered, and he bucked into Everett's hips.

His hands dropped, held Everett at the waist as his lips moved down Everett's neck, over his collarbone. Down to his pec, where he bit the curved muscle. Nuzzled Everett's nipple, and then sucked it hard.

Everett groaned.

Hands grabbed both of his ass cheeks, cupping them. A grunt and a lift, and then Lawrence hefted him into his arms. Everett wrapped his legs around Lawrence's waist and his arms around his shoulders. He stared into Lawrence's eyes.

"Take me," he said. "Fuck me. I want to *feel* it, Law."

Lawrence kissed his neck, his collarbone, feather-light. "Let me make love to you."

"I want to *feel* it." He needed to feel alive again, like he hadn't, not since the spreading pool of blood, and the taste of dust on his lips.

"You'll feel it," Lawrence promised. "You'll feel *me*. I swear it."

Lawrence carried him to the trailer. Everett stroked his face, peppered his head with kisses. Traced his jaw, the stubble growing in. Ran his fingers through Lawrence's dark hair. The door opened. Everett ducked his head, and Lawrence carried him over the threshold.

The trailer was worn inside, like a time capsule from the 1970s. Battered wood paneling lined the walls, peeling in areas. Plastic lawn chairs surrounded a laminate table next to a tiny galley kitchen. One narrow hallway led left to a bedroom, little more than a flat platform with a large mattress on it. Sleeping bags cluttered the floor. Cowboys had shared the mattress, bundled in sleeping bags, in the past.

Lawrence carried him down the hall and dropped him on the mattress. There was no sheet. He felt the springs coil and complain, groan and scream as he bounced.

Then Lawrence was on top of him, crawling over him and pushing him down. They kissed again, bodies gliding together, cocks rubbing, chest to chest. Everett wrapped his leg around Lawrence's hip as Lawrence threaded his thigh between Everett's legs.

Lawrence ran kisses down Everett's chest, his stomach. Over his belly button, to his hips. Then there was heat and suction, and he grabbed Lawrence's hair, hissed, and spread his legs wide, feet planted flat on the mattress. He quivered, right on the edge, a breath away from—

Lawrence pulled back with a pop, sitting on his heels and stroking Everett's thighs. Cursing, Everett shuddered, backing down from the edge of orgasm. "Cruel," he gasped, smiling as a rush coursed through him. He felt this. Felt alive, finally.

"You have a beautiful smile," Lawrence said softly. His hands massaged Everett's thighs, ran up to his knees. "I hadn't seen it yet."

Swallowing, Everett's smile fell.

He rolled over. Pushed to his knees and lifted his ass. "Fuck me."

The mattress whined as Lawrence stood. Everett lowered his head, let it hang between his shoulders. He closed his eyes and waited.

Sounds, but not behind him. From deeper in the trailer near the kitchen. He turned, searching for Lawrence.

He was rifling through the cupboards, searching for something. Finally he grabbed a bottle and came back, holding it out. "Cooking oil," he said. "It's old. But it will do the job."

Everett's ass clenched. He went back to his elbows and knees, ass up. "Hurry."

Hands grabbed his waist. He clenched his teeth.

Lawrence turned him gently, urging him to lay on his back. Hands stroked down his chest, massaged his skin. Caressed him. "Not like that," Lawrence murmured. "I want to see your face."

"No." Everett tried to twist away. He threw an arm up, covered his face with his forearm. "No, that's not—"

"Everett." Lawrence peeled his arm away as he crawled between his spread legs. "Let me see you."

"Just hurry up already!" Everett snapped. He pushed his hips into Lawrence's, grabbed his own cock and jerked it hard. "*Fuck* me! Don't you want this?"

Lawrence poured the oil into his hand, slicked Everett and himself, and settled between his legs. He lined himself up. Everett hissed, arched his back, and held his breath.

Fingers laced through his. Lawrence fell over him, propping himself on his elbows, chest to chest, face to face. His lips pressed to Everett's as his cock pushed inside his hole, agonizingly slow.

It had been a *long* time. Everett gasped, groaned. Squeezed his eyes closed and panted. His teeth clenched hard. He whined, panted into Lawrence's kisses and his open mouth.

Slowly, so fucking slowly, Lawrence pushed in until he was as deep as he could go.

He kissed Everett until they shared breaths. He stayed still, his hard cock throbbing inside Everett's stretched hole. Everett's legs wrapped around his waist.

He couldn't speak, not around the kisses they shared, the breaths. Lawrence was everywhere, all around him. Over him, inside of him. He tasted him, smelled him. Was a part of him. He squeezed his ass, felt Lawrence embedded to the hilt. He had Lawrence buried inside of him, deeper than he'd ever had anyone. Lawrence was big everywhere, bigger than he'd ever had.

He wanted it. He wanted to break open.

He wanted Lawrence to be the man to do it.

Lawrence started to move in slow circles, barely at all, his hips pulling back and pushing in the barest amount. He raked over Everett's deepest core, and Everett shuddered. He squeezed his hands in Lawrence's, their fingers still laced together and pressed to the mattress on either side of his head. Each thrust of Lawrence's hips fucked a moan out of Everett. A curse. A plea for more.

He arched his back and pushed against Lawrence when Lawrence pressed in. Rocked his hips in time with Lawrence's thrusts.

It was Lawrence's turn to gasp and curse, bury his face in the side of Everett's neck. Kisses mapped the skin from Everett's ear to the pulse on his neck, fluttering beneath his skin.

"Everett," Lawrence breathed. He pulled back, until he could look into Everett's face. "Look at me."

Everett refused. He kept his eyes closed, turned his head away. Tried to push his hips faster, grind into Lawrence harder. Tried to speed up the fuck, make it harder. Twist it around, until he felt something other than the golden heat and perfection Lawrence had speared him with.

It shouldn't feel good. He didn't deserve good. Not anymore.

"Everett." Lawrence slowed down, moving in deep, steady plunges in and out. Almost all the way out, and then back in. He held Everett's hands to the mattress and stared down at him. Even with his eyes closed, he felt the weight of Lawrence's gaze, the heat from his burning eyes.

Fuck, Lawrence's cock was good, no, better than good. He was great. *Lawrence* was great, moving inside him in perfect ways, making him *feel* in ways he'd never felt before. His soul shivered as he gasped, arched into Lawrence's thrusts.

"Open your eyes."

He didn't want to. He didn't want to feel anything beyond this, the carnal rush of his body. He didn't want it to be this wonderful. He didn't

want to look into Lawrence's eyes and see something there. See a spark falling from those burning eyes, see something that could ignite his soul, that could threaten to unmake his world again.

He didn't want to feel *anything* for Lawrence.

But here he was. Too close, he was too close, to *everything*—

His body quaked. His breath hiccupped. The edge of an orgasm vibrated inside him like a plucked string, but never tipped over the edge. Lawrence was keeping him there, holding him on the brink.

Everett gave in. His eyes fluttered open.

Lawrence gazed at him, his breaths caressing Everett's cheek and lips in tiny pants that trembled. They'd kept the lights off in the trailer, and the glow of the fire flickered through the curtainless windows, feathering flames through Lawrence's amber eyes.

Lawrence smiled. He kissed Everett gently. Held his gaze and never looked away.

He looked at Everett like he was something worth looking at. Like he was something Lawrence *wanted*.

It was too much, and something splintered inside of Everett, something he'd carried for two years and eight months and fifteen days. Some fracture, some fault line, something that had torn in his soul. He felt it break all the way, cleave him open to the quick.

Lawrence was there, though, filling the emptiness, the hole he'd hovered over. Pulling him back from the edge of whatever he'd been running toward. A darkness, a blackness he'd wanted to drown in.

A hiccupping sob, and then he couldn't see, not through the water in his eyes. He kissed Lawrence, squeezed his hands, kissed him again and bucked in his arms, writhed and groaned and screamed, shivering on the edge of something far bigger than an orgasm.

Lawrence held him through it. He wrapped himself around Everett as he sped up his thrusts, as he grabbed Everett's legs and spread them, pushed his thighs to his chest and buried his face in Everett's neck. His lips found his ear, and Lawrence whispered, "Let go, Everett. I got you."

That warm voice, layered in wood smoke and honey and mountain air, summer days and fire-lit nights. It was a voice that went to the center of him, and Everett was powerless against it. Screaming, he arched his back, pushed into Lawrence's next thrust, and tipped over the edge.

A moment later, Lawrence grunted, and he thrust in and held, unloading inside of Everett. He felt the burn inside him, felt the wet slick.

They breathed together, a sweaty, slick mess, hair stuck to foreheads and arms and legs wrapped tight around each other. Lawrence slid his weight off Everett, but Everett held him close. "Don't go," he murmured. "Stay."

"'M not goin' anywhere," Lawrence said. He gazed at Everett like Everett was the sun. Kissed him like he was special.

Everett turned into the kiss. And felt his heart beat.

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CHAPTER 13

HE WATCHED EVERETT SLEEP, WATCHED THE SUNRISE SPILL GOLD OVER THE high meadow and the run-down line camp. Light flickered through the dusty windows, tracing Everett's eyelashes, the curve of his jaw. Everett had turned into him, pillowed his face on Lawrence's shoulder, his cheek on his chest, and fallen asleep with an arm and a leg thrown over Lawrence's body.

It felt good to be held close. Damn, it felt real good.

He'd ached for this, for holding someone tight, for being someone's special someone. For being a shelter at the end of the day to a man, letting him unburden himself in Lawrence's arms.

He'd always wanted a man who could face him down under the sun and lie down next to him at night.

Hadn't met a man yet who wanted to look him in the eyes and stay by his side. Or who wanted to live with him and not fight him.

But when Everett drove up, he'd squared his shoulders and pushed back when Lawrence's fire sparked, and the way his mouth ran ahead of his brain. Thirty-five years he'd been trying to pull back his own reins. He hadn't figured out how yet. Or how to quench those flames inside of him, bank his temper when it wanted to consume him.

Trying to understand Everett Dawson had been like trying to cage the wind. There were moments he'd thought there wasn't anything there, that Everett was just a hard mask, a fierce man of iron will and hunting instinct. But here and there, his humanity seeped out.

Bled out, he realized. Everett was a walking wound, spun so tightly he held himself together through force of will alone. He was a tornado flying apart, but the only thing he was destroying was his soul.

He should have seen the signs. He'd been that way, once. He knew the shadows Everett ran from: Everett cast them himself. As soon as Everett realized that, realized he was the source of his own pain, and as soon as he faced himself, things would turn around. But not before then.

Maybe last night he'd touched him, at least a bit. A bit more than just a quick fuck, hopefully. Everett hadn't looked like he'd shared that story before. Or had let himself go since.

Knowing Everett, having him, was like a cleansing air rustling through Lawrence's soul. He'd felt, for the night, what he'd craved: a man who could live inside his heart.

Morning brought the bitter truths back to light. Moonlight and flame had obscured the hard edges, concealed as well as revealed. There were hard times ahead for both of them.

Hopefully they could face it together.

Everett stirred as a sunbeam tickled his cheek and draped across his eyelid. He squinted, tried to peel away. Lifted his head from Lawrence's shoulder.

Lawrence smiled as best he could, bracing himself. "Mornin'."

Everett blinked. *He regrets it. He wishes he hadn't. He'll want to forget everythin'.*

"You're a very good lover," Everett breathed. His hand came up, sliding through Lawrence's hair until he cradled the back of his head. He tugged, and Lawrence went, melding his lips with Everett's as he rolled on top of Everett.

He kissed him slowly, tasting him, playing with his tongue and nibbling on his lips, biting up his jaw and sucking on his ear. Everett shivered beneath him and snaked his legs around Lawrence's waist. Two hands grasped Lawrence's naked ass. Squeezed.

"It had been a long time for me," Everett whispered, drawing Lawrence's face back to his. He pressed their foreheads together. Kissed Lawrence gently. "I thought I wanted something else. But..."

"You wanted it to hurt 'cause you're hurtin' deep down inside." Lawrence rubbed his nose against Everett's. "I was like that once. And I chased that kind of pain, too. Never did me no good. Don't go chasin' that."

"What happened to you?"

Their words were shared breaths, the sunlight speckling their chests, their interlaced hands. Lawrence molded his hips to Everett's, hard cock to

hard cock.

“I was the man no one wanted. Not my teachers, not my drunk mother. Not my father, and who knows if he’s even alive anymore. Not Dan Howell, or Jim Burke, or any of the other the Endless Sky hands. Not a soul in these mountains wanted me, it seemed. And I was desperate for someone, anyone in the world. Spent some nights at the truck stop blowin’ guys just to feel like I mattered for five minutes. I would have given anythin’ to feel alive.”

“How did you stop? How did you come back? I’m so far gone—”

“You’re not.” Lawrence kissed his forehead, the tip of his nose. “You just gotta turn around. That’s all it is. Turn around. Time moves in one direction, but you’re tryin’ to fight it and keep runnin’ away from the present. You’re a fish swimmin’ upstream, but you gotta turn back. You’re still you, Everett. You’re just afraid of what you’ll see when you look at yourself.”

“And what will I see?”

Lawrence kissed him, slowly. “Yourself. You’ll see yourself and your life. Every man has to face himself and what he’s done. Every man makes a choice in his life: do you keep on goin’ with what you’re doin’? Or do you change? Some men give up. You ain’t a quitter. Stop wastin’ your life.”

Everett hissed, and Lawrence started a slow rock, a gentle roll of his hips. Their cocks slid together, heat rising between them. Everett shuddered, bit his lip.

“It was Delaney that made me turn around,” Lawrence said softly, still rocking. “He was lookin’ for hands. He was an out-of-towner, and everyone was tryin’ to stiff him. Overcharge, under deliver. He was gettin’ a raw deal everywhere he went. So I presented myself. Told him the truth, told him I would work for him for fair wages and never cheat him. Never lie to him. Said I had been a bad man before, but I wanted to be a good one. And I just needed one chance.”

Everett stroked up his sides, carded his fingers through his hair. Laced his hands behind his neck. His thighs squeezed Lawrence’s hips. “And you got it.”

“And I’ve never let it go. I never will.” Another kiss, and he grabbed Everett’s ass. Lifted him. Lined them up, the head of his cock at Everett’s still-slick entrance. “You’ll find what you need when you turn back. You’ll come back to yourself.” He slid in, easier now, Everett’s body open, wet, and wanting.

Everett groaned, and he thrust onto Lawrence's cock. They rocked until Lawrence shifted Everett's legs, raised his calves up to Lawrence's burly shoulders and bent him forward. Everett folded in half as Lawrence grabbed his hands and pinned them to the mattress beside his head, pistoning in and out of Everett's hole in long, deep strokes.

He laced their fingers together, held his hands, and rode Everett through every gasp, groan and buck, every scream, every cry and thrust and shiver. Everett begged to come, to touch himself.

"Please," Everett whispered. He bit his lip. Stared into Lawrence's eyes. His eyes were sex-drunk, pupils blown. "Please, *God*."

"M' name is Law," he teased. He slid in again, all the way in, as deep as he'd ever been, and kissed Everett. Everett quaked in his hold and kissed him back, tried to climb inside Lawrence's body. "Come with me," he murmured. "Let me give that to you."

"Please..."

More thrusts, deep and slow, building in speed until he was driving in and out of Everett hard and fast. Everett shouted, hoarse bellows and cries of *yes* and *more*, his toes curling over Lawrence's shoulders, leg muscles flexing, fingers clenching on Lawrence's hands so hard it hurt.

"Law, I'm coming," Everett gasped. "Fuck, I'm coming!"

Lawrence followed, driving in and holding, his orgasm pulled from him as Everett's body milked him dry. He nearly blacked out, landing on his elbows over Everett as he let Everett's legs fall from his shoulders.

Everett kissed him in between breaths, his hand stroking up and down Lawrence's sweat-soaked back. His fingernails caught on the edges of scars, and he fingered one long knife wound from years past.

"What this?"

"Ancient history." Lawrence shifted, pulled out, and laid on Everett's side. Everett faced him.

"Everything here is history. Everything is connected to the past. Nothing here is simple."

"God no." Lawrence chuckled. "Everyone knows everythin' in these parts. Everyone's connected to everyone else, and some of those connections are darker than others. You go your whole life with the same people day in and day out, and there ain't no hidin' from anythin' up here. No runnin' away, neither. Your life is just a series of memories passed

between people, good or bad. And you live with the consequences for those memories.”

“What is it about this place?” Everett breathed. “The Crazies. Makes you wonder if those stories are true and this mountain really does make people go nuts.”

Lawrence shrugged. “Maybe it does. I’m not all that sane.” He grinned. Everett chuckled, and it smacked Lawrence in the chest, the punch of that smile. His thoughts fled, scattered, and he stared at Everett, struck dumb, for a long moment.

“But I think it’s the freedom,” he finally said, shaking himself back to rights. His heart still fluttered, still cradled Everett’s smile. “Have you ever felt more free than you do out here? It’s just you and the world under this big blue sky. You get to know yourself out here, break yourself down until find out what you’re made of. That’s freedom. And that’s strength, facing the inside of yourself. It makes a man, being out here.”

“Now you really sound like a cowboy.”

Lawrence laughed. “As opposed to my high school dropout, no diploma, ranchin’ and ropin’ ways? Ain’t much in this world I can do, ‘cept ranchin’.”

Everett’s eyes sparked. He smiled again, and Lawrence’s breath hitched. “And fucking.”

“You just say the word, Army. I’ll make love to you anytime.”

Everett’s smile softened. Had he heard what Lawrence was trying to say? The moment lingered, their eyes locked together. Lawrence almost reached out, almost dragged him in for another kiss—

Everett sighed and laid back, scrubbed his hands over his face. “We can’t stay here forever. They’re still looking for us. And they’re going to arrest you when they find us.”

“Hopefully my truck at Birch Creek will send them off track for a while.”

“Hopefully. But in the meantime, we need a plan. Unless we can find who the killer is, this whole mountain seems hell-bent on pinning the blame on you.”

The peaceful morning, the sun-dappled happiness, fled. Lawrence sat up, elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands together. “Whatever is going on, from the rustlin’ to the drugs to the killin’, it’s all being done by people

who know enough about these mountains to move around. And by people who know our history. Who know what's been happenin' here."

"Locals. It has to be. I came from Helena and I knew nothing about what the Crazies had been through. It has to be a local."

Lawrence frowned. "I don't think there's a man in these mountains as twisted and full of hate that could do that. Kill a man in cold blood? Shoot him in the back? Hang Carson off his horse?" Lawrence shook his head. "That's a special kind of evil."

"And it takes a special kind of hate." Everett peered at him. Lawrence could see his mind working, watch his thoughts come together in his eyes. His eyes were laser focused and a million miles away, chewing through pieces of the puzzle. "Walk me through the timeline again. When did the rustling start?"

"A year ago. Last summer, when we was turnin' the herds out to the wide pastures. Rustlers hit every ranch. Endless Sky, Lazy Twenty-Two, Heart's Rafter, Rocking H, and Flying Joker."

"Tell me about those last two ranches. You haven't mentioned them before."

"Rocking H is Martin's outfit. He and Howell have been buttin' heads over a water access dispute. There's an outflow that comes off Crazy Peak, and it meanders through Rocking H before flowin' into Endless Sky's basin. Martin tried to put dams on it, keep the water for his land. That didn't sit well with Howell. They been in court ever since."

"And the other?"

"Flying Joker? They're a dyin' ranch down in the foothills. Never had much luck there. The good grazin' was always deeper in the Crazies, as backwards as that was. They're Howell's neighbors, and they get along all right, I suppose. They run through cowboys like a dog shits. Get a lot of the Endless Sky rejects and the saddle tramps passin' through that don't make it up the mountain."

"Every ranch lost stock?"

"Every ranch. Some more than others. Endless Sky lost a hundred head. We lost thirty. Flying Joker lost about two dozen, but they don't have much to begin with. Heart's Rafter is broken now. Don't know how many they lost, but they got the brunt of it."

"And the rustling, it began before the troubles with the truckers? Before the big fight?"

Lawrence nodded.

“When were Carson, Dell, and Aaron fired?”

“January. Hard time to be an out-of-work cowboy.”

“But they landed on their feet pretty quickly.”

He nodded again. “Carson came here, and Dell and Aaron went to Heart’s Rafter.”

“Rustling kept going? You kept losing stock?”

“It slowed in winter, but yeah. We all kept losing stock.”

“Was there ever a break? A month, or however long, where you didn’t lose any cattle?”

He flipped back through his mind, trying to separate the drives, the seasons, the herds coming in and going out. Terry riding up and prattling in his ear, going off about missing cattle again and again. “February. We didn’t lose any stock in February.”

Everett breathed deep, still flat on his back, staring at the trailer’s ceiling. “And when did Dell and Aaron go missing?”

“Three months ago. April.”

Everett *hmmmed*. “Why do you think they were murdered when Braddock thinks they just got out of town?”

“Bill Warner at Heart’s Rafter says they vanished overnight. He says he saw them come in for the evening, he remembers talkin’ to ‘em over dinner in the bunkhouse. The next mornin’, nothin’. No tracks, no note, nothin’. Gone.”

“Any sign of a struggle? Or missing horses?”

“Not that Braddock said, or Bill said, neither. No missin’ horses. They just up and vanished in the middle of the night. It spooked the hell out of Bill. Wasn’t that long after he decided to pull out and get gone. Men abducted off your ranch, maybe murdered?” His lips thinned. His throat clenched, and he looked away. He closed his eyes, opened them as the image flashed behind his eyelids again: Carson, swinging in the wind. “Like Carson was. He was taken and he was killed. I think the same thing happened to Dell and Aaron, ‘cept we haven’t found the bodies yet.”

Everett stared at him, not saying a word.

“You don’t like Dell and Aaron, do you?”

“I think they’re rotten sons of bitches without a lick of God damn sense between them. Carson kept them in line, said they could cut a horse and run a herd decent enough. But every time I saw them, they pissed me off. Now,

that does not mean I wanted ‘em dead. Or that I’m happy they’re gone. I’d rather have ‘em here pissing me off and know the Crazies are safe.”

Finally, Everett smiled again. Lawrence’s heart skipped a beat. “I didn’t expect this from you, you know.”

“What?”

“I thought you’d be more black and white. I didn’t expect the nuance. For you to think so large.”

“Darlin,” Lawrence drawled. He arched an eyebrow toward Everett. “Black and white is *you*.” Standing, he kissed Everett’s cheek, chuckling at Everett’s shocked look. “C’mon. We gotta get goin’.”

They washed from a bucket of frigid well water pumped from behind the trailer. Lawrence had already pulled out spare clothes for Everett, cowboy jeans and button-downs left behind from years past, and had laid out Everett’s pistol and cell on top of the pile.

“We need a plan.”

“We were huntin’ the rustler hideouts when we heard that shot yesterday. Should we finish the job? Check what’s been happenin’ at the rustler camps?”

“Yes. And I want to see a map again.”

Lawrence’s map was in Trigger’s saddlebag, and Trigger’s saddle was tucked in his horse barn down in the foothills of the Crazies. He rifled through the cupboards and drawers in the trailer until he found an older map, about ten years out of date, and passed it to Everett. “Here, here, and here,” he said, circling the locations on the map, “are where the camps we was aimin’ to search are located.”

“Show me the Heart’s Rafter. I want to know where it is.”

Lawrence drew an *X* on the map. Overhead, the Heart’s Rafter made the third point of a triangle around Crazy Peak, with Endless Sky and the Lazy Twenty-Two the other two points. Heart’s Rafter land bordered Endless Sky, but there was public land between Heart’s Rafter and the Lazy Twenty-Two.

The land where Carson had been murdered.

Further down the mountain from Carson’s murder site, in the same strip of public land, lay Whiskey Gulch.

“You know, Howell has always made noise about closin’ those public lands. Lockin’ up the Crazies, keeping the ranch land private. Denyin’ public easements through private property. I didn’t much agree with him,

but...” Lawrence shook his head. “Seems like our murderers been usin’ that land.” His finger traced the cottonwood grove north of the Lazy Twenty-Two.

Carson’s final moments had been in that grove. Had he looked down at the pastures where they used to ride together?

He pushed that away. “Good riders could cut stock out of herds from these pastures,” he said, clearing his clenched throat. He circled pastures high on the slopes of the Crazies on Endless Sky and Lazy Twenty-Two range. “And then drive that cattle through the Gap. Called Cowboy Gap by us locals, but it doesn’t have a name on the map.” He traced his finger down the knife edge of a mountain pass until it petered out near Heart’s Rafter next to the public lands. An outflow off one of the hundred unnamed mountain rivers wandered through the area, bending around and through the area. “They take this route, then the rustlers can drive the cattle out to clear country. It’s empty out there. You can go miles without seein’ a soul.”

“That river passes by Whiskey Gulch.” Everett stepped back. That look had fallen across his features, the hard look, the face of a hunter. “That’s where we’re going,” Everett said. “And I know what we’ll find.”

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CHAPTER 14

TREACHEROUS WAS THE WORD HE'D GIVEN TO EVERETT, DESCRIBING THE trail down to Whiskey Gulch.

He'd been too generous.

The Crazies were an eldritch place, filled with more than two centuries of ghosts and choked with even older mysteries. The trail to Whiskey Gulch seemed to gather all those haunted stories, every whispered fear ever spoken, and collected them in the shadows of the pines and the tangled brush. The mountains were normally alive with movement, animals of all size weaving to and fro: deer nibbling through their trails, picking on grasses and roots. Elk grazing the high pastures. Bear sign on big pines scattered across the north slope. Squirrels and rabbits always scampered in the brush, and birds flittered from branch to branch overhead.

Now, not a whisper of breath stirred on the trail. It seemed like all life in the mountains had fallen silent, had fled. Even the sun seemed to still, the golden light turned to a gloom. Not even an insect buzzed.

The silence was louder than a scream, and scraped down Lawrence's bones. For a man attuned to every sound the mountains made, it was a warning as loud as an alarm.

Even the lonely places, the empty places, had sounds. Had movement.

Shadows clawed for them both, riding together on Trigger. Everett sat in front of Lawrence again, sheltered in his hold. Trigger moved slower but carried them both steadily.

They were walking into silence, and it made him want to fight, lash out before whatever was out there came for them first. He cradled an old shotgun he'd taken from the line camp trailer in the hollow of his arms and

scanned the trees. Everett kept one hand on the reins and one hand on the holster of his pistol.

Their bodies moved together, swaying with Trigger's movements. Everett's back pressed against Lawrence's chest, his hips, his thighs, every part of the man touching part of Lawrence. He was alive with Everett, smelling him, the sweat and dust and leather mixture that was all male, all cowboy, and all Everett.

Everett calmed the inferno of his temper. He was the whistling wind cooling his soul. Kept him alert. Kept him focused. *I won't let you die. I swear it.*

Their path brought them down perpendicular to the trail the rustlers might have used to drive the cattle through, all the way to Whiskey Gulch.

Everett wanted to sneak up on the place. See who or what was down there. Take the lay of the land.

It was afternoon when they reached the rim of Whiskey Gulch, the edge of a gorge carved into the mountains. Sometime long ago, water had carved the mountain in two and left behind the gorge. Almost a thousand feet deep, the gulch was a dark stab in the earth, so narrow the sunlight skirted the edges, avoided the depths. A rushing tributary of the river flowing off Crazy Peak roared at them from the bottom of the gulch, the sound crawling up the sheer walls.

Lawrence dismounted Trigger and peered over the rim. "No rustler is drivin' a herd down there," he said. "The herd would panic. Cattle don't like spaces like that."

"I don't think the herd's been down there. They've been resting nearby. But the camp, and who we're after—" Everett jerked his chin to the gorge. "If you needed to disappear in these mountains, where would you go?"

"There are better places than this. Just gettin' down there is liable to kill a man. This place has been dead man's land for a century. Not even the bootleggers used it."

"What if you were faking your death? And you couldn't be seen, couldn't chance it at all?"

Lawrence frowned. "Who do you mean?"

"I think I know who is rustling the herds and why Carson was murdered. And why you're being framed. If I'm right, we'll find them down there."

“Then let’s go.” He held out his hand for Everett and helped him off Trigger’s back. “We’ll leave him up here.” He tied Trigger’s lead to a tree, giving him enough room to stretch and feed on the grass.

There was one rocky trail, juts of boulders and broken chunks of rock, that slashed across one wall of the gorge all the way to the bottom. Here and there, wooden planks had been stretched from rocky outcropping to outcropping, forming nearly-rotten bridges over a gut-clenching drop. They picked their way down the gorge carefully, hugging the rock wall, sometimes leaping across to the next jutting boulder. By the time they reached the bottom, they were both dripping with sweat and breathing hard.

The gulch was choked with brush, dead tree trunks and limbs from a hundred winters that rolled down the mountain and fell into the earth with each melting snow. The river in the base was calmer than it sounded, and the debris created gentle pools and soft waterfalls, crystal clear water tumbling over ageless wood worn smooth and jutting river rock. In the shade of the ravine’s walls, elder and ash grew, and one willow listed almost sideways at the head of a deep and wide pool. Its feather branches skirted the water’s surface. This far down, there was no wind.

Lawrence stepped wrong on a boulder and slid, his boot slapping the burbling water. Rocks scattered when his boot splashed. The sound was loud as a gunshot and carried, echoing off the ravine’s soaring rock walls.

Everett crouched immediately, covering behind a boulder with his pistol in his hands. Lawrence ducked behind a tree trunk, trying to peek almost as soon as he was down. Everett motioned for him to stay low.

This wasn’t Lawrence’s expertise. This was Everett’s area. Lawrence was a cowboy, not a soldier. Not a lawman. He wasn’t an investigator and didn’t have the mind for this. Or for hunting men. He stayed down.

Silence crawled over them, the same stillness, the same unnatural emptiness from above. There was no reaction to Lawrence’s slip.

Everett crept around his boulder first, peering past an elder tree as he crouched low.

A buzzard screamed and took to the sky, clipping Everett’s head. He ducked and whirled, watching the bird climb out of the ravine.

Lawrence’s gut tightened. The last time he’d seen buzzards, they’d been circling over Carson’s body. If they were here now...

He joined Everett at the elder tree. Everett’s shoulders had gone tense, his spine rigid. He could read the tension in Everett’s body after spending

so many hours pressed against him.

He didn't look to the gulch, not yet. His eyes were fixed on Everett.

"I didn't expect this," Everett breathed.

Ahead of them, on the pebbled banks of the still waters beside the willow, lay the remains of a rustler camp: a burned-out fire pit, a lean-to shelter built against the ravine's wall. Sleeping bags tangled on a tarp. Lanterns burned out. Nearby, branding irons rested on the pool's edge, freshly cleaned after being used.

And blood. A whole mess of blood.

It coated the rocks, the pebbles leading to the willow's pool. Water lapped gently at the rocky shore, pulling strings of crimson with each burble and wave.

Blood dripped down the ravine walls, large splotches of it, as if men's bodies had exploded backwards and coated the stone. More filled the gaps between the rocks on the ground, small rivers of gore spreading over the dust.

"Where are the bodies?"

Everett stared at him. Lawrence couldn't read that look, that hollow-eyed expression.

He followed Everett over the boulder and down into the carnage.

"Careful where you walk," Everett called. His voice was strange, hoarse and thready. "Stay out of the blood."

"Kinda hard to do that, isn't it? It's everywhere."

He mimicked Everett, stepping from high boulder to high boulder. Everett headed for the camp, for the ransacked remnants, the disarray. Lawrence went straight for the brands. There was space, near the water, where he could stand on rocks free of blood. Kneeling, he peered at the brand, flipping it in his mind. "Fuck."

"What is it?"

"They're rebrandin' all the stock they stole. Layin' a new iron over the original brands. We won't be able to tell which belongs to which ranch unless we skin 'em and look at the brand from the inside."

Everett stared at Lawrence as he knelt over the fire pit.

"You can tell a reworked brand from the inside of a hide. It scars different from the original. But, you gotta slaughter the animal to get to it." He sighed. "They're using a Box 88 brand. They can lay that over a Lazy Twenty-Two or the Crazy A that Howell uses. They can even get it over

Heart's Rafter if they're crafty." He cursed again, pushing to his feet and walking away from the brand. He was liable to throw the damn thing in the pool, and if he did that, Everett would be pissed. Surely that brand was evidence. "What you got over there?"

Everett sifted through the ashes of the fire pit, raking with his bare hands. Colored bits of plastic popped out of the ash, twisted and burned. He plucked them out, laid them aside.

Red bordered plastic appeared on his next sweep. The shape of a credit card, or at least part of it. Fire had eaten away at the bottom corner. But the rest was intact, enough to read. Everett flipped it around and held it out. "This is Dell Richards' driver's license."

It was Dell all right. The same beady eyes, the same *fuck the world* attitude. His license photo looked like a mug shot. He'd probably had tons of practice getting his photo taken by the state. Just looking at his face made Lawrence want to lash out. But he swallowed it back, unclenched his fists. "What's it mean?" he grunted. "The license in the fire?"

Everett was silent. He kept sweeping the ash, searching.

"Everett? What's this mean? What's all this blood? This don't look like they slaughtered any cattle down here!" The copper, the heavy taste of the blood, choked his throat. It hung in the ravine, a thickness that coated his skin, slipped up his nose and into his lungs, his belly. Swirled inside him until he felt sick.

"This isn't animal blood," Everett said. "It's human. I recognize the smell."

Lawrence swallowed hard. He'd lived his whole life in the Crazies, had been a part of the life and death of a thousand different animals. It was the cowboy way, living on the range.

But he'd never seen so much spilled blood from a man that he could recognize the scent or the taste on his tongue.

"Who was killed?"

Everett pulled out a second driver's license, burned more than the first. He rubbed at the front, squinted. He held it out to Lawrence. "Is that Aaron?"

He looked quickly. "Yeah. Yeah, that's him."

"These must be the remnants of their cell phones." He held up the plastic he'd pulled out of the fire before the licenses. Parts and pieces of an

iPhone and an Android. A case with a naked woman on it fingering herself. “Yeah, I saw Dell with that shit once.”

He walked away before the vomit rose. His boots crunched river rock and sand, the faint sound almost swallowing him whole. It was gorgeous down here, untouched country, pristine and perfect. And now haunted forever. He sighed and kicked a rock, hurtling it across the willow’s pool. He watched it hit the water, sink—

A bloody trail crawled out of the pool’s pebble bank on the far side, under the willow’s drooping branches.

“Everett!” he bellowed. “Get over here!”

Everett was by his side in a moment, pistol in hand. “What is it?”

Lawrence pointed. Everett cursed. He edged his way to the pool, the still waters trembling against the river rock. The water was a crystalline blue that lied about the pool’s depth. A hundred years of water cascading against rock, snow melt filling and emptying the pool, had created a hole almost twenty feet deep. Nothing lived in the pool to cloud the water. It was rocks all the way down.

And on the bottom, beneath the wavering light of the water, lay a pile of bodies.

“Well, that’s where they went.” Everett crouched by the water, trying to peer deeper, somehow part the waters and see what he couldn’t reach. “I can’t see their faces. They’re all on their bellies.”

Lawrence hovered over him. “I see... maybe eight bodies? Maybe more, if they’re stacked on top of each other?”

“We won’t know until we get divers out here to bring them up.”

“You really think divers are gonna come all the way out here?”

“To clear your name? To find the truth?” Everett’s gaze pierced him, stole his breath away. “I’ll make them come out here. I’ll bring them all the way from Helena, or further if I have to.”

Lawrence swallowed.

“Stay behind me,” Everett said. Moving swiftly, he circled the pool, ducking beneath the wispy willow branches, and followed the blood trail rising out of the pool. Someone had crawled out of the water, dragged themselves across the rocks.

It wasn’t hard to find who. The cowboy lay propped against the willow’s trunk, slouched on his side, one hand covering his belly and trying

to hold in his guts. His lifeless eyes stared at the branches, and his mouth was slack, open like he'd been screaming in his last moments.

"I know him." Lawrence heaved a sigh and stayed out of Everett's way. "That's Bart Conway."

"And who is Bart Conway?" Everett lifted the dead man's hand, checked his stomach wound. He'd taken a shot to the back, a rifle by the looks of it. Bloat had already set in. Rigor mortis had passed.

"Local no-good son of a bitch. He's been thrown off every ranch in the county. He cowboys until he can't hide the booze and the drugs he's addicted to. Then he robs the ranch, the hands, and splits. He's been in and out of jail for years. Last I heard, he was fired from the Flying Joker for the third time."

"He the kind that would get into rustling?"

"To make a quick buck to buy his drugs? He'd do anything. He wasn't a bad hand when he was sober. He could run a cuttin' horse across a ridgeline and never slip."

"Was he a leader? Or did he follow?"

"Bart?" Lawrence snorted. "He was a rat. He'd follow anyone who gave him a mean look, least until the addiction set in. Then it was all about gettin' money for his next fix. But even then, he just started followin' the druggies and the dealers."

Everett stood and dusted his jeans. "Seems we've found our rustlers then." He nodded to the willow pool.

"But why are they all dead? And where is the herd?"

"The herd is at Heart's Rafter."

Lawrence stared. "How do you figure?"

"This?" Everett waved to the carnage, Bart's body, the crystal pool and its silent tomb of corpses. "This is cleanup. Someone has been running an operation and decided to wrap it up. Someone who knows the area and knows the Crazies. Someone who has worked the land and knows the history here. Someone who knows enough to maneuver you and box you in. Frame you. And," he said slowly, "who knows how to disappear and knows they won't be missed, because they're already supposed to be gone."

It clicked, like a shotgun racking. "Dell and Aaron."

"They'd be ghosts if it weren't for you making a fuss about them vanishing. But their disappearing act spooked Bill Warner at the Heart's Rafter. He split after that, right?"

Lawrence nodded.

“The ranch has been abandoned. That’s a whole lot of land to run a stolen herd. And with everyone focusing on their missing cattle, no one is looking at an abandoned ranch’s wild fields.”

“And Carson?”

Everett’s lips thinned. “That was personal.”

The fire inside him flared. His vision narrowed, the tunnel vision of a predator, pure blood lust. “You’re God damn right it was,” he growled. “And I’ll make it personal right back.”

He’d kill them. He’d kill them both for what they’d done.

Everett’s hand on his fist broke the fury, shattered the rage like a wave breaking against shore. He was almost dizzy, and he stumbled slightly against the sudden emptiness. “They’ll pay,” Everett said quietly. “Don’t throw away your life on them, though. They aren’t worth it.”

He closed his eyes. Tried to swallow. Everett’s hand squeezed his fist, and he turned his hand over. Laced their fingers together. Stood in the silence with Everett for a minute.

“All right,” he said, pulling away. “Let’s get to Heart’s Rafter. I want to find the herd.”

HEART’S RAFTER WAS A BROKEN RANCH.

Her fences had fallen and the gate swung wide and rattled in the wind. The barn paint had peeled, and someone had used the broad side for target practice. Shotgun pellet holes dotted the whole damn thing. Someone was either an especially shit shot, or they had been drunk. Blind drunk.

The main drive to Heart’s Rafter led to the empty ranch house. Broken windows on the back porch revealed the break in, and the back door had been forced out of its frame. Someone had been squatting inside. They’d burned fires in the fireplace, read porn magazines, and left a mess in the kitchen.

“Touch nothing,” Everett said. “We’ll get this all fingerprinted.”

They slipped back out and stood on the porch, looking at the pastures rolling up the Crazies. There was a horse in the corral, unbranded, unsaddled. A mare, and she snorted at them while Lawrence found a bale of

hay in the barn. By the way she ate, it had been some time since she'd been fed.

"According to the map, they would have driven the herd into the pasture beyond that rise." Everett pointed beyond a wooded glen and a slope leading uphill a mile away.

"Good place to hide them."

They set off, riding Trigger across the fields. The sun beat down, hot enough to pull sweat from their skin even as it started to fall behind the tip of Crazy Peak. Exhaustion tore at Lawrence, jerked on his soul. He leaned into Everett, resting his forehead on Everett's shoulder, and closed his eyes.

Months he'd been trying to rustle up support to search for Dell and Aaron. Months he'd thought they'd fallen victim to predators, had been attacked, taken, murdered. He hated them, sure, but no man deserved to be forgotten. Not even rotten Bart Conway.

Had they been rustling cattle even before the brawl with the truckers? Had getting told to get gone just been their excuse to turn to ghosts?

Had what Lawrence did, the beating he'd put on them, been the reason they'd turned on Carson?

Had he caused Carson's death?

His hand snaked around Everett's hip, and he squeezed, holding Everett close. His breath shuddered, feathered over Everett's neck.

Everett's hand landed on his. Squeezed.

And then Trigger was trotting up the rise, and they were pushing through the cottonwoods, and before them lay Heart's Rafter's back pasture, a private, hidden slice of golden grass and trickling streams, enough for five hundred head of cattle to graze at their leisure.

There they were. Almost three hundred head of cattle lazing in the sunshine, turned out in the pasture. They sported new Box 88 brands, an 88 inside of a square, laid on top of their old brands. Some still were healing.

Everett sighed, his back pushing into Lawrence's chest. "We found them."

"*You* found them." Lawrence dropped a kiss to Everett's neck. "I'm glad you came to the Crazies, Army," he whispered. "I knew you'd figure it all out."

"Law, look." Everett guided Trigger down the hill, to the edge of the fenced pasture. "Look at those tracks."

The slender-footed horse had ridden past.

CHAPTER 15

THEY RODE BACK TO THE LAZY TWENTY-TWO ON THE TRAILS, NOT HIDING anymore. Trigger was glad for the sure footing, and he moved faster, stepped lighter. Still, they didn't get back to the ranch until past midnight. The moon hung high in the sky, quartered over the ranch, silvering the fields and spreading stardust over the treetops.

Lawrence guided Trigger into the barn, and he took his time washing him down. Trigger deserved it, after everything. Everett shoveled fresh hay for him, poured his feed, and then brushed Trigger alongside Lawrence.

Their hands strayed, finding each other. First it was innocent, hands on hands, on shoulders, guiding each other. Then it was hands on asses, on thighs, on crotches. Lawrence pushed up behind Everett, grabbing his hips. He ground his swelling cock against Everett's ass.

Everett turned and kissed him, wrapping his arms around Lawrence's neck—

Trigger snuffled in their faces, blowing air and snorting.

"All right, boy, all right." Lawrence pushed Trigger's nose away and scratched at his snout. "You get some sleep. You've earned it."

He led Everett to his cabin, set back in the tree line behind the barn and the empty bunkhouse. It was a one-room log cabin, just a kitchenette and a living area with a messy queen bed shoved in the corner. There was a fireplace of stone and a sliding glass door that led to a small porch he'd built, with a grill, a fire pit, and lawn chairs overlooking the meadows and woods.

"Sorry for the mess." Lawrence flicked his blanket over the unmade bed. Dishes lay unwashed in the sink. "I wasn't expectin' company."

“I don’t care about the mess.” Everett dragged him close. “Show me to the shower, cowboy.”

They used all the hot water, soaping every inch of their bodies, exploring and tasting, going where they couldn’t before. When the cold became unbearable, Lawrence twisted off the water and towed Everett dry.

Light from the bathroom split the cabin, one slice of light that built shadows in the corners. He walked Everett backward to his bed. Everett cradled his face. Stared into his eyes.

It was slower this time. They kissed and kept kissing, bodies rocking, hands stroking. Lawrence wanted to explore every part of Everett, take his time. Kiss the inside of his knee and the bend of his thigh. Nibble on his hip bones and stroke his chest, run his hands down Everett’s corded arms. Beneath his touch, Everett shuddered.

Everett was slower, too. He kept his eyes open. He reached for Lawrence and drew him closer. He seemed to rise from the darkness, each caress more sure, each rock of their bodies more certain.

They were more than naked, more than rutting together. Lawrence felt exposed in a way he never had, laid bare beneath Everett’s touch.

There was fear in Everett’s eyes, but something else, too. A spark that hadn’t been there before. Longing mixed with hope. He was laid bare, too. He was turning around and facing himself.

Eventually, Everett pushed Lawrence back and straddled him, pushed down on him, and rode him like Lawrence was a bronc he was taming.

He welcomed it, surrendered to it, to Everett’s riding and the gentling of his soul. His hands cupped Everett’s hips and held on. *You can make me yours if you want to.*

It was his turn to sit up and take charge, capture Everett in his arms and guide his legs around his waist. Everett tipped his head back, groaned long and loud as Lawrence’s cock plunged deeper. He writhed, fingers dragging down Lawrence’s back, and then tipped forward. Captured Lawrence’s lips in a kiss that could have stopped time.

It didn’t take long after that. Lawrence held Everett close, ground into him, felt Everett’s cock throb against his belly. “I’m close,” he whispered.

“Me too. Come for me, Law,” Everett gasped. He grabbed Lawrence, fingers sliding through his hair, and kissed him as his cock erupted between

their pressed chests. He muffled his scream around Lawrence's kiss, clung to his hair, his shoulders, as he quaked.

Lawrence fell into the abyss after him, kissing Everett and thrusting deep as he shot his seed deep inside. He gasped and his vision went white, danced with stars and lightning until he thought they were back on the mountain, together beneath the night sky with the whole world at their feet.

It took an hour to get up, after tipping sideways and panting, kissing and stroking sweat-cooling limbs, fingers lacing together. They rinsed off in the shower again, quicker this time, and then dressed in silence.

"I need to call Braddock," Everett said. "He gave me his cell number. I'll call him directly, explain everything. We need to clear your name." He glared at his cell phone, dark and silent in his hand. "My battery is dead. Do you have a charger?"

"I barely use a cell. I'm still on the old flip phone without all that fancy big screen crap." Lawrence grinned. "But Carson had one like yours. You can use his charger. He kept it in the kitchen."

Everett nodded as he plugged in his phone. He waited, staring out the window overlooking the pasture and the woods as his phone powered up.

"You probably won't get any signal." Lawrence pulled two beers from the fridge and popped the tops. "There's nothing out there on the mountain, but even here at the ranch, no one could get signal." He passed a beer to Everett. "Carson never took his cell out with him."

The beer dangled in Everett's frozen hand. "He never took it when he went riding?"

Lawrence shrugged. "What's the point? No signal on the range, and the best you can do is not lose it when your horse decides to be funny right when you pull it out. Every cowboy learns that lesson real quick. No one carries 'em." He took a swig of his beer. "Only place you can get any signal is at Endless Sky's ranch or down in town."

Everett stared out the window as his jaw clenched, the muscle in his cheek tensing and relaxing. His knuckles, wrapped around his cell, had gone bone white. His shoulders strained beneath the t-shirt Lawrence loaned him.

And then he jerked. Pushed his face to the window. "Get your gun, Law. There's a rider coming in from the back pasture. He's just ridden out of the woods."

THEY RODE TOGETHER TO MEET THE RIDER, PULLING TRIGGER AND BANSHEE out of the barn. No time for a saddle. They both swung up bareback.

Lawrence had held Everett's gaze as he guided Banshee out of her stall and passed the lead to Everett.

Their mystery rider wasn't moving fast. Still, they took no chances. Lawrence carried his shotgun and Everett had his hand on his pistol, ready to draw.

At the crest of the hill sloping toward the ranch, the rider pitched sideways and fell from his horse.

"Yah!" Lawrence squeezed his heels into Trigger's side, and Trigger leaped forward, sprinting up the hill. He recognized the mare as they drew near. "She's from Heart's Rafter. She was in the corral."

Everett circled the mare and came up behind the fallen man. He was facedown in the grass, unmoving. Blood soaked one shoulder, and his right arm had been shot off at the elbow. A mess of bone and blood and destroyed flesh hung from the joint. Three fingers were still attached at the end of the smear of blood, but they'd turned black and had swelled grotesquely. "Cover me," Everett said.

He racked the shotgun. Brought it to his shoulder as Everett dismounted Banshee and crept to the fallen man. Slowly, he rolled him over, cradling his head. Blood streamed from a cut on his temple, and there was a hole in his right shoulder, stuffed with a blood soaked handkerchief.

"Shit." Lawrence peered over Everett's shoulder. "I know him! That's Connor O'Donnell. He's an Endless Sky hand."

Everett felt for a pulse on his bloody neck. "He's still alive, but he's in shock. That wound is infected. He might be septic."

"He followed us here from Heart's Rafter. Why?"

Everett patted Connor down, checking his pockets and his waistband. "No weapons. He wasn't coming to kill us. In his condition, I don't think he was doing anything other than trying to survive." Everett hauled him up, throwing him over his shoulder in a fireman carry. "We've got to get him back to the ranch before he dies."

"We'll take him to the main house. There's a medical kit in the kitchen."

Trigger carried Connor draped on his back, Lawrence riding as gently as he could, sweet-talking Trigger the whole way. Everett rode ahead with

Banshee and led the mare, tying both up outside the ranch house on the fence line.

“Lay him down on the kitchen table,” Everett said when Lawrence carried him in Delaney’s big log-built ranch house. Connor’s breaths were shallow, weak, and wet. “The light is best.”

Under the kitchen light, they could see the full extent of Connor’s wounds. His arm was gone below the elbow. What little remained would have to be cut off. Already, it was infected and slowly poisoning him. Blood still wept from the torn flesh and arteries that dangled free. Someone had shot him with a large caliber rifle, the kind normally used to hunt elk. Or bear.

A second shot in his shoulder had gone straight through, a clean entry on his back and an explosive mess through his front. “He was shot in the back,” Lawrence said.

“Like the bodies in the gulch. And judging by the blood left behind down there, they were shot with a similar caliber rifle.” Everett tore at Connor’s clothing, ripping away the soaked flannel shirt. “I need towels and hot water. And a belt.”

Everett cleaned Connor’s wounds as best he could, plucking the dirt and rocks and debris from the ravaged flesh. He wrapped the belt above Connor’s elbow and yanked, tightening it until Connor’s skin buckled, and then strapped it down.

Connor moaned. His head flopped left and right, and he tried to fight Everett off with his remaining arm.

Lawrence grabbed him, pulled his hand away. “Easy, man! We’re tryin’ to help you!”

Eyes flickering, Connor stared upside down at Lawrence. His gaze was a million miles away, and he stared through Lawrence for a long moment before focusing in. “Law,” he croaked. “That you?”

“Yeah, you bastard, it’s me. Why the hell are you tryin’ to die in my field? Who shot you to hell and back?”

“Law...” Connor’s eyes closed. He hissed, and his legs kicked, pain wracking his body as Everett probed his shoulder wound. “Law, I swear, I never wanted to get no one killed...”

“What were you a part of, Connor? What’d you get wrapped up in?”

“It was just supposed to be a little rustlin’,” he breathed. His voice was ragged, his throat raw. “We was just supposed to unsettle everyone. Get

people riled up.” He coughed.

“You working with the boys campin’ at Whiskey Gulch? Helpin’ drive stock down the mountain to Heart’s Rafter?”

Connor nodded. His eyes were still closed.

“This is going to hurt.” Everett held a thick bandage, soaked in alcohol from the medical kit. He pressed a clean towel to Connor’s back, and then pushed the soaked bandage against the shattered flesh on his shoulder.

Connor shrieked, fighting Lawrence’s hold, kicking the air over the table. His mangled arm waved, dead fingers flapping against Everett’s thigh. “Fuck you!” he spat.

“It’s this, or you die.” Everett kept pushing. “Pass me the duct tape.”

Lawrence held Connor down while Everett taped the towel and bandage around Connor’s shoulder, and then taped his destroyed arm in a towel sling to his chest. Connor clenched his teeth and cursed the whole time, and tears began to flow from the corners of his eyes. But when Everett stepped back, he rolled his head toward him and croaked, “Thanks. You fuckin’ asshole.”

Lawrence and Everett helped him sit up. He shivered, his sweat-soaked body trembling so hard his teeth chattered. “Let’s move him to the den. I’ll make a fire,” Lawrence said.

They carried him together to the couch, and Everett wrapped Connor in a blanket while Lawrence built a roaring fire in the stone hearth. “Now,” Everett said, kneeling in front of Connor. “Tell us everything. Why were you rustling? Who was at the camp? Who shot you and the others?”

Connor’s words came slowly, stuttering between shivers and quakes. His eyes were bloodshot, pupils blown wide with his body’s agony. He rocked on the couch in the blanket, leaning into the warmth from the fire.

“We was told we were gonna make trouble. We was gonna bother up all the ranches. Make it hard to live here, you know?”

“Why?” Lawrence sat on the hearth, hands clasped, watching Connor. He’d fought with Connor over the years, bar room brawls and backwoods bare knuckle fights when they were spitting mad, cussing each other out and hurling insults and fists. Connor was a lazy son of a bitch, and he’d always wanted the fast and easy way instead of the hardworking way. He had rubbed Lawrence wrong every which way every time.

Connor shrugged. “I dunno. I was just paid to rustle up stock from every ranch.”

“You and the guys in the gulch?”

Nodding, Connor swallowed. “We was picked from Endless Sky. Current guys and some old ones, guys who’d been fired. We was told we was hand-picked, and we was special. That we’d been evaluated or somethin’, and we was exactly what was needed.”

The only thing Connor O’Donnell was hand-picked for was an ass whooping. He was special in his loafing. Lawrence’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah right. That’s a load of horse shit.”

“It’s true!” Connor snapped. “That’s what he said!” Fire burned in his eyes and his jaw was set, a hard line to his jaw.

For a man who had been told he was a fuck up his whole life, who had his ass beaten for being lazy and a smartass, being told he was picked for something special must have been like taking a hit of the best drug there was. Lawrence rocked back and sucked on his teeth. Shook his head and looked away.

“Who?” Everett asked. “Who picked you? Who told you that?”

Connor hocked a bloody wad of spit on the carpet. “Fucking Old Man Burke, that’s who!”

“What?” Lawrence jumped to his feet. His jaw fell, and the ground seemed to shift, slide to the left, the world falling off its axis. He shook his head, snarled. “Jim Burke?”

“Who is Jim Burke?” Everett asked. His eyes bounced between Connor and Lawrence, a frown creasing his forehead and pulling his lips down in a scowl.

“Endless Sky’s foreman,” Lawrence breathed. “He’s been in these mountains for fifty years.”

“He’s a fuckin’ murderer!” Connor shouted. “He told us to camp in the gulch! He said we was gonna be safe there! We just needed to hide there when we wasn’t out rustlin’! He’d bring us supplies, give us free booze when we’d done good!” His voice choked, and hot tears ran down Connor’s cheeks. He wiped them away, glaring at the fire. “And then he came back and he got us all drunk. Told us we’d all done good, and we was gonna make the cattle drive soon. And then it was a fat payday for us all.” Connor sniffed. “Then he shot us! Every one of us, one by one. While we was runnin’ away. While we was beggin’ for our lives. He shot us in our damn backs!” Connor shouted. Another tear fell down his cheek. He let it run.

“Were Dell and Aaron part of your outfit?” Everett asked softly. “Were they in the gulch with you?”

Connor nodded. “Burke made ‘em leaders. They was in charge of some of the rustlin’ teams. Told us what to do and when. How.”

“They were there when Burke shot everyone?”

Connor nodded again. He was a miserable heap of blood and tears, snot and shivers. He slumped forward, the fight, the fury, ground out of him. Lawrence tried to swallow, couldn’t.

Old Man Jim Burke was like a father to a hundred cowboys in the mountains. Nearly everyone had done time at the Endless Sky through the years and had trained under Burke. He had been like a father to Carson. He’d been a man Lawrence wanted to be, once.

Connor had worked for the man, had been told he was special by Burke. That Old Man Burke had hand-picked him.

The pride Connor must have felt. He’d probably never worked harder, or better, than he had on the rustling outfit.

And then Burke had turned a gun on him, shot his friends dead. Lawrence ran his hand down his face, scrubbed his jaw. “How did you survive? We found Bart Conway. He crawled out of the pool.”

“I’d gone to piss. I’d drank too much, and I stumbled away when it happened. I heard it, though. I thought we was under attack. So I ran back, tried to get my gun. I was gonna defend us.” Connor snorted. “And then Burke turned his rifle on me. Blew my arm off. So I ran. Everyone else, they was already dead or dyin’.” He shook his head, tried to shake something off. “I can still hear ‘em screamin’.”

“What happened next?” Everett, ever the lawman, refocusing Connor on the story. “What did Burke do then?”

“I was crawling the ravine. Tryin’ to get out of there. He shot me in the back as I was scramblin’ over a boulder. I fell. I thought I was dead, ‘cause there’s no good place to land down there. Guess he thought I was dead, too, ‘cause he didn’t come lookin’ for me. I landed in the dry brush, scratched myself to hell. But I was alive. I waited and waited. I kept my arm up, and I breathed the dirt and I sobbed, Law.” He looked up, his bloodshot eyes fixed to Lawrence. “I prayed, ‘cause I swear, I thought I was gonna die any moment. And then... the sun come up again. And I saw what happened to everybody.”

“Did you see the bodies?”

“He dragged ‘em in the pool.”

Everett nodded. “How did you get to Heart’s Rafter?”

“I climbed. Took me a whole day. Burke musta took our horses, ‘cause they wasn’t up where we’d left ‘em. But one of the guys had a horse that was crazy loyal and she came back. I was able to catch her. Rode her to Heart’s Rafter where we was hidin’ out some, and where we kept the stock.”

“You saw us when we were there earlier, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I hid in the old bunkhouse. I didn’t know if you was with Burke or not, if you was comin’ to kill me. But, Law, I thought about it. Burke hates your guts. He was the one who threw you off Endless Sky all those years ago. He wouldn’t have brought you in. And anyways, you was always too high and mighty. You wouldn’t be a part of what we did. Not on your life.”

“You’re God damn right about that. You’re a fucking thief, Connor. You been rustlin’ stock for months and now your friends are dead!”

“I fuckin’ *know!*” Connor shouted. “You think I don’t know I fucked up? I know it, Law! I fuckin’ know it!”

Everett stood, one hand on Connor’s shoulder. “You fucked up,” he said softly, “but you also survived. And you’re going to help us make sure Jim Burke pays for what he’s done.”

“Who are you?” Connor squinted up at Everett.

“Everett Dawson, Stock Detective.” He squeezed Connor’s uninjured shoulder once. “And Connor, you’re under arrest.”

Connor shrugged. “Figured. Least I can take that son of a bitch with me.”

Everett smiled, just briefly. Lawrence’s heart skipped, and he kicked himself for it. Not the time, God damn it. “Now,” Everett said, meeting Lawrence’s gaze, “we call the sheriff.”

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CHAPTER 16

“SON, I AM DAMN GLAD TO HEAR YOUR VOICE,” SHERIFF BRADDOCK SAID, sighing. Delaney had a wired phone installed, but it was old and static bled into the line. *“I have been worried sick ‘bout you. I feared the worst. I didn’t go to Helena for the warrant, I stayed to search for you. I’ve had teams combin’ the whole area since you vanished.”*

“Did you find the guys who shot up my hotel room?”

“We’re still lookin’. But we got good descriptions of their trucks and their license plates were snapped by a camera down by the highway. We’ll get ‘em, I promise.”

Everett nodded, pressing the phone to his skull. He had an ache behind his eyes, a dull pain that made him want to crack his head open. “Sheriff, I’ve got a lot of information for you. I think I’ve locked down what’s happening up here.”

“Tell me you have good news. You found the herd? Did you find the rustlers, too?”

“All that, and more.”

“Where you at, son?”

“At the Lazy Twenty-Two.”

A pause. *“You’re with Law? You all right?”*

“Yes to both. It’s not him, Sheriff. I can clear his name.” He sighed, rubbed his forehead. “We found the bodies of the rustling outfit in Whiskey Gulch and the missing cattle at Heart’s Rafter. The rustlers were waiting to drive it down for private sale. But they were all murdered. Butchered, more accurately.”

“Murdered?” Braddock cursed. Everett heard him breathe slowly, gather himself. *“What else do you know?”*

“I know who’s behind everything. I know who organized the rustling outfit. And who killed them all.”

“*Who? Don’t leave me waitin’, son!*”

“Jim Burke. Endless Sky’s foreman.”

Silence. Static whispered over the line. Sheriff Braddock exhaled. Everett heard leather creak, metal whine. The sounds of a man sitting heavily in a chair, shock knocking his knees from him. “*That’s a hell of an accusation to make of a man who helped build these mountains.*”

“He didn’t kill everyone, Sheriff. He left a survivor behind: Connor O’Donnell. And he’s sitting here with me. He told me everything.”

“*God damn,*” Braddock breathed. “*Son, I am damn glad you survived. I wanna know how you got away from that hotel, and how you put this all together ’cause, Everett, you are one hell of an investigator. Buck was right ’bout you. All right, I’m on my way up right now. You need anythin’?*”

“Connor’s hurt bad. He needs medical care.”

“*I’ll bring up the kit and let the hospital know. We’ll bring him down together.*”

“Prepare an arrest warrant for Jim Burke. He’s a murderer, Sheriff.”

“*We’ll do it together, son. You earned that.*” The line clicked, and static swallowed the signal after Braddock hung up.

Everett set the phone down. He pressed his forehead to the wall, closing his eyes. Breathed in and held it.

“Y’alright?”

Lawrence, checking on him. Everett nodded. He turned, leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. “I never told you how Lieutenant Holt died.”

“Your lover?”

Everett nodded.

“Said he was shot.” Lawrence shoved his hands in his pockets. “In the back. Guess all this is hard on you, then?”

The memories came, sliding over the present, the sounds of the village, the Humvee engines idling. Lieutenant Holt’s voice, singing songs with the village kids and kicking a soccer ball with them.

Everett had been on guard duty, but he kept getting distracted. His gaze was drawn to Holt, and he kept watching, smiling. They were there to visit the tribal elders, check on the new school they’d helped build a few months back. Deliver supplies for the students.

An Afghan National Police unit patrolled with them, and had patrolled with them for months. Their unit was helping train the Afghans, teaching the police and the military how to be a modern country with equal laws that treated everyone fairly. This was progress, he'd thought. This is justice. Kids in Afghanistan going to school. Villages prospering. There was life here, and a future.

But not everyone wanted that future.

Holt was kicking the soccer ball and then he wasn't. The echoes were still bouncing off the mountains, the *ratta-tat-tat* of the rifle. The shooter had almost emptied his rifle into Holt's back.

The children screamed. Ran in every direction. Their platoon took cover, took firing positions. They searched for the enemy, scanned the hills, called out clear signals as they tried to find the Taliban, the insurgents, whoever was shooting at them.

And the captain of the Afghan Police unit, who had walked at Holt's side for *months*, stared them down, holding the smoking gun.

The captain ran. Some of his men covered for him, shooting in a blind panic. Others dropped their rifles and hid, choosing neither side, just running for their lives. In one hour, the village turned into a shooting gallery, houses pockmarked with bullet holes, four civilians dead, children screaming in terror. The school was shot to pieces, and, as a final *fuck you*, some of the captain's men blew themselves up in the school.

Everett was the first to go to Holt's cold body, pull him from the dust. He was undeniably dead, had been dead before he'd hit the ground.

Everett held his lover while the taste of dust and blood and ash settled around him. And, deeper than that, the taste of betrayal filled his soul.

He'd walked out of the firebase that night and started hunting. He was AWOL, gone for weeks, but no one stopped him. He missed Holt's body being flown back to the States. Missed the memorial ceremony the base commander held, the boots, rifle, and dog tags, and the fine words said about Holt's memory.

His own memorial had been hunting that captain down. Taking his time when he found him.

His death had been slower than Holt's. And in the end, Everett's hands had been bloodred and soaked.

When he walked back to base, he said he was quitting the Army. He was a problem no one wanted to deal with, and they quietly shuffled him

out the door, pushed him through the months of paperwork to be cashiered out. For a year, he was listless, lifeless, living on back pay in hotel rooms and staring at the ceiling, trying to stop the replay of memories in his mind. That day, that fucking day, was a repeat he lived through endlessly.

Finally, he'd applied to as many law enforcement positions as he could, from federal to state to local, and even to the Montana Department of Agriculture for their Stock Detective opening.

Montana was the first, and ultimately only, call back he received. His name was poison, it seemed.

"I didn't think I'd really live again," Everett said softly. His voice had gone thin, speaking from far away, lost in time as Montana and Afghanistan traded places in his soul. "I had no plans. No thoughts. I was just... wasting time until I died."

"And now?" Lawrence had stayed away while Everett spoke and shared his story. He seemed nervous, skittish in a way Everett never was. This wasn't Lawrence's space, though. He had no claim to the man, or to his past. Or his future.

Everett stepped forward. He held out his hand and tried to smile. "I don't know," he said truthfully. "But I think my life is getting better."

Lawrence took his hand and tugged, pulling Everett into his arms. He wrapped him up, holding him close, and breathed into his hair. "Seems like this is your chance, you know. Bein' out here. And you're takin' it. You're makin' something of yourself." His voice choked off. "You're somethin' special, Army."

"So are you, Law." Everett tipped his head up and kissed Lawrence, a soft press of their lips together. "Thank you. For everything."

Lawrence smiled. "Anytime."

SHERIFF BRADDOCK PULLED INTO THE DELANEY RANCH JUST BEFORE TWO IN the morning. His Sheriff's Department truck rolled up the gravel drive, tires crunching dirt and rocks, headlights bouncing across the ranch house living room wall. He parked out front and came up the porch steps clutching a mug of steaming coffee and carrying a medical kit.

Everett and Lawrence met him at the door with nods and hellos. Everett took the medical kit. Braddock eyed Lawrence but held out his hand. "All right, Law?"

"Been better, Sheriff. We got a hell of a situation up here."

"That we do." Braddock sighed as he took off his hat. "Show me to Mister O'Donnell. I want to hear his story."

Connor lay propped on pillows on the living room couch, wrapped in a blanket by the roaring fire. Earlier, Lawrence had dug out a fentanyl patch from the barn's vet kit, emergency pain meds for the horses if they were badly injured, and had cut one into quarters for Connor. Connor's breathing had evened out, and his eyes were less pinched with pain. "Sheriff," he drawled.

"Mister O'Donnell. I'd hoped you'd found a good place to land at Endless Sky. Hoped all your troubles were behind you." Braddock's mustache twitched as he pursed his lips. "Well, let's hear it."

Connor told his story again, his voice rising and falling, sometimes trailing off as pain hit him, or as he rode a fentanyl wave. He told it all, though, working his way through being recruited by Jim Burke to join the rustling outfit the year before and how they'd stolen cattle from every ranch. How, after Dell and Aaron were fired from Endless Sky, Jim Burke brought them to the outfit and put them in charge of the others.

"When was this?" Braddock asked, taking notes.

"Spring. April, I think."

Everett found Lawrence's gaze. He sat on the couch arm beside Connor, leaning against the cool glass of the living room's window overlooking the corral and pasture, the sloping hills rolling up to the mountain.

April. Right when Dell and Aaron went missing.

Connor's story continued, rolling through Burke congratulating them all in the gulch, getting everyone drunk, and then shooting them all down. His escape, and then following Lawrence and Everett after they'd found the herd at Heart's Rafter. "It was wrong what was done, Sheriff," Connor said. "Dead wrong. We wasn't in the right, stealin' those cattle, but we wasn't killin' nobody."

Braddock sighed, long and hard. He stood, flipped his notebook closed. "Well, you boys have certainly done a lot of work." He rubbed the wide brim of his cowboy hat, fingers rubbing over the felt. Placed it on his head. "And you boys have it only half figured out."

Glass shattered. Fire slammed into Everett's shoulder. His bones burned, cracked, shattered. Blood sprayed in front of him, covered the side of Connor's face. Numb, he stared, watching the drops fly, scatter across the living room floor.

He hit the floor before he realized he was shot.

"Everett!" Lawrence bellowed.

"Not so fast!" Braddock shouted. His pistol pointed straight at Lawrence's forehead.

Lawrence stilled. Raised his hands.

Gasping, Everett writhed on the floor, breathing in the old dust from the throw rug. Blood pumped from him in time with his racing heart, falling from the burning hole blown through his shoulder. His arm hung limp and useless.

Half-blind with pain, the world swam, colors mixing with sound, reality spinning as he clawed the carpet, tried to hold on to the world.

"What the fuck?" Connor shouted. "The fuck is happenin'?"

"You weren't supposed to survive, you dumb motherfucker," Braddock spat. "Leave it to you to fuck everythin' up. You are the worst kind of dumb shit I have *ever* seen, O'Donnell."

He kept his pistol fixed on Lawrence as he kicked Everett in his shot shoulder, sending him sprawling on his back in front of the fireplace. Everett roared, his vision splitting, the world splintering. He heaved, bile crawling up his throat, and he choked on vomit facedown in the carpet.

On the couch, Connor screamed. Everett tried to push himself up. His arm collapsed, and he fell to his face. Still, he watched with one eye as Braddock knelt on Connor, twisted his one good arm back. Watched him press his knee into Connor's throat.

"No..." Everett grunted. He tried to crawl forward, a broken man. "No!"

"Look at you," Braddock drawled. "Big bad Army boy comin' in to save the day. You're not so big and bad now, huh, son? Don't know everythin' now, do you?"

Everett hauled himself forward another inch. Collapsed.

"I kinda liked you, you know? You wasn't so bad. But you couldn't just follow what you was given. I laid it out for you, son. All you had to do was help me take out Law. You coulda lived if you'd just followed what I laid out for ya. But now..."

“Fuck you,” Everett croaked. His vision split, went triple. He was nearly blind with pain, with the ravaging agony burning from his shoulder, radiating through his body.

“You musta thought I was some dumb hick when you called this in, huh? All this happenin’ in my county and I don’t know a damn thing. You think I didn’t know ‘bout it all? These are my mountains! I knew the whole time!”

“You’re working with them!” Lawrence growled. He was frozen by the kitchen, pinned by Braddock’s gun. “You, Jim Burke, and the rustlers!”

Down the hallway, the front door opened. Boots hit the hardwood. Two pairs. Everett grabbed the carpet with his fingernails and dragged himself forward.

Lawrence’s eyes burned holes in the side of his face. He flashed him a look, a quick glance. Then he flicked his gaze to the fire. And back. *Understand me, damn it. Understand.*

Lawrence stared back at him, his fire-bright eyes melting his sorrows.

Two pairs of boots strode down the hall. Two men walked into the living room. Jim Burke, Endless Sky’s gray and sun-weathered foreman, tall and broad and holding a hunting rifle fixed with a scope. His watery blue eyes fixed on Everett, drifted to the hole in his shoulder. The corner of his lip curled up.

And behind him, Dan Howell came forward, tall and lean and mean in his cowboy hat and Endless Sky vest. He stood next to Braddock, his hands on his hips, and he sighed, shaking his head down at Connor and Everett. “These the last loose ends?”

“That they are. They been fuckin’ stubborn loose ends, too.” Beneath Braddock’s knee, Connor gurgled, struggling to breathe. His legs kicked wildly, trapped in the blanket.

“Not anymore.” Howell shook his head. He looked around the ranch, his cold gaze assessing, taking everything in. “We’ll shoot them all and let the place burn. You can take care of the death investigations.”

“Such a tragedy, three young men burnin’ to death in an accident.” Braddock pulled the hammer back, the pistol pointed at Lawrence’s forehead.

No, not again. Not like this. It couldn’t happen to a man twice. Here he was, tasting dust and blood again. And betrayal.

It wasn't going to end the same way. Fire rose in his soul, so fast, so fierce Everett gasped. Since that day, since two years, eight months and fifteen days ago, he'd covered his fury with silence, with a stranglehold on his soul. He'd murdered his own heart somewhere along the line.

Once, Everett had unleashed his wrath, and it frightened him after, staring down at his blood soaked hands, his blood soaked clothes, and looking at what was left of the man who had killed his lover. Now, he felt that berserker fury sparking again.

He was capable of unspeakable things.

Something inside of him broke.

Roaring, his voice ripped raw with anguish and fury, he lunged at Braddock, dragging his good arm through the fire and grabbing the end of a burning log. He swung, swinging for the fences, for a record-breaking home run, and slammed the fiery log into Braddock's ribs.

Braddock went down, shouting, falling off Connor to the carpet. Flames crawled up his jacket. He rolled, bellowing at Howell and Burke.

Burke raised his rifle, aiming at Everett. Everett faced him, holding his flaming log and breathing hard.

A shotgun blast burst behind Burke's head. Wood splintered, the log wall shattering. Shrapnel flew at Burke's face, sliced open his cheek and jaw and slammed into his neck and shoulder. He dropped to his knee, hissing in pain.

Lawrence marched to Everett's side, the shotgun he'd propped by the kitchen table up at his shoulder. He pumped the slide, readied the next round. Aimed at Burke's head.

Logs had tumbled free from the fireplace with Everett's mad grab. Flames danced across the carpet and climbed the chairs in front of the hearth. Smoke rose, choking the air.

"Look out!" Connor gasped, his voice nearly broken. "Ev—"

Braddock grabbed Everett's legs and pulled him down. He collapsed to his face and Braddock was on his back in a moment, hands around his neck.

Lawrence pivoted, aimed for Braddock—

Burke and Howell scrambled down the hallway to the front door. "Barricade it shut," Howell shouted. "Lock them in there and let it burn to hell! If they crawl out the windows, shoot them!"

"Go!" Everett hollered. "Law, Go! Get them!"

Lawrence hesitated, his eyes flicking from the hallway back to Everett.

The front door slammed. Something heavy fell in front of it on the porch.

“Go now!”

Lawrence hurdled the couch and slammed the butt of his shotgun through the window. Glass shattered, and he threw himself out the window. Shouts rose. A rifle cracked, split the night. Horses whined, nickered, and then hooves pounded on dirt as they took off across the pasture and headed for the woods.

Get them, Lawrence. Everett’s vision darkened, Braddock’s hands closing around his throat. He tried to grab behind him, but with only one arm, he couldn’t get the leverage. Fuck grabbing. He reached blind for Braddock’s face, his eyes.

His thumb found Braddock’s eye socket, his squishy eyeball.

Grunting, he shoved his thumb in deep, felt the jelly of his eye slip and slide over his skin, burst apart and leak down his hand.

Braddock howled. He ripped Everett’s arm away, but Everett had hooked his thumb, and as Braddock shoved him off, the remnants of his eyeball came with Everett.

Cursing, Braddock staggered back, one hand covering his empty, bloody eye socket. “You fuckin’ bastard,” he growled.

Smoke rose around them as the flames jumped higher, engulfing the living room, chewing through the furniture one by one. The chairs and the couch where Connor had lain were slowly consumed by the growing inferno. Connor was nowhere to be seen.

“We’re going to die in here,” Everett hissed. He crouched, his limp arm hanging dead, but his other up and ready, fist loose, thumb and palm covered in Braddock’s blood. “But I’m not going without taking you with me.”

“I don’t have time for you. Why didn’t you just go along with where I was herdin’ ya? You coulda lived through this.” Braddock backed up, heading for the kitchen.

Everett pressed him. He pushed forward. “I happen to like the truth. I don’t like putting innocent men in jail.” Braddock snarled. “You’ve thrown in with murderers and thieves. Why work with Burke? Why cover up the murders? Why frame Law?”

“Oh, it’s Law now, huh? You fall in love with him like Carson Riley did?” Braddock slid further into the kitchen, his back to the countertops.

“And I don’t work with Burke. Burke and Howell, they work for *me*. *I’m* the one keepin’ them out of jail! *I’m* the one who figured out what they was up to! And *I’m* the one who expanded their minds and taught them how tiny their idea was. *I* showed them how to think bigger.”

A few more steps, and then Braddock would be backed into the corner. “What could you possibly teach anyone, you fucking hick?”

Braddock’s one eye flashed. “What’s the future of Montana, boy? I told you already. Do you even remember?”

“Whatever it is, it’s not you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. *It is me*. It’s meth. And whoever controls the meth, controls the money. Didn’t you listen to me, son? It’s all about diversification. Broadening your opportunities.”

“You’re turning into a fucking drug runner?”

“Howell is one greedy son of a bitch. He wants to own the whole damn mountain, just him in his empire, no public land, no other ranches. Him and Burke cooked up their little scheme to try and scare off the other ranchers and make it too expensive to stay in the Crazies. He’d slide in and buy out the property from them when they wanted to quit, and then suddenly he’d own the whole mountain. Heart’s Rafter sold out. Flying Joker is bucklin’, too. Once Law was out of the picture, Martin at the Rocking H would have fled. It was a perfect plan. Trouble is, they got caught.”

“And you decided to make their plan yours.”

Braddock’s back hit the corner. “Once they control the Crazies, I’ll have free reign to move my product through. No one’s ever goin’ to catch me. Not here.”

“All it takes now is wrapping up your loose ends.” Everett kept his eyes locked on Braddock’s. He watched the blood drip from between Braddock’s fingers, slide down his cheek, drip from his mustache and smear over his lips.

One eye down, and Braddock couldn’t see what Everett was doing.

“Everyone in on it dies,” Braddock said. “That was the deal. We were cleaning up the Crazies of the dumbest of the dumb and making it our own, all in one go. Law had to be difficult, and you had to be even more fuckin’ difficult, but—” Braddock grinned. “Y’all are just another loose end that needs tidyin’ now. Shame. I kinda liked you, son.”

Braddock’s hand closed around a knife on the butcher block behind him. Grunting, he swung, lashing out with a wild haymaker armed with a

chef's knife flying at Everett's face.

Everett ducked, slammed his shoulder into Braddock's chest, and lifted him off his feet. His good hand grabbed Braddock's wrist and twisted until he heard bone snap.

Braddock bellowed. His hand opened, and the knife fell.

Everett spun him, shoved him over the kitchen counter and pulled Braddock's arm back, twisting until he screamed. "You don't know me," Everett hissed in Braddock's ear. "You don't know how I feel about men who betray."

Braddock spat curses and kicked at Everett. Everett slammed his boot into the backs of Braddock's knees, one after the other. Howling, Braddock sagged against the counter. He reached for the butcher block again, this time with the hand that had covered his empty eye. Everett let him. He watched Braddock struggle, watched his fingers slip over the handle. Watched him draw out the boning knife, clench it in trembling fingers.

"If you try it, you'll die," Everett warned.

"Fuck you!" Braddock lunged, aiming the knife at Everett's face.

Everett grabbed the knife. His hand closed over Braddock's, and he twisted, slowly. Turned Braddock's wrist and jerked his hand toward Braddock's own neck.

Blade slipped through flesh, severing the center of Braddock's throat.

Warm blood flowed over Everett's hand, down his arm, pooled down Braddock's body and slid between them, drenching him, once again, with the blood of a betrayer.

He staggered backward, staring at his red right hand. The murderer's hand.

It's all happening again. I can never, ever escape. Not from myself.

Smoke filled the ranch house, his nose, his throat. The roar of the flames surrounded him on all sides.

He tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

LAWRENCE RODE TRIGGER AS HARD AS HE EVER HAD, CHASING DOWN Howell and Burke. They were fleeing across his pasture and heading for the

tree line. Burke fired wild shots over his shoulder as they rode. One zinged close enough to Lawrence to whistle.

Trigger snorted as he galloped up the hill. Ahead, there was a flat plane, a smooth stretch of grass. Lawrence rose, sitting high on Trigger's back. If he'd saddled Trigger, he could stand in the stirrups, but this would have to do. Breathing in once, twice, he hefted himself up and brought the shotgun to his shoulder.

He took aim. Exhaled. Squeezed the trigger.

Howell's arms flew up, and he nearly tumbled from his horse. Burke weaved close, grabbed Howell's sleeve and hauled him back into the saddle. Lawrence saw Howell lean forward and grab his horse's mane with one hand.

"Go!" Burke's voice carried on the still night. "I've got this." He wheeled his horse around as Howell rode on, his silhouette outlined in the moonlight filling the meadow, his shadow reaching for the trees.

Burke turned his horse and faced Lawrence across the pasture. His horse stamped, sidestepped. Stilled. Burke raised his rifle.

"Shit." Lawrence pulled Trigger hard to the right, circling into the shadows cast by the woods. He had to get Trigger off the meadow, get him out of sight. In the moonlight-drenched field, Trigger would be easy prey.

Burke's rifle split the night, a thunderclap that bounced off Crazy Peak and rolled down the slopes. He jerked Trigger left, pure instinct, pure desperation. The shadow of a cottonwood swallowed them both.

The bullet whistled on their right, sliding between branches. It slammed into the trunk ahead of them, splintering wood into toothpicks and sparks.

Trigger screamed. Lawrence ducked over his neck, holding tight to his mane.

He wove Trigger through aspen and ash before he slipped off his back. "Hide, boy," he whispered. "Stay out of sight." Trigger snorted. He nuzzled at Lawrence's hand, rubbed his face against his chest. "Get gone!" He slapped Trigger's ass, and his stallion darted through the trees.

It took some time to creep back to the meadow. Burke waited, patient and still in the center of the pasture dappled in starlight. His hat cast shadows over his face, and his clothes were drenched by the moon. He looked like Death riding for Lawrence. Waiting for him.

"I know you're there, Law," Burke called. In the stillness, he didn't need to shout.

Down the hill, the ranch house burned, flames licking the sky and casting a crimson glow across the field. Sparks shot upward as the roof collapsed, and timbers split like the earth was cleaving in two. *Everett.*

“You come out that tree line, I’m goin’ to put a bullet in you. You used your last shot.”

He stayed low, hidden behind a fallen log. “It was you, wasn’t it?” he hollered. “You killed Carson!”

“It was supposed to be both of you hung!” Burke chuckled once. It was a humorless laugh, like dry leaves catching fire. “He was supposed to bring you up there. He’d figured out some Endless Sky boys were doing the rustlin’, and he wanted to talk it through before going to the sheriff. I told him to bring you up and we’d clean out the bad seeds together, then get our stock back. Course, he figured out the truth of the matter when that rope went ‘round his neck.”

“And Phillip? Your own hand?”

“Phillip? He was the one that helped me. Never underestimate hero worship. Phillip woulda done anythin’ I said. ‘N that’s why he had to die.”

Lawrence peeked over the log. Burke was sighting his rifle, aiming for the tree line, worryingly close to Lawrence’s hiding spot. He scrambled sideways, moving into an animal den cut into the dirt behind a tree trunk.

Another shot split the night. The log Lawrence had hidden behind exploded.

“I thought it would be downright poetic. Two lovesick cowboys can’t make it in the world together and end up swingin’ together. Damn it, you were supposed to hang with him, Law. Would have made everything so much fuckin’ simpler.”

“Sorry to disappoint you!” he shouted. He ran before he finished shouting, diving for a boulder that edged against the hillside down to the ranch. Burke fired, and another tree splintered, bullet shattering wood.

Lawrence wasn’t far enough away that time. A missile from the trunk launched for him, stabbing him through the side below his ribs. He fell to the dirt and managed to muffle his scream.

“You know, Carson already had that note written. I didn’t write none of that. He really was plannin’ on endin’ it all sometime. That’s hardly murder, is it? If I killed him faster than he could kill his own self?”

Lawrence fingered his wound, felt the blood, the torn skin. His nerves pounded, shrieking in pain, and he clenched his teeth so hard he thought

they'd crack. *Carson...*

"I don't believe you!"

"I never woulda put down that he loved you, 'least in his own way. But he'd already written it out. All I had to was make it easy to find on his phone, once Darby grabbed it from your place."

Agony seared through him, exploded from his chest. Was it always going to end up this way? Was he always destined to bring Carson's body out of the mountains?

No. Carson was dead because of Jim Burke. *He* was the murderer.

Anguish was like a knife, sliding through his lungs.

The pain fed his fury. Damn this man. Jim Burke had defined his life, one way or another, since he was a boy. He'd wanted to work for the man, be one of Burke's golden cowboys. He'd tried, damn it, he *had*, but he'd been trying to outrun himself, and the only way he knew how was to fight everything in his path. Jim Burke threw him off Endless Sky before he'd even got his feet underneath him. And that had defined him, to himself, to the whole town, to every gossip in Timber Creek, to every man whose eyes slid sideways away from him. One way or another, he'd been running away from Jim Burke his whole life.

No more.

He heaved himself up, braced himself behind the boulder. Squared his shoulders. There was fifty feet between him and Burke. Shadows covered maybe a third of that. If he ran fast, if he zigzagged—

Burke was fast with his rifle, but Lawrence had rage on his side.

Roaring, he charged around the boulder, shoulders down, storming the Devil himself as he sprinted out of the tree line. He spotted Burke and watched him swing the rifle toward him. Watched him raise it, press the stock to his shoulder. Lean his cheek against the grain and close one eye.

The roar split the pasture. Made Lawrence's ears ring and knocked him from his feet. He sprawled on the grass, tasted dirt. Breathed in, and waited for the pain that never came.

A second boom thundered. He looked up.

Everett strode out of the shadows of the hill like a ghost, drenched in blood, his face twisted in savage ferocity. He balanced a shotgun in one arm, holding it steady and aiming straight for Burke. Smoke rose from both barrels.

Burke fell sideways from his saddle. He hit the ground and didn't move.

Lawrence scrambled to his feet, wincing at the shrapnel embedded in his side. He checked himself, ran his hands over his body. He'd expected to die. He'd expected to be shot to hell.

But Everett had saved him.

He limped to Everett, got to his side in time to catch Everett as he slumped forward.

Everett's eyes were wild, unfocused. His clothes were burned and stained with soot and soaked in blood. His skin was blackened from the smoke where it wasn't soaked and stained in crimson and ruby red. He looked through Lawrence, beyond him.

He wasn't entirely there, not right now. Lawrence set him down in the grass and took the shotgun from him. Slowly, he crept toward Burke, still and facedown in the field. Burke's rifle was out of his reach. His empty hand clutched at dirt and air.

Lawrence kicked him. Burke didn't move.

Burke's horse snorted and trotted away. She was a small thing, light and good for maneuvering over hard country. Slender, though. She was a young horse, and it was a surprising choice for a man like Burke.

His eyes strayed to her tracks: slender tracks from a narrow hoof.

Sirens rose through the mountains, dozens of them, red and blue lights flashing up and down the mountain as police cars and fire trucks wound their way up. But why? No one would have known to call—

Connor O'Donnell leaned against Sheriff Braddock's truck, waving at him. He held the truck's radio in his one good hand.

It was too late for the ranch house. They needed to save the fields, the forest. The horses were all free, thankfully. They'd fled for safety, Lantana and Banshee and Trigger off in the pastures, along with Connor's mare he'd rode in on. They'd come home when it was safe.

He collapsed, falling to his knees beside Everett and hauled him into his arms. Everett's eyes opened, and he slowly fixed his gaze on Lawrence. His bloody hand cupped Lawrence's face.

"I promised you I'd get him."

"Yeah," Lawrence breathed. "You did." He pressed his lips to Everett's hair and rocked him as sirens filled the ranch yard.

CHAPTER 17

SUDDENLY, THE CRAZIES WAS WHERE EVERYBODY WANTED TO BE.

State Police and FBI, Montana's Department of Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife, State Disaster Management, and even the Governor all descended on Timber Creek and the Crazies. Firefighters poured in, and smoke jumpers built barricades to stop the spread of the ranch fire before it chewed through the forest. Delaney's custom built ranch house was gone, as was his barn, Law's cabin, and part of the forest next to the meadow.

Lawrence, Connor, and Everett were taken first to Timber Creek's tiny medical center and then flown to Helena for treatment. Connor was handcuffed to the gurney on the chopper there, bitching the whole time. "I only got the one arm," he said, cussing out the State Trooper guarding him. "What you think I'm gonna do with one arm?"

Everett was taken to surgery when they landed, and then he disappeared into the Department of Agriculture's bureaucracy. Try as Lawrence might, he couldn't get any news on Everett. The man seemed to have vanished, and even when he wandered the hospital halls and poked into each room, he couldn't find him.

Calls to the Department of Agriculture and the Stock Detectives' office went unanswered. He left messages with Buck Williams, Everett's supervisor.

Silence whittled away at his once-fevered hope.

He was given a ride back to Timber Creek by a State Trooper who told him the Timber Creek Sheriff's Department was being administratively run by the State Troopers for the time being, until they could figure out how deep Sheriff Braddock's corruption went. Braddock's deputies walked

around like ghosts, shellshocked mannequins that didn't know which way to turn. None seemed to have been part of Braddock's designs.

Search parties scoured the Crazies. FBI teams pulled the bodies out of Whiskey Gulch, processed the crime scene, and carted each and every piece of evidence out of the canyon.

Lawrence, Martin from the Rocking H, and Bill Warner got together and divided up the Box 88 cattle evenly. They'd all had stock stolen, but so had Endless Sky to cover their complicity. They divided up Endless Sky's stolen cattle among them, and Bill decided to move back to his old ranch. Lawrence spent a few days at his place, helping fix it up, repaint the house, and mend the fences while Bill's cattle grazed with his own in the Lazy Twenty-Two pastures.

The FBI seized Endless Sky, froze its assets, questioned and re-questioned every hand working there. Most tried to split town, get out of Dodge, and were picked up at truck stops in Wyoming, Idaho, and the Dakotas. Others claimed they'd looked the other way, ignored signs they, in retrospect, regretted not have noticing sooner. More than a few were hauled away in handcuffs.

Three weeks after Dan Howell tore off from the Lazy Twenty-Two on horseback in the middle of the night, State Police search teams found him hanging in the woods. Suicide, they ruled.

Tyler Delaney flew into Timber Creek to take stock of the damage, a month after everything settled down. He toured the wreckage with Lawrence and kicked at the ashes, what was left of his first million dollars.

Later, he bought Lawrence a steak dinner in Garrison, the next nice town, and told him he was selling the ranch. "It's time to let it go," Delaney said. "Even if I rebuild, I'll never go back there. My wife never liked it. And with twins, well..." He shook his head. "Ranching life is not for me."

Lawrence had tried to keep his voice steady, tried to keep his eyes from watering as he took it in. "I understand, sir. I can help you get it ready for sale, help you put it on the market. She's a fine ranch, and she makes good money. You'll sell her for a pretty penny, sir. She was a good investment for you. So, whatever you need—"

"Lawrence," Delaney said, grabbing his arm. "I only want to sell the ranch to *you*."

He did cry then, but he let Delaney see it, let him see the way his eyes went bloodshot and fat drops ran down his cheeks. "I don't have that kind

of money. Not for what that ranch is worth.”

“We can work it out. You’ve more than earned it. That ranch is more yours than it ever was mine. The best decision I ever made was hiring you, Lawrence. I wish I could hire ten more of you in Silicon Valley.”

He laughed. “Sir, you don’t want me near a computer. First time I saw one, I tried to use the mouse in the air.”

A month later, they signed the documents and made it official. Delaney Ranch was now Jackson Ranch. Tyler Delaney got a quarter of his annual profits, and Lawrence had taken over the mortgage for a song.

He taped a cardboard sign over the iron gate that afternoon, his last name spelled out in duct tape and lashed up there. It wasn’t much, but it was his, and as soon as he could, he’d get a real sign made. But for now, the land, the burned-down ranch, and the trailer he’d hauled up the mountain to live in, was *his*.

He sat on his truck’s tailgate and drank a beer as Trigger, Lantana, and Banshee chewed hay in the corral, snorted at each other and flicked their tails. He’d move his other horses up here, sell the little stable in the foothills. Make this ranch a horse and cattle farm, breed good working horses along with beef. He’d make a good name for himself with this ranch.

His thoughts were interrupted by a truck engine slowly grinding its way uphill, tires chewing dirt and spitting gravel. He twisted, watching as the shiny black truck pulled into his drive and stopped at the gate.

The side of the truck read, *MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE: STOCK DETECTIVE*.

This time, he didn’t take Trigger. He ambled down the drive himself, taking a drag from his beer as he walked. The sun was high in the sky, midsummer’s heat burning down on the Crazies, and he’d traded his button-down for a t-shirt. Sweat dappled his chest, the canyon of his spine. His new cowboy hat shielded his face, and he pulled the brim down low.

“Can I help you, Detective?” He leaned against the gate, arms crossed over the top, head tilted, one boot kicked forward.

“I was looking for the Delaney Ranch. Seems I can’t find it.”

Lawrence downed a long swallow of his beer. “There ain’t a Delaney Ranch no more. He sold it. This here is the Jackson Ranch.” He pointed to his sign. “Says so right there.”

Everett squinted at the cardboard from underneath his *STOCK DETECTIVE* ball cap. His elbow hung out the driver’s window and a slow smile curled

up his lips. “I do see that now. Well, congratulations are in order.”

Lawrence tipped his hat. Raised his beer. “Might feel like celebratin’ with someone. If someone was interested.”

This time, Everett really smiled wide. “Open the gate. I’ll show you how interested I am.”

Hesitation curdled Lawrence’s stomach. Made him hesitate. “It’s been two months. I called.” He pulled out his cell phone, brand new and bought from Wal-Mart. It was one of those fancy ones with a full screen. Delaney had helped him install satellite internet before selling the place, and now, he had access to the world from the palm of his hand.

All he wanted, though, was one phone call. “You forget how to use one of these?”

“I needed time.” Everett swallowed. “I was put on medical leave. My shoulder was shot to shit. I left Montana for a while. I was in Walter Reed, getting treated there. And I went to Arlington.” He looked away. “I visited Holt.”

Lawrence’s gaze hit the dirt. He nodded. “I buried Carson, too. He didn’t have much in the way of family. I did what I thought he’d like, though.”

He’d finally read the suicide note, too. Was Carson really going to do it? Or was that note something he’d written one night when he was down and out, but had then put away? Something he hadn’t gotten around to deleting? The date on it was six weeks before he’d been murdered, right when he was really struggling with losing Endless Sky. And losing Jim Burke, a man who had been a father to him. *You keep me here, Law, he’d said. You and Endless Sky, and I’ve lost one and I’m losing the other. If I didn’t have you, I wouldn’t have any reason to be here, and I wouldn’t know who I was no more. Maybe we never should have met—*

The note had ended on that line.

In the six weeks after he’d written the note, they’d had good times. Eventually, it became clear they weren’t right for each other, not the way they’d hoped for, and Carson was talking about moving on. Going to Wyoming, or Utah. He had plans for the future.

He wasn’t going to do it, Lawrence decided. *Believed*. Clung to, with all his heart. He wasn’t going to do it. He was down one day, and that got the better of him, but he had a future in mind, something Jim Burke stole from him.

When he'd found out about the rustlers, that Endless Sky hands were the ones doing it, had he thought bringing that to Jim Burke would get him back on at Endless Sky? Had he had a desperate wish to go back to the way things were? Was he hoping for his job, his old life, back?

Carson never would have been a part of their scheme. As soon as he knew the truth, he was marked for death. And Jim Burke was the man who'd killed him, a man he'd thought of as his father, a man he had looked up to since he was fifteen years old.

"I thought about what you said, too. Thought a lot about it." Everett turned back to him and held Lawrence's gaze, shaking him out of his reverie. "I think you're right. Montana, this. It's a chance for me. And I think I want to take it."

Lawrence's heart skipped a beat. "What? Bein' a stock detective? Huntin' rustlers and chasin' cattle thieves?"

"That's part of it. Part of what I want."

Slowly, Lawrence smiled. He pushed the controls to open the gate. Stepped back, and waited for Everett to come in.

Everett beat him back up the drive. He parked in front of the ash pile, the remnants of the ranch house that weren't hauled away. Across from the heap, Lawrence's new trailer waited, two new lawn chairs in front of a shiny new fire pit, all still with that brand-new smell on them from Wal-Mart. He'd built the place for two instead of one, purely on hope.

A cooler rested between the two chairs, long neck bottles of beer chilling on ice.

Everett hopped out of his truck and nodded to the cooler and the chairs when Lawrence ambled up the drive. "Got company?"

"I was hopin' for someone to come by eventually."

When Everett beamed, Lawrence melted, all of him going loose and weak inside, his stomach slip-sliding as his heart burst. "I love that," he blurted out. "Your smile. God, I love it. Makes me go crazy."

To his delight, Everett kept smiling. "My supervisor has released me from probation and assigned me my area of Montana to cover: the southwest, including the Crazies."

"Big area."

"It is. So I asked him, where should I live if I have to manage such a big area? What's a good central location?"

"And what'd he say?"

“Buck told me, ‘live wherever the hell you want to. The job is the job. You come home to what you live for.’” Everett spun his keys in his hand. He dropped his duffel, a bag Lawrence hadn’t noticed slung over his shoulder. “I think I’d like to live right here.”

“Right here? With me?” He had to be sure. He had to be dead sure.

“With you.” Everett grinned. “You know, someone once told me once you get the Crazies in you, you can’t get them out. I think that man was right. I’ve gotten a bit of the Crazies inside me, but I want more. I want a *lot* more. I want all I can take, in fact.” He inhaled, a quick breath. “I want everything. I want my chance at everything, at least.”

It was what he’d been waiting for his whole life. Happiness. Another man who wanted him, who saw him, all of him, and still wanted more. Who looked at him and thought he was worth it, worth building a life with. The feeling bloomed inside of Lawrence like summer wildflowers, like his fields bursting to life. He tipped his head back and smiled at the sun.

“There’s just one thing,” he finally said, striding toward Everett. “I don’t let anyone with ridiculous hats on my ranch.”

Everett pulled a face. “My hat is fine. It’s my work hat.”

Lawrence plucked Everett’s ball cap off and tossed it into Everett’s truck bed and then took his own cowboy hat off. He set it on Everett’s head. “There. That’s better.”

“Will you kiss me, Law, God damn it?” Everett grabbed the front of Lawrence’s t-shirt and dragged him close. He tipped his head up, the brim of the cowboy hat brushing Lawrence’s hair. “I’ve been dreaming of coming back to you, and it’s the first time I’ve dreamed of anything since Afghanistan. I *crave* you, Law.”

He traced a finger over Everett’s cheekbone, ran his touch down to his jaw. Cradled his neck. “I been dreamin’ of you my whole life,” he whispered. “Been waitin’ on you. Cravin’ you, even before I knew who you were, Everett Dawson.” He leaned forward and kissed Everett, a gentle, slow caress of lips. “I want to put a little Crazy in you,” he whispered in Everett’s ear.

Everett wrapped his arms around Lawrence’s neck and beamed. “Give me your Crazies, Law. I want it all.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who is Tal Bauer? Tal Bauer is an award-winning and best-selling author of gay romantic thrillers, bringing together a career in law enforcement and international humanitarian aid to create dynamic characters, intriguing plots, and exotic locations. He is happily married and lives with his husband in Texas. Tal is a member of the Romance Writers of America. Check out Tal's website: www.talbauerwrites.com or follow Tal on social media.

What is the best way to stay up to date on new releases and all things Tal Bauer? Follow Tal on BookBub and sign up for his newsletter!

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