

Alan G. Hagberg
Writing as
Alan H. Gael
P.O. Box 1197
Harwich, MA 02645
(774) 789-6647
info@alanhagberg.com

THE YOUNG RIDERS

A Novella

by Alan H. Gael

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CHAPTER ONE

SADDLE PALS

The first sign that the summer of 2025 would be unlike any summer before it came at approximately seven forty-five on a Friday evening in late June, when a wolf came out of the marsh.

Larry Alden saw it first. He was sixteen years old, tall for his age, with the kind of easy athletic confidence that made catching a pop fly or turning a double play look effortless. He and his younger brother Tom were jogging down Millbrook Road on the edge of their family's property outside Bramley, Ohio, baseball gloves dangling from their wrists, the late June light going golden over the rolling hills. They were running because their father had made himself clear that morning: keep supper waiting again and they would lose their spots on the JV team—and losing their spots meant no tryouts in the fall, and the thought of that was enough to keep their feet moving even after an hour of fielding drills.

Tom was fifteen, lean where Larry was broad, thoughtful where Larry was impulsive. He had a habit of watching the world as though he was filing everything away for later reference, a quality that made him a better student than his brother but a slightly slower runner.

"We're going to make it," Tom said between breaths, glancing at his phone. "Four minutes and we're home."

"Put the phone away," Larry said.

"I'm tracking our pace."

"You're slowing us down."

"I'm literally—" Tom stopped talking because Larry had gone rigid beside him.

The marsh that bordered the western edge of the Alden property had been quiet for as long as either of them could remember. It was a feature of the landscape you stopped noticing after a while—a half-mile of cattails and standing water where Millbrook Creek backed up each spring, smelling of mud and old leaves. The boys had been warned off it since they were small, not because anything dramatic had ever happened there, but because their mother had conducted a preemptive intervention involving mud and eight-year-olds before any dramatic moment could arise.

Something was in the marsh now. Something large, low to the ground, moving through the reeds with a focused, unhurried purpose.

They both heard the growl at the same moment.

"Did you—" Tom started.

"Yeah," Larry said.

And then it came out of the cattails.

Later, trying to explain it, they both agreed that the thing which stayed with them was not the size of the animal—though it was enormous—and not the sound it made, though that sound seemed to rattle around in Larry's chest for days. What stayed with them was the eyes. Yellow, and absolutely without doubt.

It was a wolf. Not a coyote, not a large stray dog. A wolf—gray and black, perhaps a hundred and thirty pounds, with its

head dropped low and its ears pressed flat, staring at them across thirty feet of gravel road with the expression of an animal that has made a decision.

"That's the Kellerman wolf," Larry said, with the strange precision of a mind that has decided naming a thing will make it manageable. The Kellerman Wildlife Center, eight miles east on Route 20, had been in the local news the previous winter when a pair of gray wolves had arrived from a Minnesota sanctuary. Recently, one of them had apparently reconsidered its relationship with captivity.

"Run," Tom said quietly.

"If we run it'll—"

"Larry. Run."

They ran.

The wolf moved the instant they did, its paws hitting the gravel with a sound Larry would spend the rest of his life describing as applause. He was fast—faster than Tom, faster than most people his age—but he had the sudden, clarifying impression that he was not faster than this. He screamed for the house. Tom screamed for the house. Their voices went out across the fields and for a moment there was nothing but running and the footfalls closing behind them and the farmhouse lights impossibly far away.

Joe Ramírez was at the kitchen sink when he heard them. He was twenty-three, had worked the Alden property for three summers, and the one thing he had not been prepared for was two boys screaming about a wolf at seven forty-five on a Friday evening. He came out the back door at a run and in the same

motion grabbed the .22 rifle that hung inside the doorframe—a habit of rural Ohio households that Larry and Tom had always considered faintly excessive and now considered the single most important piece of foresight their parents had ever exercised. His hands were shaking. He had never fired at anything living before. Down the path, the wolf was ten feet behind Tom.

"Shoot!" Larry screamed back over his shoulder. "Don't worry if you miss—just shoot!"

The instruction seemed to cut through something. Joe raised the rifle, found his footing on the porch planking, and fired.

The wolf staggered sideways. Not a killing shot, but enough. Joe chambered the next round, steadied, and fired again before the animal could recover. The second hit was solid. The wolf went down.

The boys collapsed in the yard, breathing in great ragged pulls. Mrs. Alden came out at a run, dropped between them, ran her hands over their arms and faces with a quick professional efficiency.

"Did it touch either of you?"

They shook their heads.

"You're certain."

They held up their arms for inspection. Mrs. Alden sat back on her heels and exhaled once, slowly, then stood up, smoothed her jeans, and went to check on the wolf. It was dead. Joe stood over it with the rifle held loosely, looking like a man who'd had a very unexpected evening. Mrs. Alden touched his arm.

"You did well," she said.

They heard the pickup before they saw it. Theodore Alden turned into the driveway at his usual measured pace and stopped in the yard, taking in the scene: his wife beside a dead wolf, his sons face-down in the grass breathing hard, Joe Ramírez holding a rifle with an expression of mild philosophical shock.

Theodore Alden was forty-five, with the wide shoulders and weathered patience of a man who had farmed two hundred acres and run a small equipment-leasing operation for twenty years. He had the steady, unhurried manner of someone who had learned that most crises resolve themselves if you resist the urge to add panic to them.

He got out of the truck. He looked at the wolf. He looked at his sons.

"Somebody start talking," he said.

Tom talked. He was better under pressure—cleaner, more linear—and the story came out in short organized bursts while he was still catching his breath. Theodore listened without interrupting. When Tom finished, Theodore looked at the wolf for a measured moment and then nodded once.

"Good thing you were close to home." He paused in the way he did when something was working in the back of his mind. "This is quite a day for news, actually. Boys—after you've cleaned up, I need to talk to you both at dinner."

"About what?" Larry asked.

His father's mouth curved in the private way it did when he was enjoying a secret. "Clean up first."

Dinner was pasta and garlic bread, Tom's favorite since he was six. He sat at the table with his hair still damp from the shower, watching his father eat with the controlled patience of someone waiting for a verdict.

The verdict came over the last of the bread.

"I received an email this afternoon," their father said, setting down his fork, "from a solicitor in Glasgow. My great-uncle, Thomas Darwent, passed away three weeks ago. He's left his entire estate to me." He picked up his water glass. "The solicitor estimates it at roughly three hundred thousand dollars, once the properties are assessed and the accounts settled."

Silence settled over the table.

"Thomas Darwent," their mother said slowly. "Theodore, you haven't spoken to that man in—"

"Twenty years. It's complicated. The short version is he had no children, no closer relatives, and apparently thought of me more warmly than I'd realized." Their father turned his glass in his hands. "I need to go to Scotland. I fly out Sunday."

"Sunday." Their mother set down her fork with precision. "That is two days from now."

"I know. I'm sorry about the short notice. I'll be gone most of the summer—eight to ten weeks. The property assessments need someone present, and there are legal proceedings that require me on-site."

Tom looked at Larry. Larry looked at Tom. Something moved between them, quick as a signal.

"What about us?" Larry said carefully.

His father looked at him the way he looked at a field before planting—assessing something beneath the surface. "What about you?"

Tom had his phone out under the table. Larry put his hand on Tom's arm.

"We were hoping," Larry said, choosing each word like a man crossing ice, "to go out to New Mexico this summer. To see Bill and Horace Wilder."

The Wilder boys—Bill, seventeen, and Horace, fifteen—were the sons of David Wilder, who had gone to college with Theodore Alden and moved his family to a working ranch outside Tolopah, New Mexico four years ago. The four boys ran on the kind of friendship that survives long gaps of distance and absence and reconstitutes instantly the moment you are back in the same room. The previous Christmas, Horace had sent a text that read: *You two need to come out here. We have horses and three thousand acres and actual cattle. You would completely lose your minds.* Bill had followed up with a voice memo that lasted eleven minutes and contained more specific information about the virtues of ranch life than anyone had asked for.

They had not stopped thinking about it since.

Theodore Alden looked at his sons for a long moment. Then he looked at his wife.

Sandra Alden had been watching the boys throughout the conversation with the quiet attention she brought to everything. She had seen the careful hopefulness in Larry's expression and

the barely-contained excitement in Tom's. She had done her calculation.

"They'd be better off with the Wilders than sitting here with me all summer," she said. "If the Wilders will have them."

What followed was several minutes of barely managed chaos. The boys were out of their chairs before Theodore had finished nodding. Tom had his phone in hand in the time it took to exhale and was typing before he'd properly registered that anything had been agreed.

Hey. Any chance we could come out for the summer? The whole summer? We could be there by Wednesday.

The response from Horace arrived in four minutes flat.

ARE YOU SERIOUS. YES. COME NOW. Bring nothing, we'll sort out boots and everything. Dad says absolutely yes. Bill is literally running a lap of the barn right now. GET ON A PLANE.

Larry read it over his shoulder and made a sound that was not quite a word.

"They said yes," Tom reported to the table.

"I assumed," their father said.

The next two days moved at a pace that made everything before them seem slow. Their mother assembled bags with the focused efficiency of someone who finds packing meditative. Their father drove to the bank on Saturday and came back with two prepaid Visa cards, each loaded with five hundred dollars, in plain white envelopes with the PINs written on the inside flap in his careful, even handwriting.

He took them to the barn on Saturday afternoon for what they had long ago identified as the Location of the Serious Conversation.

"Five hundred dollars each," he said. "Don't carry it all in your wallet. The card goes in an inside pocket, somewhere it can't be lifted in a crowd." He looked at each of them. "Budget it—about a hundred and fifty for the outbound flight, a hundred and fifty set aside for the return. The rest is yours, but keep fifty in reserve. When you arrive, give David Wilder the return portion for safekeeping. Don't argue with him about it."

"We won't," Larry said.

"I know. I'm saying it anyway." He paused. "This is the first time you'll be on your own—genuinely on your own, making decisions without your mother or me available in any practical sense. Scotland is six hours ahead. I'll have a set check-in time twice a week, but I can't be your first call for every problem."

Tom felt the weight of this settle on him in a way that was not unpleasant—more like the feeling of a pack going on your back, the pleasant reminder that you are going somewhere.

"The Wilders are good people," their father continued. "David Wilder has more sense than most men I know. You listen to him the way you'd listen to me—which means actually listening, not nodding and then doing whatever you were going to do anyway. Bill's in charge when David isn't around. You follow his lead."

He let that settle.

"Tolopah is a small town. The county is large and rural and remote. The people out there have a different set of rules and

expectations than Bramley does. Keep your eyes open and your mouths closed until you understand a situation, and you'll be fine." He put a hand on each of their shoulders—his version of an embrace. "Don't embarrass us."

"That's the whole speech?" Larry said. "'Don't embarrass us'?"

"I've been working on the brevity."

Sunday morning, Columbus International Airport, the pre-dawn hour when the terminal belongs to the grim and purposeful. Their parents stood with them at the security checkpoint. Their mother hugged them both twice, then a third time, then held them at arm's length and studied their faces as though committing the current versions to memory.

Their father shook their hands in the formal way he had—each one separately, a brief firm grip, eye contact—and then said: "Text when you land in Albuquerque."

"And when you get to the ranch," their mother said.

"We'll text constantly," Tom said. "We'll text so much you'll block us."

Their mother laughed and then almost cried, which she managed not to do, which was impressive in its own right.

Then they were through security and moving toward the gate, and when Larry looked back his parents were still there at the checkpoint, getting smaller. He turned forward and kept walking.

"You all right?" Tom said.

"Yeah. You?"

"I've never flown without Mom."

"It's the same except she's not there."

"That's less reassuring than you think."

They found their gate and sat in plastic chairs with their bags between their feet. Outside the windows the tarmac was pale gray in the pre-dawn light, and the ground crews worked with the deliberate mechanical precision that Larry had always found calming—everything in its sequence, everything following a system. The intercom announced their boarding group and they stood up, shuffled forward, found their seats on a plane that smelled like recycled air and optimism, and settled in for the first leg.

The first flight was unremarkable except for a delay in Dallas that turned sixty minutes into eighty-five, and a bag of pretzels Tom consumed in approximately four minutes. Then they were in the air again, banking west over the Texas panhandle, and below them the landscape was changing in ways that neither of them had seen outside of photographs—the greens of the Midwest giving way to the tans and ochres of the high desert, the earth below them growing drier and older-looking with every mile.

Larry had his face against the window when he became aware that someone was watching him from across the aisle.

The boy was approximately their age, perhaps a year older, with light hair and the specific expression of someone who has been traveling alone for longer than is comfortable. He was wearing a light jacket that was not quite warm enough for the aircraft's air conditioning, and he had a travel guidebook open on the tray table in front of him—German text on the cover, a map

of New Mexico open to a dog-eared page. He had been gripping the armrests, Larry noticed, with the concentrated focus of someone for whom flying was not a neutral experience.

When he caught Larry looking, he sat straighter and made a visible effort at composure.

"Excuse me," he said, in English that was careful and considered. "That below us—is that already New Mexico?"

"Should be getting close," Larry said. "We're maybe forty minutes out from Albuquerque."

"Ah." The boy relaxed a fraction. "Good. I begin to think perhaps something went wrong with the direction."

Tom leaned across. "You flying into Albuquerque?"

"Yes. From there I will take a bus to a small town—Tolopah. There is no direct flight to Tolopah, I think?"

Larry and Tom looked at each other.

"We're going to Tolopah," Tom said. "There's no bus, but there's a shuttle service from the airport. What are you going there for?"

The boy's expression shifted into something more complicated—relief layered over a worry he was trying not to show. "My brother. He has a restaurant there—a small place, very new, he has been there two years. I am to help him for the summer. Perhaps to become a partner." He touched the front of his jacket reflexively, a small checking motion, as if verifying that something was still there. "I am Hans Ober. From Berlin."

"Larry Alden," Larry said, extending his hand across the aisle. "This is my brother Tom. We're from Ohio."

Hans shook both hands with formal German thoroughness.

"Ohio. I know this. The—how do you say—the Buckeyes."

"That's us," Tom said.

"And you go to a ranch? Like actual cowboys?"

"Like actual cowboys," Larry confirmed.

Hans considered this with visible interest. He had the look of someone who finds the real thing somewhat more alarming than the idea of it. "Cowboys still carry guns, yes? Not only in movies."

"It's not exactly like the movies," Larry said. "But it's rural New Mexico, so—yeah, people are armed."

"I think perhaps America is more..." Hans searched for the word, gaze drifting to the landscape below. "More literal than I expected."

The plane banked, and for a moment the afternoon sun came in sideways across the aisle and the whole high-desert basin opened up below them—brown and vast and astonishing, utterly unlike anything they had grown up looking at. All three of them went quiet.

Larry thought: this is real. This is the thing they keep warning you about, the thing that happens when the map you've been carrying in your head meets the actual ground. Everything was bigger than he'd been told.

He looked at Tom, who was looking out the window with an expression Larry recognized—the one that meant he was already trying to find the right words for something.

"Hey," Larry said.

"Yeah," Tom said, not looking away from the window.

That was sufficient.

Hans was still watching the ground come up to meet them. His knuckles, Larry noticed, had relaxed their grip on the armrest.

The Albuquerque airport was bright and broad and smelled of the desert in a way that hit you immediately upon stepping off the jetway—dry and mineral and clean. The boys collected their bags from the carousel and found the shuttle desk with relative ease, and it was at the shuttle desk that the day added one more surprise to its collection.

Hans Ober was standing at the same desk.

"The shuttle to Tolopah," he said, looking up with the expression of a man who has just discovered that coincidence is real. "You also."

"Also us," Tom confirmed.

The shuttle was an eight-passenger van driven by a laconic man named Reyes who appeared to regard conversation as an extravagance. He loaded their bags with mechanical efficiency and they pulled out of the airport into the late afternoon, heading northeast on the highway toward the mountains.

Tom had his face against the window for the first forty minutes, watching the landscape, while Larry watched Hans watching the landscape, and Hans watched the landscape with the expression of someone trying to simultaneously appreciate a thing and be afraid of it.

"Is it how you imagined?" Larry asked him.

Hans thought about this. "In Germany I read many books about the American West. It seemed very large in the books." He paused. "The books were not exaggerating."

"They usually aren't," Tom said, without turning from the window.

Hans looked at them both. "Your friends—the ones at the ranch. You trust them?"

"Bill and Horace? Yeah," Larry said. "Completely."

"And their father. He is a good man?"

"From everything our dad's told us. They've known each other a long time."

Hans nodded slowly, processing this. "My brother Chris, he is good man also. But he does not always tell me everything. He said come and help, it will be wonderful. He did not say it was so very—" He gestured vaguely at the landscape outside, at the scale of it. "Far."

Larry smiled. "Wait till you see how big the sky gets."

Hans looked up through the windshield at the sky above the highway, which was already doing things that Ohio skies simply did not do—going three different colors at once, stretching out to the edges of the world without interruption.

"Yes," Hans said, quietly. "I see what you mean."

The van climbed into the mountains as the sun went down behind them, throwing long shadows across the road. By the time the lights of Tolopah appeared in the valley below—small and scattered and entirely unlike anything back home—the sky had gone

from gold to deep violet to a blue-black thick with stars. More stars than Larry had known could fit in a sky.

He texted his parents: *Landed safe. In the van. Almost to Tolopah. Stars are insane.*

His mother replied in forty seconds: *Thank God. Be good. Love you.*

His father replied in three minutes: *Good. Text David Wilder when you arrive.*

His father, as always, was the practical one.

The van curved down out of the mountains into the valley, and the lights of Tolopah grew and spread. It was a small town by any measure—a main street, a gas station, a feed store, a diner with a neon sign that said OPEN in letters that one by one were negotiating their retirement. But it was alive at this hour in a way that surprised Larry: people on the sidewalks, trucks angled into parking spots in front of what appeared to be a bar, a group of men in work clothes standing outside the feed store having a conversation that looked like it had been going on for some time.

Reyes pulled the van up in front of a small covered bus shelter that served, apparently, as the transit hub of Tolopah. He killed the engine and got out without ceremony. "End of the line," he said, and began unloading their bags.

Hans stood on the sidewalk with his suitcases and looked at the street with the expression of a man arriving at a foreign country for the first time and realizing that the brochure had omitted certain details. Larry and Tom stood with their packs, scanning for Bill and Horace.

A truck pulled up—a mud-splashed F-250 with a Half-Moon logo on the door—and two boys climbed out before it had fully stopped. One was tall and deliberate, with the easy economy of movement that comes from two years of physical outdoor work. The other was shorter and quicker, already grinning before he'd covered half the distance between them.

"You're here," said Horace Wilder, arriving at a near-run and grabbing Larry's arm with the grip of someone confirming a reality. "You're actually here. Do you have any idea how boring it has been?"

"Horace," said Bill Wilder, arriving at a more measured pace, "they have been traveling for ten hours. Give them a second." He shook Larry's hand, then Tom's, with the solid quiet confidence of someone a year older and considerably more composed than his brother. Then he looked past them at Hans, standing alone beside his luggage with the expression of a man who has just realized he may have made a mistake. "Who's this?"

"Hans Ober," Larry said. "We met on the flight. His brother runs a restaurant here in town."

Bill looked at Hans, then back at Larry, with the slight almost-imperceptible widening of the eyes that communicates: *there is something I should tell you about that, but not right now*. He said only: "Let's get your bags loaded. We can talk on the way."

As they carried luggage to the truck, Larry glanced back at the main street. Nothing he could have named as remarkable—

trucks, people, the diner's failing neon. Just a small Western town at eight o'clock on a June evening.

He noticed, without knowing exactly why, a large man in a dark jacket watching them from in front of the bar across the street. The man had a look that Larry would not be able to articulate for some time—close-set eyes, a kind of heaviness around the jaw, the particular stillness of someone who is watching something and has decided, not yet, not yet. It put Larry in mind of something his father had said once about certain animals: the ones that have never been properly checked tend to look at the world like it owes them something.

Then the man turned away and went inside, and the moment passed. Larry climbed into the back of the truck.

The summer—the real summer, the one they would carry with them for the rest of their lives—was about to begin.

CHAPTER TWO

WELCOME TO THE HALF-MOON

The truck smelled of diesel and dry grass and the particular mineral dust of New Mexico, and it was, Larry decided, one of the best smells he had ever encountered. He sat wedged between Tom and Hans in the back seat with his pack at his feet, watching the darkness outside the window while Horace, riding shotgun, explained everything about the Half-Moon Ranch that had not already been covered in eleven months of texts.

"Three thousand acres," Horace said, "but we're leasing another eight hundred to the south, which Dad's thinking about buying outright. About two hundred head in the home pasture and closer to three thousand out at Long Creek, which is fifty miles south and where the cowboys actually live most of the year. You'll meet them eventually. Cross-eyed Pete is the foreman—don't ask about the name—and he can rope a steer at full gallop without looking directly at it, which is as impressive as it sounds."

Bill drove with the quiet competence of someone who has been navigating these roads in the dark since he was fourteen. The headlights lit up the highway in a long white corridor, and beyond it on both sides there was simply nothing—no streetlights, no houses, no indication that anyone had ever been out here. Larry found this exhilarating in a way he could not quite articulate. Tom was already leaning against the window, watching the sky.

"No signal," Tom reported, holding up his phone.

"You won't have signal at the ranch either," Bill said.

"There's Wi-Fi in the house, and it's decent, but you'll need to be inside. Out on the range, you're on your own."

Tom appeared to process this. "Good," he said, after a moment.

"Good," Larry agreed.

Hans had been quiet since they left Tolopah. He was sitting very still in the way of someone working through a private calculation, and when the highway curved and the headlights briefly illuminated a roadside sign reading TOLOPAH 14 MI, he turned to Bill.

"My brother," he said. "Chris Ober. You know him, yes? He has a restaurant in Tolopah, the—" He stopped. "I think it is called El Farolito."

A brief silence from the front seat.

"Yeah," Bill said. "I know Chris."

"He is there? At the restaurant?"

Bill glanced in the rearview mirror. "Hans, I'm sorry. Chris isn't here right now. He left about three months ago. He went down to Mexico City chasing some deal—a supplier, or an investor, something like that. He told people he'd be back in six weeks." Bill paused. "That was three months ago. His phone goes to voicemail."

The silence that followed was different from the first one.

"Gone," Hans said quietly.

"His restaurant is still there—he left it with a manager. But Chris himself, nobody's seen him. I'm sorry. I figured you knew."

"I did not know." Hans looked at the window. "He told me: come in June, we will work together, it will be wonderful. He did

not say: I will be in Mexico City." He was quiet for a moment. "I have sent many messages. He answers sometimes but not clearly. He says he is coming back soon. He has been saying this for months."

Larry and Tom exchanged a look across the dark cab.

"You could go back to Albuquerque," Tom offered carefully.

"Get a flight home."

"And do what?" Hans said. "Sit in Berlin and wait? I am here now." He was quiet another moment, and then something in his posture settled, as though he had made a decision. "I will wait for him here. If that is permitted."

"Our dad already said yes," Horace said from the front. "You can stay as long as you need. We've got a bunkhouse."

Hans nodded once, with the careful composure of someone who will cry later, privately, and not before.

They turned off the highway onto a gravel road that ran straight east toward the mountains, and after two miles the fence line began—barbed wire posts trailing off into the dark—and then a gate with a steel arch above it, and welded into the arch, a crescent moon. The Half-Moon Ranch.

The house was low and wide with a covered porch running its full length, every window lit. Beyond it Larry could make out the shapes of other buildings: a large barn, a long low bunkhouse, a series of corrals, and in the corrals, horses. Even in the dark he could see them—pale shapes moving quietly, the occasional sound of a hoof on packed earth.

A woman came off the porch before the truck had stopped. She was compact and quick, with the look of someone who has run a

large operation for a long time and finds it neither overwhelming nor particularly remarkable.

"You made it," said Carol Wilder, and her voice carried a warmth that made the whole drive worth it. "I was starting to think you'd taken a wrong turn in Albuquerque." She looked at Larry and Tom with the appraising kindness of someone who has been told a great deal about you and is checking the description against the reality. "You must be Larry. And Tom. You look exactly like your father described."

"Hopefully that's good," Larry said.

"Your father described you as capable boys who would work hard and stay out of trouble," Mrs. Wilder said. "I'm choosing to take that as a compliment to all of you." Her gaze moved to Hans, standing slightly apart with his suitcases. "And you must be Hans. Bill texted ahead. You'll sleep in the bunkhouse tonight—it's clean and the beds are decent. We'll sort out the rest in the morning."

Hans blinked. "Thank you. I am sorry to be—"

"Don't apologize," Mrs. Wilder said. "You're our guest. Come inside, all of you. Manny left food on the stove."

Manny turned out to be Manuel Ortega, who had cooked at the Half-Moon since the Wilders moved in and who expressed hospitality primarily through volume. The kitchen smelled of green chile and warm tortillas and the deep-savory richness of a pot of beans that had been going since morning. Manny himself was already in bed—he rose at four, Bill explained—but he had left

enough food for eight people on the reasonable assumption that hungry travelers would find their way to it.

David Wilder appeared from the back of the house while they were eating. He was a large, weathered man with the steady eyes and unhurried movements of someone for whom the world had proven, over time, to be exactly as serious as he'd always suspected. He shook the boys' hands with the careful directness of a man who means a handshake to be a statement.

"Your father tells me you're good workers," he said to Larry and Tom. "I'll find out if he's right. Get some sleep—we start at five."

"Five in the morning?" Tom said.

Mr. Wilder looked at him for a moment. "Five in the morning," he confirmed, and went back to wherever he had come from.

Their room was simple and clean: two narrow beds, a window facing east, a ceiling fan that turned slowly in the warm night air. Larry dropped his pack and sat on the edge of his mattress and looked at the window, beyond which the prairie was a vast dark presence stretching toward mountains he could feel but not see.

"We're really here," Tom said.

"We're really here."

"Five o'clock."

"I heard."

Tom checked his phone for the time. "It's eleven-fifteen. That's less than six hours."

"Then we should sleep."

Neither of them slept for a long time. The night outside was not the Ohio kind of quiet, which was not truly quiet at all—traffic on the county road, a dog somewhere, the ambient hum of civilization. This was a different species of silence, broken only by wind in the grass and, very distantly, a sound that rose and fell in a way that raised the hair on the back of Larry's neck before he identified it.

"Is that a coyote?" Tom said.

"Has to be."

Tom was quiet for a moment. "It sounds like it's grieving something."

"Everything out here sounds like that. I think that's just what coyotes sound like."

"I love it," Tom said.

"Yeah," Larry said. "Me too."

They lay in the dark listening to the coyote until it moved on, and then they were asleep.

They were not awake at five o'clock.

The alarm Larry had set on his phone did not wake him because his phone had slid off the nightstand at some point in the night and landed face-down under the bed, where its alarm went off into the floorboards at four fifty-nine without disturbing anyone. The next thing Larry knew it was five-seventeen and Horace Wilder was standing in the doorway holding a pitcher of water.

"Good morning," Horace said, with the particular cheerfulness of someone who has been awake for over an hour and finds your suffering amusing.

"Don't," Larry said.

Horace dumped the water on both of them.

What followed were several seconds of chaos—Larry on his feet before he was fully conscious, Tom making a sound that was not a word, both of them soaking wet and blinking in the early light while Horace stood in the doorway trying and failing to look apologetic.

"Father wants you outside," Horace said. "Now. He's already at the corral."

They dressed in approximately ninety seconds and went outside into the cool pre-dawn air. The sky to the east was just beginning its transition from black to deep blue, and the stars that had been so astonishing the night before were retreating before it. Mr. Wilder was standing at the corral fence with a coffee mug, watching his horses, with the expression of a man who has been up for a long time and has not been idle.

He looked at Larry and Tom for a moment without speaking. Then he said: "You're late."

"Our alarm—" Larry started.

"I said five o'clock. Five means five. Not five-fifteen, not five-seventeen, not whenever you happen to feel ready." He said it without raising his voice, which was somehow worse. "Out here, late doesn't just mean inconvenient. It means cattle that didn't

get water, a horse that went unsaddled, a fence that wasn't checked. Out here, late has consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Larry said.

"Yes, sir," Tom said.

Mr. Wilder looked at them a moment longer, then nodded once. "Good. It won't happen again."

"No, sir," they said, in unison.

"Get some breakfast. Manny's up. We start riding in twenty minutes."

Manny fed them eggs and green chile and tortillas and did not speak to them, which they found entirely acceptable. He was a small and efficient man in his sixties who operated the kitchen with the focused silence of someone who has fed large groups of hungry people for forty years and has nothing left to prove about it.

After breakfast, Bill walked them through the ranch while the morning light came up golden and sideways across the prairie.

The barn was enormous and functional, its smell a deep warm combination of hay and leather and horse that Larry immediately decided was the best indoor smell in the world. The tack room off the main aisle was hung with saddles and bridles and coiled lariats, everything worn and oiled and exactly in its place. The corrals held eight horses, four of which, Bill explained, belonged specifically to them for the summer.

"That's Blackhawk," Bill said, nodding at a tall black quarter horse that was watching them from the far side of the corral with an expression of intelligent assessment. "He's Tom's."

That roan over there is Lightning—he's yours, Larry. Good horses, both of them. Experienced. They'll do most of the work if you let them."

Tom was already at the fence, extending his hand. Blackhawk came over and lowered his head, and Tom's expression as the horse breathed against his palm was one Larry recognized—it was the expression Tom got when something exceeded his prior expectations.

"We've ridden before," Larry told Bill. "A little. Trail rides, that kind of thing."

"That's not riding," Bill said, pleasantly enough. "That's sitting on a horse while it follows other horses. We'll start from the beginning."

They walked past the bunkhouse—a long, low building with six rooms that currently housed only the ranch's two full-time hands—and past the equipment shed where a row of ATVs and a flatbed truck sat beside the kind of mechanical miscellany that accumulates on a working ranch over years. At the far end of the property, in a small fenced corner shaded by three cottonwood trees, there were nine simple grave markers. White-painted wood, names and dates.

Bill stopped there without being asked. "Ranch hands who died working here, or who had no other family to go to. Dad started this when we first moved out—said every man who gives his work to a place deserves a marker."

Larry and Tom took off their hats, a reflex they couldn't have explained. The markers were weathered but readable. The dates went back decades, to owners long before the Wilders.

"How do you die, ranching?" Tom asked quietly.

"Lots of ways," Bill said. "Thrown from a horse. Trampled. Heatstroke. That one—" he pointed to a marker near the back, "—that was a hand named Slim who got caught in a stampede last year."

The word "last year" landed differently out here, Larry noticed, than it would have back in Ohio.

"Come on," Bill said. "Time to actually ride."

The first hour in the corral was humbling.

Bill was a patient teacher in the way that competent people sometimes are—clear, direct, and entirely without the impulse to make you feel better about your mistakes. He demonstrated mounting in one fluid motion, settled into the saddle with the ease of someone sitting in a chair, and looked down at them.

"Weight in the heels, not the toes. Sit deep. Hold the reins loose—you're guiding, not pulling. If you pull, the horse stops. If you pull hard, the horse rears. Don't pull hard."

Getting onto Lightning took Larry three attempts. The stirrup kept swinging away from him, and on the second try he bounced off the saddle and landed back on the ground with a thud that made Horace inhale sharply through his teeth. On the third try he made it up and sat there, slightly breathless, eight feet off the ground, aware of the animal moving beneath him with a life and weight entirely its own.

Tom had better luck with Blackhawk—up on the second try, moving almost naturally. Horace, watching, said nothing, which was somehow the most diplomatic response.

"Walk," Bill said. "Just a walk. Follow me."

For the first twenty minutes they walked in circles. Then figure-eights. Then Bill called for a trot, which required moving with the horse in a rhythm that took Larry approximately fifteen attempts to find and Tom approximately four. Then a canter, which was faster and smoother and which nearly threw Larry twice before he found the balance.

By the end of the hour they were both sweating, both sore in places they had not previously known could be sore, and both more competent than when they had started.

"Not bad," Bill said, which in this context felt like high praise.

"When do we learn to rope?" Larry asked.

"One thing at a time." Bill dismounted. "You can barely stay on your horses."

"We want to learn everything," Tom said. "We only have the summer."

Bill looked at them for a moment with the expression of someone revising an estimate upward. "All right," he said. "After lunch."

The lariats Cross-eyed Pete had left for them were thirty-five feet of braided nylon with a metal honda at one end, and they were, in their initial encounter, completely uncooperative.

Bill demonstrated on a fence post: the rope came alive in his hands, spinning overhead in a perfect flat loop, and then sailed through the air and dropped neatly over the post as though it had been dropped from directly above. He made it look like something gravity was doing, not something requiring skill.

Larry's first throw hit him in the ear.

Tom's rope fell in a heap six feet short of the post.

"The loop needs to be spinning flat," Bill said. "Not at an angle—flat. Like a plate. Keep your wrist loose."

They practiced for an hour. Horace practiced alongside them, occasionally producing throws that landed correctly and occasionally producing throws that were difficult to explain. By the end of the session Larry could keep the rope spinning for a reasonable interval and his throws, while not reliable, were at least going in the intended direction.

Tom was better. He had the quality that good throwers have, which is less about strength than about timing—a sense of when to release that seemed almost intuitive. His fifth throw caught the post cleanly, and he stared at it with an expression of genuine surprise.

"Lucky," Horace pronounced.

Tom's sixth throw also caught the post.

"Still lucky," Horace said, with less conviction.

The south pasture was three miles from the ranch house, and riding there the following morning Larry understood for the first time what Horace's texts had been trying to convey and had not quite managed. The sky was the thing. You could not get this sky

from a photograph or a description—it required being under it, surrounded on all sides by distance, with the mountains to the north and the prairie rolling south until it met the horizon. It was not that there was more of it than back home. It was that out here the sky was the dominant fact of the landscape, and everything beneath it—grass, rock, cattle, people—existed in proportion to it rather than the other way around.

"You all right?" Horace called back to him.

"I'm good," Larry said. "Just looking."

"People do that their first few weeks out here. Then you stop noticing."

"I don't think I'll stop noticing."

"Everybody says that."

The herd—two hundred and thirty head, as it turned out—grazed across a broad stretch of grassland that looked, from a distance, almost peaceful. Up close it was a more complex proposition: cattle that weighed twelve hundred pounds apiece, with horns, who moved according to their own logic and regarded the horses with a wariness that could tip into agitation without much warning.

Bill split them up at the perimeter. He and Tom took the east side; Larry and Horace took the west. The assignment was a slow circuit of the herd's perimeter, looking for injured animals or cattle that had strayed.

Ten minutes into the circuit, Horace pulled up.

"There," he said, pointing into the herd. "That cow. See her?"

Larry looked. A brown cow was moving with a slight hitch in her gait, favoring her left front leg.

"She's lame," Larry said.

"We need to separate her and check the leg. That's Bill's call, though. We go find him first." Horace looked at Larry. "The instinct will be to just go handle it yourself. Don't. You spook this herd and two hundred cattle move at once and you do not want to be in the middle of that. You understand?"

"Find Bill first," Larry said.

"Find Bill first."

On the east side of the herd, Bill had been teaching Tom to read cattle while they rode—which bunches were calm, which were restless, how to count in groups of ten without losing track. He listened to Horace's report, studied the limping cow for a moment, and made a decision.

"Tom, you're going to rope her back legs while I take the head. Larry, you and Horace hold the rest of the herd back. If they start moving toward us, you ride between them and the cow. Just hold your position—the horses know what to do."

"I've never roped anything that moves," Tom said.

"It's the same principle. Bigger target. Less cooperative." Bill uncoiled his lariat. "You'll be fine."

Larry positioned himself with Horace between the herd and the injured cow, and watched. Bill's throw was exactly what it always was—effortless, precise, the loop settling over the cow's head and neck as though it had been placed there by hand. The

horse backed up automatically, keeping the rope taut. The cow pulled against it and then stopped.

Tom swung his lasso overhead, and Larry saw his brother's face go still with concentration—that expression Tom got when something required his full attention, slightly narrowed eyes, lips pressed together. The rope went around twice, three times.

He threw.

The loop sailed wide and then fell, impossibly, around the cow's back legs.

"He did it," Horace said beside Larry, with what sounded like genuine surprise.

Blackhawk backed up without being told, and the cow—caught between two ropes—went gently down onto her side in the grass. Bill dismounted and examined the leg.

"Prairie dog hole," he called. "Sprain, not a break. She'll heal." He released the ropes and the cow lurched to her feet and moved back into the herd, and that was that.

Riding back, Bill was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "Tom. That was a good throw."

"Blackhawk did most of it."

"Blackhawk held the rope. You put it where it needed to go." He looked at Tom. "That's the part that takes people weeks to learn."

They were cooling down the horses at the home corral late that afternoon when a truck came up the ranch road—older, dusty, a rancher's working truck without pretension—and stopped in the yard. A girl got out.

She was about Larry's age, in worn jeans and a canvas shirt, with the kind of unhurried confidence that either comes from growing up in a place or from being genuinely unbothered by it. She scanned the yard with the quick efficiency of someone looking for a specific person and not planning to stay long.

"Is Mr. Wilder around?" she said, to no one in particular.

"In the barn," Bill said. "Emma—these are Larry and Tom Alden. They're here for the summer."

She looked at them. Not rudely, not appraisingly—just directly, the way people look at things they want to understand quickly.

"You're the ones who stood up to Gus Megget in Tolopah," she said.

Larry blinked. "We—we just got here last night."

"Word travels fast out here," she said. "Ned Reyes told the clerk at the feed store. My dad heard it at the gas station this morning." She said it without apparent judgment—just reporting the information ecosystem. "I'm Emma Larson. Our place is north of here, about four miles."

"You run it?" Tom asked.

"My dad runs it. I help." She said this with a flatness that suggested the question had been asked before, by people with expectations she didn't find worth addressing. Then she turned and went into the barn to find Mr. Wilder, without waiting to see whether the conversation was over.

Tom watched her go. "She seems—"

"Capable," Bill said. "She's about the most capable person in this county. Her dad says she shot her first rattlesnake when she was eight."

"I was going to say direct," Tom said.

"Also direct."

At dinner that evening, Mr. Wilder told them that Tom's throw had been the subject of commentary from Bill, which was, apparently, unusual enough to be worth mentioning. Tom went red. Larry ate the rest of his green chile enchilada with the proprietary pride of an older brother.

Hans had been quiet through most of the meal, but toward the end he looked up and said, almost to himself: "Today I went into the barn. Without anyone asking me to. I touched two horses."

Mrs. Wilder set down her fork. "Hans, that's wonderful."

"Lady Belle," he said. "The gray mare. She has a very good temperament." He paused. "I think perhaps I will try again tomorrow."

Mr. Wilder, who had not looked up from his plate, said: "Good."

It was brief and unelaborate, but Hans received it as though it were a longer speech.

That night Larry lay on his back in the dark with his hands behind his head and listened to the coyote, which was back, and the wind in the grass, and the horses moving in the corral, and thought: I am not the same person who woke up in Ohio three days ago. He couldn't have said exactly what was different. But

something had shifted, quiet and irreversible, like a plate of ground finding a new position in the dark.

"Tom," he said.

"Yeah."

"I think this is going to be the best summer of our lives."

A pause. Then: "Yeah," Tom said. "I think you're right."

They slept without difficulty, and the coyote moved off into the prairie, and the stars outside the window turned in their slow ancient patterns, and the Half-Moon Ranch settled into the deep quiet of a place that has been working hard all day and has earned its rest.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HUNTING TRIP

Two weeks into the summer, Larry and Tom Alden had become something that could reasonably be called, in the broad sense, ranch hands. They rose without an alarm at four fifty, were at the corral by five, and could saddle their horses in the time it would have taken them, in Ohio, to locate their shoes. Their

hands had toughened from the roping practice. Their legs had stopped aching from long rides. They ate everything Manny put in front of them and asked, usually, if there was more.

Mr. Wilder had noticed this. He didn't say much about it—he was not a man who said much about anything unless something needed correcting—but one morning, watching them tack up, he had said to Bill, in a voice just loud enough to be overheard: "They'll do." Bill had reported this to Horace, who had reported it to the brothers, who had received it with the particular pride of people who have been told something indirectly and find it more credible for that.

Hans, meanwhile, had developed what he described as a cautious professional relationship with Lady Belle. He could now approach her, bridle her, lead her around the corral on foot, and sit on her back for stretches of fifteen or twenty minutes without appearing to be in immediate danger of a breakdown. He could not yet ride independently, but he was making progress in the deliberate incremental way of someone who has decided to confront a fear by treating it as a project rather than an obstacle.

It was on the fourteenth morning of their stay that Mr. Wilder announced the hunting trip.

He did it at breakfast, setting down his coffee mug and looking at the table with the calm authority of a man who has already thought through all the objections. "We leave at six. Three days in the Lost Lode mountains. You'll need your sleeping bags, three days of food, your rifles, and nothing you aren't

willing to carry. We're hunting deer for winter. You'll learn to track, to camp properly, and to move in the mountains without getting killed. Questions?"

There were no questions. There was only the sound of four chairs pushed back simultaneously as the boys got up to pack.

Hans watched from the kitchen doorway with the expression he got when adventure was departing without him—a mixture of relief and something he couldn't quite suppress that looked, if you studied it, like envy.

"The mountains have bears," he said, as they loaded the horses.

"Probably," Horace said.

"And mountain lions."

"Possibly."

"And no cell service."

"Definitely not."

Hans nodded, as though this confirmed a hypothesis. "I am happy to stay here," he said, and then looked at Mrs. Wilder with an expression that was a fraction too eager to be entirely convincing.

They rode northwest across the prairie for three hours, the mountains growing from a purple suggestion on the horizon into something real and enormous and immediate. The transition from grassland to foothills was gradual and then suddenly complete—the grass giving way to scrub oak and juniper, the air cooling by ten degrees, the trail narrowing between rock faces that caught and

held the morning's shadows long after the sun had cleared the peaks.

Mr. Wilder rode at the front and taught as he went, which was his preferred mode of instruction. He pointed out a set of antelope tracks in the soft dirt at a creek crossing and made Tom tell him which direction the animal had been going before he gave the answer. He stopped beside a clump of grass that had been rolled flat and explained that a mule deer bedded there the previous night, probably a doe given the width of the impression. He showed them where a coyote had marked a rock and where, in a pine's lower bark, something had raked long parallel scratches.

"Bear," he said.

The word produced a brief respectful silence.

"How old?" Bill asked.

"Old enough that the sap's dried brown. Week, maybe two. It's not in this area right now." He studied the scratches with a professional neutrality. "Probably not."

"That's not entirely reassuring," Tom said.

"It's not meant to be," Mr. Wilder said, and rode on.

He was the kind of teacher who believed that the landscape itself was the primary text and that his role was simply to help you read it. He covered fire safety, water sources, elevation sickness, what to do if a horse threw you in remote country, and how to navigate by the sun and the ridgelines when your phone had no signal and your GPS had died, which was, he said, the condition you should always be prepared for and never be in. Larry absorbed it all with the focused attention of someone who

understands, for the first time, that this information has practical consequences. Tom wrote notes on his phone while he could still get to them, a habit that made Mr. Wilder glance back once with what might have been approval.

They made camp at the edge of a stream in the foothills as the afternoon light went sideways and golden through the pines. The campsite selection was itself a lesson: Mr. Wilder walked the area for five minutes before he put his pack down, checking the ground for drainage, the trees overhead for dead branches, the upwind and downwind directions, the distance from water.

"You want to be close enough to water that you don't have to carry it far," he said, "but not so close that you're in the flood line if it rains in the mountains. You want wind at your face when you're cooking, not at your back. You want a clear view of the approach, and you want the fire between you and the dark."

He showed them how to build a fire that would last without constant attention, using a base of dry bark and layered wood of increasing diameter. He showed them how to hang their food supply—all of it, including the wrappers—on a line strung between two trees twelve feet off the ground and eight feet from either trunk. He checked every rifle, made them each run through a safety check on their own, and told them where the weapons would be kept at night: within reach of whoever was nearest, on the uphill side of the camp.

"You're expecting trouble," Larry said.

"I'm preventing it," Mr. Wilder said. "There's a difference."

After dinner—freeze-dried meals supplemented by Manny's tortillas, which packed flat and traveled well and were the single greatest luxury of the expedition—they sat around the fire as the temperature dropped and the stars came out. The stars at altitude in northern New Mexico were a different proposition from the stars at the ranch, which were themselves already more than Larry had grown up with. Up here the Milky Way was an actual visible structure, a river of light overhead that made the sky feel three-dimensional.

"Tell them about the Lost Lode," Horace said.

Mr. Wilder was quiet for a moment, poking the fire with a stick. "It's just a legend."

"But is there a mine?" Larry asked.

Another pause. "There's a mine. Spanish, colonial era—probably mid-seventeenth century. They were working silver in these mountains for decades before they abandoned the operation. No one's ever found a record of why they left, and they left no maps that survived. The mine disappeared with them." He looked at the fire. "People have been looking for it ever since. Some have spent years on it."

"And?" Tom said.

"And nothing. It's never been found."

Horace leaned forward. "Pete says the Spanish soldiers who worked it were buried inside when the mine collapsed. He says on quiet nights you can hear them."

"Pete also says he once held off six men in a bar fight using only a pool cue and a bag of pork rinds," Mr. Wilder said. "I'd weight his testimony accordingly."

"But you believe the mine is real," Bill said.

"I believe there was silver in these mountains. The geology supports it. Whether any significant quantity is left, whether the mine is accessible—" He shrugged. "Probably not. Old mines are death traps even when you find them. Bad air, rotten timbers, unstable shafts. More people have died looking for the Lost Lode than could ever have gotten rich from it." He added more wood to the fire. "Now sleep. We hunt at first light."

The forest settled around them, full of the small sounds of living things making their careful way through the dark. Larry lay in his sleeping bag looking up through the pine branches at the stars and thought about a mine that had been lost for three hundred and fifty years, about the men who had worked it and the ones who had looked for it, and felt the particular gravity of a place that has more history in it than it looks.

In the morning the frost on his sleeping bag was real and the coffee Mr. Wilder had already started was the best smell in the world. They ate quickly, packed their daypacks with water and emergency gear, and listened to the plan.

"Bill and I take the east trail. You three take west—stay on the ridge above the creek drainage, work toward that peak that looks like a broken tooth. Look for deer or elk. Don't shoot unless you're certain of a clean hit—wounded animals in this terrain are serious problems." He looked at each of them. "If you

get lost, stay where you are and fire three shots. If you find the mine—which you won't—stay away from it. Old mine shafts have air you can't breathe and floors you can't trust. Questions?"

No questions. They split up.

The three boys moved west in a line with Horace leading, rifles slung, moving with the deliberate quiet that Mr. Wilder had drilled into them. The ridge above the creek drainage was steep and rocky and gave them a view across a wide hanging valley, the kind of landscape that looks like it was designed for the particular purpose of making a human being feel small in an instructive way.

Horace found the tracks an hour in.

"Mule deer," he breathed, crouching in the soft earth at the edge of a clearing. "Fresh. The edges haven't dried out yet." He studied the impressions. "Big animal—look at the depth. And the stride." He stood and looked up the valley. "There's a browse line up there, along that aspen grove. If he was moving this direction this morning—"

They found him forty minutes later.

The buck was in a small meadow below the aspen grove, a hundred and fifty yards off, grazing with the unhurried confidence of an animal that has not been pressured recently. He was enormous—twelve points on his rack, his coat the deep brown-gray of mountain summer, his antlers carrying the light in a way that made them look almost unreal.

They went still. The three of them on the ridge, watching. Nobody spoke.

Then Larry said, very quietly: "Tom."

Tom looked at him.

"You're the best shot. Take it."

"You're older—"

"Take it."

Horace said nothing, which was his agreement.

Tom moved forward to the edge of the ridge and lay prone on a flat rock, working his rifle's bolt with careful silence. The buck grazed on, unaware. A hundred and fifty yards was a responsible distance on a still morning—challenging but within Tom's range, and Tom's range had improved substantially in two weeks of daily practice on the ranch's shooting bench.

He spent sixty seconds on his breathing. Larry watched him and thought: he's not nervous. He's somewhere else, somewhere very quiet, that he goes to when something matters. It was a thing about his brother he had noticed before but never had the right words for.

Tom fired.

The buck leaped—a single explosive bound that was instinct before pain—and then was down. Clean. Instant.

Horace exhaled and then let out a sound that was partly a whoop and partly a laugh. Larry put a hand on Tom's shoulder. Tom lay still for a moment, looking at the meadow, and then sat up.

"Good shot," Larry said.

"Good shot," Horace confirmed, with the authority of someone who has seen many.

Tom nodded once, quietly, and worked the bolt to clear the chamber. He would be more effusive about it later, Larry knew, when the solemnity of the moment had had time to settle into satisfaction. Right now he was still in that quiet place.

They were halfway down the ridge toward the meadow when the sound came from above them.

Low. Resonant. The kind of sound that activates something in the human nervous system that predates language.

All three of them stopped moving simultaneously, which was itself a kind of answer to the question of whether they'd heard it.

"That's not a deer," Tom said.

"No," Horace said.

They turned slowly.

On the ridgeline above them, silhouetted against the sky with the absolute clarity of something that wanted to be seen, stood a large brown-phase black bear. It was enormous—four hundred, four hundred and fifty pounds, the size that stops being an abstraction and becomes a physical fact. It was looking at them with the flat, unimpressed attention of an apex predator assessing a situation.

"Back away," Horace said, in a voice that was very nearly calm. "Toward those trees. Slow. Don't run."

They began moving. The bear moved with them, descending the ridge at a diagonal, its enormous head swinging as it scented the air. It smelled the deer.

"It wants the buck," Tom breathed.

"Then let it have the buck," Horace said. "Keep moving."

Tom's boot caught a root.

He caught himself before he went down but his rifle clattered against a rock, a sharp crack that split the morning quiet like a fault line. The bear's head came up and its attention, which had been divided, was now singular and directed entirely at them.

It charged.

The speed of a bear at full run is a thing that no description or footage fully prepares you for. It crossed forty yards of steep rocky terrain in approximately four seconds, and those four seconds had a quality of crystalline slowness in Larry's memory afterward, each one perfectly preserved and distinct.

"TREE!" Horace shouted, and broke into a run.

The pine was massive, its lowest branch eight feet up, and Horace hit it at a jump and pulled himself up with the desperate efficiency of a person for whom the alternative is very clear. Larry was behind him and went up almost as fast. Tom was last, and the bear was close enough that Larry, reaching down from the branch, could see the animal's breath.

He grabbed Tom's wrist and pulled. Tom's boots cleared the branch by perhaps six inches. The bear's paw swept up and caught nothing but air.

For a moment no one spoke. They sat on the branch and looked down at the bear, which stood below them with its forepaws against the trunk and its head raised, and the bear looked up at

them with an expression that Larry could only describe as patient.

"It can't climb," Horace said. "Too heavy."

"How long will it stay?" Larry asked.

Horace looked at the sun and did the calculation. "Mr. Wilder said meet back at camp at sunset." He paused. "The sun is at about ten o'clock."

Tom looked down at the bear, then up at the sky. "That's eight hours."

"Yeah," Horace said. "Give or take."

They waited.

The bear ate the buck, which was an experience they endured from twelve feet up with the helpless attention of people watching something they cannot intervene in. It was thorough and methodical and took about an hour. When it was finished, the bear lay down at the base of their tree.

"Why is it still here?" Tom said.

"We're still here," Horace said.

"We're not a threat."

"It doesn't know that. And we're in its territory." Horace shifted his weight on the branch. "Also I think it just likes the spot."

The afternoon moved with the particular slowness of time passing in cold and discomfort without any agency. Their phones were useless—no signal, and little enough battery that they kept them off. The temperature dropped as the sun moved behind the ridge. Tom's hands went stiff on his rifle. Larry's left leg fell

asleep somewhere around the third hour and he spent twenty minutes gently working the feeling back into it while trying not to make noise.

They talked, quietly, about things that didn't matter—what they would eat when they got back to camp, whether Manny had sent tortillas enough for four days, what Horace thought the spread on the east drainage would look like in hunting season. It was the kind of talking people do when they need to maintain a connection to ordinary life.

At one point Tom said: "I'm sorry. I tripped."

"Everybody trips," Larry said.

"I knocked the rifle."

"Yeah. And now we're in a tree." Larry looked at him. "We're okay, Tom."

Tom looked down at the bear, which had not moved. "Not yet we're not."

"We will be."

The shout, when it came, was distant but unmistakable.

"Tom! Larry! Horace!"

Mr. Wilder's voice, from the direction of the ridge. Far off but coming closer.

"HERE!" all three of them shouted at once, and the bear came to its feet with a jerk, startled by the sudden noise. "HERE! WE'RE HERE!"

"Keep shouting!" Horace said. "Guide them in!"

They shouted continuously while the bear paced below them, confused and agitated by the noise. The crashing through

undergrowth got louder, and then Mr. Wilder and Bill came into the clearing at a run, rifles up, and assessed the situation in approximately two seconds.

Mr. Wilder's voice dropped to a command. "Don't move. Don't make a sound."

He raised his rifle to his shoulder, aimed once to establish the angle, and then deliberately lowered it. He raised his voice instead—a full-throated shout directed at the bear, something wordless and enormous—and fired once into the air at the same time.

The bear flinched at the shot and looked at him.

He advanced, still shouting, waving his free arm. Bill moved to his flank and did the same—two large, loud, moving humans closing the distance. The bear made a sound deep in its chest, turned its head once to look back at the tree and its former occupants, and then lumbered off into the forest with the unhurried dignity of an animal that is leaving on its own terms.

"Stay up," Mr. Wilder said. He watched the treeline for three full minutes. Then: "All right. Come down. Slowly."

Coming down was harder than going up. Larry's left leg was still not entirely reliable and he missed the branch once and caught himself on the trunk, scraping both palms. He dropped the last four feet and landed in the dirt and stood there feeling the solid ground under his feet with a gratitude he had not previously known he owed the earth.

Mr. Wilder checked each of them with the rapid efficiency of someone running a damage assessment. Hands, faces, ankles.

"Anyone hurt?"

"No, sir."

"The bear?"

"Not shot," Horace said. "It chased us up the tree when Tom's rifle made noise. We couldn't get down."

Mr. Wilder looked at the remains of the buck, then at the three of them, and appeared to reach some internal conclusion. "You did right," he said. "All of it. You didn't panic, you found cover, you waited. That's exactly what you do." He looked at Tom. "Your shot was clean?"

"Yes, sir. It was already down when the bear found it."

Mr. Wilder nodded once, in a way that meant the matter was settled and there would be no extended discussion of it. "Gather what gear you can. We're heading back to camp before it's fully dark."

Around the fire that evening they ate and told the story, and the telling of it was the first time that the fear began converting into something else—not quite pride, not quite humor, but the composite thing that stories are made of when they come out the other side of danger. Mr. Wilder listened to the full account without interrupting, and when it was finished he said: "The wilderness does not care about your intentions. You can do everything correctly and still find yourself in a tree waiting for a bear to lose interest. What matters is what you do when that happens. You did well."

Bill said nothing, but in the firelight his expression was clear enough.

They broke camp the next morning and rode home under a sky that was, in Larry's estimation, even larger than it had seemed on the way out. The mountains felt different going in the other direction—less threatening, more like a place he had been and would go again.

Mrs. Wilder met them in the yard and hugged Bill and Horace and then looked at Larry and Tom with the expression of a woman who had been managing her anxiety about this trip for three days and was now releasing it in a controlled fashion. "Inside," she said. "All of you. Tell me everything."

They told her everything at the kitchen table, the story passing from one of them to another across mugs of coffee and the remains of a peach cobbler Manny had made in their absence. By the end, Mrs. Wilder had gone from relieved to faintly pale and back to relieved again.

Hans had been listening from his chair at the end of the table with his hands wrapped around his mug and his eyes moving from face to face throughout the account. When it was finished he was quiet for a moment.

"You were in the tree for eight hours," he said.

"Give or take," Horace said.

"And the bear did not climb."

"Too heavy."

Hans nodded slowly, processing something. "In Germany," he said, "I would have panicked. I am certain. I would have run and the bear would have—" He stopped. "You did not panic."

"We were panicking on the inside," Tom said.

"But you did not run."

"There was nowhere to run to," Larry said. "So we climbed."

Hans turned his mug in his hands. "I think perhaps that is what courage is," he said. "Not the absence of fear. Just the absence of other options." He paused. "Tomorrow I am going to try riding Lady Belle to the end of the driveway and back. By myself."

The table went quiet in the particular way it does when something small and significant has been said.

"I'll be at the corral fence," Larry said.

"I know," Hans said. "I know you will."

It was three days later that Wade Larson's truck came up the ranch road. He arrived with Emma, who had a way of arriving at places that made it seem like she had been there for a while already. Wade had the look of a man carrying news that he has decided to deliver without ceremony.

"The bear killed two of my calves," he said to Mr. Wilder, shaking hands on the porch. "Yesterday and the day before. Big brown-phase black bear, comes in at night, bold as anything." He looked at Larry and Tom. "Same bear you ran into, from the description. Once they start taking cattle they don't stop on their own."

Mr. Wilder's expression settled into something considered and unhurried. "You're organizing a hunt."

"Day after tomorrow. Meet at my place at first light. I'd like your boys with us—they've seen this animal and they handled themselves in the mountains. That counts."

The four boys looked at each other. Then, in unison, at Mr. Wilder.

He studied them for a long moment before he answered. "We'll be there," he said.

Emma was watching Larry and Tom with the direct, evaluating gaze she always wore. "First organized hunt?" she said.

"Yes," they both said.

"Stay close to your group. Don't try to finish something you're not in a position to finish. And"—a slight shift in her expression that was almost a smile—"try not to get treed this time."

She walked back to her father's truck without waiting for a response, leaving Larry standing on the porch with the specific feeling of having been simultaneously warned, evaluated, and dismissed by someone he was fairly certain he would be thinking about for the rest of the evening.

Tom appeared beside him. "She does that on purpose," he said.

"Does what?"

"Walks away at the exact moment when you want to say something."

Larry watched the truck back out of the yard. "I think she just has places to be."

"Sure," Tom said. "That's definitely what it is."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BEAR HUNT

They rode to the Larson ranch in the dark, the five of them—Mr. Wilder, Bill, Horace, Larry, and Tom—with the eastern sky barely lighter than the mountains it was rising behind. There were already a dozen horses tied to the fence when they arrived, their breath misting in the cold, and a dozen ranchers and hands standing around with rifles and thermoses and the particular kind of quiet that gathers before something serious begins.

Wade Larson stood on the porch steps doing what men like Wade Larson do well: organizing. He had a topographic map folded in thirds and a radio clipped to his belt and the expression of someone who has been awake for two hours already and has spent them productively.

"Three groups," he said, when they had all assembled. "Center group with me along Lost Lode Creek. Right flank goes with David Wilder through the ridge timber. Left flank—" He pointed to a man near the back of the group, a figure so weathered and still he might have been mistaken for part of the fence. "Jake leads the left flank."

Jake was somewhere past sixty, though the range could have been anywhere from fifty-five to seventy-five. He had a face like old saddle leather and the economy of movement of someone who has been doing physical work for four decades and wasted nothing on anything unnecessary. A scar ran from his left jaw to his collar in a line too clean to be an accident. He looked at Larry and Tom once, briefly, with eyes the color of creek water, and then looked away.

Emma emerged from the barn with her horse already bridled, rifle in its scabbard, dressed identically to the day before and the day before that. Several of the men looked at her with the expression that men sometimes wear when their assumptions about a situation are being silently corrected. Wade Larson noticed and did not address it.

"My daughter shoots better than half of you," he said, to no one in particular, in the tone of a man reading a weather report. "The other half is welcome to demonstrate otherwise. Mount up."

Emma passed Larry on her way to her horse. "Stay close to your group," she said. "Don't improvise."

"You said that last time," Larry said.

"Last time you ended up in a tree."

"That wasn't improvising. That was surviving."

She paused and looked at him with a recalibrating expression that he found difficult to read. Then she said, "Fair point," and kept walking.

Jake took the left flank into a section of pine and juniper forest that ran below the main ridge, moving at a pace that looked unhurried and covered ground with a quiet efficiency. He communicated primarily in gestures—a raised fist to stop, a flat hand to slow down, two fingers pointed to indicate a direction. He did not explain himself in real time, and Larry learned quickly that the questions would be answered retroactively, if they were answered at all.

The tracks were there from the start. The same broad, deep-clawed prints they'd seen in the mountains. Jake read them the

way Mr. Wilder had taught them to read the land—not staring at any single element but taking the whole picture in at once, the direction and depth and the disturbance pattern in the surrounding ground.

"How fresh?" Tom asked, in the quietest voice he could manage.

Jake pointed at the print without looking up. The dew on the disturbed earth hadn't dried. The edges of the impression were still sharp, not yet softened by morning air.

"Hour," Jake said. Two syllables, and then he moved on.

They tracked for ninety minutes through country that got denser and steeper as they moved north along the base of the ridge. Jake moved through it the way water does, finding the easiest line through the terrain with a minimum of adjustment, and Larry found himself watching the man as much as the trail—the way he placed his feet, where he looked, how he held his rifle at the low-ready with the ease of something he'd done ten thousand times.

Jake stopped.

His fist came up. They froze.

Ahead, through the interlocked trunks of a pine stand, something large was moving. The sound was the particular combination of weight and carelessness that signals something that has nothing to be afraid of.

"There," Jake said, at a breath.

The bear was digging at the base of a deadfall tree about seventy yards ahead, its back to them, entirely absorbed. It was

even larger than Larry remembered from the ridge—a fact he filed away with the grim resignation of someone who had hoped memory was exaggerating. The big muscles of its shoulders moved under the dark brown fur as it worked.

Jake signaled: Stay. He pointed to himself and then forward. He was going for a better angle.

He began moving, and the watching was almost as tense as being in the tree had been—this man they had known for two hours, in his sixties, working through the forest toward a bear with the careful patience of someone who has done this before and respects what he's approaching. He got to within thirty yards. He raised the rifle.

The bear lifted its head.

Not because it heard anything. Because it smelled them, or some current of air shifted, or the accumulated presence of three humans registered in whatever sense bears use that isn't exactly smell or sound but is something older than either. Its head came up, the massive skull turning toward them with a speed that the rest of the animal's size did not suggest was possible.

It saw Jake.

It roared.

The sound hit them in the chest like a door slamming. The bear dropped off the deadfall and charged—not the slow circling assessment of a startled animal but the full committed charge of one that has made a decision.

Jake fired. The bullet hit the bear's left shoulder and the bear staggered but did not stop, and Jake fired again and the

second shot missed, and then he turned to run and his foot went wrong on a root and he went down hard on the rocky ground with a sound that Larry heard from seventy yards away.

The bear was on him before he could get up.

Larry moved before he had consciously decided to move. Tom was half a step behind him and they were running, both of them, rifles up, firing as they closed the distance—not aimed shots, not the careful breath-controlled shots from the ranch's shooting bench, but suppressing fire, noise and impact, anything to interrupt the bear's attention. Larry saw the bear's head swing toward them and felt the specific terror of being the thing it was now looking at and fired again and again, the rifle jolting against his shoulder.

One of Tom's rounds hit something that mattered. The bear staggered, a deep labored sound coming out of it, blood on its muzzle. It took two steps toward them and then its legs gave out and it went down.

It did not get up.

The silence afterward was absolute in the way that silences after large sudden sounds always are—not the absence of noise but its photographic negative, the shape noise leaves behind.

Larry lowered his rifle. His hands were shaking. He became aware of this distantly, as a fact about himself that he was observing from a slight remove.

"Jake," Tom said, and they both turned.

Jake was on his back, one hand pressed to his chest, the other flat against the ground. His face was gray. The bear's

claws had opened three long parallel lines across his chest and shoulder, and the blood was coming steadily through his fingers.

"Three shots," Larry said. His voice came out steadier than he felt. "Tom. Fire three shots."

Tom raised his rifle and fired three times into the air, the signal, the call for backup. The shots went out across the forest and up the ridge.

Larry pressed his own hands over Jake's. "Stay with us. Help is coming."

Jake looked up at him with those creek-colored eyes. He seemed entirely conscious, which was either reassuring or alarming depending on how you looked at it. He said nothing. He kept his hand where it was and breathed in the deliberate way of someone managing pain by treating it as a task.

They heard crashing through the timber in under four minutes. Wade Larson came first, Emma half a step behind him, and Wade's expression as he took in the scene—the dead bear, the wounded Jake, the two boys kneeling over him with their rifles still warm—cycled through several things before settling on purpose.

Emma was already pulling a trauma kit from her pack before she'd fully stopped moving. She worked quickly and without commentary, cutting Jake's shirt away from the wounds and packing them with practiced efficiency. Wade watched her for two seconds and then turned to coordinating the other hunters.

"Travois," he said. "Two poles and a saddle blanket, do it now."

They had Jake rigged for transport in eight minutes. It was not comfortable and it was not elegant but it would work, and in the calculus of remote country that was the only measure that counted.

As they lifted him, Jake looked at Larry and Tom. "Good shooting," he said. His voice was rougher than before but it was there.

"Just kept firing," Tom said.

"That's what you're supposed to do." A pause while he managed something. "You kept your heads. That matters more than the shooting."

They carried Jake to the Larson ranch, three miles on the makeshift travois. His wife—a former emergency room nurse from Albuquerque who had retired to the ranch with the skills that turned out to be most needed there—met them in the yard with the calm brisk competence of someone shifting from domestic mode into clinical mode without any apparent transition.

The hunters dispersed into the yard in small groups, a dozen men all dealing in different ways with the particular residue that violence leaves, even necessary violence, even successful violence. Some of them went to look at the bear when it was brought in on a horse. Others did not.

Larry and Tom sat on the porch steps and did not move for a long time.

Horace came and sat with them. He didn't say anything, which was the right thing.

After a while Bill came and sat too. "You did well in there," he said.

"Did we?" Tom's voice was flat in the way it got when he was processing something that hadn't finished resolving yet.

"You kept firing. You didn't freeze and you didn't run. Jake's alive because of that."

"We don't know that he's going to be okay," Larry said.

"He's going to be okay," Bill said. "Martha Jacobs was a trauma nurse for twenty years. If she says he'll be okay, he'll be okay."

Emma appeared in the doorway behind them. "Jake's asking for you," she said.

They found him in the front bedroom, propped up against pillows, bandaged across his chest and shoulder, looking like a man who has been rearranged but remains fundamentally intact. The color had come back to his face. Martha had done what she'd come to do and moved on to the next thing.

"My rescuers," Jake said. There was something in his voice that was not quite humor and not quite sentiment but lived somewhere between them.

"We just kept shooting," Larry said, for the second time.

"I know. I was there." He looked at each of them. "I've known men twice your age who would have run. You came forward. That's different." He extended his hand. "Thank you."

The handshake was brief and without ceremony. It was not a small thing.

As the afternoon light went flat and the other hunters prepared to disperse, Wade Larson moved to the center of the yard and waited. He did it without announcement—simply stood until the conversations around him ran down, which they did, because Wade Larson was someone people oriented toward when he was still.

"Before you head out," he said. "This was good work. We dealt with an animal that had become a serious problem and we got it done without losing anybody—which, with Gus Megget running around the county, is more of a distinction than it usually is." A dry murmur from the crowd. "Jake will be in bed for several weeks and he is going to be irritable about it, so if you plan to visit him to express sympathy I suggest going soon, before the irritability becomes fully operational."

More laughter, real this time.

"I also want to say something about these two." He looked at Larry and Tom. "They've been in Colfax County six weeks. In that time they stood up to Gus Megget when a lot of grown men were watching from a distance. They survived this bear once already, which is more than most people ever have occasion to do. And today, when Jake was down and the situation was deteriorating, they moved toward the problem instead of away from it." He looked at the assembled ranchers. "I don't know what they teach in Ohio, but it seems to be working. These boys are welcome at my ranch any time they want to come."

The applause that followed was brief and without flourish, in the way of people who mean something and don't need to make it large.

Larry stood and took it with the discomfort of someone who is not accustomed to being the center of a room and discovers, when it happens, that it is not as pleasant as it looked from the outside. Tom was studying the ground, which was his version of the same feeling.

Emma was across the yard, near her horse. She met Larry's eyes for a moment and gave him a single nod—the same nod Wade had just spent several sentences on, compressed into one gesture—and then turned back to her horse's bridle.

Three days later, Wade Larson held a barn dance.

He had been planning it for weeks—a celebration of the new barn he had built over the spring—and he declined to postpone it on the grounds that the territory had been through enough and could use a night that was simply good. The whole county appeared to agree. By the time the Wilders arrived in the early evening the ranch yard was already transformed: long tables end to end, lanterns strung from the fenceposts, a three-piece band setting up in the corner of the barn with the relaxed preparation of people who have done this many times.

Hans came with them, wearing his one good shirt and looking around at the gathering crowd with the expression of a man who has been told that this will be enjoyable and is determined to proceed on the assumption that the people who told him are correct.

Mr. Wilder had given them his rules in the truck on the way over: respect everyone, no fighting, decline any offered whiskey politely, and dance with the girls who aren't being asked. "The

pretty ones will have plenty of partners," he said. "The shy ones won't. Be gentlemen."

"What if we don't know how to dance?" Larry said.

Bill spoke from the back seat: "Nobody out here dances well. That's part of it."

The barn had been emptied and swept and decorated with the efficient thoroughness of people who understand that a good barn dance requires less decoration than the right atmosphere, which the barn provided on its own: the smell of old wood and hay and the warm particular smell of a building that has been used hard for useful purposes. The band—two guitars and a fiddle—launched into a Texas swing tune the moment the Wilders walked in, as if they had been waiting for permission to start.

Emma found Larry within approximately four minutes, which suggested she had been aware of his arrival before he was aware of hers. She was in clean jeans and a white shirt and looked exactly like herself, which was to say like someone who had decided long ago that presentation was less interesting than substance.

"You owe me a dance," she said.

"I never agreed to that."

"You didn't decline. In this county that counts as agreement." She took his hand in the matter-of-fact way of someone who does not waste time negotiating social transitions and pulled him onto the floor.

Dancing with Emma Larson, Larry discovered, was less like learning a skill and more like being corrected by someone who is

simultaneously patient and direct and does not consider your discomfort a reason to go slower. She told him where his feet went and then stopped telling him and simply moved, and after several minutes of doing it wrong he found the rhythm, and after several more minutes it felt almost natural.

"You're not bad," she said.

"You sound surprised."

"I'm calibrating." She turned them through a corner. "You and Tom. You handled Jake well."

"We didn't know what else to do."

"Most people don't do anything. They stand there. You moved." She looked at him directly, which with Emma meant something more than it usually did. "My father says you have good instincts. He doesn't say that about people."

Larry absorbed this. "And you?"

"I'm still calibrating," she said, and something in her expression was the closest thing to a smile he had seen from her.

On the far side of the barn, Tom had been claimed for a dance by a girl named Elena from one of the smaller ranches to the south, and was managing it with the kind of focused concentration he brought to any new skill. Hans had found the one other person at the dance who appeared to be wishing they were somewhere quieter—a girl about fifteen named Sarah whose parents had brought her from town, and who was explaining to Hans in the precise tones of mutual recognition that she found large social gatherings efficient primarily as a way of meeting the specific people who also found them exhausting. They were standing near

the barn wall with the contented expressions of two people who have located their one relevant conversationalist in a crowded room.

It was late in the evening, when the dancing had found its second wind and the food was nearly gone and the lanterns had that warm amber quality they get as the night deepens, that the mood shifted.

The music stopped—not at a natural break but in the middle of a phrase, the way music stops when the musicians have seen something that redirects their attention. The crowd near the barn door parted.

Gus Megget walked in.

He had cleaned up somewhat since the truck stop in Tolopah, but his eyes were the same—the close-set, held-in calculation of a man who catalogs every room he enters for its advantages and its exits. He had two men behind him who wore the particular expression of people whose role is to make someone else look less alone. He looked around the barn with unhurried assessment and then found Larry and Tom, which did not appear to take him long.

Wade Larson stepped forward. His voice was the careful even tone of a man choosing precision over volume. "Gus. I don't recall inviting you."

"Public dance," Megget said. He was still looking at Larry and Tom. "Heard there was food."

"There was. It's mostly gone." Wade didn't move from his position, which put him between Megget and most of the room.

"You're welcome to what's left. Long as everyone has a good evening."

Megget let that land without acknowledging it. He walked toward Larry and Tom in the way of a man who has decided on a direction. The crowd made room in the instinctive way crowds do when they sense that what's coming does not include them.

"I heard you boys had some excitement," he said. "Bear hunt."

"We were there," Larry said.

"Killed it, they say." Megget's voice had the flat quality of something that sounds like a compliment and isn't. "Lucky shots."

"Jake Morrow is alive," Tom said. "Whether that's luck or not depends on how you look at it."

Megget's eyes moved to Tom with a new attention. "You've got a mouth on you for someone who's been here a month."

"About six weeks," Tom said.

Larry put a hand on his brother's arm—not restraining, just present.

Mr. Wilder appeared at Larry's shoulder with the quiet speed of a man who keeps track of rooms. He looked at Megget with an expression that contained a specific kind of patience—the patience of someone who is not afraid but is being careful about the sequence of events.

"Gus," he said.

"Wilder." Megget glanced at him and then back to the brothers. "Just getting acquainted with your boys."

"They're acquainted with you already. We all are." Mr. Wilder's voice carried without effort, a quality Larry had noticed before—the kind of voice that fills whatever room it's in without being raised. "This is Wade Larson's celebration. You're welcome to be part of that or you're welcome to leave. Those are the options."

The room was very quiet. The band had not resumed. Wade Larson was still in his position near the door.

Megget looked around the barn—at the assembled ranchers and hands and families, at the expressions they were all wearing, at the arithmetic of the room. He looked at Larry and Tom one more time, and something moved through his face that was not quite readable but was not good.

"Enjoy your party," he said.

He turned and walked out. His two men followed. The band, after a beat, picked up where they had left off.

They rode home under a sky thick with stars, the five horses moving easily in the dark, hooves on packed earth.

After a while Tom said: "He's going to do something."

"Probably," Mr. Wilder said.

"What do we do?"

"We stay sharp. We don't go places alone. And we don't give him an occasion he can use." He was quiet for a moment. "Gus Megget has been looking for something to take in this county for years. He's mean and he's patient and he doesn't forgive embarrassments. We've given him two—you boys at the truck stop,

and tonight." Another pause. "That doesn't mean something bad will happen. It means we don't give him a third."

"And if he makes one anyway?" Larry said.

"Then we deal with it." Mr. Wilder's voice was even in a way that was neither reassuring nor alarming, simply factual. "As a community. That's what the law is for, and that's what neighbors are for. Nobody handles Gus Megget alone."

They rode on. The ranch lights appeared in the valley below. Hans had ridden out here from the barn dance and navigated the road home in the dark without incident, which he would report at breakfast the next morning with the measured satisfaction of someone recording a personal milestone.

Larry looked at Tom, riding beside him.

"You really had to correct him on the timeline," Larry said. "Six weeks, not a month."

"Accuracy matters," Tom said.

"He's a cattle rustler with a grudge."

"Accuracy still matters."

Larry was quiet for a moment. Then: "You're not wrong."

Behind them, at a distance that made him invisible from the road, Gus Megget sat on his horse on a low ridge and watched the ranch lights until they turned off, one by one, and then he turned his horse and rode away into the dark. He was not a man who forgot things. He was not a man who let things go. He had been patient before. He would be patient again.

But he would not be patient forever.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE MOONLIGHT RIDE

A week after the barn dance, Horace Wilder sat on the top rail of the corral fence in the early evening and watched the sun go down and was bored out of his mind.

This was not a state he inhabited quietly. He communicated it through a series of increasingly elaborate sighs, through the particular way he was sitting—slouched backward, heels hooked on the second rail, arms crossed—and through a running commentary that his audience of three did not request and could not easily avoid.

"Nothing happens anymore," he said.

"We killed a bear," Larry said.

"Eight days ago."

"Eight days isn't that long."

"It's a week and a day. In terms of interesting things happening, that might as well be geological time." Horace dropped off the fence and began walking in a circle, which was his thinking posture. "We need something to do. Something that isn't a chore."

"We could work on our roping," Tom offered.

"Tom." Horace looked at him with the patient expression of a person explaining something obvious. "We have been working on our roping every day for four weeks. I can rope. I don't want to rope. I want to do something interesting."

The sun was almost gone, a last slice of orange above the western ridge, and the sky above it was the deep saturated blue that came before dark. The moon was already visible, nearly full, enormous and close-looking in the way that high-altitude moons

always are. It was the kind of evening that looked designed for something.

Horace saw it at the same moment Larry did.

"The moon," Horace said.

"Don't," Larry said.

"Look at it. It's practically daylight out there."

"Horace."

"A race. Blackstone Ridge and back. Ten miles, but the trail is clear, there's no significant gradient until the last mile—" He was already talking faster, the way he did when an idea was generating its own momentum. "We'd be back before midnight. No one would know."

"Your father would know," Bill said, from the other end of the fence where he had been listening with the expression of someone who has heard this particular category of idea before and knows how they tend to end.

"Only if we tell him." Horace turned to Larry and Tom. "Come on. You've been here six weeks. Haven't you wanted to just—open it up? Full speed, no one watching, just riding?"

There was a pause. Larry did not answer immediately, which was itself an answer of a kind.

"Racing across unknown terrain in the dark," Tom said, "on horses we've been riding for six weeks."

"It's not unknown. We ride out to the Blackstone area every week."

"In daylight."

"The moon is—"

"Horace." Bill got down from the fence. "Drop it. It's a bad idea and you know it's a bad idea, which is why you're selling it this hard." He looked at Larry and Tom. "Come on. Manny's about to put dinner out."

Horace watched them walk toward the house with the expression of a person who has been voted down on something they were not wrong about and has not yet decided whether to accept the verdict.

Dinner was quiet in the way that dinners are when one member of the table is demonstrating their mood through the quality of their silence. Horace ate without contributing to any of the conversations around him, responded to direct questions with single words, and declined a second helping of the green chile stew that was, under any circumstances, one of the best things Manny made.

Mr. Wilder observed all of this from his end of the table and then said, in the tone he used when he had been patient long enough: "Horace. Speak up or stop sulking. You're bringing the room down."

"I'm fine," Horace said.

"You are visibly not fine. What is it?"

Horace looked at his plate for a moment. Then he looked up. "I'm bored," he said, with the directness of someone who has been building toward a statement and has decided to simply say it. "We work every day, we eat, we sleep, we work again. I'm not complaining about the work. But I feel like I'm running in place."

Mr. Wilder was quiet for a moment. "You killed a bear eight days ago."

"I know."

"You think that's going to happen every week?"

"No. I know it's not." Horace pushed his stew around.

"That's sort of the problem."

Mrs. Wilder looked at her husband across the table with an expression that contained several things at once, all of them maternal and slightly amused. Mr. Wilder looked back at her with the expression of a man receiving a message he understands.

"There's a section of the north fence that needs walking tomorrow," he said to Horace. "About four miles of it. You'll spend most of the day out there alone with your horse and your thoughts and a wire-stretcher. Might help."

Horace did not appear to find this encouraging. But he said, "Yes, sir," and finished his dinner.

Hans, who had been following the exchange with the attentive interest he brought to all things ranch-related, leaned toward Larry and said quietly: "He is restless, yes? Like an animal in a pen."

"He's fifteen," Larry said. "Same thing."

Hans considered this. "In Germany we say: the restless horse runs into the fence. He must either learn patience or find a larger field."

"Which do you think Horace will choose?"

Hans glanced down the table at Horace, who was now staring at the ceiling fan with the intensity of someone who has

transferred his frustration to an inanimate object. "Larger field," Hans said.

After dinner Hans told them, without being asked and with the matter-of-fact delivery of someone reporting a small personal accomplishment, that he had ridden Lady Belle to the end of the driveway and back twice that afternoon without stopping and without gripping the saddle horn even once. Mrs. Wilder applauded. Mr. Wilder said "good" and meant it. Larry noticed that Hans had stopped looking surprised when people responded positively to his progress, and had started looking, instead, like someone who expected to keep making it.

It was a small thing, set against the backdrop of bears and bear hunts and a county full of sharp edges. But it was not nothing.

Larry had been asleep for an hour when the knock came.

Three soft raps against the window glass—not accidental, not the wind. He was awake before the third one, in the abrupt way you wake when a sound is directed at you specifically.

Tom was already sitting up across the room. In the moonlight through the window his expression was the resigned one of someone who has anticipated this.

They looked at the window. Horace was outside it, fully dressed, hat on, holding the reins of four saddled horses with the focused energy of a person who has spent the last three hours converting restlessness into a plan.

"No," Larry said, through the glass.

Horace's expression said: give me thirty seconds.

They gave him thirty seconds. They gave him approximately three minutes, during which he made a series of arguments in pantomime that were surprisingly coherent for being conducted entirely without sound, and at the end of which Larry and Tom found themselves getting dressed with the specific silent efficiency of people who have made a decision they know is questionable and are proceeding anyway.

They were outside, both of them, pulling on their boots in the dark when Bill's voice came from the shadows by the barn.

"I've been up for an hour," Bill said pleasantly. "I heard him saddling horses."

Horace winced.

"Go back inside," Bill said.

"Bill—"

"Horace." He came out of the shadows. He looked at all three of them—Horace with his plan already half-disassembled, Larry and Tom with their boots on—and appeared to make some internal calculation that involved remembering what it was like to be fifteen. "If I say no and go back to bed, you'll do it anyway. Without me."

A silence that was technically not an admission but functioned as one.

"So I'm going with you," Bill said. "We do it my way. We stay together, we keep to the west trail where I know the ground, and at the first thing—the first shadow, the first bad step, any reason—we turn around. No argument. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Horace said immediately.

Larry and Tom looked at each other. "Agreed," they said.

Bill took the reins of his horse. "And this does not happen again. And we do not tell my father."

"Obviously," Horace said.

They rode out of the yard as quietly as four horses can be ridden, which is quieter than you would think, the soft earth of the ranch tracks absorbing the sound. The last building light disappeared behind them, and then there was only the prairie and the moon.

The moon was doing exactly what Horace had promised. It hung enormous and white over the eastern mountains and it turned the prairie into something silver and architectural, every shadow sharp, the grass pale as dry paper, the distant rock formations standing out against the sky with the clarity of objects lit from above. It was, objectively, one of the most beautiful things Larry had seen, and he had been looking at beautiful country for six weeks.

They moved at a canter along the west trail, and when the trail widened Bill gave the signal and they opened up into a full gallop. The sound of four horses running together is one of those sounds that bypasses analysis and goes straight to something older—the rhythm of it, the ground coming up to meet you, the wind against your face carrying the smell of grass and dust and the mineral cleanness of high desert air. Horace let out a sound of pure joy. Even Tom, who had been the most skeptical, was grinning in the moonlight when Larry looked over at him.

For a while it was perfect in the precise way that things are perfect when you know they cannot last.

The land out here had different qualities at night—flatter-seeming, the distances harder to judge, the familiar landmarks reorganized by shadow into things that required translation. But the trail was clear and Bill knew it and the horses knew it and there was the additional confidence of the moon, which really was doing exactly what Horace had promised. Larry rode with his face up, feeling the speed, feeling the night air, feeling the specific unrepeatable thing of being sixteen and going fast on a good horse in country that had no ceiling.

It lasted about twelve minutes.

Then a jackrabbit exploded out of the grass directly beneath Blackhawk's feet.

The horse's reaction was instantaneous and total—a violent sideways shy that went from walking to panic in the time it takes to register that a thing is happening. Tom, riding with the loose confident seat he had developed over six weeks, made the correction automatically, shifting his weight, gathering the reins. It should have been enough. Under most circumstances it would have been.

But they were going fast, and the moon cast shadows in ways that daylight doesn't, and the ground that looked flat and clear was not, and the edge of the gully materialized out of a shadow at approximately the same moment that Tom realized it was there.

Blackhawk skidded to the edge and then went over.

The image printed itself onto Larry's memory with the specificity that extreme moments sometimes produce: Tom airborne, separated from the horse, arcing through the silver light with his arms out like someone trying to adjust their trajectory, impossibly high and then impossibly fast, and then the gully swallowed him and there was only the sound of impact—a series of sounds, actually, none of which were good—and then silence.

Blackhawk scrambled up the far side and stood on the opposite bank, breathing hard, unhurt.

The gully was fifteen feet deep, rocky-sided, invisible from this angle until you were at its edge.

"TOM!" Larry was off his horse and at the edge before he had planned to be. Below him, in the shadows at the bottom, something moved.

"I'm here," Tom said. His voice was strange—breathy, effortful—but it was there.

"Don't move. We're coming."

"I'm not going anywhere," Tom said, with a quality that might have been humor if the circumstances had been different.

Getting down into the gully required finding a slope fifty yards to the south where the walls were less sheer—Bill found it, moving fast in the moonlight with the efficiency of someone who keeps his head when things go wrong. They went down in single file and found Tom sitting up against the far wall with his left arm cradled against his chest and his face doing the thing faces do when they are actively managing pain.

Bill ran his hands over Tom's arms and legs with the practical assessment of someone who has had the basics of field medicine drummed into him by a father who understood what remote country requires. "Tell me what hurts."

"Shoulder. Ribs, I think. Both knees." Tom took a careful breath. "Nothing I can't move."

"Shoulder might be separated. Ribs might be cracked." Bill sat back. "Can you stand?"

Tom stood, slowly, with Larry's help on the right side. He got vertical and stayed there, breathing, conducting some internal inventory.

"Yeah," he said. "I can stand."

"Okay. We're going to get you up out of here and back to the ranch." Bill looked at Horace. "We're going home. Right now. No argument."

"Obviously," Horace said. He looked at Tom with an expression that was entirely unlike his usual one—stripped of its usual performance, just the face underneath, which was frightened and sorry. "Tom. I'm—"

"Don't," Tom said. "I'm all right."

"I shouldn't have—"

"Horace." Tom's voice was steady, which required some effort given the ribs. "I chose to come. That's on me."

They were making their way back toward the slope when Tom stopped.

"Wait," he said.

"We are not waiting," Bill said.

"Thirty seconds." Tom was looking at the far wall of the gully—the rock face exposed by the cut of the drainage, rising in a vertical section above the opposite bank. In the moonlight something glinted in it. Something that was not quartz or mica or any of the usual ways that rock catches light, but a different kind of glint, more purposeful.

"There's something on that cliff face," Tom said.

They all looked.

The rock face rose about thirty feet on the far side of the gully, and carved into its surface—carved deliberately, with purpose, centuries ago from the look of the weathering—were symbols. Arrows. Directional marks. Characters in a script that was neither English nor any modern language.

"Those are Spanish," Larry said. He had seen photographs of colonial-era markings in a book Mr. Wilder had on the ranch house shelf, and the script was the same—conquistador carving, the kind left to mark something important in country you intended to return to.

Bill was very still.

The symbols all pointed in the same direction: toward a narrow defile between two rock formations at the end of the gully, fifty yards to the north, where the canyon walls closed together like hands.

"Bill," Horace said.

"I see it."

"Is that—"

"I don't know." Bill looked at Tom, who was standing with his arm cradled and a specific expression on his face that Larry recognized as the one Tom got when something had exceeded his expectations. "We are going home. Right now. In daylight, with my father, we come back and look at this properly." He looked at each of them. "Nobody says anything tonight. We get Tom looked at first."

Nobody argued. They got Tom up the slope, caught Blackhawk, and helped Tom into the saddle with the careful handling of something fragile. Then they rode back toward the ranch at a walk, Tom setting the pace, the moonlight still extraordinary and now entirely irrelevant.

They rode in silence for the most part. Larry kept close to Tom's right side in case he needed steadying, and Tom rode with the careful upright posture of someone who has learned that any lean to the left produces a specific consequence. After a while he said, more to himself than anyone: "Worth it, though."

"Not worth it," Bill said, from ahead.

"I said what I said."

"Tom—"

"Something's been lost for three hundred and fifty years," Tom said, with the deliberate patience of someone making an argument they have already internally rehearsed. "And tonight, because Horace was bored and I can't say no to a bad idea, we may have found it." A pause. "My ribs hurt and my shoulder is going to be spectacular tomorrow. But I maintain my position."

Horace, riding behind them, said nothing. But in the moonlight Larry could see that his expression had shifted from guilty to something more complicated—the expression of a person who has caused an accident but is beginning to suspect that the accident may have been useful.

The ranch yard was dark when they came in. All four of them exhaled.

Then the porch light came on.

Mr. Wilder was sitting in the porch chair in the dark, which was why they hadn't seen him. He stood up, and the porch light caught his face, and his expression was the one that is worse than anger—the measured, quiet, entirely awake expression of a man who has been waiting for something he suspected was coming.

He came down the steps and went directly to Tom, the way parents go directly to the injured one. His hands went to Tom's shoulder, his eyes moving over the damage with the same rapid clinical assessment Bill had done in the gully.

"Separated shoulder, maybe cracked ribs," Bill said. "He can move everything. He fell into the Blackstone gully."

"I know which gully." Mr. Wilder's voice was very quiet. "Carol," he said, toward the house, in a normal voice.

Mrs. Wilder appeared in the doorway within thirty seconds, which indicated she had been awake too. She took one look at Tom and said, "Inside," and that was the end of the triage portion of the evening.

They stood in the kitchen under the fluorescent light while Mrs. Wilder worked on Tom and Mr. Wilder stood with his arms

crossed and said nothing for a long time. The silence was specific and inhabited.

"You went out in the dark," he said finally. Not a question.

"Yes, sir," Horace said.

"Against everything I have told you about this land at night."

"Yes, sir."

"And Tom went over the Blackstone gully." He looked at Tom, who was sitting at the table while his mother worked on his shoulder with the practiced hands of someone who has managed ranch injuries before. "Tom. How bad?"

"It'll heal," Tom said. "Sir."

Mr. Wilder was quiet again. Then he turned to Larry. "You said you found something."

Larry looked at him. "Bill texted you."

"Bill texted me the moment you left the gully, yes." A pause that contained several things. "Spanish markings on the cliff face."

"Yes, sir. Directional. All pointing toward a defile to the north." Larry paused. "We didn't go in. Bill said to wait."

Mr. Wilder looked at Bill with an expression that was not quite approval but acknowledged something. Then he looked at the window, at the dark outside it, at the mountains somewhere beyond the dark.

"You're all on fence-walking duty for the next three weeks," he said. "That means you, Bill. You went with them."

"Yes, sir."

"And you should have stopped them."

"I should have. You're right."

Another silence. Then Mr. Wilder set his coffee cup on the counter and said: "At first light, after Tom's been seen to properly, we ride out and look at these markings."

Horace looked up.

"You are still on fence-walking duty," Mr. Wilder said, without looking at him. "But first we look at the markings."

He went to bed. The remaining four of them stood in the kitchen in the specific silence that follows someone with authority leaving a room. Then Horace sat down heavily in a chair and put his face in his hands and said, muffled: "I'm sorry, Tom. I'm really sorry."

"I know," Tom said.

"I keep doing this. I keep having ideas that seem reasonable and then they aren't."

"The idea wasn't entirely unreasonable," Tom said. "The execution had some gaps."

"You went over a gully."

"The gully wasn't part of your plan. The gully was my fault." Tom looked at him. "Also, Horace—we found the mine. If the mine is what I think it is, your bad idea may turn out to be the most consequential thing any of us do this summer. So."

Horace looked up. "You think it's really there."

"I think those are three-hundred-year-old Spanish markers pointing at a mine entrance in exactly the location where the legend says the Lost Lode should be." Tom's voice was patient and

careful, the voice he used when he had worked something out and wanted to be accurate about it. "Yes. I think it's really there."

The kitchen was quiet for a moment with the specific quality of people absorbing something.

"Fence-walking duty is going to feel very different now," Horace said, at last.

Mrs. Wilder finished with Tom's shoulder-bruised, not separated, which was the good news—and told them all to sleep, which they did, eventually, in the particular way of people who have too much still turning over in their minds to sleep cleanly but are too exhausted to stay awake.

Tom lay in his bunk with his shoulder wrapped and the moonlight coming through the window and thought about carved symbols in a cliff face, and arrows pointing north, and a defile between two rock walls that no one had apparently thought to look through in three centuries.

"Larry," he said.

"Yeah."

"I think we found it."

Larry was quiet for a moment. Outside, the coyote was going again, farther off tonight, its voice carrying across the distance with the strange clarity that the high desert air gives to sound.

"Maybe," Larry said.

"The Lost Lode. I think that's what it is."

"We don't know that."

"The Spanish markers. Pointing toward a mine entrance. In exactly the area where the legend places it." Tom shifted carefully, minding his shoulder. "How many other things could it be?"

Larry had no answer for that. He lay looking at the ceiling while the coyote went quiet and the moon moved and the ranch around them settled into its deep working silence.

"We'll find out in the morning," he said.

Tom was already asleep.

THE LOST LODE

Tom came to breakfast moving with the careful deliberation of someone who has discovered overnight exactly which movements cost something and which do not. His left shoulder was wrapped, his left side was a color that Mrs. Wilder had assessed at six in the morning and described only as "significant," and he ate his eggs and tortillas standing at the counter because sitting and getting back up again had proven, on the first attempt, to be more of a production than he wanted to repeat.

"You don't have to come," Mr. Wilder said, from across the kitchen.

"I'm coming," Tom said.

"Your ribs—"

"Are bruised, not broken. I can ride." He looked up. "I'm the one who saw the markings first. I need to show you exactly where to look."

Mr. Wilder studied him for a moment with the evaluating expression he brought to things that required weighing. Then he said: "You ride with your right hand. Anything that requires your left side, you ask for help and you ask immediately. Clear?"

"Clear."

The surprise was Hans.

He appeared in the kitchen doorway at ten past six in his riding clothes—the worn jeans and flannel shirt he had adopted somewhere in the second week as his standard ranch attire—with

Lady Belle already bridled, visible through the window behind him at the corral fence.

"I would like to come," he said. "If it is permitted."

Everybody looked at him.

"I can ride that far," he said, with the careful confidence of someone who has checked this claim against evidence before making it. "I rode to the Jensen fence line and back yesterday afternoon. That was eleven miles. The gully is ten."

Mr. Wilder looked at Hans for a long moment. Something in his expression shifted—not surprise exactly, but a recalibration, the subtle adjustment of an estimate that has been revised upward.

"Saddle up," he said.

Hans went back out to the corral, and Larry watched him go with a feeling that required a moment to identify. It was pride, he realized. Straightforward, uncomplicated pride in his friend.

They rode west in the early morning, six of them—Mr. Wilder, Bill, Horace, Larry, Tom, and Hans—with the sun at their backs throwing long shadows ahead of them across the damp grass. The night had been cool enough to leave moisture on everything, and the prairie at this hour had the clean particular smell of water and earth and something almost sweet that Larry had come to associate with early mornings in this country and would associate with them for the rest of his life.

Tom rode with his right hand doing most of the work, his left forearm resting across the saddle horn, and managed it well enough. Blackhawk seemed to understand something was different—he

moved with less of his usual energy, an unusual steadiness, as if he had made an assessment and adjusted accordingly. Tom noticed it and said nothing, but Larry saw him put his good hand briefly on the horse's neck.

Hans rode near the back, next to Larry, and was quiet in the focused way he got when he was managing something that required concentration. He had the reins correctly, the posture correctly, the weight in the heels. He looked like someone who had been riding for more than six weeks, which was a product of the fact that when Hans Ober decided to do something he did it with the absolute seriousness of a person who does not intend to be wrong about it twice.

"You checked the distance before you offered to come," Larry said to him, low enough that it was just between them.

"Of course," Hans said. "I am not brave. I am prepared. These are different things."

"Most people think they're the same."

Hans considered this. "Most people have not had to think about it as carefully as I have."

Tom guided them to the gully without difficulty—the landmarks were clear in daylight, and the overnight experience had stamped the route on his memory with considerable thoroughness. They came up to the edge and looked down into it, and in the morning light it was exactly as bad as it had seemed by moonlight, possibly worse.

Mr. Wilder studied the distance from trail to gully edge and the depth of the drop and said nothing for a moment.

"The rabbit came from the right," Tom said. "Blackhawk went left and we were going fast."

"I can see that," Mr. Wilder said. He looked at the far bank, at the rock face rising above it. Then he was quiet in the way he was quiet when something had his complete attention.

The Spanish carvings were unmistakable in daylight. They ran across a section of the cliff face about eight feet wide and four feet tall, cut into the rock with deliberate careful work—arrows and directional marks and characters from a script that no one in this county had read in living memory. The weathering was deep and even, the kind that centuries of wind and rain and freeze-thaw cycles produce, and the marks themselves were filled with the slightly different coloration of old stone exposed to long time.

Mr. Wilder got off his horse and walked to the gully edge and stood looking at them for a long time without speaking.

"Those are colonial era," he said at last. "Mid-seventeenth century, based on the script form. The arrows are directional wayfinders—the Spanish used them to mark routes back to significant sites." He traced one with his eyes without touching it. "All of them are pointing north. Toward that defile."

The defile was visible from here in the morning light—a narrow slot between two massive rock formations at the northern end of the gully, where the canyon walls came together like the pages of a closing book. It was the kind of feature you could ride past a hundred times without noticing, your eye moving over it as part of the general texture of the landscape. You would

only stop if you were looking for it, or if you happened to go over a gully in the dark.

"We need to get around to the other side," Bill said.

They found a crossing point half a mile south where the gully shallowed out to nothing, crossed, and came back along the far bank. The rock face was even more impressive up close—the carvings deeper than they had appeared from across the gully, the arrows precise and authoritative, the work of people who had expected them to last.

They left the horses with Horace and Hans and went into the defile on foot—Mr. Wilder first, then Bill, then Larry and Tom.

The passage was narrow enough that they moved single file with their arms close, the rock walls cool and damp on either side, the sounds of the prairie cutting off almost immediately as they moved deeper into it. The light came from above, a strip of blue sky visible between the walls, and it was enough to see by but only just. Their footsteps were loud in the enclosed space.

The defile ran for about sixty feet and then opened.

The canyon beyond was small—perhaps forty feet across and a hundred deep, a natural bowl in the rock that the formation concealed completely from the outside. The walls were vertical and smooth, worn by water over centuries. There were the remains of a fire ring near the center, blackened stone arranged in a careful circle, long cold. Rusted metal fragments lay nearby—the remnants of tools, their original forms barely guessable.

And in the far wall, cut into the rock with the same care as the markers outside, framed with hand-hewn timbers that had gone

gray and fibrous with age but had not yet fully surrendered their function: the entrance to a mine.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

The opening was roughly rectangular, about five feet high and four feet wide, supported by two vertical timbers with a lintel beam across the top. Above it, carved into the rock, were more Spanish characters—Larry caught the word "plata," which he knew from high school Spanish, and several other words he didn't recognize. The timbers were old enough to have gone the color of old bones, but they were still there, which meant something about the quality of the construction.

The darkness inside was absolute beyond the first few feet.

Mr. Wilder took a flashlight from his pack—he had come prepared—and shone it into the opening. The beam lit up a shaft that went back into the mountain at a slight downward angle, the walls close on both sides, the floor rough-cut stone. After about thirty feet the shaft curved and the light lost it.

He picked up a rock and tossed it into the opening. They listened. It clattered, bounced, clattered again, and then—distantly, unmistakably—splashed.

"Flooded," Bill said.

"Partially. The lower workings." Mr. Wilder moved the flashlight beam along the walls near the entrance, then crouched and picked something up from the floor—a fragment of rock the size of his palm, gray-brown with a color running through it that was different from the surrounding stone. He turned it in the light.

"Come here," he said.

They gathered around. The fragment had veins of silver running through it in thin bright threads, catching the light with a quality that made all the other rock around it look like it was standing in shadow.

"Silver ore," he said. "Not high-grade—this is surface material, probably washed in from the workings. But the Spanish wouldn't have cut sixty feet of shaft and built a framed entrance for an empty hole." He looked at the opening and then at the canyon around them. "There's more in there. How much more—" He set the rock down carefully on a flat surface near the entrance, as if placing it somewhere specific. "We'd need an assayer's report to know. And proper equipment to go in."

Larry looked at the carved timbers, the careful craft of people three and a half centuries dead. He thought about the campfire story—all the searchers, some of whom never came back. He thought about a rabbit crossing a trail at exactly the wrong moment. He thought about Tom airborne in the moonlight and was simultaneously glad and appalled by the chain of events that had led them here.

He crouched and picked up another fragment of ore from the floor near the entrance. The silver threads caught the flashlight beam and held it, a cold metallic fire in the gray rock. He turned it over in his hands.

Three hundred and fifty years. The people who cut this shaft had done it without power tools, without GPS, without any of the equipment that made modern mining possible. They had used iron

chisels and hammers and the particular stubborn focus of people who knew that silver was in the mountain and intended to have it. Then something had happened—the history had closed around the fact of it like water closing over a stone—and they had not come back, and the markers had waited in the rock face for someone to read them, and the mine had waited in its hidden canyon, and the ore had waited in its veins in the dark.

"We found it," Tom said quietly, from beside him. Not triumphant. Just stating a fact that had been true for three hundred and fifty years and was now known.

"We found it," Mr. Wilder agreed.

The sound from outside the defile was the sound of horses—more than two, moving with the purposeful lack of subtlety of people who are not trying to be quiet.

Mr. Wilder had his hand up before the sound fully registered, the gesture that meant stop and don't speak. They went still. The sound continued—hooves on rocky ground, men's voices, the creak of saddle leather. Getting closer and then stopping.

They went back through the defile carefully, Mr. Wilder first, and came out to find Horace and Hans standing with the horses, both of them looking across the gully at the figures on the opposite bank.

There were three of them. Megget and two men, sitting their horses on the far side of the gully with the easy patience of people who have been watching for a while and are not in any hurry. Megget's eyes found the returning group immediately, and

whatever calculation was running behind them was not legible from this distance, but its general character was.

"Wilder," he called across. His voice carried the particular carrying quality of someone who is used to being heard over distance. "Didn't realize this was your range."

"It isn't," Mr. Wilder said. "This is state land."

"That's what I thought." Megget looked at the defile, at the rock face with its Spanish carvings, and something shifted in his expression—a recognition, the specific look of a man who has just confirmed a suspicion he has been carrying for a while.

"Interesting country out here."

"What do you want, Gus?"

"Just riding." Megget's smile was the kind that does not change the eyes. "Heard there was some excitement last night. Boys out in the dark. A fall." His gaze moved to Tom, taking in the wrapped shoulder and the careful posture. "Hate to hear that. Hope everything's all right."

"Everything's fine," Mr. Wilder said.

"Glad to hear it." Megget looked at the defile again. "That a natural feature, you think? That slot in the rock?"

The question was asked with the lightness of a man making conversation, and it was the most dangerous thing he had said. Because it told them he knew. Not suspected—knew. He had been out here before, or someone had told him, or he had been watching long enough and carefully enough to have reached the same conclusion they had.

"Geology's interesting out here," Mr. Wilder said, in the same even tone he had been using throughout.

Megget held his gaze for a moment. Then he turned his horse. "Well. Enjoy your ride." He paused, as if something had just occurred to him. "State land, you said. That means anyone can file on it, right? If they find something worth filing on?"

"That's generally how it works," Mr. Wilder said.

"Good to know," Megget said pleasantly, and rode away, his two men falling in behind him without a word.

They watched him go until the sound of the horses faded into the landscape.

"He knows," Bill said.

"He suspects," Mr. Wilder said. "There's a difference, but it won't stay a difference for long." He was already thinking through something, his expression the focused inward look it got when he was organizing a plan. "We need to file a mineral claim today. Before close of business at the state land office in Tolopah." He looked at his phone—no signal, which he had expected. "Bill, you and Horace stay here. I want eyes on this site until we have legal standing on the claim. Don't go into the defile. Don't engage Megget or his men if they come back. You observe, you call for help if you can get signal on the high ground, and you do not do anything irreversible."

"How long?" Bill asked.

"One night, maybe two. I'll get back as fast as I can." He looked at Larry and Tom. "You two ride with me. Tom—"

"I can do it," Tom said.

"I know you can." He looked at Hans. "Hans. You said you came prepared."

Hans straightened slightly. "Yes, sir."

"Tolopah and back is twenty miles. You've done eleven. Are you certain?"

Hans met his eyes with the expression of a man who has done his calculations and stands behind them. "I am certain."

Mr. Wilder nodded. "Then let's move. We have about six hours before the land office closes."

Leaving Bill and Horace was harder than Larry expected. They stood by their horses at the entrance to the defile—his older, calmer friend and his younger, restless one—with their rifles and their water and three days of food in their packs, and for a moment the afternoon felt very large around them.

"You'll be fine," Larry said, to Bill.

"I know," Bill said.

"Megget won't—"

"Larry." Bill looked at him with the steady directness that was his defining quality. "We'll be fine. Go file the claim. That's the important thing right now."

Horace, beside his brother, was doing something Larry had not seen from him before—he was still. Not sulking—still or bored—still but genuinely quiet, the stillness of someone who has accepted that a situation is serious and has adjusted to it. He looked at Larry and Tom and said: "We found it though. Whatever happens. We found it."

"We found it," Tom agreed.

They left them there, two figures beside the defile entrance in the afternoon light, and rode south toward Tolopah. The mine was behind them, invisible behind its wall of rock, as it had been invisible for three hundred and fifty years. It had waited that long. It could wait one more night.

But Megget would not wait long, and everyone on that horse trail knew it.

They rode hard—as hard as Tom's ribs allowed, which was harder than anyone had expected. He set his jaw and kept up and said nothing about the cost of it, and Larry rode beside him the whole way and did not ask because the answer was obvious and Tom had already given it.

Hans rode with the focused competence of someone who is spending the miles being good at something. He held the pace without being told to, managed Lady Belle through the rougher stretches of trail with growing confidence, and arrived at the outskirts of Tolopah looking tired but intact, with the particular expression of a person who has just demonstrated to themselves something they were not previously sure about.

The state land office was open. Mr. Wilder was inside for thirty-five minutes while Larry, Tom, and Hans waited outside with the horses in the late afternoon heat. When he came out he was carrying a timestamp-stamped copy of a mineral claim form and the expression of a man who has placed a legal marker on something that was previously unmarked.

"Done," he said. "The Half-Moon Ranch has first claim on any mineral deposits discovered on the state land parcel that includes our site. It's on file and it's official."

He pulled out his phone. Two bars of signal here in town.

He called Sheriff Shorty Jenks.

The conversation was brief and factual, the way Mr. Wilder's important conversations always were. When he hung up he said: "Shorty's going to meet us at the ranch tonight. He'll ride out with us in the morning to relieve Bill and Horace and make sure Megget gets the message that trespassing on a claimed site has consequences."

Larry felt something that was not quite relief—relief would come when Bill and Horace were safe and the claim was secured and Megget had been shown its boundaries—but was adjacent to it. The shape of what needed to happen was becoming clear, and clear shapes were easier to move through than murky ones.

"Can we eat something?" Tom said. "I've been riding for two hours with cracked ribs on no lunch and I would like to eat something."

"Yes," Mr. Wilder said. "We can eat something."

They tied their horses at the diner's hitching rail—a concession to local tradition that the owner had installed when he reopened the place three years ago and which had turned out to be genuinely useful—and went inside and ordered food that arrived in large quantities and was consumed in the efficient silence of people too tired and hungry for conversation.

Hans ate with the straightforward appreciation of someone who has earned a meal. He had ridden twenty miles in one day, his first twenty-mile day, and he appeared to understand this about himself in the way you understand things that have just become true.

"My brother would not recognize me," he said, at some point in the middle of the meal.

"How so?" Larry said.

"When I left Berlin I was afraid of everything." He turned his water glass in his hands. "Airplanes. Strangers. Cowboys." A pause. "Horses, especially horses. And now I have ridden twenty miles today for a reason that matters. I have been part of something." He looked at the table. "I think when Chris comes back he will find me quite different from what he left."

Nobody said anything, which was the right response.

Outside the diner window, the sun was going down over the western ridge, painting Tolopah's main street in amber. A few trucks moved through town. Someone Larry didn't know waved from across the street to Mr. Wilder, who raised a hand in return—the county's shorthand for acknowledgment, not quite a wave, the gesture of people who have run into each other in every context this territory offers.

It occurred to Larry that he was beginning to recognize the rhythms of this place. Not just the ranch—the whole county, its patterns and its people and the way it operated. Six weeks ago Tolopah had been a name on a map. Now it was a place he knew, with a diner where the food was good and a land office that had

just recorded their claim and a sheriff who answered his phone and meant what he said.

That was something. That was not nothing at all.

Somewhere ten miles east, Bill and Horace were sitting at the entrance to a three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old mine and watching the darkness come in, with their rifles and their food and the patience their father had built into them over years of deliberate effort. Larry thought about Bill's face when he had said: "Go file the claim. That's the important thing right now." That steadiness. That willingness to be the one who stayed.

He thought: I want to be that kind of person. Steady in the specific way that matters when something is genuinely at stake.

He was not sure he was there yet. But he thought he might be getting closer.

And somewhere out in that same gathering dark, Gus Megget was doing his own watching and calculating, turning over timelines and opportunities and the specific question of what you could accomplish in one night on land that had just been claimed but not yet secured. He was a patient man when patience suited him. He was also a man who knew when patience had run out its usefulness.

Tomorrow would answer the question of which kind of man he intended to be about this particular situation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STANDING WATCH

Bill Wilder was seventeen years old and had been working this land for four years, and he had spent nights in the field before—riding back late from Long Creek, sleeping under the truck when a repair took longer than expected, camping in the mountains on hunts. He was not a person who found solitude alarming. But this was different from those nights, and he knew it from the moment the others rode south and the sound of their horses faded and there was nothing left but the canyon, the defile entrance, and his brother.

They set up camp in the lee of a rock formation that gave them cover on three sides and a clear view of the approach from the south—the direction Megget had ridden in from. Bill had chosen the spot before the others left, walking the area with the practiced eye his father had spent years developing in him, thinking about lines of sight and ground cover and which way the wind would carry sound. Horace had watched him do it and then helped without being asked, which was its own kind of statement about how seriously he was taking the situation.

They hobbled the horses in a narrow side canyon fifty yards back, where the animals would be out of sight and out of danger if things went wrong. They built no fire—the decision was made without discussion, each of them arriving at it independently. A fire said: here we are, come find us. The night was cold enough that it was a real sacrifice, and neither of them mentioned it.

"Two-hour watches," Bill said, as the last light left the sky. "I'll take first. You sleep."

"I won't sleep," Horace said.

"Try anyway."

Horace lay down in his sleeping bag with his rifle beside him and his eyes open, watching the stars appear one by one in the strip of sky visible above the canyon walls, and surprised himself by sleeping within twenty minutes.

Bill sat with his rifle across his knees and his back against the rock and watched the dark.

The night sounds of this country were by now familiar to him—coyotes, wind through the rock formations, the distant percussion of something large moving through brush—and he catalogued them automatically, the way you process background noise in a place you know well, noting only the things that didn't fit. For the first hour nothing didn't fit.

Then, sometime around what he estimated was ten o'clock, a light appeared to the southwest.

It was small and orange and about a mile and a half distant, in the direction of the lower basin where the scrub oak grew thick along a dry wash. A campfire. Someone had made a camp and

made no effort to conceal the fire, which was either the behavior of people who didn't know anyone was watching or of people who wanted to be seen.

Bill studied it for a long time. It was not moving. It was not going out. It was simply there, steady and patient, in the middle of the dark.

He woke Horace.

"Look south," he said, when Horace had his eyes open.

Horace found the fire immediately. He was quiet for a moment. "Megget."

"Probably."

"He's not hiding."

"No." Bill looked at the fire and then at the mine entrance, ten yards away, and then back at the fire. "He wants us to know he's there. He wants us thinking about him so we're less effective."

"Is it working?" Horace said.

Bill considered this honestly. "A little," he said. "Get some more sleep if you can. I've got another hour."

Horace looked at the fire for another moment. "You think he'll come tonight?"

"I think he's a patient man when he's calculated that patience serves him. Tonight he's watching. He'll wait until he has more people or a better angle." Bill settled his rifle across his knees. "Which is why we need to be here when Father comes back with the sheriff."

"And if he doesn't wait?"

"Then we fire warning shots and make a lot of noise and hope somebody hears it." He looked at Horace. "Sleep."

Horace slept. Bill watched the fire until it went out, sometime around two in the morning, and then watched the dark where the fire had been, which was a different kind of watching.

In the second hour of watching, he heard something in the scrub oak to the east—a single crack of something moving through dry brush, then silence. He held his position and watched the direction for ten minutes. Nothing came out of it. Probably a deer, or a coyote working the basin. But probably was doing less work out here than it did back in Ohio, where the worst thing that came out of the brush at night was a raccoon.

He thought about the mine behind him. He thought about the people who had built it—the specific human effort of cutting that shaft by hand, framing the entrance with timbers they had to carry up into this country, working silver out of the rock in a canyon no one would find for centuries after they were gone. He thought about what it meant to leave something behind in the earth that outlasted everyone who knew it was there. He didn't arrive at any particular conclusion, but the thinking occupied the watch in a way that kept his mind from cycling uselessly on what-ifs.

He woke Horace for the pre-dawn watch at four, and went to sleep himself, and was awake again at five-thirty when Horace said his name once, quietly, in the tone that means don't make noise but come here now.

Bill came to where Horace was crouched behind the rock formation and looked south.

Five riders. Moving through the scrub oak at a walk, following the basin floor north toward the gully. They were spaced out in a loose line—not the casual spacing of people riding together, but the deliberate spread of people who have decided to cover ground. In the pre-dawn light they were shapes, not faces, but the lead shape's size and posture was familiar.

"Five," Horace said.

"I see them." Bill thought through it fast: five armed men against two boys, no signal, no backup yet. Engaging directly was not a viable option. What they needed to do was complicate the situation enough to buy time, and the best way to complicate it was to make noise. "We go to the high ground. That outcrop we looked at yesterday, above the defile entrance. We have a clear field of fire from up there and they can't flank us without climbing in the open."

"We're not shooting at them," Horace said.

"We're shooting over them. There's a difference." Bill was already moving, low and quick, toward the path up to the outcrop. "Come on. Bring your water."

The outcrop was twenty feet above the canyon floor, accessible by a natural staircase of broken rock that required both hands and some commitment. They went up it in ninety seconds and settled behind the lip with their rifles, looking down at the approach.

The five riders came out of the scrub oak and into the open ground south of the gully. Megget was in front. He had four men this time, not two—he had gone back in the night and collected more, which confirmed Bill's read on him as someone who thinks ahead and prepares properly for things he intends to do.

Megget looked around the canyon with the systematic scan of a man who is expecting opposition and is locating it.

He looked up at the outcrop.

"Wilder boys," he called. His voice was unhurried, carrying the way voices do in rock-walled spaces. "Come on down. Let's talk."

Bill said nothing.

"Nobody needs to get hurt here." Megget's tone was the reasonable tone, the one designed to sound like the sensible option. "You found something. I understand that. But finder's rights don't mean what you think they mean out here. Come down and we'll sort it out like adults."

Still nothing from the outcrop.

Megget looked at his men. He made a gesture, and two of them began moving—one east, one west, working around the flanks of the canyon.

Bill raised his rifle and fired once into the rock face above Megget's head.

The sound of it was enormous in the enclosed space, bouncing off the canyon walls and returning from multiple directions at once, a rolling concussion that made the horses flinch and one of Megget's men grab for his saddle horn.

"That's a warning," Bill called down. "Next one's for your horses. You take those horses away from here and nobody gets hurt."

Megget sat his horse without visible reaction. "You fire on my horses, boy—"

"I fire on your horses and you walk home," Bill said. "Which is a long walk and a short consequence for trespassing on a filed mineral claim." He paused. "It's filed, Gus. Since yesterday afternoon. State land office, Tolopah. You can check."

A silence in the canyon.

Horace fired a warning shot of his own—into the air this time, the signal, three shots, but spread out to sound like active suppression rather than a distress call.

Megget's flanking men had stopped moving.

"You're buying time," Megget said. He was not angry—that was the thing about him that was most unsettling. He had gone past the point where anger was useful and was operating on pure calculation. "Your father comes back with the sheriff and a piece of paper and you think that ends it. But paper doesn't—"

The sound of horses from the south was not subtle.

Eight riders, moving at a canter, coming out of the scrub oak with the purposeful energy of people who have been riding hard for an hour and have arrived at their destination. Sheriff Shorty Jenks was in front—small and unhurried, as always, with the specific quality of stillness that authoritative people have when they are moving fast toward a situation they have already decided the shape of. Mr. Wilder was half a step behind him.

Larry and Tom flanked them. Three deputies spread out on either side.

And behind them, keeping pace without difficulty on Lady Belle, Hans Ober from Berlin.

Megget turned his horse to face them. His expression did not change in any dramatic way, but something behind it recalculated.

Jenks rode up to within twenty feet and stopped. He looked at the five men, at the rifles, at the position they had taken up in the canyon, and he looked at this the way he looked at everything: with the patient attention of someone who has seen the relevant categories of human behavior often enough to recognize which one he is currently dealing with.

"Gus," he said.

"Shorty." Megget's voice was still the reasonable voice, but it required slightly more effort now.

"You are standing in a state land parcel that was filed as a mineral claim at four-seventeen yesterday afternoon." Jenks reached into his jacket and produced a folded document, which he held up without offering it. "Half-Moon Ranch, primary claimant. Registered and timestamped. You and your men are trespassing."

"We were just—"

"I know what you were just." Jenks's voice didn't change volume or tone. "I also know about the warning shots those boys fired, which I'm choosing to characterize as responsible signaling behavior rather than anything that requires paperwork." He looked at Megget steadily. "You can ride out of here right now, and I drive out to your place tomorrow with the trespass

documentation and we have a conversation about it. Or you can make this into something else, in which case I arrest you and your men this morning and we have a different conversation about it in front of a judge." He folded the document and put it back in his jacket. "Your choice, and I'll give you thirty seconds to make it."

Megget looked at Jenks. He looked at Mr. Wilder, who was sitting his horse with his hands on the saddle horn and the expression of a man who is prepared for either outcome and is not afraid of the harder one. He looked at the deputies fanned out on both sides. He looked up at the outcrop where Bill and Horace were watching with their rifles.

He looked, last, at Larry and Tom. There was a moment—three or four seconds—in which it was genuinely unclear which way it would go, in which all the possible versions of the next five minutes existed simultaneously. Larry felt it as a physical pressure in his chest, the same thing he had felt on the road in front of the truck stop in Tolopah, the same thing he had felt in the tree above the bear: the recognition that the outcome was not yet settled and that what happened next mattered.

Then Megget's expression did something subtle—a compression, a decision being filed rather than acted on—and it was over.

"We're riding out," he said.

He turned his horse without ceremony, and his four men fell in behind him, and they rode south through the scrub oak and were gone.

The canyon was quiet. Then Bill's voice came down from the outcrop: "Is it done?"

"For now," Jenks said.

Bill and Horace came down from the high ground with the slightly unsteady look of people who have been holding a great deal of tension for a long time and are only now beginning to release it. Horace's hands were shaking and he made no effort to conceal this, which Larry found, for reasons he could not entirely articulate, admirable.

Mr. Wilder got off his horse and went to them without speaking and put an arm around each of them. He held them there for a moment—not long, not theatrical—and then stepped back and looked them over.

"All right?" he said.

"Fine," Bill said. "We're fine."

Mr. Wilder looked at him for another beat, confirming the assessment. Then he nodded and turned to the business of the morning.

Jenks walked the site with Mr. Wilder while the others waited, the two of them moving through the defile and into the hidden canyon and coming back out fifteen minutes later with the specific expressions of people who have adjusted their understanding of a situation significantly upward.

"That's a real mine," Jenks said to Larry and Tom, as if they needed confirmation.

"We thought so," Tom said.

"You found it because your horse went over that gully." Jenks looked at Tom's wrapped shoulder. "And you went over with it."

"The horse was fine," Tom said. "He landed on the other side."

Jenks appeared to find something in this that was either amusing or admirable, or possibly both. "I'll have a deputy file the trespass report this afternoon," he said to Mr. Wilder. "That plus the mineral claim gives you legal standing on this site. Megget can challenge it in court if he wants, but he won't win--the filing is clean and the claim is legitimate." He looked at the defile. "You'll want to get a mining engineer out here before you go in. And a structural assessment on those timbers."

"I know," Mr. Wilder said. "This summer is about securing the claim. The mining comes later."

"Good. Don't let anyone rush you into it." Jenks looked around the canyon once more, at the hidden walls and the morning light coming in from above, and his expression was the one that men wear when they are looking at something that has a long and specific weight of history to it. "You know how many people spent years looking for this place?"

"We've heard," Larry said.

"And a rabbit found it for you." He shook his head, in the way of a man updating his model of how the world operates. "All right. Let's get everyone home."

The ride back to the ranch was quieter than the ride out had been. The urgency was gone, replaced by the particular quality of

exhaustion that follows a long night and a tense morning and an outcome that went the right way. They rode in loose formation with the easy spacing of people who have shared something and don't need to talk about it yet.

Hans rode beside Larry for most of it, which had become their habit over the past weeks. He had ridden twenty miles yesterday and was on his way to riding twenty more today, and he was doing it without complaint and without the white-knuckled focus that had characterized his early attempts. He rode now the way he was beginning to do most things—with attention and care and the quiet confidence of someone who has learned that he is capable of more than he previously believed.

Jenks stayed for another hour—walking the perimeter of the claim site, taking photographs on his phone for the trespass documentation, talking quietly with Mr. Wilder about what the next steps looked like from a legal standpoint. He was thorough in the way of someone who has learned that the thoroughness done today prevents the complications of next month, and he worked without urgency, which was reassuring in a way that urgency would not have been.

Larry spent the time sitting on a flat rock at the canyon entrance with Tom, both of them in the sun, letting the warmth work on the accumulated cold of the night.

"How are your ribs?" Larry said.

"Getting there." Tom turned carefully and demonstrated that he could do so without visible distress, which was progress from

yesterday. "I've been thinking about what Jenks said. That Megget will look for another angle."

"Me too."

"He can't claim the land. He can't take the mine by force, not with a legal filing and a sheriff who knows what he's doing. So what's left?"

Larry thought about it. "He could challenge the filing. Say there's a procedural error."

"That takes months in court and he'd lose. The filing is clean."

"He could try to buy us out. Offer Mr. Wilder money for the claim."

"Mr. Wilder would say no."

"He knows that." Larry looked at the defile entrance, at the ordinary-looking gap in the rock that concealed everything behind it. "I don't know. But whatever it is, it won't be anything we see coming. That's how he operates."

Tom was quiet for a moment. "You think it'll come before the summer ends?"

"I think we should assume it will."

The sun was warm. A hawk was working the thermals above the canyon rim, circling with enormous patience, looking for something worth the effort.

"Okay," Tom said. "Then we stay alert."

"Yeah," Larry said. "We stay alert."

"I was frightened this morning," Hans said, after a while, when they were riding. "When we heard the warning shots."

"So was I," Larry said.

"But you kept riding."

"So did you."

Hans considered this. "In Germany, I think I would have found a reason to stop. To wait and see. To be careful." He looked at the mountains ahead of them. "Here I keep finding that there is not always time to wait and see. That sometimes the thing that needs doing needs doing now, and the fear is something you carry with you rather than something you resolve first."

"That's pretty much the whole lesson," Larry said.

"It took me a long time to learn it."

"You learned it in six weeks."

"Is that fast?"

Larry thought about what he had been at the start of the summer—standing in the Columbus airport at five forty-five in the morning with a prepaid Visa card and no idea what a cinch strap was, no idea what the country looked like west of the Mississippi, no particular notion of himself as someone who could do the things he had done since. He thought about Tom's lasso throw on the injured cow, and the tree above the bear, and Jake's hand gripping his in the bedroom of the Larson ranch house. He thought about last night, riding hard across dark country toward a canyon where his friends were holding a position, and not stopping.

"Yeah," he said. "That's fast."

Hans was quiet for a while. Then: "When I go home, I think I will not recognize myself either. I think the person who arrives in Berlin will be quite different from the person who left."

"Better or worse?" Larry asked.

Hans considered this with the seriousness he brought to genuine questions. "Better," he said. "I think definitively better. Though perhaps also more complicated."

"That sounds right," Larry said.

Mrs. Wilder was on the porch when they came in, and she came down the steps with the directness of a woman who has been managing her anxiety for twenty-four hours and is done managing it. She went to Bill first, then Horace, then looked at everyone else in turn, doing the rapid inventory that mothers do, checking each face against the list of things that can go wrong and finding, apparently, that the list had not been consulted.

"Inside," she said. "All of you. Manny started dinner two hours ago."

They went inside. The kitchen was warm and smelled of green chile and garlic and the deep comfort of a kitchen that has been cooking for a long time, and the table was set for ten, and Manny was moving between the stove and the counter with the focused efficiency of a man who has been informed that more people than usual are coming home and has adjusted accordingly.

Over dinner, Mr. Wilder said: "I've spoken with an assayer. He can come out next week. We'll get a preliminary assessment of what the mine contains before we make any further decisions."

"And Megget?" Horace said.

Jenks, who had accepted Mrs. Wilder's invitation to dinner with the ease of a man who has learned not to decline Carol Wilder's table, looked up from his plate. "Megget will come at this legally if he comes at it at all. He's mean and he holds grudges, but he's not stupid. He knows what trespass costs him if it goes to a judge, and he knows the mineral claim is solid." He ate for a moment. "That doesn't mean he's done. It means he'll look for another angle."

"What angle?" Larry asked.

"I don't know yet," Jenks said. "But Megget always has an angle. It's his most consistent quality."

The dinner conversation moved on to other things—the assayer's visit, the structural work the mine would need, the investment capital that serious mining operations required and where it might come from. Practical, forward-looking conversation, the kind that happens when a crisis has been resolved and what's left is the work.

Larry ate and listened and thought about Megget's face in the canyon—that last look at him and Tom before he turned his horse. The look of a man storing something away. He thought about what Jenks had said: he'll look for another angle.

He was right, of course. They all knew it. The mineral claim was a legal wall, and walls were real and they mattered, and this particular wall was solid. But walls did not change the nature of the person on the other side of them.

The question was what angle, and when, and what it would look like when it came.

The answer, as it turned out, was fire. But that was still a week away, and on this particular evening the kitchen was warm and the food was good and everyone at the table was whole, and that was, for now, sufficient.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE

The week after the standoff at the mine was a week of heat and watchfulness. The heat was meteorological—it had not rained in twenty-one days and the grass had gone from green to the pale yellow of old straw, crackling underfoot, the ground beneath it dust-dry to a depth that made you think of the word tinder before you thought of anything else. The watchfulness was human. Extra locks on the equipment shed. A loaded rifle in every room of the house. The ranch hands riding the fence lines daily, checking for cut wire or disturbed ground. Mr. Wilder and Jenks talking by phone every other evening in the quiet way of people coordinating a contingency they hope not to need.

Megget had been silent. This was not reassuring.

"Quiet men with grudges are more dangerous than loud ones," Jenks had said at dinner, and nobody had argued with him.

Larry and Tom spent the mornings on the shooting bench, drilling the kind of practice that is not about enjoyment but about making something automatic. Tom's shoulder had healed enough for full use, though he favored it still in cold weather. Hans practiced too—not with a rifle, which he had no background with, but with his horsemanship, which had reached the point where he could be assigned a routine task and trusted to complete it without supervision. He had, quietly and without ceremony, become useful. Not ranch-hand useful—he was still learning too much for that—but useful in the way a person becomes useful when they stop requiring other people's attention and start contributing their own.

The assayer had come out on Tuesday and spent three hours in the hidden canyon with his instruments and his sample bags, and he had come out looking the way people look when the numbers are better than expected. He would have a written report ready in two weeks, he said. He was not in a position to make specific claims at this stage. But his expression made several specific claims on its own, and Mr. Wilder had read them without comment and thanked the man and driven him back to Tolopah in a state of private satisfaction that he shared with no one except Mrs. Wilder, at length, after the boys were in bed.

It was Hans who volunteered for the Tolopah run.

Ned needed supplies—wire and fence staples and three fifty-pound bags of cattle mineral supplement that had to be picked up in town because the delivery truck had broken down outside of Raton. Mr. Wilder had been putting it off because he did not want

to reduce the people at the ranch, but the mineral supplement could not wait another week without the cattle feeling it, and so the trip became necessary.

Hans said, at breakfast: "I will go. Larry and Tom can come with me. Three riders is safer than one, and Ned can use the help loading."

He said it in the tone of a man proposing something reasonable, and it was reasonable, and the fact that three weeks ago it would have been unthinkable was something he appeared to find neither remarkable nor worth mentioning.

Mr. Wilder looked at him for a moment. Then: "You take rifles. You stay together. Any sign of trouble, you turn back and you don't stop to think about it first."

"Yes, sir," all three of them said.

They set out mid-morning, when the heat was already established and climbing. The prairie stretched south toward Tolopah in its summer condition—vast and dry and absolutely still, the air above the grass shimmering in bands that distorted the distant horizon into something liquid and unreliable. There had not been a cloud in the sky for two weeks. The mountains to the north, usually blue-purple with atmospheric haze, stood out with abnormal clarity, which was itself a sign of dry air, of moisture wrung out of everything.

Tom had been saying it for days, in the way he said things that he had noticed and was filing for eventual use: that the grass was wrong, that the color was wrong, that the ground under their horses' hooves sounded wrong—too hollow, too light, the

sound of something with nothing left in it. He said it again now, looking at the country around them.

"Everything out here is just waiting," he said. "It's all just waiting for a reason."

"A reason to what?" Hans said.

Tom looked at the pale grass bending slightly in the hot, dry push of air from the south. "To catch," he said.

They rode on. The horses moved easily at a steady trot, conserving themselves in the way horses do in heat, and the three riders fell into the companionable silence that long rides produce. Larry checked his phone occasionally—one bar most of the way, sometimes two—but there was nothing that required attention. He looked at the country instead.

He had learned, over the summer, to look at this country differently from how he had looked at it in June. Then it had been scenery—extraordinary scenery, but scenery nonetheless, something to observe from outside. Now it was something he was part of, something he read the way Mr. Wilder had taught them to read it, looking for what it was saying rather than simply how it appeared. What it was saying today was: dry. Hot. Still. He would have said that the stillness was pleasant, except that it was the wrong kind of still—the held-breath kind, not the resting kind.

Lady Belle stopped.

The horse's ears went forward and then flat back in rapid succession, and then she shifted her weight sideways in the small anxious way horses have when something is registering before the rider can identify it. Lightning, beside her, picked it up

immediately and began to dance, and Blackhawk came three steps to the left with his nostrils wide.

"Something's wrong with them," Hans said, working to settle Lady Belle.

Larry was already looking south, because that was where the wind was coming from and horses orient into wind when they're alarmed. For a moment he saw nothing—just the flat horizon, the pale grass, the white sky.

Then he saw the smudge.

It was dark against the sky, a low dirty column rising from the southern horizon, not the clean white of cloud or the gray of dust but the particular brownish-black of combustion, and even at this distance it had a quality of weight and intention that made something in Larry's chest do something he would describe afterward only as recognizing it.

"That's smoke," Tom said.

"That's a lot of smoke," Larry said.

They watched it for perhaps five seconds, which was long enough for it to visibly grow—not the slow expansion of something distant, but the fast unmistakable spread of something that is moving.

"Prairie fire," Hans said. His voice was calm with the specific calmness of someone who has learned, over a summer, that calm is a choice you make under pressure rather than a feeling you wait for.

"Moving this direction," Tom said. He was looking at the grass between them and the smoke, and at the way the stalks were

bending—gently, steadily, from south to north. "The wind is pushing it toward us."

Larry had his phone out. One bar. He called the ranch—no answer. He tried Mr. Wilder's cell—straight to voicemail, which meant he was somewhere without signal. He tried Jenks.

Jenks picked up on the second ring. "I see it," he said, before Larry could speak. "I'm calling it in now. Where are you?"

"Two miles south of Elkhorn Creek. On the Tolopah road."

"Do not try to outrun it to Tolopah. The fire is between you and town. Get to the creek. Get in the water and stay there until it passes." A pause. "Go now, Larry. Right now."

Larry hung up and looked at the others. The smoke column had become a line—not a single source but a spreading front, east to west, still distant but moving with the wind at its back, and the wind was picking up. He could feel it now on his face, warmer than the air around him, carrying a smell of burning grass that was faint but unmistakable and getting less faint.

"Elkhorn Creek," he said. "It's a mile west. We ride now."

Nobody argued. They turned their horses and went.

The fire moved the way no one who hasn't seen a prairie fire quite believes it can move. It came across dry grass the way water comes downhill—not stopping for individual obstacles, splitting around them and rejoining, covering ground with an indifferent comprehensiveness. From behind them as they rode, Larry could hear it: a sound like wind, but heavier, layered, with something percussive underneath it that was the individual voices of ten thousand burning things.

He did not look back for the first half-mile. Looking back was information he did not need and would not be able to use.

Then he looked back.

The wall of flame was thirty feet high at its peak, orange and white at its leading edge, the smoke boiling up above it in great dark volumes that were already obscuring the sky to the south. It was, objectively, one of the most extraordinary and terrible things he had ever seen. It was also closer than it should have been.

"Faster!" he called, and the horses needed no further encouragement—they could smell it now and fear made them willing, and the three of them stretched out across the pale grass at a flat gallop, manes whipping, the ground beneath them a blur.

Hans was keeping pace. Lady Belle had the good sense that well-trained horses develop, the quality of trusting the rider when the rider is clear and committed, and Hans was clear and committed—leaning forward, weight in the heels, reins steady, the technique that had taken him six weeks to develop now operating without conscious thought because there was no time for conscious thought.

The creek was marked by a line of cottonwoods and willows that became visible above the grass when they were half a mile out—a strip of green in all the yellow and brown, the specific green of plants with access to water in dry country. The most welcome thing Larry had seen all summer.

But the fire was faster than it had seemed. He could feel the heat now, a physical pressure from the south that was

distinct from the ambient temperature and growing, and the smoke was thickening above them, and the light was changing—going amber, then a deeper orange, the sun filtered through the column of combustion to something ancient and wrong-looking.

"Don't stop at the bank!" he shouted across to Tom, who was level with him. "Straight in, all the way in!"

The cottonwoods were fifty yards ahead. Twenty. Ten.

They hit the bank and the horses went down it and into the creek without hesitation, water flying up in great silver arcs, the sudden cold of it on Larry's boots and legs a shock after the building heat. The creek was three feet deep in the main channel and running clear from the mountain snowmelt. He turned Lightning to face upstream, keeping the horse's head above water, and looked back.

The fire reached the south bank of the creek forty seconds later.

It came with a sound that was not one sound but all sounds, the complex roar of wind and combustion and the percussion of individual burning things failing all at once, and the heat that arrived ahead of it was a wall, a physical impact that made Larry raise his arm against it involuntarily. The wall of flame hit the creek bank and reared—thirty feet of fire against the sky—and for one terrible moment it seemed to pause and consider whether to jump.

The creek was just wide enough. The moisture in the soil on both banks, the water itself, the break in the fuel—it was enough, barely, just, by a margin that Larry would not be able to

estimate afterward because he had no way to think clearly in those seconds.

The fire split. It went east and west along the near bank, finding the drier ground, and the roaring moved with it, and the heat moved with it, and after perhaps three minutes of crouching in the cold water with the horses pressing close and the debris raining down from above—burning fragments, sparks, a piece of something that had been a fence post—the worst of it was past.

Larry straightened slowly. His face was hot and his hands were shaking and the creek water around him was warm on the surface from the radiant heat. Tom was fifteen feet away, upright on Blackhawk, covered in ash and creek water, looking at the south bank where the grass was now black and smoking. Hans was between them, his hat gone, his face the face of someone who has just moved through something and has not yet fully registered what it was.

"Is everyone—" Hans started.

"Yes," Larry said. "Everyone."

Tom looked at the fire going east and west along the creek bank and then looked north, toward where the ranch would be, and his expression changed.

They came up out of the creek and rode north through blackened country—the ground still hot under the horses' hooves in places, wisps of smoke rising from the remains of individual plants, the air thick and gray and carrying the particular smell of burned grass that has no equivalent and never leaves your memory once you've encountered it.

The fire had moved northeast, which was the direction of the ranch.

Larry pushed Lightning as fast as he dared over the uncertain ground, and Tom was beside him, and Hans was a half-length back, and none of them spoke. The smoke ahead was dense and dark and very much not the kind of smoke that means a controlled burn.

They came over the last rise and saw it.

The barn was fully involved—a column of orange fire rising from the roof, the old dry wood going fast and completely, the way things go when there is nothing left to slow them down. The bunkhouse beside it was catching at its western end. The equipment shed was already a framework of black timbers with fire at its base. And the house—the ranch house with its covered porch and its six rooms and Mrs. Wilder's kitchen where Manny had fed them every morning—the house was burning at the roofline, the fire working its way down.

A dozen figures moved through the smoke in the yard—Mr. Wilder and the ranch hands with wet blankets and shovels, working the perimeter, trying to buy time for the house. Bill and Horace were driving cattle away from the barn toward the north fence. Mrs. Wilder and Manny were at the house with a garden hose that was making no impression on anything.

Mr. Wilder saw them coming and raised his arm—not a wave, a directive. *Get here now.*

They rode in at a gallop and were off their horses before they stopped moving.

"The house," Larry said.

"We can't save it," Mr. Wilder said. He was not looking at the house. He was looking at the people around him, conducting the count. "The fire's in the rafters. Thirty more minutes and the roof comes down." He looked at Larry with the expression he had worn at five in the morning in the canyon—absolutely present, absolutely resolved. "We get the animals out and we get everyone to the creek. That's all there is."

"Your house—" Tom said.

"Is a building." Mr. Wilder's voice did not waver. "Everyone move."

What followed was twenty minutes of hard physical work in smoke and heat and the roaring background of things burning. They got the horses from the corral. They drove the cattle that had been left in the near pasture toward the north gate. They grabbed what was grabable from the house—the fire safe from the office, the framed photographs from the hallway, Mrs. Wilder's laptop and the external drive that held the ranch's financial records. They did not try to save furniture or clothing or any of the thousand accumulated objects that make a house a home rather than a structure, because there was no time and because Mr. Wilder said clearly: nothing worth dying for.

Mrs. Wilder, at one point, stopped in the yard with an armload of framed photographs and looked at the house, and the expression on her face was one of the most private things Larry had ever seen—not grief exactly, not yet, something more immediate than grief, the specific look of a person watching a

large and irreplaceable thing being taken from them in real time. It lasted about four seconds. Then she turned and kept walking toward the creek.

They were in the water and accounted for—all twelve of them, plus the horses and the dogs—when the barn roof came down. The sound of it was enormous, a concussive collapse that sent a column of sparks two hundred feet into the air, and the cattle that had already been driven north scattered further at the noise.

Then the ranch house roof went, more gradually, one section and then another, the way things go that are not designed to fall all at once.

Larry was standing in three feet of cold water with Lightning's reins in his hand, watching it happen, and the watching was the thing—having to stand there and see it because there was nothing else to do. He had been at the Half-Moon Ranch for eight weeks. He had woken up in that house every morning for eight weeks, eaten at that kitchen table, sat on that porch in the evenings looking at the prairie and the stars. He had been told, and had begun to believe, that it was his home for the summer.

He thought about what Mr. Wilder had said at dinner once, in a different context: *the wilderness does not care about your intentions*. What burned cared nothing about what you had built in it or how long you had built it or what it meant to the people who lived there. This was not a lesson he had needed to be taught in Ohio. Out here it arrived with a particular specificity.

The fire burned through the evening. The wind died at sunset, which slowed it and eventually stopped it at the natural firebreak of a dry wash half a mile north of the ranch. By dark the main structures were ruins—black frames and stone foundations, the iron stove from Manny's kitchen standing alone in the open air, the only thing left completely intact.

They came out of the creek in the dark and built a fire on the bank from wood that was already there and would not catch anything further. The twelve of them gathered around it with their wet clothes and their shock and the particular silence of people who are still processing what they have just been through.

Horace sat with his arms around his knees looking at the ruins and said nothing for a long time. Then he said, to Bill, not loudly: "We're going to have to rebuild everything."

"Yeah," Bill said.

"The barn. The house. The bunkhouse. Everything."

"Yeah."

"That's going to take the rest of the summer."

"Probably longer."

Horace nodded slowly. "Okay," he said. It was not a small thing, the way he said it—it was the specific tone of someone who has just accepted a large fact and is already beginning to orient around it rather than away from it. "Then that's what we do."

Mr. Wilder stood up.

He looked around the group—his wife, his sons, the ranch hands, the three boys from Ohio, the young man from Germany—and

then he looked at the ruins of his ranch, which were still smoking in the dark.

"Everything we need to know," he said, "is right here. The cattle are safe. The horses are safe. The mine claim is filed. And everyone who was here tonight is here." He stopped for a moment. "A building is materials and labor. It can be rebuilt with the same materials and the same labor, and it will be, and it will be better than what we had because we'll know more the second time." He looked at his wife. "We've built things before. We'll build again."

Mrs. Wilder did not look away from him. Her expression was the one people wear when they are receiving something they need in the exact form in which it is needed.

"This was arson," Jenks said. He had arrived within an hour of the fire—he had been monitoring police radio and had driven out with two deputies at the first reports. "Fire started in the south field, not the west. And it started in two places simultaneously, which fires don't do naturally." He was looking at Mr. Wilder. "This was Megget."

"I know," Mr. Wilder said.

"I'll have a warrant by morning."

"I know that too."

They sat by the creek fire for a long time. Someone produced food from the emergency kit—energy bars and jerky and the protein crackers that Manny had always kept in the equipment shed's emergency cache, which had been one of the first things grabbed. It was not dinner. It was enough.

Hans sat beside Larry on a flat rock, looking at the ruins of the ranch house across the field.

"I am sorry," he said.

"You didn't do it."

"No. But it is—" He searched for the word. "It is a loss. A real loss. And I am sorry for it."

Larry looked at the iron stove standing alone in the open air—dark against the darker ruins, the only vertical thing left, absurdly intact. Something about it struck him as both desolate and oddly funny, the way things sometimes are at the far edge of a long and terrible day.

"It can be rebuilt," he said.

"Yes," Hans said. "But it will not be the same."

"No," Larry agreed. "It won't be the same."

He looked up. The sky above the smoke was clearing, and the stars were coming back, and they were still the same stars—as enormous and indifferent and astonishing as they had been on the first night he had lain in his bunk at the Half-Moon and listened to the coyote and known that something in him was shifting, quiet and irreversible, like a plate of ground finding a new position in the dark.

The ranch could be rebuilt. The summer could not. But both of those things, he thought, were true in exactly the way they needed to be.

Tom appeared beside him, having made his way around the edge of the group. He stood looking at the ruins and then at the sky

and then at the iron stove standing intact in the middle of everything.

"Of all the things to survive," Tom said.

"Cast iron," Larry said. "Built to last."

"Manny's going to be delighted."

"Manny will be cooking breakfast on it by eight o'clock tomorrow."

Tom smiled—the real one, the one that didn't require any setup—and they stood together in the firelight for a while, the way brothers do when the words have temporarily run out and the silence is sufficient.

Somewhere to the south, Megget thought he had ended something. He had not ended anything. He had started the last phase of it, the one that would settle the question of what kind of country this was and who it belonged to. But that was tomorrow's reckoning. Tonight there was the fire on the creek bank and the people around it, and the stars coming back, and the iron stove standing in the ruins like a statement.

CHAPTER NINE

THE LONG WAY HOME

The sun rose on a ranch that was not a ranch anymore, or not the one it had been the day before. The stone foundations stood. The iron stove stood. The corrals stood, because they were fenced with steel posts and wire rather than wood, and because the fire had been moving too fast to pause for anything that didn't give it easy purchase. The windmill at the north end of the property stood, its blades turning slowly in the morning air above the wreckage of everything else, with the blunt indifference of mechanical things that have no opinion about what happens beneath them.

Larry stood at the edge of what had been the house and looked at it. He had not slept well—none of them had, arranged in their sleeping bags on the creek bank under a sky that smelled of smoke until almost three in the morning, when the wind finally turned and brought in cleaner air from the north. He was tired in the particular bone-deep way that follows a day of fear and physical exertion and inadequate sleep, and his face was stiff

with dried creek water, and he had eaten an energy bar for breakfast and was still hungry.

He looked at the ruins and tried to take an honest inventory of what he felt, which was his habit when things were complicated. He felt the loss of the place—real, specific, the loss of the room he had slept in and the kitchen where Manny had fed him every morning and the porch where he had sat in the evenings watching the prairie. He felt anger, clean and cold, at the person responsible. And underneath both of those, something else—something that required more than a moment to identify—which was a kind of steadiness. Not acceptance, not yet. But the recognition that what needed to happen was clear, and that clear things could be moved through.

Emma appeared at his side around seven, while he was still standing there. She had ridden over before dawn, she said, the moment her father got the call from Jenks. She had brought food and lumber and herself, in that order, and she was already dressed for work.

She looked at the ruins without saying anything for a moment.

"I'm sorry about the house," she said.

"Mr. Wilder says it can be rebuilt."

"It can. We rebuilt ours after the foundation cracked in the big frost four years ago. It takes time." She looked at him. "How are you?"

The question landed with the directness Emma brought to all questions, and Larry understood that she was not asking how he

was in the polite sense but in the actual one—wanting a real answer.

"Okay," he said. "I think okay." He paused. "Tired. Angry. But okay."

She nodded. "That's the right order to be those things in."

Mr. Wilder appeared beside him.

He was already dressed for riding, which meant he had been up before the sun. He looked at the ruins for a moment with the expression of a man who has already done his grieving privately and has arrived at what comes after it.

"I'm riding out with Shorty this morning," he said. "We have the warrant. We know where Megget's operation is based."

"I'm coming," Larry said.

"No." He said it without particular force, which was how he said things he had already decided. "I need you here. You and Tom and Horace and Hans." He looked at Larry directly. "I need you to be the men of this ranch today. Clear what can be cleared. Protect your mother. When the neighbors start arriving—and they will arrive—put them to work. You know what needs doing better than any of them because you've been here all summer." He paused. "Can you do that?"

Larry thought about the question for exactly as long as it took to know the answer. "Yes."

"Good." Mr. Wilder put a hand briefly on his shoulder—the gesture he used when he meant something that did not require more words—and went to saddle his horse.

Bill went with him. They rode out with Jenks and three deputies into the early morning while the rest of them stood in the yard and watched. Horace watched his brother go with an expression that Larry recognized—it was the expression Horace wore when he had been left behind and had accepted that it was the right call and resented it anyway. The acceptance and the resentment coexisted without apparent contradiction.

"He said we're the men of the ranch today," Tom said to Horace.

"I heard him."

"That means something."

"I know it means something." Horace turned away from the direction his father and brother had ridden. His jaw was set in a way that looked like his father. "Let's get to work."

Hans had been standing a few steps back, listening. Now he came forward and said, with the practical directness he had developed over the summer: "Where do we start?"

"The barn foundation," Larry said. "We need to know what's structurally sound before anyone walks on it. Then the house. Salvage anything intact—fixtures, hardware, anything the assayer or the contractor will need to keep."

They set to work.

Clearing the ruins of a house and barn is heavy, specific work that demands the kind of attention that leaves no room for the mind to wander into things that cannot be immediately addressed. Larry was grateful for this. He moved through the remains of the house with a systematic focus, calling out to Tom

what was worth keeping, helping Mrs. Wilder make the decisions about what had been salvageable and what was gone. Manny worked beside them with the wordless competence of someone who has dealt with large practical problems for forty years and finds grief most manageable when there is also a task.

The iron stove was exactly where it had been. Manny laid his hand on it, briefly, in the way you touch something that has exceeded your expectations, and then got a bucket and brush and began cleaning the ash off it without being asked.

By nine o'clock they had cleared a working path through the main wreckage. By ten they had identified the structural elements that had survived—the stone chimney intact, the concrete block foundation of the house unmarked, the root cellar beneath the kitchen floor intact and accessible, its contents undamaged by everything that had happened above it. Root cellar full of preserves and Manny's carefully labeled dry goods, cool and dark and exactly as it had been, untouched.

"That's something," Horace said, when they found it.

"That's a lot," Hans said. He was already making a list on his phone of what was down there, organized by category, which nobody had asked him to do and which turned out to be exactly what was needed.

The first truck arrived at ten-thirty.

It was Wade Larson's, loaded with lumber—two-by-fours and plywood and a generator and a nail gun—and Wade got out and looked at the ruins and then looked at Larry and said: "Tell me where you need it."

Emma was in the passenger seat. She got out carrying a large insulated bag that turned out to contain enough food for twenty people, which she set on the tailgate without ceremony and then went to find Mrs. Wilder.

By noon there were seven trucks in the yard.

The Hutchinson family from town arrived with more lumber and three experienced carpenters. Doc Abrams came with a flatbed carrying a used but functional bunkhouse unit—a prefabricated room on a trailer that he had been using as a storage shed and offered without condition. The Mendoza family from the south pasture country arrived with a stock trailer full of fence posts and wire. The Garcias, who ran the feed store in Tolopah, arrived with a truck full of donated supplies and the store's teenage son and daughter who came to help without being asked and turned out to be excellent workers.

Larry found himself doing something he had not expected to be doing at sixteen years old, eight weeks into his first summer away from home: organizing a construction site. He did it the way he had done other things this summer—by paying attention, by following the logic of what was needed, by asking rather than assuming when he didn't know. He directed lumber to where it was needed. He organized the work into teams. He took requests from the carpenters about what sequences made sense and translated them into assignments for the people with less experience.

Tom handled the food and water, keeping people supplied and the makeshift table on the tailgate stocked, with the additional function of knowing everyone's name within an hour and using it,

which turned out to be its own kind of logistics—the social kind, the kind that keeps people working comfortably together rather than at cross-purposes.

Horace drove the ATV that had survived in the equipment shed, moving materials from one end of the site to the other, covering more ground in an hour than four men on foot could manage. He was fast and precise and he did not stop.

Hans worked wherever the need was largest. He had the carpenter's background from his father, which showed in the way he handled tools and read what the lumber needed from him rather than imposing on it, and the carpenters noticed this and started assigning him tasks that required more skill. By early afternoon he was working alongside them as an equal rather than a helper, and if they found it strange that the person doing finish work on a framing project was a German gap-year student who had been afraid of horses eight weeks ago, they were too busy to find it worth remarking on.

Around noon, when the framing crew broke for water and the pace slowed for twenty minutes, Horace sat down beside Larry on a section of timber and looked at the work in progress.

"We're doing okay," he said, as if checking the assessment against the evidence.

"We're doing well," Larry said.

Horace studied the frame going up. "Dad said we were the men of the ranch today. I keep thinking about that. Whether we're being that or just doing tasks." He squinted. "Doing tasks is

just keeping busy. Being responsible for a place means caring whether it comes out right, not just whether you did your part."

Larry looked at him. He had watched Horace go, over two months, from a restless fifteen-year-old who needed a midnight race to feel alive to someone who could sit in a canyon alone with a rifle all night and then, the next morning, look at the ruins of his home and say: okay, then that's what we do. It had not been a smooth progression. But it was real.

"I think you're being it," Larry said.

Horace considered this, nodded once, and went back to work.

Emma appeared beside Larry mid-afternoon, during a brief lull. She looked at the frame, at the organized site, at the systematic activity moving across it.

"You ran this today," she said.

"Everyone ran it."

"Everyone contributed. You organized it." She glanced at him sideways, with the directness she always used. "Your father raised you right, Larry Alden."

It was the highest thing she had said to him all summer, and she knew it, and he understood that she knew it.

"Your father did too," he said.

She considered this a moment. "Yeah," she said. "He did." She left the way she always left—no extended goodbye, no ambiguity about what had been said—and Larry turned back to find Tom standing nearby with an expression of considerable satisfaction.

"Still just friends?" Tom said.

"Go do something useful," Larry said, and Tom went, still satisfied.

Mrs. Wilder checked her phone periodically throughout the day in a way she did not draw attention to. Larry noticed it the third or fourth time and understood it—she was waiting to hear that her husband and her older son had come back from wherever they had gone, that the warrant had been served and whatever needed to happen had happened and everyone was intact.

At two-fifteen her phone rang.

She walked a short distance from the work site to take the call. Larry watched her back—the way she went still when she answered, the way she listened, the change in her posture at some point in the middle of it. She was on the phone for about three minutes. When she came back she had an expression that was not quite relief—relief was part of it, but it was layered with something more complicated, the expression of someone for whom a long tension has been resolved and the resolution is producing not just lightness but a kind of fatigue.

"They got him," she said, to whoever was near her, which happened to be Larry and Emma. "Shorty arrested Megget at his property this morning. They have him in custody in Tolopah."

Emma nodded once, with the specific satisfaction of someone who considers this the correct outcome and sees no reason to perform more emotion about it than that.

Larry sat down on a pile of lumber and put his face in his hands for a moment—not crying, just taking stock of something. The mine was claimed. Megget was arrested. The ranch was in ruins

but was being rebuilt, right now, by half the county, with the systematic competence of people who know how to do this because they have had to know how to do this. His parents were coming home in three weeks. Everything that had needed to be resolved was resolving.

He raised his head. The work site was loud with hammers and the nail gun and voices calling measurements. Hans was on a ladder. Horace was coming around with the ATV. Tom was handing someone a water bottle and telling them something that was making them laugh.

He got back up and went back to work.

Mr. Wilder and Bill came back at five o'clock to a ranch that looked materially different from the one they had left—the frame of what would become a temporary sleeping structure rising where the bunkhouse had been, the house foundation cleared and marked and already the subject of a conversation between the Hutchinson carpenters and Mr. Garza about which reconstruction approach made the most structural sense. Lumber stacked and sorted. The root cellar's contents transferred to the Doc's donated bunkhouse unit, which had been set up at the north end of the property with the generator running.

Mr. Wilder got off his horse and stood in the yard and looked at it.

He looked for a long time.

Then he said, to the assembled people—neighbors and hands and his own family and two boys from Ohio and a young man from

Germany—"I don't know how to say thank you for this adequately. So I won't try. But you should know what it means."

Wade Larson said: "You'd do the same." Which was both true and, in this context, beside the point, but it was what people say because it is the only way to receive this kind of help without being made small by it.

Bill looked at the frame going up and then looked at Larry and Tom and Horace with the expression he wore when something had exceeded his expectations, which was not a frequent expression from Bill Wilder. He didn't say anything. He put his hand briefly on Larry's shoulder and then went to unsaddle his horse.

Mr. Wilder found Larry a few minutes later, at the edge of the work site.

"Bill told me what you did today," he said.

"Everyone did a lot."

"That's true. But there's a difference between doing a lot and being responsible for it." He looked at Larry with the evaluating directness he brought to things he meant. "I left you in charge of my ranch and my family today. You handled both."

Larry did not know what to say to this, exactly. He settled for: "I tried to do what you would have done."

Mr. Wilder was quiet for a moment. "That's all anyone can do," he said. "And it's enough." He looked at the temporary structure—the frame solid against the evening sky, the site organized, the foundation of the house clear and ready. "Your father's a good man, Larry. He raised you right."

The echo of what Emma had said, hours earlier, from a different direction.

"He'll want to hear about today," Larry said.

"Write him a letter. A real one, not a text. Some things deserve the length."

Over dinner—served from Emma's insulated bags and whatever Manny had assembled from the root cellar on the tailgate of Wade Larson's truck, the whole group eating standing or perched on lumber or tailgates—Mr. Wilder told them about the arrest. Megget had been at his property, which was forty miles east near the state line, when the posse arrived at six in the morning. He had not resisted. He had been, according to Jenks, extraordinarily calm in the way of someone who had prepared himself for the possibility.

"Calm men are harder to put away than angry ones," Jenks said, from his place at the edge of the tailgate crowd. "But we have the evidence. The accelerant, the ignition points, two of his own hands who've already decided that loyalty to Gus Megget is not worth a conspiracy charge. He'll be tried. He'll be convicted." He ate for a moment. "It'll take months. But it'll happen."

"And the mine?" Tom asked.

"Mineral claim stands. Megget's arrest has no bearing on it." Mr. Wilder looked at his phone—an email had come in from the assayer that afternoon. He had read it once and set the phone down and not mentioned it yet. He mentioned it now. "The preliminary assessment came in. The assayer believes there are

significant silver deposits in the lower workings—more than he expected based on the surface samples. He's recommending a full exploration survey and a structural assessment before any extraction. That's a process of months, not days."

He paused and looked around the group.

"The Half-Moon Ranch is going to be fine," he said. "The rebuilding will take the rest of this summer and most of the fall. The mine will take longer than that. Nothing about this is going to happen fast, and nothing about it is going to be easy." He looked at the frame going up in the last light. "But it's going to happen."

The neighbors dispersed as the evening deepened—trucks pulling out with waves and calls, offers to return tomorrow, the particular generosity of people who are not performing but simply doing what they consider normal. The Wilders and their household settled into the temporary shelter, which was crowded and not comfortable and sufficient.

Larry and Tom sat outside on the flat rock where the porch steps had been, looking at the stars coming up over the eastern mountains. The smoke smell was almost gone. The windmill was still turning in the dark.

"They got him," Tom said.

"Yeah."

"It's done. The mine is ours, Megget is arrested, the ranch is getting rebuilt." He turned the facts over in the way he had, examining them for anything that had been missed. "We did all right."

"We did all right," Larry agreed.

Tom was quiet for a moment. "Do you know what I keep thinking about?"

"What?"

"The crossing in Oklahoma. The truck stop. Megget riding at Hans on that horse." He looked at the dark. "If we hadn't been there. If we'd been in a different car, or flown a different route, or not gone to Tolopah at all."

"We were there," Larry said.

"I know. But it keeps occurring to me how specific everything was. This particular summer, this particular ranch, this particular set of things happening in this particular order." He paused. "I keep thinking: what are we going to do with it? With having been here, having done this?"

Larry thought about it. Above them the stars were doing what they always did—vast, indifferent, entirely present, the same stars that had wheeled above this country for every summer of the three centuries since the Spanish miners had walked away from their hidden canyon and not come back.

"I think we go home," he said. "We go back to Ohio. We go back to school. We play ball in the fall. And we carry this with us, and it changes how we do all of those things, and eventually we figure out what it was for." He looked at the windmill, still turning. "I don't think you find that out the summer it happens. I think you find it out later, when you're doing something hard and you realize you already know how."

Tom was quiet for a while. Then: "Like what? What will we know?"

"Like: when something needs doing and you don't know how, you ask someone who does and you pay attention and you learn fast. Like: the person who organizes things isn't always the one with the most skills, just the one who can see what order they go in." He paused. "Like the fact that people will show up for you if you've been there for them. Half the county came today because Mr. Wilder has been there for half the county, for years, without keeping score."

"That's a long investment," Tom said.

"It paid today." Larry looked at the dark. "I want to invest like that. Wherever I end up."

"Even in Ohio?"

"Especially in Ohio. Ohio needs it more."

Tom laughed quietly. "That's surprisingly wise for someone who rode into a burning ranch yard this morning."

"I've been in the West for eight weeks. It does things to you."

Tom laughed—the real one—and they sat in the comfortable dark and let the evening be what it was.

Inside the temporary shelter, Hans was already asleep, having worked for twelve hours without complaint and eaten his dinner with the satisfied appetite of someone who has been exactly where they were supposed to be all day. Horace was awake, making a list of what materials would be needed for the next phase of construction, the restlessness that had caused the

moonlight ride having found, at last, something worthy of it. Mrs. Wilder was writing emails at the small table with the focused efficiency of someone who has accepted that grief and logistics coexist and that the logistics cannot wait.

It was, in its own particular way, a good night.

CHAPTER TEN

WHAT WE CARRY

Three weeks after the fire, the Half-Moon Ranch had walls again.

Not the same walls—the new house was slightly larger than the old one, the floor plan revised to include a mudroom that Mrs. Wilder had wanted for years and never gotten around to requesting, and the barn was being rebuilt with steel framing rather than timber, a concession to the practicalities of a changing climate that Mr. Wilder had resisted until the fire made the argument for him. The bunkhouse was framed and roofed and two of the rooms were livable. The corrals had been reinforced with new posts. The equipment shed had a concrete pad where before it had been packed earth.

The Hutchinson carpenters had come back three weekends running. Other neighbors had appeared and disappeared and reappeared with materials and tools and food and the kind of company that makes hard work sustainable. Emma Larson had been there more often than not, doing whatever needed doing with the efficiency she brought to everything, and Wade had sent two of his own hands over for a week at a stretch to help with the heavier framing work.

It was not finished. It would not be finished before Larry and Tom had to go. But it was no longer ruins, which was the essential thing, and the shape of what it was becoming was visible in the structure going up—something solid, something built to last, something that would stand here long after everyone currently working on it had moved on to whatever came next.

Larry had written his father a letter. A real one, handwritten, four pages, the way Mr. Wilder had suggested. He had sent it to the Glasgow address his father had given him at the start of the summer, and six days later he had gotten a response—also handwritten, two pages in Theodore Alden's careful even script—that said, among other things: *I am very proud of you. Both of you. More than I have words for, and you know I am not a man who runs short of words.* He had read it three times and then put it in the zippered pocket of his pack where he kept things he intended to keep.

Hans's brother called on a Tuesday morning.

Hans was in the corral working with Lady Belle when the phone rang—a video call, which was Chris's preferred format, and which Hans had been receiving approximately once a week throughout the summer, each call from a different-looking background as Chris moved through whatever Mexican enterprise had detained him. This call was different from the others. The background was the interior of a van on what appeared to be a highway, and Chris Ober looked, for the first time since Hans had arrived in America, like a man heading somewhere with purpose rather than circling something he hadn't quite figured out yet.

"I'm coming back," Chris said, in German. "Next week. The deal is done and I'm coming back."

Hans held the phone and looked at his brother through the screen and experienced, for a long moment, the compound feeling of someone who has been waiting for something for three months and has, in the time spent waiting, become a different person from the one who started waiting.

"Good," he said. "I will be here."

After he hung up he stood with Lady Belle for a while, his hand on her neck in the easy familiar way it had become over the weeks, and thought about what here meant. It had meant something specific in June, when he had arrived terrified and alone and his brother was not where he was supposed to be. It meant something different now. Tolopah was a place he knew. The Half-Moon was a place he had worked, that had worked on him in return. The people in it were his people in a way that had nothing to do with where he was born.

He told the others at dinner.

"Chris is coming back next week," he said.

"That's good," Mrs. Wilder said. "You must be relieved."

Hans considered the word. "I am glad," he said. "Relieved is different. Relieved would mean I have been suffering. I have not been suffering." He paused, looking for the precise thing. "I have been somewhere I did not expect to be, doing things I did not expect to do, and it turned out to be the most important summer of my life. That is not suffering. That is something else entirely."

Nobody had a better word for it. So they left it at that.

The full assayer's report arrived by email on a Wednesday, and Mr. Wilder read it at the kitchen table twice before he said anything about it to anyone.

Then he said: "The mine is significant."

He did not say how significant, which was itself a form of communication. He was a man who understated things that were large and overstated nothing, so when he said significant without qualification, the room understood that the actual word was larger than that.

Jenks, who had come for dinner and was at the table, said: "How significant?"

Mr. Wilder looked at the email. "The assayer estimates recoverable silver in the primary shaft at levels that would generate—under current prices, with proper extraction infrastructure—somewhere between four and eight million dollars

over a decade of active mining. Possibly more if the secondary workings yield what the geological survey suggests they might."

The kitchen was quiet in the way kitchens are quiet when a number has been said that requires a moment to absorb.

"That's significant," Jenks said.

"Yes," Mr. Wilder said.

Horace said: "We're rich."

"Potentially. Over time. With substantial investment in infrastructure and extraction, which costs money, and with markets that cooperate, which they don't always." He looked at his sons. "This is not a lottery ticket. This is a long project that requires careful management and realistic expectations. It will change this ranch. It will not change who we are."

Horace nodded, processing this with the seriousness he had been developing all summer. "Okay," he said. "But still."

"But still," Mr. Wilder agreed, and almost smiled.

The letter from their parents arrived in the last week of August, forwarded from the ranch's post office box to whatever address Ned was using for their mail while the house was being rebuilt. Their mother had written it; their father had added a paragraph at the end. She told them what she always told them—that she missed them, that she was proud of them, that Scotland was beautiful and strange and that the business had concluded more favorably than expected. Their father's paragraph was characteristic: brief, specific, and at the end of it, a single sentence that Larry read and then had to look away from for a moment.

Whatever you've found there this summer, bring it home. We can use it.

They had one week left.

Larry spent that week the way he had spent the whole summer—working, riding, paying attention. But there was a quality to it now that was different: the quality of doing things for the last time, or for what felt like the last time, which turned out not to be the same as actually doing them for the last time but felt indistinguishable from the inside.

The last early morning at the corral, saddle in hand, Lightning standing steady. The last ride out to the south pasture, the country opening up the way it did when you crested the rise, the way it always took a moment that never got smaller no matter how many times you did it. The last dinner at Manny's table—the table being, currently, a piece of plywood on sawhorses, which was its own statement about something.

Tom spent part of the last week writing. He had bought a notebook in Tolopah in June—one of the first things he'd picked up at the general store, because Tom always bought a notebook in a new place, a habit carried since middle school—and it had stayed blank through the summer, not because there was nothing to write but because he had been too busy living it to narrate it. Now he filled it in the evenings at the makeshift table, covering the pages in the small dense script he used when something mattered, working through the summer in order, the careful linear way he approached things that required precision.

The other thing Tom did in the last week was spend an afternoon with Mr. Wilder, asking questions. Not about ranching—he knew the ranching by now—but about the decisions. Why he had bought this particular land. How he had managed the first hard year when the cattle market went against him. What made a good foreman. How you built a community in a county of people spread twenty miles apart. Mr. Wilder answered each question with the directness he brought to questions that deserved answers, and Tom listened and wrote in his notebook and asked the next one.

"You're going to come back," Mr. Wilder said, at some point in the middle of it. Not a question.

"Yes, sir," Tom said. "I am."

Tom spent part of the last week writing. He filled a notebook that he had bought in Tolopah in June and never used, covering the pages with the small dense script he used when something mattered, working from memory through the whole summer in the careful linear way he approached things that required precision. Larry looked at it once over his shoulder and recognized the beginning of something that was not a journal entry.

"Is that a story?" Larry said.

"Maybe," Tom said.

"About this summer?"

"About this summer. About all of it." He capped his pen. "I don't want to forget how it felt before it's had time to become a memory. Memories lie. You remember the shape of things, not the texture."

Larry thought about this. "You're going to be a writer."

"I'm going to be a rancher," Tom said.

"You can be both."

Tom looked at the notebook and at the country beyond the unfinished window frame and at some point in the middle distance where the future apparently was. "Yeah," he said. "I think maybe I can."

Emma came over on the second-to-last day.

She came in the late afternoon with a box of supplies from her father—hardware Ned had ordered—and stayed for dinner, which had become a regular enough occurrence that no one remarked on it. Afterward, while the others were clearing the makeshift table, she found Larry at the corral fence doing what he did when he needed to think: watching the horses and not talking.

They stood there for a while. The sun was going down behind the western ridge in the colors it specialized in out here—the specific oranges and magentas and deep reds that you did not get in Ohio and that Larry still looked at, every evening, with the attention of someone who knows a thing is not permanent.

"You're leaving Saturday," Emma said.

"Saturday morning. Flight out of Albuquerque at ten."

She looked at Lightning, who was grazing near the fence with the unhurried contentment of a horse at the end of a good working day. "He's a good horse. You did right by him."

"He did most of the work."

"That's what a good horse does. Still takes a good rider to let him." She paused. "You're going to be fine, Larry Alden. Whatever you do next."

He looked at her. The directness she brought to everything was there, but there was something else in it tonight—not softer exactly, but more deliberate, as if she had decided to say the true thing rather than the proximate one.

"So are you," he said.

"I know," she said, without arrogance, just as a fact. Then: "Come back sometime. When you're older and you've figured out what you want to do with yourself. There'll be work here. There's always work."

It was an invitation and it was more than an invitation, and they both understood what it was and neither of them needed to say more than that. This was, Larry thought, one of the things about Emma Larson—she was exactly as much as she said and exactly as clear, and there was a freedom in that that he had never encountered before and suspected he would spend some time looking for again.

"I'll come back," he said.

She nodded once. "Good." She pushed off from the fence. "Say goodbye to your brother for me."

She drove out in the last light, and Larry stood at the fence until her taillights disappeared over the ridge, and then he turned back to the ranch.

Hans found them after dinner, sitting on the foundation stones of what would become the new front porch.

"I have decided to stay," he said, "until Chris comes back. Another week, perhaps two." He sat down beside them. "Mr. and Mrs. Wilder have said I am welcome. I would like to be here when the house has walls on the inside. I would like to see how it ends."

"How what ends?" Tom said.

Hans thought about it. "All of it. The mine being real. The ranch being rebuilt. Chris coming back." He looked at the half-finished structure rising above them in the dark. "I came to America afraid of everything. I would like to leave from a place I know, when I am ready, rather than from a place I arrived at by accident."

Larry looked at him—this person he had met on a flight into Albuquerque eleven weeks ago, clutching his armrests and asking if the ground below was New Mexico yet. He thought about the distance between that person and the one sitting here now, who had ridden twenty miles in a day, worked twelve hours in the ruins of a fire, stood watch at a mine entrance, and said: *I have not been suffering. That is something else entirely.*

"You're going to be okay," Larry said. "You know that, right?"

Hans considered this. "Yes," he said. "I think I do know that now. It took the summer to be certain, but I am certain."

"That's what the summer was for," Tom said.

Hans smiled—the full one, unhurried, that he had started producing more frequently in the back half of summer. "For me, yes. What was it for, for you?"

Neither of them answered right away. The question deserved a real answer and neither of them had one yet that was finished enough to give.

"Ask us in ten years," Larry said.

"I will," Hans said. "I will find you on the internet and I will ask."

They laughed—all three of them—and the laughter went out across the half-built ranch and the dark prairie and the mountains beyond, and the coyote, somewhere out there in its customary distance, contributed its own commentary, lonesome and carrying and entirely at home in the country that held it.

Friday night, Mr. Wilder gathered them.

Not formally—he did not do things formally—but he asked everyone to stay at the table after Manny cleared the dishes, and when they were all there—his wife, his sons, the two boys from Ohio, the young man from Germany—he looked around the group the way he looked at things he wanted to be precise about.

"I want to say something before you go," he said to Larry and Tom. "And I want to say it while there's time to say it properly, not at the airport where everything is rushed."

They waited.

"You came here as guests. You stayed as workers. You became—"
He paused, in the way he paused when the word he wanted was close but required care. "You became part of this place. Not because of what happened—the bear, the mine, the fire—though those things showed what you were made of. But because of how you did the ordinary things, the daily things. The five o'clock

mornings and the fence walking and the roping practice and the work that never got celebrated because it was just work." He looked at each of them. "You showed up every day and you paid attention and you did what was asked and then you did more than that. That's not a small thing. That's the whole thing, actually."

The table was quiet.

"You're welcome here," he said. "This summer and any summer. For as long as there's a Half-Moon Ranch. Which, thanks to you, is going to be a long time."

Bill raised his water glass. Horace raised his. Manny, in the kitchen doorway, raised his coffee cup. Hans raised his. Mrs. Wilder smiled the smile she had been saving for this moment.

They drank to it.

Saturday morning was clear and cool, the mountains sharp against the sky, the air carrying the early-fall quality that had begun arriving in the mornings over the last week—a slight edge to it, a reminder that summer was a condition rather than a permanent state.

Larry and Tom loaded their packs into Bill's truck and shook hands with the ranch hands and hugged Mrs. Wilder and accepted Manny's parting gift, which was a sealed container of green chile that he had spent two days preparing and which he handed over with the expression of a man transferring something of value who trusts the recipient to treat it accordingly.

Horace shook their hands and then, slightly to everyone's surprise including his own, hugged them both. "Come back next summer," he said.

"We're thinking about it," Tom said.

"Don't think. Come."

Hans walked them to the truck. He had Lady Belle's reins in one hand and his phone in the other—Chris had texted that morning from somewhere in southern New Mexico, two days out.

"Safe travels," he said, in English, and then said something in German that neither of them understood.

"What does that mean?" Larry said.

"It means: go well, come back changed, and tell me about it." He paused. "It is not a direct translation. It is more the sense of it."

"We'll come back changed," Larry said.

"You already are," Hans said.

Mr. Wilder drove them to Albuquerque himself, three hours south on the highway with the mountains behind them and the high desert doing what it did, going immense and old and indifferent on all sides. They talked for a while and then were quiet, the way you are quiet in a car with someone you know well enough not to fill the silence. Somewhere past Santa Fe, Tom fell asleep against the window.

Larry watched the country go by.

He thought about everything that had happened and found that it did not resolve into any single lesson or image or conclusion. It was too large for that, the way the country itself was too

large for a single view—you couldn't see it all at once, you could only see the piece of it you were in, and trust that the rest was there.

What he could say, sitting in the passenger seat watching New Mexico flow past at eighty miles an hour, was this: he had come here not knowing what he was, and he was leaving knowing more of it. Not all of it—he was sixteen, and all of it was still a long way off, and he knew enough now to know that. But more of it. The specific more that comes from having been tested by things that didn't care whether you were ready.

He had stood up to a bully on a truck stop parking lot in Oklahoma. He had spent eight hours in a tree above a bear. He had charged a bear to save a man's life. He had found a mine that had been lost for three centuries. He had ridden into a burning ranch yard because there were people inside it he couldn't leave. He had organized a construction site at seventeen and been trusted with a ranch and been told, by people whose opinion he had come to value more than almost anyone's outside his own family, that he had handled it.

He was not the person who had walked into Columbus airport at five forty-five on a June morning with a prepaid Visa card and a baseball glove. That person was still in him—the Ohio boy, the farmer's son, the kid who'd only ever seen horses at county fairs. He would always be that person. But he was also, now, someone else. Someone who had been somewhere and done something and come through it and knew, in the quiet particular way you

know the things that are actually true, that he would do it again.

The Albuquerque airport materialized out of the valley below them, and Mr. Wilder took the exit, and Tom woke up when the truck slowed.

"Are we there?" Tom said.

"We're there," Larry said.

Mr. Wilder parked and walked them to the departures entrance and shook their hands—the firm brief grip he used for things that meant something—and then stood with his hands in his pockets while they gathered their bags.

"Write your parents," he said.

"We will," Tom said.

"Real letters."

"Real letters," Larry confirmed.

Mr. Wilder nodded once. He looked at them for a long moment—the specific look of a person memorizing something they don't want to lose—and then he turned and got back in his truck and drove away, back toward the mountains, back toward the ranch that was being rebuilt, back toward the mine and the work and the country that had no end to it.

They went inside.

On the plane, at altitude, with the desert already far below them and the summer retreating into the distance that geography makes between a place and the memory of it, Larry took out his father's letter and read it again.

Whatever you've found there this summer, bring it home. We can use it.

He folded it carefully along its original creases and put it back in the zippered pocket.

Across the aisle, Tom had his notebook open and was writing again, the small dense script moving steadily down the page in the way it moved when he had found the thing he was trying to say. Larry watched him for a moment and then looked out the window.

Ohio was five hours east. Their parents were there, and their friends, and the fall tryouts for the baseball team, and school, and the thousand ordinary components of the life they had been living before the summer happened to them. All of that was real and all of it was waiting.

But so was New Mexico. So was the Half-Moon Ranch, rising from its own ruins. So was a silver mine in a hidden canyon that a rabbit had found for them in the dark. So was a coyote somewhere in the distance calling across country that it owned by virtue of knowing every inch of it and caring for nothing beyond it and asking nothing of the universe except to be exactly what it was.

So was all of it, waiting, the way the West waits—patient and enormous and entirely prepared to be there when you come back to it.

And they would come back.

That much, Larry Alden was certain of.

THE END