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Steelhead Blues

by

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The unusual Indian summer, so bone dry it made you nervous just striking a match, had overnight done a fast turnaround and stuck a thin wet tongue of fog out over the estuary. Snug in my Polartec-lined jacket, I ambled down to the dock and did a bonhomie grin for my passengers, then introduced myself with the moniker my friends used. This morning they were much quieter than the noisy summer batches. A backdoor autumn unexpectedly getting underway always did that, along with fog. They were swaddled up good in warm jackets, up too early for a vacation they weren't sure they should have taken this late in the season, and cold. What was going to happen they wondered

with strained return smiles. Was I some daredevil hot-dog boat jockey, going to rev up three 460-horsepower engines, stand the boat on its nose and scare them shitless, or at the very least get them all wet? They were mumbling to each other with sympathetic, only partly joking voices. I heard the usual complaints about not being able to have enough coffee because it was a two-hour ride to Agness with no place to piss on my big jet sled but over the side. Hardly possible and sure not acceptable in a mixed crowd. I looked to see how mixed and how many while I asked them to pass their tickets to the dockside. Not a real tight load.

In the middle of a half-suppressed yawn I shook my head, lifted my polarized shades to wipe my eyes, and caught her watching me. Something very different. Most of the folks on board were easy to identify, mild-mannered retirees who liked to do their vacationing, as one of the Golden Agers himself aptly put it: "...after all the self-centered gimmies and screaming little savages are back in their winter cages." But here was a young woman with a thin scarf tied over her blond hair, very dark sunglasses, and the rest of her pale face clinched down in raw fear. There was space all around her except where she had snugged her black-coated self against the starboard gunnel, and her slender white hands were knotted in her lap. She wasn't allowing anyone to get too close. Interesting. My carefully directed everything's-going-to-be-okay smile didn't shake anything loose.

"You ready, Belle?" I asked as my two-year-old black Labrador retriever trotted up to the boat. She gave me her wait-a-minute look, dashed back up the ramp, bounded off onto the shale bank, and did some last minute very

important business. An elderly gentleman stood alongside me as we watched her speedy return. His sun-beaten, rope-skinned face jawed out from beneath the white bill of his Sunday farm hat. Retired Dakota wheat farmer, I decided.

"That dog does it right," he said.

"Oh, you bet," I agreed. "She's turned into a real nice lady with a little coaxing from her master."

Belle followed me as I stepped in and aft, climbed up to the covered console, turned on my mike and gave my short but informative welcome aboard speech, adding: "Going to be a real nice day soon as this fog clears. Blankets under the seats, if you're cold." Then I started the engines and listened to their instant rumble of chomping anticipation, pure thoroughbred racers at the starting gate. I throttled forward, slowly swinging the prow around away from the dock and out into the channel. There was a whole flotilla of morning traffic strung out across the estuary, snapping up homeward bound salmon, but very few of my tardy steelhead.

We edged by all those eager lines on our best behavior. I waved and smiled at the familiar faces, until I saw a mammoth sea lion rise up and brazenly snatch a fish right out of the maw of an old fishing buddy's dipping net, the happy moment of rewarded effort stolen away.

"Hey, Ray!" I called, "look at that fat bugger wolf down your fish. Or should I say seal down your fish? Yeah, *seal* down your fish. What a shame. Might as well of handed him that one."

My passengers were looking with acute interest.

"You see, folks, I don't fish the estuary because I can't take that kind of blow to my ego. I don't even much fish the homecoming salmon. I fish what that veteran of the Rogue, Zane Grey, called the 'aristocratic trout,' the

noble fighting steelhead. That's real fishing in a wet river, so to speak...in an entirely different manner.

"Will you look at those greedy thieves gobbling up handy snagged fish. Can't shoot 'em anymore like they used to. Marine Mammal Protection Act. It's quite a sight to watch an innocent sea lion supporter-cum-fisher person turn killer the first time one of those endless sets of jaws clamp over a big salmon ready for the net."

We eased up to Ray Shiner's boat. He had a couple of fishing clients aboard.

"Now you know why I went to fly-fisher heaven," I joshed him.

He gave me a look I understood. "Mornin', Griff," he called, and tipped his hat back with an extended middle finger as we passed daintily by.

Out under the bridge and we were flying, but carefully and certainly not full out. I glanced down at the whipping scarf and taut back of pale Misery. Her arms were straight at her sides, her hands gripping the thwart. Why the hell come out here in that condition? Even closeted up high and leaning over my console, my deputy sheriff's curious nose was beginning to smell something strange.

"If you folks have any questions, just raise your hands. We're gonna look at things...the flora and fauna of the shore and river, huh? And talk a little from time to time about the Rogue. I've lived on her all my life, and she gets plenty of my respect."

I saw a few people had their cam recorders out. Then a teetering gray-haired woman tried to stand up and take a picture, and I throttled down.

"We'll be slowing down briefly at some good picture spots, but if any of you have your camera eye on something

special just let me know."

After they saw airborne white cattle egrets craning their long necks over a slick on the far shore, and realized there was *wild* life out there, my alert passengers started eagerly scanning the river banks, sighting a blacktail doe and yearling offspring, a family of otters, an osprey's nest crowning a dead treetop, and plenty of California buzzards hunkered down among high branches. I saw Misery turn her head at last and look up at them with a grimly set mouth.

I skimmed slowly over to the north bank and idled below a fresh little spring pouring over the steep rocks and watering a leafy clump of wild rhubarb -- edible but far from palatable. This was a favorite picture spot. Misery hardly glanced at it, apparently toting no camera.

Everyone went crazy over a flock of wild turkeys strutting over the big gravel bar further along on the south bank. I fly-fished there sometimes when I didn't have time to go anywhere else, casting below the riffles. A couple of the old fellows aimed their fingers like rifles, very likely dreaming of unsurpassed Thanksgivings of a fading vintage. Belle left her place at my feet to step quietly outside and study those birds with a splendid concentration.

"Four toms and a hen. Look at her arranging a coy distance...sashaying over the stones. What do you make of that?" I had those solemn faces laughing, all but one.

In the expected place: sand and gravel bank, rocky overhangs, deep holes below riffles, we came across the Fish and Wildlife boys and girls. Their rigs were parked on the gravel shelf, and they were rubber-booted up to their hips, with their sleeves rolled and their caps,

bearing the appropriate government insignia, pulled down over their squirrely eyes. They looked like they were working.

"Ah, the F and W gang. Some diehards claim the letters stand for foolish and worthless. Let's see what they're up to, folks. That's right...a little seining expedition."

We held there while one of their nimble team players jumped into an inflated runabout and tore a ways upstream, towing their catch net which was pegged to the shore. He slid gently across the river and arced slowly around. Then one of the robust boys on the bank waded out, grasped the traveled part of the net, and the pink-faced boys and girls on the gravel began hauling it in hand over hand. The entire event was pretty as a scene staged for a film crew.

"Get out the clipboards. Get out the scales. If there's anything in there, it's fun watching those agitated finners leap and scamper. Well...no...I don't think so."

My passengers, with cameras and cams at the ready, made light groans of disappointment as the net came up empty.

"Sorry, the party's canceled, folks. Nobody showed up. Boy, where are those fish? I hope there's one left for something in my fly box."

I revved the engines and we swooshed by the sheepish young F and W saplings. If they kept it up, by the end of the day they'd probably have something to mark down.

It wasn't long before we skimmed into Bear Canyon. I prepped my onlookers until they were scrutinizing every leafy shadow for rascally *Ursus americanus*. I was wishing equally hard for this act. Wouldn't that lift Misery out of her strange inferno for just a minute or two? It

didn't. A beautiful black bear, chock-full of blueberries, was sitting on the bank with his stubby legs nearly crossed, lazily contemplating the circus floating by. She glanced at him then back at her hands clenched palm to palm in her lap. A kernel of annoyance was sticking in my craw. I wanted to throttle down the engines, make my way forward, and throttle *her* instead. Despite the silent resistance of one troubled woman, that zany bear was a star performer and nobody wanted to leave. While cameras ate up film, I slowly moved on.

The human virus was messing with the planet again, and it was heating up, drying us out. Odd behavior as long as Homo sapiens hung around. Maybe flooding us all to kingdom come later, but now the river was dangerously low. I had to fling us high speed over some tough rocky rapids. It took a little more concentration. My passengers were screaming, laughing, getting doused with a fine cold spray. When I finally looked at Misery she was rigid as a pole. That unwillingness to let go had locked her spine up tight. I felt wicked when I grinned at her discomfort. But then I had to censure myself. Only a person tortured by something soul-wrenching wouldn't enjoy the fun we'd just been through. What the hell, I was starting to worry.

"By the way, did I mention that we're now on government land? The Forest Service is in charge here. Any structures you see along the bank revert to Uncle Sam when their owners die. Eminent domain. No sales, no heirs apparent...and, incidentally, not a whole lot of electricity."

A spunky-looking woman with big gold-rimmed glasses raised her liver-spotted hand and waggled her bent, swollen-jointed fingers. I leaned out around the cabin.

"Ma'am?"

"Well, I thought I saw a kind of steps going up there in the rocks. Where does that lead to?"

"Nothing wrong with your vision. If you squinch your eyes and look real carefully a little further back and up the bank, you'll see the hint of a nice little A-frame hidden behind the trees. That's my friend Ed's place.

"Poor old Ed. He's fallen into some bad times. Has to leave his nest soon to undergo some extensive rehab in a therapy clinic. Seems he came a cropper under a shaky woodpile while tossing kindling at a discourteous black bear. Ed has a lot of exotic house plants. Wants to rent his place while he's gone. You can go for it...if any of you folks don't mind spare electricity, whimsical plumbing."

Now I noticed something that really grabbed my attention. From somewhere down in the depths of her high-collared pea jacket, inert Misery had withdrawn a small pair of bird-watching binoculars. Suddenly her straight back was alive with intense motion. She had whipped off her dark glasses and was aiming up at the bank, trying to fine-tune the lenses as we cruised away from the hidden A-frame. I thought about this the rest of the way to Agness. I thought of it while we were studying a shy less seen smaller Green Heron, annoyed at us interlopers, fluffing its head comb and dipping its tail over the rocks. I thought of it while we were enjoying the sexy antics of a pretty little pair of high-society mergansers. And I thought of it while we were assaying the rippling confluence of the southerly Illinois River, mercifully feeding into the Rogue. The sky, forsaking my promise, remained overcast, but the dry grasses and the leaves of

the deciduous trees on the broad point were still a luminous chrome yellow and marigold orange.

Just before the juncture I said, "Okay, we're at the first lunch dock. Your tickets indicate the one you've chosen. All of you getting off here be back at the dock by 12:40 sharp. If you're late you'll have to take a room at the Lucas Lodge." A laugh went up. "I'm not kidding. No idling engines for dawdlers. Have a good one."

I noticed that Misery was still aboard. When we off-loaded at the next dock, she was still aboard, and when we off-loaded at the last dock, she surprised me by sitting there with her hands folded. I groaned and jumped down onto the boardwalk with a bouncy deck shoe landing, then went forward to the thwart where she remained immovably planted.

"Ma'am, aren't you hungry? You're gonna miss your lunch," I gently coaxed that pale, partially hidden face.

She pulled off the fashionable dark glasses, and I stared into the most forlorn and arousing golden brown eyes that ever looked back at me. They reminded me of melting butter swirling through the warm amber syrup on my Sunday pancakes. Dumped in the rapids, deep trouble ahead.

"Richard Griffen?"

"Ma'am?"

Her voice was a soft, throaty kind of velvet, like one of those San Francisco cabaret singers.

"I heard you know just about everything."

"Well, no ma'am." I laughed. "Not altogether. Who told you that?"

"The woman at the Post Office said...told me you knew everything that was--"

"Barb? Guess I'll have to have a talk with ol' Barb,

because there are still one or two things I haven't quite figured out yet."

The smooth translucent skin of her face tightened up with impatience, and her plum-colored wet lips puckered as if about to curse or cry or spit. But she was persistent.

"...everything worth knowing around here. Then, when you said that about the...the A-frame, I thought you could...maybe you could take me over there and get your friend to let me rent it."

"Wait a minute, ma'am. You're going way too fast for me. You want me to recommend you to Ed? Excuse me, but I don't even know your name."

She looked up at me for several seconds, then yanked at her scarf and shook her head. Her pale satin hair fell just across her padded shoulders, curling over her black coat like smooth taffy. I'm good at reading faces, but that dumbfounded look of shame was no mystery. It said, *How come I have to do this? How come I have to lower myself to do this?* Finally she got around to the finishing touch, a smile. It didn't look all that deceitful, but I thought I'd seen that smile somewhere before. And it was a killer. I felt a sharp jab in my groin and stepped back, staring across the river. You idiot, Griffen, I said to myself.

"It's Kim...Kim Bailey."

She put out her hand, and I leaned down and took it in mine with great trepidation. It was small and icy-cold and trembling nervous. Almost at once, I had an uncalculated idea that I would kneel down and rub it and blow on it and slip it into my pocket, the way I used to do with my faithless wife's cold little mitts. I let go.

"I guess we could...I guess I could...huh...let him

know you're interested...anyway. Where are you staying?"

"That motel over by the bridge. I don't--"

"Okay. Never mind, I'll be in touch. Why don't you go on up and get something to eat now."

I took her by the arm, just a very automatic gesture, and helped her climb out of the boat while I was wondering how the hell she was going to live out here, a woman like her. If she'd been sick and needed to recover this wasn't the place to do it. There was some work involved that even hearty old Ed before the accident was having trouble getting done. But if she was running away from something...

She put on her glasses and tied her scarf and climbed up the hill with tired, halting steps, looking pretty lost.

"But I don't think you have a real affinity for bears," I called.

She turned and looked back at me a moment. And then came that low, sultry voice, speaking mostly for herself so that I had to woods-tune my ears away from the river to hear it: "Bears...I'm not afraid of."

I understood the ambiguity at once, but the real impetus of that remark would only be revealed to me later, when it was too late to weigh the comparatively innocent danger of bears against the evil that men do.

On this balmy late afternoon I wasn't after steelhead, although I could hear them calling to me from down below the mouth of the Rogue feeder stream. I was after a rainbow for my good friend, Faye. She fancied a plump trout frying in clarified butter as much as I fancied her. Faye had washed up in Gold Beach some years back and had

been accepted into the wary local fold by virtue of her friendly disposition and exceptional culinary skills. She had long dreamed of addicting the jaded taste buds of the California summer crowd by luring them with a steady surfeit of unforgettable food. Alas, poor Faye forgot about winter. She also forgot about tight-fisted fishermen, hunters, farmers, and loggers, and never even knew that the frequently upscale salmon and trout fisher folk habitually prefer greasy spoons. It's a punishing self-infliction that goes with the rigor of the sport, if not the empty wallet. She swiftly succumbed to bankruptcy and the sad closure of her classy staging ground for imaginative concoctions, but carried on with a fine stoic rebound. Her saved-up funds and business ideas then equally exhausted, Faye became a waitress at the Sand Dollar Cafe. She couldn't do much about the food, but she was good at her job. Her primary aim was to make her hard-bitten customers feel better at all times, right through all their shifting fortunes and disgusting moods. She had certainly done wonders for me. When I finally recognized her warm-hearted body as something besides its familiar cheerful persona, I was swinging on the hook of a killer depression and taking my last gulp.

I knew damn well what made me feel the need to bring Faye a fish today, not just my usual horny hunger, but also guilt. With one hopeful little smile, Kim Bailey had me trotting right back into the pawing and prancing behavior my wife used to inspire. I considered that while I tied a wet fly on the leader tippet and roll-cast diagonally upstream, into the shadow of an overhang bank where I hoped an old rainbow lie was as good as dinner.

Immediately, Belle, whom I had already taught to stand

well back off the water line, went into her silent stalking crouch. I nodded my head and she lay down with her nose resting on her paws. With her first sight of one of my leaping fish and a little encouragement from me, she had quickly learned that I was a hunting creature, too, and that it involved the same wily stealth that her natural instincts impelled. Belle was turning into a dream of a dog; but superfluous here, easily a threat. On the perimeter of this condensed stream, even a dream dog was a self-indulgence.

There are a number of Rogue feeder streams with more delicate and stable gravel beds than the turbulent headrace into which they drain. Here rainbow and even cutthroats spawn in tranquility, or ecstasy, away from the mighty roil of their ocean-bound brethren. These places are akin to side channels of the mind's busy roadstead, special places where secretive food for thought is stored. Feeder streams can equal tender rainbow for an impatient belly or for the nuanced palate. These speckled beauties still offer plenty of challenge, still require keen familiarity and expertise, and sometimes just getting to them is a test of ingenuity.

Reeling in, I changed flies, racing my fingers through the tying and snipping of my zillionth Duncan Loop. This time I used one of my own Griffen trout specials dubbed Nit on a Gnat's Nut, one of the more humorous aspects of designing and tying your own flies. There always needs to be a generous salting of whimsy in this chronically studied self-discipline of fishing on the fly. The ill-informed or uninitiated call it a lunatic self-indulgence; my ex-wife often agreed, although she remains a smooth-handed expert.

Casting again, I felt my concentration stray over into the risky province of Kim Bailey. She'd been a little

different on the return trip, her hair whipping in the wind while I tossed in my usual demonstration of high speed on a broad open river slick -- a gale-force sixty miles an hour because ultimately, when it looked like we weren't going to hit anything, the passengers loved it. Ms. Bailey removed her scarf. After ten years of river piloting, I had learned that when a woman pulls off her scarf and allows her long hair to suffer all those certain snarls, she either means she is free to do what she wants or that she is wishing like hell she were.

Uh! A strike. I tipped up the rod, lowered it again, and a lively little rainbow was outward bound, heading upstream then swinging back like a yo-yo. I knew just where he was going: over a riffle and into a slide with a submerged wingdam, a cantankerous old tree trunk. If he made it, it was the end of my lure and probably my leader, but I was cocky with the confidence of long experience. The rainbow darted right at me then ran away as I hauled some temporarily loose backing while swinging adroitly around, preparing to scamper downstream over the clunky stones. But, lo and behold, I tripped over my reclining dream dog. What the hell! I could not believe it. Belle immediately jumped up and barked a complaint. I sat there on my stone-abused backside and looked at her in amazement. She gave me a quick humiliated glance and stared off at the spot of the vanished prey. What a dumb klutz I have for a master, was the way I read it. Maybe somehow I could blame this on Kim Bailey. The rod was dead on the bank. I picked myself up, clambered over to it and reached down. But it danced away. "Jesus!" I exclaimed. I grabbed for the traveling rod, and from then on the trout was mine -- after that brief stint of wacky choreography, one of the

most memorable little one and a half pounders I have ever hung up.

"You'll never know the trouble this finny fellow put me through," I said as I leaned in Faye's bungalow doorway and held up the trout.

There stood safe and sane, curly-headed, freckle-faced, unaffected Faye in plain tan slacks and blue shirt, but not exactly with her usual good humor.

"Okay, tell me about it," she said, looking past me for Belle -- who was home chasing a pesky digging squirrel -- and ignoring my pretty offering.

"Never mind. It's way too embarrassing. Suffice it to say that in this latest precarious labor of love I used parts of my anatomy that are seldom employed in trout fishing."

"Precarious love?"

"Precarious labor...what's the matter, Faye?"

"Oh, nothing...much. Want me to fry that?"

"It's for you to do with as you please...and eat."

She took ahold of the fish with a paper towel, dropped it into a plastic bag and slid it into the fridge but didn't close the door. Standing there staring at the shelves of cold objects, she eventually got around to saying in a refrigerated voice, "Want some Wild Turkey and soda?"

"Okay."

I went to the kitchen sink where I washed my hands and dried them with a paper towel. As I leaned against the counter watching Faye fix our drinks, I determined that she was holding her mouth in a funny way. There was something

unusual about it that warned me off asking her anything, so I just went up behind her and nuzzled my mouth down into her short curly red hair, kissing her neck. She had the subtle sweaty perfumy smell of those small wild strawberries you find still producing in a hot late summer meadow. My happy heart sent a warm pulse quickly south.

She turned around and plowed my drink into my stomach.

"Faye!"

"Taste it. Too much soda?"

"Faye?"

Her head was bent down, and when I tipped her face up to search for the reason, I saw the banks of those soft blue eyes flooded and ready to spill.

"What the hell is going on here, Faby?"

"Don't call me that. I'm not your Faby baby. I'm not your little red-headed fish fryer. I'm not--"

I stopped her mouth with a dissenting kiss. "Yes, you are...and a whole hell of a lot more."

"God, oh God, Griff. Why couldn't you ever have just...just...oh, never mind."

"Yeah, never mind," I said, picking her up and heading for her bedroom, but we didn't make it that far because she wasn't through.

"You think you can just solve everything with a good poke, don't you? You damned chauvinist--"

"Now wait a minute." I dropped her on the sofa, trying for a light-hearted approach. "Don't get vulgar. What is this, anyway, PMS?"

Her body shook with rage. "You bastard!" she cried. "That's the only possible explanation you're capable of imagining, isn't it?"

Still lying there propped against the tumbled pillows,

she yanked her rumpled shirt from beneath her belt and used one of the tails to wipe her streaming eyes. Black tears of smudged makeup left pitiful crooked trails over her flushed cheeks. Her plump round breasts were exposed below the fold of lifted shirt, tender and so inviting, bare, as they often were beneath her clothes. I watched the firm, goose-bumped mounds of my favorite dessert rise and fall as they quivered in misery. I was useless with timber in my jeans, couldn't do anything but stand there transfixed on those waving red nipples.

"Faye...honey, what the hell is this about?"

"All kinds of things. I have a life, you know...one that goes right on when you're not around."

"I know that."

She pulled her shirt down, sat up and tucked it in.

"Do you? Do you know I've been seeing Frank Campbell?"

"Well, sure. You see him every morning at the shell shack."

"You call it that, and what do you call me? A shack-up, a good lay? That's all I am to you, a hash slinger with a handy sheath for your big appetite."

This morning, the first time I saw that grim-faced beauty staring up at those buzzards, I knew things were shifting off center without my permission. No fish had ever knocked me on my ass on dry land before. Even my dog had begun to lose respect for me, and now Faye, the most dependable woman on earth, was going haywire on me.

"Faye...you need something." I stared around the room with a sort of dazed expectation, as if I could locate whatever it was just lying around and hand it to her. I noticed that the photograph she always kept on her small

oak desk was missing. A picture of the two of us laughing and dancing to bluegrass at a harvest festival. "You need something...a drink...a real good screw...maybe even a vacation."

"You're right. I need something, and you can't give it to me, Griff."

"What did I do to make you so blazing mad?"

"Nothing, that's what you did."

"Nothing?"

Faye studied the black mascara on her fingers and rubbed her hands together, glancing at me sideways. "Anyway, on top of everything else, Bo Riley saw you talking to a strange woman alone in your boat at one of the Agness docks."

"This damned busybody town."

"You love this little town, Griff. It's one thing I know you love."

All right...but sometimes it fits too tight. A person can suffocate. Is that what this is all about? There wasn't a thing wrong with what I was doing there." Except maybe in my head, I thought.

"So Bo wasn't just teasing me."

"I just might stuff Bo Riley's mouth with whatever's handy next time I see him. You swing your juicy hips and bat your blue eyes at men all day long, and I don't give you any static about it."

"If you really cared about me, you *would* give me static, and you wouldn't let those cross-eyed fompers get within twenty feet of me."

"Honey, do you want me to go down to the shack tomorrow morning and knock some out-of-line heads together? Will that make you feel better?"

"You can't. It isn't your jurisdiction, Deputy."

"I wouldn't let a little thing like that stop me."

"Oh, tough guy. You aren't always going to be a big good-looking hunk in charge of things, Griff. Some day before you know it, you're going to be stoop-shouldered, a gray-haired old fart...maybe all alone...maybe with only a dead dog to mourn."

"You sure can be gross and cruel, Faye. I didn't know you had it in you."

That started the salt flowing.

"Don't do that...please."

"Why? Am I besmirching your perfect existence? Griff, I know you a lot better than you realize. On cold nights after you leave my bed, you sit up at your place in your tidy little den, tying flies with your devoted Belle at your feet, a pine log fire...maybe some bluegrass mandolins crying high, and you never even think of me. You've got everything you want: a gratifying and darn fun job rocketing that boat up and down your mistress river, charming all your breathless passengers -- especially the women -- with your clever country drawl and reams of astounding information; plenty of time to chase your beloved steelheads along every stream within five hundred miles of here; and a part-time deputy sheriff position that allows you to *ride 'em cowboy* with access to anything you want."

"Hey, that's way off the mark."

"Is it? What do I have that even comes close to that?"

"Well...at least you've got me."

"No, I don't. Sometimes I think I'd rather *be* you than have you. I wonder how it feels. You look just like

the happiest, most contented man on two cocky feet."

"Thanks to you. Maybe you've forgotten all the gray mornings a certain red-eyed drunk used to drag himself into the shack and slump over the counter, looking like the spoiled bycatch they sweep off trawler decks. That was me."

"Yes...you were a broken man."

The punishing sarcasm hurt, but I sat down with a worse pain forking into my gut. I knew what was coming.

"Your beautiful childhood sweetheart ran off with a rich sportsman."

"You can save that word for somebody who knows what sport and courtesy and decency are." I stood up and paced with folded arms, mired once again in the same old rage and disbelief. My own hail-fellow-well-met, dirt bag weasel of a client -- the son of a bitch who finally drove me out of the guide business forever -- comes into town with a fistful of all the appropriate hunting and fishing licenses but thinks a marriage license isn't worth diddly. Hell, yes, it's okay to wife poach in any season, isn't it?

"And why, for God's sake, did you have to bring this up, Faye? Why get me riled over a subject you know is like poison in my veins? It's a little sadistic, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Griff." She hung her head and healed her hand against her eyes. "I guess I hurt a lot because you've never come close to loving me like that."

I went silent, wondering for the first time just where that endless love collided with ego? It wasn't over yet.

"I guess that kind of...of feeling is dangerous, Faye. It makes you crazy." I felt sad, sorry, restless.

I went into the kitchen and drank my tepid abandoned whiskey, then opened the refrigerator and helped myself to

a beer, chugging it. Faye followed, coming up behind me and putting her arms around my waist.

"I don't get any enjoyment out of hurting you, Griff."

The next thing I knew we were in the bedroom with most of our clothes missing, but we had ended up on the floor not the bed. It was a fast, desperate, clutching and thrusting wildness that left us both gasping and probably bruised.

"A little fracas now and then is good spice," I said. I smoothed her damp curls back off her forehead and heard her whisper something in my ear so startling I thought I misheard it. The deep confirming sobs in her throat made her choke. She couldn't stop the sobbing and choking.

"What did you say?"

"I'm...I'm going to marry Frank and...and work with him on his boat."

I sat up, and realized the floor was cold.

"Honey, that's not even a joke. You puking on a rolling deck? It's rough and it's cold and it's dangerous."

"But you don't care about Frank at all, do you?"

"I guess I just can't believe it. Don't you know what it's like out there? Even if Frank had the sense to keep you home, you'd probably end up a young widow."

"Oh Griff, I can't take any more of this. I've cried my eyes out. You never would have married me anyway."

"It's the first I've heard of anything like that. You know I'm pretty wary of swearing oaths."

"I know...I know. You never promised anything. And that's why I'm marrying Frank. He did."

"If that's true, why am I here on the floor in this ignominious position...near shirtless, my jeans hard to

find and your sweet little body crawling all over me?"

Her sad eyes turned on me, stuck me full of sharp arrows, and I knew the anger was because I hadn't said anything about killing Frank. I figured he had enough of an enemy with just the sea at his back. She fumbled her way into her robe, getting it on backwards and starting over, then flouncing out of the room with her answer following.

"Oh, that was just my way of saying good-bye. When you get your shirt buttoned and your fly zipped, come out in the kitchen. I have something for you."

When I got out there, I stood mulling things over, wondering how to deal with Faye and when the shock of it all was going to hit me. Right then I was just sated and numb.

Faye opened the refrigerator, pulled out my bagged rainbow and dropped it into my surprised hands.

"You take it. I'll have plenty of fish from now on. Why don't you go on over to the bakery and give it to Maryann. She's working late, and she's always had a hankering for your damned fish."

She opened the door and stood waiting for my exit.

I stepped out onto the dark porch and turned around, hoping to leave behind careful words explaining all that she meant to me, but I and my rainbow found ourselves alone. Some minutes went by before I went down the stairs. I felt ashamed, but not ashamed enough. No, I never had asked Faye to marry me or even considered it, or anyone else, and had no future plans in that direction at all. The little trout that hexed me had only been trying to mind its own business, but it had paid me back in full. It did wind up over at Maryann's, and I went home with a free bag

of donuts.

"Belle?" I called. Wearing my uniform, I was standing in my yard with the deputy car engine idling in the drive, sucking up county fuel while Belle made herself scarce. I inhaled air heavy with the pungent aroma of very dry pine needles. Staring up at my big friendly cabin, I liked the way the early morning sun painted its burly gold logs with a thin drizzle of red. The blond yard grass was dry as straw stubble and tinged with coppery red light. Low overhead, a pink-tinted heron flapped its wings in slow motion, crossing behind the aspens near the cabin. They shivered loose a few more sulfurous leaves that whirled down, slid off the roof, and landed on the long veranda. From there on a clear day, you could see all the way across the estuary and miles up and down the lapis-edged coast. A peacefulness hovered over the cabin and yard and grazing field. The whole solid place rested quietly above sea-misted dark canyon pines, cedars, oaks, and shiny perfuming myrtles encircling the foot of my hill. Still, the secure rosy atmosphere whispered to me of long ago mornings carelessly used up. Images flashed across my mind of early risky explorations that could only have been done by that fingerling I was. The necessary innocence somehow got away before I was ready to leave that vintage season behind. I damped those memories down, sniffing at a fresh rising breeze that swirled some heady odors around my eager nose: cedars, pines, and myrtles, with a strong mix of sea salt and new fall spices. The combination made me high. Floating above the world. I knew why the herons, ospreys, and eagles hereabouts built their carefully elevated nests

so far out of reach, for the same reasons I had built this place -- ideally, but not really, a safe haven.

Belle charged around the house corner in hot pursuit of her bedraggled squirrel who looked downright exhausted. He ran all the way up the crooked old pine below the house, and perched out on a dead branch hiccuping. Belle fixed herself beneath his taunt, panting with her tongue out.

"Belle, think you can leave that frazzled squirrel long enough to ride with me on a little paper-serving stint?" I called. She trotted up and I said, "What do your feet look like? Have you been anyplace off limits to my vehicle?" I glanced at her feet, patted her head, and she jumped in.

"You need some water?"

She jumped out, ran up on the veranda, took a few slaps at her outside bowl and dashed back, wagging her tail.

"What about pissing?"

She gave me an impatient look. *For this I interrupted my hot squirrel chase?*

"Go on over there...and not on the rhody."

Finally, we were off to the northeast, out to visit some undesirables squatting on the back forty of a dairy farm. Sounded to me like the return of the Old West. There was still a little of that to be found around here.

I was thinking about Faye, feeling a vague anxiety and worried for her. Then as I passed the Bridge Motel, I suddenly remembered Kim Bailey. So much happened last night I forgot about her. I wondered what she was up to. Was she there cooling her heels, or off doing something else? She had looked to be in a fairly inoperable state the last time I saw her. She was scared. I didn't know

how badly yet. Then an idea came to me. I swung my car around and drove up to the office, but she was out or not answering her door. I went on about my business, thinking I'd catch her later.

The squatters were a pitiful lot, living in a beat-up camper with three barefoot kids and, of course, no plumbing or electricity to speak of. The youngish father was already an old man, grizzly-bearded with pocked, hollow cheeks and a body as worn as his holey, mottled clothes, gone south. His angry wife was seeded from a batch that blooms and fades overnight, then swells and turns slovenly, torn soiled sweat clothes, no socks in her filthy tennis shoes, ignorant and pregnant again. The father tried to work up enough steam to look threatening, a hacked off little cock protecting his hen and chicks.

After I explained the paper and handed it to him, he jerked around like one of those old tin wind-up toys with chipped paint, a derelict relic with a fixed expression of menace and gloom. He pointed his dirty finger at me.

"This here is just toilet paper to me, mister."

I stared at the broken, black-edged nail waving in my face and sighed.

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to wipe your ass with it somewhere else, my friend, because this is prime dairy land, and the owner pays his taxes."

His Adam's apple bounced up and down in his scrawny neck and his red-mad eyes watered up. I knew who he was. I'd seen him in many shapes and sizes in lots of places, ever since I was a boy: the pariah at the back of the class, dragged in and made to sit there in belligerence, picking at scabs on his dirty arms, barbed wire cuts from crawling under fences stealing chickens for his stewed and

pregnant mother to throw into a watery pot. He thrived on anger and hatred born of an ignorance that deprived him of choice. His stubbornness was pure as sainthood.

"I got no job and another kid on the way."

"I suppose it's kind of after the fact, but I have some condoms in my glove box. Ever use those?"

"I got rights!" he shouted at me with spittle flying. "I got as much right as anybody else to people this earth."

"Oh, everybody has a right," I said, swinging open the door of my vehicle. "Your fellow human beings all have rights. This dairy farmer has rights. Your kids have rights. And the more of them you make the more rights that are necessary. Get my point?"

"Be on your way down the road by morning, and haul this trash spread around here out with you. Okay? Take your wife and kids over to Family Services."

I drove off slowly, the dust spinning off my tires in an obscuring cloud as I looked back. The dairy farmer would probably have to clean up the trash. The squatter would go as far as his broken down rig would roll, then I, or someone like me, would scatter his hopeless brood again.

Belle was staring at some white cattle egrets soaring over a short-cropped pasture of Day-Glow green. There was the thin sparkle of a stream meandering through the fields. Maybe it had some trout, probably just minnows. I patted Belle's head, and she gave my hand a swipe with her tongue.

"God, it's good to be alive at this particular moment, you know it, Belle...just to be alive and not have to be that poor son of a bitch back there."

I was thinking about my father, a county court judge who died five years ago while sitting in our crammed ranch house library reading a brief. His big generous heart wore

out, the arteries bursting inside his chest. One of the most important things he taught me was how to fish, most important because along with the slow accumulation of that special knowledge went patience, courtesy, fair play, and a reverence for nature. I knew that in the early days he had a strong, if patient, desire to see me follow in his well-respected footsteps, and had sent me off to OSU undergrad school with that eventuality in mind. But broadening my backside on the bench while listening to the incredibly evil and convoluted ways human beings can screw up their own and other people's lives was not my idea of living. I graduated with a degree in biology, and with some highly enjoyable literature classes under my belt, and came home. The summer before my college graduation, dad decided to take his family to Europe to show us a few of the high points he had discovered as a young traveler. My sister and I kept diaries of the trip, and took it all in as if we were in an extended Technicolor dream. When we got to Venice, I vowed that I would bring my sweetheart back there and glide down the pungent Grand Canal in one of those elegant black gondolas powered by singing Italians. My wife and I never made it. We were too happy on our balm-scented river.

The deep reverence for nature that I acquired on the ranch turned the country into a big outdoor classroom where I fished and hunted to my heart's delight, finally guiding and river piloting for a living. Then the Sheriff asked me to run the twenty-foot police jet boat up and down the river twice a week, and I became a part-time deputy. I don't hunt much anymore -- why do I need all that meat?--, except for lost hunters and hikers and malfeasant two-legged animals who have forfeited their places at the top

of the food chain. In the end, my sister Jackie fulfilled some of our supposed obligations by becoming a municipal judge in Coos Bay. She likes it, is good at it, and made our daddy proud.

As a generally fresh-bait angler who in early days nearly always ate his catch, dad did respect and enjoy the way I fly-fished. The first time he watched me confidently flitting my imitation prey upstream over the riffles and across a run, floating that hackled fly down without much drag, I saw a real look of pride topple his indecision. And when a silver steelhead took my pretty two-stepping fly and tail-danced over the water, dad was beaming. Reeling in an exhausted nine-pound fighting wonder and then coaxing it to swim free, he recognized as a harmonious act of elevated reasoning. He knew what it meant. That was enough for me.

With the help and expertise of Jackie, mom sold off most of the ranch not long after dad died. She kept the house and twenty-five acres, and put the sale money into diversified stocks and money market funds. Missing dad badly, she got busy with her longtime friends and volunteer work, and is doing just fine. Unfortunately, I've turned out to be her main frown. She knew my wife practically since Betty was born and liked her fine, up until the time when Betty's value system -- a lot shakier than any of us realized -- went down in flames. Everyone watched her lose her mind over a cologned cashmere jacket being pranced around on the shallow surface of a secondhand body.

If I ever came close to wasting another human being for relief, that was the time. But I hardly laid a finger on the thieving bastard, merely stripped a few buttons off his shirt thinking about it. He made a shameless, sippy

apology, claimed he was in love, *they* were in love. Maybe if I had waxed him good, broken his running upper crust nose at least, I wouldn't feel so bad whenever the whole sorry mess crosses my mind. Instead, I was a nice guy, Betty's true-to-form noble knight, hunkered down in a nut basket as brainless as if I'd been smacked in the head twelve times with a billy. I did sink his boat, along with a big, hot, fuel-emptied Evinrude. Then I put my fist through a window and tried to fish with a bloody hand. I gave that up fast and went on a six-month drunk. I couldn't get Betty out of my mind because she had always been there, all those years of crazy escapades, laughter, and tears. If I had doused myself with 100 proof whiskey and lit a match, I would have still been thinking about her as my head turned to charcoal. It was Faye and my friend and cohort since memory begins, Keet Tealwing, half Siletz Indian, the other half coming from some rare breed of white woman -- whatever it was the fortuitous combination was an incomparable success -- who finally sobered me up to the point where it was possible to experience shame.

Keet is a big, beautiful maverick, a one-time rodeo circuit rider, tough as rawhide that's been rained on a thousand times and burned in the sun as many. I have an attitude that can slip around, but Keet has a philosophy that's rock solid. It's existential and has to do with personal responsibility for everything you do and liking yourself even when you fail sometimes and get it wrong. After Keet broke nearly every bone in his amazingly resilient body ten times over, he discovered an interesting fact: that if you outfitted some tolerant horses, planted five or six eager dudes on them, packed them up into the hills and sat around a starry campfire telling enormous

lies while you filled them with barbecue and whiskey, you could make a little money without busting your butt to the point of no return. In that sense, Keet runs a sort of dude ranch, although he would sure have his tongue in cheek over that description. He raises a few thoroughbreds for sale, and he also employs young wranglers to take riders out on day rides, along the beach and up into the hills. And when he's not doing his own business, sometimes he's riding with me.

Being a part-time deputy makes me the obvious choice for a lot of frivolous paper chasing that the other full-timers can't always undertake. I don't mind. Usually, it's the police jet boat stints and short round trips for me and Belle in the patrol car with some necessary unpleasantness in the middle, a nice breather from tourists and the more serious work that also comes my way. And sometimes my boss, Sheriff Jimmy Brandle, has a special kind of work for me -- shit-kicking hound-dog work, Keet calls it -- because I know the back country where hunters, lax day-trippers, or lunatic desperadoes go with the mistaken idea that it's going to be a cinch. Then I turn into a lawman on an above-average horse, a special animal I call Little Bit because he has a small streak of amusing contrariness, except when he knows I mean business. Although I've got a short grazing field up at my house, I keep my horse trailer and Little Bit on Keet's large spread. When I need to ride for the county, I take my rig out there and load up. And when Keet Tealwing comes along, we have deluded ourselves into believing we're an unbeatable combination. Most of the time we are. We've never failed to locate a hiker or a runaway felon. Interesting how they both nearly always return with the

same considerable relief.

Sheriff Brandle, sitting at his desk in the Curry County Courthouse with his ear to the phone, raised his fist in the air and shot his stubby index finger at a chair. I sat down and studied him as he worked at tongue-lashing a deputy's indefinite methods -- way too relaxed for his energetic program -- into a more accelerated performance. I expected I was probably next, although offhand it seemed to me I was fulfilling most of the obligations of my current assignments without too much slack. Jimmy Brandle generally held the opinion that it was better to beat up on a deputy's lassitude before, rather than after, say a *person of interest* flew the coop. Besides, he had a hot temper that needed plenty of outlets. His deputies all had to suffer those unpredictable surges of testosterone that made him a powerful foe in law enforcement but also hell on legs. He was well aware of his volatile condition and swore he lifted weights as much for temper control as physical fitness.

The sheriff slammed down the receiver, rubbed his chunky forearms, and set his narrowed gray eyes on me like fractured shafts of mica. For just a fast second I thought I detected a forgetfulness of purpose: why the hell was Griffen here, anyway? Then he rubbed his thumb across his crooked nose, which got that way from his father's frequent inability to cope with his son's temper, and coughed against the open palm of his hairy hand.

"Griff, how's it going?"

"Going fast, Jimmy, but okay." I offered a grin.

He belched softly and slid to the edge of his chair,

stroking his sandy crew cut forward with both quick hands as if he were flinging a noxious insect off his head. His thin lips sank at the corners as he pushed his left hand into his paunch. Apparently exhibiting my pearly whites didn't do anything for his deep-fry dyspepsia.

"You know Griff, I've spent most of my life mad as hell over one thing or another. I guess that's why your laid back cheerful attitude is such a mystery. In fact, I have to tell you, sometimes it's a giant pain in the ass."

"Well, you've probably got better things to vent your spleen on than my perky smile, boss."

"That remark's likely to come back at you, fella."

I waited, my confidence unshaken.

He cleared his throat. "Seems like there's a worse infestation of those California grass worms. You watching any of that...doin' your duty? Didn't I ask you to do a little spraying over in the east?"

"They're mostly on Forest Service land. We all know that. Let the feds do the vermin spraying. They need something to do besides annoy the guides."

"You're telling me *mostly*? Am I the sheriff or the town idiot?"

"I say that because you know we haven't been able to find them anywhere else...not lately...but that doesn't mean they aren't there. If they get in my face...anywhere in this part of the county...you'll be the first witness of how I interpret my duty, boss. But it's just chaff. The big stuff, bales of it, are floating in at night on small vessels and getting trucked north. That's the preferred method everywhere these days."

"Hell, yes. And up in Canada they're sending it south. God a'mighty, when I was a boy grass was something

you cut on Saturday mornings to pretty up the yard. Now it's just the soft end of evil. Goddammit, overnight we got the feds running around here smacking bushes with their waders." He sighed and swallowed from a scummy mug of cold black coffee. On one side of the mug it said: *The pay raise stops here.*

"Being so damned close to the grasslands in Humboldt County, we get all that weed creeping across the border. Who'd ever've believed a nice little place like this could turn into a playing field for hophead dealers?"

"Well, it isn't out of hand yet," I said. "Most of it's just passing through...but that changes the atmosphere for the worse, and doesn't overjoy me either."

"Somebody as happy as you?" The sheriff had finally produced a broad grin that showed off his large, nearly even, coffee-stained tusks.

"If it'll add to your sense of justice, Jimmy, I was a lot happier two days ago."

"That so? Why's that?"

"I wouldn't tell you, boss. You might enjoy yourself. Besides, it's personal."

"That's right, I *am* your boss, and don't forget it."

"Never have...never would."

His square face flushed with rushing blood as he stood up and leaned across the desk on both hands.

"By the way, I liked how you stepped in on your own initiative and figured out the culprit in the Jacobs case. You've got a real detective's nose, Griff...s'pose I'd even have to say a good brain. Think maybe we'd be wasting human resources not to take advantage of it more from now on."

My slow nod of dubious appreciation was thoughtful,

the offer cutting two ways: more work and exertion, but definitely more leeway and challenge ahead.

"All right, I guess this conversation is over. And don't forget I fish with live bait and a bailed reel...and I fry what I catch."

"You mean if they're wire-tagged hatchery," I said, grinning. "I know you wouldn't break the law. My way is better, boss, for the digestion...and the disposition."

He waved me off. "Can't help but like you, Griff, almost as much as your old man, or I'd have fired your ass out of here some time back for insubordination."

"You mean I'm not more valuable than radar yet?" I said over my shoulder as I hot-footed myself out of there.

"Watch it, Griffen...you are dispensable!" he shouted, and then I heard him grousing on the phone again.

In the hall I met a deputy I share a vehicle with when things get a little closer to the edge. Wayne Rickle is a gangly, easygoing, mustachioed fellow who naturally sets Sheriff Brandle off with his droll remarks. The two of us together can send the sheriff into a tailspin, but we try to hold it down. Sheriff Brandle couldn't be the sheriff if he didn't understand that humor is a necessary component of this kind of work, and the tougher things get the more of it that's required. We all know how to be serious. That's as easy as giving up fruitcake on Christmas Day.

"Wayne, how's fishing?"

"Temporarily nonexistent." His boyish blue eyes blinked with exaggerated misery, then he chuckled and scratched over the sleeve of his bony elbow. "Gotta get the house painted before we have the weather down on us."

"Need some help?"

"Nope. Thanks. Almost finished."

"How are Babe and Buttercup?"

His eyes gleamed. "Babe's proud as a strutting peahen. Buttercup just printed her name with a big red crayon."

"No kidding. Man, just yesterday she was the size of a chickadee."

"Come and witness the amazing feat. Drop in any old time. We'll barbecue."

"That I'll do. Say hello to Babe."

"Say hello yourself. Wednesday night next week?"

"Sure, thanks," I said.

It felt good to have an invitation somewhere, since my little sidekick had kicked me out into the cold of solitude. Maybe from Faye's point of view she had a right, but from mine she didn't. Imagining Frank on Faye's doorstep didn't summon up much indulgence, not with my history, but I went right on worrying about her and regretting Frank. It wasn't Faye's fault that my original loyalty remained lodged in a fractured blood pump bound up with fish line.

After I left the Sheriff's office, I drove over to the Bridge Motel. Earlier, the manager had told me Bailey was in number five. I stared at the faded orange door for a while, thinking, then got out of my vehicle and knocked softly, calling her name. Nothing. I trotted over to the office and caught a glimpse of Burnie's shoulder in the back room. He was planted in front of the television, mesmerized by a vacuous afternoon show full of jabbering air-heads lying to each other. Smoke drifted out. I glanced at the key board and stepped around the counter,

reaching for number five.

"You working with the city, Griff? This a raid or something? Got a warrant?" The cigarette voice wheezed.

Burnie had come unglued from the set and grabbed number five with lightning speed surprising for a coffin-dodger.

"Hey, I'm not here on official business, Burnie."

"Oh yeah? Then what kinda business you here on?"

"Just checking up on a sick tourist for a friend." I stuck out my hand. "Something might be wrong in there. Give me the goddamned key, Burnie...please."

After knocking for a while and announcing myself, I unlocked the door. The room was dim, no artificial lights and the blinds zipped down tight. I hesitated, letting my eyes adjust from the bright sunlight outside. A dark figure materialized in the corner, then a strip of light at the blind's edge fell over movement, shiny metal. I focused on that real fast, screwing my eyes down on what closely resembled a .32 caliber menace; it was gewgawed up to look like a harmless piece of jewelry.

She was backed into a corner like it was a familiar place, with the pistol held out in front of her in two shaking hands. The gun was gripped so tight she couldn't possibly have pulled the trigger with any speed or hit anything with very much accuracy. But she'd have hit something.

"Jesus! Point that nail driver somewhere else, Miz Bailey. It's Richard Griffen."

I heard a sobbing gasp of air sucked in, and her hands dropped, the pistol hanging in limp fingers.

I walked over and took the pearl-handled trinket out of her hand, snapped the safety, and dropped it into my

pocket. Then I flipped the blinds. The light hurt her eyes, falling over a ghostly white face that looked like it had passed into limbo with hell on the way.

"Skulking in the dark hugging a Saturday-night special isn't exactly my idea of a vacation, Miz Bailey."

Her voice was different, higher but cold and tight with fear: "I didn't know you were a policeman."

"County deputy. I'm not here on my own business. I'm here on yours. Remember?"

"You mean...the house?"

"That's right." Avoiding the bed, I lowered myself onto a squat old armchair reupholstered in wine corduroy.

She eased her slight body by me and sat on the edge of the bed, her back ramrod straight and her hands, on either side of her black-slacked thighs, clutching at the flowered spread. She was terrified of our closed-in proximity.

I thought I would just continue on in a warm friendly manner until I found out why such a strikingly beautiful example of the opposite gender wasn't out laughing and playing in the autumn sun with some lucky bastard at her side, why this small-boned, pale-skinned, delicate female animal, who probably hated guns, was sitting all alone in a dark motel room with a cheap pistol aimed at the door.

She glanced at me and across the room, then opened her clenched fingers and touched the side of her hand to the tip of her slender nose. "The gun...am I in trouble?" Her voice wavered up an octave, pitiful and effective.

"Why?...for defending yourself?" I pulled out the weapon. "You have a permit for this little remedy?"

"No."

"But you were just about to get one...remember?"

This time she fingered back a sliding shock of pale

satin hair and looked at me with a wary searching gaze, the amber eyes settling on my offer of a friendly face.

"Why don't I call Ed Rainer and see if he wants to talk about his house. Then you can vacate this black hole for awhile...fresh air...scenery. Okay?"

She nodded with what I decided was a small sign of relief.

I reached Ed's cellular from her room, then took her over to the county parking lot. I checked for busybodies before we exited the deputy car and got into my rig.

"There's just one more thing I have to do...run up to my place and shed this constabulary khaki." I shot her a casual look. "You can wait on my deck. All right?"

As I was tucking my brown plaid shirt into my jeans, I heard Kim Bailey give a startled cry from my den.

"You have books!"

"I even know how to read!" I called back. "I thought you were waiting on the deck."

"Gee whiz! *Life on the Mississippi, A Sand County Almanac, Silent Spring, The Well-tempered Angler, Zane Grey's Tales of Fresh Water Fishing...Hanta Yo* -- that's a wonderful book --, oh, way back to *The Compleat Angler*, and lots of Graham Greene. Hmm, fish, fish, fish. Oh, my God! Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* and even Eudora Welty and --"

"Hey, I know what I've got there," I called, lacing up my canvas deck shoes.

"You're an Ivy Leaguer, aren't you?" I said, coming up behind her as she went on reading off my titles in a carefully enunciated, well-acquainted voice. "One of the

chosen few who went off to...where?"

"Barnard...on a partial scholarship."

"Who went off to Barnard, and after just four years nobody could tell you anything you didn't already know."

An involuntary smile appeared, this time without any certain purpose. "You're a little over-sensitive, aren't you? I was just enjoying finding some of my old friends."

"In a cave man's den, no less."

"I've known you weren't a Neanderthal ever since I heard you talking on that boat, Mr. Griffen. The fetching down-home delivery notwithstanding." She was staring.

"Did anyone ever mention that you look a lot like--"

"Joel McCrea? Yes, they did." Memory jabbed at me. Betty used to tease me with that same notion. I never liked being compared to anyone, especially an actor, even one as naturally home-spun as Joel McCrea. I preferred being just my singular self, sort of one-of-a-kind and incomparable.

"Well, you do, quiet a bit...just the way he looked in that old '40s film *Sullivan's Travels*. You know it? Kind of amusing...with that small pretty actress, Veronica Lake."

"Okay. Need to locate my dog. Coming?"

Standing on the end of the veranda, I called for Belle. She raced up with wild tail and backside going crazy, thomped over the deck, and skidded to a stop in front of Kim Bailey. Ms. Bailey knelt down and put her fingers around Belle's neck, lifting her collar and scratching underneath, where it felt so good. Belle turned her head, licking the soothing fingers and smiling at her new friend, then putting her nose straight forward and waiting stock-still for more.

"You have a dog?" I asked, taking my foot down off the bottom railing and patting Belle.

She stood up, brushed her hands over the arms of her black turtleneck, and said, "I used to...on the farm...a Jack Russell terrier."

"You a farm girl?" My voice climbed in surprise.

Her short-lived laughter rose up and spiraled down, almost as giggling-shy as a teen-ager.

"See now...you can read and I can ride a horse. How about that, Mr. Griffen?"

"The road to Agness is pretty good, actually," I said, slowing my rig and easing over some torn-up pavement. "A few rough places...a few cave-ins from rain."

Kim Bailey turned around and stared past the gun rack at Belle looking intently through the window at us. She muttered something softly under her breath.

"Ma'am?"

"I said she probably doesn't enjoy giving up her seat here beside you.

"And could you please not call me ma'am, please? It makes me feel about a hundred years old."

"Sure...it's just the way I was brought up. I'll try and stop that, Miz Bailey."

"Or *Miz Bailey* either."

"What then?"

"Just Kim."

"Then it's Griff."

I reached under my seat, came up with a tape and stuck it in my well-used tape deck.

Below the road the river was sparkling through the

manzanita and fragrant myrtles, winking and burbling over riffles. I was wondering just where the steelhead were playing today. Down there in the green lies where I should be, not up here getting myself into some kind of trouble, the kind that could become necessary.

"Doc Watson," Kim said in a whispery voice.

I glanced over at her straight-ahead profile half hidden by the dark glasses, a scarf over her hair, looking sometimes out the open window or at Belle, but not at me.

"Doc on his magic twelve-string with his son, the late Merle Watson playing the banjo. Imagine how a loving father misses a dead son...then imagine a blind musician missing an adult dead son...one with so much talent." Doc Watson's soulful voice was painting a picture of *Omie Wise* clear as the leaf-swirling road ahead. A sad river ballad of a faithless lover who drowns his pregnant sweetheart.

My throat tightened up as the song flowed to its bittersweet end. I turned to Kim and saw her struggling with emotion, glasses off, head dropped over her lap.

"Jesus...a bad idea," I muttered to myself.

I flipped the tape out, tossed it under my seat, and stopped my rig. There wasn't much road shoulder.

"Sorry. You...want to talk?"

She looked up and stared around her with a dazed expression. "What? No. I...the song...sad...beautiful."

Swinging open my door, I stood up and slid my fingers into my pocket for a handkerchief. I shoved it at her.

"It's clean."

"Nobody carries a handkerchief anymore...do they?"

"I do."

"Don't tell me. I know." Her starved lungs sucked in a gasp of air. "It's the way you were brought up."

"They come in handy."

"This one did, anyway," she agreed, wiping her eyes.

She had no make-up on so the tears didn't make much of a mess, just red eyes.

"How long before we get to the house?" she asked, blowing her testy little nose into my handkerchief.

To reach Ed's hideaway you had to either descend on foot from the driveway or ascend that way from the river. The path down was made of round chunks of wood sliced from good-sized fallen trees, their ringed hearts dropping in a staggered diagonal to his garden and hillside structure. The thick-sawed guiding circles were lined all the way by ferns and manzanita and huckleberry bushes. Ed was standing hunched over crutches up on his stained brown deck.

Belle, sniffing hard, took off immediately, hoping to find Ed's Russian Blue cat in an accessible spot, but I could see E.A. Poe through the glass, safely sprawled high up on the fireplace mantel, his tail slowly twitching.

"Well, here comes the rogue of the Rogue. Nice to see you, Griff." He balanced on his crutches with his legs bent and stuck out his hand, then offered it to Kim. "And this must be Miss Bailey. Come on in, folks. Got some coffee, or tea if you like."

We walked in and Kim glanced around the open rooms, the largest space brightened by a river-facing skylight where no storm-tossed trees could fall on it. Plants in all sizes hung from the walls and ceilings and were spread around the other windows and the floor and outside across the deck.

"It's like the Garden of Eden."

"Ah, perhaps you're my muse...arrived too damn late to be of any use," Ed said, giving her an appraising eye.

Kim looked at me.

"Ed's a poet," I said. "A real one -- his stuff doesn't rhyme." I was chuckling. "A very good one."

"That's wonderful. Mr. Griffen's read your work?"

"You'll have to ask him. He has autographed copies."

"Mr. Griffen can even recite from them," I said, "especially the poem with the steelhead in it."

"You know of course that Griff is a steelhead fly-fisherman par excellence, Miss Bailey? Around here for some folks that's better than God."

"Don't confuse her, Ed. She thinks I'm the devil."

Kim's expression flattened. "Do you...I suppose you do expect me to keep all this greenery in working condition."

"Just alive would be sufficient...but I don't know that I'm going to let you do anything yet." Ed's mild voice was apologetic. He ran his fingers through an unruly shock of white hair and raised his snowy eyebrows in careful scrutiny of his potential renter's face. "How long have you known Griff?"

Kim shot me a worried look, begging support, getting no show of it, and answering with measured voice.

"We've just met...a few days ago."

It was the truth. So far I had nothing to add.

"Well, I think I've got some fairly straight questions for you, Miss Bailey."

"Please go ahead," she said with an unhappy smile.

"Where have you been living?"

"I...up north."

"But where?"

Kim was silent. I went over and began petting E.A. Poe. Belle, who was sitting outside on the deck, barked through the window then bounced up and down and whined. "Sit down and be quiet, Belle!" I called.

"Have you any references?"

Now I saw a frantic expression come into her eyes, a rising fear that she was inviting refusal. As she realized the position she was in, her voice grew defiant.

"Yes, Mr. Rainer, I have good references, lots of them...from...from the family that raised me and brought me up to respect other people's property," She flashed me an unmistakable look of complicity which I rejected. Still leaning against the corner of the mantel overtly devoting myself to E.A., I picked up his velvety front paws one at a time and stroked the soft leathery pads. "to...to longtime friends and associates who would certainly vouch for my...my--"

"Integrity," I said.

Now I was getting daggers.

"Well, then...fine," Ed said more benignly.

"But I can't give you any of them, Mr. Rainer. If I do I'll be found. I can't be found right now. That would explain why I want to live in your home for a while."

"But it doesn't explain much else," Ed said, not surprisingly with a cooling voice.

"I haven't broken any laws, Mr. Rainer. I just...just can't be found."

"I've no idea of your situation, Miss Bailey, therefore you'll forgive me if I sound pretty damn selfish, but if you are found what can I expect to happen to my house?"

"I...I won't be...can't be...won't be."

"I'm sorry, but--"

"Please...what if Mr. Griffen came and checked up on me from time to time. He could -- couldn't he? -- tell you what a good job I'm doing."

"Well, Griff's a busy man. He has his own obligations. I can't expect him to police my house in his spare time."

It was supposed to be time for me to show my support, but I was still standing there playing with E.A.'s restless tail and wondering how the hell all this accountability happened to be landing in my net. I supposed some of the blame could accrue to me since I brought the unknown entity Kim Bailey into Ed's house, but I was damned if I was going to take responsibility for someone on the lam from God knows what -- most likely an irate husband or a pissed off boyfriend.

"Excuse me, Ed, could I just step outside with Miz Bailey here a minute?"

I took her by the elbow, propelled her outside, and walked her to the other end of the deck.

"Sit, Belle!" I barked at my ecstatic dog as I loosed my annoyance on Kim.

"How the hell do you expect anyone to rent you a house with the kind of information you're doling out?"

A wildly nervous gesture sent her hand sliding over the weathered two-by-four railing, and I watched amazed as pain flamed up in her blinking eyes. Blood was trickling from her palm where a long splinter had impaled itself.

"For God's sake!"

I grabbed her hand and jerked the splinter out while she stifled a yelp, then I pulled out the handkerchief she had blown her nose in and pressed it against the wound.

For a long moment, her eyes looked straight into mine, and I could see way down at the bottom a struggling life trapped and slowly drowning in a black well. I watched her quivering wet mouth begin to shape a desperate plea as though her head were barely above water: "I want to live."

"What the...you want to--"

"I want to *live*...they want to kill me...I want to live. I haven't done anything...nothing...but I know things."

Shit! my brain hollered in a dead silence.

"So, how many applicants do you have ready to rent this place...for as long as it takes you to recover this winter?" I asked Ed Rainer.

"None...I'd agree to," Ed answered, thumbing a drip of coffee from his bottom lip with the mug still in his hand. We were sitting at his hand-constructed kitchen table.

Kim was on the deck, trying to feed a tame squirrel that even with its small brain was not stupid enough to get near Belle. I had warned Kim to stay out there while I did some repair work of my own -- Ed, in possession of plenty of first-aid supplies, had taped a plaster over her left palm.

"This woman...boy, I don't know, Griff. What kind of trip is she on, anyway?" His pale gray eyes held me.

"I think she herself is pretty harmless, Ed. I think she means to be responsible. As for the rest, I don't know much either." I felt a little anxious because I had omitted my vague new awareness of the dark force that drove Kim to attempt invisibility, the severity of her situation.

"I've got more surgery to worry about. Can't spend

too much time thinking about this place. It's all I've got. Memories of my life in other places...people I've known, my poetry...and this." He waved his arms around him. "My cat."

"Miz Bailey likes animals."

"This kind of loneliness...it takes a special breed. Isn't good at all for a sad person...somebody used to bodies and human noise."

"Well, I always intended to check up on her, Ed. You know I keep my eye on things." We sat in silence a few minutes, then I said, "I think inside that slip of a body there's some manner of toughness, capability...or she wouldn't have gotten this far."

"Oh, hell, let her try it then. Tell her to come in here and I'll explain some things she needs to know."

After we wound up our business, Ed took Kim aside and said in audible mock secrecy, "You know this guy always puts his steelhead catches back in the river. But if he ever gives you a little tagged jack for your supper, consider yourself one of the chosen."

I laughed, and Kim's curving mouth sent me that small reward.

"You don't need this, Griffish...a wild bird gets you in some hitter's cross hairs? No way do you need this."

Keet was up on his big palomino stallion, Chaser, tossing a short lariat into the air in lazy buzzard circles.

I jumped off the top rail, deflecting to the outside of his corral and heading for my rig. "Get down off that expense account and let's go fishing," I called over my

shoulder.

I'm the one who encouraged Keet to fly-fish. It suited his reflective moods, and there was no serious competition there, the kind that might be left over from his rodeo days. I liked that; it meant he was a happy angler. He doesn't go a little crazy the way I do, but he does give the sport his undivided attention while he's at it, and he uses more gadgets than a purist like myself would ever care to play with...knot tyers.

Mid-stream in our waders, no more than a riffle, run, and pool-span away from one another we fished in silence, awareness of each other tucked away in an unobtrusive pocket. Time was locked in the play of fish and line and fly, the nature of shifting wind and light-chipped water, a wily river surface concealing all the proving obstacles that were always in the flux of change.

With the same kind of instinctual flash that sends the steelhead back home, I suddenly knew that Keet would raise a fish. I looked up to watch him side-cast in a crossing breeze, the tight loop reversing, singing forward, and dropping over a slick. He had a strike almost immediately, probably a seven pounder. A sparkle of silver powering up in a boil of foam, the caudal fin flipping in a vertical dance, then running full-bore on a six-pound test leader and taking a few bows. *One, two, three, four! Dance with me!* I laughed with the wonder of it, and that included wondering at my own fresh amazement every single time it happened. The fish worked Keet for five or six minutes, fandangoing its way to the head of the class, then he reeled in and lovingly sent his exhausted graduate back out

to play.

He sat on the gravel bank of a gentle inside curve, watching me. I knew he was wishing for the cigarette he had lately been denying himself. The even gray sky knotted up in protest at the way the earth was spinning, and I heard a distant rumble of anger, then down came big slopping drops.

"Hey pardner, is this part any fun, or am I just getting old?" Keet called.

I pulled my crushed-up bucket hat out of a vest pocket and fitted it tightly on my head, but a side wind was directing water down my neck. This was certainly the norm, or something like it, for steelhead fishing. I had raised three high-spirited fish, successfully concluded two of the strikes, and I wanted to keep going -- the habit of treating adverse weather as a contest of endurance now had a second purpose, diverting my troubled mind -- but Keet was hungry.

"This stuff is just passing through," I tried, watching rain circles spread over a slick, and knowing I had the wrong argument. Keet was no softy, just stubborn when his mind was fixed on something basic like food.

"Good, then we'll be able to sit out on my deck and wolf some red trout."

Behind Keet's house -- a noble-faced, gray-framed old saltbox nestled against a hill -- there was a low deck big enough for a good-sized party. I'd seen it that way too many times, crowded to the rails with fancy, gaffing dudes drinking iced beer. In the middle of one end of the deck was a stone-edged fire pit banked with sand. Keet and I

had been sitting there for a while, our bodies snuggled up to the wind-whipped flames, our bellies sloshing with beer, telling fish tales under a crisp twilight sky of fast-moving clouds and slow-moving stars.

When the hot alder burned low, Keet brought out a broad Chinook filet and threaded three long flat sticks through the rosy flesh. Then he jabbed the long ends of the sticks into the sand, angling the salmon over the crackled orange logs. This was done with a quiet finesse, effortless second nature, hands graceful and quick, fire-lit eyes already visualizing the result. His eyes were smiling, his mouth curling up at the corners, maybe not even thinking of the fish, but of the credit swell on his accounting books, or the butterscotch fingernail moon slipping out of the clouds, or maybe even of some particular woman's buttocks bouncing in the saddle on one of his trail-ride hacks. He glanced up at my inquisitive eyes and said, "I was thinking about the time a couple of juveniles stole a goat from a redneck wife beater up near Bandon...traded it to an itinerant gypsy for a jug of homemade applejack that tasted like goat piss."

"But we drank every puking drop," I said, easily recalling our blissful misery.

He pulled out his pocket knife and slashed a branch from the gnarled rosemary bush growing below the deck, dipped the branch in an old galvanized bucket of fresh water, and laid the dripping rosemary over a glowing slab of alder. The spiky dark leaves sizzled and curled to white ash as the herbed smoke and steam coiled up, caught the wind, and swirled around the salmon in a melding of delicate aromas.

"God, I'm sated," I said, patting my stomach.

We were indoors with our feet up on the raised stone hearth. Keet had fixed the place up a little when he started attracting city folk. Nothing fancy. Just cozy, well-used, and friendly, with giant sagging pieces of overstuffed furniture, a glass-topped, elk-rack coffee table, a few framed Remington prints, and some photographs mostly of the back country. I liked the ones of Keet high-handing broncs, calf-roping, and somersaulting through the air above a big mean Brahma, his tooled leather chaps flapping like butterfly wings. There was also a wall of ribbons, and shelves of trophies that Keet's office girl kept shined and dusted.

A late night soberness was settling over me in spite of the beer. Keet had poured the last cans into iced glasses.

"You think I'm a selfish son of a bitch, Keet?"

"She said that?"

"Not exactly, but it was strongly implied. Ah, Faye," I lamented and sighed.

"Marriage, huh?"

"You sure got that in a hurry, cowboy."

"That's an easy one."

"Marriage...an easy batch of paperwork that fills up years with...misery?...once in a while bliss. I ended up with both. They say a pessimist is a married optimist."

"Sometimes it works."

"For that and Frank Campbell, sweet sassy little Faye deep-sixed me, Keet...deep-sixed me on her way to Davy's locker as fish food. She didn't even fish with *me*. Great, huh? The horse died under me, and I hardly noticed."

Keet slapped his knee and shook his head laughing. "Hey, Griffish, isn't there some rule there about mixing your fin and cayuse?" Still chuckling but in a heated sweat, he tore off his leather vest and tossed it on a chair, then rolled up the sleeves of his red plaid shirt.

"Mixed metaphor? Why not? Half of the works is a metaphor for the rest. Pile it on. At least you and I can stand up on our hind legs and give the cerebral cortex a workout -- for a sorry heap of humanity that's Mount Everest. As for metaphor...you are one, Keet...a beaut."

"Yeah right. I learned about it the same way you did. Remember?...in Miz Bailey's fifth grade class. I thought at the time it might come in handy some day."

"Miz Bailey? Was her name Miz Bailey? Yeah, I guess it was." Silence. "I didn't need to be reminded."

"About what?"

Keet threw a pine log on the dying fire. It immediately snapped and sparked at us. Sweating, too, I moved to the sofa and lay with my arms behind my head.

"Kim Bailey. That's what she calls herself...an assumed name for sure."

"Her real name is trouble, Griffish. Big trouble. What kinda low-life scum is after her, anyway?"

"She won't say...so far. She's all alone up there. I loaned her a cell phone and had her memorize a bunch of numbers that'll get me most of the time."

"Boy, you really like to mix in it."

"Well, I kind of promised Ed."

"Uh-huh."

I sat up and looked over at Keet. He was running his fingers through his black hair, and his smoothly weathered round face was entirely recast in a large worried frown.

His intelligent jet eyes flashed me a long complicated message of censure and concern without accompanying words.

I decided to push it a little further.

"Kim mentioned that she used to ride a horse. She's feeling pretty low, Keet. If I brought her around here for a little canter, how would you treat her?"

Keet stood up, then walked over and looked down at me for several seconds. He gave a disgusted sigh and flung himself into a spacious nearby chair covered in the same distressed brown leather as the sofa.

"You have to ask? Don't you know yet? Same way I treat all women. Like I'm up for sainthood."

"Your mother was a jewel, Keet...the way she brought you up."

"Yeah, my mama was a jewel...a Jewish jewel."

"You're kidding."

I tried to get a look at his eyes but he was rubbing them, his large head lowered in thought, the thick raven hair loose on top but the longer hair below twisted into a very short looped braid at the base of his powerful neck. He stroked his face and slid his hands inside his open shirt, resting them flattened below opposite shoulders.

"No I'm not kidding. My mother was a New York Jew."

"Ah, so that's what that cute little accent was. Somehow my mind just couldn't make the connection. Now I hear it perfectly. Must be a real interesting story."

"I think so."

"How come, all this time, you never told me?"

"Heck, I thought it was obvious. Anyway, you never asked, captain. You tell so many whoppers on the river I imagine you'd appreciate a true story for a change."

"Hold it there...I try to give people a little honest

history. So once in a while it sprouts wings," I said, looking around for my beer glass.

"You still wanta hear my mama's story?" Keet asked, walking out to his refrigerator and back. He tossed me another can of beer as he crossed the room.

"I'm waiting. It's *your* story, isn't it?"

I opened the exploding can and poured. The foam went over the glass top. "You beat up this beer, Keets old boy. Now it's on your coffee table." He paid no attention.

Keet has such an easygoing disposition that even in his version of an agitated mental state he almost never shows any physical signs of it, unless he's really fired up. That's why I was surprised to see him pacing. Then he stopped. He folded his big-muscled arms over his barrel chest and leaned against the wall across from me.

"Before I get started with *my* story, I think I'll just change my mind and say something about yours, and that'll be it. Probably...no, for damn certain, it's none of my business...but it's something bigger...my conscience. So just give a listen like it was bullet breeze whistling past your deputy ears.

"When women look at you, and they do, they see a good hunk of man, but they don't know the half of it. Faye does, and, if that's the way she wants it, it's her loss. Maybe it's just her clock ticking. Hey, buddy, if you can help your little fugitive without getting involved, great, but I sure as hell doubt it. You want some tailspin just drop by here on a Saturday morning when the clean wholesome wannabe cowgirls line up at the corral looking for the Old West -- for most of them the Old West is my young wranglers in tight jeans. It's just one big happy hayride around here...so damn much activity I can hardly keep my guides in

their saddles. If you don't go for that, you could easily find something top of the line elsewhere, Griffish...if you weren't thinking so hard about what's gone. Policing this county is one thing, man, but hanging around holding some poor unfortunate's hand while she waits for a hit man to blow in and blow out her brains is something entirely else. Suicide comes to mind." For emphasis, he leaned over me with his hands in his back pockets. "Okay, I'm through."

I don't remember Keet ever talking that long and serious in one stretch about my personal situation, not even when he was helping me sober up.

"So now about my mother. It begins with my father...as my mama told it. He was a big Siletz, not bad looking -- carried a little raindrop of foreign blood from some Scot bushwhacker in the smoky past -- with intelligent brown eyes, even white teeth, and giant beat-up hands. I remember those hands. I came to believe there was nothing they couldn't do. First glance, they looked clumsy, like clubs, only good for punching holes in things. But those patient fingers could thread a tiny silver needle or tie a ribbon in my mama's hair. Papa loved her long wild hair, thick and dark with fiery red glints.

"My daddy's tribal name was Follows Sun, Sun Foot, but everyone called him Jack or Big Jack. My grandma said when he took his first steps he toddled straight over to a yellow strip of sunlight and held his hands up, reaching for the golden dust motes. He came into the world owning nothing and grew with no idea of owning anything...until he learned what had been taken away from his own. Then he worked as many jobs as he could stand, hauling garbage,

hauling scrap metal, pruning trees, switching for the railroad. Finally he farmed for an old white woman whose husband had died and left her with eight hundred acres to till and plant. He did nothing but torque up his body in hard labor, nearly as I can tell, until he was thirty-two. The old woman -- for sure you know about her: Lottie Brown -- had one son, a spoiled brat who hated farming and ran off at sixteen. Didn't matter; she loved the worthless shit...as mothers will do. She was dying, and seeing how my dad had put his soul into the place and made it sing, she sold it to him for all the money he'd saved. Shrewd Lottie put the money into a trust for her son, then she took herself off to a nursing home and died in a handful of days. Papa respectfully buried her, with a granite head stone...had enough pretty white words on it for a peaceful rest.

"But there'd be no peace for Follows Sun, no fruits of his labor, no soul feeding on the land -- the land he'd bought had actually belonged to the Siletz...as much as they figured it belonged to anyone. All the land hereabouts held the mark of their feet and the bones of our people. It was twice paid for when he held the title in his big sore fist.

"Papa, who had never celebrated anything but sunlight, decided to give thanks...had himself a few nightly swigs of white man's poison and an on-and-off powwow around a bonfire of his very own orchard prunings. He was Follows Sun, singing in a high state of hoopla, trodding the sweet sod of his ancestors. At last he was ready to live flat out.

"Somehow the snake heard about his mother's death, and slithered back...conveniently right after the granite stone

was planted. But there was no home, just money in the bank, to be doled out slowly enough to keep it from all being flushed at once. The rotter talked to the trustee, trying for a total windfall. No dice. He talked to his mother's attorney, who showed him iron-clad proof of a square deal. Then he went ape. His poor mother was out of her mind he shouted at every pair of ears he came across. At his low level of air intake, he naturally stumbled onto a shiftless little band of no-account malcontents ready to help him drink up the first installment of his allowance. In no time, amidst all the swagger and vomit, they were beating their chests and sniffing around for the enemy. Of course it was that son of a bitch Indian con man, way too big for his jeans. Well hell, they'd fix that. First, they tried intimidation: screaming profanity, stoning the house, and some time later attempting to burn the barn in the coward's black cover of night. When none of that phased papa, who'd been expecting it, the rotter decided he needed real clout. He set about identifying some more respectable Indian haters. There were plenty of those in the woodwork.

"By singing and dancing solo around his bonfire in thankfulness -- news got around that there'd been a wild Indian orgy over at the old Brown place -- Follows Sun had innocently speeded the cause of the new enlistees and sealed his fate: the worthy act of ridding the vicinity of a crazy Indian. After all, what was the country coming to when a drunk Indian could steal eight hundred acres from a poor widow too demented with grief to know what the hell she was doing? The rotter and his cohorts bent the sheriff's ear, and he and his deputy showed up with a fistful of papers that allowed them to haul papa off to a

lunatic asylum for observation. Follows Sun saw the way things were going to turn out. Furious and fast as a bursting dam, he knocked their two heads together and hit the road with nothing but the clothes on his frame. It was his sickened heart on the rampage that drove him all the way to the East Coast. There he vanished into the underside of New York City.

"The reward of his life's work was gone; he had to scrounge, doing hard stints of the kind of labor nobody wants...until he knew his way around well enough to apply for a job as a cab driver. He showed up in a new suit and offered to drive without pay for two weeks to prove he was the man for the job. They figured hell, they'd get two weeks out of him. He drove for two years. The place where he picked up his custom suit -- nothing ready-made in those days would fit a big guy like my dad -- was the shop of a meticulous, straight-laced Jewish tailor whose daughter helped with the accounts.

"The first time Follows Sun looked into the dancing brown eyes of that pale-skinned little beauty with her full head of flaming auburn hair, he nearly fell to his knees. He started picking her up and driving her to work every morning. Then he was there in the evening, too. When he was free, they sat on my grandfather's Bronx stoop in those humid New York summer nights, papa crouched down like a caged animal, silent and staring at his hands. But Mama gradually pried open his clamped mind...tapped his bitter heart with gentle questions, sometimes her amazing sense of humor...more and more questions. Papa was surprised to find himself answering in longer and longer sentences. One day he looked over at her and saw her eyes full of passionate outrage. Tears. He'd given out the whole

damned story.

They were deep in love. He told her her laughter was like spring bird song and named her Little Red-wing.

"After they were married, and while papa was still driving his cab around New York, mama did something unusual but actually very true to her nature. She drew out all of her savings, accepted the dowry-style money her husband had refused, and left town. She took the train, came out here, quietly installed herself in a room with board, and went to check on the deed. It was still filed in papa's name. Next she hired a lawyer, and when the lawyer verified papa's legal rights, mama took possession of the land and the empty house that had been put up for sale. Her lawyer also got the committal papers thrown out of court; the rotter had been trying to reissue them, but how could a married law abiding citizen who'd been drawing a paycheck for two years be crazy? By the time my sweet-talking mama got through with them, the two knocked-together heads said they were willing to forget the whole thing. When the rotter came around to try and scare mama off, he had to back carefully away from a blazing female war machine waving a shotgun at his vital parts. Mama knew that to keep papa in New York would be like trying to hold a wild seal in a bathtub, but she also knew he'd never let her do what she had in mind, especially since she was carrying me around in my fetal curl at the time, so she'd just left him a note. By the time papa made it out here, he was a reinstated landowner.

"That was some kind of love all right. Never see the like of it again. Not me, not you, old Griffish."

I was still thinking about Keet's story as I drove over to Ed Rainer's place a couple of days later. Keet's early childhood had been a few notches different from mine. I knew some of it. I knew he'd been well loved; it was what made him so valuable. I tried to fix on his experiences, finding it damn near impossible to imagine myself where I'd never been. It rankled to think that his life, not even a fraction of it, could ever really be known by me, just guesses topped off with my own hatch of experiences.

Then there was Kim Bailey, so-called. I wasn't sure I wanted to get inside that head at all, but she didn't have a friend anywhere in sight. She was way too scared to trust anyone, and the law made her real nervous. I pondered that.

She was standing on the deck in a pale blue robe, and holding E.A. Poe, when I came up the path. E.A.'s tail wasn't even twitching he was so content. Finally he was making himself useful. Allowing physical contact when it isn't necessarily the cat's idea is the ultimate sacrifice a cat can make.

"I made coffee. How do you like it?"

"In its natural state, lean and mean. Thanks."

I let my eyes make a quick evaluation, and decided she'd found the right escape. She looked more at ease. Her pale skin was a little flushed, her eyes softer.

She brought a yellow steaming mug out to the deck table, set it down, and twisted the handle toward me. Her nails were trimmed short with neat half moons and no polish.

"I was going to change when you called but, since you were almost here, I thought the coffee was more important.

So if I can just go and...what do you wear fishing anyway?"

"Depends. Stuff we're not wearing today. Just some jeans...a shirt, a sweater..." I looked up at the sky. "A Windbreaker, some kind of hat...in case it rains."

"Where's Belle?"

"Back home on squirrel patrol."

I'd left Belle home with a motive. This would be pleasure for Kim, yes, but also focus time. In a subtle way, I wanted to analyze character and causation, and I wanted Kim to concentrate on me, not my dog.

"I like that dog. I was counting on her as a diversion from my incompetence at fishing."

I took a swallow and leaned back, resting the heel of my tennis shoe on the lowest rail of the deck. "'S okay. I've seen plenty of incompetence...guiding fisher folk. I suppose you know there's a difference between incompetence and not knowing how to do something. Today is just for fun, Kim, and if you learn anything it won't be my fault."

"Oh, but it *will* be your fault. You're the one who knows everything," she said over her shoulder as she went inside to change.

"Wrong," I called back, then shifted my resting leg fast. E.A. had jumped onto my knee and was about to steady himself with four batches of handily extended claws. I unhooked him and held his silky, warm body high in the air. His dangling tail whipped against my arm, and his enlarged black pupils glared back at me with fierce annoyance.

"Can you fix this, Griff?"

My toes were in the water of a usually faithful Rogue feeder stream, my fly was on a downstream riffle, and I was

executing a double spey cast when I looked over at the simple spinning outfit I'd given Kim. Before I handed the rod over, I knew I'd tightened the drag sufficiently for a novice, so I did a double take. Her head was bent over a wad of filament that looked like my mother's forty-year-old string ball collection.

"What the hell is that supposed to be?"

Sunlight darted out from behind a swollen cumulonimbus and spanked her face white. She let go of the mess with one hand and lifted that hand against her cheek to shade the glitter out of her eyes.

"Well, can you fix it?" she demanded with a stubborn belligerence, as if I were the one who created the tangled bird's nest that had her in such a snit.

"Sure," I said, stepping over to her with my dead line dragging the stream.

I slid a clipper out of my vest, snipped off the works, and stuffed it into my pocket.

"Fixed."

"That's kind of a waste, isn't it, Griff?"

"I'll say. Show me what you were doing when you did that. Sorry I wasn't paying attention. See that water ring out there. I was about to hook our supper."

"If I knew what I was doing when I did that I probably wouldn't have done it."

I started to laugh because she had enough of a grin for dimples and she'd punctuated her remark with crossed eyes. Then she was laughing a little, too. A new face.

"Huh, you're a clown, kid. Just uncross your eyes and sit over there on the bank while I catch this trout."

"Please don't patronize me with that condescending verbal pat on the head. Just because--"

"Hey, hold it. Your vocabulary won't get you out of this one. As a fisher person, so far you're a washout. But if you want, you can probably learn. Will you just sit down and be quiet a minute...please, my friend. Because..." I said, in the middle of my cast, "the humor is on me now for that seductive little trout out there...nearly willing to sacrifice itself for your supper...seeing how it's you."

From the corner of my eye I saw her climb up and sit down on a grassy knoll, then drop back with her arms folded under her head, watching me.

"Oh God, Griff, that was beautiful!"

"What?"

"What you did there with your flashy sky whip."

"My...uh-huh...and here comes your rainbow."

"Why take them to your place? Isn't my place closer?"

I was backing my rig past some crumbling old tree stumps and out onto the dirt trail, heading for the gravel road. Looking over my shoulder, I swung us around a small pine and changed gears before I caught her expression, but I heard it in her voice again. Fear.

"Actually, your place isn't closer. But I just like cooking fish on my own turf. Nothing personal." I hoped she understood the emphasis on that last remark.

One hand on the door handle and the other braced on the dash, she tossed her head, tucked her chin, and looked out the window. I was concentrating on reaching the pavement, such as it was, when she finally looked at me.

"You're not...going to try and collect my fingerprints or anything?" She had tried for humor and failed.

As soon as I braked on the shoulder and shut off the

engine, she yanked the door handle and had one foot out.

"Wait a minute! Where you going? Camping? You like cougars and hungry bears? My god, you're a wary one. That was a damn silly remark, Kim. I could nail your history, probably in twenty minutes, but right now I'm not into that. You know how much you just told me with that silly remark?"

"Not much."

"You're not who you say you are. Maybe the police are looking for you...as well as those threatening enemies. You've certainly got me curious about that all right."

She dragged her foot back in and slammed the door. I could hear whispers as she dropped her head into her hands.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Her head lifted and her darkened eyes blazed at me. "I haven't done anything. I just wanted some peace, some quiet...safety...some possible way of... Just my luck that you're a...you're nearly as dangerous as... You could get me killed. Couldn't you just leave me alone? Couldn't you just let me live awhile in peace?"

"I thought I was. I thought that's just what I was doing. What is it, Kim...besides paranoia? Conscience?"

"Conscience? Conscience! Oh my God, conscience! If somebody had one, I wouldn't be here like this. Awhile ago I was going to apologize for being nasty...ungrateful. You've been so amazingly kind. I wondered why...but not for long. It's because I'm a...a *person of interest*."

"You're way too hard on yourself. You won't even allow yourself the possibility of being good company. All I know about you right now is how you act, what you tell me, what I observe. You've got a problem you're not capable of hiding. That tells me you're not a very

hardened criminal."

"Thanks."

"Look, that's enough for now. Let's go cook fish."

Too late I realized I should have gutted my two fish earlier by the stream, and grilled them there. Except that it was getting late, and Kim would have made something out of that, too. I couldn't have known what was coming, but when it was over I wished I could toss it off my back like a bad dream. I wished I could return Kim to a normal happy environment with the same ease that I put a wild steelhead hen back in the river. You held her exhausted head gently upstream and watched her come to life. She'd thank you with a quick flip of her tail and a silver roll as she swam away. I've seen fly-fishermen put their finned honeys back with love words that would have made their wives turn green. But Kim still had the hook in, and there was serious damage.

The rainbows were lying on the tiles next to the kitchen sink. Belle had duly sniffed them and was obediently resting back on her haunches out of the way.

Kim had her arms folded and was leaning against the pine-paneled door of the broom closet, expecting to remain a hands-off observer in the less exciting but necessary phase between catching and eating.

I took off my vest and hung it over a chair, then unbuttoned the cuffs of my flannel shirt and rolled up my sleeves. I looked over at Kim who was obviously counting on nonparticipation.

"You know what? I'm going to let you clean these fish," I said, handing her the fish knife. "From now on the catcher doesn't clean 'em. That'll give you a little incentive to catch a few."

"You mean we're going to do this again?"

"I think so. Possibly many times."

"Well, okay...but be forewarned that I don't remember ever having done this before."

She was grinning, pushing up the sleeves of her navy jersey. At least she was a good sport and not squeamish.

I tore off some paper towels for her, then stood aside as she slid the fish off the counter into the sink. The first thing she did was try to slice off the head. Not necessary, and to me unappetizing. Soon giving up on the wasted effort, she was about to stick the knife into the wrong part of the fish when I stepped behind her and took hold of the hand with the knife in it. I gripped her hand and made one quick long slice from the anal vent to the gills. "Like this," I said as the shallow gash sagged open to the spill of dark red guts.

The next thing I knew she was screaming and fish guts were everywhere, on me, on the wall, on the ceiling, dripping off the blinds above the sink, and on the floor.

"Don't touch me! Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" Kim was shouting with flailing arms.

"Jesus Christ! What on earth?... What the hell happened?" I gaped at the mess, then looked over at Kim, now turned away and sobbing in the corner with her bloody hand clenched against the wall.

The fish was winding down its spin on the linoleum when I spotted it. Belle was standing over it barking as it came to a stop, its loose head dragging along in a

bloody circle.

When I turned around, Kim was crouched on the floor. Her voice was small and whimpery, like a punished child, but wavering close to hysteria.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry...I'm sorry...I'm sorry."

I took wet paper towels and knelt down, wiping the red spatters off her face then her sticky shaking hands. As soon as I finished, she jumped up, heading for the door."

"No!" I barked. "Stop! I won't touch you. I won't touch you again. Just realize I'm not the bad guys. I'm not the bad guys. Understand? Sit over there on that stool while I clean this mess up before it's cement...please."

While I cleaned, she sat staring at the floor, with her hands pressed together between her denim-covered knees. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Occasionally she would sigh and look up vacantly. I knew she was deep inside herself, working at what she would tell me, how she would tell me. I took my time, hoping my preoccupied silence would calm her down enough to open up. I already suspected what I didn't really want to know.

I cleaned myself up in the bathroom, emerged and found Kim in the exact position I'd left her on the couch. I decided to give her her head, the way I handled Little Bit when he needed to work out his complaints.

"Where shall I sit?" I asked.

She pointed to the far end of my long couch, and I sat down turned toward her, then leaned back with my arm propped on the arm rest. For a while we just stared at each other.

"I wish I knew you better, Griff...knew what you'd--"

"Kim, I'll be honest with you. From a personal standpoint, I'm not real excited about getting involved here. But from the standpoint of living with myself as a humane person, damn it, I *am* involved."

She held her hands against her mouth and bit her thumb. "I just don't know why I should tell you anything, Griff."

"Because you're dangerously exposed and alone...because emotionally you're standing on a high ledge and ready for a nose-dive...because I can't help you, try to get you some peace of mind, if I don't know where the bad stuff is coming from. How's that?"

"Very convincing...for an officer of the law."

"Just leave that out of it for now. Try and think of me as a dependable ally, not a threat, because I'm not."

She stood up, folded her arms, and paced in front of the cold fireplace.

"Shall I make a fire?"

"I'm sorry, Griff. You must be really hungry, and I've...I've ruined everything...the fish supper...the--"

"Forget it. You hungry?"

"No, but you can go ahead."

"I can wait."

"Wait for this long, long story?...if I start at the beginning, you'd...I don't really know where to start."

"Just keep talking. You'll get it. Want a little Scotch encouragement?"

"Yes...that'd be nice. How did you know it was Scotch?"

"I just did."

"You like it, too?"

"Sometimes...more often *Wild Turkey*, but I'm not a very heavy drinker anymore," I said as I headed for my liquor cabinet. She followed me into the kitchen when I went for the ice. I caught her looking around.

"You did a good job cleaning up. I...I went crazy, and you want to know why, don't you? I'm really sorry."

I handed her the glass. "Please stop apologizing. You must have a damn good reason. Under normal circumstances, I think you're probably a real level-headed person."

"Funny, you only understand what normal circumstances are when they're gone. There haven't been any for a while."

When we were back on the couch swallowing Scotch, she said, "I'm afraid of what'll happen to me in the telling. Maybe...maybe I'll just come apart. Maybe you'll--"

"If it happens it happens. Might be what you need to do. I'm not worried. The trout are cleaned and in the refrigerator."

She laughed a little but said, "Oh, I dread this."

"I told you I grew up on a farm. It was a nice farm, a truck farm...wonderful vegetables...immaculate, lush fields. My mother taught me to cook. She's a great cook. I can do vegetables first class. I think a long time ago I even cleaned fish...my daddy's fish. I was a happy confident child, a little country-girl shy, but boisterous enough with my pals. I had my horse. I did my chores. I liked school and was a good student. The darkest place was my father's early death. So, I went off to Barnard and met my husband in New York at a weekend house party. By the way, my name is Kimberly Norris, maiden name. My married name was...was Antonio. A big Italian family."

Restaurants. Roberto was...something terrible happened to him. He didn't start out to be a monster. Of course not. How could I ever have married a...? Oh no, he was polite, clean-cut...well, very spoiled, I guess, a little moody...someone with a head full of ideas who wanted to prove that he could make it without much help, but then... How strange it is that people..."

She stopped and stared after Belle who had gotten up and padded out to the kitchen, headed for her water bowl. We heard loud tongue splashings, then Belle trotted back in and put her nose on Kim's lap.

"Good girl. What a good girl." She lifted Belle's black velvet ear and stroked it between her hands, then picked up her Scotch glass and drank a long swallow.

"We decided to start a place in San Francisco, a great restaurant, with wonderful dishes and, of course, superb vegetables. His father did help finance. We found a very creative chef with common sense. That's really a winning combination. It's a difficult, uncertain business...very daunting in a city of great restaurants, but we were both determined, ready to go the whole distance to make it work. I thought it was working, working so beautifully. I rushed around with my head in the business, fretting over cucumbers and asparagus...also getting involved in community things. I never even saw it coming. I would come in on weekends and play my guitar and sing folk ballads for the patrons -- I'd been singing all my life. Nimble and confident me, perched on my spotlight stool...looking so sophisticated, smiling and plucking my strings...sending adoring glances to my husband as he passed through on his way to...to where? To hell. To poker games, that turned into heavy gambling, that turned

into big debts, that turned into an evil that doesn't go away once its hand is in the till. So...so, can you guess what happened next?"

"The drug market?"

"Yes, how very perceptive of you." Her sad eyes were leveled on me, glowing chestnut in the evening light.

"Well, not so hard to figure. It's a quick fix for the desperate...fast money...lots of it."

"Lots of filthy, filthy money laundered through our stillborn culinary dream: *Lo Mejor del Mundo*."

"The deeper Roberto sank into it, the more vodka he secretly drank. Then the drugs. It was the...the carefully hidden tracks on his arm that first sent me into a spin. Can you imagine how trusting...how childishly blind and stupid I was? I, with my strophes of poetry and arrogant appreciation of James Joyce, couldn't see my own husband crumbling away. By then our accounts were completely irreversibly screwed. The cartel was into us big time. The restaurant was failing. The chef, far more perceptive than the dreamy mooncalf strumming her guitar, got himself out of it fast. So you see I'm not so level-headed."

"We can all tell tales about what life did to us."

"The postmistress said you lived...alone. It seems so unlikely...but you wouldn't have let me come here. When I think of it, I'm astonished at what fear has made me do."

"Let's keep you talking about what needs to be said."

"It's getting more difficult. I don't want to change your opinion of the wholesome...the innocent country girl. I don't want to see your face...not when I tell you--"

"Come on Kim. I'm not judging you."

"Maybe you will...probably..."

"This is where I get confused about what to say first. Roberto fired the manager, who was fed up, and was pressed to hire someone from the outer echelons of the cartel -- unbeknownst to me. The man would stand and watch me sing, in a way that I now think of as...as... Oh God...oh God.

"When things started to...to come apart, I hung up my guitar, stopped my very important search for peak produce, curtailed all my social projects, and tried to pitch in to straighten things out. I was so out of it, I imagined we had overbought and overpaid. I was trying to get Roberto to face things. I begged him to go to counseling...AA. I still had no idea of any of it. One evening I walked into his office. He was high and with a waitress in a very compromising and, to me, very sad, very disgusting...it was so... I...I quietly closed the door and went off to vomit my dinner. The new manager began to take my side against Roberto...a part of the hideous evil itself scheming to win me over, continually offering his perverted sympathetic shoulder which I continually rebuffed. When he realized he was getting nowhere, he told me something that turned me to stone where I stood. 'Rob wants it,' he said. 'Rob wants you to be nice to me. I can help. I can keep him alive. Otherwise, he's a dead man.' I walked out of the restaurant and swore I'd never set foot in it again. I filed for divorce, and was naive enough to believe that was the end of it. But I knew too much. I left our far too expensive San Francisco home and everything in it...went to stay with my mother on the farm near Sacramento. I lost all interest in material things...trying to get back inside the skin of my childhood. I wanted to shed layers and layers of living until I was just mama's child. All I wanted to do was stare at grass blades...let the sun burn

me clean. But...but..."

She looked over at me quickly and then away. Her eyes were liquid brown grief, her face contorted in misery. I thought about holding her, but I didn't move or speak. I thought I knew what she had to say, and that she wouldn't say it if I did anything. I waited.

"However twisted up, Roberto still knew what divorce meant. It wasn't just the cartel. There was the crime. The feds had wire-tapped. They were on the move. A wife couldn't destroy her husband. By that time I knew a lot of things, names, places, amounts, visual identification of everybody who'd ever set foot in our restaurant...and they set foot in a lot of restaurants. I knew because my husband filled in all the gaps. Before I ran off to the farm, he and the manager had made me sit and listen. Roberto pretended that he was confessing to me, but he only wanted to make me vulnerable so he could use me as a bargaining chip for his own safety. Isn't that too convoluted? Can you imagine anything that kinky? Can you imagine anything that...that...? Can you? What kind of brain...? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but absolute knowledge is the end of existence. The manager certainly had his own motives. Roberto was promised a way out of the country if he helped them, if he told them where I was...if he...if he gave me to them. He called me at the farm and begged for his life, and I lied and said I'd stop the divorce, but I didn't. I knew it wouldn't stop them, but even when they came...when they came to get me I lied about it. I thought it might help somehow. That's what I thought."

She laughed, a peculiar strained titter of sound that wasn't laughter but renewed shock, and pain.

"I was...was standing on my mother's deck in the sun, husking corn. She'd gone to the grocery store for ice cream and root beer. We were going to make root beer floats -- I used to love them. I was daydreaming about when my father was alive. I picked up the knife to cut off a cob end. For an odd moment, I forgot, thought the moving shadow was my father. Hands reached around me...fingers tightening on my wrists. My knife hand was forced up to my throat and--"

"Jesus, I'm sorry! My God, Kim."

"Oh, but that was only the beginning...only the very beginning. They held a gun to my head while I wrote -- I've never had a gun that close; it's hard to write, and the more I shook the harder they pressed it to my temple, until I wasn't shaking at all. I wrote a tender apology to my mother about having to run off and take care of a suddenly ill and hospitalized Roberto. They took me to some place. I don't remember where because they stuck a needle in me. They had to beat me to make me obedient...and succeeded. But then the manager came to rescue, *rescue* me...angry at them, posing as my savior. Drugged, nearly brain-dead, I stumbled into his arms like a trampled puppy. Do you know where he took me? Back to my very own husband and home in San Francisco. Until-Death-Do-Us-Part in one bedroom cracked out of his mind, me in another with the kindly manager and two other men who...who...men who...who...not really men...demanding, demanding...demanding... I wasn't even there, not me, not me with those...those...those--"

"Okay, Kim. Okay, okay! That's it. That's enough."

"Don't you want to hear how I got away? They were going to kill me, but I got away. Oh, I'm so clever,

really clever. See, the mistake was putting me in my own house. The fools put me in my own house. I was clever...I was clever...I was so clever. Don't you want to hear how I--"

I was down at the other end of my couch before I knew anything, but then I didn't know what to do with my hands, my murderous, threatening hands.

"May I hold you? May I hold you...or no...can I? For God's sake, what can I do? Let me hold you."

"No! No! No, you cannot! Oh, you can't hold me! Hold who? Who am I going to be now?...for how long? A doctor said I was fine. I laughed at that. Yes...yes..."

"Does that mean yes?...yes for me to touch you? It's just...you need to be held, and I'm the only one here."

I'd held a body numb and lifeless, then put her to bed in my spare room, with a glass of warm milk. I walked into my kitchen and stood there rubbing my eyes. My stomach was empty, but I wasn't all that hungry. The way I did it was just a mechanical operation, while I was thinking about the last things she'd said. I threw the poor disgraced trout into a frying pan, sat down at the kitchen table, and ate it out of the hot pan as it rested on a singed potholder.

Belle had decided to lie outside Kim's door in a kind of dog-wise guard duty, but it was probably mostly just those tender caressing fingers she was waiting for.

I couldn't merely drive Kim back up into the woods and dump her off alone after what she'd been through. I felt so sorry for her that I could hardly stand it. Her beautiful haggard frame. The blush of youth wasn't even off her skin. There was murder in my heart. I had tried

to comfort her, fairly amazed that my feeble attempt was even allowed. But now this wounded soul was in my spare bedroom. When I'd gone in to hand her one of my pajama tops, she was sitting on the foot of the bed staring into space. She could just as well have been sitting in my tool shed for all she knew.

"The feds warehoused Roberto in rehab with twenty-four-hour security. Someone told me he'd...OD'd."

"What? You mean...?"

"Yes...dead. Oh God...oh God. You can just imagine how he got that way, can't you?"

"You think they got to him?"

"They must have gotten to him. When there's that much at stake they always get to you. I'm supposed to be dead."

"You can't think that way, Kim."

"I have to, or I wouldn't be here. They'd want me to step forward, lay my neck on the block and testify. Then, if I survive that, they'll put me into a witness protection program where the cartel contractors can snuff me out while I'm walking around with no identity. No thanks."

"You've certainly got it down."

"That's what happens when paranoia turns into reality."

"Maybe they'll find someone else to testify, if they think you're...if they can't find you."

"Oh, that's a nice tidy solution."

"Drink your milk and work on some sleep, Kim."

"I should warn you that sometimes I wake up screaming."

"Okay. I won't wait up for it. I'll be two doors down if you need anything. I'm frying fish. Still no food?"

"No...thank you...for everything...even your humor, Griff. Somehow you...you even manage to make me smile."

"The jokes are all on me. Try to let go. Sleep."

Kim was up before I opened my eyes, five or so. I never heard any screaming, if there was any. She'd made coffee and had ransacked the refrigerator for eggs and bacon. All she found were stale donuts.

"I don't eat much breakfast anymore."

"But isn't that what gets you through the day?"

"No, that's coffee."

She wouldn't look at me, and it was beginning to annoy me. Her embarrassment had me treading so carefully my nerves were zinging. It would have to stop.

"I've got to run some folks up the river today, so if it's okay with you I'll drop you off early."

She was washing a clean plate, nearly scrubbing off the glaze, and didn't turn around to answer.

"That's fine."

"Is there anything else you need?"

"No, nothing." She dipped her head to her right shoulder and kept on scrubbing the plate.

"Kim..." I sighed and plunged in. "Will you please turn around. I'm tired of talking to your back. You haven't looked at me once this morning. Am I that bad?"

"No, that's me...that's me. I can't stand what I'll see in your eyes."

"All you'll see are a pair of gray-blue eyes looking back at you with appreciation. Come on try it."

She turned around and lifted her head. Her eyes were the same gorgeous brown, but pink and moist around the

edges, full of pain. I felt a jarring thud, a brain-click of revulsion for the cause of her suffering, and wondered if my eyes were going to betray me, but I smiled a reassuring smile that drained off some of the agony in my gut.

"How'd you like to go to a private barbecue a friend of mine is having Wednesday night?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Your calendar too full?"

"No, Griff, it's just...going out, being seen..."

"It'll be okay. I'll pick you up around six.

"Ready for the ride home?"

When I finished jetting my cantankerous passengers up to Agness for lunch and back, I stopped in at the Sand Dollar for a reality check on Faye. Was she really going to marry Frank? Apparently she was, but it turned out that I was more surprised at something else. It was the size of her engagement ring. Frank would have had to second mortgage his boat and hock all his fishing gear for a rock that big. For as long as I'd known him, Frank Campbell had been scraping by, struggling to pay off his huge license fee and operating costs. He was always in the hole, or hold, to be more accurate, and complaining bitterly about how everybody was out to get him.

"What happened, Faye, did all Frank's relatives die at once?"

Faye stuck out her pretty lower lip and blew a small red curl out of her eye, then refilled my coffee cup and slid it in front of me with haughty dismissal.

"I think you're just a little jealous, aren't you,

Griff. I'm certainly not going to ask Frank how he financed my ring. Everyone buys things on credit, don't they?"

"What credit? Frank's in debt up to the top of his radar antenna."

"That's none of your business, Griff."

"Okay. I'm sorry you feel that way, Faye."

"How's the blond?"

"Huh?"

"The blond you've been running around with."

"I haven't been running around with anyone."

"That's funny. Was that a ghost Bo Riley saw in your truck yesterday?"

I rolled my eyes, sighed, and slammed my hand down flat on the counter. Talk about no one's business.

"That really totals it," I said, sliding off the counter stool and looking around the room.

"He's not here," Faye said with a slow grin. "Last time I saw him he was on his way to Coos Bay. When I see him shall I tell him to meet you down at the O.K. Corral?"

"Not exactly, but the next time that loose-jawed dimwit comes in with a load of...of tattle, you can tell him he'd better cross the street when he sees me coming."

"Aye, aye, cap'n," Faye said, saluting with the flat back of her hand laid against that tempting mass of little red curls. I turned away as I left so she wouldn't see my sad smile. I was hoping she had one, too.

Wayne Rickle had a cozy little yellow bungalow down in the flats a few blocks back from the beach. His whole non-professional life was centered inside the white picket

fence with his wife and child. His back yard was a miniature garden of Eden, and he was always trying out some new plant or bush. Probably he should have been a nurseryman instead of a sheriff's deputy.

I told Kim a little about Wayne as we drove the long drive from her place over to his. Kim had wanted to look nice and was fretting because she didn't have many clothes with her. But at the same time she admitted that she was ashamed of the closets full of outfits she'd left in her house. She laughed a little, the kind of laugh that helps you blow off things that can't be helped, and said the feds were probably enjoying her house -- there was no warrant out for her arrest or any criminal record. I'd checked the data bases we used. Possibly the feds had talked to her mother and really believed she was put away for good. As for clothes, I thought she looked just fine and said so, but really she looked more than just fine, maybe a little too svelte for Wayne's back yard. She had on a long slender skirt of a kind of thin brown wool and a scooped-neck, long-sleeved cashmere sweater the taffy color of her hair. I was just wearing a beige shirt and freshly creased tan slacks with a nice leather belt and polished loafers. Wayne was bound to think that was overdressed.

"I think I'd like to get some kind of a car. It wouldn't have to be much, just second-hand wheels," Kim said, as we turned down Wayne's street.

"How you plan on doing that?" I asked. "Registration, driver's license, not to mention the money."

"I've got a purse full of money. You could buy it and register it, and I'd just pay for it and drive it."

I pulled into Wayne's drive. The big yard light was on and also the lights in back. I turned off the engine

and sat looking at her.

"You've got a purse full of--"

"Don't look at me like that, Griff. It's not that filthy money. It's mine. I took it out of my own account a long time ago, and it has nothing to do with anything. I carried it with me on the bus when I left."

I just kept staring at her.

She sighed. "You don't believe me. Well, you knew I was paying my rent. What did you think I was using? You're the one who dropped me at the post office for the money orders."

I tapped the steering wheel with two fingers and made no move to get out of my freshly washed shiny black rig.

"I don't want to be so dependent on you, Griff. That's all. I'm a nuisance. I need groceries...I need--"

"Are you gonna be trouble for me, honey?" I said, looking over at her dark, side-lit profile. I could see her wince. She got the sarcasm and she got the point, and I felt like a lowdown heel, but a cautious heel.

"Then you're not going to... I can't really...trust you...after all?" Her voice was so soft I could hardly hear it, and her hand went up to her mouth and back before she reached for the door handle.

"I'll get you the car," I said with quick words. But it was like everything had suddenly jumped onto another configuration with a different set of rules, a very uncomfortable feeling. I realized I was angry, and I didn't quite know why. Angry at her or myself? Angry because I was being a sheriff's deputy instead of a friend? Angry at the loss of something, our mutual trust. And sad. I wanted to drive away and talk, but Wayne opened his door and waved, striding up to my rig with a friendly greeting.

"Hey, what you two doin' out here, spoonin'?" he said with a big ear-to-ear grin.

"Hi there, Wayne. This is Kim Bailey."

"Glad to meet you. Old Griffen always gets the best lookin'...well, I mean..." He shrugged with embarrassment and stuck out his long youthful fingers. Kim took his hand with a sparkle of smile I wished I was getting.

"The house looks great, Wayne. Nice paint job."

"Come on around back. I just lit the coals.

"You don't think I got it too yellow this time, huh?"

"No, looks great under the light...brand new," I said, letting Wayne and Kim walk ahead on the brick side path.

"Babe," I called out as Babe came out of the house, in black slacks and a pink angora sweater. She had Buttercup by the hand, her little blond daughter dressed in denim overalls, a pink shirt, and tiny pink tennis shoes.

We made the introductions, and I could see that Kim was a very gracious social animal. She chatted with Babe, praised Wayne's green thumb, then held Buttercup on her lap and they sang the Sesame Street song together.

"Hey, nice voice," Wayne said as he flipped the chicken sizzling on the grill. "I've got a guitar. Can you play? Boy, we need some entertainment around here."

I started to open my mouth, but Kim glanced over at me and said, "Oh, no, I don't play anymore. But you must...if you have a guitar. Why don't you."

Wayne explained that he had to watch the chicken, and things got a little quiet around the picnic table. Babe went inside and came out with a huge myrtle-wood bowl, full of tossed salad greens, that drew Kim's attention. Babe explained that the bowl was local wood carved by a town woodcrafter. Then everyone focused on Buttercup. She

toddled over to me and grabbed my hand. I tickled her chin and picked her up, a squirmy little bundle of giggles. I carried her across the yard and held her so her perfect snub nose, barely there, just touched a honeysuckle blossom on a branch trailing off the arbor. "Ummm," she said. "Sooo sweet, like mummy." That brought a big swell of laughter.

"Smart kid, right as usual, sweet like mummy," Wayne announced, sending Babe a special look.

Later, after all the good food was down and I was off at the foot of the yard, standing beside a young fan palm and drinking a beer with Wayne, he said. "Don't wanta talk too much business here, Griff, but the boss is really putting the screws on us full-timers. You notice that? He wants all the grass outta here, and it just ain't gonna happen."

"He knows that, Wayne. He always overdoes it out of his own insecurity. He's just a control freak."

"He wants 1950, Griff. That's gone forever."

"Oh boy, I'll say. No sign it ever existed. It's looking more and more like the 1920s around here."

"And the feds are up to something, too. I think the Coast Guard is moving in for the kill out there."

The ride to Kim's was quiet, just some small talk about what a nice family the Rickles were. I walked Kim up to the sliding doors on the deck and checked around a little in my security mode. She didn't invite me in, so I just walked in and stood there a minute with no idea of what I was doing.

Her solemn face was like a mask, her manner back to

the way it was when we first came to look at Ed's place.

"Thank you so much. I'm a little tired, Griff."

"So will I please get the hell out of here."

"I don't treat you like that. I'm grateful for all you've done. Where would I be without your help? I'm...I'm getting mixed signals from you, and I don't know what to do. I don't know what you want."

"I don't want much...honesty."

"But do you recognize it when you see it?"

"I think so. I *think* so."

"That hurts...it hurts so much because I know I'm an imposition. And not to be trusted is... You know I'm trying hard to survive. I don't want to seem to be using you with...with feminine wiles. Oh God, I hate that! All my life men have looked at me and... I guess that's all Roberto wanted...an ornament. It makes me feel...wasted and shallow. But I'm not, damn it! I'm not! I'm not!"

The things I wanted to do to counter her misery would all look self-serving. I couldn't make a move toward her or do anything with my hands, so I just stood there and talked.

"That's right, you're not. You've got a lot of justifiable anger that you don't know how to deal with, because it was never part of your character. You can't help it if you look good enough to attract unwanted attention. But you're a lot more than nice skin and bones. You're sensitive and smart and funny...and I like the way you handle my dog...but not the way you fish."

"Griff...how do you...get me smiling like a such a silly..." She brushed her fingers over a curling mouth.

"Try to stop thinking you caused what happened to you, Kim. You've got to know you didn't."

"I do know that...somewhat...intellectually...but misery looks for causes...reasons."

She leaned against the metal edge of the sliding glass door and tilted her head back, briefly closing her eyes.

"That's the way it was when my father died. Mother and I were just going to drive into town. We hunted up dad to tell him, and saw him near the edge of a field in a corner near the highway. He was changing irrigation pipes. He lifted his hand to wave good-bye, and did something he'd warned his workers not to do so many times. I knew what was going to happen, but I couldn't stop it...all I could do was scream. It's so clear in my head...the long pipe rising up and touching a line on the transformer pole. Slow motion, like a dream where you're frozen and can't act in time: the pipe rising up, my scream, my father falling with a smile still on his face. His steaming body grounded thousands of volts. The soles of his shoes and socks and feet were burned black. For quite a while, I was certain it was my fault. I had to take the blame to try and understand it. Gradually, I became more philosophical and realized it was a fateful thing...an absurdity of life that didn't have anything to do with blame or understanding. That was the lesson I learned...but I don't always profit from it."

I took ahold of her arm, her nervous hand sliding over the door edge. "I'm really sorry, Kim...a tragedy that--"

"I didn't tell it for sympathy...only to show that I still sometimes look for reasons when there aren't any."

"I think you're going to be all right. You're really amazingly strong...and your head works beautifully."

I knew I had to get myself away from there in a hurry. I stepped back out onto the deck and said, "I'll find you

some transportation. G'night, country girl."

"Hello, Deputy." It was Keet's voice on my cell phone. "You anywhere near the homestead?"

"No, but I can get there easily enough. What's up?"

"Just something a little strange that maybe you should know about. Tell you when you get here.

"You tired of red trout?"

"Hey friend, stake out that salmon. Gotta drop off some papers, and I'm on my way."

I pulled into Keet's yard in a cloud of dust about six o'clock. Another dry fall day. I could smell a little smoke off the hills and hoped it was just some field burning and not smoldering fir trees.

Belle jumped out and took off after Tom-tab, one of the less shy, big tabby mousers Keet had around. She loved that old tom and had been trying for a long time to make friends, but the cat was sticking to the more traditional role of hiss and claws. Tom-tab was finally cornered on the deck and sent up a weird yodel of warning protest.

"Shut up, you silly reptile," Keet said, boosting the cat gently toward the deck edge with his boot.

Tom-tab flung himself over the rosemary bush, rose straight up in the air, flipped over in a yowling rage, and vanished in a blurry streak. Belle stayed on the deck with her nose between her paws in a state of rejection.

"God, that fish smells good," I said, swigging from one of the bottles of microbrew Keet had set up.

"You know what that is, you lucky bastard? Copper

River King from way up north. Eighteen dollars a pound, if you could even get any around here when it's in season. Maybe only then from one of our fancy resort menus."

"Hey, wait a minute. That's a spring run. You bought that frozen out of somebody's treasure chest? What's the occasion?"

"Well, huh, that's just it, Griffish. Only how about we eat it first and discuss the source later."

"Is this something I'm going to regret?"

"The Copper? Not on your life."

And he was so right. That fish went down like manna from heaven. But actually the source was a little closer to the other place. We were inside pigged out and spread over the furniture when Keet got around to who it was.

"Frank Campbell?" I roared in disbelief.

"You said it, buddy. He brought that frozen Copper in here like he was the good humor man. Just a little friendly lagniappe for selling him one of my best thoroughbred sale colts."

I jumped out of my chair and went over to examine Keet's face. "Have you been hitting the bottle a little too hard, or is this just another of your wacky jokes?"

"The joke's on us, I guess, but who's laughing? The reason you're here, aside from the fish orgy, is not because I'm a tattletale, ol' Griff, but because something smells bad. I'm worried about Faye, and maybe you should be, too. I've always been real fond of her."

"Faye?" All at once, Keet had me thinking I'd left Faye exposed to something poisonous and ready to bite.

"Frank didn't quibble one hairsbreadth at the price, which I had jacked up expecting to come down, and here's the clincher: He paid cash."

Now I wasn't sure just what my belly was going to do with the fish. "Let me get this straight. Frank Campbell paid top dollar cash for one of your best thoroughbred colts while doling out a generous amount of Copper River salmon?"

"You got it."

"First of all, Frank wouldn't know the north from the south end of a horse. He's never been on anything but a rolling deck. Secondly...never mind, secondly. Shit!"

"He said the colt was a wedding present for Faye. I couldn't be happier. But is this the same tight-fisted guy whose reputation is known far and wide as the poor sap who'd rather sleep with his empty wallet than Pussy Galore?"

"You don't have to hit me over the head twice. I guess I know what we're both thinking. But I still can't believe it. And what the hell do I do now? There's Faye, happy as a June bride, waving that big diamond engagement ring around."

"Frank gave Faye a big diamond engagement ring?"

"Dammit, yes."

"Jesus, I'd split my gut with laughter if it wasn't so sad. Sweet Faye hooked up with that fish bait."

"You're lucky, my friend. You're just the evidence man. I'm the poor bastard who has to drop the axe."

"Hey, I don't want the feds to get my colt. I'd rather give it to Faye myself."

"You still have the colt?"

"He's coming for it on Sunday."

"Tell him you discovered something wrong with it. Make up something he wouldn't know about, and give him back his cash. Just tell him the rest of your stock is sold."

"Old Frank isn't going to like that...especially since we've been eating up his lagniappe."

At that moment, I wished I was a million miles from law enforcement, and that Frank was a rich cranberry merchant.

I sat at the shell shack counter watching Faye in the mirror. She moved among the tables like a solo dancer, so quick with her nimble little hands, cheerfully floating heavy crockery around and pouring java while dealing kindly with everyone's impatience. She never lost her sense of humor, even when she was mad at some out-of-bounds idiot. She had so much more to offer than this, and she deserved so much better. I caught a fast view of her heading for the counter with the refill pot. A trawler deckhand grabbed her apron and reached for a look at her ring hand. She bent her curly head, laughing, said something, and started toward the counter. My heart zinged. I just couldn't face her, so I pretended I didn't see her, looked at my watch with an exaggerated motion, and tore out the door.

Later, as I drove back from Agness, I was still frowning my way through the whole sorry development, wishing that by some miraculous turn of events Frank's sudden good fortune would prove legitimate. All signs pointed to my day going from bad to worse. Back in Agness, I had to offer an ultimatum to some middle-aged hippies squatting on a fishing camp's riparian rights. Where do these aimless birds come from? They land suddenly at dusk, like buzzards, scour the place out, and vanish after the second or third warning, leaving behind their stenchy

droppings. The toked up, tangle-haired, scruffy head man was thoroughly unwashed, although he was standing by the river -- actually that was fortuitous; the fish didn't need any more contaminants. He wanted to liberate Belle from the confines of my vehicle, which he called dog abuse. He'll never get lucky enough to enjoy her life style. As I pondered this latest nut case, my cell phone went off and worse had arrived.

"Griff, it's Kim. Where are you? Can you get here quickly?"

"Kim?...speak up, " I said as I floored the accelerator. "What's wrong? I can barely hear you."

"I'm trying to whisper. There are two men out on the deck, sticking a knife into Ed's table. I'm scared, Griff."

"I'm on my way. Don't hang up, and stay out of sight. Tell me about it. You know these guys?"

"No. This morning I went for a long hike, across the road and up over the hill, different from my usual route. God, I walked right into a big patch of marijuana up there. I turned around immediately, but I knew I'd been seen. Adrenaline got me all the way back, and I locked the doors. They followed me. They're out there deciding what to do, I guess. No phone wires around here. Maybe they don't realize I have a phone."

"Where are you?"

"Up in the loft."

"Can you get out and up to the road?"

"I don't think so, not without being seen."

"Where's the .32?"

"Right beside me."

"Good girl. Remember what I showed you. If you have

to use it, don't hold it too tight. Meanwhile, just stay where you are. I'm nearly there."

After alerting the office, I cruised down into Ed's off-road parking and killed the engine. From my position, I had no clear view of Ed's deck. Belle was ordered to stay inside the car. She could smell the change in me, and omitted her usual wine of protest. I opened the trunk, grabbing my Ruger Over-and-Under and loading with 12-gauge shells. Then I eased down the lid without slamming it, and crouched low, heading through the brush away from the open path.

"Hey, lady! Hey, woman in there!" I heard one of the young druggers yell. Their backs were to me, and they were both trying to see through the partially curtained plate glass. One of them raised the butt of his big steel hunting knife to bring it down on the glass.

I stepped up just close enough to keep them from seeing my reflection. "Looking for somebody, boys?"

They both turned around fast, focused on my shotgun blocking their way down, and glanced at the cantilevered end of the deck, calculating how far they'd have to fall if they jumped off.

"I wouldn't. I'll bring you down like duck meat. Just ease that knife down and step slowly this way. That's right."

One of them eyed my uniform and badge as he came, and said, "You got no jurisdiction here."

I laughed. "Oh, pardon me. Please go right on with your forced entry and assault while I excuse myself."

"Yeah, deputy, you got no jurisdiction. You can't hold us," the other one prated.

"But I've got the shotgun; just watch me. You losers

musta smoked yourselves to dreamland. On the ground, face down, hands behind your heads. Your transportation will be arriving posthaste. Looks like your green pastures have temporarily dried up, boys."

When the intruders were given the Miranda, cuffed and caged in Wayne's vehicle, and carted away, Kim and I sat drinking coffee at the kitchen table. Neither of us needed coffee with the adrenaline we still had pumped into our systems, but it was a handy excuse for sitting and talking. I was trying to dispel the uneasiness she was feeling.

"Are federal agents going to come and talk to me? If they are it's probably the end of my--"

"Kim, the rangers know about that steep patch. Drug Enforcement knows about that patch. Damned near everybody in the county knows about that cannabis. Drug Enforcement was planning to move on it just before a harvest, when a larger fish was expected to swim into the area. That's the way it's often done."

"You knew about it?"

"Sure. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were gonna move your tired little self that far up the hill. I didn't realize how strong you are. I like rough hiking, too."

I received no smile. Her face was dead serious. "Now what happens, Griff?"

"Nothing...to you. They'll expect me to ask you a few questions. I'll take care of that."

"But if they want me to testify to--"

"They don't need you, Kim. They're not looking at you. Don't be too paranoid. They just have to move on it now, that's all...and switch their hunt for big fish to

somewhere else. There are plenty of somewhere elses around here."

I leaned back in my chair, then forgot the social amenities my mama taught me and tilted it, balancing on two legs. It held up fine. Ed was good with a hammer.

"I wonder what would've happened if you hadn't been on your way from Agness, Griff. Oh God, I was glad to hear your voice outside. I don't want to shoot anybody."

"Who does? Only a few lunatics find that activity entertaining."

"I wonder who'll be pounding on my door next...someone from San Francisco?"

"Not likely," I soothed, only half believing myself. "They wouldn't expect you to end up this close to home when you could've run a lot further. Why didn't you?"

Kim still had on her hiking shorts and T-shirt, but she had taken off her tennis shoes, and her feet were bare, perched on the chair rung above her kicked-off thongs. I stared at her perfectly shaped, small, pearly toes, caught myself drifting, and ordered my thoughts back to the matter at hand. "Why didn't you?" I repeated.

"I was way too scared to travel much...wanted to...to crawl away and...just heal myself. But I couldn't go far from my mother. She's getting older...hasn't been feeling well. I didn't want to leave her. When I came to stay with her, I was shocked at how she'd aged. I hadn't even noticed I was so preoccupied. She's still so enjoyable to be with. How I wish I could have..."

She lifted her head and looked at me with such a hopeful longing in those soft brown eyes of misery I had to look away. Worse yet, I was starting to feel like a hungry man at a gourmet deli, and I didn't approve of myself.

"Well," I said, planting the chair back on four legs and standing up. "Gotta hit the road. Feel all right now...about staying here alone?"

"I'm okay." She couldn't hide the nervous look, and I knew she wished I wasn't going anywhere.

"Found you a car over in Bandon, by the way."

Her lowered head rose again, but with a blooming smile. "You did? Oh, what a relief to have my own wheels...not that you haven't been... Thanks so much, Griff."

"I'll bring it up tomorrow...let you drive me home. Find out what kind of a driver you are. You like to drive?"

"Yes. I've always loved it...especially out into nature. Of course, crowded freeways aren't much fun."

"There's plenty of nature around here...no freeways."

"Kim," I said, aiming for her full attention, "I wouldn't become too well known around town. I'm sorry to say we get California druggers through here...mostly on their way to somewhere else, but--"

"No, no, I wasn't planning to...just dark glasses and a scarf for some groceries...the post office. Remember? I've got a box there. Mother has an elaborate system for forwarding things to me."

"That method isn't foolproof at all, Kim. I don't care how good you think it is. And as for Barb...well...bless, her well-meaning heart, she distributes more news than the local paper."

"Barb believes I'm a serious writer...holed up in peace and quiet to do my work. We're almost conspiratorial, you see -- I'm not to be found or disturbed. She's generous with all kinds of information

that she thinks would make a great book."

"Clever," I said. "Maybe you oughta take her up on it. She's the best source in town." Except for that long-nosed blabbermouth, Bo Riley, I was thinking.

E.A. Poe came scampering up on the deck with Belle in well-intentioned and misunderstood pursuit, and that was my signal to take my dog and take my leave.

"That Bailey woman up at the attempted break-in, isn't she the same one was camping over at the Bridge Motel a while back?"

"The same," I said, halting my lengthened stride down the hall in order to face off with Sheriff Brandle. I had tried to get past his office after I finished my computer stint, but he wasn't letting anything go by that easily, and I'd been expecting the inquiry. I knew Burnie was one of the Sheriff's information cronies, as was Barb at the post office, and anyone else rooted in town who had eyes and ears. We all picked from the same grapevine when needed.

"A scribbler, the way Barb tells it. Wants to be left alone out there...by most of us."

"That sort of work requires it, I imagine. She was looking for a quiet place."

"And found it, too...with a little help from a certain river pilot stud."

I had to tamp down a sudden desire to protest the insinuations by landing one on Jimmy Brandle's prying and oft-broken nose. It would probably never happen, but it was a soothing idea. Some of the gossip that included me was coming from Burnie, but most of it was from Bo Riley,

who actually stood a much greater chance of having his proboscis rearranged at some point in the near future. I knew Ed Rainer up north in his hospital bed wasn't talking. He didn't have any great desire to have his house visited by the wrong people.

Despite my annoyance, I quickly seized upon the idea of using a healthy interest in Kim's undeniable appeal as my sole reason for involvement.

"A nice woman...smart," I attempted as closure.

"Good lookin', I hear."

"That too."

"Uh-huh."

My patience was thinning out fast.

"How's Faye? Just pullin' your tail with ol' Frank, isn't she?"

"Look, Jimmy, how's your sex life?"

"What the hell!"

"Well, dammit!" I said.

"All right, Griffen. All right. My apology.

"Nice catch with the hopheads. Only now the feds'll have to scoop up that mess and hunker down somewhere else. They'll ask for our help again. Just wait and see. Those noodle-kneed honchos can't even stand up in that country, let alone recognize their own footprints."

It was a warm fall late afternoon, and I was standing by the open car door just breathing in a spicy little ruffle of myrtle-saturated air. Kim raced up the path like an airborne antelope, gave me a quick hug, and slipped behind the wheel before I could even get my arms around her. I never saw anyone go that crazy over a second-hand

Chevrolet. You would have thought that stripped-down, slate blue, two-door Chevy had been custom built for a Texas oilman.

"If I'd known the effect this would have, I'd have done this a whole lot sooner," I said.

"Where shall we go? Oh, where shall we go, Griff?" The sound of her breathless enthusiasm headed straight down my spine, and for a second I forgot what I had in mind.

"Well...a...I was just on my cellular talking to a friend about a horse. We could drive over to his place. I'd like for you to meet him, anyway."

"Oh...but I'm not really dressed for riding...these thin slacks and loafers and...and no hat?"

"Doesn't matter. Unless you want to change. The horse won't mind. Besides, Keet has hats, jackets, probably all kinds of stuff. He's used to dudes."

"I'm not a dude." She frowned at me.

"That's what we're going to find out, aren't we?"

"Why did you say *anyway*...you want me to meet him *anyway*?"

"I want you to meet him whether or not we ride horses."

"Because?"

"Because he's my best friend, and because he's someone good to know...really good to know."

"Nice driving," I said as we got out of the Chevy in front of Keet's house. "Good attention...no nonsense."

Kim slid out and stretched. "Oh, well. You're lucky not to have seen snotty little me in my racy Porsche roaring up and down Highway 1 in California."

"Glad I didn't," I said, looking around for a sign of Keet. It rankled a little too much to hear about riches and California days from Kim, but I knew she wasn't snotty. Then I noticed that her own recollection had changed her expression to something between disgust at herself for taking any pleasure in the past, and worry. I smiled at her in an attempt to restore her earlier enthusiasm.

One of Keet's older rousters came from the direction of the corral south of the house. He waved a friendly greeting as he trotted up in worn jeans and scuffed boots. I walked forward, leaving Kim a little behind me, because I well knew Dirty Jerry's history. Keet rarely let the salty old mucker spend much time near female riders, but he'd been around so long he was an indispensable fixture and pretty harmless.

"Howdy, Griff, how's your lady-killin' self?" he said, giving Kim a quick appraisal and then a second take.

"Just fine. Any sign of Keet?"

"He was here. Went over to the barn to chew out somebody for leavin' a horse saddled. I know who it was. That motherfucker don't give a rat's ass about the fu--"

"Whoa!" I said, glancing at Kim who had joined us.

"How about sanitizing your mouth, Jerry."

"Sorry. Oh yeah, sorry."

"Why don't you folks go around to the deck. Keet'll be here in two shakes of a...well, real soon," Jerry said, backing off and disappearing.

Kim was laughing and looking up at me sideways as we headed for Keet's deck.

"Just life down on the ol' ranch, huh, podnah?" she said with one of her cute takes.

The bleached-wood deck table held cold microbrew

sweating in bottles on a tray, along with a bottle of iced Chardonnay and glasses. There was a big platter of nachos waiting under a fly screen, probably hustled up by Keet's office girl, Patty.

We sat on the edges of the recliners, and I had started to say something about the ranch when I heard Keet's boot on the side steps and looked over that direction.

Keet had on a crisp wine and beige snap shirt, creased tan slacks, and a pair of his fancy dress boots. His clean raven hair was perfectly combed, the naped braid in a neat muscular loop, and he looked like a larger-than-life romantic picture of the Old West in Hollywood Technicolor. My surprise was loaded with gratitude, especially when I saw Kim stand up and smile with her hand extended.

"Kim Bailey this is Keet Tealwing," I said.

Kim's pale hand slid into Keet's large tan fingers, and he grinned and said, "Welcome to Sun Foot Ranch. I'm real glad to make your acquaintance, Miz Bailey."

"Kim, puh-leeze," Kim said with a laughing voice.

"Your place looks wonderful, Keet, like real honest to goodness home on the range."

"Thanks," Keet said, sending me an approving look.

"It's home all right, and I'm real happy here. Lucky I can share it with a few nature lovers."

Keet's eyes traveled over my Oxford shirt and slacks and he said, "You serious about riding?"

"Well, sure, " I said, raising my leg. "See, boots."

I lifted the fly screen and offered the nacho platter to Kim, while Keet poured her a glass of Chardonnay.

"Whew!...nice and hot," I said, swallowing a clump of peppers, tomatilloes, and tortillas smothered with cheddar.

"Patty likes her chili peppers," Keet said.

He was drinking his beer out of a schooner instead of the bottle. So was I. We two fools were certainly outdoing ourselves in the present company.

We talked a little about the most comfortable and mundane subjects we could think of, like the dry weather and the good Curry County earth and finally horses.

"What kinds of horses?" Kim asked.

"Why don't you come on down to the stables and see what you recognize," Keet invited.

Kim set down her half full wine glass with a quick eagerness. She blinked her eyes, threw her head back, and smiled at me, as if she had just stepped out of a dark room into the sun.

When we got there, I saw that Keet had my big quarter horse, Little Bit, saddled, along with a spunky, sure-footed Appaloosa mare named Polka. Chaser was leaning over the paddock fence, swishing his brushed cream tail and looking neglected because he was unsaddled. I started to comment on that when Kim dashed off to the fence adjoining the paddock. She'd spotted one of Keet's Thoroughbred colts. It galloped over to her and whirled up in a nervous playfulness, then stuck its curious nose through the rails.

"A little Thoroughbred," she called, touching his silky black flank. "What a beautiful foal, ready for weaning."

"Weaned," Keet called out. "My Thoroughbreds are all sale stock right now."

Keet winked at me and said in a low voice, "Frank's diseased pony. Kim has good taste. Might say a few more words about that later. Frank's burned up and a little suspicious...had to smooth his feathers with big lies."

"He'll calm down.

"Why isn't Chaser saddled?"

"Well, I thought you wanted to...a--"

"I want you to saddle Chaser and come with us, that's what I want. I'm not courting," I said in a low voice. "For crying out loud, Keet, this is supposed to be like therapy...a nice healthy lope with...with two prancing buffoons."

"Yessir, doctor," Keet answered. He grinned, yanked down a bridle and saddle blanket, and headed for Chaser. "Make yourself useful and hand me that Chavez on the trestle, Griffish," he called over his shoulder. Keet was certainly going all out, putting one of his best hand-made seat holders on Chaser, a Dale Chavez show saddle.

I looked over at my trusty Circle Y on Little Bit, a damn good hunk of leather, manufactured in Texas and well broken in. I felt silly at this particular moment for feeling wistful about the beautiful hand-made Crates I'd been thinking of buying. What did it matter, anyway? Kim probably wouldn't know a Crates from an apple crate.

Kim came around the paddock and walked up to Little Bit. "The only quarter horse I've seen around here so far." She patted his quivering neck. "Really a nice animal. I always had quarter horses. They're powerful and fast, and they can learn to turn on a dime easily enough."

"Kim, meet Little Bit," I said. "My faithful companion in the outback."

"Oh, your horse. You keep him here?"

"Sometimes I have him up at the house, but mostly here. He gets tender loving care when I'm not available."

"A really nice streamlined saddle. Circle Y, yes? Lord, have a look at that Dale Chavez on Keet's palomino.

He's ready for a parade.

"And I guess that means this pretty Appaloosa mare is for me."

Keet jerked his head at me, and I closed my mouth. He cupped his hand for Kim, and said. "She's still a lot of good horse. Up you go. This is Polka."

"Can she jump?" Kim asked while Keet adjusted her stirrups.

"When she's expected to, she can jump just fine."

Apparently that was all Kim needed to hear. She backed Polka out a ways, toed down her stirrups, moved her loafer heels in well to the south of Polka's belly, and raced forward, just clearing the trail fence that Keet was on his way over to swing open. All we saw was a rushing rump of white, black-dotted horseflesh and flying blond hair. We stood there in silence for a few seconds, then got into our saddles and ambled down to the wild west show.

Keet was quiet as we went along.

"I know what you're thinking, Keet. You don't want your animals unduly abused, and I'm sorry."

"No, 's okay. I might be thinking something else right now if Annie Oakley hadn't cleared the gate. Actually, it was a pretty sight...watching them jump that fence. I wouldn't have sworn Polka could do it."

"You know what I think it is, Keet? I think she's been cooped up so long...pretty stressed out and missing the old days, her horse... The poor kid just kinda lost it."

"And what I think is, you're down for the count, pal."

"Damn it!" I complained, but Keet, looking straight ahead, had already moved Chaser out.

Kim was standing by a thread of stream stroking

Polka's neck when we rode up pretty tight-lipped, both wondering what was coming next. She looked at us a couple of glances and said, "That was wrong of me wasn't it...that kind of conduct on an unknown entity? It was something I'd have advised my riding students never to attempt...foolishness on a horse they didn't know."

"You were a riding instructor?" I said, realizing how much I didn't know about Kim.

"I was in one competition or another most of my life, and...giving troubled teens riding lessons was something I just naturally fell into during college summers."

Keet dismounted and said, "Want a leg up, Kim?"

"Sure, thanks," Kim responded, docile and friendly.

Back on Polka, she glanced over at me, then down at the crystal stream. The land was so dry the run was barely alive in the thirsty sedge, but still trickling out of the piney hills, catching the sun in places and winking like a rhinestone necklace tossed into the blond grass.

"I haven't ridden in so long...guess I was having a contest with myself. Guess I was feeling free...couldn't remember how it felt...the most wonderful feeling. Thanks both of you. I'm so lucky today. How did I get so lucky?"

Keet turned his concentration from Kim out to the long strip of sere meadow. "This is a nice place to gallop," he said. "Have at it, Kim."

Keet wanted us to stay for supper, said he had some venison steaks thawing. I wondered if Kim was touchy about deer meat, but not for long.

"I could fix you a good sauce if you had a few fresh currants, or even blueberries...blueberries work very

well," she piped up. "Blueberries, brandy, and a dash of cayenne."

Keet looked very doubtful. "Well, I've got plenty of blueberries, but I don't like my venison smothered in--"

"Oh, no, never smothered...floated. You float the grilled steak in a spoonful of reduced sauce on the plate. It just adds something special to the venison.

"Where are they?"

"What, the blueberries? They're growing down beside the fruit orchard north of the house."

Kim took a small bowl and went out the side door and down the steps to the orchard. The screen door banged.

"She's really getting a kick out of this," I said. "Temporarily out of incarceration, and happy as a jailbird ordered to hoe off strawberry runners."

"How happy is that?"

"That's what I mean. Temporarily happy."

"Well, it sounds like she knows what she's doing." As he talked, Keet was arranging the lean and oiled deep red steaks in his wire grilling basket.

"She and her no-good ex owned a fancy restaurant."

"Well, well...maybe you'll die of calorie intake before the sniper's bullet even reaches its mark."

"That was way out of line, Keet."

"I know it. Sorry. I'm just a real nervous friend."

"And Kim has never served me anything but coffee. I've got no idea how she cooks."

By the time the meal was over I had an idea. The sauce Kim made did send the venison floating. She also fixed pesto mashed potatoes, with basil from Keet's herb garden, and wilted dandelion greens vinaigrette from garden weeds. Later there was warm apple crisp dabbled with fresh

Sun Foot Ranch cream. The apples Kim brought from the orchard, and they baked while we ate. Waiting for dinner, Keet and I sat on the deck drinking beer, playing gin rummy, and finally grilling the steaks -- all we were allowed to do.

I went in once to get us beers, and leaned against the counter watching Kim. She had a tea towel twisted around her sapling waist, and her mouth was curved in a faraway smile. The white flour smudges on her heat-flushed cheeks made me grin. I gave her a questioning look when she glanced up at me. "No, this isn't work," she insisted. "It's fun...love this big old kitchen. I'm really enjoying myself, Griff." But there was a kind of sadness in her shining amber eyes, even while she swore how happy she was.

Afterward we sat quietly on the deck, dazed and sated, watching a giant orange harvest moon hover on the tree line.

"How'd you like to be my personal chef?" Keet asked.

"No greater compliment," Kim said with a pleased voice.

I wondered if Keet realized that his invitation could double for a marriage proposal.

"Will you let me ride again?" Kim's voice was serious.

"Anytime. We've got a trail you might like...crosses the highway, winds through scrub pine, goes into the dunes and along the beach. Folks love it at sunset. Good for the soul," Keet added, lifting passing Tom-tab onto his lap.

"Next time we'll all take the sunset ride," Kim said.

In the middle of the night someone shattered my living

room window with a single rifle shot. I stumbled into my jeans, slid my semiautomatic Glock out of the holster, and crept out the back of my house and around to the side, stopping among the aspens. The sound of splintering glass echoed and echoed in my brain. My bare feet cooled in the damp sea-misted grass as I moved into the front yard. Slowly making a half circle down to the edge of the tree line, I heard nothing, saw nothing in the steely light of the high moon. I crouched under the old pine awhile and squinted into the long dark tree shadows. Finally I stood up and walked back up on the veranda. Belle was cautiously waiting there, and when she was sure it was me she started barking in a sort of commiserating relief. She isn't a barker, but it took awhile to shut her down. Then I vaguely recalled hearing whining in my sleep. I knew that she had sensed something threatening before the shot was ever fired.

I was in no condition for shuteye, so I got out the broom and dustpan and started sweeping. Belle was sniffing around, and I yelled at her to get her paws out of the glass. She looked guilty and hid behind my leather chair.

"It's not your fault, Belle. You probably tried to warn me didn't you, poor dog?" She stuck her nose out and whimpered. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

I dug a .22 magnum projectile out of the pine log to the right of my fireplace mantel while letting out a stream of curses. The slug looked like it could have gone a lot further and fared no worse. While I was tarping the window and patching up the log, I considered a list of enemies. It wasn't a long list and mostly contained people I'd helped send down the river or up the road. I couldn't believe it was about Kim. If they'd found out where she

was they'd hardly bother about coming around to my place, unless...

"Jesus, you dumb klutz, Griffen!" I said, dropping the spackle knife and running for my phone. I punched numbers.

"Griff? What...? Griff! Oh, God, what is it?"

"Calm down, Kim. I'm just calling because... Is everything all right up there?"

"It's...well, I...I don't know. It's...what time is it? Is someone...is something going to happen, Griff?"

"No, I don't think so. I was a...I was just lying here and I thought maybe I should check in. I mean...a...just remind you to keep your pistol beside your bed and a--"

"Are you keeping something from me, Griff? Tell me, for God's sake. You know something I should know. What? What is it?"

"It's really nothing. I just want you to be careful, that's all. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any worry."

She laughed a little. "Hmm. Well, you have a strange way of not meaning it, since I'm sitting on the edge of my bed and my whole body has turned to ice."

"I'm sorry. Get warm. Get under the covers. Go back to sleep," I said, feeling foolish but relieved. "I'll talk to you soon. G'night."

"No, good morning, Griff," she said and hung up.

I sat there for a while and finally realized I was thinking about Frank Campbell. He was mad as hell at Keet, because Keet had refused his offer for another colt. And Frank knew Keet was my best friend. And Frank knew Faye had been my best girl. What else was he thinking? I was thinking he had a lot of reasons for paranoia and revenge,

and most of them were me.

But why shoot at a deputy when you're freighting dope? That was cocky...stupid. Did Frank think I wasn't fast enough to get around to him, or was he so mad he couldn't control himself? He must have thought his only worry was the Coast Guard. Still hard to believe he was smuggling.

It was a crazy business. The last time I talked to Frank was before Faye's announcement. We were friendly enough, shot a little bull at the Sand Dollar. He wasn't a happy man then, grouching about expenses and debt. Suddenly he asked Faye to marry him. I'd been avoiding him since then. I decided later this morning would be a good time to get in front of him and see what kind of reaction I got.

Cruising by the Sand Dollar where I expected Frank to be, I saw no sign of his grimy old burgundy Ranchero. Then I focused on a spanking new Ford rig with a vanity plate that read, SADIE. That was the name of Frank's boat. Bold as a spring bull, and damn his hide. He was going to mess up Faye's life. I got out of my vehicle and looked through the truck's window at the gun rack. It held an impressive sleek Browning A-bolt Stalker fitted with a BOSS accuracy system, and a pretty new Winchester .22. His old shotgun was nowhere in sight. Frank, who rarely departed from his fish diet for anything but a putative poached turkey, was certainly hauling around plenty of serious firepower. I'd like to have checked out that .22, but the door was locked. I was on my way down to the wharf, so I kept going, fuming all the way. I poked around the net shed, where I wasn't too surprised to find no hanging nets from Frank's boat in evidence. The Sadie was freshly painted and spiffed up

like a tourist charter. I hoisted myself aboard and stood looking at all the new gadgetry.

"What the hell you doin' on my boat?"

I turned around slowly and saw Frank's graying blond mustache twitch over a snarling mouth. His weather-bitten cheeks had gone crimson with hot blood, and beneath the red bill of his cap his electric blue eyes were all adrenaline-charged black pupil.

"Hello, Frank. How's the fishing business?"

"You're trespassing, Griffen. Get the fuck off my boat."

"You used to be a fairly decent guy, Frank. What happened? I really hate to see you get--"

"Aw, you're just sore 'cause you can't laugh anymore? Frank Campbell, fish bait good for a laugh, huh? I don't see you laughing, Griffen. Lose something?"

"I've never laughed any more at you, Frank, than you have at me. And if you mean Faye, the main reason I'm down here bothering with you is because of her. If you don't care about yourself, what about her?"

"Yeah, what about her? You never cared. But you had to queer the deal with Tealwing because you couldn't stand me giving her that colt. You sonofabitch! Faye hates your guts."

"I don't think so, Frank. I don't think Faye hates my guts. And you know what else? I think you tried out your brand new Winchester on my front window last night."

Frank's fists clenched and unclenched and clenched again. He took a step toward me. I folded my arms and stood my ground. I'm a little bigger, maybe in better condition, and for both of us muscle was more of a threat than my holstered weapon. He moved in close and angled his

chin up.

"Window? I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about, loser. Some kinda trouble must be headed your way. If I were you I'd be real worried about my dog."

I unfolded my arms, took hold of both sides of the collar of his sporty new leather jacket, looked straight into his raging eyes, and said, "If anything happens to my dog, Frank, if anything happens to my poor defenseless dog, you creep, your lifestyle is gonna change so fast you won't even have time to wave good-bye to Faye. Understand?" I let go with a shove for emphasis.

Frank whirled backwards and snatched up a huge steel wrench lying on a hatch cover. He started toward me with the monstrous thing rocking high in the air like a haywire cruise missile.

"Get off my boat, you fucking bas--"

I grabbed his arm, twisted the wrench out of it, and tossed it through the wheelhouse window. The sound of breaking glass closely resembled the sound that woke me up earlier this same sad morning.

"Now we're almost even!" I shouted as I flung myself off his deck. "Watch your step, Frank."

"You watch yours, cocksucker!" he shouted back.

"Lord a'mighty, you think that fracas went unnoticed? Maybe somebody up the far north end of the county missed it, but nobody around here, Griffen. One of my men in uniform down on the city wharf tossin' a big wrench around like a scene outta that *Waterfront* picture." Sheriff Brandle shook his head slowly from side to side in a dangerous prelude to unforgiving measures.

"Was I just supposed to let him splatter my brains all over my freshly pressed uniform?" I asked with a cool voice.

"You had no business on the goddamned boat!"

"I understand that, but Frank had no business on my property, and he had no business shooting out my front window. I don't imagine you'd be smiling if it happened to you, Jimmy."

"I'm not smiling. Do you see me smiling?"

"While wearing that uniform, you are the law, Griffen."

"I was being the law."

"Oh, no. You were a county deputy on a private boat on a city wharf bein' a friggin' vigilante disguised as the law."

"Okay, you're the boss."

"This insubordination is absolutely beyond belief. I gotta sit down here before I develop appleplexy."

The Sheriff flopped into his chair and studied me. He was experiencing what is known as cognitive dissonance -- several opposing opinions, all thought to be true, at war with each other -- and I felt a little sorry for him.

"Okay if I sit down?"

"No!"

I shifted from one foot to the other and looked out the window. Barb was standing outside the post office talking to a woman in a blue scarf and dark glasses. I leaned forward and squinted. Talking to Kim. I wished Kim wouldn't stand out in the street like that. She looked like some kind of celebrity whose incognito was showing.

"The trouble is I like you, Griffen."

"I like you too, Sheriff."

"Goddammit, sit down!"

I pulled out a heavy oak chair and sat up straight to indicate my respect for the office and for the man.

The Sheriff gave a big sigh and coughed for a few seconds, then pulled out his handkerchief and spat into it.

"I wonder if you could possibly be thinking I don't know about Frank Campbell."

"Being the Sheriff, I imagine you do."

"I'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb, wouldn't I?"

"I'm assuming that's a rhetorical question."

The Sheriff folded his graceless hands atop his desk and sent me a hopeful smile; it reminded me of the uncertain smile sometimes seen on tipsy men of the cloth. He was on unfamiliar ground and trying to force himself into patience. "Well now, let's talk, let's talk about Frank Campbell."

The Sheriff got up, went as far as the edge of the open door, and gave it a shove. He leaned down over me and said, "Of course, this information goes no further than this office. The Coast Guard is about to move on Frank out there. It's too bad, isn't it? Too bad Frank had to get so greedy...and too bad for Faye. I guess she really did intend to...a...marry the poor bastard. I just wonder if Frank would have gone this crazy if he hadn't been trying to impress her...and if you and Faye hadn't--"

"Sheriff, this sounds way too personal for me. If somehow some of the blame for Frank's felonious stupidity is about to get dumped on me, I'm not having it. I'm not having the blame, and I'm not having the invasion of my private affairs here. So, if that's where this is going you can--"

"Wait...wait a minute! Hang on there. No offense.

Just...just a little display of human feeling. That was all. I was about to come around to something else."

He sat down again and picked up a pencil, sliding it through his fingers.

"While I can understand your anger, it was damned inconvenient that you got old Frank to thinking about what might be coming. That really puts him on the defensive and could jeopardize our work. And that makes me cussed mad at you, Griffen. Goddammit!"

So much for patience.

I sighed and looked out the window. Kim was gone, and the street was empty.

"Okay, so a...where was I? The reason the Coast Guard let us in on this is that they want us to help out in the event of a landfall. See, the feds wanta know exactly where the boats are comin' in and who's on shore, so they have to let 'em get a lot closer than they'd like, in order to--"

"Why don't they ask me?" I said. "I'll be happy to tell them the three main places the boats are probably--"

"Just let me finish. As I was saying, when the thing goes down, if Frank and whoever is on his boat happen to get away and come ashore, they want us to be in a position to help make the arrest."

"If we're at the right position," I said.

"And if it happens that they make a run for it, into some of the rough country," the Sheriff said, ignoring my remark, "I think it would be a good idea to have you on it. Well, it probably won't happen, Griff, but if it does..."

Now I was good old Deputy Griff at the ready again, so I leaned forward in my normal relaxed manner and tried to take the positive approach to a very depressing situation.

Keet's silent and rosy-round cousin, Chrysanthemum, who dropped in regularly to clean house and sometimes fix lunch, carried over two plates loaded with huge cold turkey sandwiches and set them down in front of Keet and me.

"Thank you, Mum. That looks real tasty," I said.

"Uh-huh," Mum answered, tossing large dill pickle quarters onto our plates with quick jerks of her plump brown wrist.

It was a drizzly fall day, and Keet and I were sitting at the dark green table in the nook at the far end of his spacious warm kitchen. There was an alder wood fire burning in the double-sided fireplace, a wide-hearthed stone rectangle cut through to the living room. The snapping flames were comforting, cozy, friendly against the outdoor backdrop of gray misty hills. I was glad I'd stopped in at that particular hour, even though I hadn't expected lunch. I intended to talk over the upcoming Coast Guard operation with Keet. If I did get involved, I'd probably be wanting his savvy company.

"Going to be snow in the hills," Keet said, taking a bite out of his sandwich and licking mayonnaise off his thumb. "Could be messy...not much fun, Griffish."

For Keet, that usually meant the reverse. He innately relished the idea of roughing it, of having his mettle tested. That's when he was in his element.

"Well, the C.G.'ll probably scoop the bad boys off the rolling blue, and it'll go down without us, Keet. And this time, considering the prey, I hope that's the way it goes. Oh, they'll probably ask us for a little assistance on terra firma, but I still want us to have something in mind

in case it gets more complicated."

"S'cuse me I'm goin'. Try to stick your dishes in the washer," Mum said, walking toward us while tying on her scarf. "Glad it's raining. Everything's so thirsty. But then there's the mud." She sighed and dipped her head sideways with her eyes briefly and humorously closed.

"You want me to clean out the refrigerator tomorrow, or does Patty have her heart set on throwin' away jars with strange lookin' stuff growin' in 'em, Boss Man?"

"Patty's into bookkeeping big time tomorrow. But she can do that any time if it's too scary for you, Mumsy."

"Scary, huh!" Mum said, slapping her broad, blue-coated hip with a giggle. "If you don't toss that stuff it's gonna bust outta there and haunt you, all right."

"Okay, it's not that bad. Thanks a lot, Mumsy. See you later."

"Pin neat tidy," Keet said when the door closed on Mum's back. "Kim didn't seem to mind my refrigerator."

I looked at Keet and blinked. Something pinged in my chest when I remembered Kim wrapped in that tea towel, pushing hair out of her bright eyes, her face flushed from the oven as she scooped us up servings of sweet hot apple crisp. I turned my attention to the weather outside.

"You didn't say much to Kim in my presence, and now you're adding nil. Actually, that says a lot more than you think, Griffish...but it's not a good sign."

"Kim needs kindness...just the way you were treating her, my friend. That's all."

"Uh-huh...you're really knocked out this time."

"Come on...will you cut it out, Keet?"

"I was just thinking of the slug that landed in your wall. That's never happened before. The price of

kindness?"

"It was Frank Campbell, and there isn't a shred of doubt in my mind about that."

Keet got up and threw a chunk of alder on the fire. He stirred around with the poker, then turned to look at me. "Wish I could have seen that wrench flying into the wheel house." His dark eyes held the same quick bright light as the scattering fire sparks, and he was grinning.

"That got me into a hot match with Jimmy, but if I had it to do over, I'd probably do the same thing."

We drank a second cup of coffee and ate more of the big, gooey peanut butter cookies Mum had made, then I stood up, stretched, and put on my waterproof parka. Keet dutifully stuck our dishes in the washer. We went out the side door to the mud room, where Keet, in his stocking feet, sat down on the boot bench and pulled on his work boots. Then he reached up and unpegged the old boiled wool green jacket that he'd been mucking out the stables in with Dirty Jerry when I arrived.

"Can't you teach old DJ some manners around the Sun Foot social club?" I asked.

"Can't teach Jerry a thing, Griffish. He's running at full capacity...since he was ten years old."

"He's damn lucky to have you, Keet."

"So I'll be ready with the gear and an eager two or three fat ponies, if needed," Keet said as we walked outside and turned our faces up to a fine sprinkle.

Tom-tab shot out of his secret rain cover, blinked and sniffed at the slick new world, then shook his wet paws in disgust. He wound around Keet's boots, giving out loud erratic purring that sounded like a small misfiring engine.

"Stay away from your windows, pardner," Keet called as

I drove off.

Even though I could tell that Keet liked Kim, probably more than he'd intended, he was worried about my health. He didn't have to make me cautious, I was already that on a number of counts. I didn't fancy getting my hide punctured for the sake of a feeling I'd been avoiding long before Kim showed up. If you went all the way to the top of the most tempting mountain for the high ecstasy of it, you'd have to come down one way or another, and the pain of that descent, I well knew, could be excruciating.

On the night that Kim drove me home from Sun Foot in her used dream car, she told me, "You knew I'd like Keet. In fact, I think I'm in love."

"You couldn't do better," I said, and certainly meant it. There was no envy. I was sad with knowing that Kim was untouchable until she decided otherwise. And that took time, maybe a very long time to fade those surreal days.

"Why hasn't some lucky woman snatched up a big beauty like Keet?" Kim asked in a pondering voice.

I thought a minute about how I could answer without violating my friend's privacy.

"Well...I think Keet was once pretty taken with a little rodeo queen...broke her neck in a freak accident that had nothing to do with her talent. Since then he just tends to like women in general and skips the particular."

"Oh, that's so sad...a very sad story, Griff.

"And as to you..." she went on after some hesitation, and I thought, oh boy, here we go, an examination of my past. But I'm fairly adept at politely skirting my personal history, so I wasn't overly concerned.

"When I first watched you jetting up the Rogue...and listened to you wooing the passengers, I thought you were

some kind of liberal conservative. Then later, I thought you might be more of a conservative liberal. But, no, you defy labels. I only know how very much I don't know -- I think there's quite a lot. You're sociable but not a joiner, are you? I don't imagine you belong to anything."

"Just myself. No, I'm with Groucho; I wouldn't belong to any club that'd have the likes of me."

"Oh, but you can't fool me with droll put-downs. There's a lot of complicated you inside that skin. I know you're a very kind person with a great sense of humor, loyal to your friends. What thousand and one other things are you, Griff? Tell me some...please. My knowledge of you is running dry."

Her constrained voice reminded me of how we both really wanted no complicated involvement. My own complicity and sudden intimate knowledge of her made for a difficult relationship, deeper than either of us really knew how to handle without a chance to pull back a safe distance. I had more of her than she had of me. But in a way, by trying to equalize us, she was going against both of us. Her eyes held to the road, her restless hands sliding over the wheel. I looked out my window, down at the river surface flashing quicksilver blue chips of moon. Beneath the dark water in calm holds, the steelhead were resting, their long silver bodies pointing into ceaseless current, their fins barely moving, renewing their strength, certain of the way home. It had taken a lifetime of innocent, foolish, selfish, frequently involuntary, occasionally useful, always unique, sometimes very painful, but often rewarding experiences to arrive at the me of the present moment. Out of the definite randomness I'd discovered fairly early on, I created my own kind of order,

without much analgesic. Almost home, I rode out my unwillingness to tackle any part of my history. Then we ascended to my high cabin. Kim cut the engine, and I heard Belle's single bark coming from the veranda. In the closing silence, I answered somewhat unfairly, holding to the sparest truth with little chance for further scrutiny.

"I'm just a fly-fisherman with a dog...trying to live on a hill that has the only view of the world I want."

Wayne and I were on our way to a small farm northeast of town. This night's road gleamed wet, and the rain threw back our light beams like silver buckshot scatter. We were troubleshooting -- I was hoping that wasn't an accurate pun -- at the insistence of an allegedly abused wife and son.

There were a lot of farms that matched our destination, worn buildings showing the dilapidation of continuously missing profit, built by long gone relatives in a more prosperous or at least more promising era. Small farms were now just a reminder of old country life. A few were owned by city folk -- those were nearly always handsome nostalgic recreation. A few more were owned by the elderly, slowly growing as rickety as their buildings and hopeful of collapsing simultaneously. Others were owned by a restless and rough breed of angry descendants who took the land for granted and were suspicious of the outside, with their shotguns at the ready and trouble always brewing; their discontent created it, and they fed on it. Actually, most of the real, semi-profitable small farms lived on only in old brown tintypes. The monolithic agribusiness that devoured them was itself now competing with the aggressive marketing of what used to be called the Third World.

We sloshed through deep ruts in a gravel entrance road and pulled into a weed-filled yard that was more accurately a cemetery for ancient and worn out farm machinery. The family dwelling, an off-plumb old saltbox, hadn't seen paint in decades. All the lights were on and the door was wide open. There was no sign of life, but a pervasive air of unrest, as if some finality had just occurred and the whole place was in shock.

Wayne and I got out of the vehicle and stood listening. I heard something and turned my flashlight toward a looming old barn that had a little red paint still in evidence and a sagging roof. Sobbing from the barn. Then we both heard a loud male voice in the house. We had our guns unholstered.

"You wanta check the house while I see what's going on out here?" I said. "Leave that front door open."

"Right. Careful out there, Griff."

I watched Wayne cautiously enter the house and heard him talking in a level tone before I went toward the barn.

I edged around a sliding door leaning off its track and crept through the shadows thrown out by one dusty naked bulb hanging in a back stall. The sharp, damp earth smell of the barn instantly sent me back to a root cellar I'd played hide and seek in as a little towhead. Crouching low, I moved in and slowly stood up behind one of the stanchion posts. I looked down inside. My stomach muscles tightened up, and I holstered my gun fast.

A boy of about eight or nine was on his knees hunched over a dark mass in the straw. The blond straw and the back wall were splattered red. The boy had gotten blood on him. His hands were stroking the blood-clotted chestnut withers of a little colt with its head blown to hamburger.

"Jesus," I whispered. "Jesus Christ!"

He turned his face slowly up to me, tears mingling with blood, and the look in his innocent, wide blue eyes was a knife in the heart.

"He didn't have to. He didn't have to. It was just mean...it was rotten mean." His body jerked with sobs. "Zig didn't...he didn't eat that much, but dad said... Anyway, I was...I was gonna give him away."

"Come on out of here," I said, moving over the straw and pulling the boy up by his thin, quivering arms. "Let him rest now. Come on. Let him rest."

I put my hand on his shoulder and walked him slowly through the barn and toward the house while I talked.

"My name's Griff. What's yours?"

"I'm not gonna stay here anymore. I'm gonna run away. They can't stop me. Nobody can stop me."

"Can't I at least have a name?"

"Dale." The boy was silent, then a rush of hot anger spewed out. "I'd like to do it to him...get a gun and--"

"No you wouldn't. Anyone who loves something that much isn't a killer. You could hardly kill a mouse, Dale, let alone your own father."

The nearing light of the house shone on his bloody face. I pulled out my handkerchief and started to wipe away some of the dark, tear-streaked blood. He yanked the crumpled white linen out of my hand.

"I can clean my own face." He stood scrubbing at his face and hands, then held out the handkerchief and said, "You want this dirty old mess?"

"Keep it."

He looked at the open door of the house and backed up. "I'll never forgive him as long as I live. I hate him, and

I'll never forgive him."

I decided that for the moment the boy didn't have to go back into the house. His father would probably be leaving it manacled soon enough.

"Your father hit you?"

"You mean now or...all the other times?"

"Did he hurt you tonight?"

"Sure. I tried to stop him. I tried to--" He was thinking of the colt and struggling to hold back tears.

"It's all right to cry. Just tell me if there's any place you're hurting bad."

"He...he... I got a kick in the ribs."

I lifted his shirt and shined my flashlight on the puffy blue mark along his right set of ribs. It was red around the edges, and I could feel it in my own rib cage.

"We'll have a doctor look at that. Things are going to be better for you, Dale. I promise you. Go sit in your family car there." I pointed to a blue, mud-spattered Dodge with several years of wear, parked beside the house. "I think maybe your mother will be joining you in a while."

Inside, Wayne got up from the lumpy Colonial-style sofa, stuck his note pad in his chest pocket, and came over to me.

"Mrs. Harner has a bleeding scalp, some hair missing, a black eye, and a split lip. She wants her husband out of here. Neither of them has been drinking."

I looked over at a thin woman in a purple sweatshirt and black slacks, sitting on the sofa, staring at the floor. Her dark blond hair hung down around her narrow face, and her hands were rigidly held together beneath tight lips.

"Mr. Harner is in the bedroom lying on the floor. No

guns in there. I found an empty shotgun. Claims he's dying of overwork and his family has turned against him. There's a little girl, but she's in town with her grandmother."

"Boy has to learn!" Mr. Harner shouted from the bedroom.

"He hurt his son, shot his colt," I said quietly to Wayne.

"Mr. Harner!" I called. "Will you please come out here."

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Harner answered.

"Out here now!" Wayne ordered.

We heard cursing, then the balding unshaven father appeared in his stocking feet, a holey T-shirt, and jeans.

"Hey, I can't get that kid to learn anything," he said, leaning against the door jamb and scratching his head. "I'm a poor man, a working man, and he wants pets. We can't have pets around here. That kid's gotta learn."

"What?" I asked. "What does he have to learn? How to get mad enough to shoot a healthy domestic animal? How to kick a child's ribs in?"

"Listen, I'm teachin' him the facts of life."

"Looks like the main thing you've taught him so far is how to be miserable," Wayne said. "We're taking you in, Mr. Harner. We know it's probably not going to solve a darn thing here in the long run, but your wife is afraid of you, and the situation certainly calls for it."

"Arrest me for shooting that worthless expense?" He gave us a nervous grin and shook his head in disbelief.

I walked over to his wife, lifted her lowered head, and gently turned her face toward her husband, the side with the bruised eye and split lip. "For this and for your

son and for the colt."

"I told her to stay out of it. She shouldn't have tried to stop me. And sure as hell not my kid."

"Says you, bud. If you want a change of underwear get it now. You're going to the county jail," Wayne said.

"Hey boys, I ain't never been arrested in my life."

"That should be a clue as to how far you've slipped," I said.

I followed Harner into the bedroom and watched him yank out an entire drawer of underwear. Socks and shorts were hanging over the tilting drawer as he tried to wriggle into his shoes without letting go. With shoestrings dragging, he started out the door, the drawer tucked high under his arm while he alternately grinned in defiance and tried to force air into a jaunty whistle without success. He was on the edge, heading for the danger zone.

"I don't think you'll be needing a year's supply just yet," I advised as he rushed through the front door.

"Sorry!" Wayne called, "You'll have to put that down. You've got to hear your rights and get cuffed, Mr. Harner."

Harner stopped in the yard with his back to us, stood there a minute in silence, then grunted and tossed the drawer high into the air. T-shirts, jockey shorts, and socks came sailing down everywhere, into mud puddles, spread over weeds, and flung onto derelict farm machinery. One luminous pair of shorts with both leg holes peering back at us, hung prophetically from the hydraulic lift of a manure scoop. The shadowy yard looked like wash day in an old pioneer community, except that it was dark and it was raining and Mr. Harner, now lying face down on the ground, had lost it completely.

After a night of rain came a dazzling sunrise. While my jet boat passengers were looking for bears, I let Wayne's and my brief experiences of life at the Harner place drift into my thoughts. Harner was a hard worker all right, but he'd never learned how to be a decent husband or father. Pushed to the brink by debt and a succession of failures, all the worst that was in him took full possession, and his wife and son took the punishing brunt.

Wayne and I had decided not to wait for any medical assistance. I got in the Harners' car and drove Mrs. Harner and Dale to the hospital, and Wayne headed on down to the county jail with Harner. The boy had two cracked ribs. He and his mother were patched up and spent the night at the hospital in peace and quiet. They both needed counseling, and I sent Family Services over to look in on them before they went home the next day.

On my way to the office in the afternoon, I was again thinking about Dale. Those sky-blue eyes floating up out of innocence and dissolving over bloody death haunted me. How long before there was nothing left to save? I wondered if Keet might possibly have something for him to do around the ranch, maybe a young foal to nurse along. The boy needed substantial positive events in his life. Things denied but easy to give. Late that afternoon when I got home and changed my clothes, I decided to call Keet. Just as I was reaching for the phone, it rang, and life jumped the tracks again.

"Griff, it's Kim. Oh God, I so hate to bother you, but I need to talk to you." Her voice was high and thin

with panic. A different voice, one I'd never heard before.

"Everything okay up there?" I asked with a heart that was suddenly cramming a lot more beats into the minute.

"Everything's okay but me. Something happened, and I'm really afraid...really scared out of my mind."

"But otherwise you're okay right now?"

"I'm all right...can you come? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Stop apologizing, Kim. I'll be there as soon as I can," I said, knowing I was the only one in the world she had to call, and regretting that singularity to the point of self-castigation. Here I was finding counseling for a family in severe decline when Kim, who needed counseling and comfort in the worst way, was essentially going it alone.

It was a grim evening with gray, fading skies. Along the road to Ed's place the dark trees reached for me with threatening limbs, and I felt grim and gray and fading myself. I knew I wasn't really there for Kim, because it involved landing in a place I didn't want to be. Maybe I'd already landed there and was just fighting to get out. I wasn't a father or a brother or a counselor for her. I was a man who'd thought of doing, however desirous of giving pleasure, something monsters had done to her. When I figured it that way, my stomach churned and turned me away from her with a huge wallop of guilt.

She was standing on the deck when I came up the walk, wearing gray slacks and a black sweater. Her neatly combed hair fell in a striking coil over her black, cable-knit-covered shoulders. Ferine jet pupils temporarily overspread the honey amber of her eyes, large almond shapes filled with fear and dread. She couldn't resist briefly

touching my arm with a quick sense of relief when I came toward her. Her hand dropped back, and I reached for it without thinking. The first time we'd touched since that lightning quick hug of thanks for the car. I felt the cold, nervous fingers knot up in my fist, but I didn't let go.

"Your hand is like ice, Kim. Can't you get this place warm?"

"It's warm enough. That's what happens to me when I'm in a state of...when I'm--"

"Come back in. Let me throw some more wood in that big ornery stove...get you warm."

While I stoked the fire, she poured us coffee in yellow mugs, and there was a blue plate of cranberry bread cut in slices, placed in the center of the table. We sat down, and I sipped coffee while Kim watched, frozen in her chair.

"You make this?" I asked, holding up a sugary bread chunk full of dark cranberries. "It's delicious."

"Yes...I made it yesterday. Yesterday was...was very different from today."

"All right, what happened today?"

She lifted her hands up to the table and braided her fingers so stiffly together the knuckles were white, then shot me a look that went in like an arrow.

"I know you're not going to like this, but I...a...I stopped in at the Sand Dollar Cafe."

"No, you're right, I'm not real excited about you going in there. That's a Gold Beach hub, where folks who've known each other all their lives run up against transient types just passing through. I know you're lonely, Kim, but why the hell did you have to go in there?"

"I might as well confess. I guess you're my confessor now, too, aren't you, Griff?"

Her eyes traveled over my face, and I felt that erratic hammering again, my heart acting like a fist. I lifted my cup, took several swallows, and said nothing, giving her back a straight-on questioning look.

"I'd just been talking to Barb. I never really say very much. She just blurts out everything. She told me about Faye...that Faye was your...your--"

My tilted chair slammed down on its front legs. I swore, keeping it low, but shaking my head.

"I wanted to see what she looked like...just a quick glance. I was curious...she's so pretty. It was silly and I'm embarrassed. I'd never have told you, if I hadn't... God, now I'm in deep trouble and--"

"Kim, where is this going?" I interrupted, and heard the bark in my voice, way too angry. "Did I drive all the way out here for this?" I asked, knowing full well Faye wouldn't scare anyone and that the worst was still to come.

Kim's face had gone white. She couldn't respond.

"Okay, you saw someone in the Sand Dollar, someone you know. That it?"

"The one and only time I went in there it had to be the time that... God, those eyes...those smutty eyes on me. I'll never forget...like...like evil itself...poison pits of radioactive waste. He lifted his head and looked straight at me. I know he saw me. I know he recognized me."

Her body rocked forward. She dropped her head into her hands, then slowly raised it without looking at me. "If I could have shot him there...if I'd had my pistol, I'd probably have shot him right there. I wouldn't have felt

anything. I wouldn't have felt a thing."

One of the men who had molested Kim was hanging around the Sand Dollar? "What the hell was he...? Wait a minute, was he alone? Who was he with?"

"I don't know. I never saw the other one before. He looked rough, like the fishermen in there...commercial fishermen. Faye had her hand on his shoulder...pouring coffee. I suppose it was the man Barb mentioned."

Of course it was. I asked what I already knew. "Faye's friend...did he have a sandy-gray mustache, and was he maybe wearing a red baseball cap?"

"I guess you know him, Griff."

"Yes...unfortunately. He's... It might well be that the man you recognized didn't recognize you, Kim. That bastard is up here on business, not after you. You're pretty paranoid, so it's just possible you only *think* he recognized you."

"I wish it were true. How I wish I could believe that, but I don't think so."

"What did you do when he looked at you?"

"I looked down, pretended to laugh at someone I didn't know, and edged my way out of there without ever looking back. I jumped in my car and drove home so fast I thought I'd end up in the river. At least it would have kept that depraved...that...that...from getting to me. I think now it's only a matter of time."

She had pulled herself up straight and smudged off tears with the back of her hand, trying for stoicism.

"Kim...I'm sorry, but I need to know some things...I've got to know his name and what the man looks like...the one who...the one you think recognized you."

Kim stared at her hands, then out the window, anywhere

but at me as she spoke. "He calls himself Marco...Bologna. He's...stocky, medium height, large-boned, straight black hair...broad nose. Eyes...a sort of curdled green...the color of pond slime. Bushy eyebrows, thick lips, mouth like a...a carnivorous fish...a thin white scar above the...the top lip. Is that okay? Is that enough for you, Griff? Oh, just thinking about it makes me cringe... I can't--"

"Enough. Get a few clothes together, and leave some food for E.A. I'll have to check in on him from time to time. You're coming with me. I'm not all that sure that it's any safer at my place, but at least I can keep an eye on you there. Bring the cranberry bread," I added with a wink, but there was no rewarding smile.

For a while it was nice, too nice. I'd come home and find my supper waiting. I didn't want it to become a habit or make her wait on me, so I started eating before I got there and coming in later. When there was no night patrol duty, there was plenty of piled-up desk work at the office. The only thing I swallowed at home was my shame when Kim fed my half of her gourmet meals to Belle.

"Don't waste food," I said one night. "Just cook for yourself and don't wait for me. I get tied up."

"Belle likes my cooking," she said with a wistful smile, getting up from her knees where she'd been dumping my herbed wild rice stuffed chicken breast into Belle's bowl. It could have been placed in the freezer but that wasn't the point she was making.

I stared at Belle wolfing it down and hated myself.

"Just give her what she's used to and don't do this,"

I said. "It's wasteful. I mean, thank you, but don't."

"All right!" she said, slamming the dinner plate down on the counter. Then she looked up at me, her wild eyes full of glinting black pupil. "Selfish...stubborn! Why couldn't you let me do this? I need to do things. Don't you even realize that much? How can you give but take nothing? It isn't fair. It isn't!...isn't! What am I? Social work? What am I, anyway!"

"Hey. Hey! Hey!" I finally shouted, working hard to get her attention. She'd lost sight of me completely, turning inward and raging, back to punishing herself for past history. "We don't have to fight," I said. "We don't have any reason to fight. Don't you understand that? You must, you're so damned smart."

She had dressed herself nicely, attractively, as she always did, choosing carefully from the scant wardrobe she'd carried away in panic-stricken haste: a pale olive silk blouse, black trousers of a kind of crepe material, skimpy black sandals thonged between her perfect toes. Her hair had been a shimmering even roll over her shoulders, until she tossed it back in a fit of anger, her lambent honey eyes blazing in fury at my calculated self-protection. She wore no makeup, her eyebrows pale as her hair, her smooth cheeks flushed now but her skin nearly always like the new petals of a creamy, pink-tinted flower, at its center her small delicate nose. Proximity wasn't easy without quick heat, the hot recollection more and more frequent, causing me to embarrass myself alone in the shower. We both understood everything very well but that didn't make us proficient at dealing with it. She was shaking with anger.

"Go sit down in the living room, Kim. I'll clean up

the kitchen."

"Why? Why should you clean up the kitchen, when you've been working all day, haven't eaten a thing here, and I'm the one who made the mess?"

"Go read something," I said. "You need to calm down."

"Oh...read something," she said with a mocking voice and a quick shake of her head. "Literature as sedative. Please allow me to apologize, Richard. I *am* reading something from your library. I wonder if you've read it. Well, of course, you must have: *The Well-tempered Angler*?"

"And you can learn a lot from that book," I said, winking at her. I was laughing and then she was laughing.

"I'm sorry...sorry...sorry...sorry..."

"Cut it out. Go read," I said, rolling up my sleeves.

Kim was depressed and scared and going without sleep. I couldn't convince her that she might not have been recognized by that lowlife slime bag. I wanted to find the bastard, blow him away out in the woods somewhere, and let his carcass rot like deadwood. He was too contaminated for buzzard food. On the other hand, I knew what was going down. I couldn't mix it up with any personal vendetta, but if he was still around and loose afterward, he'd get clipped and locked up for a serious stretch. I'd see to it.

Late one night, after lying there listening to her trying hard not to wake me up with a midnight breakdown, I got up and put on my robe. I dragged Belle off the foot of my bed by the collar, trotted her down to Kim's room, and pulled her up onto the bed where Kim was thrown against a stack of pillows weeping. Belle wriggled toward Kim and

obligingly licked her face. Kim's arms reached out and wound around her.

"You might as well have her company. She's warm and friendly...and fairly decent security," I said. "Ever thought of trying some sleeping pills?"

"I'm, sor--"

"No, don't. Don't apologize anymore. I can't take it," I said. "I'll get you some pills tomorrow."

One late October night a couple of weeks after Kim came to stay, there was a wild windstorm that blew across my hilltop with ear-shattering high velocity. In the shank of the night, a limb broke half way off one of the alders and began tapping against the window in Kim's room. I heard her scream. Then Belle let out a commiserating howl.

When I got to her room and switched on the light, Kim, in a long, high-necked, white flannel nightgown, was backed into a corner with the largest carving knife I owned held in front of her. Unbeknownst to me, she'd been sleeping with it under her pillow or possibly the mattress. The knife was in one hand and her .32 was in the other.

"Don't shoot me," I said, almost smiling, but it was too pitiful. She certainly didn't plan on going down without a fight. Belle was planted on the bed with her hair standing straight up. I walked over and started to loosen the knife from Kim's grip, surprised because it wasn't easy.

"Let go of that."

Her rigid fingers were clenched white and her whole body was shaking, flooded with adrenaline. I unglued the knife from her incredibly strong grip, tossed it on the night table, and went after the pistol.

"Come on, Kim, give me that."

I eased the pistol out of her hand, realizing at the same time that Kim was not really there. Her eyes were starting to roll back in her head. I carried her to the bed, laying her flat and elevating her feet with a pillow then rubbing my fingers lightly over her neck. Finally her eyes opened. She had expected to be dead by then. I sat back and looked at her.

"What am I going to do with you? I thought you were a brave country girl. That noise is just a broken limb. See? Look over there. It's scraping on the glass. It'll be doing that until some time after daylight...as long as the wind blows, because I'll be damned if I'm going out there in the dark and take care of it. Are you okay now?"

"Yes...I'm...okay."

"I thought fainting went out with women's lib," I said, aiming for a little humor. "It's a very primitive way of escape. When you can't handle any more you just shut down."

"I realize...I know that...I hate it. It's happened since I was a little girl, but not often...until now. My metabolism is abnormal. It's something to do with minerals, and...and also mild hypoglycemia. It gets worse when I'm stressed. I've never ever thought of myself as a poor helpless little...jellyfish...but I...I was so scared...the thought of them coming back...of not knowing when... I don't want to die from a knife...a bullet...out of nowhere."

She sat up, and I said, "Don't get up too fast. Probably you shouldn't drink much alcohol...and maybe watch your sugar intake."

"I know what I'm supposed to do. I think it runs in my family...my mother used to just...we'd be in a

restaurant and suddenly she was sliding under the table. Now I guess because of all this...it's getting worse."

"Take a couple of deep breaths. Get under the covers. Try and relax. I'm putting this monster cleaver back in the kitchen, Kim."

I never bothered to tell her where I was keeping my loaded semiautomatic.

"Your mother left a message on your machine today. You haven't called her in several days," Kim said when I arrived home one evening.

"So now I've got an extra conscience living in my house," I said, attempting a lighthearted response.

I went into my den, closed the door, and rang up my mother.

"Is everything all right, Richard?" mother asked in her soft low-registered voice.

"Everything's fine, Mom...guess I just got busy. Sorry. How are you, queen bee?"

"Buzzing around like mad, as usual. Jackie is coming over tomorrow, and I want you to be here, Richard."

"Why do I have to be there?"

"How long has it been since you and Jackie saw each other?...since the three of us saw each other at the same time? I just think it's nice for us to get together once in a while...bring each other up to date. I've finally managed to pry Jackie off that municipal bench. Can you join us for lunch?"

"I...a...huh...yeah...yes."

"For goodness sake, Richard, what on earth was all that indecision? Is it going to be that difficult for you

to get yourself over here?"

"No, I can make it. I'll be there at noon. I was just wondering if I could..."

"What?...for heaven's sake, *what?*"

"There's someone...if I could bring someone along?"

"Faye? Is it Faye?"

"No, mom, it isn't Faye."

"So Barb was right. Kim Bailey, I think she said."

"Mom...mother? Damn it! This whole county is really spinning on itself."

"Never mind, dear. I don't know a thing and I didn't ask either. You know Barb. She thinks it's part of her job...the way the Pony Express used to carry the mail and pass along news and rumors."

"Rumors, all right."

"My friend is pretty reclusive and I just thought it would be nice to get her out...and you're such a sweet friendly person...great company and--"

"Oh honey, butter me up good. I'm not at all choosy when it comes to compliments. I'll see the both of you tomorrow at noon. Bye-bye, dear."

A few minutes later, I had to gingerly talk Kim into coming with me, explaining her fears away by telling her what a soft gentle understanding creature my hardily enduring mother could be, and usually was.

"Look, this isn't *guy takes girl to meet mother*," I explained with a hearty megalaugh. "You need a little social contact, that's all."

Her porcelain pale cheeks actually flushed with embarrassment. I almost wished it could be what I'd assured her it wasn't, if only to bolster her deflated ego. I never expected the disturbed response, but I should have.

"No, I'm certainly not that kind of material, am I?"

"What kind of material? You can't mean good enough to meet my mother. What? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, I guess it was just the way you laughed. I know I'm in a sort of unique position here...being helped...being cared for by someone who...who was nearly forced into it."

"Don't hurt so easily, Kim. You're too sensitive...but I guess I understand why. No one forces me into anything. At least you ought to know that by now."

"Oh God, there I go again...like a beggar. You know what's so awful?" The disarming combination of honesty and a sudden stubborn pride held my attention. "I hate this feeling, this beholden feeling for your kindness...your charitable...generous...sacrifice. Oh, that sounds so ungrateful. What do you get out of this besides a big threat to your own comfortable existence? That sounds like begging, too, doesn't it?...like I should be such a really remarkable person you wouldn't give it a second thought. Oh, I'd better stop. I don't know where I'm headed. The invitation sounded so...innocent...familiar and simple and normal -- the way I was...but not the way you think of me...not the way you've ever seen--"

"How the hell do you know what I think? You're too busy making up my mind. Simple? No, I certainly don't think that. Innocent and normal? You are, Kim. Familiar?" I laughed. "Well, not entirely...but that's okay, too. Do you have to keep punishing yourself? Hey, you're hurting enough. The bad part of your past, the part you couldn't help, means nothing to me where your character and worth are concerned. Get it? Do you get it?"

"I guess...I've got it."

"Well try and hang onto it so we don't do this again."

Showing concern without it leading to something deeper and broader was becoming a delicate piece of work. I'd rather have bet on teasing a wet fly over a fast water surface without sinking it.

"Griff...thanks for including me. I'll try to...use higher brain function...stay out of the *Slough of Despond* from now on...but if you catch me drowning in mire, please ignore it." She actually smiled enough for dimpled cheeks.

Control was tenuous. I was staring, mentally listing as many indications of a fine intelligence as I could tote up in a few seconds. The slender physicality of her was nearly lost beneath my filched green flannel shirt, needed, she'd been quick to explain, for warmth not for fun, and draped over her navy jersey like a baggy cardigan.

She went over to my new window to catch the sunset, standing with her hand sliding over Belle's blissful head. The two of them there, turned away from me and strikingly backlit by a diminishing orange light, were a curious exclusion. All at once, I felt shut out and irritated. I walked over and lifted my hand to the back of her neck.

"What are you thinking...feeling right now, Kim?"

"What are you feeling?" she asked without flinching or turning around.

I knew in an instant what she meant and sighed, wondering how many times I would have to explain.

"You think any of this is revulsion? My God, human communication is pitiful. All the restraint I have is pure consideration for your happiness...your well-being."

She turned around and looked at me, lowered her eyes, and then looked again, trying to believe the simple truth, probably in the same way I was trying to imagine myself as

uninvolved.

"Please have another piece of cake," my mother said, holding the plate in front of me and winking at Kim.

"Mother, don't try and make Rich gain weight. His vanity couldn't stand it," my sister Jackie teased.

"I don't think Griff...Richard is vain at all," Kim said, her cheeks blooming with a very faint crimson at her boldness with blood relatives.

"I've got a smidgen of vanity," I admitted, snatching my second piece of marble cake, "but it has more to do with steelhead than paunch."

"Paunch you will never have," Jackie said. Her broad laughing mouth displayed large, even white teeth, and my father's intelligent blue-blue eyes flashed back at me from beneath her thick, more red than blond waves.

"Your marble cake is really good," Kim said to mother. "What is it that's so wonderful about coffee and cake and afternoon talks? My mother and I used to..." She stopped herself mid-sentence and glanced at my mother's cherry wood baby grand. "What a beautiful piano. You play, of course?"

"Don't I wish," my sprightly mother said, shaking her head of feathery white hair and holding up two arthritic hands. "Oh, sometimes I still plunk out a little stiff-jointed Chopin...when nobody's around. I do keep it tuned. Do you play, Kim?"

"I haven't in a long time. I used to like rags...Jelly Roll Morton...and on and on and on." Her laugh was shy.

"Will you do us the honor?" my mother coaxed, standing

and straightening her beige sweater, then walking briskly over the buff Persian carpet to flip the piano lid.

"I don't think I have enough fortitude to disgrace myself in quite that manner," Kim said with a raised eyebrow and a fetching, uncertain twist of her head.

"I for one won't know if you're disgracing yourself," Jackie admitted, "since I dawdled and fumbled and dreamed my way through all my generous piano lessons."

"And my piano lessons were nonexistent," I offered.

"That's right. You absolutely refused to even sit at the piano bench," my mother lamented. "But you did enjoy my playing when my hands worked properly.

"Come on, Kim dear, let's hear a rag or two."

Kim was finally brave enough to get herself to the piano and settle on the bench in a very professional looking manner. She was wearing the same slender brown wool skirt and taffy sweater she'd worn at Wayne's, but even in my mother's large, comfortable living room facing on rounded, misty green hills, she looked sophisticated for a so-called country girl, owning a natural grace. How little it ever mattered what stereotyped place a person came from when they had that. Poised against the warm walnut paneling, her pale presence, with its unexpected vitality, decorated the baby grand artfully. But she played in the same manner, like an artist, maybe even like a professional. My own enthusiasm didn't include fine distinctions, but my mother looked quite impressed and so did Jackie. Then she played and sang an English ballad, and we all looked very surprised, because we were. Her high, passionate voice was a vibrating shaft that would have pierced the stoniest heart, clear and soulful, holding onto me the way startling songs of unseen birds always did.

At the end, her bright eyes held the possibility of tears, the reason she had tried to refuse.

"Oh, such a treat! I wish I could disgrace myself like that," Jackie said, giving Kim a quick hug.

"You've sung professionally," my mother affirmed, taking hold of Kim's nervous hand and squeezing.

"Oh...well just...I've sung for people," Kim answered, dropping her head briefly and then glancing at me.

"For lucky people," I corrected, my responding look loaded with admiration no celebrity would ever get.

"It's going down day after tomorrow evening," Sheriff Brandle told me behind the closed door of his office.

"They know exactly when it's coming in, and they're going after the transport same time they haul ass after Frank on his way in. You know Griff, I actually feel sorry for the poor bastard."

The first thing I thought of was Faye. What if somehow she ended up on Frank's boat? I knew she was completely innocent. If Frank was that stupid I'd shoot him myself.

"If you're worried about Faye...it's for certain she'll be indisposed. The wife's taking her over to the Harner place at just the right time...going to show Mrs. Harner how to make cranberry relish."

That's why you shouldn't even mentally punch a decent person when you're mad, I reminded myself; because the next day you might feel like giving the poor devil a hug.

Coming back from some routine work late that same afternoon, I passed the crimson cranberry bogs where the corralled cranberries floated ready for loading. Fall

harvest season had crept up on the southern coast yet one more time, and I'd hardly noticed. There was a feathery band of red clouds on the horizon, and shafts of bleeding light made the bogs look like ponds filled with rubies. I remembered how I used to tease Faye about all the creative things she could do with cranberries, and was thankful she'd be doing some of them while Frank was getting busted. I let all of that go, staring out at the clear, candy-red autumn light glazing my world. I could almost taste Kim's tangy sweet, moist cranberry bread and realized I was hungry. The two of them really excelled with food, turning it into a very useful art. But they didn't have much luck with men.

The setting sun made me think of something else, Kim's promised sunset ride. Tomorrow would be a good time for it, and I had to talk to Keet anyway.

"What'd you do today?" I asked Kim in a perfunctory manner as I came through the door. I was headed for my bedroom to change and dig out my riding boots, but her answer stopped me in my tracks.

"I gave Belle a bath."

"Huh? She doesn't like them for some reason, so I usually let her cavort in the river...where she's a normal water-crazy Lab. How did you manage?"

"She was fine when I added bath salts and got the water the right temperature."

"Kim?...I think you're ruining my dog. How'd you get her to stay in the tub?"

"While she was soaking I read her Robert Service."

"You read her Robert..."

"Oh God, if you could see your face, Griff."

She stood with her arms akimbo and her head back, laughing, reveling in a wonderful deep satisfaction with herself. Her white shirt sleeves were rolled as if she'd just finished the job with Belle. I wanted to kiss her in the worst way, or the best way. Just one appreciative kiss.

"Okay, you got me," I said, taking the stairs two at a time with a wide grin that I kept to myself.

"I did give Belle a very enjoyable bath, Richard," she sang out in a light voice, hanging onto her pleasure.

"Enjoyable for which one of you?" I teased.

"Put on some jeans. Remember? We're going riding," I finally called down.

We rode single file with Keet point man on Chaser, then Kim ahead of me. She sat easy on Polka, very at home there, and I liked to look at her. No boots on her feet, instead moccasins. Almost at once, the two sensitive creatures had generated a graceful symbiotic relationship of maximum performance with minimum effort. Responsive and reliable, the young Appaloosa also had a spirited and playful personality, like Kim's best moods. Both desired freedom.

Overhead were clouds, but a band of blue in the western sky promised a sunset, maybe a dazzling one. Earlier, when we rode across a grain field side by side, our horses had brushed over stubble, scaring up a few chucking pheasants. Then we'd crossed the empty rising and dipping highway, and now we were on the narrow trail trenched in the rolling dunes. We were still going through

scrub pine, before the dunes opened up to sea grass and finally dropped down on the flat beach. The sound of crashing waves was growing louder, and above us, the occasional noise of a twittering nighthawk that had risen up and was diving for small prey. We were instinctively silent, enjoying the sounds of nature, breathing in the gently misted fresh salty air.

I watched Chaser and Polka haunch back and spring down a precipitous sliding dune into a very narrow sand cut, a tricky place. I followed, leaning aft on Little Bit, who liked to rush short steep places and get it over with in a hurry. At the bottom, he wanted to prance over his accomplishment in the heady salt air. Not a good place in the narrow trench.

"Cut it out, Bit," I advised. "Wait till we get on the beach." At the sound of my voice his ears rolled back and forward in the language of agreement. He plodded on in obedience like a good trail hack, even though we both knew he was so much more.

The sun had dropped from the clouds and was hovering on the horizon by the time we reached the waves spreading over the long flat shingle. I heard Kim exclaim in a high sound of pleasure as we dropped down out of the last dune. The spired dark rock formations rose up from the water in a gathering pink mist, their edges lined with crimson light. We reined in and sat staring at the watermelon sun as it oozed into sea, turning the spraying waves to fire flames.

"Come down this way," Keet called above the rhythm of the waves.

The sea wind chilled. I zipped up my jacket and rode north slowly. I was well familiar with the sight Keet found so impressive, and desirous of watching Kim's

reaction.

A massive volcanic tower shot up out of the sea like a burning torch, but at its base was a giant hole bored through by millennia of wave thrashings and, in the right viewing position, it neatly framed the pleating red ball of sun.

Kim gasped and turned to us with a dreamy smile, touching her forehead and speaking in a reverent voice. "Now I've got that hung in my very own picture gallery."

Her cheeks and blowing hair were pink-tinged, her eyes rose quartz, her white sweater the pale pastel of wild roses. It was a fleeting portrait too rich and sweet for reality. But I enjoyed it anyway, just sitting and looking at her with the misty rock spires at her back, until I heard Chaser moving away from us at Keet's low, succinct command.

"You realize you're riding a pink pony?" I said to Kim, breaking the spell.

Then we were all in a race, an unofficial contest of wild horsemanship. Little Bit wanted to win and would have, but I didn't need it. Neither did Keet. We soon left it to Kim. She obliged us, moving ahead with a squeal of delight. Little Bit was all powerful in a medium length race, and Chaser was formidable, but maybe, with Kim aboard, that tough little Appaloosa could have beaten us in the long run.

On the way back, the black scrub pines burned at their edges with the last raspberry streaks of sun; it winked at us, shooting radial laser beams out of the dark branches as we moved along in the dim light. In among the plodding hoof thuds and creaking leather, I heard a sigh from Kim. A sound of awakening pain. A sound of regret. Darkness

brought melancholia. When we had crossed the road, we saw the buttery harvest moon rising over the grain field, as fat and sated as if he'd just left a banquet on the other side of the world.

"Oh lovely...and isn't that Mars?" Kim said, her spirits lifting a little.

When we reached the yard, I went in and lit Keet's expertly laid fire while he fed the horses and put away the tack. Kim insisted on helping him. Although the fire warmed invitingly, I sat out on the frigid deck and stared at the slowly shrinking moon, glad for the cold. I heard Kim laugh and was glad for that.

Admittedly, there was a fire blazing in the groin from temptation and restraint, but there was also a fire in the belly and a fire in the brain. A habit forming. That wasn't good. Keet knew it. His earlier remedy had been for me to go back to Faye as soon as Frank was nailed. But even though I adored Faye and loved lying down with her, that was cruel and selfish and very unfair, especially now that I knew how much she wanted what she wanted. Recently, I'd created a dangerous proximity, dutifully enough, but it landed me in a position of constant denial. Denial of need and denial that there was anything to deny. Too late, I realized I couldn't back off without sending Kim down a very rough road. I couldn't resolve the problem. It was time I focused on something outside this narrow perimeter. I hoped to hell Keet and I would have to chase Frank to kingdom come. But then there was that nagging fear of what would happen to Kim while I was gone. Would I leave her to chance out of frustrated inaction? I'd never be able to live a decent life beyond harmful neglect. How much should I risk, and for what? For life, Griffen. For someone's

sweet life.

I'd had Kim come in her own car, so she could leave after our light supper of scrambled eggs à la Keet, by the fire. I needed to talk to Keet in private about the Coast Guard operation. We didn't talk very late, because we knew the next day might put us on a very taxing schedule.

After Kim left, we didn't mention her. Until at the end of our discussion Keet asked, "If you have to shit-kick, what are you going to do about Kim?"

"You, too, huh? Now that you've asked why don't you answer your own question. I don't presently have an answer."

"You love someone...you've taken on that gal, and you don't know, Griffish?"

"I don't *love someone*. I remember what love is."

"More denial, huh?"

"All right...I might be in some kind of thing with her. More like admiring the Mona Lisa from afar. She isn't well. She's lost a lot of herself, and I feel responsible for protecting what's left."

"What kind of shit is that, you phony bastard!"

"Wait a minute, Keet. Are you arguing for or against? Last time I saw you, it was definitely against."

"But against my advice you took on something here, Griffish. I know you think it's none of my business, but if you lift a broken animal off the ground, you've got a little responsibility there before you leave it alone."

"Responsibility...isn't that what I'm doing here, dammit? You've got a pretty low opinion of me, Keet."

"Wrong. I know who you are, pardner. Maybe it's just that right now your mouth isn't lined up with what's inside

your head. That's confusing. And it's all because of Betty. Somebody's gotta crack you out of that glacial ice before you freeze to death."

"Okay, you've had your say. I'll work it out. I don't very often tell you what to do, Keet."

"When I need it, tell me. That's what a friend does, right?...if he cares. Even if he has to shovel it with a stubborn cuss like you."

"I think you've been around Dirty Jerry a little too long. Better watch that, Keet old boy. Pretty soon you won't be fit for my genteel company."

I was actually smiling to myself on the way home. I saw how Kim had won Keet. Beyond true admiration, she was gratefully beholden. Survival needs make a person defer humbly to the gatekeepers. That's why patients so easily suck up to doctors. Kim didn't like that phenomenon, or the part that made her apologize so much. But wrapping his concern around Kim was easy for Keet; he loved all women unconditionally, starting with his wise mother, luckily for all the rest of them, the first good woman he encountered.

Climbing the hill, I saw no house lights on through the trees. When I pulled into the drive I noticed that the door of Kim's car was open. I got out and walked up to the car. Then I saw the bullet hole in the fractured windshield. I found Kim on the front lawn. With exploding heart, I sank down on my knees, examining her body all over and finding no blood. There was vomit on her sweater. I deduced that she'd been shot at, crawled away in a state of complete panic, vomited, and passed out. I carried her up to the house, finding the door still locked and Belle

howling inside. I got Kim settled on the couch, removed the soiled sweater she was wearing over her shirt, and went upstairs for my Glock, nearly tripping over a wildly excited Belle.

When I came down Kim was looking around the room in shock. She had started shaking badly. I fixed a warm washcloth and wiped her face. Then I brought her hot milk, fed it to her, and held her chilled-down body against me.

"Nobody came here," she said through chattering teeth. She thought that was important for me to know because of the Glock lying on the coffee table.

"I drove up to Ed's to check on E.A. Was followed on the road back...shot at. I hit the brakes...went down and just...huddled there. A car drove up...coming to...make sure...finish it. My heart almost stopped. Another car, a truck came along...then I was alone. I didn't come straight here...couldn't let anyone...follow me to you. I don't remember where I went... I got here somehow. Was I...what happened to me? Where was I?"

"Why did you have to feed that damned cat?" I said.
"I take care of that cat."

"Griff, I'm so sor--"

This time I stopped her apology with a silent mouth. But I couldn't stop myself. Her mouth was cold and I wanted it warm. Then I wanted it any way at all. Finally, I pushed her back on the pillows and said, "Now I'm sorry."

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm not sorry...not for that. I'm sorry for... Jesus Christ!" I said, standing up. "I don't know what I'm sorry for." I knew I was losing it. Too much adrenaline. Complete frustration. I didn't know if I could save Kim. If someone out there wanted her dead, I was in trouble.

"I don't want you to die, Kim. Don't die! I don't want you to die! And I don't want you to hurt anymore."

Her elusive, shadowy body worked itself around me, a little powerhouse of strength with a core of tremendous heat radiating from deep inside that slender frame of chilled flesh. A cool hand curved over the back of my neck and tugged. "Don't worry. Don't. Stop it please, Griff. God, it's painful...really painful."

I opened my eyes in my handsome pine-log bedroom that always smelled so richly of its pungent cedar closet, and smiled. Fool that I was, I was a happy man. I lay a moment thinking of the previous night, of how I'd carried Kim up to my room and warmed her shivering body in the best possible way, of how for a few hours we forgot the dangerous reality of serious obstacles. At first, I held back, letting her initiate all the wildness of our liberated emotions, then I was so ravenous I just managed to get my reckless hand into my night table drawer. Incoherent, mostly speechless, I urged my starving self on her, not an offering but a mutual breaking of fast. Gluttony. Our loaded silence made no irreversible promises. Between waves of euphoria and exhaustion, however, my thoughts toyed with a simple future, one geared to our similar tastes, but probably just good for wishful dreaming.

I found her note when I shambled down to drink the coffee she'd left on her way out of my life.

"Griff, I can't do this anymore. It's all been stolen. I haven't words to thank you for what you've done. And to thank you for last night, for what a part of me

wanted from almost the beginning. Once, I just had to survive. Now I have to think of you, too. Don't hunt for me. I'll be trying hard to live. I have a plan taking shape, and maybe I'll see you again. Please allow me to apologize one more time, because I feel so bad. I already miss you. I know we're committed to nothing. Kim."

I ran outside in my bare feet with the note still clutched in my hand. I looked inside the rarely used garage, and the Chevy was there. Careful to hide it from prying eyes before she left. Back inside, I saw the phone book lying by the phone and realized she'd called a cab. A cab to where? The bus station. She'd mentioned a bus before. What if the wrong person saw her, followed her? The poor kid's blood stopped feeding her brain when her panic button was pushed to the max. Could she make it? I threw on a shirt and jeans, pulled on my boots, ran outside and jumped into my rig. I drove down to the foot of my hill and stopped, staring into the trees with eyes that wouldn't focus. What was I going to do? Bring her back here and make it easy for the bastards? What was I going to do? Every second she was a little further away. If it made her safer... A part of me tore loose and roared after her. My hands gripped the steering wheel so hard I felt the knuckles cracking. I turned off the engine, got out, and left my rig sitting there. Belle came to meet me as I walked slowly back up to my empty house. I sat down on the front steps and put my arm around my worried dog.

"It's just us again, Belle. Probably for the best."

"Can you beat that? Frank's boat was empty," Jimmy said to me. His voice feeding into my phone ear sounded

more surprised than angry.

"When they boarded: nobody. We joined forces where we expected him to land. Nobody came ashore, and nobody showed up on land...not where we thought, at least. If Frank was just tryin' to save his hide, he couldn't swim that far, anyway. Could he? At night? In the cold and dark? No way."

"They use any dogs on shore?" I asked.

"Yeah, they tried the nose. Nothing."

I decided to have you out there, too, Griff, just in case. Where the hell were you? Nobody could reach you? You knew this was going down."

"I was ready, if needed. Had something I had to take care of first," I said, "but I got your message, and I'm here. Actually, I thought this was about the time you'd be asking...if at all."

"Hell, I don't know what to make of this. That boat was loaded. Coast Guard took it away. Suppose he just jumped off and drown? Nah, Frank's too stubborn to die that easy. Wonder if he had a smaller fast boat helping him. The Coast Guard says no. They did find his empty skiff floating by the seiner. So, he just flew away? Where the hell is he? Fish bait? You think? I don't believe it."

"You mind if I nose around a little on a few possible beachheads?" I said. "Sort of unofficially."

"Hell, no. That's just what I want. And it's official. Go to it, Griff. I'd sure like to see us wrap this up."

The Sheriff had to know that others would be along soon to take the place of whoever got caught, but he kept up the positive attitude. This heavy traffic never gets

wrapped up. Not when big cash is flowing. It just shifts.

I lifted my fly rod off the kitchen counter and headed for my den to put it away. After the first hard rain, the fall steelhead had started running, and I'd been running with them. Out in the cold Rogue, with boots but no waders, freezing my butt off on the wet banks and in tricky parts of the swollen river just to keep my head clear. The colder it got, the less I hurt, until I was damn near paralyzed. After a few small guys with plenty of energy, I reminded myself that a fighting trout gets eight times its normal endorphins for feel-good durability. That's what I needed. A wet black fly finally took a seven pound buck that nearly jerked my arm out of its socket. Heaven-sent when folks were down on their knees for two-pounders. His generous fight momentarily postponed my trip to misery, just that spectacular duel, finessing with a fine tapered leader that stayed in place. On another day I'd have been singing. When it was finished and my silver beauty was headed back upstream, I sat on the gravel with Belle, water in my boots and down my neck. At last, I was all over mercifully cold-retarded with bone-numbing inertia.

The next day, with a fix on the final position of Frank's empty boat, I calculated the swimming range normal scuba gear would allow and headed for a couple of places I thought he might have come ashore. I'd seen the new gear on Frank's boat when I boarded it on the day we played with Hercules' wrench. It surprised me enough to stay in my memory. I'd never heard of Frank going in for scuba-diving, and it wasn't something you'd find on most small seiners around the area.

I checked the more exposed place first and encouraged Belle to hunt around, too. Sometimes she turned up things with her curious nose. When I was satisfied there was nothing dumped or cached, and no sign of passage along that strip of beach, I moved down the coast to a place I thought more likely. A curving finger of land that would beckon to a wet-suited swimmer in a hurry to haul himself out. It was the spot I'd thought of first. A narrow sheltered reach out into the sea, and a perfect place to stow a survival pack. The fugitive could pick up his travel cache, bury the tank, then head across the highway and vanish into some fairly rugged hills. This back country was also a lot more familiar to Frank, the place where it was said he liked to poach turkeys, and only a few miles from Keet's ranch.

It didn't take long to find the loosened dirt hastily patted down among dry grasses. It was well above the eroding shore turf, under a couple of small pines. Belle got there ahead of me. She sniffed and started digging. Sprays of dirt flew out behind her eager paws until I saw the yellow glow of a tank, the bright new tank color I'd seen on Frank's boat. There it was, buried fairly shallow in the damp pine humus. Somewhere around the tank I'd probably find a wet suit, if I wanted to spend the time.

I was sure I knew who was in on this with Frank, and who would also be on the run from their bosses before a failure to deliver was discovered. A member of the same San Francisco candy club that got Kim in its perverted clutches. They ran up and down this coast bold as brass, hauling in dope like there was no tomorrow while the law was sitting there bailing out the ocean.

From my vehicle and with my cell phone, I had Patty track down Keet and ask him to call me back. He was prompt.

"Saddle us up, pardner. I'm not far from you, but I have to go home first and get weatherproofed. The Coast Guard found an unmanned loaded boat, but Frank crawled ashore at Index Point. I just found his scuba tank. His cohort probably met him there. They're into plan B."

"Way to go, Griffish. Just a second. Patty! Girl Friday, will you please hustle a week's worth of our camp food into trail status fit for two buzzard hunters." Back to me Keet said, "By the time you get here there won't be a thing left to do but load your gear and mount up, Deputy."

"Good guy," I said, and punched off my phone.

Belle wanted to come along, with unusual back-talk. I swear that dog knows when I'm going to be gone for more than a day. I debated taking her, but I remembered Frank's vengeful warning and decided her black coat would just make a good target, especially if we hit snow country. I asked Wayne to check her well-stocked water and food supply and give her a pat while I was gone. She'd have to occupy herself slimming down the squirrels.

I parked my rig inside Keet's equipment barn. We two climbed aboard our favorite trail animals and headed in a southeasterly direction above Index Point, then east into the hills. We had along two lightly loaded pack horses that could haul out bipeds when located. In my scabbard, I had my Ruger Lever Action .44 Magnum with a four-round magazine, and Keet had his Winchester Lever Action 30-06,

also with four rounds. We were carrying plenty of extra shells, and I had the Glock on my belt and binoculars in my pocket. Keet's favored hip companion was a .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson revolver. Enough firepower to make us feel comfortable in a confrontation with anything. I really didn't expect our prey to have more than pistols, but I didn't want to be proven wrong with a long range sneak attack on our circulatory systems.

Initially, we didn't have to do any tracking. The land was county watershed, and the trail, although rough and sketchy in places, was the fastest way in and out. Frank wasn't the sort to do any trailblazing when it was already done for him. He'd use that trail until it spit him out into unmarked wilderness, a wilderness Keet and I knew well enough to respect and use to advantage. There was hardly a canyon or fall of water or rocky ledge that hadn't tempted our audacity as tough young saplings in our green years, or later as serious and seasoned hunters.

On the first five or so miles we were south of Bureau of Land Management land, and then we were in and out of the Siskiyou National Forest and crossing the Pistol River. At that point we were trying to think like very likely two fugitives who weren't all that comfortable without trails and markers and who were taking the easiest unobstructed route east. They were probably still telling themselves and each other that the law assumed they were deep-sixed, and the rest would be easy as target practice on a side of barn.

The soft drizzle didn't bother us in our layered clothing and slickers, but the air was chilling up. We'd been climbing and descending for a while, and we decided to camp before diminished light took away our range of choices

for good cover. We stopped by a trickle of water where light filtered through the trees and greened up the banks. There we unsaddled and strung our horses, letting them drink and nibble, and giving them a little high energy mash we'd brought. Everything but the horses went under our pegged, three-sided, waterproof nylon shelter. In a heavy rain, the horses could cluster under a thick stand of pine nearby. Sitting on our unrolled beds, we ate stew and drank boiled coffee. Just outside our rock-backed cover, we maintained the small cooking fire that warmed our feet.

I called the Sheriff on my cell phone, wondering if he had any more information. He told me one of the shore stakeouts had seen a rig with an empty boat trailer in tow parked at a short sandy beach a mile above Index Point. When one of the DEA men disguised as a fisherman headed his way, the rig driver started his engine and cruised slowly back to the highway. That was well after the time Frank would have brought in his payload in the empty skiff they found floating by his seiner. The officer didn't want to grab the driver and foil the overall plan, but by the time he got back to his vehicle and made the highway the rig was gone. Later the empty rig and boat trailer were discovered not far from Index Point. They were rentals, and had been rolled off a gravel side road down into a hollow of brush. We were definitely tracking two men, one of them most likely the mutated subspecies that Kim had identified.

"What makes you think they didn't just head back to California?" Keet asked, warming his hands on his tin cup.

"If you believed that you wouldn't have waited this long to mention it. Unless you're having so much fun out here that..."

Keet was laughing and shaking his head.

"For one thing, now we know the rig they'd probably have escaped in got rolled into a gulch; for another, would you head back to the boss if you'd just lost a load of hay? No, I think they intend to lie low and reconnoiter, maybe steal somebody's wheels in a few days. If they've planned this much, they've got supplies, maybe rifles. Their main objective right now is not to get caught."

Keet was silent for a while. He'd glance at me occasionally and then look into the fire, sipping his coffee. Finally he tossed out the grounds in his cup. He'd nerved himself up enough to say, "Kim going to be okay?"

I didn't answer immediately. We both listened to an owl hoot its presence from somewhere above us. The drizzle had stopped. I squinted up into washed layers of shadow and branches, locating the black form of a Great Horn Owl atop the tallest pine. Its neck swiveled, then those large telescopic orbs caught the firelight, glowing red. The big phantom sighted on us down to the goose bumps on our flesh.

The content of my tardy answer went undecided until I heard my own voice. "I don't know where Kim is." That short and simple truism evoked considerable surprise.

"You don't know?"

"That's what I said." I explained to Keet what happened to Kim the night she left his place ahead of me. Understandably, his reaction flared with anger, but I didn't know whether most of it was for me or for Kim's suffering.

"You do any police work on who shot at her?"

"No. I've been trying to keep Kim anonymous. You know that. How was I going to start a noisy search, probably a futile one, and still keep her out of it?"

"Hell, you're right I guess. So she just left without even considering what you've...without even--"

"It wasn't quite that way, bronco. When I woke up she was gone...left a note."

Keet stirred the fire with a branch then kicked a burning limb further into its hot center with his boot toe.

"I get it. And I'll wager somewhere in there the note said she was leaving to save your neck."

"I guess she knows what she's doing. She might be safer than I could've kept her. Maybe she's better off. If I'm worse off, despite my saved neck, it serves me right. Isn't that what you'd say? Never mind saying anything. I'm through talking about it."

"I worry about her, too.

"I know.

"Let's hit the ground. I think it's going to snow.

I was right. When I woke up cold in the gray light, I looked out at the horses huddled beneath snow-dusted pines. Keet, with an impervious hide when he needed it, was delighted at this new handicap for the hunted.

We ate granola bars and drank leftover coffee, then doused our small fire and packed up.

"You know what I'm thinking, Griffish?" Keet said as he tightened Chaser's cinch, his gloves tucked under his arm, his chilling fingers working fast. "I'm remembering a little fishing shack up on one of those Pistol feeder streams. Not too far from here. What do you think? You think Frank knows it's there?"

"That's where we're headed," I answered. Our minds ran so tandem when it came to this kind of work that we

just talked to clarify the objective.

Little Bit and Chaser puffed out vapor clouds as we climbed, and one part of our proposed shortcut was so precipitous we both dismounted and slipped and clambered up over the lightly snow-covered acclivity, trying to keep our horses' reins taut behind us. The pack horses, two tough little mustangs named Drummer and Frisco, were grunting and blowing out steam. Finally, we hustled up over the rim and stopped to reconnoiter and listen. Silence. Then we heard the clear throaty cry of a raven echoing through the snowy brush beneath us. The low sky was soft white and a few flakes were drifting down. Our strategic horizon was fast disappearing. I pulled binoculars out of my pocket and glassed the area for a sign of something. Smoke maybe.

Keet turned around, whipped off his strung leather hat, whacked off the snow, and settled it back on his head with a big grin. "Going to get dumped on, Griffish."

"Well, don't look so happy about it, you crazy masochist," I said, knocking the snow off my felt duster.

"Might as well head down there and get wrapped," Keet suggested. His back was to me, but I could see the smile. "Think of this stuff as someone else's problem, Deputy."

"And supposedly we're close on the quarry," I added. "If not, we still might find their tracks...if we can manage to see that far in front of us."

After working our way down alongside a clear rivulet that dropped into a stream basin, we found plenty of prints. They crisscrossed the fresh snow on the level banks. With the early snowfall, every living thing was in a hurry to get somewhere; deer, grouse, cottontail, and large paw prints -- a cougar -- but no sign of humans. The snow was beginning to clump and rearrange the

vegetation, from small whorled-out blades of stream-side grass to loaded and sagging fir boughs. By morning it would be a white-weighted landscape, pure and virginal. Somewhere in it there were two nervous felons who were beginning to want out before all of this pristine beauty finished them off.

Neither of us was surprised at how long it took us to reach the spot where we ended up for the night. The fishing shack was just over the next rise, but it was too dark to get close enough to investigate anything.

"Weather's kind of wacky this year, don't you think?" I said, sipping my coffee and staring at the surrounding forest in the dimming light. The snow was thinning out temporarily. Nearby, a gust of wind shook the white powder loose from purpling red dogwood leaves and shafted it to the ground like a windblown waterfall. So tenuous and beautiful a thing it sent a shiver up and down my spine. I thought of Kim with a needling disappointment, realizing I'd like to have shared that one sudden glimpse of beauty.

A willow deadwood fire was crackling in the lee of our shelter, and the horses were tied under a Douglas fir stand. With whirling smoke in our faces, we ate some camp food that I thought tasted as bad as the stuff we'd had the night before. That meant I wasn't starving yet.

"This certainly ain't no fancy barbecue for dudes, is it?" Keet emphasized when he saw my displeased face.

"You can say that again. I didn't think we had to rough it in the grub department. Where's the good stuff?"

"Back home in the freezer," Keet said, with a short laugh. "The idea is to make us wanta get out of here faster, isn't it? No rare steak or juicy ribs, pardner."

"My God, don't mention it. Hey, you mean you aren't

loving every minute of this stark existence, Tealwing?

"'S okay until my toes get chilblains. That's where I draw the line."

I dragged another dead branch of mountain willow onto the fire and warmed my numbing hands. Then I told Keet about the troubled boy, Dale Harner, leading up to the place where he could make some kind of helpful offer. I knew he would, and it was more than generous.

"There's a real feisty mix of colt I'm planning to use for trail. You've seen him. Pepper. The Harner boy could come over and take care of him. And if he wants to help DJ muck out the stables, put down fresh straw, feed the stock, he can do that, too. Also, my winter layabouts always need a workout now that the fall tourists have hung up their boots and most of my crew are back in college. Not very hard work, but some handy cash for the kid...camaraderie, responsibility. DJ has a real tender spot in his raunchy old heart for folks in need. Might be good for all of us.

"That was sort of the idea. Thanks Keet. The kid's a nice chap. Farm-boy innocent in a lot of good ways. He really needs to stay pointed in the right direction. But tell old DJ not to color up the kid's language too badly or I'll be in big trouble with his mama."

"Probably better to tell the kid to slough it off as an unfortunate condition. I've never been able to change a hair on DJ's balding head...let alone a wag of his loose tongue. Maybe the kid will pay attention to me instead. There's a sterling example for him."

"You think that's funny, but he couldn't do better. Anyway, I always feel like something good is rubbing off on me when I'm around the Tealwing."

"Okay, we got enough snow already, Griffish. Let's

hit the ground. Have to bust that fish shack open tomorrow. Probably more work than fun."

The wind howled in the darkness, then wore itself out, rested, and howled some more. Somewhere in between the moaning wind and the layers of cold, I went from pondering our manhunt to unrelated dreaming, dreaming about Kim with me. The memory of us sharing my bed always seemed much more of a fanciful dream anyway. It was something I didn't dwell on while awake. But there it was, fully colored in dream space: once again the real and visceral sensation of feeding a deep mutual hunger, of having something so good you know you'll never get enough. It wasn't clear to me just when Kim turned into Betty, subtly interchanged as if by some automatic master control programmed to default. I dreamed on in the heat of pleasure, until I was jolted awake.

Switching from dream arousal to the blood-curdling howl of a big cat with its fangs dug into squealing fear, really kicks over the heart. I saw that Keet was out from under sleep and cover with lightning speed. We knew one of our horses was in trouble. I grabbed the flashlight and shined it toward the animals tethered under the firs. A terrified corkscrewing Frisco was wearing a hungry cougar on his neck like a tight fur piece. The other horses were going crazy.

"Jesus! Don't wanta kill Frisco! Don't even wanta kill the cat!" Keet yelled as he charged toward the fracas with his Smith & Wesson aimed in the general direction.

I tried to hold the light on a safe target point while he fired. The cougar leapt up and screamed, grazed high on the rump. A little lower with that .357 blockbuster, and the cougar and maybe even poor Frisco would have been

buzzard food. Keet fired again, intentionally high. The big cat flashed its suffering green eyes at us, let out a spine-curling feminine cry, and tore off down the stream bank, splashing through the dark icy water and vanishing.

"He'll be rolling in the snow over that one, but he'll make it okay, with a hell of a battle scar," Keet said.

"Considering the risky conditions you had, that was a damn good shot, my friend."

Keet got out the first-aid kit and rubbed some anti-bacterial cream into the claw and teeth wounds on Frisco's neck while I held the flashlight. The still shaking animal had nearly gone down. I settled the horses, taking special care with Little Bit, who was for heading home pronto. Then we decided to build up the fire and warm our frozen bodies.

"Goddammit, my socks are icy wet!" I complained.

"Three entire pairs. Should've slept in my damn boots."

"Fraternal Order of Soggy Socks," Keet said, holding a steaming, wet-socked foot over the fire. He probably knew that wasn't really the thing that had flexed me so far out of shape. His resigned, half-amused face turned serious.

"You think our likely next-door neighbors heard the gunshots?"

"Don't know. The wind's been pretty noisy, and they're one hill away. Maybe not. But we can't rule it out."

Our dawn ride eventually ended the speculation. They either heard our late night cougar ruckus or saw us coming in, and they had at least one rifle. From the sound of it, it was Frank's fierce new Browning. Fortunately for us,

Frank apparently hadn't figured out how to tune the barrel vibration harmonics for hair precision. But he was missing good. I hoped it was intentional, swiveling my neck around while he blasted off fir boughs and made our horses dance. I still couldn't believe that Frank was a killer, although I knew he considered me an easy excuse for making him one. On the other hand, I instinctively knew his career criminal sidekick would drop us as thoughtlessly as blinking an eye.

We dismounted and yanked our animals behind a snowy hillock of trees. Frank had started firing before much of our horses came into view, which at least gave us the opportunity of trying to save our animals.

"We must've looked like moving ducks at a fairgrounds target booth coming over that ridge," I barked at Keet as we squatted in the snow.

"Dammit, had to get in somehow," Keet said. "And the stream bed was too rocky. Now at least we're in, but *close* is just going to be a little harder."

"We'll leave the horses here. Let's tie 'em and work our way along this little rise on our bellies. See how it curves down to the stream bank. We can get pretty close to the shack that way and still keep some cover."

As we edged lower in sideways increments, clumped wet snow was getting inside my gloves. I dumped it, shook the gloves, and pulled them back on. Warm bare hands were a necessity for accuracy in handling the Ruger slung over my back or the Glock on my belt. I loosened my parka hood and tossed it back to listen. Silence. A fast delicate rush of wind, then stillness again, accompanied by a few minuscule flakes drifting down. We needed to get this over with. I didn't even want to contemplate a shootout at the onset of a blizzard. We were almost to the burbling

crystal stream. As the friendly curls and whispers and ruffles grew louder, my thoughts softened.

"If I have to suffer like this I'd rather be fishing," I said, my words capped with a rifle shot.

"Shit!" Keet exclaimed.

"What? You okay?" I said running my eyes over Keet's big snow-caked body sprawled on my left.

He leaned on his elbows, then tossed his hat aside and pulled up his brown parka hood. I looked at his hat lying in the snow and saw that it had a new frayed spot along the front crease.

"Jesus! Keep your head down, bronco. For Christ's sake!" I was starting to boil. That condition might or might not improve my accuracy in a few more seconds.

"Frank!" I yelled, "Might as well get your ass out here and give yourself up. No sense postponing the inevitable."

"Hey, narco pig! I hear we got the same girlfriend!" came a voice I'd never heard before and never wanted to hear again. I almost stood up and fired right through the shack window, but Keet's firm hand was on my shoulder.

"Not that way, Deputy," he reminded me. "That's what he wants."

I thought I had enough fire in my gut to melt the snow in a one mile radius. *Cool it, Griffen, I soothed myself. Real cold now and careful and calculating. This part is strictly business, and you are the long inescapable arm of the law.*

"Look, Frank," I called out, "what are you going to do out here? Get snowed in? Run out of food? Freeze to death? Come on out with your hands empty and high, and you'll get a ride back to town. We can make it a lot

easier for you, man. Your record's new and short. Come on, do yourself a big favor."

"We're gonna do ourselves a big favor, motherfuckin' Lone Ranger! We're gonna whack you and Tonto there and help ourselves to your horses. You're the ones out in the cold, not us."

I paid no attention to the lunatic ravings of Bologna, using his own game of attempted enragement by ignoring his tired old comparison and continuing to work on Frank.

"You know what, Frank? I can call on my cellular here and have all the supplies and help I want. We can stay out here and ring in the New Year, if necessary. But I don't think you're gonna last that long. I guess it's not a bad way to die, starving, freezing to death. But the punishment is a little steep for the crime...so far, that is. If you come out now, you might actually get some of your life back."

I heard loud cursing and arguing voices inside the shack, and wondered if I'd gone too far. If Frank Campbell was wavering, maybe Bologna was crazy enough to blow him away and try to go it alone. I wished I knew what kind of firepower Bologna had and how good a shot he was. I didn't have to think about it for long. Bologna stuck an AK-47 assault rifle out a broken corner of the shack window and chewed off the willow tops growing along the stream bank, missing our earth-hugging bodies by a few feet.

"Hey, that guy's really jacked," Keet said. "And he even brought his firecrackers to the party."

"Yeah, guess we're in the big rotten league here, Keet...otherwise known as the very bottom of the pit. But, speaking as a survivalist, the Siskiyou's are a long way from San Francisco. And in this case, a cellular is a lot

more useful than an AK-47."

"You think so? So, who you calling first?" Keet asked. He was pulling off his gloves and levering his Winchester for action.

"Nobody. Just feels good to know I've got the option."

"That's what I thought," Keet said, balancing on one elbow as he aimed, fired, and splintered out the rest of the shack window.

"Hey! getting drafty in there?" I called, and we both flattened ourselves while the AK-47 chewed off more willow.

At the same moment that our overhead cover was getting brutalized, the rusty-hinged door of the shack creaked open and Frank dropped out into the snow. At first, I thought he'd been shot, but then I realized he was just hellbent to save his skin. He looked like a horizontal whirling dervish as he rolled away at frantic speed and disappeared over a short incline. The assault rifle suddenly appeared at the door, firing in the direction Frank had maneuvered himself. At that point, I raised up, levered my Ruger, and dropped the AK-47. A hand reached for it, and I hit it again, watching it bounce out of reach. The door slammed shut.

I ripped open the Velcro on my pocket and pulled out a set of cuffs. "Take these and work your way around over there...see if you can decommission Frank before he turns into a snowman. Watch it; he had his rifle."

"Griff, that bastard inside's no cake. The creep just loves what he's doing. He's a slaughterhouse, and you have to know he's playin' with a snubbed-up semiautomatic." Keet wasn't reaching for the cuffs, and he looked worried.

"Sure he's got a fast pistol. So do I. But I think

he's fresh out of assault rifles. Come on, take these." I held out the cuffs.

"You expecting to kill him?"

"I don't think so...not if he behaves himself. And actually, I'm not real interested in a bloodbath. Because then we'll have to patch up the son of a bitch."

"But a nice clean shot through the brain--"

"Is what he'll get if he tries it on me. Go on, bronco, before Frank turns hypothermic."

I watched Keet moving off, sending me a look I could read easy as a stop sign. He was worried about my health, both mental and physical, because he was half expecting me to kill Bologna to keep him from ever touching Kim. No matter how worthless, dangerous, and depraved Bologna was, it wasn't in the Tealwing code to kill for the wrong reason; it wasn't in the Griffen code either, and the only right reason afforded us was self-preservation. But I can't deny I was hoping I'd have to preserve myself, or one of us.

I placed my rifle below a rotting log and checked my Glock, then I crawled back, picked up Keet's hat, and returned to the stream bank, snuggling myself up against the lip of the rise below the shack. Forging the hat on a bent down willow shoot, I eased it slowly up above the high bank, let go, and moved myself back fast. While a round from the shack was going into Keet's hat, I raised myself above the bank and fired on Bologna's protruding Baretta. *Don't get cocky*, I said to myself with a grin. For a second, I saw my boy self with my feet fractiously up on my mother's prized mohair sofa, watching black and white Westerns on TV. It was such an old trick, but effective. The Baretta was now lying outside the shack in the snow.

Before Bologna could switch to whatever else was available, I clambered over the high bank and ran pellmell through the snow for the shack, kicking the door in with my Glock extended in front of me. Bologna was kneeling on the floor wildly trying to shove a clip into a nine millimeter Smith & Wesson.

"Let it be and put it down. Now!" I said, pressing the Glock behind Bologna's left ear. He hung onto the clip for a couple of seconds longer, and I said, "Please give me an excuse to scatter your small slimy brain." He set the clip down, raised his hands, and turned slowly around.

A thread of white scar stretched above the upper flesh of full pillowy lips as they tightened in a self-absorbed sneer of indifference. His eyes were narrowed slits of opaque milky green, aloof, like nothing caught, merely waiting for a chance to be the catcher.

"Down on the floor. Hands behind your back," I said, reciting his rights while I reached into my pocket for the other set of cuffs.

He went down onto his stomach easily, quietly offered his hands, then turned his head to the side and said, "She got some use out of you with her--"

I lifted his head by his oily black hair and slammed his face into the floor so hard the aging and weathered boards went concave and almost cracked. I lifted his head and did it again.

"I'll bet you've got a headache. You've got one hell of a nosebleed. Maybe it's broken."

Keet stepped through the door.

"I've got Frank on Drummer."

"Hey, Tonto," Bologna said, gasping and spitting blood. "This...gook's...breaking my face. Just because I

mentioned our...little blond--"

I slammed his head one more time while Keet stood there with his arms folded.

"My God, you're a slow learner," I said. "Your head's gonna be mush and pretty soon your mouth won't work at all."

Bologna moaned for a while and when he could use his tongue said, "See...what...I...mean. You're a...witness to this."

"Huh?" Keet said. "Me no sábe."

We were all mounted, with Frisco and Drummer on tethers, and picking our way up over the ridge. After I'd gone through Bologna's pockets and relieved him of a switchblade strapped to his ankle, I had to cuff him in front so he could sit on Frisco. The horse was still nervous from his cougar experience and didn't much care for anything alive on his back. Bologna had no idea what to do on a horse, and I warned him not to make any sudden moves or he'd find himself chucked on his rearranged face. Keet had stopped the bleeding quite efficiently by holding Bologna's head in a snowdrift before we left.

Frank was sullen and cowed and hadn't spoken to anyone, but it was clear that he hated and feared Bologna and didn't want to get near him. With what lay ahead of us, Keet and I appreciated the unlikelihood of collusion. Gradually we worked our way out of the snowy elevation and back toward milder marine air. I kept us moving pretty fast and closer to darkness than we'd allowed ourselves to travel before, trying to cut our time to one night out. I didn't trust Bologna at all, and could feel his shifty mind working on something every time I glanced his way. Then

Keet remembered an old Forest Service trail that put us more easily near the camp we used on our first night in, and I pressed us hard toward that familiar little stream-side meadow.

"Goddamn it, I can't take any more of this! My back is breaking," Frank complained.

"Hey, I'll finish the job, putz," Bologna offered. "You put us in this position, you ignorant--"

"Too bad you're still alive!" Frank yelled. "I thought you were a better shot, Griffen."

"Too bad for you I'm alive, because your days are numbered, you stupid, incompetent, asshole fishmonger. As soon as I get free here you're the first thing I'm gonna take care of."

Bologna, squirming around wildly on Frisco, was beginning to agitate the horse, and we were on a narrow precipitous trail just coming down into the brush-strewn, white-patched meadow. Without letting our captives know, Keet had moved out much further ahead than merely the next imperceptible switchback. He was already figuring out camp and probably starting a fire. Before we left, he'd transferred some of our equipment onto Chaser, who was powerful enough to carry a big load. I was eager to get these two unpredictable malcontents confined for the night.

"Quiet down right now, or I'll tie you two lovers together and make you hike the rest of the way holding hands," I warned.

"I got you in my cross hairs, pig man," Bologna said.

I urged Little Bit forward through the thinning snow without another word, drawing us down in a series of punishing jerks that kept my captives tight-lipped and hanging onto their pommels.

Keet had arranged the nylon so that it was merely a canted awning that would cover four of us for the night, something I didn't relish in the least, sharing protective space with a lowlife I'd rather pulverize and freeze-dry.

The fugitives had their cuffs loosened while they ate and had a chance to relieve themselves, then tightened up for slopping a little coffee into their systems and bedding down.

With the other two tied down, Keet and I leaned into our small warm fire, speaking softly to each other.

"All this is the result of no one having the guts to legalize grass and control the garbage," Keet said. "Can you imagine how fast everything would shut down if we did that? Overnight. The stuff would lose a lot of its big fascination...doled out by the government...no longer cool. We'd probably have less users, and the criminal element would dry up in a minute. God, we could stop building prisons and switch to health care."

We heard a loud laugh and a snort of derision from Bologna.

"Hey, Tonto, that's the biggest fucking crock of pie in the sky I ever heard. Nobody wants government choke. You're gonna have big-time lucre lords until we all walk free or there's a slammer every square mile of the entire country. In and out, up and down. It's the American way, morality at all costs. We fuck morality. For us, it's just sermon-assisted commerce, see? Business as usual. There's a junkie born every minute. We got nothin' to worry about."

"How do you suppose vermin like this get hatched?" I asked Keet.

"They don't," Keet said, "Spontaneous generation out

of the sewer."

"Deputy," Bologna said in a sly self-satisfied voice. My side glance caught the back of his hand moving slowly back and forth beneath his round, blood-crusting nose. "If you promise not to bust me again, I'll give you a hilarious piece of news about the blond squeeze."

I raised myself up, facing Bologna, who lay with red, hate-filtered eyes glinting at me in the dim firelight. He had my undivided attention without the possibility of getting pasted, because I knew he was hoping to avenge himself and that I might learn something.

"I hear she blew. Too bad, pigeon. We gave up on her when the feds hauled in a squealer from another greenwasher on our books -- a fancy hash house with a little rat-faced manager that's boxed and ready to squeal his head off; we'll get that cheese-eater sooner or later. And just for your benefit, dick, I hope your spooked songbird disappeared permanently on the other side of the world. But here's one last valentine, sucker: Blondie knew about the greenwash from the get-go. She couldn't throw the dough around every which way fast enough."

The wind cried against the nylon, flexing our ceiling with the sounds of a luffing sail and chilling my bones. Keet took a gentle header into dreamland as effortlessly as a fox curled in a warm den. I'd decided not to sleep, or for a long time sleep had decided not to have me. Just a little wakeful rest, I figured, but sometime before the first light I dozed off. That proved unfortunate. A human cry of pain raised me up from my hard-won, dreamless void.

"See what I got here?" came the low growl of Bologna.

"Christ, help me!" Frank rasped out before the pressure Bologna applied to his neck left him voiceless.

I snapped to with my nearby Glock already a part of my hand and aimed at Bologna. He had managed to pull out one of the thick knife-shaved pegs of our nylon roof and was holding it deep against Frank's neck.

"I don't care how many slugs you got, pig man. I'll get this through his pipes before I'm dead."

Keet and I looked at each other in the rising light, thinking fast. Then we shared a barely perceptible complicitous nod of temporary assent. I lowered my Glock.

"So, now what? You plan to sit there all day holding that stake?" I asked with a mild voice.

"It's goin' through the jugular right now unless you unlock these cuffs, fuckup deputy."

"And then?"

"I want your gun and two horses."

"I can do that. You have any idea where you are, how you're getting out of here?" I asked while I was moving at a snail's sleepwalk toward him, blocking his view of Keet. I reached into my pocket.

"Hold it! What you got there?" Bologna shouted, twisting the stake and forcing a groan out of Frank.

"Just the key...what you wanted. Right?"

"Get on with it, before I stick this dipshit."

I started to kneel down but instead flung myself aside, trying to kick the stake from Bologna's tight grip at the same moment that Keet's .357 blasted the air around us. He hit the only place available without damaging Frank: Bologna's head. It was a mess. Frank was still clutched against Bologna, shaking with fright and sickened by the blood oozing over him. The distraction of my

otherwise ineffectual kick, coupled with Keet's sharp aim, had preserved Frank. Bologna's lifeless hand still gripped the stake as proof of the other probable outcome.

"Not as much fun as a rolling deck, huh, Frank?" I said, dragging him off Bologna.

Frank's neck was purple, and he was wheezing for air. He closed his eyes and lay back, speechless.

"I didn't have much choice," Keet said. "No body shot, nothing else to hit...bad business."

"Thanks," Frank said in a whispery voice. He rolled over then coughed and dry-heaved.

"You did what you had to do," I assured Keet.

The best way to handle this now was with a series of methodical actions that got us home, and without any hard thinking about much else.

We broke camp and headed out with Bologna slung over Frisco and all that coagulating bad blood slowly dripping into the snow. Keet was quiet and serious, his reverence for life marred by an abhorrent strike against civilized conduct. I left him alone, and Frank said absolutely nothing to either of us.

I had used my cellular phone and, when we reached the vehicle trail, Drug Enforcement was there waiting for us. Before they got to Frank, for whom I felt a little sorry, I asked him something that was bothering me.

"Frank, are you the one who told Bologna about Kim knowing me?"

"That's right," Frank said through white-edged lips.

"So...no one else knows that?"

"I heard Bologna mention on the phone she was here. Nothing about you. He only made one call. So what?"

"If you keep that knowledge to yourself, I'll stand up

for you, Frank...see what I can do."

"I got no reason to tell those bastards anything."

The cartel might double their efforts to find Kim if they suspected she was already talking to the law. I was trying to quash that action or at least slow them down.

The DEA slipped Bologna into a body bag and packed the two fugitives off in their van. Keet and I and our horses were finally left alone, making our way over to Keet's ranch through a chilly snow-mixed drizzle. DJ took over the horses when we arrived, cussing a blue streak at us for arriving tired, damp, and cold. I found myself in the unusual position of cheering up Keet. "The guy was a genuine bastard," he said, "but I'd rather catch 'em than kill 'em." Regarding the present case, I had little desire to commiserate, although any wasted life is certainly nothing to crow about.

Sitting at Keet's green kitchen table before a warm pine-snapping fire, we ate without words, tiredly chewing the garlic and rosemary, rare beefsteaks Patty had started for us when Keet phoned in our approximate arrival time. We drank a little Cabernet. Celebration food with not much to celebrate. Finally, Keet put down his fork and assailed me with silent but hard-ricocheting thoughts, until I pushed aside my half-empty plate and stared back at his brooding liquid-brown eyes.

"I'm not all that sure Kim's as safe as Bologna made out. Maybe he just wanted you to relax enough to make her a good target. Anyway, I don't believe a word of that other trash Bologna was talking about her. He said that because he couldn't stand getting nailed by you."

"Well, it doesn't much matter anymore...anyway...does it?"

"You could find her. I know damn well you could."

"Why?"

I could feel the skin on my face getting singed from Keet's hot anger.

"Well, goddammit! if you don't know I'm sure as hell never going to mention it again."

What I'd really meant was, why try and bring her back, assuming I could find her, when I didn't know who'd shot at her? If it wasn't Bologna -- something I'd already figured out -- who was it? Somebody still out there ready to try again? No small mystery. No small problem. Besides that, Kim had a right to make her own survival decisions without my interference. I was too tired for a long harangue.

"Okay," I said, getting up and reaching for my jacket.

I stood there talking a few more seconds, unloading my appreciation for all of Keet's help and for supper.

I was almost out the door, heading for the office, when Keet called, "You have any idea how depressed you are?"

"You don't much resemble a bridegroom yourself, pardner...but you did it right," I called back.

When I was finished with my boilerplate work on the computer, I sat there awhile staring at the screen and thinking. My body had had it for the nonce, but I knew my brain wasn't going to click off for a long time. For a few seconds, I wondered if my brain had enough power left to hold up my complaining frame while I went on an extended fishing trip in cyberspace, then I forgot about it. I accessed one of the big data banks used by police forces and got myself hooked up with vital statistics in

California. By the time I was through, I had Kim's social security number, most of the information found on her birth certificate, the names of her parents, and her mother's address and phone number. If I sat there long enough, I could probably have found out what kind of toothpaste she used. Instead, I went home, reacquainted myself with my wild dog, and slept until noon the following day.

I lifted my head. Belle was looking at me with her inquisitive brown eyes, wondering why I wasn't up when the sun was high overhead and streaming through the windows. I thought about coffee but didn't move. My mind had begun to work like a steam roller that goes back and forth over something until it's completely flattened.

Sometimes that process began the moment I opened my eyes, and went on until hunches turned into solid answers. But today my thoughts drifted away from the methodical analysis of known facts, mainly because I'd come up with an explanation of who Kim's assailant was. It all fit together tightly enough, and I wanted to think of something else.

I looked at the pillow on the other side of the bed, looked until gradually it lay beneath Kim's head. I dragged it over and held it against my nose, inhaling the faint human scent of clean sweating flesh that went along with a hint of freshly cut lawn grass and gardenia and citrus. All Kim. If sunshine had an aroma it would be her. The sweat of her in lovemaking was pure arousal. I hadn't changed the bed linen since she slept with me. What was that about? Perverseness, lethargy, or longing? I could feel her warm damp body snuggled against me, hear the

soft wonder of her voice: "If this were some other world, some other time, maybe we could have... Now look what you've done. I really didn't believe there was anything like this. Did I scare you?" I couldn't quite remember what I'd thought, only that she surprised me, and I held her without answering. Why didn't I say something? Why didn't I at least acknowledge a trust so quick and deep its meaning was unmistakable?

I got up, tore off the bedclothes, and headed for the washing machine, stopping to flip on the coffee maker on my way. The ring of water sprayed noisily into the machine over the collapsing white sheets and cases while I measured the soap powder and tossed it in. I stared at the rising water without really seeing it. Then suddenly I caught myself dreaming and slammed down the lid.

I'd expected to make children with Betty. The idea never entered my head with Faye. We were necessarily there for each other, two people in need who made each other feel good. That was what I believed. But I knew Faye would be a wonderful mother. What if I went to her and said, "Honey, let's get married and start a family."? The next feeling I had was one of tremendous inadequacy and fear. That made me sad. Then I thought of my prodigal seed sprouting in Kim and my eagerly accommodating body turned into a stoked furnace. The strong attraction and the unlikelihood made it easier to play around with the idea, but the fact that it didn't bother me scared me enough to hang it up fast.

After a breakfast omelette, which was actually a late lunch, I took Belle with me over to the city dock. From

there I ran my flat bottom twenty-five horse outboard up the river with the excuse that I had to feed E.A. Poe. I intended to drift back, letting my wet flies sink down where the steelhead were moving slow and deep, hardly striking, fiercely choosy, and taking a long time to digest the smidgen they deigned to eat. That was always a real test of endurance, but since my pernickety mind was working slow and deep with cold facts, I figured we'd be right in sync.

There was enough of something else on my fishing mind to make the trip entirely justifiable. I kept recalling the face of one of the druggers I'd nailed at Ed Rainer's place: the crowded small dark eyes; the narrow pointed chin and thin-lipped mouth. I'd seen him, or someone very like him, somewhere before. When I awoke with that thought, almost immediately something at Ed's place had flashed in my mind.

Climbing the walk from the bank, I remembered Kim standing above me in her pale blue robe. I unlocked the sliding deck doors and went through the kitchen. Belle's tail thwacked on the cabinets along the floor as she sniffed for E.A. The cat was in his usual safe zone, up on the living room fireplace mantel with his tail twitching.

"You hungry, E.A.?" I called, pushing Belle all the way back outside and closing the doors.

E.A. answered with a trilling meow, his food call.

"Well, come on down."

He refused, eyeing an anxious Belle beyond the glass.

"Come on now," I said, walking over to the fireplace.

E.A. was sprawled beside a photograph of Ed's brother, Lyle, who was proudly posed with his hand on the door handle of his shiny new Mercedes sedan. When I looked

closely at the picture, I knew immediately that my earlier speculation had unearthed the truth. The druggie must be Lyle's son, and Lyle must be the unknown big fish the feds wanted, the guy expected to swim in around hay bailing time. And, of course, Ed must know this. With his sharp intelligence and keen poetic observation, even with just his proximity, how could he not? I liked Ed and didn't welcome the idea of his possible involvement. Besides, it didn't jibe. He was too affable and sensitive and soulful, and moreover, he wasn't rich. I figured he was staying out of it, looking the other way because it was his brother in the business.

After E.A. had filled his fat little tummy, I stroked his back for a while and let him purr up a storm. He seemed deprived after all of Kim's adoring attention. It bothered me to think that she couldn't have him with her. I watered the plants and closed up. E.A. rubbed back and forth on the other side of the glass with his mouth opening in an inaudible but pitiful cry of loneliness. He actually had a little flap in the back door that allowed him to get outside when he felt the need. Cats are pretty adept at going it alone, but E. A. Poe had been cared for by Kim and, like me, he was spoiled for good.

Belle and I got back in my boat, motored out into the river's flow, and at last I was necessarily and gratefully just a single-minded fly-fisherman with a patient dog.

"About your plants," I said to Ed Rainer, "It's chilling up out there...I don't know."

Ed was wearing an olive sweatshirt and khaki shorts and sitting in a large comfortable chair with one bandaged

leg up and his walker nearby. The rehab clinic in Portland was taking good care of him, and he had no complaints except the problem of his abandoned home. I felt responsible, but when I considered that he didn't have any other renters I didn't feel completely at fault. And when I considered what Ed had known at the time he let Kim rent his house, I felt myself getting entirely shoe-horned into the tight space of an impersonal sheriff's deputy.

"It's awfully good of you to take the time to go over there, Griff...and to come way up here. I'm pretty sure my solar panels will heat the place okay...enough to keep the plants going, anyway.

"You know...I was going to call you. I guess it was for the same reason you flew up here, right?"

I looked at Ed, a man of dignity and calmness, and saw him fidgeting and having trouble looking squarely back at me. He ran his sensitive writer's fingers through his bushy white hair, rubbed his long straight nose with his knobby fist, and stared out the window, without realizing he was looking mostly at the side of a brick building.

"I'd have come to see you whether the rest of it happened or not, Ed, although I might have driven instead of flying on the county's dollar. In fact, I wish there was only one reason to be here...just friendship."

"You must think I had a lot of nerve questioning Kim Bailey's character when my own nephew is in jail for growing pot. Isn't that what you've discovered? I really didn't want anything to do with that. I was staying out of it. But then I heard something...a phone conversation...here in the clinic. That is...some of my family were here in my room. They thought I was asleep. It went something like...they didn't get Kim Bailey, but at

least they got her out of town. I don't know what's going on, Griff. Did something happen to Kim Bailey before she left my house?"

I waited in silence until Ed was looking fully at me. Then I said in a deliberate and even voice that took some control on my part, "Kim stumbled onto the boys at the nearest grass field, and your brother tried to kill her."

"My brother!"

Ed threw himself forward, half rising. His leg slid off the foot rest, and I lifted it back while he groaned.

"You don't look anything like your brother, Ed. But your nephew is the spitting image. That's how I figured out who he was, even though he goes by the name of Al Cross."

"What on earth does that prove?" he asked, rubbing his leg and glaring at me.

"It was your brother you heard on the phone talking about Kim, wasn't it?"

"I never said that."

"Come on, these assumptions are child's play. Neither of us is slow-witted here. Lyle is in big trouble. He may still be your little brother, but he's been an adult a long time, and God knows how long he's been a felon. Considering his life style, I'd say a number of years. I'd also say he's probably farming a lot of national forest along with some private timber lands. The feds really like that, Ed. It gives them something to do. Now the Sheriff doesn't like it at all. He'd rather have the old days back. So, of course, the heat's on his deputies."

"And that's why you're here."

"Not altogether."

"Why then?"

"I don't like what happened to Kim Bailey. Every time I think of it I boil over. Any more ideas in that direction and I'll know exactly who to look for. You might pass that on to your brother if you see him before I do."

"He's out of town and I don't know when he'll be back. He doesn't live anywhere near me."

"But you wouldn't tell me where he is, would you?"

Ed sighed. "Griff...is this going to be the end of a beautiful friendship?"

"Well, I guess that depends on you," I said. "It doesn't change my opinion of your poetry...and I'm still feeding the cat."

I hung around Portland for another day, staring now and then at Mount Hood floating above the Willamette River beyond my window at the Benson Hotel. The room was too expensive but I was soothing my desiccating brain, which was beginning to feel like a dry sponge, with my proximity to a good bar and a fairly decent jazz band. I checked the Friday paper for musical events, female guitar players in smoky lounges. None of them were Kim, by name or face. With the voice she had and her musical ability, I fantasized that she was somewhere like that, treating people to much more than they were fit to appreciate. It wasn't realistic because she was trying to hide not show her face. I began to feel sorry for myself and stayed in the bar so long the pretty brunette server thought I was interested in her company. She tried to get me to wait for her to go off her shift. I woke up with a headache, which I rarely get, took a taxi out to the airport, and flew home drinking coffee.

"I want you to know something," Ed Rainer's crackling voice said into my telephone ear as I sat in my den. "If anything further happened to Miss Bailey and it was my brother's fault, I'd testify against him myself, and I'll tell him that. I practically raised him and he knows I mean it. He'll listen."

"I appreciate that. I hope you're right," I said.

"This whole business has been a bone in my throat for a long time. I don't know where it'll end, but it's beginning to ruin my life...what's left of it. I'm damned mad."

"Well, if it helps, I hope you stay that way for a while longer," I said. "Thanks for telling me, Ed."

My hands finessed the tying of one more fly while my head worked over Ed's call. I wanted to find Lyle. He was a slippery character and no less dangerous for all Ed's assurances. I didn't believe Lyle would lie down for his brother, not when it came to his own neck. Ed had no idea how dirty those guys played. They wouldn't survive in the business without a flat disregard for the human race -- generosity was self-serving. Kim couldn't do Lyle any more harm than I could, but his criminal offspring, the extension of his own ego, was in lockup and that probably made him mad enough to want somebody whacked. I'd rather it was me they were after than Kim. I felt like a guy taking a bath on a downtown corner when I thought of what Keet would say about that, until I remembered how much he liked Kim.

In another minute I found myself pacing. I grabbed my jacket, and Belle whined.

"Sorry, kid, you'll have to sit this one out," I said.

The Seahorse Bar had only a few desperate souls when I arrived on this dark and misty fall night. It was ten o'clock. The swollen surf below was in a noisy uproar.

"Rex, can you fix me a tuna melt and pour me a glass of somebody's microbrew?" I said to the stocky crewcut owner.

"Sure enough. Late supper, huh?"

"I just forgot to eat...too antsy to stay home and cook," I said.

Three beers went by after the sandwich, and my ideas were becoming as unrealistic as my dreams. A body settled on the stool next to me. I turned sideways and looked into Faye's sweet blue eyes.

"Well, hello," I said with a cheerful voice that surprised even me.

"I saw you come in here awhile ago, Griff, and I've been thinking about it."

"Everybody sees everybody else doing everything in this town," I said, feeling my mouth work at a lopsided grin. "I suppose you're plenty mad at me for hauling Frank out of the wilds and into the slammer."

"I think maybe you and Keet saved the fool's life."

"Guess I'll never have to save yours, Faye. That beautiful common sense of yours does it every time."

She pushed up the sleeves of her emerald sweater and ran her neatly painted nails through her red curls.

"Rex, I'll take whatever he's having."

"He's having too many beers," I informed my little erstwhile companion.

"I hope you're not starting that again," Faye said, sliding her thumb over the condensation on the full schooner Rex handed her.

"I'm not -- another beer, please, Rex -- but you don't have to worry about it anymore. Your problems are over."

"Oh, what a stupid remark, Griff. I'm sitting here sad and lonely, hating myself and missing you as usual, and my problems are over."

"Honey, tonight I'm missing me, too." I gulped beer.

"Well, you've drunk just enough to get cute, haven't you? Why don't you quit while you're ahead. And don't drive, either. Let's walk over to my place."

"Walk over to your place," I said, imagining that I had instantly sobered up.

"We could just sit and talk."

"What for?"

"You bastard!"

"Let's walk over to your place."

There was a crisp cold wind off the sea. I inhaled the brine and tried to clear my brain. I was walking over to Faye's place, and I was still asking myself what for.

Faye was hugging herself and walking along in silence. She dropped her green-sweatered arms straight down and slipped her hands into the pockets of her black slacks.

"Where's your coat, honey?" I asked.

Faye didn't answer, and when I looked down at her she was crying.

"Now what did I do?"

"You cared, that's what you did. You cared about me, and that's the most painful thing I can imagine at this moment."

"I'll always care. I've never stopped caring. Why is

that so amazing?"

"Oh God, I want to be your friend, Griff, but I don't think I'll ever make it to that point. I care too much."

"Honey, that remark is just plain ridiculous. You sound like the one who's been drinking."

"Not that it's of any consequence whatsoever, but I've drunk a little glass of whiskey every night since that horrible evening you took back your fish."

She was shivering.

"I did not take back my fish. You practically threw it at me," I said, removing my jacket and hanging it over her shoulders. For the next few blocks silence felt better.

We climbed the stairs, and Faye unlocked her door. I followed her inside and stood there blinking in the light she switched on. What am I doing here? I thought. What the hell am I doing here? Faye doesn't deserve any more of me.

"You and Frank--"

"Oh shut up!" Faye shouted as she turned around and plowed her fist into my stomach. There wasn't much power behind the attack. A little slow, I tightened up my solar plexus, receiving that blow and one more before I grabbed her wrists. She collapsed against me.

"Oh God, poor hopeless Frank. I don't ever want to mention any of that again. Can you imagine the anger I have?...anger at myself? Can you? Can you!"

She looked up at me with tears streaming down her face, and I leaned down and kissed her sweet mouth. That was an unavoidable mistake. She took my arm and pulled me toward the bedroom, and I lumbered along after her. I myself was a wreck, lonely and sad and horny, and not in

any condition to resist. I tried to tell myself that I was helping out. It had taken only five beers to come to that conclusion.

"You don't deserve this, sweetheart," I argued, while she wrestled me out of my shirt. "A half-drunk idiot in your bed." She reached for my belt buckle.

"You're not going to fall asleep on me, are you?"

"Are you kidding?" I said, pulling her sweater off over her head. "I'm gonna fall on you, Red, but not asleep. Wait a minute, though...wait a minute. Before we do this I've got to tell you that I'm...that I'm--"

"That you're involved with someone else," she said in the sweetest softest voice, and for a few minutes I wasn't sure of anything, not even that I was Richard Griffen.

I could smell coffee and frying bacon when I woke up. Oh Jesus, I said to myself, I've thoroughly enjoyed Faye one more time at her own undeserving expense. I felt sated, ready to tackle the world again. But what did Faye feel?

My clothes were neatly folded. I showered, put them on, and leaned through the entrance to the kitchen with a sheepish grin. "Morning, Faye. That was...some night."

"Nice wasn't it?" Faye said, turning around in her pale green duster with a spatula raised in her hand. "Have some coffee, and don't pretend you feel bad about it, Griff."

"Not even hung over...feelin' good, Faye...except--"

"Me too, so never mind the rest. It was good, wasn't it?"

"Honey, you sure burned the carbon out of my engine. I'm ready for the highway."

Faye tossed back her flaming wisps of hair and laughed with appreciation. "What are you doing today, Griff?"

"I'm...well, I'm...it's Sunday. I don't know," I said, filling a big white mug with life-force black java.

"Could you possibly take me over to Keet's place? Maybe we could ride horses. I'd especially like to see the little thoroughbred I almost owned."

"The colt...you think that's a good idea? I mean, what if you fall in love with the little critter? Poor Keet's turning into a social worker."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Yeah, I'll take you. Sure, we can ride. Nice day for it. Nice fall day. I'll call Keet."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm running a sort of health clinic," Keet said in a low voice but with a grin.

We both stared after Faye who was standing in about the same place Kim had stood and reaching through the fence petting the same frisky and curious young thoroughbred.

"A health clinic? Maybe you are. Maybe that's exactly what you're doing...all the time. I was actually thinking something similar earlier this morning when Faye asked to come and see her colt."

"Hey, let's at least keep the ownership straight."

Keet looked appreciatively at Faye, standing there in her denim jacket and blue shirt, her jeans rolled over shined sorrel cowgirl boots only slightly dusted from our ride. "If she were mine, I'd give her the colt, of course."

It took a couple of seconds for me to realize that Keet was talking about Faye and a different kind of

ownership, the human kind that's mutual. I studied him more carefully. He was transfixed on Faye. He walked over and leaned down and said something to her. Faye looked up at him and laughed. The way the two of them were standing there together looked like the beginning of something. Faye touched his arm and pointed, but instead of looking where she pointed Keet was still looking at her. Just then, it came to me how he always showed so much concern for her, deep consideration that was a lot more than just the normal part of his nature. I suddenly realized that Keet was in love with Faye, that maybe for a long time I'd been with Faye at Keet's expense. He never said a word, of course. Because of me, Faye was way off limits.

Awhile ago, while we were all out on the trail, I'd hung back and let Faye ride close to Keet. He was good medicine. She was comfortable there, chattering and laughing and shaking her red curls. My pumped ego decided she was flirting a little in front of me. Now it occurred to me that she was simply enjoying Keet. I could understand that well enough. Still, I felt simultaneously happy and sad, especially when I considered the next thing I was going to do, because Keet had invited us to supper.

I called Keet back to the corral fence and said, "I'm sorry Keet, I've got to go. Tell Faye I forgot to feed Belle."

Keet's dark eyes flashed with anger. "I can't believe this. You rude--"

"Keet. Remember how you used to say I was down for the count? Well, you're out cold, bronco, and it's time to concede the fight. I'm out of here, and if you don't know what to do about that you're dense as this concrete." I kicked the chunk of concrete holding the gate post.

"Hey, wait one minute, you crazy man. You think you can rearrange people's lives and make yourself feel good? You can't just pass off a human heart like this."

"I'm doing it because I want you two to be happy, and because you'd never touch Faye otherwise," I said in a low insistent voice. "You -- I think better than anyone else -- know what Faye wants...and you know me a little, don't you, Keet? I just want some well deserved happy times for both of you. I'm trusting you with someone precious to me. That ought to count for something. So you can take it from there, pardner." I walked to my rig without looking back.

"Well, damn it!" I heard Keet whisper. But it didn't have the dangerous sound of unforgiving profanity.

The moment I was back on the highway, I was consumed by a gloomy feeling of sadness, of bereavement and self-pity. Unlike her experience with Frank, I knew that Faye couldn't fail to love Keet. I would never be that close to her again. I only hoped I could have the friendship of the two of them together for as long as we all lasted.

When I arrived home after another tuna melt supper at The Seahorse, there were a couple of phone messages for me. Message number one: "Faye was spitting nails and had me drive her home with no supper. Don't ever pull anything like that again, Griff. I know you meant well, but I'd guess Faye is yours till hell freezes over. See ya." Message number two: "Of all the embarrassing, lowdown, nasty tricks, this really takes the cake, Richard Griffen. Keet Tealwing is one of the dearest kindest persons I've ever had the good fortune to know...and if I wanted to fall in love with him I'd do it in my own way on my own time.

Honest to God, how insensitive can you get? Oh, screw you!"

"Well, Belle, what do you think? Does that sound like any kind of progress?" I said to my intelligent looking dog. Belle wagged her tail slowly and licked my hand in pity.

I decided not to act in a cowardly way but to take immediate aggressive action and call up Faye.

"I'm sorry...sorry, Faye. You didn't hurt Keet?"

"Me? Me! You've got a colossal nerve, Griff."

"It really finished me off leaving you there...because, in my own...hopeless way, you know how much I care for you. On the other hand, Keet's in love with you big time."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Keet loves you way over the mountain, honey. It's serious. I didn't even realize it until today. You know he's a better man than I am and--"

The phone went dead. I had planted the idea with the best intentions, if without subtlety. Even so, the manner was indefensible. I was every kind of fool, every accursed word that Keet and Faye could think of and heave at me. If I were Belle, I could more easily express my feelings by crawling under the bed. Playing Cupid isn't just shiny little arrows shot from pretty bows. Every once in a while Cupid shoots a magnum shaft into his own clumsy foot.

Now that my personal life had gone over Niagara in a splayed barrel, there was nothing left for me to do but get on with hunting down Lyle Rainer. For all I knew he was temporarily in Nova Scotia or Mazatlán. What I did know

was the possible location of some prime cannabis patches that he most certainly overlorded. Eventually, in the camouflaged leaf shed of one of them, I was bound to meet up with Ed Rainer's elusive fraternal disappointment. But I'd have to expose myself to the superior firepower and kill-crazy muscle corps that an unending supply of greenwash can buy. With fall soon disappearing into winter, it might already be too late, but there was a remote chance that Lyle could still be around somewhere greedily toting up the harvest. I didn't actually believe that Ed was telling me the truth on that one. After all, Lyle had just been to see him. Some kind of upper echelon business might also be in the works.

The ideal but scary situation would be a turf war that brought the San Francisco supermarket into the fray -- China White, Lady Snow, and Colombian Gold versus Siskiyou Savory. Then the feds could bust everything out of the badlands and off the water surface at the same time, and leave those places to the fish and turkey poachers. What a dream. Instead, it was all a big endless banquet where crime and law enforcement dished from the same bowls, a highly beneficial way of life for every greedy feeder at the table. For a while I allowed my cynical overview a free ride on testy Griffen wings. Then I set myself back down in the real world of base and basic drives.

The real world was actually national forest, through which I was packing gear in the crisp fall dusk, with the Glock holstered and my Ruger .44 Magnum cracked over my shoulder. Did I resemble a licensed hunter? I was one. I inhaled deeply, detecting among the mélange of smells a mild scent of mushrooms, probably the tasty yellow-fleshed boletus easily found growing nestled among fallen alder

leaves. The freakish early snow had disappeared, except in the high mountains, and the cool spicy woods breezes now and then gave off faint intimations of warmth curling beneath the drifting marine clouds.

There is something about moving alone through the forest primeval in the slanting light of a fall evening that is of itself soulfully mysterious and atavistic. On a self-imposed manhunt, if more or less officially sanctioned, I was dealing with emotions that rapidly zigzagged between high ecstasy and very earthbound concerns. The awareness that this particular foray was also dragging a load of personal baggage heightened my caution, making me keenly alert for the least little unexpected occurrence, along with all the standard glitches that experience anticipated.

Descending gradually for a hundred or more feet, I saw through the trees a limited catch of watery marsh. I heard a liquid crash, splashing, and a whistling trumpet like no other sound. Then silence. I leaned against a luminous bigleaf maple near the shallow basin's tangled edge, searching over the silvery reeds and flame-tinted brush tips until I caught sight of the noise maker. There in the rising moon stood a quarter-submerged elk the height of myself, with his dampened muzzle dripping dimly sparkling marsh water. I was downwind but it was the mating season, and if that nervous moonlight drinker spotted me he would probably lower his magnificent stack of antlers and charge. Very likely the big stag would attack anything now that his reproductive signals were switched on: man, beast, or even an inoffensive tree trunk. The presence of a mate hardly mattered. For a while longer he stared toward my shadowy place, courteously uncertain and grandly formidable, the

very essence of elkdome. Finally, he splashed through the wet brush and sedges at the far edge of the marsh, gave one last whimsical glance over his powerful shoulder, and vanished into the same darkening forest that swallowed me.

There was an old overgrown logging road somewhere around my chosen shortcut, and I lay zipped into my sleeping bag, intermittently thinking about that and about the hot morning coffee that I was not going to get. Then a minute fragment of something I must have been dreaming flashed across my mind, so provocative that I tried to pull it back and capture the rest for a careful examination. Lying in my secure old bag must have triggered it, because the dream was about Betty and me, about learning to share the unequalled pleasure and humor and incredible proximity of one sleeping bag. The first time we tried it, out on Lobster Creek on one of our early, escape-from-the-world camping trips, we tangled ourselves up so nicely I was good for only one continuous thing. If it hadn't been for the pill, we'd have had a litter by the time we got married.

All at once, I had a gut-wrenching longing for her, something I'd managed to side-step for quite a while, with sweet Faye as my inhibitor. Back came the old sadness over lost youth, its carelessness and boundless expectation. The problem was I couldn't think of that part of my life without thinking of Betty. She had ruined all the best memories by discounting their value. I still believed she would come to admit how wrong she'd been -- precisely what she did in the dream, emerging from a green willow thicket with springy, life-affirming steps, barefoot and naked. She swayed above me for a few seconds, then tossed back her

long, coppery-blond hair and wriggled down into my sleeping bag. I felt those firm, cool arms slide around me as she went after my forgiveness. I also felt tremendous relief as I welcomed her back along with the entire front part of my fledged life, to be lived all over again exactly the same but without desertion. I expanded and glowed with the consuming heat of it, then fell to pieces like white ash.

By the time I found the abandoned logging road it was nearly dark again. It wouldn't be easy to see from the sky, running as it did beneath maturing firs. The road was freshly in use -- there were cut back huckleberry bushes, torn away sword ferns, and rutted tire marks. If I followed the tracks to the old logging camp, I was certain of what I'd encounter.

The Sheriff didn't know I was here and didn't want to know. He knew that I was somewhere, and that it was vaguely where he expected me to be, but only after the fact. Only when my presence became indisputably advantageous, when, in conjunction with quickly alerted DEA forces, actions assumed the heroic proportions of a richly yielding bust, only then did the Sheriff expect to have the exact details of my whereabouts and the precise identity of any involved malefactors. I knew that the DEA was not looking for Lyle Rainer, and probably didn't even know he existed. I was fairly certain that his brother, his son, and I were the only ones who knew about Lyle Rainer. He was elusive, seldom in the area, and his own son used another name. Despite all of this privileged information, I believed I was technically out of my jurisdiction, although there was some privately owned timber land around

here for which I didn't have the exact boundaries.

There is this avoidance thing called plausible deniability, an essential way of life for government and police agencies, and, incidentally, criminal elements who use it against each other to elicit more crime. Without the dodge of plausible deniability, everything would lock up in a hail of legal wrenches tossed into the machinery. That's why the most effective surreptitious actions usually only become viable and acceptable after the fact. And that's why I could be simultaneously on federal land -- if I was -- and somewhere else less contentious, and possibly unofficially and officially poised beside an unknown road that led to a cannabis field that didn't exist until I decided there was a reason it should. I really didn't give a damn about the field. I wanted Lyle Rainer, bad enough to convince myself with nothing but a gut hunch that he was near at hand.

Alongside the road, crouched low in the competing brush, ferns, and brambles of a young fir stand that would eventually extinguish them all, I waited. While I was waiting I tried to reach Keet on my cellular. Sometimes it worked out here, sometimes it didn't. This time I was at a high enough elevation for contact.

"Hey, Deputy."

Keet's voice sounded complacent and friendly.

"You still mad at me?"

"I never was. Maybe a little disgusted...but that finally worked around to some kind of useless gratitude. What's up? Lot of static. Where you at, anyway?"

"I'm way the hell gone, Keet. Out here on the fringes of some kind of trouble."

"How about you get a little more precise. Something

going down?"

"Not unless it's me. I don't want the county in on this yet, but probably somebody ought to know where I am. Just in case I disappear. Got a map handy?"

"I don't need a damn map. Just tell me approximately where you think you are."

I explained the way I'd been spending my time and the location of the abandoned logging road that was no longer abandoned. Keet was far from amused. His voice tightened up, and he swore at me for leaving him out of the one-handed loop. I vindicated myself by reminding him that it was police work.

"Uh-huh...where's your backup? Griffish...don't try anything alone out there, not in that nest of vipers."

"Look, stay out of here, Keet...if that's what you're intending. I'm just after one rotten son of a bitch who thinks it's okay to whack innocent folks off the highway."

"What the hell! You, a straight arrow, turning into a cowboy? Right nice police work, okay, but you know damn well who you're playing around with there. Those bastards use assault rifles like knives and forks."

"I'm not playing, my friend, just doing my job," I said with an even voice, and hung up.

I went on waiting and thinking. There was plenty of time to do both. No one showed up on the road that night. The next morning just before dawn, I decided to take a look at the camp, and used the dim early light to hike in through the tangled cover running along the road's edge. The mature cannabis, planted wide apart in the manner that separated it from harmless hemp cultivation, was far in among the trees, and most of it had already been harvested. A shabby old slash burner that would attract no attention

was probably being used for storage. Beneath an army style canopy of branches, workers had set up housekeeping, and there were two dirt bikes parked there invisible to a sky search. That was all I could see with binoculars. I hiked back out to a point where I could safely remain without interference from the grunts. I'd allow myself a couple more days before deciding to give up on Griffen prescience. I drank a little water from my canteen and settled into the brush, waiting for nightfall and letting my thoughts wander again.

"You've changed," Jackie told me when she cornered me in my father's library the day I took Kim there.

"Since when? How?"

"Well, just like that, for instance. See how eager you are to find out about yourself. Awhile back, you would've merely laughed at the idea of change."

"Okay," I said, awaiting a verdict in dad's wing chair.

When observing my large-boned, freckle-faced, brimming with life female sibling I always see a full house: an attentive mother with real brain power, plenty of fortitude, and a svelte athleticism generated by steady opposition to a sedentary bench life. My willowy sister is not quite beautiful but pleasing to the eye, coltish, radiating the sparkling energy of a rushing mountain stream. On that day it was especially so, in her navy, long-sleeved, straight-skirted, gold-buttoned dress with a pale orange and brown silk scarf tied low beneath her long ivory-skinned neck. I draw a lot of comfort from her self-confidence. She holds the opinion that life is a

magnificent process and that its bad elements can and will be rectified. Jackie is patently there to see that it gets done. I don't always share her optimism, but I'm glad she has it. She likes to analyze everything, and sometimes, when the old habit gets too stridently verbal, it can stir my reflective silence into a mild irritation. But that's what makes her such a capable judge. When she comes to a conclusion, it's usually dead on the point with no extra frills. Jackie's husband, Paul, is a hard-nosed newspaperman and well able to withstand her saucy, take-charge personality.

She nudged my arm and threw back her head with her special skittering laughter. "Look at you, just waiting for me to tell you something interesting about yourself."

"All right get on with it, Your Honor."

"Well, you look like you might be ready to take on something more important than a big steelhead run."

"Not *more important* -- the wrong attack on this way of life. Maybe some form of *as well as*. I'll allow that."

"Well, for a self-satisfied, self-contained fly-fisherman, you're giving me a *whole* lot," Jackie remarked.

Then she went over my face with a careful examination, one that was concerned and loving enough to be tolerated. For once, she restrained herself, following up her conclusion in silence with a quick mischievous shrug of satisfaction at her own supposed accuracy.

I don't really believe that adult humans can change, and I reminded Jackie of that long-standing opinion. "Sometimes another part of you that was always there just opens up and reveals itself. For a while it overshadows something else. That's all. We're all hard-wired early on, Jackie. Nobody really changes very much."

"That explanation is sophistry, Richard."

"No...nothing false or shallow about it. It's just the way things are."

"Well, then you're quibbling, splitting hairs. Why do you think it's necessary?"

"Get off your bench, Jackie. You're not always right," I said, but I was feeling too lighthearted for an argument.

"Your sister is quite something," Kim said on the way home. "If I didn't enjoy her so much, she'd really be intimidating."

"Why? She doesn't intimidate me."

"Well, of course not. It's just that she's so in control of her life. Envious."

"And she has a lot of concern for you, Griff."

"How do you claim to know so much in just a few minutes?" I said, only half teasing.

"Because she told me so and frankly implied, without explaining very much, that you were not to be hurt again."

For a while I was speechless. Then I said, "I suppose some of that's my fault for...for some past lunacy I put everybody through. Poor Jackie is going to regret that."

"Don't you dare say a word to her," Kim swiftly demanded. "I admire her for it. I admire her!"

I conceded, said no more on the subject of Jackie's awkward tactics, and offered no further enlightenment on my troubled and troubling past. I knew it was a stance that kept me in a precarious comfort zone. I didn't care as long as I stayed there. If Jackie only knew how little she had to worry about.

Just after the wine-streaked dusk faded to gray, I saw a set of distant lights flickering in and out of the trees. They bounced and swayed over the roughly maintained roadbed as some kind of vehicle advanced. My attention and energy amassed in a single sharp focus of readiness. Once that was done, I felt as calm as the eye of a hurricane. As long as my presence went undetected there was nothing to fear but a mistake of my own making, the loss of choice.

I watched, adjusting my binoculars, as a dark van bounced quietly past me over the rutted road. Through the open window, I saw one male driver, late twenties, and a shadowy passenger. Maybe more in the back. Grabbing up my rifle, I ran my earlier course through the brush, following the van in. When the passengers left the vehicle, I wanted to be there. I made it without even taxing my lungs.

Just before the driver switched off the engine, I thought I heard a low bark, but when I listened more carefully I heard nothing. I watched the single passenger get out and rapidly move his chino-covered legs through the headlight beams. It was Lyle Rainer. The temples of his dark head were going gray. His brown leather pilot's jacket flashed briefly in the lights, and then the two men were together in darkness. One of the workers came out and held a flashlight. The driver and Lyle went inside the old renovated smoker.

My mind was doing cartwheels of self-satisfaction. I advised myself to settle down as I edged closer to the makeshift living quarters. Pale light escaped the camouflage, slanting over the shadow-rough ground. I was planning to move nearer and eavesdrop when I noticed

something: a chain leading from a ground peg. My eyes followed it until I came to an indistinct black mound of fur curled beneath a small pine. The animal, a Rottweiler, lifted its head and sniffed the air, then dropped back down into sleep. If the dog got a whiff of my presence, all of my advantage would instantly vanish. I backed off, stealing over to the van, slowly opening the side door, and getting myself into its back. Now I was really giving up choices. If they decided to do any loading, I'd have to exit with my Glock extended and hope for the best. My thought was that Lyle was too far up the pole to be hauling. He'd leave that risk to his well-paid muscle. I believed he was there mainly to gloat over his bountiful cache, like the weaver Silas Marner counting his money. When Lyle and his escort reentered the van without any freight, I knew I was right.

I bounced along in the clumsy rear darkness with my Glock out and under my belt while I locked my right foot around a counter support and used my left foot to keep my rifle from sliding out of reach. I needed my hands free, but before my act was on I wanted to get well away from the camp and as close to my little side encampment as possible.

Lyle had a healthy ego and spent a lot of time painting himself as Mr. Wonderful, in big colorful swatches of felonious achievement. Finally, he got around to agrarian serendipity.

"Beef, we were lookin' at killer weed there. The best of its kind." Lyle twisted himself forward in his seat and rubbed his back. "Yeah, real good stuff."

"You oughta know, huh, boss?" his sweet-talking muscleman answered.

"I expect you to get in here early tomorrow...get that

prime yield on the market pronto."

"Right, boss.

"You goin' straight to the airport?"

"Yeah. After a whiff of that beautiful stack I'm already airborne. Smells green, huh? Smells like best of everything. Shit, there's nothin' like it. You hang in there, man, you'll find out. It's all ahead of you."

"You said it, boss.

"Sure sorry about the kid."

"Shut up! I'm all through talkin' about it. Those motherfuckers'll find out soon enough what I think. Jesus, my own kid that dumb. It's an embarrassment. Goddamn his stupid little ass. Somebody's gonna pay for that."

"Somebody almost did, boss," Beef said with an apologetic click of air through his gums. "Shit, I'd a had her, if that truck hadn't come along. Two guys in a truck...looked like trouble."

"There'll be trouble all right...plenty of it. Somebody'll pay for my kid."

"How about you pay? You're the one who raised a felon," I said, nosing my Glock in tight behind Lyle's right ear. His body jerked and froze while his voice erupted in a gurgle of rage then settled down to an oily inducement.

"What we got here, some kinda underpaid lawman? You wanna earn what you're worth, I'll forget this happened."

"Keep both hands on the wheel, meathead!" I ordered the driver who had started to reach under the seat. "And you, Lyle, keep your hands spread on your knees while we park this bus and regroup."

"Listen, Jack, I keep my word. It's payday. Just stop all this and consider yourself a real lucky son of a

bitch."

I already considered myself conditionally lucky. I had Lyle Rainer on the finesse and under the gun. But his lunkheaded driver, wild with being caught off guard, was about to go berserk. I lifted my rifle up with my left hand and pressed it into his side. "Park it now!"

Beef slowed the van -- a response far too accommodating for my wary nerves -- then suddenly twisted the wheel and floored it. His intention was merely to knock me loose, but the front wheel clipped a low stump beside the road and the van tipped, swayed for a strangely silent, precariously rocking moment of indecision, then rolled. Everything topsy-turvy in the darkness, my body slamming into a foam padded seat then rolling across the roof of the van, back to the floor, back to the seat and out the hole left by the ripped away sliding door. I was oozing blood, helpless and witless jetsam moving swiftly to my final resting place. Stationary at last, I encountered pain and swore with the hurting. Eventually, I discovered that my tortured limbs worked nearly as well as my mouth. I hoisted myself above a thick tangle of ferns that had cushioned my landing, briefly explored my bruised frame in the darkness, then shambled toward the van. It was resting on its side with one headlight still burning. Crawling back in, I twisted the key off and hunted around for my Glock. First I found my rifle rammed under loose carpeting, then the pistol wedged in the seat back. Priorities, my shocked brain announced as I next began to search for bodies. Nobody was wearing seat belts, and nobody was anywhere around. I knelt on the ground, trying to deduce something while rubbing my screaming splintered elbow and mopping blood out of my eyes with my shirttail.

If anyone could survive even more abuse than this, it would be the bonehead driving. He had the physique of a steroid-loaded bull, and nothing much could happen to his head that would change his attitude. As for Lyle, he could have flown out the door early on and might be lying in the brush somewhere taking an involuntary snooze.

A low groan and then a barely coherent string of profanity perked up my ears. I moved back inside the van fast, looking for anything that would make light. Finally, my torpid brain remembered the pen light clipped to the inside of my shirt pocket. I felt for it and found it painfully embedded in the right place. It had punched hard into my chest, but it still worked. I turned myself in a carefully searching arc, aiming the pale beam at brush and ferns. The darkness was so dark that the short range of my feeble light made a distinctive difference as it settled over a hand clawing at a tangle of brush.

"Let's see the other hand," I ordered.

"I think it's broken, you son of a bitch! Oh my God!" Lyle's driver bellowed.

I leaned into the thorny brush and pulled on his free hand, but the other hand rose up and swung at my face. I let go and ducked then spun around, trying to keep my light where I could readily detect any other extracurricular activities Beef had in mind. He was busy rustling up his torn trouser leg and hustling a mirror-shiny, double-edged blade out of its leg sheath. If he was intact enough to stand up, I was going to need firepower. Whipping the Glock out of my belt, I backed up and held the light in his eyes. He lowered his head, trying to get on his feet.

"Just drop that knife and crawl! Crawl out of there and stay put. You hear me? On the ground."

"I'm gonna cut you up, pig face."

"Give me that slicer, dunderhead. You're some lousy driver, and you're not even interested enough in your boss to find out if he's *in extremis* or just taking a nap." I was talking to get the driver's pit-bull attention focused on something besides my heartbeat while I got my hands on the knife. The moment I stopped talking we heard groaning.

"Beef? Kevin? Beef! What the...where the hell am I? What the fuck happened?"

I turned my light toward Lyle's groggy voice at the same moment that I took hold of the knife handle, but that big barn-side of beef held on and plunged the razor-sharp point straight down into my thigh. He lifted the knife to do it again, and I fired. He was down and on his way out. I thought maybe I was, too. When I checked, there was no spurting artery, just a steady ooze of blood, and pain shooting up my spine and into my throat, red hot flames.

"You did it to yourself!" I raved with a shaky voice, but Beef wasn't listening anymore.

While Lyle was sitting up trying to remember what country he was in, I tore my undershirt and belted my leg wound, swearing under my breath and striving to keep my personal status all to myself. The throbbing in my left leg felt like the enraged ghost of Beef was still working it over with his blade as I eased through the ferns and brambles to the place where I expected to find Lyle. I held the light on him and he lifted a hand to cover his eyes.

"Who fired...? Who's that? Kevin?...or...or Beef?"

"Beef opted for the happy hunting ground," I said, sucking in air with the pain. "Although I doubt he's happy where he ended up."

The sound of my voice must have reminded Lyle of what was happening before the van rolled over. "You son of a bitch! The deal's off!" he roared.

"I'll say," I said, fighting straight through a rush of pain that was about to knock me flat. Shit! if I faint that's the end of this work, I told myself. Standing quietly on one foot for a few seconds in an obscuring blackness, I took a single deep breath, held it, then exhaled. There followed a feeble oath that I wouldn't hyperventilate myself cross-eyed. I was dripping sweat, but my head was a pin cushion of cold needles.

"Can you stand up?"

Lyle got up slowly without answering.

I didn't know where the cuffs I was carrying in my jacket had landed, maybe in the van, maybe not. But I had another set in my backpack somewhere around there, if I could stay on my feet and run Lyle in the right direction. I had to move fast because my leg was freezing up. Fumbling in the darkness, I lifted the belt and checked the bloody patch without giving Lyle a clue of what I was doing.

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah, so what? I'm not goin' anywhere with you, you goddamned skull-buster."

"Start walking...or I'll lay you out for good like your jobless friend there." I ran the Glock's barrel nose down Lyle's temple and pressed it into his cheek.

"Okay, I'm walking. Get that fucking hardware outta my face."

We moved slowly down the edge of the road. My little pen light wasn't going to last much longer, and I was hoping to locate the tall pine with its diseased rusty-red

limb that hung over the road like a friendly flag. Beneath it, I'd stashed my backpack. Very soon I spotted the shadowy tallest of tall pines with its distinctive dead arm. The ground around it was soothingly familiar to me. Waves of pain and relief swept over me as I stumbled forward.

"Sit down," I ordered Lyle while I searched through my backpack. My shaky fingers slid over the cold metal of containment. I kept my head down while a bout of dizziness disoriented my intent.

"Get up. Hands out and around the trunk," I said, rising slowly and trying to short-circuit my pain threshold with a batch of words that fell on deaf ears. "Lean in. You get to hug *Pinus lambertiana*. My deepest apologies, old sugar pine."

"You're squirrel-food...a real nut case."

"Okay, both hands all the way around. You hear me, wise-ass? The hands! This is a...a form of survival...you got that?...the opposite of death," I muttered, stuffing the Glock in the top of my beltless jeans and clicking on the cuffs. Then I Mirandized a pair of deaf ears.

"Now what? How long's this gonna last? Somethin's wrong with you. You got knocked in the head, too, right?"

Lyle was trying hard to look me over, but my gratuitous partnership with the night had thus far foiled his attempts and given me the temporary edge I needed.

I limped away, eased myself down beside my backpack, and rested against a low cropping of basalt. There were stars but not in the sky, little flashes of light, pops of sharp color. My leg was a pulse of color, too, red and blue and sulfurous spears of pain. I loosened the belt. The wound oozed black blood. I tightened it up, then

hunted for the cell phone in my backpack. I tried the office. Nothing but static. I tried Keet. His message recording faded in and out, but I heard the beep. "Hey, pardner," I said. "Thought you'd be here by now." More static. I punched off and leaned back, suddenly reminded of the pain in my elbow.

"I gotta take a leak," Lyle whined.

"Wet your pants, hotshot," I said. "Stand there with your poison piss running down your miserable legs, and think about what your brother tried to teach you."

I closed my eyes in exhaustion, hunting for sleep. But it felt like someone was laying a white hot branding iron across my brain. After a while, I realized Lyle was talking, babbling mostly to himself.

"My brother, the dreamer. All words. Art? Shit! I can buy art, all the sculpture, music, paintings, books I want. I got houses full of the stuff. What's it mean? Nothing. It's all phony garbage. Cars, cashmere, silk, women...plenty of gorgeous ass ready to fall all over you, that's the real world...a few lines of bliss and a roomful of expensive skin, that's the real world...taking big chances, that's the real world. I got my own airplane, my own boat. What's he got? Words. Dreams. Stuff nobody even reads. What's that?"

"You'll never know," I called out. "That's why you surround yourself with everything that's worthless."

"Jesus! if only I'd stayed the hell out of here!" he shouted, furious at my rediscovered presence. "Your wiring's loose, motherfucker. Can't wait for daylight...get a good look at your haywire mug, bull man."

What he would have a good look at was my disconnected leg, steadily growing more useless. I was shivering, even

with my jacket zipped and a thin blanket wrapped around me. Lyle had a leather jacket. I had no choice but to leave him where he was, or, when he found out the condition I was in, he'd find a way to finish me off.

"Christ, I've got one palooza of a headache from that knockout. Maybe it's a concussion. If I could get my hand in my pocket, I'd have a smoke."

"Now's the time to quit," I said.

"You rotten fuckup! When I'm free here, the first thing I'm gonna do is whack you right outta the universe."

"You'll probably be too late," I said to myself.

I didn't think I was going to sleep, but I fell into some kind of hallucinatory condition that resembled it. Hot and cold waves of pain and flickering images that came and went like spliced strips of film. Brahm's Lullaby...my mother's soft young hands floating confidently over her piano keys...*Now go to sleep, my wild little rascal.* Frosty December on the river with my first spinning rod, my loosely traditionalist father's insightful Christmas present...ice and stone, blood and bone. The majesty and heart-yanking impermanence of a silvery speckled trout rising up from sluggish green depths alive and full of fight. The beginning of a fish story and the certainty of an end, even without interference, finally introducing and defining slippery, slippery time.

Pale sunlight tapped me awake. I was freezing with sweat in my eyes. I undid the belted shirt pad on my numb leg. A trickle of blood. Lyle was leaning away from, but still embracing his towering and reliable keeper. His narrow chin had sprouted a fiendish black shadow, but his expensive chino pants were soiled with urine, canceling much of his satanic splendor. He watched me with sharp

interest, then threw back his head and laughed.

"He got you! Old Beef stuck you good. You're gonna rot and die, you unlucky son of a bitch. How about one last act of consideration...decency? How about you crawl over here and unlock these cuffs? I won't lay a finger on you."

I felt my heart speed up a little. I shifted my back against the rocks and smiled.

"When they come...to haul away my carcass...that disgusted old sugar pine'll still be...tryin' to chuck you off, you worthless piece of detritus." I closed my eyes. I didn't think I was sleeping. In a while, I didn't even remember where I was.

"There's a smell snow has. You ever notice that, dad? Boy, it's hard to describe, 'cause there's nothing else smells like that."

"Well, son, I suspect snow takes on some of the odors of wherever it falls. Don't you think?"

"Maybe a little, but there's something else all its own...the smell of snow." I laughed at my remark, but I was serious. I stood there with my boots planted in the shallow end of a stubble field snowdrift, trying hard to approximate the smell of snow by silently making a list that didn't quite work. A clean linen smell? A metal smell? A smell not really flowers or weeds or moss or leaves or wood or earth. "I guess it's just the smell of no smell at all; none there without a nose, anyway, and mine's freezing."

I turned to my father who was rumbling with laughter.

Dad's dark twill pants were tucked into his

weatherized rubber-soled field boots, and his big torso was covered with a fir-green turtleneck, a heavy worsted black sweater, and his red plaid wool jacket. He pulled off his black knitted cap, tucked it under his arm, and removed his leather gloves. Long fingers, expressive and energetic, combed his thick sandy hair as he looked up at the sky.

"Probably you're right," he agreed, repositioning his cap. "But you know what I find most interesting, son?"

"What?" I asked, tossing a handful of powdery snow into the air and watching it sift down on a slight wind.

"That you would have such ideas, think such things. It shows how observant you are. You're a young fellow quite in tune with nature, close to the earth. I often see your interest, quick and lively, in so much out here around us. Your grandmother was so inclined. It's a birthright I think you'll always have. Some day you'll see it as more valuable than a lot of other things considered more important. I'm glad for that...very glad. I hope you'll remember."

My undisciplined thoughts condensed as I gazed out at the horizon through my own white breath. There was the filtered cottony mass of sun sinking into the tree line, spreading a burnished sheen over the snow-covered fields and striking both of us with a silver-yellow light. I looked with unsuspecting comfort at my father, then into his luminous, grayed-blue eyes, sharp with experience and knowledge and set wide above flushed little pouches of tired flesh, evidence of intense and constant reading. My eyes fell to his great long shadow stretching away, bending and curving around everything in its path and far out into the field where I could perceive no end to it.

"You see how she stole that fish right out from under my hook?"

"You let her," Keet said.

Sunlight water spangles flickered over our drowsy warm bodies. Cool river rushes of air revived us with the smells of willow, sweet moldering leaves, overripe wild berries.

"Why'd I let her get away with that?" I was grinning, expecting no answer. The question was an answer.

We were both silent, watching Betty pick her way over the rocks with the sagging net, bend down, flatten the net, and stroke the stymied little jack into an iridescent flash of freedom. She stood up, hand-shaded eyes following her fish, her slight body in jeans and white sweatshirt gilded with lazy afternoon light. Finally, she turned back to us with a satisfied sparkle of triumph, always thoroughly and irresistibly in the moment. Then, just to make us crazy, she called out, "Why do this, anyway?"

"That's why," I muttered, my head turned away from Keet, answering two questions at once.

"You coming to the dance tonight?"

"Nope."

"Why not, Keet? Dammit!"

"Got no lady. Besides, I feel like an ox at those things. Clumsy and stupid."

"Aw, come on. You can dance. I've seen you."

"When I'm a little juiced, but not there. Chaperones? No thanks. I don't dig that whole rigamarole. Hey, never mind. Enjoy yourself."

"How about thinking of someone else for a change?" I said with huge unfeigned disgust.

"Huh?"

Keet, surprised, tossed back his head of short black hair -- cut the same as mine was, for the purpose of avoiding human entanglements --, ran his bewildered hands down the sides of his brown plaid shirt and shoved them into his jeans pockets.

"All the shy pretty girls that never get asked. All the shy little girls that stare at your back in the hall, you big wasted load. How about that?"

"Hey, they get there without any help from me."

"Then come over and dance with 'em, give 'em a thrill."

"Why you need me at this thing?"

"You gotta share my misery, Keetwing."

"Uh-huh. Betty, misery?"

"Well, you know...butterfly ritual."

"Oh yeah."

"Aw, come on."

Keet showed up late in a leather jacket, a white shirt, dark slacks, shined loafers, and with a drink under his belt, showed up with the idea of suffering. Betty tugged at his arm, persuading him to dance with her, spring-fresh in a narrow green dress the color of unripe figs. Watching her filled me with pride and lust, a little misery. I thought of dancing with someone else, but didn't. Keet, used to fighting back, tried to resist complete feminine dominance only half aware of itself. He barely held onto her solvent body, choosing levity, dancing by me with his head back and his eyes half closed, high on both his partner and his convenient sense of humor. He gave her up with surprised reluctance, confounded. Having tested the new waters, he was soon roughhousing the willowy

volleyball princess around the floor, free to enjoy himself at no cost to me. She was listening and giggling -- positive rewards, a variety of siren song encouraging false belief in his own powers. Keet had peppermint on his breath. He was dead ripe.

Before the last dance ended, the four of us were riding in my mostly unpaid-for Mustang, with Keet driving -- not just because Keet had come to the dance on his Harley but because I so enjoyed sitting in the back seat of my car with both arms free to wrap themselves around Betty. We were bumping along out on weedy Bolder Creek Road with Betty singing to the radio: *Angel Cake and Wine*, and Billie, the reedy athlete still not as tall as Keet, squealing her delight and blowing kisses at the raccoons. The churring little bandits were everywhere, staring down at us from the trees, or suicidally loping their nervous raked bodies back and forth in front of our headlights.

"Oh my Gaaahd! Look! On his hind legs! They're so adorable!" our champion spiker sang out.

"So they must stay out of your garbage, huh?" Keet said, swinging the wheel to avoid flattening one of them.

"Don't you love 'em! Don't you just love 'em?"

"Well, a...I wouldn't go that far. They're okay. Sometimes they're cute. You want one?"

Betty and I pulled away from each other, both of us leaning forward to listen. The conversation was getting interesting.

"What're you talking about, Keet Tealwing? This isn't some pet shop. You can't really catch those things, can you? Gaahd! Wouldn't it be kind of dangerous?"

Keet didn't answer. He stopped the car, turned off the engine and opened the door, inviting Billie out.

Pony-tailed Billie stuck the pink-enameled tip of her little finger in her pettish mouth, then folded her rangy athletic arms, her body stalled in suspicion.

"Out there? In the dark? I don't know you that well."

"I'm harmless," Keet said. "Even to raccoons."

Betty and I got out of the car, and Billie cautiously followed us. We stood in cricket-backed silence for a few seconds and heard Bolder Creek gurgle and splash below the road. A light-edged cloud scuttled away from the half moon.

"Be right back," Keet said. I saw his white shirt dart quickly away and thought he was going to relieve himself.

We sat on the ground awhile listening to the car radio, then I turned it off and listened to the woods. The brush was moving around, twigs snapping, limbs cracking, and we heard a noisy barrage of raccoon scolding. I switched on the car lights. Keet loomed over us, sidelit, holding a crying baby raccoon by the scruff of its neck.

"Oh my Gaaahd! How on earth...can you see in the dark? It's darling. Oh, it is sooo cute," Billie cooed, and rushed up to Keet, trying to pet the baby bandit.

"Careful. It's had plenty of training in self defense," Keet warned. He set the raccoon on the hood of the car, keeping ahold of its neck while Billie petted.

"But how did you do that?" Betty asked.

"The mother'll run you away from them while they try to hide. They're not very good at it."

"What's it doing to my car wax?" I asked in a half teasing voice. The small raccoon drew itself into a motionless curl of fur, playing dead.

"Oh, I want it," Billie said, reaching for it.

"No. Sorry. I didn't mean you could keep it," Keet apologized, swiftly scooping up the miniature raccoon.

"Back to mama." He put the baby down on the ground and let it scurry away toward its mother's angry voice.

Betty was laughing. That was the main thing I heard, her laughter...the sound of the engine. Keet drove fast. "Raccoon faces everywhere," I said. Why was Keet driving so damned fast? Betty and Billie laughing. I wanted to laugh. I couldn't. "All...those...crazy little raccoons...biting. It fucking hurts! You're driving too fast, Keet. Slow down. Jesus Christ...cold! Roll up the damn windows." Keet's large hands on the wheel...faster and faster. "Any blood left? For God's sake!...I'm cold! Any...my...cold blood...left?... 's okay...never mind. I'm tired."

"Hang on, pardner. Just hang on, Griffish."

Keet's voice was far away, so far away I thought I fell out of the vehicle into freezing air...flying and bouncing and rolling and splintering. I tried to tell him that I couldn't hang on to anything, not the night of raccoons, not the voices or feelings, not Betty, not that young stud with all my unconsidered rich red blood...nothing.

I'm not a patient patient, so I was comparing myself to an eagle in a birdcage. Family, close friends, and various other Gold Beach folk kept arriving and departing my confining hospital room, sitting and staring as if I'd just been declared on the verge of extinction. Even little Dale Harner showed up with Keet. He had a handsome

photograph of himself exercising Little Bit while wearing new boots Keet had given him for his tenth birthday. That was a cheery interlude in the circus crowd.

"When you going to start throwing peanuts?" I asked Faye and Keet on their second visit. "My God, it was just a little knife wound."

"Uh-huh. You were run through, pardner; blood pressure practically non-existent when I arrived at the checkout. Now that your tongue is back in working order and you're about to walk again, you want to hear the truth, Griffish?"

"The truth? That'd be real nice."

"You were on the way out."

"Well, thanks to you, my friend -- and I certainly mean that -- I'm shuffling toward the living with a vengeance."

"I thought Sheriff Brandle did a neat job with the vengeance when he weaned Lyle Rainer from that sugar pine and introduced him to steel bars," Keet observed.

"That was just the initiation," I said, eyeing Faye in a clinging green wool dress, sitting with her legs crossed and winking at me in her sexy Irish sprite persona.

She kept looking at Keet with what I half kidded myself was thankfulness for his swift response to my dilemma -- an action as standard for Keet as it would have been for me. But even granting her thankfulness, Faye was looking at my Samaritan with increasing respect and a keen interest.

"You sure went through there like a cyclone. A rolled van with a busted briefcase of greenwash blowing through the trees, a buffalo cadaver, a guy with a serious physical..." Keet hesitated, looking at Faye. "A real

anxious felon overly attached to a tree. The animals back at the hay barn didn't even realize they were out of work until the law read them their rights."

Faye rose from her chair and walked up to Keet.

"Is this jabber some kind of code language to throw off people in the dark with only one headlight?" she asked.

I shook with laughter until I felt pain in my left leg.

"My God, I can feel my leg," I said. "I think I'm going to walk."

"Lie still, it'll pass," Keet suggested.

"Why don't you two go enjoy yourselves at my expense somewhere else," I said with tired but friendly collusion.

They departed, Keet smiling over his shoulder at me. I thought of a sleek dark alpha wolf with beautiful red and green feathers in its mouth, and was ashamed of myself.

"You mean to tell me you've never gone fishing?" I said to Dale Harner with amazement.

"No, sir. He always...my dad said there was no money for all that stuff."

"All what stuff?" I inquired, winking at Keet who was leaning against his corral gate in an old jacket and work jeans.

"You know," Dale said, squirming around, then hugging himself and scratching an elbow peeking through the worn arm of his heavy wine work shirt. The shirt was two sizes too small. The boy needed a haircut, and the temptation was there to take him in hand and simply outfit him completely. "...just stuff like...well, a pole...a reel, I guess...some line and bait. Oh, and hooks."

"Definitely hooks," I agreed.

"You know what, Keet? I need a haircut. How about you come with me, Dale? We'll go down to Marv's Barbershop and get our locks trimmed. Marv's a tonsorial expert."

"My tonsils are still okay," Dale said with a worried look spreading over his freckled face.

"A tonsorial expert is just Deputy Griffen's fancy talk for a real good barber," Keet explained with a kindly grin.

"Aren't you a little early this time?" Marv asked when I walked into his shop with a shaggy boy in my shadow.

A quick cheerfulness spilled out of me as I hailed middle-aged, dark-haired and mustachioed Marv Jamison. I jerked my head over my shoulder at Dale. Immediately made comfortable by this thickset man who exuded pleasantness, Dale offered Marv one of his infrequent smiles. It nearly always worked that way with Marv, because instead of growing cynical with passing time, here was an easygoing man made amused and tolerant by the constant foolishness of others.

"We're both getting clipped today, Marv. This is Dale Harner, a guy who really appreciates tonsorial experts."

Motioning for Dale to do the same, I dropped into one of Marv's restful old barber chairs.

"So then, who usually clips your hair, young man?" Marv asked, sizing up the overgrown bowl-style cut.

"My mother," Dale said, his nervous eyes roving over the walnut-stained shelves of jars and tubes and clippers and combs and scissors, and finally coming to rest on the spinning barber pole, a glorious antique in mint condition.

"Oh, your mother. Ah, yes. Well, mothers are experts at all things...all things," Marv assured his new customer with barber-style diplomacy.

Marv clipped and combed on me while he chatted with Dale, who gave shy but slowly and carefully thought out answers, as if he assumed this was all part of a once in a lifetime test for advancement, one he really wanted to pass.

Finished with my shearing, Marv started on Dale and began directing his conversation to me, apparently the least distracting work method.

"How's the leg, Griff?"

"Well, you saw me walking. How'd it look?"

"Couldn't even detect a limp. You working at that?"

"Maybe a little. It'll soon be gone."

"Well, looky there in the mirror, Dale, you've got ears. I tell you what, you come back without him, and I'll fill those ears with some real good stories about Deputy Griffen."

"Nice guy. This is my reward for a new customer, huh?"

"Bo Riley was in two days ago, talking a blue streak. That fella sure takes an interest in you, Griff. Seems to think you lead a real fascinating life."

I clenched my teeth, but merely grimaced and asked, "Which part of it?"

"Well," Marv said with a short laugh that quickly raised and lowered his amazing handlebar mustache, "I don't think the part where they haul you in to emergency."

"Could be the part where I go fishing and totally forget about people who spend all their time huddling with rumormongers and making chin music."

"Do I detect a little bit of animosity there?"

"If that's all you detect, you're slipping, Marv."

"Well, I'll have to admit I've heard a lot of incredible stuff bending over these chairs for the last twenty-three years. Can't be avoided."

"Maybe you should write it down. That's what every Tom, Dick, and Harriet does these days."

"They say that woman, Kim Bailey, was writing something up there at Ed Rainer's place."

I remained silent.

"Barb said she suddenly stopped coming to her letter box...without a word. Then yesterday Barb asked the woman's husband about it when he showed up to collect her mail. He said his wife had to take care of her sick mother."

I stood up, watching Marv make the last swerve of his comb through Dale's hair.

"Hey, I think we've got a real good looking fellow emerging from those sandy locks," I said. "Nice job, Marv."

"Anytime, anytime. Glad to meet you, Dale."

"Thirty dollars, please, Griff."

The plans I had for this idle Saturday were instantly blanked out by Marv's jolting gossip, now pulsing through my head. I had intended to take Dale down to Fred Meyer and buy him some warm winter clothes and then maybe show him a little easy fishing. As we left Marv's place, I'd almost forgotten the boy was even there dogging my footsteps. I was vaguely aware that he had stopped to look at himself in the plate glass. A real adult-style haircut. Important for the kid. I just kept walking. The heat was still on Kim.

"Mr. Griffen? Deputy Griffen?"

Dazed, I turned around, climbing out of anxiety and confusion. Urgency as yet undirected roiled up my insides.

"Thanks a lot. Gee, thanks a lot."

He stood there, skinny and in clothes detergent-faded and too small, but with shining blue eyes and a knock-out trim, transformed into that fleeting combination of innocence, self-awareness, and self-satisfaction -- a moment he'd never experienced before and might lose, if I didn't make an effort to pack in all the wildness coursing through my arteries. I smiled approval while reconfiguring.

We'd left Belle with my guide friend Ray, who was working on his boat down at the dock, with the intention of picking her up later for our fishing excursion.

"That's a fine looking hair job. You're almost set now. Think if I leave you off with Ray you could check on Belle while I run an errand, Dale?"

"Sure, Mr. Griffen."

"Didn't I say you could call me Griff?"

"Okay, Griff." He looked at me dead on for the first time, then straightened up his bony little shoulders and angled his newly contoured head with a fresh cocky pride.

"Barb, how on earth could you have just handed over her mail? You know that's illegal."

"But I told you, Griff. What could I do? I don't understand this. He had a note from her that matches her signature. Said they were living with her elderly mother. Of course, I asked for ID, and he showed me his driver's license with his picture, his name, Lester Bailey, and

their permanent Sacramento address."

"Oh, Jesus!"

Barb stood looking at me with big trepidation while I clenched my jaw, released it, clenched it, then worked my hand over my mouth and up across burning eyes filled with a thousand grains of misery.

Barb must have thought I was staring very impolitely at her long, sloping body. I vaguely saw her swollen-jointed fingers fussing at loose strands of dark blond hair that was pulled back and fastened at the nape of her wrinkling neck. Then an index finger edge brushed over her narrow blue-boned nose as she blinked her rainy-day eyes and snuffed at post nasal drip. I shook my stupefied head as if I'd nearly lost my footing on the edge of something bottomless. Her blurring presence converged in front of me, sharp.

"Richard, I don't think I've ever seen you looking like this. I know you...I mean, I think you just didn't--"

"Let me see the note," I demanded.

"Well, I...it went into the trash."

"While you're fishing it out, give me a description of Lester Bailey," I said, sneering at the name.

I followed her into her office as she began to search, very uncertain, through a half full waste basket.

"I don't remember if it went into the bin already or if..." She went on pulling out crumpled papers.

"Lester Bailey?" I urged.

"Oh, he's medium height, a plumpish man...must say I was surprised...sure didn't seem like Kim's type, but...to each his own." She shrugged and decided to dump the entire contents of the waste basket onto the linoleum, snapped rubber bands, pencil sharpener filings, erasures, rusty

paper clips, smashed Dixie Cups, wilted flowers and all. "Had gold-rimmed rather thick glasses, and he looks right through you with those big red-rimmed glassy eyes...some dim shade of watery blue. I wouldn't last long in that company. Thinning blond hair. Wait...I think maybe this is it. Yep. Here it is," she confirmed, standing up and straightening a crumpled paper against her desk top. "He did have the most perfect teeth, and he knew it, grinning all the time, bleached white, too white...unnatural. There...there's her signature. Matches the one she gave me, anyway."

I snatched up the paper without reading it and stuck it in my shirt pocket. My mind was already out on the street.

"Richard Griffen, I think you better--"

I turned on her and leaned into her face, scaring her I knew, but a little of that was definitely in order.

"This is police business. Confidential. *Absolutely* confidential. Not another word of any of this goes out of here, Barbara. And the next time you even catch a glimpse of Lester Bailey, I want to know about it immediately."

"Oh, sure enough. You don't have to tell me twice," she answered with a nervousness that was encouraging.

As I went out the door, I heard her less self-assured but habitually inquisitive voice on the rebound: "Since most everything in this office is a federal matter, I guess you're working with them?"

The door slammed.

Ray was an agreeable fellow, an understanding father, and I figured Dale would be just fine there at his boat with Belle while I raced home and got ahold of the information I'd printed out on Kim. I found her mother's

number and used police channels to try and find out if her phone was tapped. The information was negative. The phone rang a long time, and then a very hesitant older voice answered.

"Mrs. Norris, you don't know who I am, but please don't hang up on me until I finish. I'm a good friend of your daughter's. Now I know that's going to be hard for you to believe but--"

"I don't think my daughter has any friends anymore, and I don't believe you...no."

"Nevertheless, her life might depend upon you hearing me out before you disconnect. I truly am a friend, and your daughter is in real danger. I'm a sheriff's deputy up here in Gold Beach. I was helping Kim, but when her enemies became too threatening she left town. She didn't tell me where she was going. Now I need to know because I think someone else knows, and it's the wrong person."

I went on explaining, beseeching her to get in touch with her daughter and tell her what I'd said. I asked Mrs. Norris to call me back as soon as she'd done that.

I paced up and down and finally went to reheat coffee. Then I used my cell phone to call Ray on his and check on Dale. Everything was okay in that department. Tired from doing nothing, wondering what else I could do, I sat down at my desk and stared at my wall of fish photographs. My mind drifted off and pretty soon I was recalling a very anxious Kim unburdening herself at my kitchen table.

"My husband never even noticed how independent I was. That's why he mistakenly thought I'd do whatever he wanted. I wasn't just playing my guitar...or...looking for perfect vegetables. I devoted some time to conservation-tilted ballot measures. People...groups treated unfairly had me

on their call sheets. If I wasn't fighting for wild horses, I was out railing against...I don't know...the overuse of pesticides that had worried my father. I've been pounded so far down into the earth by all of this I don't know if I can ever get up...or live long enough to do any of that again. All the normal things like getting my teeth cleaned and voting seem way beyond my reach. I...I'm nonexistent...and pretty soon maybe that won't be just a figure of speech."

I don't remember exactly what I answered, some sharp protest, consoling, reassuring. I remember trying for diversion. I offered to share my dentist, and that made her laugh. I really wanted to make her laugh.

A nerve-racking hour later the phone rang. Coffee spilled as I tried to get my fingers out of the mug handle. I grabbed the receiver.

"Richard Griffen."

"Griff?"

I wasn't expecting it, or the effect of that voice. I gazed across my piney den with an elliptical burn circling through heart and groin. Late morning light filtered in, still untarnished autumn.

Kim listened in silence while I explained everything. She knew immediately who the so-called Lester Bailey was: the oily, abusing son of a bitch the cartel had appointed her restaurant manager. Moreover, she had seen in the newspaper a picture of one of the restaurateurs who had been scheduled to sing to the feds. He was dead. I could hear in her voice exactly the state she was in.

"Can you get back here?"

"I don't know."

"Think there's anything in your mail that would help

the lowlife find you that fast?"

"Mother wrote me a couple of lines about a riding academy, a friend who wanted a new partner and had inquired about me. She told me the letter was on its way when I called her on your cell phone the morning that I...left. I pretended to be my cousin. It's what I do when I call her."

"And...?"

"The academy...that's where I've been."

"Now?"

"Now I'm in a phone booth in Santa Barbara."

"God, I wish you were way the hell out of California. Does the phone booth have a directory?"

"Yes."

"Don't go back to your car. Call a cab. Look up a flying service and ask them to have a plane waiting. For a small fortune, they'll land you at the Gold Beach airstrip. Don't stay in the phone booth any longer than necessary. Have the cab pick you up somewhere else. Is there some place near there busy with people?"

"Starbucks."

"Go there, and keep your back to the wall and your eyes wide open until the cab arrives. Did you bring the money?"

"All of it. What if they won't fly me up?"

"Have them call me on my cell phone number. Remember it?"

"Yes."

"In any case, have them call me when you take off. I'm hanging up now, Kim. Try to move it along. I'll be seeing you, country girl."

"Griff...thank you."

I didn't answer. *Don't thank me yet.* I hung up, grabbed my cell phone and my jacket, and went to pick up Dale and Belle.

Dale noticed the drift in my attention, even Belle noticed when I told her to wait in the cab of my rig. I tried to keep my mind on the boy while we looked at winter jackets. First, we had to get over stubborn pride, the boy insisting he didn't need anything. "You're growing and your clothes aren't, Dale. It's as simple as that," I said. Then I had him pick out a couple of flannel shirts, we found some jeans, and I took him back over to Keet's place. On the way, Dale talked more freely, about his happy work with Pepper, what a great guy DJ was -- I couldn't help laughing at all my concern there --, and how he wanted to grow up and be just like Keet, have a ranch, raise horses.

Dale showed off his new clothes for Keet, then took Belle along to check on Pepper. Still grinning after Dale, Keet was already looking at me sideways.

"Thought you two were going fishing."

"We were...and we will. Just can't do it right now."

Keet removed his new black felt hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He shoved the hat back on his head and put his foot up on the corral fence, gazing off toward his cavorting young Thoroughbreds.

"You upset about something...about Faye?"

I gave a short burst of laughter. "Hell, no. That's the one thing makes me happy."

"Only one thing?"

My cell phone rang, and I slid it out of my pocket.

The flying service informed me that their plane was taking off with Kim on board. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned around to find Keet's black eyes looking hard at my altered face. I explained everything, purposely in the same abbreviated and detached way an officer would talk about a case to a work fellow not involved with it.

"Now you have the responsibility again. Not a whole lot has changed, has it?" Keet said.

"Some things have changed...and some remain the same."

Keet planted both feet on the ground and leaned toward a view of Dale, partly aware of the antics of boy and dog. Dale was trying to get my lazy Belle to fetch a tossed stick of pine kindling. Belle finally took the stick over to a full water tub and dropped it in. Definitive dog language.

"Yeah, Griff, this time you're really willing to lay your neck on the block. Doesn't that mean something?"

"That hasn't changed...much. It goes with the decision you make to do anything at all for someone in deep trouble. What for sure hasn't changed -- I guess that's what you really mean -- is my attitude about...about closing doors. I won't, because I can't, do the life I once had all over again with...with someone else."

"Of course not; that for sure changes, you wrongheaded, stubborn..." Keet stopped mid-sentence when he saw my expression and realized that he was the one landing the knock-out punch and I was the hopeless brain-mangled guy going down. "Sorry, Griff. Maybe you really believe that somehow it's all coming back and there was nothing of value in between," he said with a gentled, pitying voice.

"I've got to go."

"Let me know what I can do," Keet offered.

"Dale, next time we're going fishing," I called.

"Thank you, Mr....Griff. Thank you!" Dale responded, waving both arms over his head.

When I was in my rig and backing up, Keet walked toward me. I stopped and he reached in and put a hand on my arm.

"At least tell her before you take her back in your house. She owes you a hell of a lot, but you owe her that."

"She already knows."

I clamped my jaws together in a it's-time-to-mind-your-own-business attitude and put my impatient foot down a little too hard on the accelerator.

It was dark when the plane came in. I was standing on the Tarmac glad for the cover of night. I was off duty and had no uniform, but I was wearing a concealed shoulder holster that I sometimes used. It held an elegant and very wicked nine millimeter SIG-Sauer that had until fairly recently belonged to my late paternal uncle, Bill, a federal agent -- Bill didn't like the term *uncle*, so I'd never used it. Belle was with me. An expert at meeting and greeting, I was counting on her to set things at ease. When she spotted Kim, her body became a wild locomotion of pure pleasure.

While Kim knelt hugging Belle, I could indulge my eyes. More beautiful than ever, her svelte body encased in a slim wine suit, her small feet in shiny black heels, the smooth pale silk hair falling over half of her lowered face. Without the albatross hanging around her neck, she could do anything, have any man she wanted. It was wrong

to be glad for her need of me, but dishonest to deny that I was. If I could make her as free as anyone at this moment, would I? Of course. The way you open your hands and let a rare bird fly, something you should never have had in the first place but would love to keep, if you only knew how.

She stood up, grasped the strap of her large black patent leather shoulder bag, slung it over her shoulder and walked toward me with a cool apologetic smile.

"Here I am again," she said in a low voice.

"And this time with only a pretty suit on your back," I answered with a grin. "Guess we'll have to find you some serious clothes, but let's get you in my truck fast."

She frowned. "This isn't quite how I imagined it would be the next time I saw you."

I leaned forward, took her by the elbows, pulled her up against me and gave her a brief kiss. The fluid softness of her opening mouth almost caved my confirmed resistance.

"How's that?" I asked, pulling her arm toward my rig.

"On a scale of what?" she asked, being dragged along accompanied by my delirious dog.

"You haven't lost your sense of humor, Kim, even in the worst of times. That's good."

"Didn't I feel a gun under your coat?"

"Humor is okay, but don't joke about that."

We slammed the doors, and I checked one more time around the outside of my rig, then started the engine. After that, I spent more time looking in my rearview mirror than I did at Kim. She was making friendly faces at shadowy Belle who was standing in the truck bed staring through the glass beneath the gun rack. Kim was self-contained, almost relaxed, as if the worrisome specter had

left her body and entered mine -- it sure felt like it. Her unfounded confidence was my penance for helpless ulterior motive.

I compensated by offering Kim my guest room. She was silent and without expression.

"Look, Kim...I can't take advantage of--"

"No, it's just what I deserve," she said, letting herself inside her old room and quietly closing the door.

I stood there furious with myself, my outraged hands expecting to be holding something longed for, my entire body hurting. The hard-framed, punishing idea of honesty and fairness and consideration was developing big cracks.

I went downstairs and made sure all the outside lights were on, all the doors and windows locked. Then I drank a glass of water and came back upstairs, standing and staring at her room a minute.

The door opened and Kim stepped into the hall, still in her suit but with bare feet. "Sorry, I haven't anything to sleep in. It's a little chilly."

"I was going to give you more blankets. I'll get my pajamas. You can warm up losing yourself in the top half." That was supposed to be levity in a bad situation.

I headed into my bedroom with Kim behind me and confused Belle following us, trying to figure out which bedroom she was going to end up in.

"Belle, go downstairs and sleep by the back door," I ordered. She looked at me, uncertain, then trotted out and down the stairs.

"Amazing," Kim said. "Did she really understand that?"

"Who knows?" I answered, yanking open my bureau drawer.

"Here," I said, handing Kim a navy flannel top.

My hand accidentally touched hers. She tilted her head back and looked at me with those luminous, burning tiger-eyes. Fatal. My other hand went to the back of her neck while my fingers slipped her large suit jacket buttons through their holes.

Removing the jacket and stepping out of her skirt, Kim asked, "Are you just helping me undress, or what?"

"Or what, darlin'," I said, hauling her satin-slipped self against me, filling my drunken arms with as much as I could have of that warm, sweet, long-desired presence.

I awoke in the dregs of night, hungry. I'd forgotten to feed us. The moon was shining through the window on Kim's relaxed face, maybe the last time I'd see it that way, her pearly-blue hair spread over the pillow. Once again, I couldn't believe she was there. I eased out of bed, stepping on the pajama top I'd handed her and walking through the rest of our clothes. My holster was slung over the bedpost. I draped things on a chair, put on my robe, and went down to the kitchen.

Belle came in from guard duty to check on me and look in her empty food bowl.

"Not at this hour, you silly dog. Oops, sorry, but I missed my supper," I said, watching my well-fed dog leave after sending me a shameless look of accusation.

I made an open-faced peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich and washed it down with orange juice.

"Have you a crust of bread for the nuisance?" Kim asked, stepping into the kitchen and mostly hidden under my navy pajama top.

"Where are your arms? You've got no arms," I said, setting down my empty glass.

Kim waved flapping pajama sleeves at me. "They've dropped off from starvation."

"I'm sorry I didn't feed you, darlin'. Want a sandwich? Peanut butter and jelly."

"I guess...if I can't have filet mignon."

"Well, huh, you ain't getting no filet mignon at two a.m., sweetheart."

While I was making her sandwich, Kim walked over and picked up the Glock lying on the counter.

"Don't play around with that unless you know what it's for and how to do it."

"I think I do."

"That isn't good enough."

She put the Glock back on the counter, rubbed her hands together as if they'd gotten dirty, and sat down at the table, pulling up both sleeves and leaning on one hand.

"Are there guns all over the house?"

"Here, eat this before we touch on that subject."

I sat watching her sideways while she ate with an unabashed appetite. I tried not to stare, wondering how my body could heat up just watching her chew and swallow.

"Juice?"

"No thanks."

"You know, Griff...he probably wouldn't guess that I'd have the nerve to come back here, would he?"

A wave of grief washed over me. I thumbed a dab of peanut butter off her upper lip, licked my thumb, and kissed her mouth.

"You think he would. I guess you're right. I'm being stupid...naive." She tossed her hair back, her eyes

flashing with hurt and frustration.

"You've got to turn to stone, steel...diamond hard. And you can't let yourself faint anymore."

"I can't always control it...disgusting, embarrassing."

"Well, you need to try and stop it...take deep breaths, take vitamins with minerals, something...not because it's embarrassing but because it's inefficient. You can't take flight when you're unconscious. From now on there isn't going to be much time for anything but survival."

"Don't say that, Griff."

"I want you to understand that he's not going away, darlin'. He's a killing machine. Tonight, tomorrow, next week, he'll be along."

"Not to you. Please, not to you."

"Oh, yes, exactly to me...I hope. That's why I let you come here. He'll have to kill me. When he tries, I'm allowed to kill him, just like the Old West. I'll kill him and let all those high honchos you can identify know they're next unless it stops. That's the only thing they understand, the loss outweighing the gain."

"Oh God, Griff, my God, what have I done to you? This is a nightmare. Why don't you just kill me? Kill me!"

"Stop it! Stop that craziness right now! You're giving in. We don't give in. We fight."

Kim was shaking uncontrollably. I picked her up and carried her upstairs. Maybe the food would make her sleepy.

"Country girl, much as I like you in this position, you have to stay on your feet...fight, fight dirty the way they do. Not for me. For yourself. You've done real well

up to now. I think maybe in some ways you're tougher than I am."

Bright sunlight woke me up. Kim was lying on her side of the bed, propped on pillows and watching me. I threw back the covers and sat up.

"There are fading bruises all over your body. Last night I noticed that you limped a little carrying me down the hall, and now I see why. How did you get that horrible scar on your thigh?"

I stretched and smiled at her. "So I wasn't just dreaming sweet dreams. You made me sleep too late...need to let the office know I'm taking some time off. It's owed."

"How was your thigh wounded? What happened to you?"

"Fell off my horse," I said with a yawn.

"Of course. On your hunting knife, I suppose. Was it something to do with me? Was it? I'm going to ask Keet to tell me what happened if you don't answer truthfully."

"He won't tell you a thing, not without my permission."

"How do you know?"

"The same way I know he'll cover my back without being asked."

"If you don't tell me, I'll...I'll leave."

"You will not...but I'm glad to see that you're getting ornery, toughening up. Keep it up, kid."

"You keep it up."

"I try. With you around it's always hard."

"Griff? Oh God, you randy devil!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. But I hope

you're not being vulgar. It's unbecoming. How about some breakfast?"

There was a balmy breeze off the water, and this shimmering day of autumn was so beautiful I could hardly stand it. Up in the hills, packs of unloosed hunters were crashing around in the falling leaves, and here at sea level Kim was being hunted down like a wild and wounded half-mad doe. And all for what? To keep some lowlife greenwashers out of the big house, or at the very least simply for vengeance.

When I left her, Kim's eyes betrayed her brave pose with a film of dark fear that couldn't be masked. I hated knowing most of it was for me. After my night of hortatory confidence boosting, she wasn't about to drop at my feet, or even ask me to be careful. We pretended that it was just another nice day. I thought we still had some breathing time before Lester the Creep figured out where she was. I went in to see Sheriff Brandle, limped a lot and tried to look pale and drawn, which wasn't that hard, duly receiving my leave of absence. Then I got out of there fast, so fast I almost didn't see Wayne Rickles heading out of the lot in his vehicle. He pulled up and leaned out the window.

"Hey, how you feelin', Griff?"

"Okay. Taking a little vacation."

"Good for you. Let me know if you need anything."

You never know, I thought to myself as I waved him off. Still, I didn't want to involve Wayne in anything that might jeopardize his life, his little family. I felt bad enough asking Keet to expose himself to danger, even

though he seemed to light up at the prospect of landing on the business end of risk. Most of the time he regarded it as entertainment.

Even as I was thinking of Keet, I realized that I was going to need him today, although I didn't anticipate any immediate danger. I called him on my cell phone and asked him if he could come over to the house. He knew that I was going to try and keep Kim's presence a secret, at least until it was no longer feasible. I asked him if I was interrupting anything important, and his answer was that he'd be there as soon as he finished feeding the horses and cleaning himself up.

I drove over to Fred Meyer's and swiftly bought Kim four small flannel shirts, two pair of size eight slacks, a sweater, a navy jacket, a soft gray muffler and woolen hat with matching gloves, and a red plaid wool robe with a pair of small tan fleece slippers. Kim told me that when she suspected she might not be able to return to the academy she'd stuffed lingerie into her handbag, so I didn't have to worry about that -- cool head. I had checked the size of her heels, and I bought her a pair of tennis shoes, some white socks, and a pair of brown loafers. I would never have guessed that picking out clothes for her would be so much fun. She had no idea what I was doing, and I was mildly interested in finding out what she thought of my taste in casual wear. I didn't really care. She wasn't leaving the house right now without a powerful reason. Beyond that, I wasn't going to let her run away again just because she felt guilty about me.

Letting myself quietly into the house, I found Kim asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace. She was wearing one of my gray sweatshirts with her knees inside

pulled up in the fetal position and her arm over Belle for warmth. Belle's head lifted and her eyes followed me. She had probably known it was me coming before my rig even reached the house. Her tail moved slowly back and forth, but she wouldn't disturb her friend by getting up. Kim's deep sleep was a welcome sight. We'd ended the long night by consoling each other with another seizure of intense physical pleasure that left us both exhausted. But I was very much awake now, and I was about to do something that was absolutely necessary, as far as I was concerned.

I put the packages on Kim's bed, then went into the den and started gathering up some fishing gear. I intended to have Keet stay with Kim while I went fishing for a few hours. Away from Kim, I'd be able to think hard and long on what we were going to do, but I couldn't do that without knowing she wasn't alone. There was no one else in the world I'd entrust her to with more peace of mind. I knew she probably wouldn't understand what I was doing, but Keet would. He'd seen me resolve problems that way for most of our lives. He knew that on the day of the morning my father died I left the house that afternoon to fish where my father and I had fished together. Dad was there with me cheerfully casting his line, and I heard his resonant adjudicator's voice repeating many of the pearls he'd tossed at me through my preoccupied years, not always with very great effect. Only then did I grasp the wisdom of those carefully aimed remarks, some of which I understood for the first time.

Keet and I were well into single shots of Wild Turkey splashed over ice when Kim came down the stairs.

Her freshly washed and dried hair floated over the fuzzy white Angora sweater I'd found for her, and her clean unmade-up face looked as if she were emerging from a soft fair-weather cloud. The tan slacks fit perfectly, and she was wearing white socks with her new loafers.

"How incredible. I didn't think a rough tough river pilot could do this," Kim teased. "Everything fits so nicely. I like it all." I got a special look that induced guilt, because in another couple of minutes I'd be gone. "All that shopping must have taken awhile."

"Not quite half an hour."

"Unbelievable! I'd still be there, frowning with indecision. I'm impressed."

"It's just the way men shop."

Keet glanced at me, and I squelched the arrogance.

"She looks real good," Keet said. "You're a handy dandy man, Griffish."

"When you grow up you can be one, too," I shot back.

Kim hurried over to Keet. "Gee, I'm sorry, Keet. I didn't even say hello. Hello. Hello! It's so nice to see you again." She hugged him and kissed his reddening cheek. I watched his large hands hold onto her shoulders, and let more foolish arrogance swirl around in my head.

"Well," I said, standing up, "guess I'll be on my way for a while."

"What?" Kim said.

"We're all going to talk soon as I get back."

"But what?...where are you going?"

"Fishing."

"You're going...I don't... Fishing?"

Keet had turned away and was looking out the window.

"It's the way I think best, Kim. I'll work it out and

then we'll have a serious discussion."

Kim looked at me very disturbed, as if I were about to go off and meet another woman. In a way, I was, but the effect on our relationship could only be positive.

"But I thought...doesn't fly-fishing take a lot of concentration? How do you have time to think of anything else...wading around, snapping that line back and forth, studying the water...fish...flies...et cetera, et cetera?"

"At first, it does take a lot of concentration. Finally, it becomes second nature, the way you learn to drive a car and then forget about it. Don't tell me you haven't used driving to think about something."

"Many times," Kim said, her taut face softening a little.

"Well, it's like that, only better."

"I see."

"Even if you really don't, I'll see you later. Keet can explain it in more detail while I'm gone. I'm leaving Belle on house patrol."

I walked over and put my hand on the loaded Glock resting barely visible beneath fern fronds atop the sideboard. Behind Kim's back, I looked at Keet. He nodded with a quick understanding and assurance.

My Ford truck was already holding my gear. I went through the kitchen, rinsing my glass and then deciding to fill it with water. While I was swallowing, Kim's hands came around my middle, her face against my back.

"I need to tell you something, Griff."

I turned around. "I've certainly been well thanked for the duds, darlin'...just by seeing you in them."

"Ah, that smooth country put-down. It isn't what I was going to say at all."

I looked into those magnetic storybook eyes, nearly reading her mind, which I thought had skipped ahead to something that vexed me. "Then this isn't the time," I said.

She let go of me and stepped back, but I reached out and took hold of her, the luxurious soft Angora squashed to the warmth beneath my tightening fingers. I opened her mouth with my own deep kiss and turned to leave.

"Oh, you can send me to my knees that way," her low voice was charged with emotion, "but it was still an evasive kiss."

"No. Don't let the fishing get you, Kim. It was a hungry kiss, supposed to last until I get back.

"Please don't go outside," I said over my shoulder.

"It wasn't about the fishing," she called.

I knew that.

Shaded by my felt hat and with Polaroid-improved vision, I stood in my waders, semi-submerged in glaring, viscous, cold-thickened water. Even so, the Rogue was running fast. For just a moment, as if I had Kim beneath my right shoulder, I thought of what I was doing and how I would teach her. *Wrap your fingers around half way up the cork handle, darlin', firm but not too firm, the supportive forefinger pressed against the thumb.* She was a natural, despite all that quirky metabolism, a plucky outdoors horsewoman who would have no trouble with coordination and timing. I made a smooth long cast while my interior voice continued. *The left hand holds that line tension through the pickup, the backcast, and just the beginning of the forward cast. Now release and "shoot" line, darlin'.* I

could make her into a great fishing partner. *Man, are you a presumptuous fool.*

The cold of the water swiftly condensed my swelling head. *If you don't start thinking with the precision of artificial intelligence, employing all the intricate abstractions of the human brain, you are probably going to die before your time, Griffen.* How the hell did I get into this, when all I really wanted was to fish in the most dedicated, pleasurable, and sophisticated manner possible?

False-casting, I took a couple of steps and shot a black wet fly into the tail of a good feeding pool. Despite the effort, I was presently convinced that no single-minded fall steelhead had anything on its mind but sex. This not too subtle transference produced in me nothing but sympathy.

My arms and eyes were still working, but my thoughts had peeled off and were tracking on their own highway.

The hit man comes back into town, checks into a motel, phones a car rental service, and checks out his hardware. He can't believe the way he's being run around. A simple job. He's mad, losing time and money, wants to get it over with. He goes over to the post office to see if the mail is still being picked up. He's careful, because maybe the nosy postmistress has told someone about him. He slips in after hours and looks in the box: *There's mail.* He'll skulk around waiting, but when no one shows up to collect it, he'll have to take a chance and get it himself. He can confront Barbara or he can break open the box and help himself. Since it worked so easily before, why couldn't Kim's *husband* just march in there and pick up the rest of her mail? Why not, indeed. At this point he's hooked, unlike my ascetic steelhead.

The next turn in the road had my blood running colder than the river. It led to a perfect solution, except that it put Kim in harm's way. But she was already that.

There was an anger in me that made me hell on water. The only emotion really compatible with high-flying fishing is a kind of undemonstrated euphoria. Out of necessity, I fish in a broad spectrum of moods. With all the fury of a heavy-handed cattle drover, I false-cast myself over to the gravel bank of an inside curve. I walked along the bank then got back in the water and cast diagonally downstream into a familiar hold of the deep outside curve.

There was food there, and maybe some of my finny friends. "How about a little appetizer, something to get your spirits up?" I whispered.

In keeping with the times, my line snagged underwater, probably on roots from brush on the bank. Fully aware of my destructive mood, I'd double blood-knotted in an extra sixteen or so inches of point on my leader. It held when I ripped out the line minus my black fly. I tied another fly on with a quick figure eight. On a brilliant fall day like this there were still a few hardy flies above the water surface, and I actually saw the water lift in a rise of curiosity. Maybe these steelhead were feeling delinquent of duty, a little hungry. The next rain, the next swell of river would turn them to purpose and snap them upstream.

I roll cast very quickly straight at the spreading ring. A strike. I raised the rod tip and tightened line, setting the hook in a raging projectile distancing itself with bullet speed. The force stretched my slack arm away from its socket with explosive drive power. The fish jumped high, and I dropped the rod point fast. My incredulous eyes had seen an eight or nine pound mass of

steely argument well-hooked and fixing to snap my leader like a spider thread. He was still on, well on and running. Euphoria was on the rise. With the rod over my head, I got myself on the gravel shelf and loped along the shore. Then I was back in the water. I had to show that old wrangler some resistance because he was about to wrap my line around a mass of boulders and ruin my day. But I didn't want him going deep and sulking. The tension was just enough to change his mind. He turned suddenly. Giving slack, I let him think himself free while he ran up past me. I applied more tension. He danced in closer, by no means tired. We played at an uneven give and take for another ten minutes, a delicate two-step on my part, tough and fatiguing resistance on his. More and more, I was the taker, finessing him up until I was fingering a resting line. He was lying under the butt of my rod, just figuring to catch his breath. I bent over the pearly scales and hauled up in careful and reverent hands one magnificent titan of determination. Nine pounds that fought like thirty. The slowly twitching caudal threw cold droplets in my spell-bound face, reviving me with its own shiny life force. The glinting eyes were wondering about strange stimuli, the choke of air. My unbarbed hook slid from the snubbed mouth's corner without damage. I ran my finger over the lateral grayed red streak running the length of this prime vintage buck, then I lowered him into his water memories, stimulating instinct, destiny. It was a divine and humbling act. For a few seconds, my hands held onto inert energy, waiting until he got the river back.

"Been in and out of here a few times, haven't you, old boy? Now you're smarter...always a little smarter." I felt his trembling body pulse in a slow undulation, and

then the wild surge of strength. "I'll see you around sometime."

The earth was spinning away from its heat again. That whirling hydrogen-helium mass exiting behind a fire screen of crimson illusion. Crimson everywhere, on the water, on the shedding trees, even thickening the chill air with a peppery red haze. I finished my thinking around a few more strikes, but they were nothing like Doctor Zen, the veteran harbinger of truth and enlightenment. I wouldn't have expected another fish that wild in one day, or even wanted one. Such an experience should always stand by itself. For a while, this dreamy episode displaced my grim battle with doomsday and left me high as the rising moon.

Entering my log house through the back screened porch, I found Kim in the kitchen making herbed chicken fettuccini. Belle had for sure known I was arriving and now tried to steal my full attention away from her rival. With my one unloaded hand, I tweaked her ear and scratched her neck, then opened the door and let her race outside. Kim had a towel around her waist, and she had replaced her Angora sweater with one of my white T-shirts. Her hair was tucked behind her ears with little sweaty strands pasted across her serious forehead. The ferocity of my enthusiasm must have given me a dangerous appearance. She took one look at me and laid her wooden sauté spoon down on the counter.

I had fully intended to restrain myself, to smile and say hello and take my chilled body off to a hot shower. Kim was still in a fragile condition, and we'd been helping ourselves to each other with all the intensity and

carelessness of spring heat. We were in trouble here. There was a lot of heavy weather straight ahead. I knew Kim understood, too, that we ought to cool down, but, having run all that through my excited brain, I acted like someone addicted to something in short supply.

"Keet's downstairs watching a football game. He's in here every few minutes, checking to see if I'm still in town and I--"

I had laid my rod down over below baseboard then hauled her into my arms and backed her against the counter, kissing most of the air out of her lungs. The inside edge of her knee climbed toward my hip. For a moment, her eyes were closed. She leaned back, taking a deep breath and giving me a penetrating look with those deep wells of flecked honey she used for so much more than ordinary vision.

"Fresh and cold. You smell like the river."

"Come upstairs with me, country girl, and I'll tell you a fish story."

"I just said that Keet was--"

"I know, I know." I shrugged and lifted the strands of hair away from her forehead, kissing the tip of her nose.

"If this is what fishing does for you, I think I'll have another go at it."

I dove into a wild binge of laughter, picked up her nearly weightless citron- and sauté- and sweat-scented body and whirled her around to find Keet slouched against the hall door frame.

"I'm not leaving until I've had dinner," he said. He was highly amused at his own audacity.

"And for some time after that, pardner," I assured

him, setting Kim down in front of her wooden spoon,
"because the survival strategy is ready for review."

We finished our dessert, something light and fluffy called Prune Fool. A clever conversation piece on Kim's part, allowing us to crack some jokes about fools at our own expense. It fooled me that anything with a name like that could taste so good. I was also amazed that I had any room left for it, even as frothy as it was, after a second generous helping of the herbed chicken fettuccini.

"You're going to bounce around like a big rubber beach ball, you keep this up, Griffish," Keet teased while Kim was in the kitchen. "Man, what a way to go, fat and happy."

"Oh no," I said, standing up and grabbing our dirty china and silver. "Not the way I fish...burns as many calories as a day of full bench presses."

"That was some fish story, about the best I've heard lately. Doctor Zen?" Keet looked at me with his mouth twisted in a crooked grin like a sleepy question mark. "Sure you weren't pulling our tails? No, you're too happy. Or is that...?" Keet glanced toward the kitchen.

I didn't answer, just headed into the kitchen with the plates and helped Kim bring out the coffee.

So far, we were acting as if this were just what it should have been, a better than average day of small and large pleasures. All that was about to change.

I went into the living room, lit the fire I'd laid, and smiled as my hedonistic dog immediately settled herself on the hearth. Then I went back to get my coffee.

"Let's take our mugs in there," I said to Kim and

Keet, already sipping their coffee at the table.

"Oh God," Kim said, "I don't know if I can...I mean I want to. I want to do it, but I don't know if I'll be--"

"There's a little risk, but we'll be there. We won't let anything happen to you, Kim."

"The A-frame, is it hard to reach? I mean does it involve a lot of rough driving where I'd be hidden from view for any amount of time?" Kim asked.

"No, it's just down on the south end of my ranch in a pretty little dry gully, good view from all sides, a gravel road in. Summer folks like to lease it. Usually one of my wranglers rents it in the winter. In fact, Billy Ross was about to move in, but I can stall that."

"And you've got that brochure with its map, from the rental agency. I figured it'd work perfectly. We get that over to Kim's post office box right away, with a faked letter from the agency welcoming Kim and explaining that the map will make it easy for the repairmen she's hiring.

"I'll have Barb watching for him. We'll check his car, use the license if necessary to find out which motel he's holed up in. Then we're on him like tar pitch."

"What will he do? Will he be alone? It seems so unpredictable," Kim said. "Lester Bailey...calls himself Teague Runnah. He's a disaster at everything but trouble. Managing our restaurant was only an excuse to spot leaks and plug them with his luger. Later on...when they...I heard him talk about someone he killed." Kim's face tightened in revulsion. She looked at me. "Oh, God, I think he killed our manager. The man just disappeared, and then I heard Runnah tell a sickening joke about making

bones from the restaurant's bad meat. He didn't do drugs, but it was just as if he had, as if he were high on some strong chemical that...that made him crazy with excitement."

"Those death-hungry types are haywire loners. They need the thrill all to themselves and they hate working with someone else. They know all the subtleties of killing, but when they're on the make their minds work in one bold straight line, expedience. My guess is he'll go right to that box. Our meat, his poison," I finished without much excitement.

"How you plan on keeping Barb from tattling to the Sheriff?" Keet asked. The way he was looking at me I knew he was worried about more than discovery or even my job; he was worried about my ethics as a lawman. So was I, but the spirit of the law was on the first page of my book.

"I've thought of that. For the time being, I'm going to have to tell Jimmy that Kim's ex is abusive and we're trying to keep an eye out for him, the possibility of his arrival with the intention of inflicting harm. But I'm only doing that if the Sheriff brings it up. I'm hoping Barb will follow my instructions and keep quiet."

"So if the Sheriff knows Kim is here and knows about him, what about when this menace is eliminated?"

"I've entertained a few wild ideas about what I'd like to see happen, but I think we'll try and play it close to the books. It should be easier to deal with after the fact, after we're all safe," I added smiling at Kim. "If we can make that useless wreckage disappear permanently and by his own instigation, the rest is...well, maybe not quite a piece of cake but large crumbs."

"Large crumbs can lead to the wrong place," Kim said.

"They won't," I assured her, boosting my smile up to a confident grin. Philosophically, I felt like maybe I was headed into the maw of bad faith.

When Keet left, we repaired to my den, Kim on the computer, fabricating a rental agency letter, me at my newspaper-covered desk, cleaning the SIG-Sauer that I still thought of as Bill's. It had a shiny nickel slide with a black anodized aluminum frame, flashy for something carried as a concealed weapon. Bill had been a quiet, polished man whose carefully chosen words always got my attention. Born to be an FBI agent, he paid great homage to detail, the minutest idiosyncrasies of humans and their telltale habits. That stuck with me. I also thought he had a certain flare, in the form of hard-core willfulness that could not be laid aside. It even showed up in this choice of pistol, a favorite, although it was only one of a number of firearms he had owned. He was a solitary man, but at his work a team player. Keen intelligence and fairness garnered respect, a deference from his colleagues that was generous enough for his leadership. He must have given a few life-altering orders in his time. Cancer claimed him at a comparatively young age only four years ago. There was no other known occurrence of it in our family, and I wondered if it was somehow stress-induced. He never smoked, and drank very little. He was a single man of the old school, always on the move and married to his work. When he was available for holidays, he would bring an attractive schoolteacher to our ambitious family celebrations, all his life the same woman. As a youngster, I thought that she treated him with a playful sisterly

affection. She never married either, and much later I had occasion to think about that kind of devotion, its measure of sacrifice.

I sighted on a branch tip bleached white by the outdoor lights and swaying beyond the west window. The gun had an ingenious tritium night sight, made with minute amounts of radioactive tritium gas that produced a three-dot sight. It glowed brightly in low-light conditions, deadly accurate at all hours. I dry fired, and Kim looked up from my computer.

"Guns," she said, shaking her head and sighing then dropping back into her work.

What is it about man and his brilliantly fashioned killing sticks? Defense, territorial instinct, domination all culminated in high-tech firepower. Apparently, we could evolve no other way, at least on this planet. Guns were always in my world as a boy, either locked in my father's cabinet or with us when walking the fields and woods. I was taught to respect them, but I never craved them or coveted them or thought they added any more height than my final six foot four elevation above the ground. They were just there. Some of them were and are very beautiful pieces of human ingenuity. To hold a well-crafted firearm has always given me pleasure and a slight sense of awe, as well as great comfort and extreme thankfulness in the line of duty. I like the way they're put together and the dependable way most of the good ones work. In an ideal world, no one could ever invent an instrument that would kill his own species. In this world, I wish no one had defensive weapons except the law. But that isn't the world I live in.

I field-stripped the SIG-Sauer and began cleaning and

lubricating the frame rails with a cotton swab. I cleaned the ramp and the top of the steel locking insert. The ejector felt well broken in but it was fine. I cleaned it and then gave the grip screw heads a little lubrication and carefully wiped off the walnut grip. I moved on to the barrel, running a wet pad of powder solvent through the bore and letting it soak while I cleaned the feed ramp beneath the chamber with a copper brush. I oiled the muzzle exterior and went back to the bore to eliminate any fouling from practice firing. Then I took a pared down wood chip and cleaned under the slide's extractor hook. I cleaned the bolt face and finally worked on the slide rails with solvent. While I was lubricating, I was careful not to get any oil in the inaccessible firing pin hole. I took apart and cleaned the double column magazine which held thirteen rounds. I liked this smaller P228 because of its easy-to-conceal size and because it would actually take a fifteen round magazine, although that hung slightly below the grip.

My head was bent over the light from my green-shaded desk lamp and I heard only the click of the old regulator on the wall. Slowly it came to me that Kim's fingers were no longer punching the keys. When I looked up, I realized she had been watching me for some time.

"Fascinating," she said with a soft curious voice.

"Is it really?"

"Yes, really. You're a natural born creature of patience and method. Graceful. A joy to watch. Exactly what makes you such a good fly-fisherman, I guess."

"Darlin', I was just cleaning your pistol here. Later, I'll show you how to use it."

"You'd let me handle that beauty? Why?"

"Because it's smaller and very reliable. We'll do a little dry firing, and then I'll stick in a full magazine and see what you can do."

"Well, I know I've sometimes been able to hit a target with something...my Saturday-night special."

"That little hole punch you nearly shot off my shoelaces with the day I walked into your motel room? That's not a good piece of hardware, Kim."

"I suppose not."

Kim got up and stretched. Before dinner she'd put her Angora sweater back on, and now she folded her arms and began caressing the wool with nervous fingers. She walked over to the rows of books covering the east wall and ran her hand along an eye level shelf, whipping out an old notebook.

"When I was here before, I found this. You know what it is?"

"No. I don't know. What? Let me see it."

"It's a notebook full of your handwritten college essays, apparently done for a writing class. Most of the subjects are about nature or fishing. They're absolutely beautiful, very perceptive...in a fresh sensitive style. There I was pretending to be a writer, and you are one, you big phony down-home cowboy."

I got up and walked toward her. "Give me that. You're embarrassing me. That was a long time ago."

"Howdy, how're things down on the ranch?" Kim teased, backing up and crossing her eyes at me.

"Honey," I said, trying to hold down my laughter. "You better uncross those foxy eyes before there are two of me permanently. You're heading for big trouble with that inquisitive little nose of yours. You steal my clothes."

You read my personal papers. Have I got any privacy left around here? What good are you, anyway? You cook too much. You confuse my dog, and you can't fish worth a damn."

"Well, at least I'm no countrified contradiction, pardner."

"That's just me...not pretending anything. You know that's just who I am. You're real funny, country girl."

My laughter died. I felt the air snap past me as if the whole room had turned around and my head was on backwards things had changed so fast. Kim was down on her knees with her hands clutching the leather cushion on the easy chair.

"Oh Griff, oh Griff, oh Griff, I'm afraid of what I've done to you. I'm afraid. You didn't deserve any of this. And you're right: what good am I, anyway?"

"I was teasing you," I said, lifting her up against me. "Can't I tease you? Please let me be able to tease you. It's just a little problem right now...your self-esteem. You'll get it back. You know how I know that?"

"No idea," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Because I understand your parents raised you with responsible love. When parents do that, you've got it all the rest of your life: a strong sense of self-worth.

"And you haven't done anything to me but give me a whole lot of pleasure.

"If the letter's ready, you can give me the box key. I'll make a fast trip down and put the cheese in the trap."

I tried to think of something to keep Kim busy while I was gone. "Could you possibly do something about Belle? You're so good at it. She smells like a dead squirrel."

I woke up in a cold sweat and whispered, "Okay."

"Hmmm?" Kim said, trying to get her arms around my neck but blessedly still only half conscious.

"Go back to sleep, honey," I said, lifting her fingers out of my hair and kissing the palm of her warm hand. "I'm just going to piss. Back in a minute."

I watched her drift off with the dimly reflected outside light falling over her smooth, relaxed face, then I slid out of the covers and put on my robe. Belle was sleeping by the bedroom door, soft and shiny in her newly washed coat. She trotted down the stairs with me. With nothing to guide me but the outside lights shining in, I went to the sideboard and got my hand inside and around the Wild Turkey. I held it up to the window light and poured out a full shot glass. I took that into the den and locked myself in, leaving Belle outside on patrol. Then I sat down at my desk and drank it in one toss.

My cell phone was lying there, and I picked it up and dialed Keet's new number. A while back he'd thrown out his old cell phone because it kept running out of juice, but, in the light of recent events, he got a new one with a longer life system, and it was for sure under his pillow right now. I'd already memorized the number. I was so disturbed that when I heard his groggy voice I wasn't even ashamed of myself. The regulator on the wall read 2:35.

"Yeah?...Griff?...you crazy night owl...know it has to be you...only one's got this damn number." There was a short pause and then he said, "Jesus, you in trouble?"

"No, no trouble on the outside, just trouble on the inside. Keet, you know I wouldn't call you at this hour if I weren't in deep shit."

"I already know that.

"By the way, I went out to the A when I left your place last night. Everything's okay there for Kim."

"I just had a very tough dream."

"Uh-huh."

"My father was sitting under a walnut tree in our old orchard, wearing his court robe and lecturing me on what a bad character I turned into."

"That right?"

"Pardner, when my conscience turns into my father and haunts my dreams, it's time to pull the plug."

"You wouldn't let anything happen to her?"

"Course not. I've got to go down tomorrow and resign my position as sheriff's deputy, Keet."

"You don't think maybe Sheriff Brandle is going to be a little curious about the reason?"

"I'll just tell him I decided to guide...or turn into a private dick."

"I wouldn't use that expression with the Sheriff if I were you...leaving yourself wide open for mental cruelty. A private dick in Gold Beach. You'll be the toast of the town...sure put Bo Riley out of business. Of course, he doesn't charge. You know something I always wondered?"

"Keet, are you taking me seriously?"

Keet went right on with his train of thought, and I had to believe he was still waking up.

"Hey, what's the opposite of a private dick? A public dick?"

I punched off the power button. My phone rang.

"I'm sorry, Griffish. I was trying to cheer you up. Want me to come over and stay with Kim this morning?"

"Come over and have breakfast. Bring your medicine

bag...and all the wisest spirits in your smokehouse."

When I slid back into bed and turned my face toward Kim's shadowy form, I knew she was awake.

"Whiskey," she whispered.

"Just a little nightcap."

"A morning cap," she corrected after lifting her head and staring at the digital clock. "Our lovely affair is already on the rocks."

"I drank it neat. One shot."

"I'm going to leave you."

"No, you're not."

"I'm ruining your life."

I put my hand on her neck and tucked her head under my throat. "Be quiet. I'll see you in my dreams, darlin'."

Kim was still sleeping when I left the house, after feeding Keet coffee, toast, and eggs scrambled with smoked salmon and green onions. We talked in low voices.

"I think maybe you ought to postpone this business with Brandle, Griff. Leave it alone awhile. The Sheriff's no slouch. He probably knows more than you think he does."

"I don't think so. He's got other fish to fry. I baited the trap last night. I can't leave it alone. I just don't operate like that."

"No point in saying I warned you about all this."

"I don't think it could have gone any other way."

"Keet...Kim is...she's blaming herself and she's restless. I'm not sure if... You know I had the Chevy repaired, and she probably knows how to hot-wire the damn thing. She's clever, but even trickier, she's smart...I wouldn't put it past her."

"I won't let her out of my sight."

I stared at Keet's heavy black leather jacket hanging over a kitchen chair. The pocket bulged.

"You carrying?" I said, walking over and lifting the .357 half way out of the pocket.

"When I'm around your place lately, you bet," he answered. "My phone's in the other pocket. You got yours?"

"Yep," I said, patting the inside pocket of my coat.

I closed the door on a magazine photograph: Sleek Belle lying on the stone hearth beside a flickering fire, and Keet in a blue plaid flannel shirt, clean jeans, and tooled brown leather boots, sitting in my maroon leather easy chair, drinking coffee and reading the paper.

Sheriff Brandle was throwing *tic tacs* into his mouth, one after another. He had a whole fistful, and there were two empty boxes on the desk. I wasn't looking forward to this, and I remained standing until he insisted I sit down, pointing at a chair as if he were ordering his dog to sit.

"My stomach problem causes halitosis...bad personal problem. Funny thing, though, if you got it, you're the only one never knows when you're offending."

"Keeps the wolves off your neck, anyway," I said, offering a thin smile of sympathy.

He glared at me then looked me up and down, not used to seeing me out of uniform, taking in my gray plaid shirt, shearling jacket, jeans, and Wellingtons.

"Is this the only place you could think to limp off to on your leave of absence? If you like it so well here, maybe we'll give you a full time job."

"I'm resigning my position as of today."

"What in hell!" Sheriff Brandle shouted. Green *tics* went flying across the desk and bouncing on the floor. I grabbed one and tossed it into my mouth.

"Look here, Griffen, you're not getting another raise."

He picked up his half-full cup of cold coffee and took a swallow then slid it across the desk toward me, apparently so I could see the cup's message one more time: *The pay raise stops here.*

"I know you like this job way too damn much to quit."

"Not always."

"This is a hell of a strategy to advance yourself. Isn't up to your standards at all, Richard."

I stood up and tidily moved the chair back.

"So I'll just be going along, and if there's anything further needed for the resignation process June can let me know. It's been nice working for you, Jimmy."

"Why would you be leaving here? What you plan on doing now? This is just a diddle for more pay, isn't it?"

I leaned down and pushed together all the little breath mints, slid them off the edge of the desk into my hand, and dropped them on the blotter in front of the Sheriff.

"Think I might like to guide again...maybe even do some contractual work."

"Investigation? Where you figuring on doing that?"

"Oh, you know, up and down the coast, around the county and so forth."

"Uh-huh. Somethin' goin' on here, Griffen. Bo Riley swears he saw you out on the Tarmac a couple of nights ago, watching a Cessna Cardinal come in."

I could feel a dangerous explosion rising from down in the bowels of my being, so I just curled my toes, rocked back on my heels, and smiled.

"Boy, that's a good one. Next he'll be telling you a beautiful blonde stepped off the plane and took me by the hand."

"No, unfortunately, he says there were a couple of LCVs out there about to off-load something. Damn triple-trailers blocked his view, and he couldn't see anything more."

"That Bo Riley really gets around, barely has time to sleep, eat, and visit the crapper. You should hire him. I hear he comes cheap. The trouble is he lies all the time, has no idea of reality. That's what comes of reading all those scandal sheets and living with your mother until you're forty-three.

"Well, I've got to move on...got some errands. I hope we'll stay friends. You're a good man, Jimmy."

"Griffen!" I heard Sheriff Brandle roar as I walked down the hall. "Your resignation has been rejected! You better get your ass back here two weeks from now."

"Sorry, boss," I said to myself.

I was driving away from the lot, after collecting a couple of my own firearms from the trunk of my patrol car, when I spotted a rental car parked across the street in front of the post office. The epinephrine hit my brain as I pulled into a parking space half a block down the street and sat there staring. A chunky man in a tweed jacket walked out of the post office and put his hand on the door handle of the rental car. He was holding mail in his other

hand, and he closely resembled the description I was carrying around in my head of Teague Runnah. He looked up and then down the street, in my direction, his thick gold-rimmed glasses reflecting the steel-gray light of an overcast day. Then I saw Barbara looking out the window at his car and I knew she was getting his license number. My phone rang.

"Richard Griffen."

"Griff, this is Barbara at the post office. That Mr. Bailey just picked up his wife's mail. My memory must be slipping. I didn't think she had any more mail, but he saw it in the box right away. You want his license number?"

I mentally recorded the number, which I myself wasn't going to need because I planned on tailing Runnah. I didn't have to travel far. A little irony. Runnah was staying at the same place Kim had stayed, the Bridge Motel.

I parked over in the jet boat lot where I had a clear view of room number eleven. Then I called Keet and explained what was going on.

"Keet, you want to come down here and trade places with me while I head out to the A-frame? This takes a little more figuring."

"Thought you already had it figured."

"I do, but... Tell Kim to get the Chevy out and get ready to hit the road. The keys are inside the bird feeder hanging in the pine tree by the garage. Tell her to be sure and bring her phone. We've got a snag here because I was going to show Kim how to get out to the A as soon as I got home. Now you've got to explain the way to her until she can't possibly make a mistake."

"You know it's not that hard to find, Griff."

"She goes down to the post office and waits for Runnah

to show up. When he does, she gets out of her car, goes for mail, just a glance at her box and out before Barbara sees her, and heads for the A. We assume Runnah is going to try and catch her at the post office because he has her mail. If it happens today, he follows her and you follow him. He's a paranoid, so that'll be a little tricky. He's not going to do anything until he gets out there, because he knows he can get away clean if he gets her alone. I'll be at the A. Is there electricity and heat out there?"

"Yep. I turned it all on last night."

"I've got ammo and firearms in my rig. There's more in the den, if you need any -- you know where. Right now, I want you to get the SIG-Sauer out of my top right desk drawer, take it outside and have Kim target fire the full thirteen plus one. Only time for one clip. Before she does anything, explain the importance of the decocking lever. She isn't totally unfamiliar with guns. Correct anything she does that's serious, then let her reload and tell her to put it in her coat pocket with more ammo. I took the Glock with me when I saw what you were packing around my house."

"My Winchester's on my gun rack," Keet said.

"Oh, and have Kim carry the loaded tape recorder on my desk.

"If anything happens today, it's going to happen very fast. Tell Kim the most dangerous thing she has to do is get from her car to the inside of the A before the goon can sight on her. He won't follow that close so it shouldn't be a problem. I'll unlock the door. Where are the keys?"

"Under the last piece of slate on the path, the one closest to the A's front entrance."

"I won't leave here until I see your truck. Then I'm

out of here."

"You want to talk to Kim?"

"No, you've got to move," I said. I gave Keet Runnah's room number and a description of his car and his license number then punched off.

If Runnah decided to leave before our plan was set in motion it would temporarily screw up the works. He was inside his room with the curtains pulled, so I got out of my rig, crept over to his Nissan sedan, and let the air out of the left front tire. That would hold him long enough, if Keet was snapping it up. I could hear Burnie's TV blaring.

Edging back to my rig, I sat for a while thinking. If I rolled down the window and listened, I would probably be able to hear my SIG-Sauer going off up on the hill. I took my binoculars out of the glove box and trained them on the window curtains of number eleven, closed. No sign of life. Then I saw Burnie walk outside and go past Runnah's car. He glanced to the side, turned around, and stared at the flat tire. "Shit!" I said as I watched Burnie knock on Runnah's door. I glassed on Runnah's pale smoke-blue eyes filling the whole circle of each small thick lens. How could a hitter have any success with eyes that bad? Apparently it wasn't much of a handicap. He stood there with his white shirt sleeves rolled and I saw his lips tighten up in a curse. He walked out, looked at the tire, then looked all around the area with that wary sixth sense of the paranoid. I lowered the binoculars, too far away to be noticed.

Runnah could either call the rental service or change the tire himself. He opened the trunk and got started while Burnie stood there shooting the breeze. I was

beginning to get nervous when Keet's big navy rig cruised slowly up beside me. He rolled down his window.

"She's on her way over to the P.O. Not a bad shot."

"You're pretty laid back, Keetwing."

"You know how I come out of the chute, pardner."

I pointed toward Runnah who was now jacking up his rental. "When he leaves here, phone me. Need binocs?"

"Got some."

We talked briefly about how things ought to go, and I started my engine and left Keet with my arm hanging down the outside of my door and my fingers fixed in a V. I drove past Kim parked on the street outside the post office. She had on her navy coat and the gray hat and muffler I'd bought her. She dropped her head on one shoulder and looked at me with those beautiful eyes fixed in a strange cool glance. I wanted to jump out of my rig and make her stop it; instead, I gave her a serious nod and floored it all the way out to the A. Other than a few ruts and low weeds, and one obscuring bend, the gravel side road appeared in fairly traversable condition, good enough for a successful tail.

The A was nestled in a shallow greening-up bowl of land with some thick brush and trees around its edges. I looked for a place where my tire tracks would be less visible and drove up four hundred feet or so behind the house where I could hide the rig in among some denser ground cover. Grabbing my firearms off the rack and my ammo out of the locker in the truck bed, I ran down the slope and around to the entrance. I unloaded everything onto an outdoor bentwood chair by the door and went back down to get the key. The sense of urgency was making me move too fast.

There was no time for the careful familiarizing I'd intended in a practice run. I had spent precious extra time fishing, but the thinking I had done on the water, along with the mental rehearsal of how I would do things now, I still counted as more important in the long run.

I had been inside the A before and knew about the loft. It hung over the open floor plan, and on its right side it jutted out against the large A of glass. There was a window insert on that side and one on the opposite paneled wall to cross-ventilate the A for upstairs sleepers. The only room not visible from above was a bedroom directly below and against the back wall. Up in the loft I would be able to sight from the window with a view of the front entrance and the approaching drive that stopped at the foot of the walk. I could also easily cover the entire lower floor except for the bedroom.

When Keet arrived behind Runnah, he would veer off into the brush somewhere in back. He was more familiar with a good place than I was. He could begin covering the action with his rifle while he was working his way down.

I kneeled in the loft, checking my police issue Glock. With the Sheriff's complaints of a low budget, and wanting what I considered an excellent working handgun, I had paid for this gun, and it was mine. My Ruger .44 Magnum lay at my feet beside its bold family relative, the Ruger 12-gauge shotgun. I picked up the rifle, pushed open the window, and sighted on the footpath, then down where the drive ended.

My heart was speeding up. Blood to the brain was good, blood to the brain and out to the tips of my fingers. A voice rang in my ears, curling through the still loft air and echoing in my head. *Oh, Griff, Griff, not so fast.*

Slow down, slow down, wait for me. Betty, hiding me in her sunshine yellow bedroom and teaching me how to love her, how to love a woman beyond selfishness. I never fathomed how she could be as sensual as she was. It was partly her nature and partly my craving. She was a virgin when I first had her firm sweet little body. I was in too much of a hurry. I learned our confusing differences, the considerations that made her happy. In the very beginning, she was way ahead of me, even though my first experiences weren't with Betty but with an older second cousin. That rambunctious freckle-faced tomboy took a fancy to my overgrown gangly self, probably mostly because I was near at hand. She lured her willing explorer up to the attic of our populated house one early Thanksgiving eve when all the sated guests were deep into postprandial napping. It was a clumsy investigation minus a vocabulary, just curiosity and pleasure and fun and giggles. The lusty experimentation went on for a while. We were both eager babes in a timely woods. Whenever I see that lanky second cousin, Ginny, not a tomboy anymore, I give her a satisfied wink for having had a good idea.

Home from college for the last time, I inadvertently revealed to Betty how much I had learned, hurling myself into a long golden summer of playful self-confidence. I was an unstoppable powerhouse of ingenuity, running boats up and down the river, guiding, fishing, and making love. "You didn't learn this in any classroom," Betty accused, her warm body sprawled over me, her sleepy face pouting with ironic satisfaction. I said everything that happened to me was for her. It was a stupid, selfish line that turned out to be the truth. Before I went away I had no idea how much better it would get, all the subtle things

that could happen with inertia. Once you were experienced in those things, you could turn into a slow river of honey or into lightning wildfire. I made Betty happy for a long time. I knew she loved me, not just in lying down together but in everything we did, and even when we fought.

"You should have made her pregnant," my mother once boldly ventured. But Betty was independent, if a slightly spoiled only child. She took careful precautions to avoid early motherhood, and I certainly didn't want an angry pregnant wife on my hands. I didn't mind. Ecstatic as a kid with a full and bottomless cookie jar, I made very few demands. If I pondered for a thousand years, I would never figure out why she wanted to run away from everything we had. I still wanted to ask her that. I never got a chance.

My phone sounded off and my body flexed with a surge of adrenaline.

"Keet?"

"No. Remember me? I'm bringing someone home for dinner," Kim's cool voice informed me.

"You've got the phone up to your ear! You like to get your head shot off by a paranoid? Put it down now!"

The phone went dead and then rang again.

"What?" I said, furious.

"It's Keet. A strange caravan is headed your way."

"I'm waiting. Kim just called, and I nearly vaulted through the phone. What the hell is she doing calling me with a tail on her?"

"She's got no experience with this kind of dirt, Griff. We're strung out pretty far. I doubt that four-eyes saw her, unless he's driving with binoculars glued to his head. Haven't the bastards got any 20/20 shooters

left?"

"All the better for us...hey, he's already wearing binoculars. His corrected vision is probably 20/10. How far along are you?"

"South end of town. I think Kim just stepped on the gas. Maybe she's a little ticked off at you."

"I can take it if it'll prevent highway assassination. She's way too smart to wave that phone around. She's acting like she doesn't care. A...how was she this morning?"

"Mmm...alert but quiet. Wanted to know how you got temporarily gimped."

"And?"

"Nothing. I said I guess you fell off Little Bit."

"At least our phony stories are consistent...wouldn't convince a brain-dead turkey." I was grinning some but beginning to worry.

"She's going to find out, Griffish. What's it matter, anyway? Besides, I think maybe she's equipped with a big supply of ESP."

"Most women are. I could use some of that."

"Let me know when you get to that blind bend in the driveway out here. I know exactly how long it takes after that...if you run it below axle-breaking speed."

"It's not a bad road, Griff."

"I've got the rig hidden in the trees and brush up east of the A. That where you're going?"

"Thereabouts. There's almost enough cover running up that side to get me straight down to the house wall."

We disconnected, and I sat thinking. I didn't have to snap at Kim like that. What if I never got a chance to say another word to her? That was a hell of a good-bye. Maybe

it was because of what I'd been drifting back into before I heard her voice. Not maybe, for sure it was. I wanted the sweet without the bitter. If I had that I wouldn't turn into a snarling broken dog. I wouldn't know Kim. *I wouldn't know Kim.*

The phone rang and Keet said, "I'm at the bend. Kim should be in sight."

I leaned back away from the glass and sighted the drive with just my barrel tip leveled out the window corner.

The Chevy cruised in and Kim sprang out of it and stood down at the foot of the path, looking up at the house. She wasn't moving. My heart turned to ice. I was expecting the usual surprise, but not this one. All this time I thought I was going to save Kim, and now I realized that she was trying to save me. She was going to stand there until that son of a bitch drove right up and snuffed her out of existence. He was already getting out of his car. There was no time to leave my position and run downstairs and out the door. He was walking toward her empty-handed, walking toward her and smiling like an old friend. I sighted on him and held my hands steady, cursing myself because I was waiting for the evidence of armed assault. His head bent toward her and his round pale face broke into a grin. She stood her ground, her hands in her coat pockets as his pasty pudgy hand rose up and clamped over her small straight shoulder. My trigger finger was a hairsbreadth from the squeeze. Suddenly he yanked her toward him and reached inside his coat. A shot went off. Not mine. It was the SIG-Sauer in Kim's hand. His body, for seconds dazed and easy, slouched behind her. I knew I'd hit Kim if I fired on temptation. The gun was dangling

from her hand. "Get the pistol up!" I yelled. "Use it! Use it!" She glanced up at me, turned and fired again, all in one reflex of movement. Runnah was bleeding from a shoulder wound, and Kim had just neatly deactivated his pistol arm. But now he was at his most dangerous, a wounded beast at a disadvantage and fighting to live. He lunged straight into her and wrenched the pistol out of her hand, an ambidextrous, pain-crazed, hog-wild killing machine. At no time did I have a safe shot after Kim fired the first bullet. He had her as a shield, and he was dragging her right into the A. I grabbed the Glock and ran downstairs, giving up my perfect vantage point because I didn't want him heading for that one blind spot, the bedroom.

I held the Glock slightly away from Kim, but double-hand arm-locked in front of me, ready to go down firing. My eyes roved the back-lit periphery of Runnah. His bloody arm was locked around Kim's waist. He was aiming at her temple left-handed, with manic concentration on me, hellbent on stiffing both of us with Bill's dedicated weapon.

Trying for the distraction of talk I said, "You must hurt bad. Can't hang on too long with that arm. No matter what, I'll get you. Might as well let her go."

"Don't...let these eyes fool you, bozo. I can do her easy...and hit any part of you...with one eye closed." His low-registered voice was slow and grainy with pain, but still pumped up with deviated ego.

"Just kill him," Kim said. "You can shoot right through me."

I looked hard at Kim's white face and read a message she was offering me without herself even knowing it. Her

wide, slightly evanescent eyes were burning bright on their last dregs of fuel. She was going to faint. Did faint, her body dead-weighting forward, slumping away from Runnah's wasted bullet. I fired point-blank. Surprisingly tough as wood burl, all that fleshy bleeding bulk wrangled its way down on folded knees over Kim, Kim in the path of my next intended bullet. That temporarily shut me down. Meanwhile, my prostrate enemy was struggling with what must have felt like a ton of SIG-Sauer, for one final shot, not at Kim -- maybe he thought she was already dead -- but at me, his hoped for parting mark of expertise. His last work couldn't miss. At that precise moment, Keet's materializing bronc-busted fingers reached around Runnah's straining body and snatched away the luger. Teague Runnah's lights went out on stolen glory with a sleight of hand so swift and artful it repeated itself over and over in my head.

"You think you got yourself off the hook slick as one of your lucky fish, do you, Richard? You tell me there's a dead body out on Keet Tealwing's ranch and you're the recently resigned law officer responsible for it. Armed assault you say with hardly any particulars. This guy was ordered to bump you off for putting Lyle Rainer in jail, so you had to set him up. Can you even explain how you recognized him? I haven't heard yet these gunners leave calling cards."

"Noticed him tailing me," I said. "Got a good look and went through the mug shots...saw that he had an early history of collecting illegal firearms and shooting at people, and remembered that Lyle Rainer had threatened me."

"I tell you right now, if those blowhard feds weren't prancing around here staring up my ass every other minute, I'd cut you no slack at all. If, as you say, this hit man is connected to Lyle Rainer, you know when the bird-doggers get wind of this they might try and make something federal out of it."

"That wasn't a federal case. Why do they need to know? You've seen the guy's rap sheet, Sheriff." I had noticed that the name Teague Runnah appeared nowhere among the rap sheets AKA's, so I was calling Runnah by one of his early aliases, or maybe his true name, Terry Rimer. "Twenty-two arrests and seventeen convictions. He was all over the map, but nothing the feds would be too interested in."

"He walked through that swinging door plenty of times, all right, but that was a while back."

"I guess he finally worked his way down to a pistol with a muffler," I said, "combining work with travel, in and out and on to the next mark. He's a contract man."

"Not anymore he isn't."

Sheriff Brandle sighed and dropped his head back with eyes closed. Then he snapped his head forward, giving me a hard stare, and threw his feet up on his desk. I noticed that he had no socks on. In fact, he was wearing leather slippers. I'd had the nerve to call him at home -- that alone made him mad -- and take him away from an Oilers game. He was a big fan, born in Houston.

"If I send Coroner Shaley over there what is he going to find?"

"A bloody carcass with a messed up face -- happened when his glasses hit the floor tiles -- and a...three slugs in it. Two from my nine millimeter SIG-Sauer, and the one

that put him away from my nine millimeter Glock."

"What the hell? You were blazing away at the guy with two different pistols? Where'd you ever see anything like that outside of a picture show? You think I just fell off a hay wagon, Griffen? You wanta try again? You're in big trouble, here, fella."

I stood up and walked to the window. There was nothing in the shadowy street but a passing fuel truck and a stray dog. I almost wished Bo Riley would come along. At least I would then believe I was still in the real world. I sat down and swung my Wellington across my knee.

"Sheriff, before I explain any more, would you mind telling me a little about the federal guys? What are they in town for now, anyway?"

"Say, maybe I should just read you your rights and can your ass. I'm the one asking the questions here."

"Would I have called you, Jimmy, if I didn't have a legitimate excuse for everything that's happened? Can't you just help me out a little here? I've had a rough day."

"Well, excuse me. You got to admit it sounds pretty much like hot-dogging from where I'm sitting. I'm still waiting for an explanation of the two pistols. The Glock alone has enough rounds to make one man real dead, but you say you fired only one shot from it."

"It's a little embarrassing, Jimmy. I was just pretty well armed...careful, you know. Then I dropped one pistol backing up -- tripped -- and had to use the other one."

"Uh-huh. You could've had help."

"If I'd told you about the hit, maybe Wayne would've gotten smoked trying to help me out...or maybe he'd just be scraping me off the pavement...crossfire from too many shooters. Believe me, I wasn't having a good time, but I

kept it simple, just me and him. Please, Jimmy," I said.

"All right...okay, I'll play along. But mostly it's owing to your father, a vanishing...no, probably a vanished breed. *There* was a real man...did me a few kindnesses in his time, too. Yeah, I owe him something.

"Why you wanta know this other stuff, anyway?"

"Just to show you why the feds wouldn't be interested in the local color, I guess."

"Oh hell," Jimmy said, rubbing his eyes and yielding some resistance. "None of this goes out of this office. They tell me as little as possible, anyway. Apparently, the feds are looking for someone they traced up here from San Francisco."

God, here it comes, I thought. Runnah's already been identified and stuck in the right slot. Little did I know.

"This guy, Italian, a...Roberto Antonio, owned a restaurant down there that was a big greenwash operation. He's a hophead, supposed to have OD'd in rehab, but they think now it wasn't him. They think Antonio is alive. They also think his wife is dead and that her husband was partly responsible. Seems she ran off and divorced him, and, with everything she knew, that made her real dangerous."

My head was zinging, and I felt like a tiny little speck way down on earth being viewed by something huge and menacing that was hovering out of reach and spreading fast.

"But why on earth would he come here?" I asked. I already knew why. I just didn't know how he found his way up here and how he was connected to Runnah who should have been looking to dust him. Maybe that's just what Runnah did. Still, he'd hardly been in town long enough for that. Unless the two of them came up here together by way of

Santa Barbara where they'd expected to find Kim. But why there or here together? More likely separately. Runnah was alone at the motel. And why was Antonio still alive, if he was? There was no sign of him anywhere. So why did the feds think he was here? I waited in silence.

The Sheriff shrugged and looked at his watch with a sigh of disappointment. "Who knows why he showed up here? Maybe he just thought it was a good place to hide. Stupid, I'd say. I'd have been in Nova Scotia by now...and waiting for a boat outta there."

"I guess this is all about one of those drug cartels down there, huh? You know, in the greenwash business big time?" I asked with a slightly indifferent voice.

"Yeah, and the whole bunch of them have been indicted, some for greenwash and some, probably the hard to get guys at the top, for income tax evasion. All in lockup with about a zillion dollars worth of bail, except for Antonio."

"Hmmm," I said. "Well, I guess that didn't have anything to do with Lyle Rainer. He was in business for himself."

"Say, I'm real glad for what you did there, nailing Lyle Rainer. You know that, Richard. At least it was a local operation...no federal intervention when that patch turned out to be on privately owned timber land. We take care of our own business.

"But we can't let the news weasels make too much of this hitter coming to town. Have to keep that down. Makes our friendly little vacation community look too unprotected. Probably that corpse lying out there is none of the feds' business, either. And if, as a result of all the crap you took, you got marked, it's possible your response was in the line of duty. Hell, it would be if you

were still a deputy. As it is, guess I'll need a whole lot more from you."

"More of what?" I asked, planting both feet on the linoleum and trying not to look as nervous as I felt.

"You're going to forget about that resignation right now, Richard, and that's my final word."

Sheriff Brandle, like the hard-nosed poker player that he was, grinned at me as if he'd just thrown down a full house in front of my tight little bundle of motley cards.

When I walked out of the Sheriff's office after promising to tidy up the loose ends, I half expected him to call me back and nail me to the floor. I was temporarily unhooked and swimming fast. But my brain was moving several times that speed, almost too fast for effective cohesion. I'd managed so far to leave Kim out of it, and her fleeting, bundled-up appearance downtown had been so brief I didn't believe anyone knew she was back. When people don't expect to see something, they often don't see it. I wanted to know why Runnah was after Kim. If he was working for himself that was a lot better news than if he was working for the cartel -- Bologna had said they weren't interested in her. Now I had to keep Kim so carefully under wraps that maybe she was right: she was essentially a prisoner. There was an alternative: I could spirit her away in the night, let her flee yet one more time. The thought was so troubling that I sealed off that compartment and started thinking about Antonio, which, in no time at all, brought me back to Kim. I didn't like some of the conclusions my professional point of view was drawing: that Kim might know he wasn't dead, or even that he was around

here and after her. Did Antonio tail Runnah up here, looking for Kim, wanting to do away with both of them and maybe getting whacked by Runnah? Was a guy with a brain fried on dope kinetic enough for even a failed attempt like that? Still, Antonio apparently had enough brain function and enough desire for self-preservation to change places with a stiff in rehab, if the feds had it right. He would also know some of Runnah's hiding places in San Francisco, useful if he planned to spin the wheel with four-eyes. The longest shot of all was that Antonio followed Runnah up here to warn his ex-wife. I threw that one out almost immediately.

Before I left the house on my way to the Sheriff's office, I'd given Kim a sleeping pill, which she swallowed quickly enough in anticipation of some kind of relief. She had a few minor bruises, including one on her temple from the luger's barrel, and a bad headache. Our carefully minimal conversation skirted the repellent images in our heads. I praised and comforted and reassured in a gentle, soothing manner, and left her preparing for a warm shower and bed. A solitary sleep might help a little.

From Jimmy's office, I went straight over to Runnah's motel room. I had to get there before the Sheriff found out where Runnah had been staying and sent Wayne or one of the other deputies, maybe Bob Rossi or Pete Williams, over there to snoop around with the city police. I'd already been through the rental car and found nothing, so if there was anything interesting it had to be in the room. I had Runnah's key in my pocket, along with his fake ID, which nobody needed right now, but the door was already open. I walked right in.

Somebody had been there before me. The room was

topsy-turvy, and there was a pried-open empty briefcase on the bed and a barely visible greenback with Franklin's picture on it stuck in the crumpled bedspread lying on the floor. I straightened the place up a little, using a towel to handle things. I closed the briefcase and put it in the closet, then burned the one hundred dollar bill in a clear glass ashtray and flushed the ashes down the toilet. I wiped off anything I'd touched with bare hands. For the time being, I couldn't let the Sheriff know that there might be anyone else involved here, and I was hoping that if they had to find Antonio, either alive or dead, it would be way the hell out of town. As nearly as I could tell, it looked as if whoever had been here had found at least part of what he wanted, but was he still looking for Runnah, and, far more important, was he looking for Kim?

In for a Lincoln, in for a Franklin, I rationalized as I drove over to the post office. I went up to the desk and bought a roll of stamps, smiling and asking Barbara where the sun had gone. I turned to go, slowly, fidgeting at getting the stamps into my pocket and hoping Barbara would give me some idea of how much she knew or at least create an opening for what I wanted to say. I was counting on her insatiable curiosity, and she came through for me just fine.

"That Bailey...he hasn't been back here, Griff."

I turned around and smiled.

"Oh, Bailey. Yeah, guess he was in kind of a hurry and left the scene of an accident down in California. Nothing too serious. The feds had him mixed up with another guy. He went on home. You can probably rent that box. The Baileys are most likely gone for good."

"Well, they should've let me know and turned their key

back in when they left. Those California people really have no manners...wish they'd stay home."

"Now, now, Barb, those summer folks bring some handy California lucre into town," I scolded.

"Oh, I know it," she conceded, relieving her annoyance by knocking a wire basket around on the counter.

I walked out whistling.

On the way home, I thought of calling Keet but I knew he'd be busy with the coroner and deputies over at the A. He, of course, would have no idea what went on there during the shooting, remarking, only if asked, that he supposed I was followed out there and shot at. The Beretta in Runnah's pocket had been fired twice, and his body held three bullets, a convincing enough exchange rate, except it occurred to me that I couldn't account for the bullets from the Beretta. I knew he'd fired only once in my presence, and that was with my gun when Kim fainted. Did the other two bullets have Antonio's name on them, and, if so, who cleaned out Runnah's briefcase? Emotional involvement was gumming up the clicks in my brain.

I swung the rig around a quarter way up my hill and headed down to revisit the Bridge Motel.

After hitting the bell on the counter half a dozen times, I called Burnie's name above the televised yammering of some facile fathead with his own show, selling his own book of worthless drivel about more self-serving politicians.

"Hi, pal, how's the TV subculture?"

"Crummy junk. I'm turning into a damn zombie," Burnie complained. "What you want now?"

"Let me see the registration on number eleven,

please."

"Say, what is this with number eleven? Everyone wants in there. Maybe I should raise the rent."

"Who everyone?"

"Aw, just another guy came in here, copped a look at the registration and said he was Bronson's brother, all the way from San Diego...wanted to wait in his room. No way Bronson and him could be related, but hell I-"

"Bronson who?"

"Bronson...Harry Bronson, the guy in number eleven."

I suddenly remembered that the name was one of Runnah's aliases. Whoever was tailing him easily found out the alias by looking at the name written beside the room number.

"So, did you let his brother in?"

Burnie rubbed his gray crew cut with his nicotine fingers, then removed the cigarette in his mouth and punched it out in a full ashtray that erupted onto the counter. He thought for a few seconds. "Did I let him in? Let's see."

"Make up your mind, Burnie. How much did it take to get his foot in the door?"

The whites of Burnie's small black eyes were nicotine yellow. The black jumped out at you because of the gray hair, but the eyes were dulled by smoke and tube glare.

"I think maybe I was mistaken about that visitor."

"City police aren't going to like the way you open private doors, Burnie, old pal. But I won't tell if you won't. Just tell me what San Diego looked like."

"Should've kept my mouth shut."

"They won't hear it from me, Burnie. I wasn't even here, right? Just tell me what the guy looked like."

"Italian," Burnie said. "Mama-mia good lookin' Italian...medium height, a slight limp...favored the left leg some...a dresser, alligator shoes, maybe thirty or so."

You get rid of one demon and up pops the devil himself decked out in alligator skins. I thanked Burnie for his bad news, and we parted company with mutually sealed lips.

So now Kim's fed-hunted ex-husband was skulking around quite possibly in very close quarters. He was the only felon in that particular crop who was still running free, and he had recently supplied himself with a certain amount of drug-purchasing capital, but Kim had the power to make his future disappear. Did he take the hitter's greenwash and run, or was he still in town, and, my God, would he really kill his ex-wife, not just any ex-wife, but Kim? Yes, he would, Griffen, you juvenile mooncalf.

The missing bullets from the Beretta were still giving me a workout as I quietly let myself in the back door of my sulking log house. Maybe Antonio's slight limp was the answer. How did that hypothetical scene play itself out? Runnah took a couple of shots at a fast-moving target? Burnie hadn't reported any wounds, just a limp, and I didn't see any blood in number eleven, so if Antonio was hit he'd already cleaned himself up.

Belle's toenails were clicking on the stairs. She came into the kitchen wagging her tail and taking a quick swoop past her bowl with her nose extended.

"Ah, my faithful companion," I said with a soft voice. "You only love me because the pantry is full of dog food."

She refuted my callous assessment with a juicy wet tongue on the hand that was rubbing her velvet throat.

Coffee seemed like a good idea, but I dropped into one of my oak kitchen chairs and stared at space without even removing my jacket. Belle deserted me, presumably for Kim's bed, where I myself would like to have been with no memory of anything. My head still felt like it had several mouths aimed in several different directions and all talking at once. After a while I got up, took off my jacket, and started throwing some arabica into the coffee maker basket.

Leaning over the counter in slow contemplation, I was surprised when Kim's hands came around my middle. She laid her head against my back. I turned around and held her for a long minute without saying anything, dropping my chin against her silky warm head.

"Hello, lovely, you smell like sleep."

"What's that like?"

"Sweet...sweet...sweet," I said, kissing my way to her opening mouth and staying there until I forgot all about the coffee, all about everything.

Kim finally leaned away and studied my face.

"Griff...what have you been doing?"

"Shoring up the levee," I said, staring at the violet bruise on her temple. The sight of it made my head buzz with a shiver of prickly cold horror. "I'm not sure how long it's going to hold. I wish I didn't have to mention it, but you should know, so you can prepare yourself."

"How do I do that?"

Kim looked up at me with a soft countenance that was pure wholesome innocence, standing there in her new buff slippers and red plaid robe with her clean, bobbed, taffy hair a little mussed from my hands and falling over her smooth, sleep-flushed cheeks. I wouldn't have minded

freezing that frame for a few more hours.

I clenched and unclenched my jaw a couple of times and said, "It looks like someone named Roberto Antonio is running around the neighborhood with a stolen bagful of Runnah's dirty C-notes."

One hand went out behind her as she steadied herself against the counter. Her supported body was now entirely given over to fear, but when I looked into her eyes I knew that some of what I'd told her wasn't news. I stood there watching her part company with self-denial and slide into the dark, rainy night of reality that was now our province.

I cocked my head, and my eyes were asking a single question.

"Please don't look at me like that, Richard. It's more painful than anything that's happened up to this moment."

"It's just that...there's a piece or two of the puzzle missing. You've got one of the pieces, don't you?"

"You think that I... Oh, don't, don't do that. You're all I have...no puzzle pieces...nothing else."

For a moment she was silent, thinking, her face closed to me, then her aloof body set off across the room. I reached out to prevent her from running away from me, but she jumped back and kept moving, calling over her shoulder, "Stay there. Wait. I'll show you. It was your idea."

"What?" I said to the empty room.

I went into the living room and started crumbling paper and arranging kindling for a fire. I placed an alder log atop the pile and lit the edges of the newspaper, letting go of the match when my thumb heated up.

Sitting forward on the couch with my arms folded tight in front of me, I stared into the flames, looking at

another phase of nothing. In a minute, I realized I'd been unconsciously holding myself together as if a bomb were about to drop on the roof.

Kim entered the room and set something down on the coffee table in front of me. My tape recorder.

"I had it in my pocket," she said, and sat up straight at the other end of the couch with her hands clenched in her lap, waiting for the cassette to wind out her answer.

I didn't want to hear what I'd missed up in the A's loft, but I forced myself to listen to that syrupy sick voice punctuated with its sadistic barks of laughter at what that slimy creep considered the perks of his profession.

"Well, well, you're an easy one. I've thought about you a lot since San Francisco, princess. I'll bet you sure remember me. You should've stayed right where I was. I'd have kept you for a long time. Silence? Not even a hello for old Teague, after all we went through together? You know your brain-fried ex-jockey followed me up here. The bastard's temporarily got his marbles back in shooting condition...says he turned over. He's ambitious, but he's lying. That son of a bitch was practicing on me. I cooled his tracks, and I'll get him. He's after you, princess. Just like a bull terrier with nothing but meat on its mind. I'm gonna do it a whole lot easier than he would. It's hardly gonna hurt at all. It'll be my loss, but you could really damage me. First, let's have a little fun. Come on now, you wanta sing? sing a little for me. You know what I like. What the...hell! Oh! Jesus! You...fucking...bitch!"

Kim jumped up, punched off the machine, and threw herself back in her corner. She hugged her body, shrinking

away from that replay of horror, then threw back her head and forced out a bitter laugh. Her head shook from side to side with tears sliding over her cheeks as she muttered through clenched teeth emphatic words to herself. "What did I do? What did I do? I know it was something terrible that I did. What? What!"

"Nothing. Nothing! You know there's no payback. The only thing you did was get unlucky. It's mostly over now. Runnah was working for himself," I said, reaching for her.

She wouldn't let me touch her, putting out her hands in a posture of violent ridicule and disgust.

We didn't eat anything. We went to bed and lay there with our eyes open, not together, separate and cold but needing to be in the same room. I couldn't get warm, and I knew Kim was freezing. The pale outline of the comforter shuddered faintly in the window light, her body shaking with cold dread. Past experience made her assume my vigilance was mistrust. It even looked that way to me. I wondered where it was coming from and how I could stop it. I decided it didn't have much to do with the present, that it was mostly from the past and that maybe I'd never get rid of it.

I got up and took myself off to a steaming hot shower, thinking I would wrap my atoning frame around Kim and warm her cold body. When I walked back into the bedroom, she was gone. I threw on my robe and tore downstairs. She was dressed and heading out the back door, wearing her navy bloodstained coat and without a hat. It was dark outside with rain streaking across beams from the yard lights.

"I'm just going for a walk."

"Uh-huh. Why've you got the Chevy keys in your hand?"

She flashed me another look of disgust and ran down

the steps and toward the garage. I kept my bare feet on the wet grass along the driveway, jogging after her and picking her up, her arms flailing. She could really fight, and she loathed my confining hold on her. I almost tripped over Belle, who was going crazy, barking and whining and leaping at us. Kim's wild, contorted face finally dissolved into a fixed dazed expression. I could see that she no longer knew what she was doing; over the top and lashing out at freakish circumstances that had ruined her life. I might have been a fence post or a wall or a punching bag, instead of what I was, someone in sync with every inch of her animated body and nearly everything in her soulful head, but who didn't know how to make her understand that.

Thoroughly damp, I raced up the steps with freezing feet and set her down on the kitchen floor. She stood there with dripping hair and wet clothes, her face white, her large, wary eyes filled with the glittering and swollen black pupils that result from extreme emotion and the need for flight. The blood on her coat jumped out at me. I yanked it off of her, checked the pockets, and dragged her into the laundry room where I threw the coat into the washer along with some soap powder.

"You think you'll want to wear that again, or shall we just burn it?" I asked, whirling the dial around to a long wash cycle.

She ran her fingers through her rain-darkened hair, leaned her shaking body against the wall, and tried several times to say what she finally said.

"I will go. I will leave you. No person in my life, except perhaps my parents, has ever sacrificed more for me than you. But even you don't understand that you really

don't want me here. I can't endanger you like this. It isn't over. I've been nothing but trouble for you since the day I set foot on that boat. And anyway..." She looked down at her clenched hands and shook her head.

"Anyway what?"

You're really still married, Griff, and...and rumor has it that you always will be."

"Rumor!" I roared. "If you want to know something, why don't you ask me!"

"I did ask you."

"When?"

"Somewhere...once...in the car. It seems like a long, long time ago."

"That was before...way before things got to this point," I argued. "And I do very much want you here."

"Go take off those wet slacks. Put on your robe. I'll dry off and then scramble us some eggs. We haven't eaten."

"I'm not hungry."

"Please, Kim," I said. "I'm worn out."

While I was chewing, Kim looked up from her barely touched plate of scrambled eggs and said, "Before things got to what point?"

"Excuse me?" I said, picking up my coffee cup.

Kim smiled a wistful little smile and said, "I'm just taking up where we left off in the laundry room."

I swallowed the resuscitating, wicked black coffee that I hoped wouldn't steal most of my sleep away, and thought for a minute.

"Well, things have changed some since you first

checked into my history."

"In what way?"

"In the way I feel about you," I said, getting very restless. I stood up and grabbed my plate to rinse it off.

"How do you feel?"

I shook off the plate, slid it onto the counter, and turned around, leaning back and folding my arms.

"I can't stand you. Haven't you noticed that?"

"Humor isn't going to work right now, Griff."

She pushed aside her plate, and I snatched it up, dumped it down the sink and turned on the garbage grinder while I rinsed. The deafening noise was a welcome interlude, like snapping back to reality from the dark dream sequence of some old musical. I hit the wall switch and there was a fresh clean silence as I turned around.

"Look, darlin', we'll have to put all this on hold for a while because you're right, we're still in the middle of the woods. There's plenty of reason to believe that you're being stalked, and until I figure out what's going on there, or until the feds take care of the problem for us, we have to concentrate on keeping you alive and safe."

She shook her head with an unhealthy skepticism and said, "Stalked by...by a dead man?...stalked by Berto?"

"Is that what you call him? I've got other names. If he's here, he's here for you, and for no other reason."

"Maybe I can fix that."

"How? By getting killed somewhere else?"

I took a simmering turn around the table and then leaned against the counter in angry disappointment. Kim was looking at me with an accusatory little pout, trying to needle me into something.

"You don't like change at all, do you, Griff? You'd

really like things to stay the way they are. I hide out here and you just keep rescuing me over and over again."

"That remark was too idiotic for a rebuttal. How come? You're a smart woman. You don't have to make silly remarks like that."

"Apparently I do."

I sighed and said something I knew I'd regret as soon as it was out of my mouth.

"Sooner or later you're going to want to leave. I understand that. You can't do it right now, but sooner or later you'd--"

"I would? Oh, that's right, that's what women do, don't they, Griff? As far as you're concerned that's what women always do. Even if statistics show that most of the time it's the other way around."

"What a contradiction you are, you little screwball. You already swore up one side and down the other that you were leaving...right in the middle of trying to do it."

"Don't you understand yet why I try to leave? Oh, we just keep going round and r--"

"Where I'm going is to bed," I said. "I'm dead on my feet. Sorry, kid, but you're going to have to head that way, too. Unfortunately, I don't trust you anymore. You're just disturbed enough right now to get yourself unnecessarily killed."

"How about necessarily killed? Can I get myself necessarily killed?" she asked as I herded her along through the hall and up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, she hesitated a second and then started toward the guest room.

"Sorry, but you can't do that either," I said. "We can share my great big over-sized bed easy enough without

running into each other. You haven't minded it so far, and you don't have to worry about me. I'm so tired I couldn't even blow you a kiss."

When I woke up around 10 A.M., three quarters of my bed was empty. I looked around for Kim and discovered she was in my arms. She opened her eyes and, finding herself in my territory, focused on me with narrowed eyes.

"Don't look at *me*," I said in my grainy sleep voice. "I've been sleeping. But if you stay here much longer, I'll have to admit I believe in some kinds of change. I'm changing right now."

She didn't move and her eyes were closed.

"So?" I said.

Her eyes opened, pouring golden brown honey all over me. "I'm almost past the point of no return," I warned.

Warm hands slid around my neck as she snuggled herself against me and lifted her face up to my mouth. That was it.

She ducked away from me and slid off the bed.

"Please don't leave me in this condition," I begged. "I'll make it worth your while."

"I'm taking a shower."

She wriggled out of my pajama top and stood there stretching her lithe body in brutally seductive elongated curves of pearly-pink flesh. In one hopeless, uninvited flash, the long, wet body of a plump steelhead hen, all quivering opalescence, slid back into the river.

I shook that out of my head and said, "I've never known you to be cruel before."

She waited a moment longer, her eyes traveling over my decimated self, and then dove at me with a contrite smile.

"I couldn't ever tease you for very long...I couldn't ever hurt you that way, Griff. And besides I want you."

In a few seconds, I wasn't thinking about anything that had been said or done the night before. And a few seconds after that, she could have canceled my next birthday and I wouldn't even have noticed.

I was making French toast and grilling thick slices of Virginia ham when my cell phone rang. It was Keet.

"I need to talk to you alone, Griffish...some real interesting developments."

Paranoia was setting in when it came to telephone conversations so I said. "Can you tool over here fast for a breakfast lunch, pardner?"

"I'm not at home...just had lunch with Faye. I'll be up there in five or ten. See ya."

In about ten minutes, a dampened Keet sailed into the kitchen on a misty, cold zephyr of spices, tossed his hat on the counter, hung his oilskin jacket on his chair back, and slouched over the table. His usually taciturn, dry-witted countenance was bursting with words, but he delivered them in a low, measured voice.

"Brandle's boys were over at the A with Coroner Shaley, and they were talking about the feds looking for this guy..." Keet stopped and glanced into the hallway.

"I think she's still in the shower," I said, sliding a mug of steaming black java in front of him.

"...a guy name of Roberto Antonio. Deputy Williams said the feds went up south of Coos Bay this morning to check out an Antonio-looking character who tried to get a job in the Blue Horizon Resort up there. Brandle's

deputies were acting like Runnah's corpse didn't even exist -- blind, deaf, and dumb...under the Sheriff's orders. But they needed something to talk about, and the way they were spouting information about Antonio it didn't take me long to figure out the connection with...a...with the trouble knocking on your door. You know about this?"

"I know he's been around," I said. "He wants to keep his ex-wife quiet."

I flipped the ham onto a platter and stuck it into the warm oven alongside the French toast.

"Yeah, well I'll bet you don't know something else," Keet said, leaning back in his chair and aligning my full attention. "I was in the Dollar having lunch with Faye, and I heard a couple of guides -- one of them was Ray Shiner -- laughing about a California dude calling himself Joe Marino, who had all the wrong clothes and equipment and wanted a guide to take him way upriver for some open-ended fishing. The dude wasn't even sure what he wanted to catch, and Ray said the guy looked like trouble so he turned him down."

"He must've pitched real bad vibes. Ray wouldn't turn down a blind centenarian. You think it's Antonio?"

"It has to be, and the feds are on a wild goose chase."

"I've been wondering how the feds found out that Antonio was even here," I said, "but I do know Runnah told Kim that Antonio tried to kill him."

I leaned on the counter and stared out the window. Belle had a stray cat treed. She was bouncing all around the alder trunk and barking with thrilled exuberance, glancing toward the house, expecting me to come out and praise her wonderful accomplishment.

"Then Runnah must have paid off Antonio's assassination attempt with a tip to the feds on where to find him. What you figure? You think he plans to leave her alone for a while? He's probably so scared of the feds he's decided to move his ass out of here? The boys said he's still hanging around the dock. Probably thinks he's safe all duded up like a fish hunter while he tries to locate somebody willing to lose him up there."

I sat down and gave Keet one of my long communicative stares that was worth several thousand words and finally said, "Well, I told Jimmy I was going back into the guide business. Now's as good a time as any to start."

Keet rubbed the index knuckle of his loose right fist against the end of his rare and elegant Native American-Jewish nose. His dark eyes shot me with fire-tipped arrows. "I didn't come up here so you could chase after poison meat, Griffish."

Pulling my chair up close and leaning into Keet's ear, I said in a low, persuasive voice, "You'd have to stay here. She tried to leave again. She's convinced I'm about to get whacked off the backcourt...and that it's her fault."

"More babysitting?" Keet said with a grin. He didn't quite believe I was serious.

"You don't have to look so happy about it," I said.

"Happy about what?" Kim asked, stepping into the kitchen. She was wearing her tan slacks with one of the plaid shirts I'd bought her. "Good morning, Keet."

Keet started to open his mouth, and I said, "Happy about staying here while I maybe run upriver for a day or two. I told Jimmy Brandle I was going into the guide business again and he obligingly offered me a fat customer."

If he'll sign on, this client can probably give me a lot more referrals. I can't afford to turn him down."

Keet wasn't grinning anymore, and I sent him a warning look that was meant to stop him from burning up in Kim's very perceptive presence.

I was trying to show Kim the unworried, business-as-usual Richard Griffen who hadn't been around much lately. Fighting off any telltale blink of deception, I let my willing, overconfident head get poleaxed by that luminous amber focus. Her eyes recovered from the disappointment of desertion, and sent me a particular look, clear memory of our morning heat. Then there was the warming reminiscent smile, playful, wistful, maybe even recalling those too few other mornings and evenings of combustion. It was the smile that forced me to turn away and stare out the window at Belle's treed cat. I felt some sympathy for that frozen ball of gray fur clutching at its swaying limb. But my attention was drifting south, no, not exactly drifting, more like rushing. I could feel Keet's eyes boring into the back of my head. My inaudible curse brought no relief. I continued to watch the cat while I mentally loaded my boat with gear. When I heard Kim's acquiescing voice -- the intimate musical sound I now thrived on and heard at odd moments when I was alone -- I imagined myself joining the cat as it dropped off its swaying limb and ran like hell.

"Well, I'm...actually, in a way I'm glad you're going, Griff. I think it's good for you out there."

So I was down at the dock, nosing around, asking questions, my boat loaded, my licenses in order, my

invisible, open-for-business shingle swinging in the criminal winds of the underside.

"He was staying at that fancy place, *The Pine Cove*, last I heard. But I wouldn't waste my time," Ray Shiner said. "The guy can't find himself...talks a whole lot of shit about nothing. Evasive every time you ask him a simple straight question. And it's for damn sure that lubber wouldn't recognize a goldfish in a bowl."

"How's his cash flow?" I said.

"Must be okay," Ray said, lifting his backwards cap off a shock of wavy red hair and giving me the cool blue-eyed once-over. Tinkering a little more with his drift motor, he wiped his freckled hands on his greasy work jeans, leaned back on his heels and said, "You serious about this...going back into the business?"

I laughed. "Don't worry, Ray, I won't go near any of your regulars."

"So you're back, huh?"

"Maybe...now and then...once in a while."

"Hell of a reentry for a pro like you...to have to wipe that guy's runny nose every five minutes."

"Good refresher," I said, striding away with a wave.

I used my cell phone to get ahold of Joe Marino at *The Pine Cove*. He raced right down and leapt into my intricate web with only minimal questions about guide Griffen's competence at getting him as far upriver as he wanted.

He looked me over while I was looking him over. I was hoping he wasn't who he said he was, and he was hoping I was as advertised. He was a charmer all right: Roman head -- especially the sculpted nose; five feet ten or eleven inches of a body once so carefully tended that neglect was just now making inroads; short black curls; sleepy brown

eyes with faint gray hollows. But fussy and yuppyish and expectant, the sort who stands in front of the mirror and ties his carefully selected silk tie three times over and still isn't satisfied -- easy to picture the nitpicking habits of the self-dedicated narcissist, licking his finger and realigning his eyebrows as soon as he sees his morning mug in the bathroom glass. The loss of control that drug addiction makes a dead certainty must have been a real surprise.

As we talked, I stood alongside my boat, hugging my chest, and my sliding palm suddenly reminded me of the holstered SIG-Sauer underneath my fishing vest and tucked below my left armpit. My eyes immediately went to a similar place on Marino whose body was thickly swathed in layers of *Eddie Bauer*. If he was Roberto Antonio it was there. Two shooters on a fishing trip, apparently with only one thing in common: our gender. We didn't have knowledge of Kim in common. Only one of us knew her. Antonio could have had no idea she was a separate entity, had certainly regarded her as merely an adjunct to himself. That thought alone, even aside from his wanting her dead, made me a dangerous foe.

Any doubt about who he was came to an abrupt end when Marino started to hoist his fancy sleeping gear onto my boat and his left leg buckled. Up to that point, I'd had great difficulty believing he was on the lam. In many ways, he looked more like Betty's excuse for leaving me than someone running scared, a sporty dilettante of the leather-patched-elbow set. He must have been limping along on a shopping spree while the feds were one reach away from his monogrammed shirt collar. Loading his backpack, I discovered it was heavy enough for a whole new existence,

something I'd normally have put a stop to in short order. Redistributing the weight in my boat, I watched him cave over to his right and give a little moan that was willfully converted to a self-derisive laugh.

"Give you a hand in," I said to the erstwhile husband and would-be killer of the woman sharing my bed.

I'd already stashed my rifle when I was alone. Now I watched him take a brand new Winchester 44 Mag. Black Shadow with scope out of its floater case. If these ominous preparations had any connection with fishing, the steelhead would have gone belly up in disgust.

"You think you'll need that?"

"Oh, yeah, gotta have that, Mr. Griffen. Rogue bears of the Rogue, you know." He laughed.

No, I didn't know. "Most bears of my acquaintance generally go the other way when they see us folks," I said.

Antonio -- I'd decided to call it as I knew it -- didn't respond to my helpful observation, but only frowned and laid his rifle down beside him under the thwart.

"Better put it back in the floater," I said, powering up my engine. "Might bounce right out of here...and there you'll be...empty-handed with all those rogue bears circling around."

Turning away, I could feel those sleepy brown eyes doing a number on this ignorant backwoods river guide.

I ran upriver flat-out, allowing my shallow draft to plane high on the water -- easier on repairs -- except where I had to courteously gentle around friends, colleagues, and various staring strangers icing their fannies for a hook in the big one, or in anything half respectable that would quicken their frozen pulses and swell their corked evening conversations. At those times,

I hunkered down and stuck to business, hoping no one would yell, *Hello, Deputy!*, as folks hereabouts were wont to do. A salty old geezer, Herb Tuttle, standing off the shore in waders and with whom I sometimes played poker mainly because I knew he was lonely, yelled, "Hi there, Cap'n!" and I tipped my felt hat with a wave and moved along.

Antonio pressed his tractor-soled boot over his rifle to hold it down and gripped the thwart as occasional spray smacked his pale face. I enjoyed wetting him down, but I didn't want the guy mad at me. Not yet. Not ever, for the sake of expediency, but that wasn't likely.

"Waterproof test!" I yelled with a grin the next time he was doused with cold, late November spray. His smirking, repulsed mouth was sealed tight, and he was already beginning to murder me with incensed eyes whose thick lashes were dripping river wash.

Uninvited speculation on what Kim would think of all this pulled me up short. I had meant to subtract her from everything that was going on. The apparent cause had to begin here, the effect having no impetus but Antonio. I had as yet no idea that he would be the one to continually force her presence.

I slowed us down and said, "There's coffee in the thermos starboard." He swung his neck around to port and then back, spotted the thermos, and reached for it. "I'll have one, too," I said, retrieving and stretching toward him my insulated mug. His unsteady hand poured the pungent black heat into frosty air, coiling steam blowing away as he reached toward me with the nearly full mug. His head was back to one side, his eyes on me and narrowed to dark slits with a little bead of light in each slice of pupil.

"You like the water, sailing, ever do much sailing?"

"Obviously not," he said with a jarred slurp of coffee. "You can probably see that. Right?"

We drank in silence. I couldn't muster the old make-the-client-feel-good routine that I myself enjoyed on jet boat runs. I'd heard this man was a talker, but hadn't seen much evidence of it yet. I thought it must be the way our extremely opposed and dominant personalities clashed in an ongoing sidelong mutual scrutiny, heavy, requiring silence. I had the feeling he was planning to show me how good he was at something, something that he imagined would be very foreign and surprising to me.

"My wife and I took a sailing cruise. I didn't have to do a thing."

"And that's the way you like it, huh?" I said, then swallowed the last dregs of my coffee and stowed the cup.

He stood up and looked upriver.

"How far can we go in this...this...?"

"Boat," I said.

"You're kind of a wise guy, aren't you?...a wise guy."

"Nah," I said, laughing. "I'm just a hardheaded Welshman -- not without a little humor -- who plies the waters for whiskey and grits."

"And cunt. A big stud like you must get plenty of that. Right?"

I revved up the engine, throwing Antonio back parallel to and planting his butt hard against a thwart. This time I didn't care whether his eyes had murder in them or not.

Flying through Bear Canyon, today without the slightest flash of dark furry mass along its shores, we moved over the fast white riffles, passing feeding streams and rushing on until we sped between the four-hundred-foot-high, painted cliffs of Copper Canyon. Far below, the wise

and secretive sturgeon were amusing themselves in ninety or a hundred foot pools of depth-opaqueted water. The sound of our lone motor echoed off the canyon walls as we skimmed along in and out of pockets of bright light. The spotty fog was steadily evaporating up into a hazy blue straight overhead. Above, a sunlit eagle soared through an opening to the sky. The day would be crisp, cold, and sunny; splendid weather. That would stand as my most successful prediction of the day.

The strange thing about this journey was that I had to carry on with the false notion of a fishing trip, even in the face of my transparent passenger's disinterest in catching anything but a ride, and at its end a fugitive's deliverance. I kept moving us up the river, not sure where I would stop, waiting for Antonio to articulate something that would stop us. The river was swollen from the late fall rains, and I coaxed my outboard around the ninety degree bend of Crooked Riffle, difficult for larger boats to navigate because of its sharp right angle turn. Further ahead, I pointed out Allen Pool, a place where I'd hauled up many a fine steelhead, but I continued on without any hesitation, knowing that Antonio didn't care in the least. Passing over the familiar disturbances of water, the names I might have announced in my jet boat spiel remained in my head: Wee Riffle, a small, narrow, rocky ripple; then Smith Riffle, named after a settler, and Hotel Riffle, named by patrons of the old Agness Hotel who found good fishing there; Hog Eddy where the river once claimed a boatload of hogs near the dock of the Lucas Pioneer Ranch -- human marks of identification paid no heed by the river itself.

We were thirty-two miles upriver. For several minutes, as my motor throbbled through the silting

confluence of the Illinois River and on past Agness, I forgot the dark figure who shared my boat and pondered instead how many lives the river had carried and sustained, enlarged and diminished. Human life on the river could be dated back to nine thousand years, fragments, markings on stone. Who knows when life really began on this river, or how it would continue? The early natives of linguistic similarity we call Athabaskan -- around here Tututni and Shasta Costa -- once lived on the river's largess, its endless supply of salmon and trout. When I was a boy exploring river and woods, my conjuring mind frequently wandered into those long-vanished river camps, imagining the plank and cedar bark dwellings so clearly painted in my father's tales of local history. My willing ears often heard the dip and splash of their canoe paddles, their smoky autumn chants, the murmur of voices issuing from their sweating houses, or a lone howl of existence echoing through the still, damp forest. Serious discussion, argument, laughter, song, all rising on the wind, fading into the rich silences of human presence, a weighted ellipsis very different from the total silence of their eventual and everlasting absence.

Native Americans, miners, fishermen, settlers, worldly folk escaping civilization and looking for solace had all come here; to a small and crooked blue vein on the wrinkled face of the earth, a choke of ice water gurgling from the torn throat of a drowned volcano that had blown its top when history was myth and made Crater Lake, then tumbling out of the Cascade Range, pouring down boiling white over broken stone, running still and deep or shallow and rough two hundred and fifteen miles to the sea -- a horizon of eternal water the natives had called *the great stinking*

lake. This river took lives, made lives, broke lives, carried lives for millennia, and all with magnificent indifference: *La Riviere Aux Coquins*, The River of the Rogues, as the French-Canadian fur trappers called it when they were attacked by the frequently disturbed and vengeance-seeking Takelma Indians. Those far upriver settlements disappeared after a series of wars when the indigenous peoples surrendered in 1856 and were relocated up north on the Coast Reservation. I thought I knew who most of the real rogues were. Some of them were still on the river.

I stopped, swerved right, cut the engine, and floated onto a gravel beach. A white egret flapped up and away, cutting a ragged path through the thinning fog.

Antonio, who was perched with his neck pulled in like the plentiful, branch-clutching California buzzards along our way, straightened up, looked around him, and said, "Now what?"

"You want a good fishing spot. This is it."

"I...a...actually, I was kinda looking for a place... Some kind of old establishment around here that used to be a lodge. That anywhere near here?"

"The Pederson place? About four more miles up and a quarter mile north off the river. No outsider hears much about it anymore. It's closed."

"But maybe I could...I'd like to look, anyway."

"People get old...tired. Pederson shut the place down. They're gone. Sometimes their grandkids come in the summer. It's private."

Antonio's face had turned anxious. He hunched over, braced himself on the gunnel with nervous jerks, and stepped out onto the watery gravel.

"I need to take a crap."

"Be my guest," I said, extending my arm toward a thicket of willows. I jumped off and secured the boat.

I felt trouble coming my way as I stared after Antonio's limping khaki form disappearing into the brush. I turned away, reached beneath my vest, pulled out the SIG-Sauer and stuck it in the pocket of my parka. I didn't think Antonio was relieving himself, although that might be a secondary goal. More likely he was shooting up a batch of big-H that he'd recently acquired with the help of Runnah's fortuitous C-notes.

After a while, he returned a different man, blowing short faint whistles of airy monotony through a crack in his now lopsided and curving mouth. He had a remote but charged look, like someone who just fell off the proverbial wagon into a dense whirl of cosmic rays. I was now merely a foregone conclusion. Although nearly half a foot taller and probably a lot healthier than my deviant passenger, I had been reduced to a little flyspeck on Conquistador Antonio's map of the universe. Invincible power was on him.

He walked up close, regarded me with the pin-pointed pupils of the routinely and freshly polluted, and said, "I'm paying you to go where I want, right? That's what you're being paid for. I wanta see that lodge. Get it?"

"I'm being paid to take you fishing, possibly camping, Marino...not to assist you in breaking and entering."

"Who said anything about breaking and entering? I just wanta have a goddamn look. The place interests me. That okay with you?"

"Right now it's private property."

"Look, I wanta see that place and I'm going to see

that place, so move it out," he said, lifting his hand from his pocket with a Baretta attached.

"I don't do business this way," I said, sliding my hand over the luger still in my pocket.

"Then you're a lot dumber than I thought."

"Not quite. And you know what? If I pull the trigger on what's in my pocket and you pull the trigger on what's in your hand, we'll both be lying here bleeding. So what's the point of that?"

His eyes went to my hand waiting in my extended pocket.

"Huh? If you have got a pistol, you couldn't aim from there anyway."

"Try me," I said, easing up my hand to reveal the shine of my luger. "Maybe I've had more practice than you think."

He stood deliberating a few seconds, dropping his head to one side and wavering a little, then laughed and pocketed the pistol.

"Aw, come on. It was a goddamn joke. I'm just used to getting my way. It's a bad habit, I admit it. My old man is still kicking himself for the way he laid it on...hardly any resistance, the best schools, cars, clothes -- I always got the best women under my own steam. But, hey, when you're jump-started into life...into business, it's a whole lot rougher than you'd think...having no stumbling blocks. You don't learn a hell of a lot that way."

The newly fluent Antonio had actually turned disarming, to make a sort of pun. He couldn't know, with his cobra charm, that his apologetic complaints about the downside of privilege weren't generating any sympathy. All

they meant to me was that he was desperate for a place to hide, and onto another tack at getting his way. I'd been telling myself that I intended to level this guy out then drag him back down the river and hand him over to the feds with the appropriate horror at having discovered I had an armed felon for a client. But that wasn't really the way I expected it to go. There was too much dangerous slop. Of course, as soon as he pointed the Baretta, I knew his unusual conduct would place me forever on his agenda. He naively thought he could hide out until the feds gave up, then destroy the human evidence of his past errors. He'd kill me because I, too, had become evidence, something that from the beginning he knew would happen. He might last awhile out here, but not too long. He'd have to hide my boat. Everyone knew my royal blue, oversized, flat-bottomed river skimmer.

"Back to here and now, Mr. Marino, if you want to fish, which is what this is supposed to be about, you're going to have to hand me that Baretta. I'll lock it up in my lock box and hand it back to you when the trip is over. Otherwise, it's back to the Gold Beach dock."

"What? Why the hell should I have to hand you my pistol?"

"This is a fishing trip not target practice, and I'm not warming up to the idea of being aimed at every time you lose your temper."

"Why've you got hardware in your pocket? You guys around here all pack pistols?"

"Lucky for me I do. But you'd never have known about it if you hadn't pulled that Baretta on me."

"All right...make you a deal. If you'll just agree to run me by that old lodge to satisfy my curiosity, I'll hand

you the pistol right now."

"Hand me the pistol first, and we'll see."

"Hey, I'm not a klutz. And I'm pretty good at behaving myself. Give me a break. I don't want any trouble. Let's just eat our lunch over there on the grounds. Then you bait all my hooks, and I catch fish. How about it?"

I nodded at his ingratiating face and repeated, "Hand me the pistol."

"All right, here it comes."

He handed the Baretta over too easily, so that I knew he had something else stashed on him somewhere. Okay, I decided, we'll run upriver, hike over to the Pederson place, brown-bag it, and then it's High Noon.

Apparently it never occurred to him to wonder why I was so incurious, why I wasn't demanding to know what he wanted with the vacant lodge. To even up the edges I said, "What's so fascinating about the Pederson place, anyway?"

"Well, a...I think it'll revert back to federal land when they die, won't it? Maybe I could make a deal with the government. It'd make a damn good destination restaurant. Might even improve your business, Mr. Griffen."

"In what way?"

"More traffic...more business."

"The folks who use and respect this river know where to find it," I said, starting up my engine. After that we rode the four miles in silence.

My thermos, our cups, and the remaining crusts of our salmon sandwiches were resting on a broad gray cedar stump

amidst the tangled weedy grounds of the old Pederson lodge. The white paint was chipping off and the long veranda had a noticeable sag, but the place still offered a haunting reminder of well-spent pleasures. The hike in from the river's north shore and along hill-backed Tate Creek necessitated trampling an overgrown path, and I was wondering if any Pedersons had even made it up last summer. I was living in my head much more than I realized at the time, and a lot of local events not intersecting with law enforcement went right by me. I couldn't recall when I'd last been to the lodge, but I didn't remember the place ever looking quite so anxious for attention.

Roberto Antonio was staring at the house with the fixed concentration of a bird dog on point. He was survival-oriented, working something out. I had no intention of underestimating his ability to come up with something good. He'd already shown that he wasn't so tuned out he couldn't recognize certain changes in his environment, changes that even attentive nature lovers sometimes missed. Earlier, passing the junction of the Illinois River and slowing down at Agness but still making our own current of air, he had noticed the shift in breeze, a peculiar characteristic of the wind on the Rogue: it blows upriver from the estuary to the Illinois, and there where the river turns north, the wind begins a reversing downward rush. Upriver craft are thenceforth bucking some drag. The trees no longer attempt escape but bend toward you in a polite dance, hypnotic, a soothing illusion. "Wind's shifted," Antonio had said, and with that terse comment, signaled the troubling possibility of more subtle and hazardous observations ahead.

"That's a big chimney. Must be a good fireplace."

Without looking my way, Antonio rose from the weathered chunk of red alder he'd dragged over to sit on. He moved toward the house still talking mostly to himself. "Wonder if I can get inside...like to have a look."

I sat there in the cold damp dead grass, shaking my head with disgust because he was pushing me again, the same dogged way a wild animal will persist in stalking its meal.

"You have any notion of private property?" I called.

In the next few minutes even I experienced surprise. Antonio ran up on the veranda, trying the locked door then running down again, rounding the stone-based side of old lodge and disappearing. I loped to the side wall of the building and looked around its corner just in time to see him smack his fist, wrapped in the unzipped tail of his jacket, through the back door glass. He was in before I got there, but I was moving with caution because I didn't have him in sight.

"Hey, get the hell out of there!" I yelled.

"Cool down, man...a little broken glass...I'll leave some money," he hollered back.

"Oh great," I said, stepping through the back door and squinting in the dim light. "Goddamn it!" I felt a little strange, because normally I would have had this guy in cuffs by now. "Come on, vacate the premises, Marino."

I found him standing on one of the three worn Navaho rugs placed end to end in the huge musty living room, his back to me, not even bothering to turn around, planted there staring into the fireplace. It was a great gaping black hole surrounded by a time-melded mass of dusty gray river stone and topped by a smoke-stained, carved oak mantel.

For a few seconds, I saw before my eyes the room I

knew best: Christmas. Pine logs ablaze. The mantel strung with garlands of fir, pungent myrtle, flowering madroña, and holly with red berries. Thick green candles flickering, their reaching gold flames doubled by the high mantelshelf mirror. Mrs. Pederson, Mary Pederson, speaking in her slow drawl to Betty. Betty's excited laughter, her rosy, firelit body. Ruddy-faced Oscar Pederson telling me, his words mincing around the meerschaum stem clenched in his teeth, experiences of winter steelhead runs. There was snow outside and it was rough getting here, very rough on deep, torrential water full of debris, plenty of white water. Betty and I brought Christmas presents, the actual day of celebration only a week off. I went with Oscar to carry in snow-dusted chunks of pine and red alder while Betty helped with dinner. We talked past midnight, then stayed over because traveling down that river was difficult enough in the light of day. Upstairs, the rising mingling of fresh evergreen, burning pitch, and candle wax, our tangled bodies floating between crisp featherbeds made of warm goose down. We could hear the pine snapping in the fireplace below. Beyond the frost-edged window panes the wintry blue glow of snow light, the frozen, inky sky studded with white nuggets of ice crystal that must have been stars, the distant roar of the foamed river in spate. The frailty of every minute in every hour bolstered by the assurances of the past, the comfort of the present, the promise of the future. A high level of contentment now upended, like the dreaming house in its humiliated silence, bereft of devotion and heat.

Above the mantel, running its full length, was the crackled mirror. In it I saw Roberto Antonio's face. He lifted his head and his eyes met mine. He was smiling, but

only with his mouth. His eyes, fixed raptor eyes, coolly finished me off. The drug-squeezed pupils had long ago reduced everything but self to insignificance -- the very habit that made him smile, that would destroy him.

"I have to get away for a while...totally away from everything. My wife left me...just took off. God, I was good to her -- that bitch got everything of value she could lay her hands on and ran out with some punk. I really came up here looking for her, but now I don't care. I just want to be alone to think. You ever have that kind of thing happen to you? Your beautiful...beautiful sweetheart turns into a gold-digging, two-timing bitch?"

I blew short bursts of demi-tuned air through my lips and said, "I'll need to fix that broken window before we leave...have to find something around here and board it up."

Glancing around the room, I saw hard-worked furniture with a vitality that wouldn't die. Here was a roomful of time-nicked old friends who had welcomed and shared the secrets of notables, celebrities, and hearty river folk.

I moved on into the high-ceilinged yellow kitchen with its giant butane range, an ancient monstrosity that had generated countless square meals, many worthy of detailed remembrance, especially the hot biscuits, light as air.

"There must be something...ah, I know," I muttered. "There used to be a pile of spare shingles in the woodshed. At least that'll keep the birds and squirrels out."

Antonio tagged along out to the woodshed, talking to my back. "Yeah, fine. Sorry about that. I'll pay for new glass. I'm no carpenter...so...a...while you're fixing it I'll take a walk."

"Do that," I said. *Go take a hit and figure out your*

next move, you greased up tap-dancer. Get out of my sight before I whack the back of your knees and fold you up.

I went about my repair work, knowing that when Antonio returned the dance floor would be cleared and ready for a new show. While I was in the woodshed, I hunted up some small rusty nails and found an old ball-peen hammer that worked fine. Lifting out pieces of broken glass, I worked slowly and carefully, smiling at the thought of Kim's suggestion that a part of me was seriously methodical. I was just finishing when the main act showed up limping and puffing. The Winchester Black Shadow was on display tucked under his arm, and he was wearing his backpack.

"You expecting to shoot something?" I said, eyeing the rifle.

"I'm a good shot. That's something I'm very good at. I've brought down stuff in Africa you wouldn't even recognize."

"That a fact?"

"The leg giving you some trouble?" I said, studying the red stain on his khaki pants.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Don't lock that door. I plan to stay here awhile." The rifle rose into firing position as he was talking.

"You think I'm going to let you do that?"

He laughed. "You're damn near history, you ignorant hillbilly nuisance."

Antonio must have been moving fast to get all the way to my boat, load up, and hotfoot it back here. That was what reopened his wound, and what I hoped had prevented him from checking his equipment.

"I guess this is where I see my whole life flashing before me," I said with a grin.

"You're a cool bastard. I'll say that for you."

"That's because I aim to live a long and moderately happy life. I don't think you'll be that lucky, Antonio."

With the proper identification very unexpectedly hung on him, Antonio had suddenly been hurled into unknown territory, and the impact was evident on his startled face. He stood thinking a couple of seconds too long while I lifted the SIG-Sauer out of my pocket. Then his rifle clicked on my heart.

"Doesn't work without these, big game hunter," I said, reaching into my left pocket and displaying his shells. "That's what happens when felons get fixed in the bushes while their ignorant river guides are waiting on the shore."

He was wriggling out of his backpack and reaching under his coat when I caved his left leg with a boot behind the knee, and he found himself sitting down hard with a yelp of pain. I patted him down and removed a .38 that was stuck in the back of his belt, and then a knife from an ankle sheath.

He looked up at me with watery eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm who I always was, but more to the point, who the hell are you? I think you're a dumb screw-up. You had just about everything a person could want on your platter, and you decided to throw it all in the garbage.

"Hands behind your back. You have the right to remain silent," I began, reaching into one of my Velcroed fishing vest pockets for cuffs while I finished my spiel.

"Are you a federal agent? But how could you be and run that boat around...know so much about this river?"

"I'm not a federal agent. I'm a turkey hunter. Stand

up, " I said, grabbing him by the arm and lifting.

"Oh, Jesus! I'm in pain."

I pulled up his pants leg and examined the leaking wound in his meaty calf. It was a clean entry and exit, recoagulating. "You'll live. I'll bet with your high octane top-off you hardly feel a thing. The hasty work of the late, not-so-great Teague Runnah. If he were still around, you wouldn't be on this river at all."

"So that's why he didn't come back. Couldn't have happened to a more worthless slimebag. Did you do it? You the law around here?"

"Let's get moving," I said, pushing him in the direction of my boat.

Antonio took his time, plodding over the newly beaten down weeds and grass.

He stopped more than halfway back and looked over his shoulder at me. "My wife...she around? She do this? I should've fixed her first. I just couldn't find her fast enough. She left me once and I got her back. She *left* me. I don't have to take that...not from her, not after all I've done for her. I'll get her. No hayseed cop's going to stop me. I'll get her if I have to hire it done."

"No you won't...not you or anyone else. Move on."

"Old Doc Tate is waving good-bye. He's buried over there around where he liked to prospect," I said, nodding at Tate Creek's jaws. "Just behave yourself on the way down. We haven't got much left around here that needs a name, even an infamous one." I was aiming for distraction while I fit a life vest on and recuffed Antonio. If he fell in without a vest, I'd be in the kind of water that

sizzled.

A mile or so later, we passed a man in waders fishing. Nearby on a shelf, a young guide named Rolly was lolling in a camp chair beside a fire on the gravel. Their tent was pitched above on a dry-grassed knoll.

"Hey, Deputy!" Rolly called, jumping up with a curious stretch of his neck. "Looks like you got a live one there."

"Your man's in the wrong spot," I called, "The lie's a little further west." I glanced at Antonio. Lucky I hadn't encountered Rolly on the way up.

"So, you're a county bush beater, huh? Don't suppose you'd like to make a decent living for a change."

"Planning to pay me off with Runnah's C-notes?"

"You don't miss much, do you?" Antonio said, shifting his weight and leaning forward.

"Not if I can see it, or smell it, or imagine it." I shook my head. "I have difficulty imagining that you ever resembled anything decent."

"Why? Did somebody say I did?"

Now Antonio's narrowed eyes were scanning my face. For sure he'd fixed himself up good on his last hike. I never bothered searching through his backpack, which I'd carried to the boat, but I knew what I'd find. I also knew I should have kept my character study to myself, because I could already read his mind. I stared at water and shorelines in silence, until I heard his amazed voice above the noise of our passage, spitting out each word.

"Goddammit! Are you fucking my wife?"

We were heading into rocky white water, the fast and tricky Camp Tacoma Rapids. I concentrated on adjusting the motor and avoiding obstacles. Neither of us spoke another

word until we shot into a three-mile stretch of the calmest flattest water on this run, Clay Hill Stillwater.

"So she got to you. Well, that's just great, you son of a bitch. If you were a woman, I could do the same thing. I have no trouble there. I'm just as good at it as she is."

I stood up, moved slowly forward, and uncuffed Antonio. "It would be a disgrace if you drown without your hands free," I said. Then I placed one fist an inch from his face and knotted the other in the curly hair on top of his head, yanking him up straight. "You know I've really had my fill of you slick Johnny one-notes. Don't you ever get sick to death of hearing your own whining voice? From now on keep your slimy mouth shut or I'll bust your gigolo teeth in with about twenty years worth of unpaid dues." I dropped him back on the thwart and watched him wriggle his stiff arms. His face was white with rage, but his mouth was shut.

In the time we'd been at the Pederson place under a steady November sun, a distant but spreading dark storm had flushed out the high northeast hills. The rapidly infused river was even more swollen than it had been coming up, and continuing to rise. Leisured Rogue visitors tend to go away with a changeless river on their minds, but a river is always in flux, the end result of weather, gravity, and erosion, a lively pulsing force that swells and reforms and dwindles at the whims of the elements. With very short notice, one heavy cloudburst, it can stack its gravity-dragged tonnage to a level of ferocious hydraulic menace, culling out and rearranging its beds and banks, disgorging more gently placed debris or objects strewn around in its last rampage. A surging torrent upriver was already on the

rip, sending down snatched and tumbling flotsam, but ahead was something far more worrisome to contemplate.

There were giant new whirlpools in Copper Canyon; hungry, dark sucking pits that can swallow careless small river craft all day long without loss of appetite. At the right speed, and with the boat properly weighted, I have shot my long, flat skimmer, half airborne, right over the top of these evil eyes, but only out of necessity when one was unavoidably in my path. Today I had no interest in aquatic daredeviltry that might lead to a final rest in the house of the sturgeon. I pulled out my Polaroids and concentrated on mercurial surface boil deceptively lacquered with bright sunlight. My ignorant passenger, however, chose the exact moment we were approaching one of these ravenous vortexes to stand and begin lurching toward the bow where nothing was stashed but firearms, his repositioned weight thereby assuring our nosedive into the maelstrom.

"Hey!" I yelled, dropping down and reaching forward to grab his ankle. I yanked us aft and sideways to veer the boat to starboard, but Antonio leapt into the air, screaming curses at me for the pain in his leg, and flew right over the low gunnel.

"For Christ's sake!" I shouted as the boat shot past his bobbing white face. "You rotten motherfucker!" he screamed. But I pointed behind him, swinging my arm north and yelling, "Swim!" He was floundering on the lip of a monstrous whorl of downward spin. He looked over his shoulder then back at me with a pale, horror-stricken face. His twisted mouth wasted precious seconds hurling more invective that I made no attempt to hear. "Swim out! Swim, goddammit!" I bellowed with an impatient fury. I was

plowing through a minefield of explosive water. Finally, I had the boat turned, and sped back just in time to glimpse flaying arms descending into hell's spiral. His life preserver would eventually bring him back up, but I could only hazard a guess as to how far down he'd be sucked and held before that occurred. Unless he was an experienced diver, with good lung capacity and unusual patience, he was a goner. Fear would consume his brain and he would fight until his lungs screamed for air. There was nothing I could do, short of drowning myself, until the whirling green-black maw spit him out. To an onlooker, my response might have seemed inhuman and chilling, but there was no alternative. Ripping waters in the shoreless canyon forced me to head downstream where I could beach and wait.

Over a quarter of an hour later, I was still waiting when I spotted the orange life jacket rushing along the south shore. I had fished out bodies before, and it never got any easier. Shooting across the fast channel, I snugged my boat against the lifeless, face-down body and nudged it over into a shallow bed where I could load it without taking on water. I got out and turned the body. The outstretched left arm flopped over his head. Powerful actions had split open the sleeve, exposing a bluish-white, silky-muscled arm, da Vinci-spindled biceps toned with unmistakable self-dedication. All that effort finished as incredible irony, seen alongside the spread of track marks over the lifeless veins. His sulky, thick-lashed eyes, once so easily into seduction, were open wide and water-rimed. Strange that the sightless have seen much more than those privileged eyes ever did. So ended the life mainly responsible for Kim's own whirlpool of misery. Adjusting to the sudden finality of drowning wasn't easy, or I would

never have called out, "What a damned inexcusable waste, you pitiful bastard!" I shouted it while toxic anger still fumed off his body, infecting my voice. Maybe I said it because the force of my own vocal cords was reassuring, even when smothered by the indifferent white noise of a hell-raising river.

The Sheriff and I were the only ones left on the dock after the two federal agents left. I was tired physically and tired of questions.

"You get more police work done when it's not official," the Sheriff said, after eyeing me for a long time with what naturally seemed to me like cold disbelief. Still, he had the whole Antonio-on-the-river saga to play with, and every loose end I could think of was tied up in an indisputable bow of fact. I didn't have to work very hard feigning surprise at what happened at the onset of my recently resumed profession, one which I'd told the agents was a new part-time business. I'd left it to the Sheriff to explain that I was temporarily off duty. I said I'd been willing to take on whatever guide work came my way, no questions asked. The Sheriff waited until we were alone to remark that he thought I was supposed to be on health leave. I replied that, while I wasn't entirely sure what my official status was, and even though I was not completely well, I just couldn't afford to pass up a potentially profitable client.

"It's a good thing I didn't happen to mention the incident out at Tealwing's spread to the feds, or they might think we got a magician here in this department."

"Well, that's just the way it goes in a small place."

If you're out there you're bound to get your foot in it."

"I guess you noticed, Richard, how disgusted they were at discovering their hot prey was no longer breathing."

"I noticed. That was rough water, and the guy just wasn't giving up without a fight. I've only got two arms."

"They still want to know how he got that hole in his leg."

"I'd like to know exactly how that worked, myself. You saw them check all the firearms. Nothing had been fired. I didn't do it, that's all I can tell you...except that if I'd had to shoot him I would have."

"In your guiding days, did you always haul around that much firepower?"

"I nearly always had a rifle. I'm getting more wary than I used to be. All the crazies around."

Sheriff Brandle stared west toward the squashed red ball of fire sliding below the horizon and said, "I just keep thinking there's something odd about all this, Richard, something off kilter here." His red-tinted eyes glowed with a devilish insistence, but I looked into them without blinking and said, "I'm worn out and hungry, Jimmy."

"Hell, go on home. I'll see some of the paperwork gets started, and you can finish it up tomorrow."

Keet came out and stood on my veranda, so I walked in the front door instead of around back. It seemed to me like there was something wrong, but I thought maybe I was just tired and a little edgy, possibly a little paranoid. Belle tore around the side of the house, with a single loud wail of greeting, and squeezed through the closing front

door.

Rubbing the back of my fishtailing dog, I asked,
"Where's Kim?"

"Oh, she's..." He looked toward the stairs, and I thought maybe she was taking a nap. "How'd it go?" he asked, changing the subject.

Keet was more evasive than I'd ever seen him, but he let me tell my story first. He asked very few questions, and when I finished he said, "So that takes care of the menace, I guess. Except that..."

"Is Kim upstairs?"

"Griff...it was the damndest thing. This morning the phone rang, and I heard the speaker in your den...sounded like your mother's voice...well, it was your mother -- I replayed it later. Kim was in there looking for a book to read. She was gone awhile. Then she went upstairs. Finally, she came down, made me some coffee, and..." He shrugged with a look of disgust. "I'm sorry, Griffish. She dropped a couple of sleeping pills into my coffee and I was out of work -- I never use that stuff, because it really knocks me out. Some time later, I discovered myself hanging off the sofa. She's gone...left you a note...left me one, too."

"Not again," I muttered, and sat down on the couch, staring at Keet in silence and waiting for meaning. He yawned with a helpless look, then walked over and lifted a folded sheet of paper off the sideboard and brought it back.

I read it several times, but I couldn't make any sense out of it. It was a strongly appreciative note with a lot of pain, the pain evident because of what was left out. I didn't understand how I'd caused it.

"I figured she took a taxi down the hill...tried to find her downtown, but the bus was gone. She was on it."

I laughed, an awkward sound, and said, "She doesn't even know that she's free of him." Then I read the note one more time and was still in the dark as to what I'd done:

"Griff, you really are an incredible man, to have risked so much for someone passing through your life. I have to leave now, and that's just what you expected, isn't it? Of course, I can't ever pay you back. I owe too much. Because of you, I'm still alive and, I think, a better person. For as long as I'm anywhere, I'll remember this. I love to picture you out there on your river. I hope everything works out for you this time around. Always, Kim"

"May I read your note?" I asked.

"Sure. Here," Keet said, pulling it out of his pocket.

"Keet, dear," it read, "Please, please forgive me. You know I adore you. It was only two sleeping pills, because I have to get out of here. I'll always see you riding Chaser on those perfect trails. Your guilty friend, Kim"

I looked up at Keet and saw pity in his eyes. That rankled, and I said, "Oh, what the hell." Saying it didn't help much, but I reminded myself that my own prediction had come true and that I'd better get used to it.

"I think maybe you should listen to your mother's phone message, Griff. I expect it explains a lot more than I could. Guess I'd better head out, if you don't need anything more. I've got some chores back home, but you can call me any time tonight.

"You okay?" Keet asked when I didn't answer.

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Thanks a lot, Keet...for all the help you've been...all the effort. I'll talk to you later."

My body wasn't cooperating with my brain just then, and I stayed glued to the couch, staring dumbly after Keet.

"Get some sleep, pardner," Keet said, moving toward the front door with a few final words. "Things are going to work out one way or another."

I didn't listen to the phone message, but instead dragged myself upstairs, threw off my clothes, and stood in a hot shower. I let warm water pelt my closed eyes for what seemed like a long time, then stared at the water-beaded dark green tiles and sulked, occasionally explaining aloud to Kim the rotten muck I'd just waded through to get back to her. I really wanted what I thought should have been my reward: Kim safe and glad to see me and within reach.

"Face it, Griffen, you jackass, you knew what was coming, and you should be happy that she's free. That's what you were going to lay at her feet, isn't it? her freedom? And what about your own freedom?"

"I'm really glad she's safe, of course," I argued back, "but goddamn it all to hell!"

I went downstairs, fixed myself a double shot of whiskey -- *on the rocks, like our lovely affair*, taunted Kim's sleepy voice --, and made a grilled ham and cheese sandwich. In no time at all, I was waving my fingers and shouting at the frying pan, until Belle began to whine with alarm.

"Sorry, old girl, I'm off my nut," I said. "I should be talking to you, then I'd get an intelligent answer."

When half of the sandwich was finished, so was I. I gave the rest to Belle, climbed back up the stairs, removed my robe, and threw my body into bed, forgetting altogether about my mother's telephone message.

I roiled around in my covers until I had none, and dreamed that Kim had run away with Bo Riley. But after the dream got started, Kim turned into Betty and Bo Riley turned into a duded up fox hunter with a long curled snout instead of a human nose. I was just getting ready to do something about that situation when it vanished.

Betty's light, teasing voice came out of the dream's offstage darkness. There the two of us were, naked in a hayloft at her parents' farm -- that part had really happened. Dripping with sweat and in the middle of deeply satisfying lovemaking, I discovered that Betty was not solid flesh. I could reach right through her body. Then there was nothing there but two floating blue eyes, blond pigtails, and a smile. I said, "Why? I keep asking why and I never get an answer."

"You were the only man I ever knew, Griff."

"And I'm the best man you'll ever know!" I shouted.

"The best! Damn you, Betty! Damn you! Damn you!"

I raised my arm in the air and saw blood running down the side of her face, but it was Kim's face. She dropped to her knees, turned away from me, and pointed at Antonio's body lying in the snow. I kept on invoking Betty's name in a white hot rage, until the sound turned into a mournful howl.

When I woke up, I could still hear my own shouting voice, but my brain had recorded it the way it must have come out, a broken, incoherent wail. Belle was standing beside the bed with her nose resting on the fitted white

sheet. High-pitched whistling noises were puling out of her worried throat.

"Okay, Belle, I'm conscious," I said, reaching out and sliding my fingers over a soft black ear and getting a palmful of warm wet tongue. To myself I muttered, "Jesus, it was hardly worth lying down."

Pulling on my jeans, I yanked a shirt off a hanger in the closet and realized it was the green one Kim liked to filch. I held it up to my nose and smelled that strange and arousing mixture of her scents, then I threw it down to be laundered, and reached for a brown plaid, the one I wore the day I first let her in my house. "Hell!" I said, rehangng it and pulling out a solid black wool shirt that for some reason I hardly ever wore. It finally suited me.

When the coffee was ready, I took a mug into my den and flipped on my phone messages: Wayne's voice inviting me to his wife's birthday party; Jackie asking me to bring my lovely and talented friend, Kim, up to Coos Bay for a family dinner; my house insurance man, informing me that the company was changing owners; and my mother:

"Hello honey, are you there? Well, guess not. I have some news that I'd just like you to hear so you'll be prepared. You know I've always kept up my friendship with Evelyn. I found out she's been ill, and I drove over to see her this morning. She looks so sad, thin and pale with dark circles under her eyes. She misses Hank terribly. Just her and the hired man there now. I certainly know how that feels. But for the moment she's happy because Betty is coming home for a while. She's due in tomorrow. Richard, Evelyn told me something I didn't know -- anyway you never say anything to me about it. She said that you stop in to see her every time you pass the farm, and that

you often bring her fish. She also said that as far as she's concerned you'll always be her son-in-law. Isn't that dear of her? And isn't it dear of you? I'm glad you've been visiting her. She said that Betty would probably want to see you. That surprised me a little. I hope you can handle it. Oh, I know you'll be fine. Call me, dear. Bye-bye."

I sat there drumming my fingers on my desktop with mother's words, *Oh I know you'll be fine*, ringing in my ears. "Will I?" I said aloud. I was imagining all kinds of scenarios that were essentially ridiculous when it suddenly hit me that Kim had also listened to my mother's message. "Christ!" I yelped. But regret turned to anger and then disappointment. Why didn't Kim stick around long enough to talk to me? Because it didn't mean that much to her, I decided. At least I understood why Keet had been so ambivalent, and hadn't, for once, defended Kim. He didn't know which direction I was going to gallop, and he didn't want to end up facing the wrong way. I smiled at that. Then I frowned. It wasn't as if I could have Betty, anyway. That was pretty much ruined. A whole range of feelings assailed my crumbling avoidance, from anger to sadness to excitement to miserable frustration and, worst of all, guilt. Why should I have to put up with guilt? For a number of weeks, I'd put myself through some damned unpleasant experiences, and the resulting gloom made me decide that everyone in my life could go straight to hell.

I took myself down to the office to finish my report. While I worked, Belle lay beside the desk I used. It was a busy day and no one bothered me, not even our exacting head secretary, June, to whom I said only a few necessary words. When I was through, I got out of there fast, before anyone

could come along and nail me for further interrogation. I knew the Sheriff was still mulling things over. But nearly everything had gone by the book, except for a few omissions which I considered irrelevant to the case.

Not far from the Rogue Bridge and heading home, I looked back toward the town nestled below the green and tan hills and sprawling along the foaming coast. Once a wild estuary where explorers with prominent names connected, then a shantytown of miners and trappers, that gradually became a settlement of farmers, fishermen, and loggers, now it was changed forever by tourism. I couldn't complain without hypocrisy. I myself had partaken of the tourism. Why am I here as opposed to somewhere else? my cranky mind asked. Then I thought of my childhood on the river and my log sanctuary on the hill, and my discouraged heart lifted a rung or two. *Griffen, when you get this negative it's time to go fishing. Okay, tomorrow belongs to silver scales.*

I'd have taken Dale with me, but the boy was in school. It would have been a different kind of fishing, a delicate blend of philosophy and the basics, glued together with humor and the responsibility of influencing a young mind.

After that big boil on the Rogue, the steelhead were shooting upriver with steady determination, so one-track they wanted no interference from me or any of my fancy ideas. From my spot below Lobster Creek, I determined that the big boys were wary of even my shadow, so I fished from the bank with my dark side off the river. Once in a while a green juvenile delinquent would take a racy little nip at

my sniggering fly and keep on going. That was all right. This was a reacquaintance with patience, and I was thinking.

One of the things I thought was that while I didn't necessarily have to feel guilty, neither did I have any right to be angry at Kim. Her reading of my jammed attitude was fairly accurate. Admittedly, the chronic state I was in, dormant or in full bloom, was not encouraging, as Faye eventually discovered. The thing was, it had become a way of life to which I'd grown accustomed. I had let the door swing shut, rationalizing that the only one who could open it again was Betty. That equaled nothing; but sometimes a nothing that, along with a string of individual liberties, provided the convenience of undeterred and incomparable fishing. At least I was happy while I was doing it.

Changing places with Kim, I realized that I, too, might have left when I heard that phone message. Her assumption wasn't entirely accurate, although I knew exactly how I felt about Betty and why I kept my mouth shut. There was the inescapable love -- defined as the strongest good feeling I could have for another person -- grown in a long history of rich experiences and then thrown back at me in its prime. For that, my even disposition was split asunder by a rage I could never have imagined, volatile rage that still imploded from time to time, having no place else to go. In spite of everything, including the necessary ferocity of my dreams, the best of the memories was enough to sustain the love I had known and given and still knew. It was all unfinished business until Father Time knocked me in the head.

I was still trying to figure out just how I felt about

Kim. I knew when I got near her I went crazy. I missed her, not just her irresistible body but her quick, incisive mind, her laughter and playfulness -- especially wonderful to me because I could make it happen amidst all her misfortune. Honesty, concern for others, big courage, and a love affair with nature, which had become increasingly more obvious, finished off my positive generic index of Kim. Sometimes she was stubborn. She had a quick temper, but I thought that was a justifiable result of recent events. I supposed my little friend would be able to nag with the best of them; it was an endemic female characteristic, effective when carefully applied, that likely paralleled the male's tacit threat of generally greater strength. Anyway, I thought it probably came from a need for control and/or a lack of proper attention, although sometimes it just came from unoiled door hinges. But more likely I, the sometime perfectionist, would be nagging at her, and it would have to do with scattered flies or mishandled fishing rods.

Kim was flexible, and healing now. I knew she could survive, and do it in some special way. Even if she was through with me, I had to let her know what happened. She was comparatively safe, and she needed to know that. I didn't feel overly anxious about not finding her, because I knew that she always got in touch with her mother. But I hadn't called yet. I was burned out and scrappy, fighting off personal disappointment and the blue devils stirred up by occupational hazards.

Finally, with one sound tug on my line, I was back on the water and temporarily reborn. I raised the rod tip and felt the beginning of a smile lift my hangdog face.

I had once noticed that the more my emotions were torn loose the more disciplined I became, an indication of how even a puny semblance of order preserved my sanity. I cleaned and returned my various articles of fishing gear to their assigned resting places, then showered and dressed myself, all in a very methodical yet detached manner. It was at this point that the restlessness set in, along with a vague hollowness in my stomach which reminded me of the need to fill it. Belle was in agreement, and I heaped up her dish with healthy, low-fat dog food then replenished her water supply. Later, she saw me trying to hide my shearling jacket, and looked up from her quarter-finished bowl with a certain expression that said, *Does this mean I'm staying home again?* "I'm afraid so," I said aloud. But then I changed my mind. "Okay, why don't you come along. I'm just going down to the Seahorse Bar and get fueled." She took a final swipe at her water bowl and headed straight for the back door. Dogs never have to get ready to do anything.

I ate nearly all of the rare steak sandwich Rex had dreamed up, then sat on the wine booth seat, swigging beer while Belle dozed near my feet. Some lost soul -- I looked to see if it was Bo Riley, but it was a retired mailman named Martin Sweeney -- dropped a load of clanking change into the lit-up Wurlitzer and "Stormy Weather" came rippling out. I could probably name every record that antique machine held in its big colored belly.

"Hey, Martin," I called with a friendly grin. "It's

not even raining out. How about Streisand's 'On A Clear Day' next time?"

"That's on your nickel," he returned. "Anyway, it's dark outside, Griff."

"I noticed that."

He waved a plaid-flanneled bony arm and went back to upending his beer bottle, alone at a round oak table.

The old vinyl scratched along with prophetic accuracy, and I was just starting another beer when Betty slipped into my booth. I would have known it was her if all the dim lights had been turned off. She was still wearing the same perfume I used to buy her, "L'Air du Temps." A fast brain pulse reminded me of where we used to meet. Did I come here unconscious of the reason? That was the kind of augury I couldn't stomach. I came because I was hungry and restless. Belle stood up and gave a soft whining bark -- she'd never met Betty.

"Hello, Richard. You've got a new pal. Is this Belle? Mama told me. Hello, pretty girl...hello there."

She put her hand beneath Belle's throat and ran her thumb along the silky jaw while I stared at her. I was trying to arrange a phrase, or even a whole sentence the way I wanted it, so I sat quietly and let her play with Belle.

Her waves of pale, coppery-blond hair were pulled back with little trailing wisps flying around her oval face, and her blue eyes, which I knew always turned violet in the evening, flashed at me, at my silence, and went back to Belle. Her patience was pure consideration. Betty was brought up to be polite. The irony of that caught me off guard, and I almost smiled.

She was wearing an open-necked, dark silk shirt, maybe

blackish purple, beneath a russet suede jacket. There was a single diamond approaching three carats strung at her throat, a sparkler I would never have considered necessary, let alone been able to afford. She might have left that off; it refuted everything I thought about her manners. She saw me glance at it, then slowly put her hand over it and kept it covered, with her elbow on the table as an excuse. Finally, she cocked her head at my closed face, a pair of dangling gold and amethyst earrings glowing beneath her small shell-like ears.

"How is Evelyn?" I asked, and felt quite proud of myself.

Her smile shortened by the smallest degree, but the full crimson lips that I had times without number ravaged to a swollen tenderness retained their amused curl for a few seconds longer before they pursed.

"Mama isn't well. Seeing her shocked me. I'm really worried. I'm so glad you've been coming to see her. Thanks a lot, Richard."

"I don't do it for you. I like her."

"Lord, do you realize it's been over two years?"

"Really?"

She ignored my display of disinterest, looking around and calling for Rex to bring her a Manhattan, neat.

"Well...you've given up Riesling."

"I like the peculiar taste, the strange combination of rye, vermouth, and bitters. I like the color of it...the shape of the glass...and I like the cherry."

"That's nice."

"Rich...it's really hard...hard to sit here trying to start somewhere with silly words."

"Why bother, Betts? I wasn't expecting you. I'm just

here getting watered and fed. Go on back to your end of the county and give Evelyn some long-deserved happiness."

"Mama thought... Didn't you have something you wanted to ask me?"

"Not a thing...anymore," I lied. "Once I did."

"You were the only man I ever knew until..."

That hit me so hard in all places, body and brain, that I stood up and went to the bar for another beer just to flex the wildness in my tendons. My dreams knew more than I did conscious. I realized that the constant repetition of *why* wasn't to know but to verify what my unconscious told me, which turned out to be her explanation. It was all being charged to me: I should have let her lie down with other interests years and years ago, so she'd have come to know I was the one, the only one. If I'd known, maybe I could have stood it, but only with the certainty she'd come back to me. That's the absurdity of life -- there isn't one scintilla of certainty about anything, except that it ends.

I returned with another Manhattan and a beer.

"So, is variety the spice of life?" I asked, setting the Manhattan down beside her empty glass, and hating that stupid and reckless cliché.

Her large-pupiled eyes shone brimming-wet violet. I didn't think things were that bad.

I could barely stand to get into it, but the beer was helping. "Are you mistreated, Betty?"

"No."

She emptied half of her cocktail glass.

"Don't get drunk, Betts. You've never done that before."

"Yes I have. You're not helping." One delicately

raised eyebrow, as of old. "Why did you bring me this?"

"I thought you enjoyed looking at it."

She drank the entire remainder while I watched it pulse down her throat. Then she leaned both hands on the edge of the table and said, "I didn't know what happened, Rich. I couldn't think of anything. I was on fire with...with some kind of unexpected...thing...it just blotted out everything. It took me a while to realize what I'd done to you...and to myself. Oh, I do love you. I know that. You surely must know that."

"It doesn't compute," I said in some odd voice I didn't recognize. It was the coldest statement of all time, made while I was going down in flames.

"Sorry," I said without meaning it, "but I don't much feel like a repository for your laundered conscience."

"I'd like another drink."

I turned to steel. "No, I said. "You're not having another one of those, and I'm not having any more beers. I've walked in on one too many drunken family brawls. And besides I have to live in this town. I'm going home."

I took out my wallet and laid a couple of bills on the table.

"I'm not letting you go, Rich, not until I've been forgiven. If you can't do that...if you can't try to be my friend, then the rest of our lives are ruined...just ruined."

"You want a hell of a lot. What about what I want?"

"What? Tell me. What can I do?"

"Nothing. Give the memories back...the years and days and hours and minutes...thousands of perfect memories from which you can't ever be erased. Give them back to me without the pain that...that tears up my gut."

"Oh, Rich...oh Rich, don't you think that's why I'm grieving? All of mine are full of you...I couldn't ever let go of any of them. I go over and over and over them until I get to the place where you despise me. It's too much...too much for one frail human being to bear."

"I don't despise you, Betty. I despise what you did."

I stood putting on my jacket while Belle got up and stretched. "Are you going to be all right driving home? Those were strong drinks."

"Two of them? Don't be silly. But I'm not leaving your side until you forgive me."

"Cut it out, Betty. This isn't a trip to the dry cleaners -- in dirty, out clean." I said it quietly over my shoulder as I waved to Rex and headed out the door.

When the engine was running, I reached over and opened the other door for Belle, and was startled to see Betty running toward the truck. As soon as Belle was inside, I yanked the door shut, stepped on the gas, and squealed out of the parking lot. I'd forgotten that I needed to piss.

When I was standing back in my kitchen, swallowing a gallon of cold water, I heard banging on the back door.

"For Christ's sake! I can't believe this," I said.

Belle was wagging her tail by the door because she instinctively knew there was someone with useful fingers on the other side. She began to whine.

"Belle, go lie on your bed and be quiet," I ordered, and somehow she figured it out, moving off slowly and staring over her shoulder at the noisy door.

"Go on home, Betty!" I hollered "You must be drunk. You never could hold much liquor. Now I've got to worry about your driving. You're nothing but trouble."

"If you don't let me in I'll break this glass with my

bare hands," her muffled voice screamed.

I stood there disbelieving until she began a rhythmic beating and I saw blood splatter on the heavy double-paned glass. I opened the door and dragged her in by the collar of her jacket, breaking the chain of her diamond pendant and watching it bounce under the refrigerator. I had never laid a violent finger on Betty in my life and now I felt as if I could throttle her until she died at my feet. I hauled her up the stairs and into the bathroom, ripped off her jacket, and stuck her hand under the cold water faucet while my other hand threw things out of the medicine cabinet until I located the Band-Aids.

She stretched away from me, giving up her hand to be worked over and taped up while she berated me as if I were the guilty party.

"You big crazy man...you stubborn crazy man...it's for you, too. You! You have to heal, too. You never will. You never, never will until you forgive me. My mama knows what's wrong with you. It'd be easy to make me just a heartless cheat...but I'm not that. I have such feelings, terrible sorrow...guilt."

I pulled her in against me, grabbed a hank of the silken waves, and yanked her head back, looking into her eyes. They were back to soft baby blue in the overhead light. Still the pale freckles on her snubbed nose.

"I'm a lot more than you want to believe, Richard...or how could you have loved me all those years?"

"How could I love you still?" I said in a terrible heat of anger. "What if I strangled you now and threw you out in the yard for the buzzards? Would you be gone for good?"

She didn't answer, only struggled to bend her head and

kiss my wrist.

"Don't do that. I won't forgive you. It's the only thing I have left of us that gives me pleasure."

"Oh, Richard, this is terrible. You swore a person couldn't change, and now I hardly know you. If I did this I don't even care about myself anymore. Let me go. I'm going. Everything is dark. All the memories...everything."

"What a great act, Betty. You've really got talent. Why don't you throw yourself at my feet while you're at it? Why did you have to squirm back into my life again? I--"

She had jumped up on the bathroom stool, stood eye to eye, and slapped me across the face so hard my head flew sideways.

"Damn it, that hurt!"

"It was meant to, you big bawling oaf!"

She pushed me hard against the wall with the flat of her hand, and I said, "Stop the manhandling, or I'll--"

"What about you? Dragging me around like a dog bone."

"I'm sorry. I was damn worked up, and I wanted to fix your hand."

"Do you forgive me, Richard?"

"No."

"Then I'll break this soap jar over your thick skull."

"Betty, put that down. Wait a minute. That's enough of this." I wrested the jar out of her hand and pushed her out of the bathroom and down the hall.

At the end of my rope, I hardly knew where I was headed or what I was doing. Years of brain-clogging emotions came pouring out of me. I threw her down on my bed and started tearing off her silk shirt and pulling off her slacks until she was doing the same for me. It was the

waste or the anger or the heat or the sorrow or the pain, all of those. It was retaliation or bitterness or atonement or frustration or a love that had to include everything. I had her roughly, intending to finish us, and less roughly, realizing I never would, and finally with a slow tenderness, vulnerable, the same as forgiving.

In the morning light, I leaned on my arm and drank in every part of her body. When she opened her eyes, I said, "You're a mother."

She pushed up the pillows, leaning back against them half sitting up, tangles of hair curling around a sleepy face with a dreamy smile. "Yes, my baby girl...almost two."

"Is she mine?"

"No, darling one. You'd only have to look at her to know whose. If she were yours I'd never have left you."

"Why didn't Evelyn tell me?"

"You know why. She didn't want to upset you. She's always liked you so."

"And you...why did you want to hit me with that damn soap jar?"

"I thought you didn't love me enough to forgive me. But you do...you do. Think of something we did once."

I thought of her hanging from a curved oak limb, and of myself standing kissing her upside-down face. I smiled.

"See, you're smiling at last...and now I'm smiling."

"Wonderful," I said with sarcasm. I looked at my beautiful girl peacefully at rest, serenely a mother, sacrificially doling out my supposed relief.

"You're killing me slowly. You want to take away my anger and leave me to die."

She leaned forward, took my hand and lifted it up to her face. "We'll always love each other...no matter what. Why can't we do it without pain?...all those good memories without anger? Isn't that better? When we see each other or think of each other, won't that be better?"

"You've got your sweet reason back, but I don't have you, Betty. What did I do wrong?"

"Don't ever think you did anything wrong. I couldn't stand to know you were thinking that way. Life's too short for that kind of misery. You were so good. It was only that..."

I took back my hand and said, "What?"

"Maybe if I hadn't been *married* to you from the age of twelve, if I'd had more experience later, I wouldn't have been so bowled over, so amazed, so...when someone came along and... But it's done now. You'd probably like to know if I'd do it that way again. How can I answer that? I have my little Cindy...so sweet. I can't turn back the clock."

"I should have left you alone."

"I wouldn't have let you, Rich. I didn't ever want you going near anyone else."

"I worry so about the things you do. I've kept up with you through mama. I know you have...friends. And Keet. Is Keet disgusted with me?"

"Probably. He's never said. He understands a lot."

"I miss him."

"Go see him. He won't even growl at you."

"Oh, Richard, such sad things happen to us. I think mama's very sick. I stayed away too long."

"It isn't your fault," I said, holding her head against my chest, feeling the warm tears splash on me.

"She misses your dad, poor old Hank...the way I miss you."

Dressed and in the kitchen, I stood by the coffee maker and stared at it without moving. Betty came in tucking back her hair and smiling. A comforting domesticity momentarily settled over us before it knifed into my arrested brain. *Why don't you finish planting the tulip bulbs while I clean out the eaves troughs, then we'll go fishing, then we'll make love, then we'll do it again, and again and again, growing old going in and out, flying in and out of this log nest I built for us high on our hill.*

"I thought of making us breakfast but I'm not hungry, and I want you to go."

"Rich, please don't--"

"No, it's okay. No point in prolonging this. I just want you to go now."

"Are you...will you--?"

"I'm not and I won't...or I'll try not to," I said, forcing a smile. "Go, please, Betty. Give Evelyn a hug for me. Tell her I'll come and see her...when you're gone."

She started toward me and I backed up. "And don't kiss me anymore, please."

"I love you, Richard. I always will. I want you to be happy."

A sound like, "Mmm," issued from my closed throat as I gripped the counter below the sink window and stared out at what must have been the sky. I wanted her to go in the worst way. I wanted to howl at her to get out of there. She finally understood that and left.

I stood at the living room window, watching her red car wind down my hill and disappear into the trees. "So long, my girl, my love...this hopeless, hopeless, goddamned love."

I'd driven out to mother's, just parked my rig without even going in the house, and started walking. Belle loped along, making broad circles and sniffing at various scented enticements in the dry field grass. Before I realized it, I was half way up Griffen Hill and near the lopsided oak, a knotted old cat-faced oak that at one time or another had witnessed all of us cavorting beneath its downhill branches. There was the limb Betty had hung from upside down on a scalding summer day while I stood and kissed her. I stared at it for a long time, until I could taste the clover flower nectar on her lips and feel the sere heat, the swelling in my jeans. This very morning she made me believe that our memories would make me smile, but that was when I still had her in my arms. I threw myself on the ground with my back against the trunk and tried it her way first, then lowered my head and wept my insides out. Finally, Belle came along and shoved her nose under my arm. I rose up with two numb clumsy legs, stumbled around, and walked back to the house.

My dad's greatest decision was waiting on the steps, watching me come up. I was sorry my mama had to get a look at me, because the minute she did she always knew the lay of things. But she only said, "Hello, honey," then put her arm through mine in the old way, and we went inside and sat in the family room, drinking coffee.

Once again taking a chance that there was no tap on the Norris phone, I called Mrs. Norris. I asked if I could talk to Kim.

"She honestly isn't here with me, but she...she told me what you did. I want to thank you for helping my girl. I'm sorry I can't tell you where she is. I'm truly sorry."

"No, it's all right, but I want her to know something. It's... Roberto Antonio is dead. He drowned accidentally in the Rogue River."

"Oh Lord...he was up there after her. I think the way he was...well, it's the sorriest thing in the world."

"The indictments are all in regarding the San Francisco cases, and the depositions are going apace with some strong witnesses for the prosecution. There's little reason to think anyone will be looking for Kim. She ought to remain cautious, but ease up a little on her rigorous lifestyle. Tell her that. Tell her to take it easy. Tell her I... I guess that's all."

A week later when I was sweeping spilled coffee grinds off the kitchen floor, I suddenly remembered Betty's diamond under the refrigerator. I scooted it out with a bread knife blade and held it in my palm, remembering how it looked on her neck, a showy mark of possession. I curled my fingers around it in a tight fist and thought of taking it down and throwing it in the Rogue. But then I would have to think of it there polluting my river, the sustaining waters in which I fished. I sealed it in an envelope and tossed it into a desk drawer, wondering when she would ask for it. She didn't ask, and for a long time

I forgot about it.

"You're a little clown, a gigglefritz," I joshed.

"You laugh yourself silly every time you make a mistake."

"I can't help it, I guess," Dale said. More giggles. He was jittery nervous and laughter just poured out of him.

"No, it's all right. That's the first rule of fishing, to enjoy yourself. You listen well. You're a good mimic."

"I didn't think I'd be fishing with an old stick."

I chuckled and squatted on a flat-topped stream boulder to further study the peculiarities of the boy's green cast. I had plenty of rods he could have used but I'd cut a willow pole for him and strung it right on the bank.

"A stick with a string is how it all got started, this old marriage of man and fish. I just wanted you to start with the basics, to understand that it doesn't have to cost a fortune -- isn't that what you said? -- it doesn't have to wipe you out to go fishing. Didn't you ever want to tie a string on a stick and tease a fish?"

"I never got near much water. My dad...he never did it. I don't think he ever did. You think mama would like this? I guess women can't do it, huh?"

"Hey there, let me set you straight on that score. As far as we know, the first person to ever write about this kind of fishing was a woman, an angling nun way back in the fifteenth century -- Dame Juliana Berners."

"Gee, how long ago is that?" Dale asked, whipping his wrist back and snagging a willow branch.

"About five hundred years," I answered, hustling back

to unhook his line. Belle had jumped out of the way and now she was lying out of reach further up the bank, with her nose on her paws. "Don't flip your wrist like that. See, it's more in the whole arm with a little elbow. Like this."

"Like that?"

"Better, but not so far to the side. That's for things in the way of your line, or when the wind's blowing."

"That lady, how'd she ever know to do it this way?"

"Well, she lived in a religious house -- that's nearly the only way a woman had a chance to be independent and think in those days. She had to feed herself, so she went fishing. She got pretty good at it, and along the way surely realized it was a soulful thing, a nifty exercise for the mind and spirit. Watch it! Watch it! Don't get impatient. You've got to slow down a little. Then think where you're putting that. Try and think like a fish."

"Oh, darn it, Griff, I'm sure a dummy."

I watched the fairly short line go out one more time, quartering and sailing across the stream.

"Hey, that was good. That was real good. We might just have a Lee Wolfe or a Charlie Ritz in the making here."

"Fly-fishermen, huh?"

"You bet...so good they always will be."

"I'm stayin' here until I get it right. I'm gonna catch something."

"More than likely it'll be a cold if we stay here much longer." The boy had his jacket sleeves pushed up, and his arms were covered with goose bumps. His nose was red and running. He kept snuffing, until I pulled a handkerchief

out of my pocket, took away his fishing pole, and said, "Here blow that snot out of your head before you end up waterlogged." He blew hard and then his face grew serious.

"I still got the handkerchief you gave me. Mama washed and ironed it, but I forgot to give it to you."

"You keep it. You'll be needing it now that you've taken up winter fishing. Keep this one, too. And that's enough lesson for today. In the spring we'll go out and sieve a little water and look at some of the critters fish find tasty. Then we'll cut open a belly and look at what they're eating. Eventually we'll talk about hatches and imitation flies, dry flies and wet flies. But that's way down the road. Just enjoy it as you go. Now it's pretty near time to go home and think about what went on here."

"But I want a fish. At least I wanta see one right out of the water. Can't you get one?"

"Maybe. I was saving that for last. We'll hold to just one, because when I get started I can't quit either."

I lifted my rod off the rocks, unhooked the fly from the butt guide, and cast it out into a possibly productive rainbow lie I'd been eyeing from time to time.

Dale was watching me with real concentration and his voice was newly conscious of the wariness of fish when he spoke softly. "Gee, I see what you mean. Guess I better go home and think about it."

"Well, you're on the way, son. You're as hooked and ready to romp as a big old steelhead."

"Pretty soon I'm havin' me one of those, Griff." He looked over at me with a convincing grin wide as the river.

That sunny and cold early December day on the Rogue

feeder stream I did catch a trout for Dale, an eighteen-inch rainbow which went home with him for his mother to fry. After a few casts with my magic boron wand as part of the lesson, I had laid it aside and caught the fish on the simple willow pole which he found so ignominious, gathering the line loosely at my right ankle and whipping it into the air. This grandstand endeavor evoked a new respect for his humble equipment. He was beginning to realize that with the right information and technique you could catch a fish on just about anything, including a clothesline with no pole at all. The rest of the gear could be described as lovely embellishment, a self-indulgence with no end to it.

Before I drove Dale home, I took him up to the house and showed him the rod he was going to be using. Letting him handle it was good incentive. I was afraid to send it along with him for fear his old man would crack it over his head. But I'd heard the father had settled down some after the sobering incident of his arrest. Mrs. Harner was still meeting with a therapy group but her husband refused to go. Maybe he'd eventually learn something from his spirited and eager young offspring. If he was fool enough to throw that away, I wished him a long old age of miserable regret.

In between stints in the patrol car and the police boat, and in among gales, rain, snow, and occasionally the tying of flies and fishing, I worked my tail off around my place. I was allowing myself very little time to sit and stare at winter, and certainly not at the television, which I absolutely couldn't stand. There was plenty of yard work, pruning and cleaning away brush. Belle was happy if a little field mouse scurried out and led her on a nose-worthy chase, the slightly roughed up prey usually vanishing down a vacant mole hole. I waxed wood inside the

house and laid large terra cotta tiles on the kitchen floor. If I couldn't do anything physically taxing, too tired to move, I sat and read, comforted by a friendly fire of pitch-filled pine. Then Belle snoozed with her dog dreams. Reading was a replenishing habit that both my parents instilled in me at an early age, and one for which I was grateful.

Betty had heard the truth, that I didn't despise her. I couldn't even smile at the understatement. The anger had never really left me, not aimed at her anymore or wasted on the person she married, just floating around without a target, a thing in itself that I needed in order to stay alive. It overrode the sadness and lay half conscious behind the humor and jokes and daily jive with people I encountered, waiting for a chance to jump out or someday convert to something else. Meanwhile, the negative power gave me a false immunity that leveled me off and kept me on the restless move. *World, don't mess with me, don't mess with anything deeper than my skin.*

Faye remained a lucky experience that was wistfully and fondly remembered. I believed that she had mostly enjoyed our time together. Anyway, she was happy now and didn't hold anything against me. If she and Keet hit it off, I'd be so puffed up with matchmaking hubris I'd dance at their wedding, if they chose that route, and if I could find someone to dance with.

Keet came over one day and stood in the yard talking and watching me perched up in one of the oldest alder trees, sawing off a dying limb. I was cleaning up the earlier temporary job I'd done of cutting the broken branch away from the spare room window.

"A branch from this limb fell against that window in a

storm one night and Kim nearly died of fright," I said. "I found her backed into the corner with a butcher knife in one hand and a gun in the other...hellbent on staying alive."

I swung the chain saw down to Keet, descended a ways and jumped, ignoring the ladder. He helped me tote the limb over to a refuse heap that I was eventually going to burn.

Pulling off my gloves, I said, "Let's go have some coffee."

After the coffee maker drizzled it out good and black, I handed a mug to Keet at the kitchen table and drank mine holding my cold hand over the cup to get it warm.

"I don't know if I should mention this," Keet said.

"Well, now you'll have to, won't you?"

"Betty came to see me before she left."

"Yeah, I told her to. She said she was missing you."

"You know that woman really loves you, Griffish." Keet had wonder in his voice. "That whole mess is sure--"

"Don't go there, pardner. I'm hanging on by my nails and I don't have any nails left. That part of us is done and there's nothing more to say, so just don't go there."

Keet glanced out the nook window for a few seconds then back at me and said, "I'm helping Faye start a restaurant."

"Gee, that's good news for Faye, but what about your bank account? The last place went belly up."

"No, it'd only be open in the summer...for taste-conscious eaters with loose spending money. We're just thinking about it...looking around. It would really be great for her. She needs to get out of the Dollar. She's overworked and way too good for that joint."

"There'll be a lot of sad customers, but you're certainly right. Well, you've got good fiscal sense and she's a hell of a cook, so maybe she'll make it this time."

"I was thinking..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing...it just occurred to me...wouldn't it be a waltz if Kim was around to go in with us on the restaurant? With her savvy and experience...well, there's a real winning combination."

"That would be...a...interesting," I said, and didn't go any further with that subject either.

Christmas came and went. Belle and I had taken mother up to Coos Bay where we celebrated Christmas Day with Jackie and Paul, a few late-arriving friends, and my mischievous niece and nephew, Carly and Jed. They both -- they stuck together -- shut Belle in one of the upstairs bathrooms with an irate cat. Belle apparently sat there in polite disgust while the cat swung from the shower curtain yowling until we all thought the neighbors were killing each other. The shower curtain, brand new but torn to shreds, had to go. Jackie maintained that ever since "the terrible twos" three years ago, Carly, the youngest, initiated all the bad stuff and was a lot like me: absolutely incorrigible but still loveable enough to be forgiven.

Designated pourer of spiked cranberry punch, I was standing in Jackie's mahogany kitchen when I began to verbalize my disinterest at ever having children, mainly owing to the recent escapade, when I suddenly thought of Kim. I thought, in fact: I certainly hope she doesn't want

any of the little blighters. The thought so startled me that I dropped the ladle into the nearly-full punch bowl and walked out of the room. How could I have thought that and what business was it of mine? It was as if there'd been a gremlin in my head mishandling the controls. I didn't even know where she was or if I would ever see her again, or if it was even a good idea to subject her to any more of me.

"Where's the Scotch?" I called over my shoulder.

"Where's the punch man?" Jackie sang out.

"The pay scale wasn't worth a damn and no benefits," I hollered back.

"Well, you could have drunk all you wanted."

"I just want to sit here, before anyone else arrives, and stare at this psychedelic tree while sipping one neat shot," I argued.

"Oh, give him his whiskey, honey," mother intervened.

"Incorrigible," Jackie said.

"And not even loveable," I answered.

In a while, I heard Paul coming in from the garage and got up to fix him Scotch and soda, which I extended to him as he entered from the kitchen.

"I'm ahead of you, McAllister," I said as his long thin arm reached for the tumbler. His slender, wiry body was casually clothed in gray sweater and chinos. Managing a discreet and swift appraisal, I noticed that his premature grayness was moving along, and his dark-browed, brown eyes were a little more tired, although ever sharp and glinting with the newshawk's savvy.

"Griff...I'm supposed to be hosting you here, but thanks. Hell, I didn't mean to get stuck down there on this particular day."

"One day is pretty much like another."

"Well, when you're on your own beat, I guess that's the case. But with a family...you have to watch that easy slide into hardly ever being there."

He eyed me a few seconds, took a long swallow, motioned for me to sit down, and dropped himself into a facing black leather chair.

"You making any news down in Curry County that I haven't already heard about, Griff?"

"Now that makes me laugh," I said, "after what you just said about not being here. Turn yourself off, Paul, and deck the halls. Nothing much ever happens to me...but anyhow it's mostly on the Q.T. As for the family, let me bring you up to date with a little dog and cat story that belongs in your funnies."

New Year's Eve ended with my swimming out of a killer whirlpool in an arm-thrashing dream that sent the bedside lamp flying into the wall with a crash. The loud noise catapulted me awake. Belle leapt off her corner of the bed with her back hairs vertical and began barking at the broken lamp. I gathered it up and went off to get its companion, which was on the night table in the spare room.

The moment I opened the door and flipped on the light I realized I hadn't been inside the room in months. There on the bed were all the clothes I bought Kim, neatly folded in little piles. Belle walked around the bed sniffing at them and wagging her tail with happy recognition. I had never even thought about them, but if I had I'd have assumed she took them with her. The red plaid robe was lying over the corner of the bed and the shearling slippers

were neatly placed together on the floor below. I picked up one of the little buff slippers and put my hand inside where her small perfect toes had snuggled. Then I sat down on the edge of the bed, holding the slipper in my lap and running my hand over the wool robe. Once it was filled with her warm body and held against me on a certain threatening morning when I had to deliver bad news. I leaned back on one elbow as images rolled in like waves: her startling amber eyes when she first pulled off her sunglasses on the jet boat; her face and hands smeared with fish guts as she wept against the kitchen wall; her perplexed head catching a burst of sun as she held up the mass of tangled fish line; her teasing crossed eyes; her sunset body astride a pink horse; her white face with the SIG-Sauer pressed against her temple; her sweating naked body lying beneath me, opened mouth gasping for air, amazed and amazing eyes staring into mine. All of this came flying over a stony breakwater.

Images insisting on much more. There was the word I couldn't say, the word I'd given to Betty forever, never to be taken back or cast away. In my mind it was as solid and enduring as the relationship of Sun Foot and Little Redwing. I had never told Kim I loved her, or any other woman except my wife. I had made a point of it because I knew the word was where I wanted it, a word that had been tossed around out in the world until it fell to pieces. And yet there was no other word to take it's place. Could it be used a second time, still holding onto the first? Not without paying long term interest. "Damn it...I guess...I love you," I said, my words barely touching the walls. I expected no punishing flash of lightning or crash of thunder, just a familiar sharp sting of pain, a small

worm of misery that uncurled and went back to gnawing through scarred heart muscle.

My hand reached for the white angora sweater. Up against my face, it smelled so strongly of Kim I couldn't part with it and took it back to my bed. "You miserable fool. You messed-up case. You poor hopeless bastard," I muttered away to myself, drifting, drifting out to sea.

In the early morning, I sat at my desk and wrote in large black scrawl a five-page letter explaining everything to Kim and why she had been right. I read it over, realized it was an argument for myself, and tossed it into the waste basket. Then I took a fresh sheet of paper and wrote: "Sweet Country Girl, I'm not feeling so well without you. If you think you can put up with me, please come back. I love you. G." I sealed it in an envelope, marked her name on it and sealed that inside a larger envelope. I addressed it to Mrs. Norris with no return address, and slid it through the post office mail slot on my way to work.

Winter glided slowly away. By the first of May the jet boats were hauling tourists again. Time to bend their ears with river history and hand-fashioned humor. Time to power up enough white water for those inflated stories of near disaster -- some of them grew until they turned up in various homes as science fiction. Every now and then, stories got back to me that were good enough for the Guinness book, and one old summer yarn had me rescued from near drowning by a female tourist struggling at the controls. That time my passengers had merely waited in the stationary boat while I took off my shirt and dove into the

water to remove some moss sucked into the hydro-jet.

I didn't hear from Kim. I took the blame and the punishment, did a lot of fishing, and watched Keet and Faye falling in love. Keet was crazy about her red hair. Maybe it reminded him a little of the glints in his mother's auburn locks. They couldn't find a suitable place for the restaurant, so they were thinking about building a small, architecturally pleasing structure on his property near the highway. It would replace an old barn that had been there as long as I could remember, and face out on the sea across the dunes. Keet didn't like the idea of putting structures on scenic property, but since the barn was falling down and because he was bound to go the full distance for Faye, he decided it was the thing to do. Of course, he had given her the little thoroughbred. She was in the full bloom of an ecstasy lighter than air, now and then even thanking me with sisterly hugs.

One Sunday afternoon in early May while I was hiking along the Rogue banks with Dale, we saw a gray blur dive into the river. Belle plunged in after the tempting splash and I had to call her back. A short distance further and in among the rocks, I spied a few cream-tipped, grayish blue-green wing feathers that belonged to the Green Heron, *Butorides striatus*, probably the one we'd seen diving. I picked them up and said, "You know about the Green Heron? Have you ever seen one?"

"I don't think so. No, I guess not."

Dale was growing fast. He'd gone through a bad siege of winter flu, the nasty cough still rattling in his chest sometimes. The doctor said he was okay, but I hadn't seen much of him. His round baby face was steadily thinning out, and his wrists were reaching outside the cuffs of the

brown jacket I had bought him.

"It's a chunky little acrobat that feeds along the shore and dives into the water for food. They're shy and hard to come across. I haven't seen one since last year. Maybe this is a good sign. When he's nervous he'll lift his green comb and hop around squawking and dipping his tail. These are nice feathers. I'll try making some flies with them."

"Flies with feathers?"

I turned around in surprise and studied his truly disbelieving face. "Don't you know about feathered flies? What'd you think we were using back there? Lord, we've got our work cut out for us."

"I can learn all of it," he said with a quick stubborn voice, but he looked embarrassed.

I laughed and said, "Hey, that's okay. Everybody has a starting place. Let's go tie some flies."

The next morning I was down at the dock ready for the early run up to Agness. My big jet sled was loaded to the gunnels. The noisy, rambunctious passengers were full of vinegar, and distracting me with all kinds of zany remarks: "Hey, Captain, are we gonna do a whirly? Let's smoke it! Gotta do a whirly, boss. Let's grind those motors and open this can up!" The loudest of those suggestions came from a white-haired grandmother.

"Yeah, okay, you're a recycled teen-ager!" I shouted back at her.

"Gotta keep your antsy framework on the side of the boat without the water," I instructed an authentic teen-ager with his legs hanging over the gunnel.

The tickets were passed and collected, the engines were rumbling, and we were heading out into the estuary one more time. I did a variation of my usual spiel and tip-toed past the fisher folk, then powered up and headed east.

"We're off to Agness," I explained, "the famous little settlement that ends its name with a mistaken extra 's'. Before the turn of the century, Rogue Canyon settlers dug into that rich soil where the two rivers meet. Besides a few eateries, Agness has some small interesting buildings up on the hill, nestled among the whispering firs and pines..."

As we were skimming along, I looked over at Belle who was standing with her body poised outside the covered elevated console. She was staring straight ahead, sniffing the air with her nose stretched toward the bow and her throat emitting an anxious whine that I could just make out above the engines. I looked where she was staring and saw in the port bow a nearly hidden, slender, blue-coated back topped with a black scarf. How could I have missed that? "Jesus," I muttered, pushing back my Polaroids in disbelief. I slowed the engines way down and told Belle, "Okay girl, careful." Belle never left my side on these trips. There were no aisles below, and the seats went all the way to the gunnels. Now she set off bravely picking her way along the narrow flat top of the starboard gunnel until she reached the bow where she scrambled in front of the thwart full of passengers and put her paws up on the lap of the royal blue coat. A hand reached out to her torquing body and got itself thoroughly licked, then Belle sat down below the coat. An arm stretched itself around Belle's neck and remained there. That held my complete focus while my heart crashed around in my chest and I

nearly beached the boat. I snapped back to attention and slowly increased our cruising speed, but I was not the same man. All the rest of the sun-dazzled trip was an endorphin-filled blur of my bantering voice, questions, exclamations, laughter, camera stops, and more questions answered by my carefully informative voice as I struggled to maintain my equilibrium. My eyes kept returning to that small blue back and the black-scarved head with sunglasses. That discerning little head full of consequences turned to the side only once, as nearly as I could tell, and that was when we passed Ed Rainer's place. Ed was back home, and there was smoke from his chimney.

When we had off-loaded for the last time at the Agness watering holes, Belle ran up the hill for a little relief and nervous exercise, but the blue coat was still sitting there. I jumped down, walked along the dock and kneeled on the bow thwart. "Ma'am, you're going to miss your lunch. Aren't you hungry?" But while I was speaking I was taking ahold of her, lifting her into my arms and swinging her out of the boat. I pulled off her scarf and her glasses, angled her face up to mine, and said, "Isn't this where it all started, country girl? What took you so long, darlin'?"

"I didn't take as long as--" She tried to finish but I was making that impossible.

In a state of rapid meltdown, I leaned above that sly, shy, golden-brown intensity and, nearly ready for the consequences, said, "What do I have to do to keep you from running away?"

Her eyes left me and moved over the river as she spoke. "Oh, just...teach me how to fish."

"My love," I said with a thankful grin, "that's a

whole life-style...going to take a lot longer than you think."

She stepped back, put her hands in the pockets of her long blue coat and said, "Right now I wish...that I didn't have to look up quite so far...that we were on a more equal footing."

I settled myself down on the dock, resting back on my heels, and said, "How's this?"

That easy accommodation produced enough laughter to banish the tension building, produced eyes sparkling with a leverage of which they had no idea. It was just as well, because right then she had carte blanche.

"Oh, Griff...well...please stand up. Just keep your hands off me so I don't cave in before I say something. You are finally going to let me say something?"

"Didn't I always let you...no, I guess I didn't, did I?" I stood up and leaned toward her again. I couldn't help myself. I really got high leaning in that direction. "I just wasn't ready to...deal with it."

"Deal with it?"

"Loving you."

She turned quickly away from me, her coat flying out, her blond hair flying out, then swung back, tilting forward with her hands stuck in the pockets of her black slacks. The wavering self-control produced such a bold stance for a small slender woman that it made me smile.

"I was always trying to say that I understood that you were...are a complicated, independent man...and that I wouldn't try to fool around with any of that...because really I'm sort of that way myself...except that...well, I love to see you happy and sometimes it's better not to be too detached...sometimes you need--"

"Okay," I said, grateful but amused and grinning with a little shrug of impatience. "I know that...I understand that. We'll get it right."

We stood there looking at each other for a minute or so, myself nearly delirious with the view, then I snatched up a blanket lying on the thwart and said, "Let's go up on the grass in that grove of firs and rest a while."

As we climbed the hill hand in hand, I looked down and saw someone stumbling forward along the shore edge of the dock. Hot on our trail, he was ogling up at us.

"My God, I think that's... Bo Riley!" I hollered. "You idiot! Get a Life!"

He was so startled that he took one backwards step without looking and tumbled into the shallow, sandy ooze. There he stood, in waist high snowmelt, bawling out his sorrows at my perfect existence.

The adventurous steelhead have come back one more season from their wide ocean wanderings. Their sleek silver bodies parallel in deep green holds, finning slowly in miraculous contemplation of the exact gravelly bed where life began. There is always a nervous waiting for the rains of passage. There is always a new lesson from their bold upstream fight. There is always a need for vigilance, because steelhead are among the few wonders of nature that can still go home again.