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LIGHT



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LIGHT OF THE WORLD

A DAVE ROBICHEAUX NOVEL

JAMES LEE BURKE

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*Once again, to my wife, Pearl, and our children, James L. Burke III, Andree Burke
Walsh, Pamala Burke, and Alafair Burke*

Chapter

1

I WAS NEVER GOOD at solving mysteries. I don't mean the kind cops solve or the ones you read about in novels or watch on television or on a movie screen. I'm not talking about the mystery of Creation, either, or the unseen presences that reside perhaps just the other side of the physical world. I'm talking about evil, without capitalization but evil all the same, the kind whose origins sociologists and psychiatrists have trouble explaining.

Police officers keep secrets, not unlike soldiers who return from foreign battlefields with a syndrome that survivors of the Great War called the thousand-yard stare. I believe that the account of the apple taken from the forbidden tree is a metaphorical warning about looking too deeply into the darker potential of the human soul. The photographs of the inmates at Bergen-Belsen or Andersonville Prison or the bodies in the ditch at My Lai disturb us in a singular fashion because those instances of egregious human cruelty were committed for the most part by baptized Christians. At some point we close the book containing photographs of this kind and put it away and convince ourselves that the events were an aberration, the consequence of leaving soldiers too long in the field or letting a handful of misanthropes take control of a bureaucracy. It is not in our interest to extrapolate a larger meaning.

Hitler, Nero, Ted Bundy, the Bitch of Buchenwald? Their deeds are not ours.

But if these individuals are not like us, if they do not descend from the same gene pool and have the same DNA, then who were they and what turned them into monsters?

Every homicide cop lives with images he cannot rinse from his dreams; every cop who has handled investigations into child abuse has seen a side of his fellow man he never discusses with anyone, not his wife, not his colleagues, not his confessor or his bartender. There are certain burdens you do not visit on people of goodwill.

When I was in plainclothes at the NOPD, I used to deal with problems such as these in a saloon on Magazine Street, not far from the old Irish Channel. With its brass-railed bar and felt-covered bouree tables and wood-bladed fans, it became my secular church where the Louisiana of my youth, the green-gold, mossy, oak-shaded world of Bayou Teche, was only one drink away. I would start with four fingers of Jack in a thick mug, with a sweating Budweiser back, and by midnight I would be alone at the end of the bar, armed, drunk, and hunched over my glass, morally and psychologically insane.

I had come to feel loathing and disgust with the mythology that characterized the era in which I lived. I didn't "serve" in Southeast Asia; I "survived" and watched innocent people and better men than I die in large numbers while I was spared by a hand outside myself. I didn't "serve and protect" as a police officer; I witnessed the justice system's dysfunction and the government's empowerment of corporations and the exploitation of those who had no

political voice. And while I brooded on all that was wrong in the world, I continued to stock the furnace inside me with Black Jack and Smirnoff's and five-star Hennessy and, finally, two jiggers of Scotch inside a glass of milk at sunrise, constantly suppressing my desire to load down on my enemies with the .45 automatic I had purchased in Saigon's brothel district and with which I slept as I would a woman.

My real problem wasn't the militarization of my country or any of the other problems I've mentioned. The real problem went back to a mystery that had beset me since the destruction of my natal home and family. My father, Big Aldous, was on the monkey board of an offshore drilling well when the drill bit punched into an early pay sand and a spark jumped off the wellhead and a mushroom of flaming oil and natural gas rose through the rigging like a inferno ballooning from the bottom of an elevator shaft. My mother, Alafair Mae Guillory was seduced and blackmailed by a gambler and pimp named Mack, whom I hated more than any human being I ever knew, not because he turned her into a barroom whore but because of the Asian men I killed in his stead.

Rage and bloodlust and alcoholic blackouts became the only form of serenity I knew. From Saigon to the Philippines, from Chinatown in Los Angeles to the drunk tanks of New Orleans the same questions haunted me and gave me no rest. Were some people made different in the womb, born without a conscience, intent on destroying everything that was good in the world? Or could a black wind blow the weather vane in the wrong direction for any of us and reshape our lives and turn us into people we no longer recognized? I knew there was an answer out there someplace, if I could only drink myself into the right frame of mind and find it.

I stayed ninety-proof for many years and got a bachelor's degree in self-immolation and a doctorate in chemically induced psychosis. When I finally entered sobriety, I thought the veil might be lifted and I would find answers to all the Byzantine riddles that had confounded me.

That was not to be the case. Instead, a man who was one of the most wicked creatures on earth made his way into our lives. This is a tale that maybe I shouldn't share. But it's not one I want to keep inside me, either.

MY ADOPTED DAUGHTER, Alafair Robicheaux, jogged up a logging road that wound through ponderosa pine and Douglas fir and cedar trees atop a ridge overlooking a two-lane highway and a swollen creek far below. The highway had been built on the exact trail that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had followed over Lolo Pass into present-day Idaho and, eventually to the Pacific Ocean in the year 1805. They had not been able to accomplish this feat on their own. After they and their men had sliced their moccasins to ribbons trying to make portage with their canoes through several canyons on a fork of the Columbia River, a Shoshone woman by the name of Sacagawea showed them a route that took them up a gentle slope, past the base of Lolo Peak, into the country of the Nez Perce and the spotted horses called the Appaloosa.

As Alafair jogged along the dirt road that had been graded through timber by a bulldozer the wind blowing cool out of the trees, the western sun blazing on the fresh snow that had fallen the previous night on Lolo Peak, she wondered at the amount of history that had been changed by one brave woman, because Sacagawea not only showed the Lewis and Clark party the way to Oregon, she saved them from starvation and being slaughtered by a rogue band of Nez Perce.

Alafair was listening to a song on her iPod when she felt a stinging sensation on her left ear. She also felt a puff of air against her cheek and the touch of a feather on her skin. Without stopping, she swatted at her hair and pressed her hand against her ear and then looked at it. There was a bright smear of blood on her palm. Above, she saw two ravens glide into the boughs of a ponderosa and begin cawing at the sky.

She continued up the logging road, her breath coming hard in her throat, until she reached the top of the ridge. Then she turned and began the descent, her knees jarring on the grade, the sun moving behind Lolo Peak, the reflected light disappearing from the surface of the creek. She touched her ear again, but the cut she believed a raven had inflicted was no longer bleeding and felt like little more than a scratch. That was when she saw the aluminum shaft of a feathered arrow embedded three inches deep in a cedar snag that had been scorched and hardened in a fire.

She slowed to a stop, her heart beating hard, and looked over her shoulder. The logging road was in shadow, the border of trees so thick she could no longer feel the wind or see where the sun was. The air smelled like snow, like the coming of winter rather than summer. She took off her earbuds and listened. She heard the crackling of limbs and rocks sliding down a slope. A big doe, a mule deer, no more than twenty yards away, jumped a pile of dirt and landed squarely in the middle of the road, its gray winter coat unchanged by spring.

“Is there a bow hunter out there?” Alafair shouted.

There was no answer.

“There’s no bow season in western Montana in the spring. At least not for deer,” she called out.

There was no response except the sweep of the wind in the trees, a sound like the rushing of floodwater in a dry riverbed. She ran her finger along the arrow and touched the feathers at the base. The aluminum shaft bore no trace of dirt or bird droppings or even dust. The feathers were clean and stiff when she ran the ball of her thumb along their edges.

“If you made a mistake and you’re sorry, just come out and apologize,” she yelled. “Who shot this arrow?”

The doe bounced away from her, almost like a kangaroo. The shadows had grown so dark inside the border of the trees that the deer was indistinguishable except for the patch of white hair under its tail. Unconsciously, Alafair pulled on her cut earlobe and studied the trees against the orange glow in the west that indicated the sun would set in the next ten minutes. She fitted both hands on the shaft of the arrow and jerked it from the cedar trunk. The arrowhead was made of steel and was bright and slick with a thin sheen of oil, and flanged and wavy on the edges, which had been honed as sharp as a razor.

She made her way back down the ridge, almost to the bottom, then walked out on a rock point that formed a V and jutted into space and was devoid of trees and second growth. Below she saw a broad-shouldered man with a narrow waist, wearing Wranglers and a white straw hat and a bandanna tied around his neck. He had on a navy blue long-sleeved shirt buttoned at the wrists, with white stars embroidered on the shoulders and purple garters on his upper arms, the kind an exotic dancer might wear on her thighs. He was latching the door on the camper shell inserted in the bed of his pickup truck. “Hey, buddy!” Alafair said. “I want a word with you.”

He turned slowly, lifting his head, a solitary ray of sunlight pooling under his hat brim. Even though the glare must have been intense, he didn’t blink. He was a white man with the

profile of an Indian and eyes that seemed made of glass and contained no color other than the sun's refracted brilliance. His complexion made her think of the rind on a cured ham. "Why howdy-dooddy," he said, an idiot's grin painted on his mouth. "Where'd a cute little heifer like you come from?"

"Does this arrow belong to you?" she asked.

"I'll take it if you don't want it."

"Did you shoot this fucking arrow at me or not?"

"I cain't hear very good in the wind. What was that word you used?" He cupped one hand to his ear. "Want to come down here and talk?"

"Somebody almost killed me with this arrow."

He removed the thin stub of a cigar from his shirt pocket and lit it with a paper match, cupping the flame in his hands, then making a big show of shaking out the match. "There's a truck stop next to the casino. I'll buy you a Coca-Cola. They got showers there if you want one."

"Was that a bow you were putting in your camper? You owe me an answer."

"My name is Mr. Wyatt Dixon of Fort Davis, Texas. I'm a bullfighter and a handler of rough stock and a born-again Christian. What do you think of them apples? Come on down, girl. I ain't gonna bite."

"I think you need to get out of here."

"This is the home of the brave and the land of the free, and God bless you for your exercise of your First Amendment rights. But I only pretended I didn't hear what you said. Profanity does not behoove your gender. Know who said that? Thomas Jefferson did, yessiree-bobtail."

His teeth looked like they were cut out of whalebone. His whole body seemed wired with levels of energy and testicular power he could barely control. Even though his posture was relaxed, his knuckles were as hard-looking as ball bearings. "Are you deciding about me or invite, or has the cat got your tongue?" he said.

She wanted to answer him, but the words wouldn't come. He removed his hat and drew a pocket comb through his silky red hair, tilting up his chin. "I'm a student of accents. You're from somewhere down south. See you down the track, sweet thing. If I was you, I'd stay out of them woods. You cain't ever tell what's roaming around in there."

He let a semi carrying a huge piece of oil machinery pass, then got in his truck and drove away. She felt a rivulet of moisture leak from her sweatband and run down her cheek. A sour odor rose from under her arms.

IN THE EARLY spring Alafair and my wife, Molly, and my old partner from NOPD, Clete Purcel, had returned to western Montana with plans to spend the summer on a ranch owned by a novelist and retired English professor whose name was Albert Hollister. Albert had built a three-story house of logs and quarried rock on a knoll overlooking a railed pasture to the north and another to the south. It was a fine home, rustic but splendid in concept, a bucolic citadel where Albert could continue to wage war against the intrusions of the Industrial Age. When his beloved Asian wife died, I suspected the house she had helped design rang with an emptiness that drove him almost mad.

Albert installed Clete in a guest cabin located at the far end of the property, and the rest of us on the third floor of the house. From the balcony, we had a wonderful view of the wooded

foothills that seemed to topple for miles and miles before they reached the Bitterroot Mountains, white and shining as bright as glaciers on the peaks and strung with mist at sunrise. Across from our balcony was a hillside dotted with larch and fir and pine trees and outcroppings of gray rock and traced with arroyos swollen with snowmelt and brown water and pine needles during the runoff in early April.

On a shady slope behind the house, Albert had improvised a gun range where we popped big, fat coffee cans that he propped on sticks at the foot of a trail that had been used by Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce when they tried to outrun the United States Army. Before we would begin shooting, Albert would shout out "Fire in the well!" to warn any animals grazing or sleeping among the trees. He not only posted his own property, he infuriated hunters all over the county by chain-dragging logs across public roads in order to block vehicle access to U.S. Forest Service land during big-game season. I don't know if I would call him a rabble-rouser, but I was convinced that his historical antecedent was Samuel Adams and that ten like him could have a city in flames within twenty-four hours.

The sun had set by the time Alafair returned to the house. She told me of her encounter with Wyatt Dixon.

"Did you get his tag?" I asked.

"There was mud on it. He said he was going to the casino."

"You didn't see the bow?"

"I already told you, Dave."

"I'm sorry, I wanted to get it straight. Let's take a ride."

We drove in my pickup down the dirt road to the two-lane and turned east and followed the creek into Lolo, a small service town at the gateway to the Bitterroot Mountains. The sky was purple and flecked with snow, the neon lights glowing in front of the truck stop and adjacent casino. "The orange pickup. That's his," she said.

I started to wave down a Missoula County sheriff's cruiser at the intersection, but I decided against it. So far we had nothing on Dixon. I rubbed the film off the rear window of the camper inset in his truck bed and peered inside. I could make out a lumpy duffel bag, a western saddle, a long-barrel lever-action rifle with an elevator sight, and a mud-caked truck tire and a jack. I didn't see a bow. I looked through the passenger window with the same result.

The inside of the casino was dark and refrigerated and smelled of carpet cleaner and bathroom disinfectant. A man in a white straw cowboy hat was at the bar, drinking from a soda can and eating a sandwich. A piece of paper towel was tucked like a bib into his shirt collar. He watched us in the bar mirror as we approached him.

"My name is Dave Robicheaux," I said. "This is my daughter Alafair. I'd like to have a word with you."

He bit into his sandwich and chewed, one cheek tightening into a ball, leaning forward so no crumbs fell on the bar or on his shirt or jeans. His gaze shifted sideways. "You have the look of a law dog, sir," he said.

"Have you been inside, Mr. Dixon?"

"Inside what?"

"A place where smart-asses have a way of ending up. I understand you're a rodeo man."

"What some call a rodeo clown. What we call bullfighters. At one time I shot mustangs for a dog-food company down on the border. I don't do that no more."

“Were you hunting about five miles up Highway 12?”

“No, sir, I was changing the tire on my truck.”

“You have any idea who might have shot an arrow at my daughter?”

“No, but I’m getting mighty tired of hearing about it.”

“Did you see anyone on that ridge besides my daughter?”

“No, I didn’t.” He put down his sandwich and removed his paper bib and wiped his mouth and fingers clean. He turned on the stool. All the color seemed to be leached out of his eyes except for the pupils, which looked like the burnt tips of wood matches. “Watch this,” he said.

“Watch what?”

“This.” He sprinkled salt on the bar and balanced the shaker on its edge amid the granules so it leaned at an angle like the Tower of Pisa. “Bet neither one of y’all can do that.”

“Call 911,” I said to Alafair.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said.

“Go ahead.”

“Did somebody shoot you in the face?”

“Yeah, someone did. I was lucky. He was a bad guy, a degenerate and a sadist and a stone killer.”

“I bet you sent him straight to the injection table, didn’t you?” he said, his eyes bulging, his mouth dropping open in mock exaltation.

“No, it didn’t make the jail.”

His mouth opened even wider, as though he were unable to control his level of shock. “I am completely blown away. I have traveled this great nation from coast to coast and have stood in the arena among the great heroes of our time. I am awed and humbled to be in the presence of a lawman such as yourself. Even though I am only a simple rodeo cowboy, I stand and salute you, sir.”

He rose from the stool, puffing out his chest, his body rigid as though at attention, his stiffened right hand at the corner of his eyebrow. “God bless you, sir. Your kind makes me proud of the red, white, and blue, even though I am not worthy to stand in your shadow, in this lowly barroom on the backstreets of America, where men with broken hearts go and the scarlet waters flow. The likes of Colin Kelly and Audie Murphy didn’t have nothing on you, kind sir.”

People were staring at us, although he took no notice of them.

I said, “You called my daughter ‘girl’ and ‘sweet thing.’ You also made a veiled threat about seeing her down the track. Don’t ever come near us again, Mr. Dixon.”

His eyes wandered over my face. His mouth was down-hooked at the corners, his skin tanned as pig hide, the dimple in his chin clean-shaven and shiny, perhaps with aftershave. He glanced through the front window at a sheriff’s cruiser pulling into the parking lot. The moral vacuum of his profile reminded me of a shark’s when it passes close to the glass in an aquarium.

“Did you hear me?” I said.

“That 911 deputy ain’t gonna find nothing in my truck, ’cause there ain’t nothing to find,” he said. “You asked if I was inside. I got my head lit up with amounts of electricity that make you glad for the rubber gag they put in your mouth. Before you get your nose too high in the air, Mr. Robicheaux, your daughter asked me if that ‘fucking arrow’ was mine. She talked to me like I was white trash.”

He sat back down and began eating his sandwich again, swallowing it in large pieces without chewing or drinking from his soda, his expression reconfiguring, like that of a man who could not decide who he was.

I should have walked away. Maybe he wasn't totally to blame. Maybe Alafair had indeed spoken down to him. Regardless, he had tried to frighten her, and there are some things a father can't let slide. I touched him on the shoulder, on the pattern of white stars sewn onto the fabric. "You're not a victim, partner," I said. "I'm going to pull your jacket and see what you've been up to. I hope you've been on the square with us, Mr. Dixon."

He didn't turn around, but I could see the rigidity in his back and the blood rising in his neck like the red fluid in a thermometer.

Chapter 2

THE ALLURE OF Montana is like a commitment to a narcotic; you can never use it up or get enough of it. Its wilderness areas probably resemble the earth on the first day of creation. For me it was also a carousel, one whose song and light show never ended. The morning after Alafair's confrontation with Wyatt Dixon, we had rain, then blowing snow inside the tent, then sunshine, then sleeting snow and rain, and sunshine again and green pastures and flowers blooming in the gardens and a rainbow that arched across the mountains. All of this before nine A.M.

I walked down through the pasture, past Albert's four-stall barn, to the cabin made of split logs where Clete Purcel was staying. The cabin had been built next to a streambed shaded by cottonwoods and a solitary birch tree. The streambed carried water only in the spring and was dry and sandy the rest of the year, crisscrossed by the tracks of deer and wild turkeys and sometimes the long-footed imprints of snowshoe rabbits.

Clete's hip waders were hanging upside down from the gallery roof, rainwater slipping down their rubbery surfaces; his fly and spinning rods were propped against the gallery railing, the lines pulled tightly through the eyelets and doubled back along the length of the rods, the hooks on the lures notched into the cork handles. He had washed his canvas creel and fishnet in a bucket and had hung them and his canvas fly vest on pegs that protruded from the log wall. His restored maroon Cadillac convertible was parked behind the cabin, a tarp draped over its starched white top, the tarp speckled with the droppings of ravens and magpies.

Through the window, I could see him eating at the breakfast table, his massive upper body hunched over his food, the grate on the woodstove behind him slitted with fire. Before I could knock, he waved me in.

If space aliens ever wanted to take over the planet and wipe out the human race, they simply needed to convince the rest of us to eat the same breakfast that Clete Purcel did. With variations depending on the greasy spoon, he daily shoveled down the pipe a waffle or three pancakes soaked in syrup, or four eggs fried in butter, with toast, grits, and a bowl of milk with gravy on the side; a pork chop or breakfast steak or a plate of ham and bacon; and at least three cups of café au lait. Because he knew he had filled his digestive system with enough cholesterol and salt to clog the Suez Canal, he topped it off with a cup of stewed tomatoes or a fruit cocktail, in the belief that it could neutralize a combination of grease and butter and animal fat with the viscosity of the lubricant used on train wheels.

I told him about Alafair's encounter with Wyatt Dixon and our exchange with him at the casino. Clete opened the grate to his stove and dropped two blocks of pinewood into the flames. "Dixon allowed the deputy to search his truck?" he said.

“He was completely cooperative. The only weapon in there was an old lever-action Winchester.”

“Maybe he’s not the guy.”

“Alafair says nobody else was in the parking area or on the ridge. She’s sure Dixon is the only person who could have shot the arrow.”

“You think he has a jacket?”

“I called the sheriff an hour ago. Dixon has been around here for years, but nobody is sure what he is or who he is. He was mixed up with some militia people in the Bitterroot Valley who were afraid of him. When he went down for capping a rapist, Deer Lodge couldn’t deal with him.”

“A prison in Montana can’t deal with somebody?”

“They sent him to electroshock.”

“I didn’t think they did that anymore.”

“They made an exception. Dixon was kicked out of the army when he was fifteen for cutting the stripes off a black mess sergeant behind a saloon in San Antonio and stuffing them in the guy’s mouth. At a rodeo he knocked a bull unconscious with his fist. He says he’s born again, and some people say he can speak in tongues. A university professor was recording a Pentecostal prayer meeting up on the rez when Wyatt Dixon got up and started testifying. The university professor claims Dixon was speaking Aramaic.”

“What’s Aramaic?”

“The language of Jesus.”

Clete was looking at his coffee cup, his expression neutral, his little-boy haircut freshly combed and damp from his shower, his face unlined and youthful in the morning sunlight. “Dave, don’t get mad at me for what I’m about to say. But we got the living shit shot out of us on the bayou. Not once but twice. Alafair went through a big trauma, just like us. I shut my eyes and I imagine things.”

“Alafair’s ear was cut.”

“We don’t know that the arrow did it. You said something about ravens fighting in a tree. Maybe it’s all coincidence. Easy does it, right?”

“Alafair is nobody’s fool. She doesn’t go around imagining things.”

“She gets into it with people. This time it’s with a wack job. The guy’s truck was clear. Leave him alone and quit borrowing trouble.”

“Do you know what I feel when you say something like that?” I asked.

“No, what?”

“Forget it. Have a few more slices of ham. Maybe that will help you think more clearly.”

He blew out his breath. “You want to roust him?”

“He doesn’t roust.”

“You said he went down on a murder beef. How’d he get out?”

“A technicality of some kind.”

“Okay, we’ll keep an eye out, but the guy has no reason to hurt Alafair. And he doesn’t add up as a guy who randomly hunts people with a bow and arrow, particularly on his home turf.”

Clete was the best investigative cop I ever knew and hard to argue with. He would lay down his life for me and Alafair and Molly. He was brave and gentle and violent and self-destructive, and each morning he woke with a succubus that had fed at his heart since childhood. Whenever I spoke impatiently to him or hurt his feelings, I felt an unrelieved sense

of remorse and sorrow, because I knew that Clete Purcel was one of those guys who took the heat for the rest of us. I also knew that if he were not in our midst, the world would be a much worse place.

“I guess I worry too much,” I said.

“Alafair is your daughter. You’re supposed to worry, noble mon,” he said. “I still got some buttered toast in the skillet. Eat up.”

I knew he was kidding about the buttered toast, and I hoped that our vacation was on track and that my worries about Alafair and Wyatt Dixon were unfounded. But when he poured a cup of coffee in a tin cup and pushed it across the table toward me, his green eyes not meeting mine, I knew he was thinking about something else, not about a quasi-psychotic cowboy in a casino. I also knew that whenever Clete Purcel tried to hide something, both of us were headed for trouble.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Go ahead what?”

“Say whatever it is that’s bothering you.”

“I was just going to update you, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“Gretchen just graduated from that film school in Los Angeles.”

“Good,” I replied, my discomfort increasing.

“She called and said she’d like to visit.”

“Here?”

“Yeah, since here is where I’m staying, this is where she’d like to visit. I already talked with Albert.”

I tried to keep my eyes flat, my face empty, to clear the obstruction that was like a wishbone in my throat. He was staring into my face, expectant, wanting me to say words I couldn’t.

Less than a year before, Clete discovered he had fathered a daughter out of wedlock. Her name was Gretchen Horowitz, and she had been raised in Miami by her mother, a heroin addict and a prostitute. He also found out that Gretchen had been a contract assassin for the Mafia and was known in the life as Caruso.

“Think she’ll like Montana?” I said.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“It’s cold country. I mean cold for a kid who grew up in the tropics.”

I saw the light die in his eyes. “Sometimes you really get to me, Streak.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry is right,” he said. He picked up his dishes and dropped them loudly in the sink.

SIX MONTHS AGO, close to the Colorado-Kansas line, a little boy looked out the window of a house trailer not far from the intersection of a two-lane highway and a dirt road. The sky was lidded with black thunderclouds, the western rim of the landscape banded by a ribbon of cold blue light. The wind was blowing hard in the fields, lifting clouds of grit into the air, flapping the wash on the clotheslines behind the trailer. Even though the land was carpeted by miles and miles of wheat that was planted in the fall and harvested in the spring, the coldness of the season and the bitter edge in the elements made one feel this part of the world was condemned.

to permanent winter. It was the locale where the term "cabin fever" originated, where farm women went crazy in January and shot themselves, and a rancher had to tie a rope from the porch to the barn to find his way back to the house during a whiteout. It was a place where only the most religious and determined of people survived.

While the little boy's mother slept in front of a television screen buzzing with white noise, the boy watched a tattered man emerge from a beer joint at the crossroads and wobble unsteadily down the edge of the two-lane, one hand clamped to the hat on his head, his coat whipping in the wind, his face leaning like a hatchet into the flying snow pellets that were as tiny and hard as bits of glass. Later, the boy would refer to the figure as "the scarecrow man."

A tanker truck appeared far down the wavy surface of the highway, headlights on, its weight and shimmering cylindrical shape and dedicated purpose so great and unrelenting that it seemed to move and jitter against the sun's afterglow without sound or mechanically driven power, sustained by its own momentum, as though the truck had a destiny that had been planned long ago.

From the opposite direction, a prison van with a driver and a guard in front was approaching the crossroads. The van was followed by an escort cruiser that had stopped so close that two of the state police officers could use the restroom. In the back of the van was a prisoner by the name of Asa Surette, who was scheduled to testify at a murder trial in a small town on the Colorado border. His left arm had been broken by another inmate in a maximum-security unit at El Dorado, Kansas. The cast on his arm was thick and cumbersome and ran from wrist to shoulder. Because of the prisoner's history of docility in custody, his warders had not put him in a waist chain but instead had manacled his right hand to a D-ring inset in the floor, which allowed him to lie back on a perforated steel bench welded to the van wall.

The little boy saw the scarecrow man take a flat-sided amber bottle from his coat pocket and upend it against the sky, then screw down the cap and, for no apparent reason, stumble across the highway in front of the tanker truck. The boy began to make moaning sounds against the window glass. The driver of the truck hit the brakes, jackknifing the load. The tanker swung sideways across the asphalt, and the air filled with the screeching sound of torn steel, like a ship breaking apart as it sank.

The driver of the prison van probably never had a chance to react. The van crashed with such force into the truck cab that it seemed to disintegrate as the tanker rolled over it. The moment of ignition was not instantaneous. Debris rained down on the asphalt and in the ditches along the road, while a dark apron of gasoline spread from the spot where the tanker came to rest. There was a flash of light from the far side of the truck cab, followed by a small explosion and a yellow-and-red ball of flame that boiled the frozen snow in the fields. The two vehicles were still burning when the volunteer fire truck arrived half an hour later.

The little boy told his mother what he had seen, and she in turn told the authorities. If the scarecrow man was the cause of the accident, there was no trace of him. Nor did anybody in the beer joint remember a drunk who had wandered down the road, perhaps with a bottle of whiskey.

An investigation resulted in the following conclusions: The two state police officers in the escort vehicle were derelict in not staying within sight of the prison van; the driver of the tanker truck should have been on the interstate but had taken a detour to visit a girlfriend; the driver of the van and the guard in the passenger seat had probably died upon impact; the little boy who had seen the scarecrow man had been diagnosed as autistic and was considered by his

teachers as fanciful and uneducable in a conventional setting.

Four people were dead, the bodies burned so badly that they virtually crumbled apart when the paramedics tried to extract them from the wreckage. The centerpiece of the news story was neither the macabre nature of the accident nor the loss of innocent life but the death of the prisoner. Asa Surette had stalked and tortured and killed eight people, including children, in the city of Wichita, and had eluded execution because the crimes to which he'd confessed had been committed before 1994, when the maximum sentence in Kansas for homicide was life imprisonment.

The news of his death went out over the wire services and was soon consigned to the category of good riddance and forgotten. Also forgotten was the account given by the autistic boy whose breath had fogged the window just before the scarecrow man silhouetted against the truck's headlights. But historical footnotes are tedious and uninteresting. Why should the little boy's tale be treated any differently?

I DIDN'T WANT TO be unfair to Gretchen. Her childhood had been one of neglect and abuse. No, that's not quite accurate. Her childhood had been horrific. Her body was burned with cigarettes when she was an infant. Many years later, Clete Purcel caught up with the man who did it, out on the flats, on the backside of Key West. Later, a man's skin and most of his bones were washed out of a sandbar, a Bic cigarette lighter wedged in what was left of the thorax.

At age six, Gretchen was sodomized by her mother's boyfriend, a psychopath named Bill Golightly who did smash-and-grab jewel-store robberies and fenced the loot through the Dixie Mafia. Last year Gretchen took a pro bono contract on Golightly and found him sitting in his van at night in Algiers, across the river from New Orleans; she planted three rounds in his face. Clete saw it happen and called in a shots-fired but protected his daughter's identity. His love for the daughter and his attempts at atonement almost cost him his life.

I liked Gretchen. She had many of her father's virtues. There was no doubt that she was fearless. There was no doubt she was intelligent. I also believed that her contrition for her former life was real. However, there is a peculiar atavistic mechanism built into each of us that doesn't always coincide with our thought processes. A tuning fork buried in the human breast develops a tremolo when we come in contact with certain kinds of people. Ask any career cop about former felons of his acquaintance who have stacked serious time in a maximum-security joint and were stand-up and took everything the system and the prison culture could throw at them and came out of it fairly intact and went to work as carpenters and welders and married decent women and started families. Every good cop is glad to witness that kind of success story. But when one of those same guys moves next door to you, or asks to come by your house, or introduces himself to your wife and children in the grocery store, a film projector clicks on in your head and you see images from this man's past that you cannot stop thinking about. As a consequence, you create an invisible moat around your castle and your loved ones and subtly indicate that it is not to be crossed by the wrong people, no matter how unfair that might seem.

I was helping Albert scrub out the horse tank in the south pasture when I saw Gretchen's chopped-down hot-rod pickup coming up the dirt road from the state highway, the soft-throated rumble of the twin Hollywood mufflers echoing off the hillsides. "Albert?" I said.

"What?" he replied, obviously irritated that I had chosen to use his name as a question.

rather than simply ask him the question. His denim sleeves were rolled up on his arms, the exposed skin sprinkled with purple-and-blackish-brown discolorations that he refused to see a dermatologist about. Few of his university colleagues ever knew that Albert had been a drifter and roustabout and migrant farmworker at age seventeen and had done six months spreading tar on a Florida road gang. The greatest contradiction about Albert lay in the antithetical mix of his egalitarian social views and work-hardened physicality with his patrician features and Southern manners, as though his creator had decided to install the soul of Sidney Lanier in the body of a hod carrier.

“Did Clete tell you very much about Miss Gretchen?” I asked.

“He said she was planning to make a documentary on shale-oil extraction.”

“Did he tell you about her background?”

“He said she just finished film school.”

“She got mixed up with some bad dudes in Miami.”

He was bent over the rim of the tank, scrubbing a ring of dried red bacteria off its sides. I could hear him breathing above the sound of the bristles scraping against the aluminum.

“What kind of bad dudes are we talking about?”

“Greaseballs from Brooklyn and Staten Island. Maybe some Cuban hitters in Little Havana.”

He nodded, still moving the brush back and forth. “I never liked the term ‘greaseballs.’ I know you use it to characterize a state of mind and not ethnicity. Just the same, I don’t like it.”

“Forget political correctness. She did contract hits, Albert.”

This time he stopped working. He was crouched on his knees, one arm resting on the lip of the tank. “Why isn’t she in jail?”

“Clete and I looked the other way. I don’t always feel real good about that.”

“Is she mobbed up now?”

“No, she’s done with it.”

He watched Gretchen’s hot rod come up the dirt road, the horses running beside it along the rail fence. “I had chains on my ankles when I was eighteen. I watched two hacks put a man on an anthill. I saw a boy locked in a corrugated tin sweatbox that almost cooked his brain. I was in a parish prison in Louisiana when a man was electrocuted twenty feet from the lockdown unit I was in. I could hear him weeping when they strapped him down.”

“I had to inform you, Albert.”

“Yeah, I know. If you were me, what would you do?”

I had to collect my thoughts before I spoke. “I’d ask her to leave.”

“Going to Mass this Sunday?” he said.

“You know how to rub the salt in the wound.”

He began hosing off the inside of the tank, tilting it sideways to force the water through the drain hole in the bottom. “We didn’t have this conversation.”

“Sir?”

He glanced at the sky. “It looks like more rain. We can use as much as we can get. Those goddamn oil companies are cooking the whole planet.”

I resolved that one day I would ask Albert why his colleagues at the university had not shown him long ago.

Gretchen turned off the dirt road and drove under the arch above Albert’s driveway and

parked in front of the house. She walked across the front lawn, past the flower basket hanging from the deck, and stopped at the pedestrian gate to the pasture where we were cleaning and refilling the horse tank. She had reddish-blond hair and Clete's clear complexion and eyes that were the color of violets and the same erect posture that made both her and Clete look taller than they were. Also like her father, she was bold and irreverent but could not be called bitter or unduly aggressive. There's a serious caveat to that. Like most individuals who have been abandoned and left to suffer at the hands of predators, Gretchen viewed the world with suspicion, analyzed every word in a conversation, considered all promises suspect, and sent storm warnings to anyone who tried to impose his way on her.

Her skin was deeply tanned, her gold neck chain and Star of David exposed on her chest as the sun shined on her hair. "I wasn't sure if I should drive down to the cabin or turn in to the driveway," she said.

"Hello, Gretchen," I said, feeling both awkward and hypocritical. "This is Albert Hollister. He's our host."

"Welcome to Lolo, Montana, Ms. Horowitz," he said. "We like to say we're very humble in Lolo."

"What a wonderful place you have," she replied. "Do you own the whole valley?"

"Plum Creek owns the crown of the hill behind the house, but the rest is mine."

She gazed at the arroyo that ran from Albert's improvised gun range up to an unused logging road that traversed the top of the hill and disappeared inside stands of Douglas fir that were as fat as Christmas trees. "I saw a man up there. He must be a logger," she said.

"No, Plum Creek doesn't log up there anymore. They're selling everything off," Albert said.

"I saw a guy on that log road. He looked right at me," she said. "He was wearing a slicker with a hood. It must be wet up there."

"Did you see his face?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Having trouble with the neighbors?"

"Alafair thinks a guy farther down the ridge shot an arrow at her," I said.

"Why would someone do that?"

"We don't know," I said. I put my hands in my back pockets and gazed at the ground. I felt deceitful and totally lacking in charity toward someone who'd had a horrible childhood imposed upon her. I wished I had said nothing to Albert about Gretchen's background. "I'm glad you're here."

She stared at the blue-green roll of the mountains to the south. When her eyes came back to me, she was smiling, her cheeks full of color. The sun was bright on her face and hair and her gold chain and the tops of her breasts. She looked as though she had been caught in a camera's lens during a moment when she could only be described as absolutely stunning. "I appreciate that, Dave, more than you can know. Thanks for inviting me, Mr. Hollister," she said.

I couldn't remember when I had felt so small.

I WENT INTO THE kitchen, where my wife, Molly, was slicing tomatoes on a breadboard. "Gretchen Horowitz is here," I said.

The knife slowed and stopped. "Oh," she said.

"I told Albert of her background. I told him maybe it would be better if Gretchen moved

on. I actually told him to say that to her.”

“Don’t give yourself too much credit, Streak. Albert has two ways of doing things. There’s my way and Albert’s way. Then there’s Albert’s way.”

Molly had the shoulders and hands of a countrywoman, and an Irish mouth and heavy arm and white skin dusted with sun freckles. Her hair was a dull red and silver on the roots, though she kept it cut short, it had a way of falling in her eyes when she worked. She was my moral compass, my navigator, my partner in everything, braver than I, more compassionate, more steadfast when the storm clouds started rolling. She had been a nun who never took vows; she worked with the Maryknolls in El Salvador and Guatemala during a time when Maryknoll women were raped and killed and the administration in Washington looked the other way. Former Sister Molly Boyle should have been running the Vatican, at least in my view.

She looked through the window at the horses grazing down the slope in the shade, their tails slashing at the insects that were starting to rise from the grass as the day warmed. I knew she was thinking about Gretchen and the violence we thought we had left behind in Louisiana.

“Gretchen saw a man looking at her from the hillside,” I said. “Albert says there’s no reason for anybody to be up there.”

“You think it’s the rodeo guy Alafair had trouble with?”

“I’m going to take a walk up there now.”

“I’ll come along.”

“There’s no need for you to. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She wiped her hands on a dish towel. “My foot,” she said.

We climbed up the trail behind the house, through pine and fir and larch trees wide spaced in an arroyo that stayed in deep shade most of the day. At the top of the trail was the old Plum Creek logging road, shaped like a horseshoe and partially eroded and caved in and dotted with seedlings and heaped in places with piles of barkless and worm-eaten trees that had slid down from the bluff during the spring melt. The incline at the top of the trail was steep, and I was perspiring and breathing harder than I wanted to admit when we gained the road near the ridge. The wind was cold on my face, the sun shining through the canopy like shafts of light in a cathedral, my head reeling. When I looked back down at the valley, Albert’s three-story house looked like it had been miniaturized.

“You okay, skipper?” Molly said.

“I’m fine,” I said, my heart pounding. I looked in both directions on the road. I expected to see oil and brake fluid cans and lunch trash left behind by loggers, but the road was clean and the slopes below it carpeted with pine needles, the outcroppings of rock gray and striated by erosion and spotted with bird droppings.

It was an idyllic scene, one that seemed to have healed itself after years of clear-cutting and neglect. It was one of the moments when you feel that indeed the earth abideth forever, and that all the industrial abuse we’ve done to it will somehow disappear with time.

At the place where the logging road dead-ended in a huge pile of dirt and burned tree stumps, I saw the sunlight flash on a metallic surface. “Stay behind me,” I said.

“What is it?” Molly asked.

“Probably nothing.”

I walked ahead of her along the base of the bluff, through a low spot in the road where the soil was dark from the morning rain and marked by the tracks of someone wearing needles.

nosed cowboy boots. The tracks were deep and sharp-edged and beaded with moisture in the center, as though the soil under the boot had been compressed only minutes earlier. Farther on, lying in the dirt next to a round boulder, were an empty potted-meat can, broken pieces of saltine crackers, and a spray of what looked like fingernail clippings.

There was no movement in the trees, no sound anywhere, not even a pinecone rolling down the hillside. A line of sweat ran from my armpit down my side. Below, I saw the wind bending the grass in Albert's pasture, then climb the hillside and sway the canopy against the sun.

"Good God, what's that smell?" Molly said.

I walked another ten yards up the road and held up my hand for her to stop. "Don't come any farther," I said.

"Tell me what it is."

"It's disgusting. Stay back."

Someone had defecated in the middle of the road and made no attempt to dig a hole or cover it up. Horseflies were swarming on the spot. Up above, behind a cluster of bushes, was an opening to a cave. I picked up a rock the size of a baseball and chunked it through the brush and heard it strike stone. "Come on out here, podna," I said.

There was only quiet. I threw a second and then a third rock with the same result. I grabbed a hold of a tree trunk and pulled myself up on the slope and walked toward the cave, the ground spongy with rainwater and pine needles. I could hear Molly climbing the slope behind me. I turned and tried to signal her to stop. But that was not the way of Molly Boyle and never would be.

"Hey, buddy, we're not your enemies," I said. "We just want to know who you are. We're not going to call the cops on you."

This time when I spoke, I was close enough to the cave to create an echo and feel the cool air and smell the bat guano and pooled water inside. I took a penlight from my pocket and stepped under the overhang and shined the light on the back wall. I could see the dried skin of an animal on the floor, ribs poking through the fur, eye sockets empty.

"What's in there?" Molly said.

"A dead mountain lion. It probably got hurt or shot and went in here to die."

"You don't think a homeless person has been living there?"

"We're too far from the highway. I think the rodeo clown came back and was watching the house."

"Let's get out of here, Dave."

I turned to leave the cave; then, as an afterthought, I shone the penlight along the walls and ledges. The surface of the stone was soft with mold and lichen and bat droppings and water seepage from the surface. Close to the ceiling was a series of gashes in the lichen, a perfect canvas on which a throwback from an earlier time could leave his message. I suspected he had used a sharp stone for a stylus, trenching the letters as deep as possible, cutting through the lichen into the wall, as though savoring the alarm and injury and fear his words would inflict upon others.

I was here but you did not know me. Before there was an alpha and omega I was here. I am the one before whom every knee shall bend.

"Who is this guy?" Molly said.

Chapter 3

THE SHERIFF'S NAME was Elvis Bisbee. He must have been fifty and a good six and a half feet tall. He had a long face and pale blue eyes and a mustache he had let grow into ropes, the white tips hanging down from either side of his mouth. He stood with me in the shade at the foot of the arroyo at the back of the house, gazing up the slope at the bluff above the logging road. "The guy was wearing cowboy boots?" he said.

"I can show you the tracks."

"I'll take your word for it. You're pretty convinced Wyatt Dixon is stalking your daughter?" He wore a departmental uniform and a short-brim Stetson and a pistol and holster with a polished belt. His eyes seemed to see everything and nothing at the same time.

"I don't know who else would be out here," I said.

"Albert likes to stoke up things. Right now it's these heavy rigs that pass at the foot of your road on their way to Alberta."

"Oil companies don't hire deranged people to defecate on the property of a retired English professor."

"It's not Wyatt Dixon's style, either."

"What is? Killing people?"

"I grant Wyatt's got a bad history. But he's not a voyeur. He can't keep the women off his back."

"Wyatt?"

"He's an unusual guy. When it comes to rodeoing, he's got a lot of admirers."

"I'm not among them."

"I can't blame you," he said, shaking a cigarette from a pack and staring up the slope. "I don't think he's your man, but I'm going to bring him in and have a talk with him. If you see him around the property, or if he tries to contact your daughter, let me know."

"There's something else. Somebody cut a message in the wall of a cave up there." I recited it and asked, "You ever see anything like that written anywhere else around here?"

"Not that I can recall. Sounds like it's from the Bible."

"Part of it, but it's screwed up."

"Meaning Dixon would be the kind of guy who'd screw up a passage from Scripture?"

"It occurred to me."

He lit his cigarette and drew in on it and turned his face aside before he blew out the smoke. "Let me confide in you," he said. "A young Indian girl went missing six days ago. She was drinking in a joint near the rez and never came home. Her foster grandfather is Lovell Younger."

“The oilman?”

~~“Some just call him the tenth wealthiest man in the United States. He has a summer home here. I’m supposed to be at his house in a half hour.”~~

His choice of words was not good. Or maybe I misinterpreted the inference. But a county sheriff does not report to a private citizen at his home, particularly at a prearranged time.

“I’m not following you, Sheriff.”

“You’re a homicide detective, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Mr. Younger is an old man. I don’t like telling him his granddaughter had personal problems. I don’t like telling him the girl is probably dead or close to it or in a state of mind that no seventeen-year-old girl should be in. That particular bar she went to is a hangout for ex-cons, outlaw bikers, and guys who would cut you from your liver to your lights for a package of smokes. We used to call Montana ‘the last good place.’ Now it’s like everywhere else. A few years back somebody went into a beauty parlor just south of us and decapitated three women. I’ll let you know what Dixon has to say.”

He mashed out his cigarette against a tree trunk and field-stripped the paper and let the tobacco blow away in the wind.

ALAFAIR HAD GONE to town to buy several bottles of shampoo and baby oil and solvents to help Albert untangle the snarls and concrete-like accretions that had built up in the manes and tails of his horses. When she returned, I went upstairs to the back bedroom, where she wrote every day from early morning to midafternoon and sometimes for two or three hours in the evening. Her first novel had been published by a New York house and had done very well, and her second one was due to come out in the summer, and she was now working on a third. From her desk she had a grand view of the north pasture and the sloped roof of the barn that was limed with frost each morning and that steamed as the sun rose, and a grove of apple trees that had just gone into leaf and the velvety green treeless hills beyond it. She had a thermos of coffee on her desk, and she was staring out the window and holding a cup motionlessly to her mouth. I sat down on the bed and waited.

“Oh, hi, Dave,” she said. “How long have you been there?”

“I just came in. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“It’s all right. What did the sheriff say?”

“He doesn’t believe Dixon is a likely candidate.”

She set down her cup and looked at it. “I think a guy was following me in town.”

“Where in town?”

“He was tailgating me in a skinned-up Ford truck on the highway. He had his sun visor down, and I couldn’t make out his face. At one point he was five feet from my bumper. I had to run a yellow light to get away from him. When I came out of the tack store, he was parked across the street.”

“It was the same guy?”

“It was the same truck. The guy behind the wheel was smoking a pipe. I walked to the curb to get a better look, and he drove off.”

“It wasn’t Dixon?”

“I would have said so if it was.”

“I was just asking. You couldn’t see the tag?”

“No.”

“Alafair, are you sure the truck parked across the street was the same one that tailgated you? You couldn’t see the driver’s face, right?”

I saw a light in her eyes that I had seen in the eyes of many other women who had reported stalkers or obscene callers or voyeurs or violent and dangerous men who made their lives miserable. Sometimes their complaints got lost in procedure; sometimes they were trivialized and conveniently ignored. In most homicides involving female victims, there’s a long paper history leading up to the woman’s death. If someone feels this is an overly dour depiction, recommend he visit a shelter for battered women.

“I wish I hadn’t said anything, Dave.”

“I didn’t explain myself very well. A homeless or deranged man was up on the old logging road behind the house. I’m just trying to put that guy together with the guy in the skinned-up truck. The two don’t fit. Why would some guy in Montana single you out as the object of his obsession?”

“I didn’t say he did. I told you what happened. But it didn’t sink in. So forget it.”

“The sheriff is going to pick up Dixon and talk with him. I’ll call him and tell him about the guy who tailgated you.”

“He didn’t just tailgate me. He was following me. For seven miles.”

“I know.”

“Then stop talking to me like I’m an idiot.”

“The sheriff said a seventeen-year-old Indian girl disappeared six days ago. He thinks she may be dead. Maybe there’s a very bad guy operating around here, Alafair.”

She rubbed her temples and widened her eyes and closed them and opened them again, although revisiting an experience she couldn’t get out of her head. “I know who he is. I know, know, I know.”

“The abductor of the Indian girl?”

“The man who followed me today. I thought his face was in shadow because he had his visor down. I don’t think that’s what I saw at all. I think he was unshaved and had a long face like a Viking’s. I think I sat across a table from him three years ago and talked to him while he breathed through his mouth and tried to slip his finger on top of my hand. I remember his hair in particular. He put gel on it once so he could slick it back and impress me.”

“Don’t do this.”

“It was him, Dave. I feel sick to my stomach.”

“Asa Surette is dead. He’s not only dead, he’s probably in hell.”

“I knew you would say that,” she replied. “I just knew it.”

THREE YEARS EARLIER, Alafair told me of her plans to write a nonfiction book about a psychopath who for years had tortured, raped, and murdered ordinary family people in the land of Dorothy and the yellow-brick road, making his victims suffer as much as possible before he strangled or suffocated them. She told me this at the kitchen table in our home on East Main in New Iberia, on the banks of Bayou Teche, while the sun burned in a molten red orb beyond the live oaks in our yard, the moss in the limbs black against the sky. Her research would begin with an interview at the maximum-security unit east of Wichita, where the killer

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