

THE STORE



BENTLEY LITTLE



A SIGNET BOOK

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**THE MAILMAN... UNIVERSITY... DOMINION ... THE IGNORED
... and now ... THE STORE**

**HERE'S WHAT'S BEING SAID ABOUT
BENTLEY LITTLE**

“This is Bentley Little’s best book yet. Frightening, thought-provoking and impossible to put down.”
—Stephen King

“Bentley Little does an electrifying job of keeping the reader in suspense.”
-*West Coast Review of Books*

“With his artfully plain prose and Quixote-like narrative, Little dissects the deep and disturbing fear of anonymity all Americans feel.... What Little has created is nothing less than a nightmarishly brilliant tour de force of modern life in America.”
-*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Bentley Little has an amazing imagination.”
-*After Hours magazine*

“Delivers shock after shock.”
-*Science Fiction Chronicle*

“The *Ignored* is a bizarre psychological drama that readers will not be able to ignore as they peruse it in one sitting, from the first page to the last. Anyone who desires to emulate the famous will choose the obscurity of the ignored after reading this tale. It is that chilling a shocker. Bentley Little is a giant when it comes to the weird thriller.”
-*Painted Rock*

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SIGNET

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For my wife, Wai Sau

PROLOGUE

The DeSoto drove along the rutted dirt road through the series of low desert hills that signaled an end to the Texas **flatlands**. A cloud of dust accompanied the **car**—enveloping the vehicle, not merely following in its wake—but the dust was preferable to the heat, and the windows remained open.

It was the third day of their honeymoon, and although Nancy didn't want to admit it, she and Paul seemed to have run out of things to say to each other. They had not spoken since Houston, save for Paul's occasional requests to hand him the map, and though she tried to come up with something that they could talk about, there seemed to be no subjects that would sustain a conversation more than a few minutes. She figured she'd better save those for **El Paso** and dinner.

She fanned herself with the map. The unbearable temperature didn't help any, either. She couldn't think in weather like this. She'd never been so hot and uncomfortable in her life. She would've liked to take off her top and her bra. The old Paul would've liked it, too. It was the type of wild spontaneity that newlyweds were supposed to engage in, the sort of madcap antic that would make the honeymoon memorable, that they would be able to look back at and laugh about years later. No one else would see her—they hadn't come across a single other car for the past two **hours**—**but** even without asking, she knew that Paul would not approve.

They were supposed to have been married three years ago, but he'd been drafted, sent off to Korea and though she'd wanted to marry before he shipped out, he wanted to wait ... just in case. Each time she mentioned it, he'd remind her of Scarlett O'Hara's first husband in *Gone With the Wind*, the boy she'd married just before he'd gone off to his death in the Civil War, and though Nancy knew he was joking, his underlying meaning was serious, and it terrified her to think that he might not return.

Return he had, though. Alive and unharmed. But there'd been something different about him after the war. He seemed changed somehow, although it wasn't anything she could really put her finger on. She'd noticed it immediately, had considered asking him about it, but she figured if he wanted to talk he would, and she decided to let him be. She was just happy that they were together again. Man and wife. And if the silences were a little too long, they were comfortable silences and she knew that once they started their new life in California, once they made friends and had kids and settled into marriage, those silences would disappear.

Ahead, at the foot of a sandstone cliff on the right side of the road, was a small brick building that appeared incongruous out here in the middle of nowhere. A strip of green grass fronted the structure, bisected by a short white sidewalk. There were no windows on the building, only a large black-on-white sign on the wall to the right of the door.

"That's odd," Paul said, slowing the car.

Nancy nodded.

This close, they could read the words on the sign:

THE STORE GROCERIES·-PHARMACEUTICS-MERCANTILE

Paul laughed. " 'The Store?' What kind of name is that?"

"It's straightforward and honest," she pointed out.

"Yeah. I guess it is that. But you'd never make it in a big city with a name like 'The Store.' You'd

need something catchier, something with more pizzazz.” He laughed again, shook his head. “The Store.”

“Why don’t we stop?” Nancy suggested. “Maybe they have cold soda. A nice cold soda sounds real good right now.”

“Okay.” There was no parking lot, but Paul pulled off the side of the dirt road and stopped directly in front of the small building. He turned toward Nancy. “What do you want?”

“I’ll go in with you,” she said.

He placed a firm hand on her arm. “No. You stay here in the car. I’ll get us the sodas. What do you want?”

“Yoo-Hoo,” she said.

“Yoo-Hoo it is.” He opened the driver’s door, got out. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

He smiled at her, and she smiled back as he walked down the short sidewalk, but her smile faded. She watched him open the glass door and step into the store, disappearing into the murky dimness of the building. She suddenly realized just how odd this place was. They were fifty, maybe a hundred miles from the nearest town, there were no visible telephone lines or electrical wires, she could not believe that there was water, and there certainly was not any traffic. Yet the store was open and ready for business—as if it were in the middle of downtown Pittsburgh and not in the middle of the Texas desert.

Something about that made her uneasy.

She stared hard at the door, trying to see into the store, but she could make out nothing. No shape. No sign of movement. It was the glass, she told herself, and the angle of the sun. That was all. Besides, if the interior of the building were really as dark as it looked from out here, Paul would not have gone inside.

She tried to make herself believe it.

Paul emerged several minutes later looking stunned, carrying a large paper sack. He opened the driver’s door of the DeSoto and sat down, placing the sack between them.

“You were just supposed to get sodas,” she said.

He started the car.

“Paul?”

He didn’t respond, and she began digging through the sack. “Light bulbs? What do we need light bulbs for? We’re on vacation. Tissue paper? Whisk broom? Masking tape? What is all this?”

He glanced furtively back toward The Store as he put the car into gear. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Nancy felt a chill pass through her. “But I don’t understand. Why did you buy all this? And where are our sodas? You didn’t even buy our sodas.”

He looked over at her, and there was fear on his face, fear and anger, and for the first time since they’d gotten married, for the first time since she’d known Paul, she was afraid of him. “Shut up, Nancy. Just shut the hell up.”

She said nothing but turned around to look as they sped away. Before the car rounded the curve of the hill, before the dust completely obscured the scene behind them, she saw the door of the building open.

And, in a sight she would remember until her dying day, she thought she saw the proprietor of The Store.

ONE

1

Bill Davis quietly closed the front door of the house behind him as he stepped outside. He walked onto the porch and stood for a moment at the head of the drive, doing knee bends and breathing deeply, the air exhaling from his lungs in bursts of visible steam. When he reached the count of fifty, he stopped. Standing straight, he bent to the left, bent to the right, then walked down the drive to the road, where he inhaled and exhaled one last time before beginning his morning jog.

The dirt changed to asphalt at the bottom of the hill, and he ran past Goodwin's meadow and turned onto Main.

He liked running at this time of morning. He didn't like the running itself—that was a necessary evil—but he enjoyed being out and about at this hour. The streets were virtually empty. Len Madsen was in the donut shop finishing up the morning's baking as the first few customers straggled in, Chris Schneider was loading up the newspaper racks, and here and there individual trucks were heading out to construction sites, but otherwise the town was quiet, the streets clear, and that was the way he liked it.

He ran through downtown Juniper and kept going until he hit the highway. The air was chill but heavy, weighted with the rich scent of moist vegetation, the smell of newly cut grass. He breathed deeply as he jogged. He could see his breath as he ran, and the brisk air felt invigorating, made him glad to be alive.

On the highway, the view opened up, the close-set trees that had been lining the road falling back, making visible the sloping landscape. Ahead, the sun was rising behind broken clouds that floated unmoving, over the mountains, the clouds silhouetted against the pale sky, black in the center, pink and orange at the edges. In front of the sunrise, a flock of geese was flying south in a morphing V-formation, the shape of the flight pattern varying every few seconds as a different bird moved into the lead and the other members of the flock fell in behind it. Shafts of yellow light slanted downward through the clouds, through the pine branches, highlighting objects and areas unused to attention: a boulder, a gully, a collapsed barn.

This was his favorite part of the jog—the open land between the end of the town proper and the small unincorporated subdivision known as Creekside Acres. The dirt control road on the other side of the Acres that looped back to his street was wider and more forested, but there was something about this mile or so stretch that appealed to him. Here, the tall trees ringed an overgrown meadow that sloped up the side of a low hill. An outcropping of rock on the south side of the meadow stood like some primitive idol, its erosion-carved facade giving it the appearance of something deliberately sculptured.

He slowed down a little, not because he was tired but because he wanted to savor the moment. Glancing to his left, he saw the brightening sunlight captured and amplified by the brilliant yellow aspens that were interspersed among the pines. He shifted his gaze across the highway, to his right toward the meadow, but something here was different, something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he noticed instantly that there was an element in the meadow that was out of place and

did not fit.

The sign had changed.

Yes. That was it. He stopped jogging, breathing heavily. The weatherworn sign announcing “BAYLESS! OPENING IN SIX MONTHS!” that had been posted in the meadow for the past decade was gone, replaced with a new sign, a stark white rectangle with black lettering that sat solidly atop twin supports sunk deep into the ground.

THE STORE IS COMING FEBRUARY

He stared for a moment at the sign. It had not been here yesterday, and something about the cool precision of the type and the flat declarative promise of the message made him feel a little uneasy—although he wasn’t quite sure why. It was stupid, he knew, and ordinarily he was not one to go by hunches or intuition or anything so nonconcrete, but the sign bothered him. It was, he supposed, a reaction to the idea of something-anything—being built here in the meadow, in what he considered his spot. Sure, a Bayless grocery store was supposed to have been built at this location, but ground for the construction had never been broken and the sign had been there for so long that its promise was empty, its words had ceased to have any meaning. The sign had become part of the landscape and was now merely another picturesque relic by the side of the road, like the fallen barn up ahead or the old Blakey gas station that had collapsed into the brush on the highway west of town.

He glanced around, trying to imagine a huge, new building in the middle of the meadow, the grass around it paved over for a parking lot, and it was depressingly easy to conjure up such a picture in his mind. Instead of seeing the glistening sparkle of dew on the grass, he’d see black asphalt and white paint lines stretching before him as he jogged each morning. His view of the hill and the rocks would probably be blocked by the square concrete bulk of the store. The mountains up ahead would be unchanged, but they were only a small part of the beauty of this spot. It was the convergence of everything, the perfect integration of all elements that had made this stretch such a special place for him.

He looked again at the sign. Behind it, between the posts, he saw the body of a dead deer. He had not noticed it before, but the shifting clouds and the rising sun had changed the emphasis of the light and the brown form was now clearly visible, its distended stomach and unmoving head protruding from the meadow grass. The animal had obviously died recently. Probably during the night. There were no flies anywhere, no sign of decay, no wounds. The death was clean, and that somehow seemed more ominous to him than if it had been shot, or hit by a car, or crippled and attacked by wolves.

How often did animals drop dead of natural causes next to construction announcement signs?

He would have called it an omen, had he believed in omens, but he did not, and he felt stupid for even thinking about it, for even pretending in his mind that there was a causal connection between the two. Taking a deep breath, he resumed jogging, heading down the sloping highway toward the Acres, looking ahead at the mountains.

But he remained troubled.

Ginny was already up and had cooked breakfast by the time he returned. Samantha was peacefully eating her Cream of Wheat in front of the television, but Ginny and Shannon were arguing in the kitchen, Shannon insisting that she didn't have to eat breakfast if she didn't want to, that she was old enough to decide for herself whether or not she was hungry, Ginny lecturing her about bulimia and anorexia.

Both of them assaulted him the second he walked into the house.

"Dad!" Shannon said. "Tell Mom that I don't have to eat a big breakfast every single day. We had a huge dinner last night and I'm not even hungry."

"And tell Shannon," Ginny said, "that she's going to end up with an eating disorder if she doesn't stop obsessing over her weight."

He held up his hands. "I'm not stepping into this. This is between you two. I'm taking a shower."

"Dad!"

"You're always chickening out," Ginny said.

"You're not dragging me into this!" He grabbed a towel from the hall closet and hurried into the bathroom, locking the door. He turned on the water, drowning out the noise from the kitchen, then quickly took off his jogging suit and got into the steaming shower.

The hot spray felt good. He closed his eyes and faced into the water, the tiny stream simultaneously hitting his forehead, his eyelids, his nose, his cheeks, his lips, his chin. The water ran down his body, pooling around his feet. Low rainfall in the spring/summer months and low snowfall last winter had led to a reduction in the water table and rationing for the houses in town, but they had their own water from their own well, and he stood there for a long time, luxuriating in the shower, letting the heated liquid caress his tired muscles.

The girls had taken off for school by the time he finished his shower, and he walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"I could've used some support," Ginny said as she put the girls' dishes into the dishwasher.

"She's not anorexic, for God's sake."

"But she could be."

"You're overreacting."

"Am I? She skips lunch now. Almost every day. And now she wants to skip breakfast. Dinner's the only meal she eats anymore."

"I don't want to burst your bubble, Gin, but she's chubby."

Ginny looked quickly around, as though Shannon might have surreptitiously returned in order to eavesdrop on their conversation. "Don't let her hear you say that."

"I won't. But it's true. She's obviously eating more than dinner."

"I just don't like the way she's always worrying about the number of meals she eats and the size of her food portions and her weight and her appearance."

"Then stop harping about it. You're the one drawing attention to her. She probably wouldn't be as conscious of it if you weren't focusing on her all the time."

"Bullshit. She'd eat one meal a week if I let her get away with it."

Bill shrugged. "Your call." He checked the pot on the stove. A small dollop of hardened Cream of Wheat lay clumped against one rounded side of the metal cook-ware. He grimaced.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Ginny said. "Pour in a bit of milk and heat it up."

He shook his head. "I'll just have toast." The open bread sack was still on the counter, and he took out two pieces, popping them in the toaster. "I saw a new sign when I was out jogging. It said The Store was coming—"

“That’s right! I forgot to tell you. Charlinda told me about it Friday. Ted’s company is bidding on the roofing contract, and she said that he stands to make more from this one project than he did all last year. If he gets it.”

“I’m sure a lot of construction workers around here’ll be happy.”

“I thought you’d be happy, too. You’re always complaining about the high prices in town and moaning that we have to drive down to Phoenix in order to find a decent selection of anything.”

“I am happy,” he told her.

But he was not. Intellectually, he supposed he could appreciate the coming of The Store. It would be a big boost to the local economy and would mean not only a temporary increase in construction jobs but a permanent expansion of sales and service positions, particularly for teenagers. It would also be good for consumers. It would bring big-city discount prices and a big-city selection of products to their small town.

On a gut level, however, the arrival of The Store did not sit well with him—and not just because it was going to be built on his scenic spot. For no reason that he could rationally justify, he did not want the chain store in Juniper.

He thought of the sign.

Thought of the deer.

“Well, I’m sure local shop owners aren’t too thrilled,” Ginny said. “The Store’ll probably put some of them out of business.”

“That’s true.”

“Just what we need in town. More abandoned buildings.”

His toast popped up, and Bill took a butter knife out of the silverware drawer, grabbed a jar of jam from the refrigerator.

“I’d better get ready,” Ginny said, walking around him. She went into the bathroom, and he heard her brushing her teeth as he prepared his toast. She emerged a few minutes later, makeup on, purse in hand. “Hi ho, hi ho. It’s off to work I go.”

“Me, too.” He walked over, kissed her.

“Will you be home for lunch?”

He smiled. “I think that’s a safe bet.”

“Good. Then you can finish the dishes.”

“Ah, the joys of telecommuting.” He followed her to the front door, kissed her again, then watched through the screen as she walked down the porch steps and across the drive to the car. He waved as she drove away, then closed the door, finished eating his toast, washed his hands in the kitchen sink, and walked through the living room and down the hall to his office.

He sat down at his desk, turning on the PC. As always, he felt a thrill of almost guilty pleasure as the computer booted up, as though he was getting away with something he shouldn’t. He swiveled in his chair, looked out the window. This might not be exactly the life he had imagined—but it was pretty damn close. In his mind, the house had been a large, glass-walled, Frank Lloyd Wrightian structure, and he’d been seated at a huge oak desk, looking out a giant window into the forest while classical music wafted into the room from a state-of-the-art stereo. In reality, he worked out of the cramped back room, the walls of the office little more than an extension of his bulletin board, with magazine articles and Post-It notes affixed to nearly every conceivable space. And he wasn’t nearly so cultured in his real life as he was in his fantasies—instead of classical music, he usually listened to classic rock on a portable radio his daughters had discarded.

But everything else was on the mark. The room did indeed have a big window, and that big window

did look out onto the forest. And, most importantly, he was doing what he wanted, where he wanted. His reach may have exceeded his grasp, but he had not sold out. He had not given up his dream and settled for a lesser fate, choosing the least offensive alternative. He had stuck to his guns and here he was, a telecommuting technical writer, working for one of the country's largest software firms a thousand miles away from the corporate office, communicating with his superiors by modem and fax.

The computer finished booting up, and he checked his E-mail. There were two messages from the company—reminding him of his deadline, no doubt—and a message from Street McHenry, who owned the electronics store in town. Smiling, he called up Street's message. It was two words long: "Chess tonight?"

Bill typed a quick reply and sent it back: "See you there."

He and Street had had two separate chess matches going for most of the past year—one online and one on a traditional board. Neither of them were really chess fanatics, and they probably would have stopped long ago were it not for an interesting and unexplainable fact: he won all the computer games, Street won all the board games.

It shouldn't have worked out that way. The mediums were different but the game was exactly the same. Chess was chess, no matter what pieces were used or where it was played. Still, that was the way it broke down.

Every time.

That oddity was enough to keep both of them interested in the matches.

Bill fired off a quick E-mail message to Ben Anderson, informing him of tonight's game. The newspaper editor, the other member of their online triumvirate, had only recently learned of the Greener Juniper Chess Mystery, as he called it, but he was fascinated by it and wanted to be present at all board games and eavesdrop on all online matches to see if he could detect any patterns in their playing, any logical reason why they won and lost as they did.

The situation until this point had seemed lighthearted, their approach to it curious but not serious, their manner half-joking, but as Bill stared at his E-mail screen and thought of their past year of chess games, he was reminded for some reason of The Store.

The sign.

The deer.

Suddenly, their win-loss pattern didn't seem quite so benign, and he wished he had canceled out of tonight's match instead of agreeing to it. He already knew what the outcome would be, and he now found that a little unsettling.

He looked out at the trees for a moment before finally turning back to the computer. He wasn't in the mood to jump straight into work, so instead of calling up his two messages from the company, he exited E-mail and logged on to Fremlink, his online service, in order to check out this morning's news.

He scanned the wire service headlines.

THIRD STORE MASSACRE IN A MONTH.

The words jumped out at him. There were other headlines, more important stories, but he did not see them and did not care. Feeling cold, he displayed the text of the article. Apparently, a sales clerk from The Store in Las Canos, New Mexico, had come to work with a .45 caliber pistol tucked into the waste band of his pants, hidden beneath his uniform jacket. The clerk had worked from eight to ten in the morning, as always, then, on his break, had taken out the gun and started shooting his fellow employees. Six people were hit before the clerk stopped to reload and members of The Store's security team wrestled him to the ground. Five of those six people were dead. The sixth was in critical condition at a local hospital.

According to the article, similar incidents had occurred at the chain's stores in Denton, Texas, and Red Bluff, Utah, within the past month. In the Texas store, it was a customer who had started firing on employees, killing three and wounding two. In Utah, it was a stock boy who had opened fire on customers. The stock boy had had a semiautomatic weapon, and he had managed to mow down fifteen people before being shot by an off-duty policeman.

Corporate officials of The Store would not comment on the incidents but had issued a press release stating that the possibility that the occurrences were related was being investigated.

Bill read the story again, still feeling cold.

The deer.

He signed off Freelink and stared at the blank screen in front of him for several long minutes before finally getting back into E-mail and accessing his messages from the company to start his morning work.

TWO

1

Greg Hargrove looked down at the contract on his desk, frowning. He didn't like doing business the way. It might be the wave of the future and all, but he still liked to deal with his clients the old-fashioned way—in person. All this faxing and phoning and Fed Exing might be fine for Wall Street investment firms, but, damn it, the construction business wasn't a service occupation, or a paper-pushing job. It was manual labor. It involved real work by real men. Men who created something with their hands, who produced something tangible.

And it didn't seem right to approach it this way.

He picked up the contract. This was the biggest job he'd ever had, maybe the biggest job he ever would have, and it just didn't sit well with him to be communicating through paperwork. He wanted to see a face, to feel a handshake, to hear a voice.

Well, he'd heard a voice. Several voices, actually. All talking to him over the phone. Official-sounding corporate voices that talked at him, not to him, and didn't seem to give a damn what he had to say.

The past few days, there hadn't even been that. There'd been only the forms and the lists and the specifications and the requirements.

It was especially annoying that so much of the paperwork was faxed to him overnight. It was bad enough not being able to do business with an honest-to-God human being, but doing it when he wasn't even there? Having to find out in the morning, after the fact, what was going on? That really bugged the shit out of him.

He was used to being able to show a client around a site, to explain what was being done and why, to walk him through the various stages and steps, to answer questions and allay fears.

He wasn't used to filing reports.

And having his reports critiqued.

That was what bothered him the most. The loss of control. On all projects before this one, he had been the one in charge. He had been the one to call the shots. Sure, he had built to suit, he had carried out the client's will, but within that broad framework, he had been the one making the decisions. Now, though, he was just another worker, following orders, not allowed to think.

He didn't like that.

And they were just in the planning stages now. God knew what it would be like when actual construction started.

Better, he told himself. It had to be better.

There was a knock on the doorframe behind him, and Greg turned around. Tad Buckman stood on the porch of the office, grinding his cigarette into the cement slab with his work boot. "Ready to roll, boss? We're going to start surveying."

Greg sighed, nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be right with you. Just let me get my spec sheets." He dropped the contract back on the desk and walked over to the file cabinet for the specs, stopping by the fax machine to pick up this morning's modifications.

Her period was late.

Shannon closed her locker and twirled the combination lock, shifting the textbooks from her left hand to her right. She was never late. Some girls, she knew, varied all the time. But she was as regular as clockwork. Her menstrual cycle had never been so much as a day off in her life.

Now her period was three days overdue.

She held the books in front of her as she headed down the hall toward Algebra, her first class. It was stupid, and she knew it was impossible, but she felt unbearably conspicuous, as though she were already showing, and she tried to cover her belly as she walked.

Maybe her mom was right. Maybe she should be eating more. That way she could attribute her expanding abdomen to weight gain rather than pregnancy.

Maybe she wasn't pregnant.

She sighed. With her luck?

No, she was almost certainly pregnant.

Probably with twins.

In movies, in books, in magazines, girls always shared this stuff with their sisters, but there was no way she could do that with Sam. She'd like to be able to have one of those after-hours bedroom conversations while their parents were asleep, to be able to explain her problem to her sister and get some sympathy and advice, but there was no way that was going to happen. Sam was just too perfect. She was pretty, she was popular, her grades were always good, she never got in trouble. Although boys had been chasing after her since she was fifteen, Shannon doubted that her sister had had sex yet. She'd probably wait until she was married.

If anything, Sam would be even more disapproving of her than her parents.

No, she couldn't talk about it to her sister.

She couldn't talk to Diane about it, either. Diane was her best friend, but she was still a blabbermouth, and Shannon knew that if she even hinted about her fears to Diane, the news would be all over school by the next day. And greatly exaggerated.

She didn't want that.

The only one she could tell was Jake. And she knew he wouldn't be happy to hear it. She didn't know exactly what his reaction would be, but she had a pretty good idea, and just the thought of the ensuing conversation made her stomach knot up with tension.

She wished she knew for sure. That would make it easier. It was the not knowing that was the worst part of it. If she knew that she was definitely pregnant, at least she could make plans, plot a course of action. As it was, she could only worry and wonder, her mind vacillating back and forth between scenarios.

She'd buy one of those home pregnancy tests and perform the test here in the bathroom at school, but she knew that no matter where she bought it, word of the purchase would eventually get back to her parents.

One of the many disadvantages of living in a small town.

That was one good thing The Store would bring, she thought. Anonymity.

The Store.

It was pathetic how excited everyone here was about The Store. You'd think Neiman Marcus was coming to Juniper, the way everyone was talking, not just some chain discount retailer. It was like—

Her left foot slid backward beneath her.

She hadn't been paying attention to where she was walking, and she realized instantly that someone had spilled something on the floor and that she'd slipped in it. Scrambling to maintain purchase, trying not to fall, she clutched her books hard and stumbled backward, accidentally bumping into Mindy Hargrove.

"Hey!" Mindy said, pushing her away. "Watch it, Davis."

Shannon regained her footing. "Sorry. I slipped."

"I'll bet."

"It was an accident."

"Right."

Shannon frowned, moving away. "Oh, eat me, Mindy."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

There was a chorus of whoops from the smattering of kids still in the hall. Shannon held up her middle finger and continued walking toward Algebra. Seconds later, Diane came running up next to her, laughing. "That was great."

"You saw that, huh?"

"You smacked right into her. Practically knocked her over."

"There was water on the floor or something. I was spacing and I slipped on it."

"Serves that stuck-up bitch right."

Shannon looked mock-offended. "Stuck-up? Mindy?"

Diane laughed, and the two of them walked into class just as the bell rang.

She didn't see Jake until History. She'd been half hoping that her period would come sometime during the morning, during one of her classes, but it hadn't. She desperately wanted to talk to him, wanted to tell him, but though they sat together in class, there were too many people around and it was not a good place to bring it up.

She decided to wait for lunch, but when the time came, she couldn't think of a way to broach the subject. The two of them sat alone together, on a wall near the Junior Circle, eating in silence, and Shannon started to tell him several times, but then she thought of the way he'd probably react to the news, and she couldn't decide how to begin.

Her distress must have been obvious, because halfway through lunch he took her hands in his and asked, "Is something wrong?"

She almost told him.

Almost.

But then she thought that her period might come at any minute, might come before the end of lunch, might come during her next class, and she shook her head and forced herself to smile and said, "Nothing's wrong. Why?"

3

Ginny sat in the staff lounge, eating her lunch as she watched the kids on the playground. The blinds were half-closed, but she could still see the tetherball and hopscotch courts as well as the bottom portions of the slide and monkey bars. Amidst the chaos of activity, she saw Larry Douglas cha-

Shaun Gilbert across the asphalt and through a hopscotch game, causing the girls involved in the game to scream for one of the lunch monitors.

Ginny smiled as she finished her Cup O' Noodles. Meg Silva, who taught sixth grade and had been staring out the window as well, shook her head. "Those Douglas kids are all troublemakers. I had Bill Douglas last year. I heard he just got suspended from junior high for vandalizing school property."

"Larry's not a troublemaker," Ginny said. "A little overactive maybe, but he's not a bad kid."

Meg snorted. "You learn to spot 'em. Talk to me in another fifteen years." The older woman crumpled up her sandwich wrapper and threw it in the trash can under the table before getting up from her seat and walking slowly over to the couch.

Ginny watched Meg settle in, then looked back toward the playground. She wondered if she would be as burnt-out when she was Meg's age. She didn't think so.

It was possible.

But she didn't think so.

She liked teaching grammar school. Her father wondered why she didn't teach high school, though she was wasting her talents here, but she enjoyed working with young children. She felt as though she had more of an influence on them at this age, that she could do more to help mold and shape the way they turned out. Besides, grammar school kids were nice. Junior high students were brats, and high school students were too involved in their own teenage world to pay any attention to adults. But students this age still listened to her, still respected her authority. And, most importantly, she genuinely liked working with them. Sure, there were a few bad apples. There always were. But overall they were good kids.

Mark French, the principal, walked into the staff room and over to the coffee machine. "Looks like our culture is finally coming to Juniper," he said.

Ginny looked over at him. "What?"

"The Store." He held up the newspaper in his hand. "It says they're going to have a cappuccino and sushi bar instead of a regular snack bar. And they're going to carry videotapes of foreign films. For sale and rental. Northern Arizona is finally entering the twentieth century."

"Just as it's ending," Meg said.

"Better late than never." The principal finished pouring his coffee and walked out of the lounge nodding good-bye. "Ladies."

"Ladies?" Meg snorted.

Ginny laughed.

She stared back out the window at the playground, feeling good. Cappuccino? Sushi? Foreign film? This was like a dream come true.

She couldn't wait to tell Bill.

He was going to be so happy.

THREE

1

He awoke to the sound of blasting.

At first, Bill thought it was part of his nightmare. He'd been battling creatures from an alien world and when he heard the explosions, he thought they were merely a continuation of the dream. Bill and Ginny was stirring next to him, and it was obvious that she'd heard the sounds, too.

She turned toward him, her eyes still half-closed. "What is it?"

"Blasting," he said.

"Blasting?" she said groggily. "Are they widening the highway or something? We would've heard about it if they were."

"No," Bill said. He pushed the covers off and rolled out of bed.

She shook her head. "What?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

He slipped into his jogging suit as she silently snuggled back under the blankets. He knew what was happening, and it wasn't roadwork. There was only one major construction project in town this fall.

The Store.

His alarm wasn't set to ring for another fifteen minutes, so he turned it off on his way out of the bedroom. In the bathroom, he splashed water on his face to fully wake himself up, then went into the kitchen and downed a quick glass of orange juice before quietly sneaking out of the house.

Skipping his usual preliminary warm-up, he hurried down the drive to the road and started jogging.

Juniper seemed even more deserted than usual, and for once he found the lack of people oppressive rather than refreshing. He'd expected to see more lights in the houses, to see more people in the streets—hadn't anyone else heard the explosions?—but the town remained dark, dark and quiet, and he almost breathed a sigh of relief as he passed by the last of the downtown buildings and headed toward the highway.

Although the sun had not yet risen, there was a lightening of the sky behind the mountains as he approached his favorite stretch of highway. The forest was dark, the close-set trees still clinging to the blackness of night, but the open area ahead was clearly visible and bathed in a fading blue. He slowed down, not to savor the moment this time, but to see what was going on.

He stopped directly in front of the sign.

In the twenty-four hours since he'd last passed this spot, it had changed completely. The sign was still in place, but gone were the saplings and small bushes that had dotted the meadow. Gone was the meadow itself. The tall grass had been plowed under. Bare earth and surveyors' sticks marked the boundaries of the construction site. A portion of the hill had been blasted away, fallen timber and chunks of boulder fanning out onto the flat section of ground away from the remaining slope.

He stared at the scene, shocked. He'd seen pictures of rain forest destruction, the aftereffects of wanton slash-and-burn policies in underdeveloped countries, but even in his most pessimistic projections he had not expected to see anything like that here. Yet that was exactly what it looked like. The carefully planned and orderly executed clearing of the land that he would have thought a major

chain like The Store would insist upon was nowhere in evidence. No trees had been saved, no effort had been made to preserve or protect the character of the area. The trees had been simply cut, the land gouged, the hillside blasted.

And they'd done it all in a day.

There was no sign of the workers, only the equipment—bulldozers, Caterpillars, shovels, cranes—parked side by side in the southeast corner of the site and set off by a chain-link fence. It had been only a half hour, maybe less, since he'd been awakened by the explosions, but the men who'd set off the blasts were nowhere to be seen. He looked carefully around, trying to spot someone, anyone moving amidst the equipment. Nothing.

He frowned. Even if work was only performed at night, there was no way that there wouldn't be at least a few men still about—unless they'd detonated the explosives and then immediately vacated the site.

But he'd seen no cars on the highway, had met no vehicles on the road.

He jumped the small ditch adjoining the highway and walked past the sign onto the property, his jogging shoes sinking into the newly turned dirt. As he walked over rocks and ruts, around branches and boulders, his puzzlement over the workers reverted back to anger over the destruction of the meadow. How had this been allowed to happen? Where were the building inspectors? The code enforcement people? Juniper's zoning laws didn't allow builders to just decimate the landscape. The town's master plan specifically required all new businesses to "conform to the spirit and style of the existing community and its buildings, and to make a concerted effort to retain all geologic formations and as much natural vegetation as is feasible." The plan had been drafted in the early 1980s by the then-town council in an attempt to preserve the unique character of Juniper and its environs, and even the council since had reinforced the town's commitment to controlled growth, making sure the builder of an apartment house incorporated an existing stand of ponderosas in his landscaping plans, withholding approval for a gas station until the company agreed to shift its building fifteen feet to the north in order to accommodate a huge house-sized boulder that had become a local landmark in the years he had sat on the undeveloped land.

Now, in one day, The Store had managed to circumvent that entire process and single-handedly destroy the most beautiful stretch of road within the town limits.

Well, that wouldn't last. As soon as it opened, he'd go directly to town hall and—

He stopped walking, his stomach sinking.

The perimeter of the site was littered with the carcasses of dead animals.

He took a deep breath as he *stared* at the scene before him. A wall of debris from the cleared meadow had been pushed back by bulldozers to the rear of the property and formed a semicircular barrier to the land beyond. He had seen only trees and bushes at first, logs and branches, but this close he could see that there were animal parts mixed in with the rest of the cleared brush, bodies lying on the ground in front of the debris. As his gaze moved slowly from left to right, he counted four deer, three wolves, six javelina, and over a dozen raccoons, squirrels, and chipmunks.

How had this many animals been killed?

And why?

The deer.

The deer had been an omen, a taste of things to come. He had thought it odd at the time, eerie even, but now the animal's death seemed downright malevolent. It was as if the deer had died as a result of the erected sign. And now these other animals had died because the land had been cleared.

Their deaths seemed to be the price of construction.

It was a trade.

~~That was stupid, he knew, but logical or not, something about the idea felt right to him, and good~~
bumps arose beneath the cooling sweat on his arms as he stared at the curved line of bodies.

He began walking forward. The first deer had not been shot or injured. Had these other animals died naturally?

He strode quickly across the unevenly graded ground. Two days ago, he would have laughed had anybody suggested anything as ludicrous as what he was thinking. This was a construction site. Local workers, people he probably knew, had been hired to clear a piece of land and build a building. There was nothing strange or unnatural about that.

Only there was. He didn't know how, didn't know why, but somehow within the last twenty-four hours everything had changed. The entire world seemed different. His unshakable faith in the rational and the material had been shaken, and while he wasn't ready to believe in ghosts and goblins and little green men, he wasn't quite the skeptic he had been. It was an unnerving feeling, and it didn't sit well with him, and once again he found himself wondering if it wasn't his personal connection with the area that was coloring his viewpoint.

Third Store Massacre in a Month.

Then again, maybe it wasn't.

He reached the first animal, a wolf. Like the deer, its stomach was distended. Also like the deer there was no physical sign of violence. The wolf did not even appear to have been pushed here by a bulldozer. There wasn't a mark on it. It was as if it had walked or crawled to this spot of its own free will and died.

He looked past the dead animal to the wall of cleared debris immediately beyond.

And saw an arm protruding from the tangle of rocks and brush.

Bill's heart leaped in his chest. He took a hesitant step forward to verify that what he thought he was seeing was what he really was seeing.

Sticking out between the bare branches of a dead manzanita bush was a white hand and forearm smeared with mud and blood.

He backed up, stumbled across the rutted remains of the meadow, and, as the sun rose over the mountains, ran down the highway as fast as he could toward the police station in town.

He returned with the police to the scene, answering questions and watching as they pulled the corpse out from the rubble. After the body had been loaded into an ambulance and taken away, he rode back to the station with Forest Everson. The detective took down an official statement, which Bill read and signed.

It was after ten when he was finally through with all of the forms and questions and reports. In the furor over finding the body, The Store's destruction of the meadow and its wanton disregard for local zoning ordinances had been pushed to the side, but though Bill was still disturbed by what he'd found, he had not been distracted from his original purpose, and he walked next door, to the town hall, and explained to the young acne-scarred clerk behind the counter that he wanted to talk to one of the building or code enforcement inspectors.

"Mr. Gilman's out for the week," the clerk said.

"And who is Mr. Gilman?"

"He's the code enforcement officer."

"Isn't there anyone else I could talk to?" Bill asked.

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