

# CRAIG JOHNSON THE COLD DISH



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## **The Murder Room Where Criminal Minds Meet**

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**Craig Johnson (1961–)**

Craig Johnson is the author of nine novels in the Walt Longmire mystery series, which has garnered popular and critical acclaim. Among other awards, *The Cold Dish* was a Dilys Award finalist and the French edition won Le Prix du Polar Nouvel Observateur/BibliObs; *The Dark Horse*, the fifth in the series, was a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year; *Junkyard Dogs* won the Watson Award for a mystery novel with the best sidekick, and *Hell Is Empty*, selected by *Library Journal* as the Best Mystery of the Year, was a *New York Times* best seller, as was *As the Crow Flies*. The Walt Longmire series is the basis for the hit TV drama *Longmire*, shown on TCM in the UK and starring Robert Taylor, Lou Diamond Phillips and Katee Sackhoff. Craig Johnson lives in Ucross, Wyoming, population twenty-five.

# 1

“Bob Barnes says they got a dead body out on BLM land. He’s on line one.”

She might have knocked, but I didn’t hear it because I was watching the geese. I watch the geese a lot in the fall, when the days get shorter and the ice traces the rocky edges of Clear Creek. The sheriff’s office in our county is an old Carnegie building that my department inherited when the Absaroka County Library got so many books they had to go live somewhere else. We’ve still got the painting of Andy out in the landing of the entryway. Every time the previous sheriff left the building he used to salute the old robber baron. I’ve got the large office in the south side bay, which allows me an unobstructed view of the Big Horn Mountains to my right and the Powder River Valley to my left. The geese fly down the valley south, with their backs to me, and I usually sit with my back to the window, but occasionally I get caught with my chair turned; this seems to be happening more and more, lately.

I looked at her, looking being one of my better law-enforcement techniques. Ruby’s a tall woman, slim, with a direct manner and clear blue eyes that tend to make people nervous. I like that in a receptionist/dispatcher, keeps the riffraff out of the office. She leaned against the doorjamb and went to shorthand, “Bob Barnes, dead body, line one.”

I looked at the blinking red light on my desk and wondered vaguely if there was a way I could get out of this. “Did he sound drunk?”

“I am not aware that I’ve ever heard him sound sober.”

I flipped the file and pictures that I’d been studying onto my chest and punched line one and the speakerphone button. “Hey, Bob. What’s up?”

“Hey, Walt. You ain’t gonna believe this shit. . . .” He didn’t sound particularly drunk, but Bob’s a professional, so you never can tell. He was silent for a moment. “Hey, no shit, we got us a cool one out here.”

I winked at Ruby. “Just one, huh?”

“Hey, I ain’t shittin’ you. Billy was movin’ some of Tom Chatham’s sheep down off the BLM section to winter pasture, and them little bastards clustered around somethin’ in one of the draws. . . . We got a cool one.”

“You didn’t see it?”

“No. Billy did.”

“Put him on.”

There was a brief jostling of the phone, and a younger version of Bob’s voice answered, “Hey, Shuuriff.”

Slurred speech. Great. “Billy, you say you saw this body?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“What’d it look like?”

Silence for a moment. “Looked like a body.”

I thought about resting my head on my desk. “Anybody we know?”

“Oh, I didn’t get that close.”

Instead, I pushed my hat farther up on my head and sighed. “How close did you get?”

“Couple hundred yards. It gets steep in the draws where the water flow cuts through that little valley. The sheep stayed all clustered around whatever it is. I didn’t want to take my truck up there ’cause I just got it washed.”

I studied the little red light on the phone until I realized he was not going to go on. “No chance of this being a dead ewe or lamb? Wouldn’t be a coyote, with the other sheep milling around. “Where are you guys?”

“’Bout a mile past the old Hudson Bridge on 137.”

“All right, you hang on. I’ll get somebody out there in a half hour or so.”

“Yes sir. . . . Hey, Shuuriff?” I waited. “Dad says for you to bring beer, we’re almost out.”

“You bet.” I punched the button and looked at Ruby. “Where’s Vic?”

“Well, she’s not sitting in her office looking at old reports.”

“Where is she, please?” Her turn to sigh and, never looking at me directly, she walked over, took the worn manila folder from my chest, and returned it to the filing cabinet where she always returns it when she catches me studying it.

“Don’t you think you should get out of the office sometime today?” She continued to look at the windows.

I thought about it. “I am not going out 137 to look at dead sheep.”

“Vic’s down the street, directing traffic.”

“We’ve only got one street. What’s she doing that for?”

“Electricals for the Christmas decorations.”

“It’s not even Thanksgiving.”

“It’s a city council thing.”

I had put her on that yesterday and promptly forgot about it. I had a choice: I could either go out to 137, drink beer, and look at dead sheep with a drunk Bob Barnes and his half-wit son or go direct traffic and let Vic show me how displeased she was with me. “We got any beer in the refrigerator?”

“No.”

I pulled my hat down straight and told Ruby that if anybody else called about dead bodies, we had already filled the quota for a Friday and they should call back next week. She stopped me by mentioning my daughter, who was my singular ray of sunshine. “Tell Cady I said hello and for her to call me.”

This was suspicious. “Why?” She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. My finely honed detecting skills told me something was up, but I had neither the time nor the energy to pursue it.

I jumped in the Silver Bullet and rolled through the drive-through at Durant Liquor to pick up a sixer of Rainier. No sense having the county support Bob Barnes’s bad habits with a full six-pack, so I screwed off one of the tops and took a swig. Ah, mountain fresh. I was going to have to drive by Vic and let her let me know how pissed off she was bound to be, so I pulled out onto Main Street, joined the

three-car traffic jam, and looked into the outstretched palm of Deputy Victoria Moretti.

Vic was a career patrol person from an extended family of patrol people back in South Philadelphia. Her father was a cop, her uncles were cops, and her brothers were cops. The problem was that her husband was not a cop. He was a field engineer for Consolidated Coal and had gotten transferred to Wyoming to work at a mine about halfway between here and the Montana border. When he accepted the new position a little less than two years ago, she gave it all up and came out with him. She listened to the wind, played housewife for about two weeks, and then came into the office to apply for a job.

She didn't look like a cop, least not like the ones we have out here. I figured she was one of those artists who had received a grant from the Crossroads Foundation, the ones that lope up and down the county roads in their \$150 running shoes and their New York Yankee ball caps. I'd lost one of my regular deputies, Lenny Rowell, to the Highway Patrol. I could have brought Turk up from Powder Junction but that had appealed to me as much as gargling razor blades. It wasn't that Turk was a bad deputy; it's just that all that rodeo-cowboy bullshit wore me out, and I didn't like his juvenile temper. Nobody else from in county had applied for the job, so I had done her a favor and let her fill out an application.

I read the *Durant Courant* while she sat out in the reception room scribbling on the front and back of the damn form for half an hour. Her writing fist began to shake and by the time she was done, her face had turned a lively shade of granite. She flipped the page onto Ruby's desk, hissed "Fuck this shit," and walked out. We called all her references, from field investigators in ballistics to the Philadelphia Chief of Police. Her credentials were hard to argue with: top 5 percent out of the academy, bachelor's in law enforcement from Temple University with nineteen credit hours toward her master's, a specialty in ballistics, two citations, and four years street duty. She was on the fast track, and next year she would've made detective. I'd have been pissed, too.



I had driven out to the address that she'd given me, a little house trailer near the intersection of both highways with nothing but bare dirt and scrub sage all around it. There was a Subaru with Pennsylvania plates and a GO OWLS bumper sticker, so I figured I was in the right place. When I got up to the steps, she already had the door open and was looking at me through the screen. "Yeah?"

I was married for a quarter century and I've got a lawyer for a daughter, so I knew how to deal with these situations: Stay close to the bone, nothing but the facts, ma'am. I crossed my arms, leaned on her railing, and listened to it squeal as the sheet metal screws tried to pull loose from the doublewide's aluminum skin. "You want this job?"

"No." She looked past me toward the highway. She didn't have any shoes on, and her toes were clutching the threadbare carpet like cat's claws in an attempt to keep her from spinning off into the ether. She was a little below average height and weight, olive complexion, with short black hair that kind of stood up in pure indignity. She'd been crying, and her eyes were the color of tarnished gold, and the only thing I could think of doing was to open the screen door and hold her. I had had a lot of problems of my own of late, and I figured we could both just stand there and cry for a while.

I looked down at my brown rough-outs and watched the dirt glide across the porch in underlining streaks. "Nice wind we've been having." She didn't say a word. "Hey, you want my job?"

She laughed. "Maybe."

We both smiled. "Well, you can have it in about four years, but right now I need a deputy." She looked out at the highway again. "But I need a deputy who isn't going to run off to Pittsburgh in two weeks." That got her attention.

"Philadelphia."

"Whatever." With that, I got all the tarnished gold I could handle.

"Do I have to wear one of those goofy cowboy hats like you?"

I glanced up at the brim of my hat and then back down to her for effect. "Not unless you want to."

She cocked her head past me, nodding to the Bullet. “Do I get a Batmobile like that to drive around in?”

“You bet.”

That had been the first dissemblance of many to come.

I took a big swig and finished off the first Rainier beer and popped it back in the carton. I could see the muscles in her jaw flex like biceps. I made her knock on the window before I rolled it down. “What’s the problem, officer?”

She looked pointedly at her watch. “It’s 4:37, where the hell are you going?”

I relaxed back into the big bucket seat. “Close enough. I’m going home.” She just stood there, waiting. It was one of her best talents, asking questions and just standing there, waiting for an answer. “Oh, Bob Barnes called, says they got a dead body out between Jim Keller’s place and Bureau of Land Management.”

She yanked her head back and showed me a canine tooth. “They saw a dead body. Yeah, and I’m a fucking Chinese fighter pilot.”

“Uh huh, looks like the big sheepocide we’ve all been waiting for.” It was the shank of the afternoon, and the one beer was already helping to improve my mood. The sky was still a VistaVision blue, but there was a large cloud bank to the northwest that was just beginning to obscure the mountains. The nearer clouds were fluffy and white, but the backdrop was a darker, bruised color that promised scattered snow at high altitudes.

“You look like hammered shit.”

I gave her a look out of the side of my eye. “You wanna go out there?”

“It’s on your way home.”

“No, it’s past there, out on 137.”

“It’s still a lot closer to you, and seeing as you’re going home early . . .”

The wind was beginning to pick up. I was going to have to go long on this one. “Well, if you don’t want to . . .”

She gave me another look. "You have done nothing but sit in your office, on your ass, all day."

"I'm not feeling real well, think I might be getting the flu or something."

"Maybe you should go out and get some exercise. How much do you weigh now? Two-sixty?"

"You have a mean streak." She continued to look at me. "Two-fifty-three." It sounded better than two-fifty-five.

She stared at my left shoulder in deep concentration, juggling the evening that she must have had planned. "Glen isn't coming home till late." She looked at herself in the side-view mirror and instantly looked away. "Where are they?"

"On 137, about a mile past the old Hudson Bridge." This was working out pretty well. "They're in Billy's truck." She started to push off and walk away. "They wanted you to pick up some beer on your way out."

She turned and tapped a finger on the passenger door. "If I was going to bring them beer, I would take that depleted six-pack in the seat beside you, mister. You know, we have an open container law in this state."

I watched her man-walk with the sixteen-shot automatic bouncing on her hip. "Hey, I try and have an open container with me no matter what state I'm in." She was smiling when she slammed the door of her five-year-old unit. It's good when you can bring unbridled happiness to your fellow workers. I nosed the three-quarter ton out to the west side of town, and Vic must've passed me doing an even eighty, sirens and lights all going full blast. She gave me the finger as she went by.

I had to smile. It was Friday, I had five beers in attendance, and my daughter was supposed to call this evening. I drove out through Wolf Valley and ignored the scattered, out-of-state vehicles parked illegally along the road. During the latter part of hunting season, my part of the high plains becomes a Disneyland for every overage boy with a high-powered toy. Instead, I watched the clouds slowly eat the

Bighorn Mountains. There was a little early snow up there, and the setting sun was fading it from a kind of frozen blue to a subtle glow of purple. I had lived here my entire life, except for college in California and a stint in the marines in Vietnam. I had thought about those mountains the entire time I was gone and swore that a day wouldn't go by when I got back that I wouldn't look at them. Most of the time, I remembered.

By the time I got out to Crossroads there was a fine silting of confectionery snow blowing across the road and falling through the sage and range grass. The shadows were long when I stopped at the mailbox. There was nothing but a Doctor Leonard's Healthcare sale catalog, which scared me it was so interesting. I navigated the irrigation ditch and drove up to the house.

Martha had grown up on her family ranch, some couple thousand-odd acres near Powder Junction, and had always hated being a townie. So, three years ago, we bought a little land off the Foundation, got one of those piles of logs they call a kit, drilled a well, and planted a septic tank. We sold the house in town, because Martha was in such a hurry to get out of it, and lived in a trailer I had borrowed from Henry Standing Bear, owner of the Red Pony and my oldest friend. By the fall, we had her all closed in and the heat on. Then Martha died.

I parked the truck on the gravel, pulled out the beer, and walked on the two-by-twelves over the mud that led up to the door. I'd been meaning to get some grass seed, but the snow kept putting an end to that. I pushed the door open and stepped up from the cinder block onto the plywood floor. The place still needed a little work. There were some interior walls but most were just studs and, when you turned the bare bulbs on, the light slipped through the wooden bars and made patterns on the floor. The electricals weren't done, so I had two four-ways plugged into the box and everything just ran into them. The plumbing was done, but I used a shower curtain as a bathroom door; consequently, I didn't get many visitors. There was a prewar, Henry F. Miller baby grand that had belonged to my mother-in-law, on which I had been known to pound out a little boogie-woogie, but I

hadn't played it since Martha had died. I had my books all stacked in beer boxes near the back wall and, the Christmas before last in a fit of holiday optimism, Cady and I had gone out and bought a floor lamp, an easy chair, and a Sony Trinitron color television. The lamp and easy chair worked really well, whereas the TV did not. Without a dish, the only thing you could pick up was Channel 12 with snow for a picture and a soothing hiss for sound. I watched it religiously.

I had the phone set up on a cardboard box next to the chair so I wouldn't have to get up to answer it, and I had a cooler on the other side for the beer. I threw my coat and hat on the boxes, switched on my lamp, and sat down in my chair with Doctor Leonard in my lap. I flipped the catalog open to page three and pondered a genuine artificial sheepskin cover made for all standard recliners. I glanced up at the stacked log walls and tried to decide between the available ivory and the rich chestnut. Didn't really matter. After four years, I had yet to make any truly decisive steps in interior decor. Perhaps Doctor Leonard's machine-washable polyester acrylic fleece was my *Iliad*. This thought was unsettling enough to motivate the fourth beer, which was only slightly warmer than the first three. I screwed off the top, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, and tossed it into the drywall bucket that served as my only trash can. I thought about calling the Doc's 1-800 number but was afraid that I might block Cady's call. She had tried to get me to get call waiting, but I figured I got interrupted enough during the course of a day and didn't need to pay for the privilege at home. I hit the remote and surfed from automatic four to destination twelve: ghost TV. It was my favorite show, the one where the different-sized blobs moved around in a blizzard and didn't make too much noise. Gave me plenty of time to think.

I retraced the well-worn path of my thoughts to the report that had been lying on my chest when Ruby had come into the office. I didn't really need the actual file. I had every scrap of paper in it memorized. There is a black-and-white photograph that I had cropped down, the kind we use to attach a person to a particular brand of misery. Place

photo here. The background is a vacant white, broken only by the shadow of an electric conduit, no proper venue for intimacy such as this. In another setting, the portrait might have been a Curtis or a Remington.

Melissa is Northern Cheyenne. In the photograph, she has dark stalks of healthy hair arching to her shoulders, but there are small discolorations there and at her throat, multiple bruises, and a contusion at the jawline. I hear noises when I summon up these wounds. To the trained eye, her features might appear a touch too small, like the petals on a bud not yet opened. Her almond-shaped eyes are unreadable. I keep remembering those eyes and the epicanthic folds at the inner corners. There are no tears. She could have been some half-Asian model in one of those ridiculously perfumed glamour magazines, but she is that poor Little Bird girl who was led into a basement and gang-raped by four teenage boys who didn't care that she had fetal alcohol syndrome.

Three years ago. After all the proceedings and counterproceedings, filings and counterfilings, the case went to court in May. I remember because the sage was blooming, and the smell hurt the inside of my nose. The girl in the photo had fidgeted and twisted in her seat, sighed, placed her hands over her eyes, then pulled her fingers through her hair. She crossed her legs and shifted her weight and laid her head, facedown, on the witness stand.

"Confused . . ." That's all she said, "Confused . . ."

There are other photographs in the file, color ones I'd clipped from the Durant High School yearbook. In a fit of comic relief, I had left the blurbs from their yearbook attached to the pictures: Cody Pritchard, football, track; Jacob and George Esper, fraternal twins in birth as well as football, tie-and-fly club, and Future Farmers of America; and Bryan Keller, football, golf, debate, student council, honor roll.

They had inserted a broomstick into her, a bottle, and a fungo bat.

I was the reluctant investigating officer, and I had known Mary Roebing since we were kids. Mary teaches English at Durant High School and is the girls' basketball coach. She said she had asked

Melissa Little Bird about the marks on her face and arms but couldn't seem to get a straight answer. Later, Melissa complained about abdominal pains and blood in her urine. When Mary demanded to know what had happened, Melissa said that she had sworn that she wouldn't tell. She was worried that she might hurt the boys' feelings.

Ruby says I get the file out about once a week since the trial. She says it's unhealthy.

At Mary Roebling's request, I went to the high school in the afternoon during basketball practice. While the girls ran laps, I took off my badge, cuffs, and gun and placed them in my hat behind her desk. I sat in the office and played with the pencils until I became aware of the two of them standing in the doorway. Mary was about six even and had told me quite frankly that the only reason she had gone to the junior prom with me was because I was one of the only boys in class who was taller than she. She towered over the Little Bird girl and kept her from backing through the door by placing her hands on Melissa's shoulders. The young Indian was coated in a youthful gleam of sweat and, if not for the marks on her face and shoulders and the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, looked like she had just been freshly minted. I held up one of the American Number Two pencils and said, "I can't figure out how they get the lead on the inside." To my surprise, her face became suddenly dark as she contemplated the issue. "I figure they got these trees that have the lead already in them." Her face brightened in the relief of having the riddle solved.

"You're the sheriff." Her voice was childlike and carried all the trust in the world. I was back twenty-five years with Cady in front of a Saturday morning *Sesame Street*, watching "Policemen Are Our Friends."

"Yep, that's me." Her eyes had traveled all the way from the rounded-toe boots to the matted silver hair that I'm sure was sticking out at undefined angles.

"Blue jeans."

We were the third county in Wyoming to adopt blue jeans as regular duty uniform, but it was one of the downfalls of our particular

brand of vehicular law enforcement that the common populace rarely saw us from the waist down. “Yep, big around as they are long.” Mary tried to stifle a laugh, and the girl looked to her, then back to me. Rarely do you get those glimmers of unadulterated love and, if you’re smart, you pack them away for darker days. I started to get up but thought better of it.

“Melissa, is your uncle Henry Standing Bear?” I figured the best way to get started was to establish some kind of personal reference.

“Uncle Bear.” Her smile was enormous. Henry was one of the most understated prophets I knew and one of the most personally interested individuals I had ever met.

I gestured for her to sit across from me and rolled up the left sleeve of my shirt to display the ghostly cross-hatchings that stretched back from my left hand. “I got hurt playing pool with your uncle Bear up in Jimtown, once . . .” The girl’s eyes widened as she sat in the chair opposite me, and she instinctively reached to place a forefinger on the marbled flesh of my forearm. Her fingers were cool, and her palms were strangely devoid of any lines, as if her life was yet to be determined. I reached across the desk slowly, sliding a palm under her chin and lifting to accentuate an angry contusion at the jawline. “That’s a good one, too.” She nodded with a slight movement that freed her face, and she dropped her eyes to the desktop, which informed us of the potential for the president’s physical fitness award. “How’d you get that?” She covered the offending jaw with a quick look to the side and a through-the-eyebrow glance at Mary.

“Melissa, I’m not here to hurt anybody, but I also want to make sure that nobody hurts you.” She nodded and began gently rocking back and forth, hands firmly clasped between her legs. “Has anybody hurt you?” Her attention stayed with the glass-covered surface of Mary’s desk.

“No.”

I studied Melissa’s reflection and tried to imagine her as she should have been. Her people were strong, clear-eyed Cheyenne from the Northern Reservation, with a little Crow from her maternal side. I



tried to see a Melissa who hadn't had the spark of curiosity robbed from her by a mother who had ingested too many I-90 Cocktails—Lysol and rubbing alcohol—when she was pregnant. Melissa should have been a beautiful Indian maiden standing on the rolling, grassy hills of the Little Big Horn, arms outstretched to a future that held promise, security, and freedom. When I looked up, it was as if she had read my mind, that we had shared a vision. She had stopped rocking and was looking at the diamond snaps on my shirt.

"It was romantic." She said it flat, as if emotion would only rob her statement of its impact. Her eyes returned to the desk.

I leaned back in the office chair, allowing my fingertips to remain on the edge of the beveled glass. "What was romantic, Melissa?"

She spoke to the desk. "The walk."

I was out of beer, Cady still hadn't called, and I had given up on Doctor Leonard's sheepskin cover as the salvation of a future well-coordinated interior. I needed a Rainier and some company so I cranked my hat down hard, buttoned my sheepskin jacket up tight, and stepped into the horizontal snow flurries that were whipping around the corner of the house. I figured I'd drive the half mile down the paved road to the Red Pony. I stood there on the planks for a moment, listening to something above the wind, wings whirring only thirty feet off the ground as the geese honked their warning cries to each other in an attempt to get south. Maybe they had waited too long to leave. Maybe I had, too.

Off in the distance, I could make out the neon pony cantering in the darkness and a small number of peripheral trucks parked in the adjacent gravel lot. As I got closer, I could see that the inside lights of the bar were not on and felt a surge of panic at the thought of having to drive all the way back into town for a beer. I parked the truck and could make out a few figures moving in the darkened window of the carryout. Couldn't have been a blackout; the red neon pony shimmered across my hood and up the windshield. I pushed into the wind to open the bar's glass door and came within inches of running into the owner and operator of the Red Pony, Henry Standing Bear.

Henry and I had known each other since grade school when we had gotten into a fight at the water fountain, and he had loosened two of my teeth with a roundhouse left that had come from the Black Hills. We had played against each other in the trenches of interior line-manship from peewee through high school, whereupon I finished up at USC, lost my deferment, got drafted by the marines, and went to Vietnam. Henry had made a halfhearted attempt at the white man's educational system at Berkeley and had learned enough to protest against it before being rewarded for his efforts with an all-expense-paid, four-year vacation with the Special Forces SOG group at An Khe. It was here that Henry said he had learned of the white man's true vision and power, of his ability to kill the largest number of individuals in the most effective manner possible.

Upon his return to the States, Henry had reattempted college life but found that his ability for being lectured to had deteriorated. He returned to political activity in the seventies and had been a seminal member of every Native American movement for the next ten years. Sensing that revolution is the industry of young men, however, he returned to Absaroka County for the funeral of the grandmother who had raised him and somewhere came up with enough cash to finance a deal with the Foundation that would transform an old Sinclair station, the only public building in Crossroads, into a kind of half-assed bar that he called the Red Pony. Henry had been known to read a great deal of Steinbeck. It was in the Foundation's interest to promote the bar, if for no other purpose than to keep the shit-caked rubber boots of the locals out of their oriental-carpeted meeting rooms.

We looked at each other, his expression carrying the quiet self-deprecation that usually held some hidden meaning. "Beer, Tonto?" he asked as he handed me an open Rainier and continued past with what appeared to be a tire iron in the other hand. I looked through the poolroom into the bar proper and could make out about eight people seated on stools, outlined by the fluorescent glow of the beer coolers. Big night. I took a sip and followed him to the far end of the room

where he seemed to be preparing to tear apart the wall. Leaning against the offending structure he slipped the flat end of the tire iron behind the weenie-wood that made up the interior of the bar.

“You forget to pay your REA bill again?” He paused for a second to give me a dirty look and then put all 220 pounds into the tire iron and propelled the four-foot board from the wall, with nails still attached, to clatter at our feet. I bent from my vantage point to look at the ring-shanked holes in the plaster surface that lay underneath the removed board. Henry’s face was, as always, impassive.

“Damn.” Without another word, he slipped the tire iron beneath the next board and popped it to the floor. Same result. “Damn.”

I figured it was time to ask, “Are we redecorating, or are we looking for something specific?” He gestured to the wall with a hand that pleaded and threatened at the same time.

“Fuse box.”

“You covered it up with boards?”

Another sidelong glance. “At least I have walls.”

Henry was one of the chosen few who had been to the cabin. His statement was hard to refute. “I’ve been thinking about getting an imitation sheepskin cover for my recliner.” This got a long look.

“Are you drunk?”

I gave the question thought. “No, but I’m working on it.” He grunted a little laugh and popped off another board, which added to the considerable pile that was collecting at our feet.

“Damn.” He placed the tire iron in the next board. “Cady call you?”

“No, the brat.”

“Huh . . . She called me.” He popped the board loose to reveal the gray cover of an ancient fuse box. “Yes.”

I turned to look at him. “What?”

He tapped the small, metal cover and glanced at me. “Fuse box.”

“Cady called you?” His eyes were dark and clear, the far one split by the strong nose that I knew had been broken at least three times, once by me.

“Yes.”

I tried to contain myself and sound casual, but he had me and he knew it. "When did she call?"

"Oh, a little while ago . . ." His casual was far more convincing than mine.

With a forefinger he pulled open the small metal box to reveal four fuses that looked as if they hadn't been changed since Edison was a child. The box itself was rusted out in the back, victim of some age-old roof leak. The conduits surrounding it were rotten and peeled back, revealing frayed tendrils of green and black corroded wire. The four fuses were covered in a thick coat of dust and were surrounded by sockets, which held a strange patina of white and green crystals. They looked like two sets of angry eyes embedded in the wall, just waiting to unleash 220 volts into anything that came close.

He placed a hand on the uneven surface of the plaster where he had taken most of the wall apart and leaned all his weight against it. His other hand brushed back the crow-black hair, smattered with touches of silver, in an arch over his shoulder and down the small of his back. "One in four, I like the odds."

"Did she say anything about calling me?"

"No. Hey . . ." He bristled with mock indignation and gestured to the fuse box. "I have a situation here."

I tried to be helpful. "They've got little windows in them so you can see which one is blown." He lowered his head and squinted into the box.

"It is not that I do not trust your home-improvement skills, even though I know you do not have any." He carefully wiped the dust from the surface of the four fuses. "They are all black."

"Do you have any extras?"

"Of course not." He held up the roll of pennies that had been hidden in his front shirt pocket. "I have these." He smiled the coyote smile, the one that had made offensive linemen part their hair in the middle, NVA officers sweat between their shoulder blades, and otherwise intelligent women occupy bar stools in his immediate vicinity. Henry was the dog that wouldn't stay on the porch.

I watched with great apprehension as his fingers began twisting one of the rusted fuses from its corroded green outlet. The muscles on his forearm writhed like snakes rolling under sun-baked earth. To my knowledge, Henry had never lifted a weight in his life, but he still carried with him the tone of the warrior and was betrayed only by a very small amount of baggage at the middle. As the applied pressure began to take its toll, the glass knob turned and the remainder of the building went black. "Damn."

Hoots and laughter came from the darkness as we stood there trying to see each other. "I don't think that was it." I listened to him sigh and replace the fuse, and the lights from the beer coolers once again lit up the far room. There was a smattering of applause from the patrons.

"She did not say anything about calling you." He was still staring into the metal box, his odds having improved dramatically.

"So, what'd she have to say?"

"Nothing much. We talked about you."

"What about me?" Throughout the entire conversation, he studied the fuse box with the half-smile that told me he didn't take either the electrical crisis or my familial life all that seriously. Cady and Henry had a symbiotic, avuncular relationship that had led her into a quasi-bohemian lifestyle. She was professionally adept at billiards and darts, had majored in Native American Studies at Berkeley, his almost alma mater, had continued on to law school at the University of Washington, and was now an attorney in Philadelphia. When together, they spent the majority of their time whispering to each other, pointing toward me, and giggling. The thought of the two of them conspiring at long distance was enough to worry me but, with Ruby's involvement, something was definitely up.

Deciding on the fuse diagonally opposite the first, Henry reached in and boldly twisted. The red neon horses that had stampeded across the parked vehicles outside flickered off to more cheers from the peanut gallery. From his lack of response, I wasn't sure if Henry had noticed. "The pony . . ."

"Damn."

He screwed the fuse back in. The neon roan paused and then leapt across the hood of the Bullet. The flurries were letting up; the bad weather had decided to whistle on down the Bozeman trail to the railheads. The bar held a kind of conspiratorial coziness what with the subdued light of the beer coolers filtering through the cracks in the dividing wall. The soft murmur of small talk provided a buffer against the landscape that was now scrubbed with snowflakes.

“So, what about me?”

He tapped one of the remaining fuses accusingly with an index finger. “She is worried that you are still depressed.”

“About what?” He looked at me, decided better of it, and looked back at the fuse box. I pushed off the wall and stepped carefully over the nail-laden boards that covered the floor. “I need another beer.”

“You know where they are.” I started to turn, but he caught me by tapping on one of the last two fuses. “The suspense is killing you, right?” I made a quick face, placed the empty beer bottle on the edge of the pool table, and bent over to pick up one of the boards. I spread my feet in a good, open stance and held the bark-covered board on my shoulder with both hands. This got a look. “You are going to knock me loose from this if I get electrocuted?”

I shrugged. “It’s what friends are for. Besides, I want to see if anybody in this county has worse luck than me.”

“Not yet.” He twisted the next to last fuse and, to our amazement, absolutely nothing happened. We both looked for any absence of light, strained to listen for any lack of humming from the assorted coolers, heaters, and fans. Henry looked to the ceiling in deep concentration.

“Well, at least I didn’t have to hit you with the board.”

“Yes, but now we have to do the penny part.” He nudged one of the coins from the paper roll and held it up for me to view.

“Where do you get this ‘we’ shit, Kemosabe?”

“Have you not ever done this before?”

I lowered my board, careful to avoid the nails. “No.” We had reached the conceptual stage of the project, so Henry joined me in

leaning against the pool table. "Have you?" He crossed his arms and considered the single lowest common denominator of legal tender.

"No, but I have heard that you can."

"From who?"

"Old people like you."

"I'm less than a year older than you."

He shrugged and read the inscription, "IN GOD WE TRUST. I was going to use a buffalo-head nickel, but it has to be copper to conduct, that much I know."

I dropped my board with a clatter. "Well, all I know about this stuff is enough to be scared shitless of it. Is there any reason why this has to be done tonight?" He made a face. "I mean your beer coolers are running, the heat's on, even the horse out front is working . . ."

"Pony."

"Whatever."

He sighed and looked around the bar. "Only if somebody wants to play pool."

I nudged him with my shoulder. "Is your life worth a game of pool?" He thought for a moment.

"Seems like it has been." He placed the penny on his cocked thumbnail. "Heads we go for it, tails we go sit in the dark with everybody else." I nodded, and he flipped the coin to me, whereupon I promptly dropped it in the pile of boards. We looked at each other.

"I didn't know I was supposed to catch it." He peeled another penny from the paper roll.

"Do not worry, I have got forty-nine more. You ought to be able to catch one of them." He flipped the second penny, and I snatched it from midair and slapped it on the back of my other hand. I left my palm covering the penny for a few moments, building my own little tension.

"Is the suspense killing you?"

"Not really, next we flip to see who puts the penny in the fuse." I uncovered the coin and thanked the God we trust it was tails.

"C'mon, I'll buy you a Coke."

\* \* \*

I ambled along behind Henry as we joined the others at the bar itself. The walls were covered with the works of different artists who had received residencies with the Foundation. It was a mixed lot, but each piece reminded me of the individual who had occupied the adjacent barstool, and artists are always good for conversation, so long as you want to talk about their art.

The small group was clustered in the bar's corner, only slightly illuminated by the dim glow of available light. There were a couple of stray hunters, still dressed in their camouflage and optical-orange vests; evidently the deer were wearing blue this year. I could make out Buck Morris, one of the local cowboys who took care of the Foundation's nominal cattle herd. He was easy to spot because of his hat; a weather-worn Resistol that some oil executive had offered to buy for \$250. General opinion was that Buck had missed the boat. The young man next to him wore a frayed jean jacket and had strong Cheyenne features. He must've been from out of county, because I didn't know him.

Next was Roger Russell, an electrician out of Powder Junction in the southern part of the county who had come up here to expand his business. Turk said that he was kind of the black sheep of the family and that he had little bastards scattered all up and down the Basin: "Powder River, let'r buck, a mile wide and an inch deep." I wondered mildly why Henry and I had just been gambling with our lives while an expert nursed a C and C in the next room.

Sitting next to him was probably the reason why Roger happened to be here. Vonnie Hayes was old school Wyoming; her grandfather had had a spread of thirty thousand acres of good land. Vonnie and I had kind of known each other when we were children but, after her father had committed suicide, she was sent to boarding school and her art life had taken her east for a number of years, where she had become an accomplished sculptress. Much later, she returned to take care of her aging mother. Vonnie and Martha had worked together on the library board and a number of other community projects in the



county, and my daughter had worked for Vonnie as a housekeeper one summer. After Martha died, Cady tried to fix us up, an endeavor that Vonnie and I both viewed with equal parts humor and open-handed flirtation. Even in the dim light I could make out Vonnie's features, strong, with a lupine slant to the eyes, sandy hair pulled back in a casual bun.

I leaned against the bar beside her, bumping into Roger and giving him my substantial rear. "Jeez, Rog." I looked around in the darkness. "Don't you know we've got an electrical emergency on our hands here?"

He carefully placed his drink back and nudged it with his fingers. "I am . . . retired."

Henry appeared on the other side of the bar, slid a Rainier to me, and leaned into Roger. "What about this penny thing?"

Roger looked at him, attempting to gather himself for an answer. As he did, I looked over to Vonnie. "Boy, the things you find in the dark."

She took a sip of her chenin blanc. Henry kept a special bottle of the white wine in the cooler for her. I had always wanted to ask her for a sip but had never gotten up the nerve. Her eyes glowed softly, and the corner of her lips curved into a warm, sad smile. "Hello, Walter."

Undaunted by conversing with drunks, Henry continued. "Those old fuses, the big ones, you put pennies in them to get them to work?"

Roger laughed. "Yes you can, and you can also fuse every bit of the substandard wiring in this shit-hole and burn us all up alive." I kind of leaned Roger against the bar, stabilizing the listing that had begun as he spoke, and pulled a loose stool from the far side, placing it and myself, between Roger and Vonnie.

"Vonnie . . ." Her eyes had a way of opening a little wider when you spoke to her, then closing a little like they were capturing what you were saying and holding on to it. I was starting to remember why I had had a crush on her and continued. "You see this heathen, devil red man across the bar here?" Her eyes glanced at Henry for a moment, then returned to mine. "He and Cady are plotting some sort of intrigue against me."

Her eyes widened again, and she returned her gaze to Henry. "Is that true, Bear?" It irritated me that every woman I knew was on a cuddly first-name basis with the man.

Henry nodded toward me. "White man full of shit."

We were on a Technicolor roll now. I was Randolph Scott to his . . . I don't know, one of those bigger than life Indians that either got beat up or killed by the end of the third reel. "It's true, he's government trained to be involved in these kinds of covert operations." I pointed to the framed boxes on the wall behind the bar that contained a burnt map of North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. On this map were Henry's Special Forces pin, Purple Heart, Army Distinguished Service Cross, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and assorted campaign medals. There were also black-and-white photographs of Henry with his infantry platoon leaders, and one with his friend and team member Lo Chi, whom he had brought back and relocated in Los Angeles. There was even a picture of Henry and me, wearing the two ugliest Hawaiian shirts in Saigon, on a three-day leave in 1968. "You see all that stuff on the wall? He was trained in the war to be the gravest irritation to all those around him. There is no way a common soldier, such as myself, could possibly compete with a hand-picked, combat-hardened pain in the ass like him." Few people knew the shadowy history of the Special Operations Group that had operated out of Laos, but the numbers said it all: For every American Special Forces soldier that was lost, the North Vietnamese lost between 100 and 150 troops. The Bear had been a part of one of the most effective killing machines on either side of the war.

Henry's face pushed up and curved to the side as the weight of his head held steady pushed the palm of his supporting hand. "Common soldier? The closest he came to any real fighting was when he agreed to meet me for a three-day in Saigon." Under his breath he continued, but I'm pretty sure I was the only one that heard it, "Except for Tet . . ."

I left Henry to leverage Roger into doing some free electrical consulting work and turned my attention back to Vonnie. She was staring

into the glass eyes of one of the mounted antelope behind the bar. "Pretty animals." Her eyes remained steady on the pronghorn. "Do you think they feel pain like we do?"

"Nope."

She turned to look at me, seemingly irritated. "Really?"

"Really."

She stayed with me for a second, and then, fading into disappointment, glanced at her wine glass. "So, you don't think they feel pain."

"No, I said I don't think they feel pain like us."

"Oh." The smile slowly returned. "For a minute there I thought you had become a jerk."

"No, a blacksmith's son."

She continued to smile and then nodded. "You used to come out to our place with your father . . . Lloyd."

I watched her. "Nobody remembers his name."

"I think my mother had a little crush on him."

"Just another Longmire, plying his wiles. When I was real little, I used to make the shoeing rounds with him. It looked painful to me, so I asked him."

"What did he say?"

"Pop used to speak in biblical terms, but what he said was that the brutes of the field don't feel pain like humans. That that's the price we pay for thinking."

She took another sip of her wine. "Comforting to know that we're the species that feels the most pain."

I half-closed an eye and looked at her for a second. "Is that East Coast sarcasm I'm hearing?"

"No, that's East Coast self-pity."

"Oh." I was getting in way over my head. I can do the bull about as well as it can be done, but that edgy buzz-talk makes me weary in a heartbeat. I try and keep up, but after a while I start to drag.

She placed a hand on mine, and I think it was the hottest hand I had ever felt. "Walter, are you all right?"

It always started like this, a touch and a kind word. I used to feel

heat behind my eyes and a shortness of breath, but now I just feel the emptiness. The fuses of desire are blown black windows, and I'm gone with no pennies to save me. "Oh, you mean you really want to talk?"

Her eyes were so sad, so honest. "Yeah, I figured since we didn't have anything else to do."

So I leaned in and told her the truth. "I just . . . I'm just numb most of the time."

She blinked. "Me too."

I felt like one of those guys in the movies, there in the foxhole asking how much ammo your buddy's got. I got two more clips, how 'bout you? "I know the things I'm supposed to do, but I just don't seem to have the energy. I mean, I've been thinking about turning over my pillow for three weeks."

"I know . . ." She looked away. "How's Cady?"

Here I was floating in the white-capped Pacific of self-pity, and Vonnie threw me a lifeline to keep me from embarrassing myself. Three fingers, bartender . . . "She's great." I looked at Vonnie to see if she was really interested. She was. "She's doing so well in Philadelphia."

"She always has been special."

"Yes, she is." We sat there for a moment, allowing the crackle and roar of my parental self-satisfaction to fade into the soft glow of friendly conversation. Her hand was still on my arm when the phone rang.

"Looks like she's tracked you down." The hand went away.

I watched as Henry allowed it to ring the second time, his tele-signature, then snatched it from the cradle. "It is another beautiful evening here at the Red Pony bar and continual soirée, how can I help you?" His face pulled up on one side as if the receiver had just smacked him. "Yes, he is here." He stretched the cord across the expanse of the bar and handed me the phone. His eyes stayed on mine.

I nudged it between my chin and shoulder with one hand, took a sip of beer with the other, and swallowed. "Hello, Sugar Blossom . . ."

"Hello, shithead," the voice on the other end said. "It's not a dead sheep."

I stood there, letting the world shift at quarter points and then got a bearing and dropped my voice. "What've we got?" Every eye in the bar was on me.

Vic's voice held an edge that I had never heard before, approaching an excitement under the grave suppression of businesslike boredom. "Male, Caucasian, approximately twenty-one years of age . . . one entry wound characteristic of, maybe, a .30-06."

I started to rub my eyes, noticed that my hand was shaking, and put it in my pocket. "All right . . . call the Store and tell them to send the Little Lady."

There was a brief pause, and I listened to the static from a radio on 137 patched through to a landline in Durant. "You don't want any Cashiers?"

"No, just the Bag Boys. I've got a highly dependable staff."

She laughed. "Wait till you get out here. These fucking sheep have been marching around on everything; I think the little bastards actually ate some of his clothes. And they shit on him."

"Great . . . Past the Hudson Bridge; you got your lights on?"

"Yep." She paused for a moment, and I listened to the static. "Walt?"

I had started to hang up the phone. "Yeah?"

"You better bring some beer to quiet Bob and Billy down."

This was a first. "You bet." I started to hang up again.

"Walt?"

"Yep?"

"It's Cody Pritchard."