

Los Angeles, California
April, 2006

How the hell had they found him?

When he opened the small metal door to his post office box, he saw the letter lying there all by itself, the edges of the envelope curling up inside the tight confines of the space. He took it back home, not bothering to open it.

He was living in the trailer then, out on the ragged edge of the county. An old Airstream, not much bigger than a minivan, its aluminum shell gone dull and oxidized in the salt air.

He was alone except for the dog, Laurie living in the house in Van Nuys, Sean already gone. More than two years now since he'd worked.

The inside of the trailer was as orderly as a sailboat. He didn't own much; what he did was kept stowed away in its designated place. In the long fog-filled evenings he would cook elaborate dinners for himself. After he finished eating, he would carefully wipe off the fake wood-grained surface of the dinette table before flipping down the cushions that converted it into his bed.

Lying there, listening to the waves through the glass louvers of the

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jealousie window, he rationalized things; telling himself this was his monastic period, romanticizing it as a kind of spiritual quest. But when his thoughts gnawed at him and kept him from sleep, he'd worry that there was no way back, that he had somehow managed to let himself drift too far off course.

When he finally slit open the envelope, he thought it was a joke. Perez, or one of the others over at Rampart, goofing on him.

The letter was printed on cream-colored letterhead, some kind of curious crest at the top, a drawing of a pick ax superimposed over a pine tree. He'd never heard of the town, Haydenville, had to walk the four long miles to the library to look it up on the Internet.

The town was a long haul from anywhere, all the way up in the far northern reaches of the state. Seventy-five miles down from the Oregon border. A protracted and treacherous drive inland from the coast.

He followed up, found out the job offer was, indeed, for real.

In the end, there really wasn't much to think about.

Haydenville, California
May, 2006

ONE

Her skin was the first thing he noticed.

Already deeply tanned on only the fifteenth day of May, it was flecked here and there with droplets of water from the river.

She wore a pair of green board shorts, stripes down the sides featuring some kind of exotic Hawaiian foliage. Above the chrome snap of the waistband, her stomach was undulated with small hills of muscle. The angle of her body caused the fullness of her breasts to spill from beneath the nylon triangles of her bikini top.

She lay on a bed of cobbles that thrust out into the rush of the river. The morning sun flashed off the water in discs of light, wrapping about her head like a halo.

Will Magowan stood over her, studying her youthful face. Just beneath her hairline was a circular purplish bruise. She stared up at him, as if asking for some kind of assurance, her eyes not blinking. A milky white film covered the pupil and irises, robbing them of color.

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The air vibrated with the drone of blowflies, their metallic green bodies swarming over her nose and mouth. The insects had already managed to fill her nostrils with tiny white eggs.

He began to feel as if he were looking down at her from a great height, like a stilt walker. All of a sudden, there was the sensation of having too much saliva in his mouth. When he swallowed, the sheer volume of it surprised him.

Somewhere within his abdomen, his stomach shifted, making him conscious now of its weight. He forced himself to take a deep breath, to try to calm it.

Then, before it was too late, he spun away from her, hunching over into the willows just as the spasms began.

He could hear them laughing.

“...supposed to be some big kahuna, just moved up from L.A.” It was the one called Thomas, the police officer who seemed young enough to still be in high school.

“Don’t exactly look like it right now,” said the older one, the Forest Service ranger.

Will’s back was to them. He was still folded over at the waist, staring at the remains of his breakfast strewn on the sandy ground. A Balance Bar and black coffee. He thought the energy bar looked pretty much the same way it had when he’d eaten it, only deconstructed now, no longer in its original rectangular form.

He remembered how he used to brag about how his stomach was bombproof. He’d eat anything with impunity, would even risk the cabeza and lengua from the illicit taco trucks parked in the shadow of the 710 Freeway.

But all of that was before Eucalyptus Knolls, with its vinyl covered mattresses and echoing hallways that reeked of Pine-Sol. Before seventeen straight days of detox. No methadone, no clonidine.

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Nothing but a molded plastic vomit pan.

“Shit,” Thomas said. “It’s like the dude’s never seen a dead body before or something.”

Will ripped a sheet from his pocket notebook and used it to wipe his mouth. A second skin of sweat clung to him, the temperature already in the high eighties, so early in the morning.

They were staring at him.

Thomas and the ranger, waiting for him to say something. The ranger puffed at a slender cigar with a white plastic tip, his Smokey the Bear hat casting a semi-circular shadow down across his face.

Will realized that they were waiting for him to tell them what to do, and he experienced a momentary pang of panic. What was he supposed to say? He’d never been in charge of anything like this before. He’d been around enough crime scenes, seen his share of DOA’s, but he’d worked Narcotics ever since getting out of uniform.

He looked around, searching for the usual crush of activity—evidence techs, photographers, patrolmen—but this appeared to be the whole show. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a leather badge holder. He flipped it open to expose a brass shield and slid it down into the waistband of his jeans.

CHIEF, the badge read. First day on the job. At this rate, he thought, probably his last.

An orange whitewater kayak was sitting on the stones next to the woman’s body. Scattered around the kayak were various articles of paddling equipment: a neoprene spray skirt; a personal flotation device; a sparkle-painted red helmet with a spider web crack in the front. He had the nagging sense that something was missing but at the moment couldn’t put his finger on what it might be.

Red earth rose up steeply from the aquamarine river, nothing but the empty road above them on one side, dense Northern California forest on the other.

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They were staring at him.

The young officer, Thomas, wore his full dress uniform despite the heat, his black boots shined so they reflected the corona of the sun. His braided leather garrison belt sagged with the weight of what appeared to be every accessory that could possibly be ordered from the Streicher's catalog.

Will tried to figure out how he might proceed here. He flipped through his memories of homicide detectives past as they arrived on scene, mustard stains on their ties, the reek of Cutty thick on the breath.

When Will began to speak, he tried to channel those men, to somehow transplant their tone of bone-tired boredom.

"All right," he finally said. "So what've we got?"

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