

Includes the Bonus Novella "Weed Species," in Paperback for the First Time!

"Don't open this book unless you intend to finish it in the same night." —STEPHEN KING

JACK KETCHUM

Author of Offspring and The Girl Next Door

JOYRIDE

The background of the cover is a photograph of a two-lane road covered in snow at night. The road has a yellow center line. In the foreground, there is a large, dark, splattered bloodstain on the snow and the yellow line. The trees in the background are dark and silhouetted against a blue night sky.

Joyride

Includes the bonus novella
Weed Species

Jack Ketchum

LEISURE BOOKS  NEWYORK CITY

Along for the Ride

“Eeeeyah!”

Wayne was leaping along the shoulder like a crazed ape, like some fucking wide receiver who’s just scored the winning touchdown.

“Jesus Christ! Did you see that?”

The woman’s body slumped on its side. Lee smelled urine, shit, and gunpowder. Cars whizzed by. He could feel the warm thrusting breeze of their passing. One seemed to slow and then move on.

“Come on. Get back in the car.” The gun was pointed at him. Then at Carole.

Then back at him again.

“Get into the car!”

They did as he said. There was no way he could get to the Magnum. Wayne was too close. And Wayne was timing it perfectly. He had the rear door open, one foot in, and the .38 trained on Lee’s back through the window until Lee got his own door open. Then he just slid inside. He held both guns now, the Magnum pointed at Lee’s ear and the .38 at Carole.

“Drive!”

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JOYRIDE

SOLANGE: When slaves love one another it's not love. CLAIRE: No, but it's just as serious.

—Jean Genet, *The Maid*

By and by the judge rose and moved away on some obscure mission and after a while someone asked the ex-priest if it were true that at one time there had been two moons in the sky and the ex-priest eyed the false moon above them and said that it may well have been so. But certainly the wise high God in his dismay at the proliferation of lunacy on this earth must have wetted a thumb and leaned down out of the abyss and pinched it hissing into extinction. And could he find some alter means by which the birds could mend their paths in the darkenss he might have done with this one too.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

PREFACE

It was newly summer.

Rule drove 89 North toward Waterbury.

The proof that it was summer was his windshield. Mosquitoes, flies, bees, midges, mayflies, moths—their bodies left a thin white paste across the glass studded with harder parts, with wings and mandibles and antennae, with pollen baskets and compound eyes.

It's amazing, he thought. You can't even move in the world without hurting something.

Every step.

Something's disaster.

The highway ahead of him was the trajectory of a bullet. Rule was riding in its jacket. Its nose was his windshield.

Hurting through the living summer air.

THURSDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Rain again. Rain every day this week. The air in the bedroom so swollen by moisture that his hands felt sticky, his body sticky, the sheets as damp as if he had just made long and passionate love to her when in fact he hadn't touched her.

"We've got to talk," Lee said. "Carole?"

She shook her head. "Not now."

He watched her lying there staring up at the ceiling, wrapped tight in the sheet, her bare long arms crossed over her chest. The cats on the floor beside her darting suddenly out of the room, chasing each other, disappearing down the dark paneled hallway and thumping down the stairs, their claws skittering on the highly polished wood. He heard one of them hit a bannister and keep on running. Then a piece of furniture below.

Some other time they'd have laughed listening to them banging around down there, playing. But like she said: not now.

He saw the tightness in her mouth prematurely aging her, giving him a view of her ten years older.

"We've got to talk about it," Lee said. "You know we do."

She started to cry. The tears rolled down so suddenly it was as though they'd been waiting in ambush for her.

"There's got to be some other way," she said. "I can't do this."

"What other way? You tell me. Tell me something we haven't tried already."

Her sobs like soft explosions. They shook the bed.

He reached over and held her. He knew that holding her couldn't count for much. That they had come to a place where none of the familiar gestures seemed to work anymore, not even the most basic where their pleasures all seemed poisoned and their attempts to touch subverted.

My god, he thought. Look what the man has done. He'd never have thought it possible. That now he had to will himself to feel for her when once it had been so easy.

He held her anyway.

His embrace barely reached her. Barely got through.

Inside her images seethed and wrangled. The man Lee lying next to her wasn't part of them. The were all images of her and Howard. Howard and her.

Standing together by the sea at Rockport, his promise to protect her made against a vast flat wall of sea and sky.

Then the bed. This bed. Her arms and legs tied to this bed. Howard getting off her saying, don't worry, I'm not going to kill you, I'm taking off the gag. I'm not going to kill you this time.

Their first Christmas after the wedding. Close your eyes. Go on. Go ahead. Now open them. And Beastie just a tiny kitten—so small she fit in the palm of your hand—peering out confused and startled over the bright red rim of the stocking, and Carole knowing that this was permanent, that she was happy.

Howard standing on the lawn at four in the morning. Raving. Then handcuffed, furious inside the squad car. The policeman Rule with his tiny nub of pencil licking it staring at her bruised swollen face.

and writing in his pad.

~~Skiing the Alpine Double at Mt. Haggarty and Carole so unsure of herself, her first time, his consideration of her total, focused. Knees bent, all right? Use the poles. She had never felt so secure all her life.~~

The sound and feel of a blade drifting over her skin. Don't move. Don't move and I won't cut you.

Howard passed out drunk. Pissing the bed. And Carole waking, aware of the sudden spreading seeping wetness, changing the sheets first thing in the morning so that when he finished his shower it would seem as though it had never happened and he would not be embarrassed nor would she.

The point of the knife moving down across her belly into her pubic hair. Maybe I'll shave you. Smiling.

The arms around her pulled her tight toward the body that was not Howard's, that was thinner and smaller than Howard's and did not smell of bourbon or gin or Ralph Lauren Polo Crest or hot fresh urine.

"I can do it," Lee said. "You just get him there."

Her face and neck were wet with tears. Apparently she had stopped crying.

"You trust me, don't you?" he said.

She looked at him and nodded. When in fact she trusted no one. Not really.

For a moment the silence seemed to beat the air above her with invisible wings, she could feel them drift away from her through the evening damp. A vanishing. A flight of souls.

She had never felt so lonely.

SATURDAY

CHAPTER TWO

There were times Susan thought, who is this *alien* here beside me?

Now for instance. They were nearly all the way up the gentler face at Smuggler's Notch, nearly the pond, their path surrounded by maples, mostly—but you could smell the pine and fir trees perched along the cliffsides. It was a beautiful clear July day—one of the first really good days of the season with all the rain they'd been having. They were together.

And Wayne was scowling. Hardly talking to her.

That damned fence, she thought.

It's the fence again. You want to bet?

She doubted that there was another soul in Barstow who had one like it. White birch pickets ten feet tall and hung so tightly together around his pitiful angular cheese-wedge half-acre of land that hardly a sliver of light slipped through on a sunny day. You could stand on the lawn at ten in the morning and imagine being eaten by a shadowy row of teeth.

Teeth that were ten feet tall.

All to keep out the neighbor's dog. According to Wayne.

She'd laughed at first, saying why in the world do you need this? but she had to admit that he'd done a good job on it really. Very meticulous and even admirable in a way. Even if she still could see no reason for it. Even if it did look like a miniature Fort Apache, almost dwarfing the boxy old GI-bi home he'd inherited from his mom.

The only problem was that the neighborhood kids kept raiding it, tearing the slats off, stealing them while he worked nights. He'd had to replace three or four of them so far. Or was it five?

Wayne suspected the Leigh kids two doors down. But he had no proof. And seemed to spend half his time lately brooding on it.

When here you had this *day*!

The path wound around the side of the mountain. It opened up into a clearing. Tough windblown grass growing thick and short and hardscrabble rocky earth. Down the cliff-face through a stand of poplar (*shitwood* Wayne called it, because it threw no heat) you could see where they'd just come from. It was a ten-minute walk from here—though the straight vertical drop made it seem a whole lot closer.

"Let's rest a while, okay?" she said.

"Why? We're almost there."

"Just for a while."

It was cool up here now that they'd stopped. Her blouse was soaked in back and she could feel the dampness along the waist of her jeans. The gentle even breeze felt wonderful to her.

"Okay," he grunted.

Well god, thanks a lot, she thought.

He slipped off the backpack and tossed it down. Never mind that he'd probably just mushed the sandwiches. He sat down on a chunk of granite, kicking absently at the dirt in front of him.

You'd think he'd make some effort, she thought. With him working nights at the Black Locust Tavern and her working days at Mountain Lodge they hardly even saw one another lately except on weekends—and weekends had been lousy through most of June. Even the Fourth of July had been rainy. Hadn't he ever heard of—what was it?—*seize the day*!

There were times she'd actually considered marrying Wayne if he ever got round to asking. It was still kind of early in their relationship for that but it seemed like a pretty good idea sometimes. She'd be out of Woolcott at least.

She'd think of that. Then she'd consider how *dark* he could get sometimes, what an unreachable pain in the butt he could be.

She didn't know.

Probably, she thought, he should have sold the house after his mother died and gone elsewhere. The neighbors all seemed to irritate him now. Maybe there were too many memories in that place. Too many familiar faces. Too many kids he'd grown up with who, like him, seemed stuck there.

They'd met in his bar. It was just three days after his mother's funeral, he told her. She was amazed he was even working.

She remembered later helping him go through the house, the sheer incredible *poignancy* of things in a life that death had interrupted. The newly washed curtains waiting to be hung. The Social Security check marking her place in the Agatha Christie novel she'd been reading—the book was almost finished. The stuffed lobster wrapped in foil awaiting some special occasion in the freezer.

According to Wayne, her favorite food.

And it seemed so terribly *wrong* somehow that this woman, who she'd never even met, would never get to hang those curtains, never cash her check or finish the novel or get to taste that lobster, that she'd had to let Wayne get on with it alone for a while—while she went out into the yard and had herself a good cry.

It occurred to her that a life was only measured time, really, and that you were the only measure. Like people were all just a bunch of clocks each set to a different time, each fatally winding down. And that seemed to her so sad, so lonely.

It's *got* to be depressing for him, she thought. Living all alone there. It's got to be. It's still only four months now. You don't just dump twenty-five years of memories overnight.

That's why he's still this way, she thought.

This broody.

That, and maybe the DWI. The poor guy couldn't even *drive* anymore.

It was costing him a fortune in cab fare.

She thought, I've never seen him cry. Not once.

Well, she wasn't going to let him get her down. Not today. Not with this beautiful day here. Not with this clean fresh air and the warm sun and gentle breeze.

She knew a way to cheer him up. If only for a little while.

They were all alone up here, nobody around. And it was the perfect day for it too.

A little adventure could go a long, long way.

"Hey Wayne?" she said.

He looked up at her, expressionless.

She smiled at him anyhow.

She pulled the blouse out of her jeans and felt the cool breeze slide across her belly as she started in on the buttons.

The breeze tickled, made her giggle.

She unzipped the jeans and walked over.

It was the worst it had ever been.

He had her on the ground. Had her naked. He had her legs spread wide and he was sticking it into

her and it was hurting her all right, she had her blouse down under her but that wasn't doing much, he could see by the expression on her face that she was part all excited and part unhappy with all these pebbles and rocks and shit grinding up through the grass into the pale flesh of her ass—so he poked at her harder, let her have his weight each time. He wanted her to hurt, to bleed a little, he wanted her shoulders to bleed and her back to bleed. Wanted her ass to bleed. He wanted...

...*anything* that would get rid of this tension that started in the muscles of his back, ran up through his neck and roared like a freight train through his brain, that seemed to kick chunks of brain matter out like gravel through his ears, his nose, his eyes...

Jesus!

It was the *worst*. It was always the worst every goddamn time. But this was the *worst*.

The absolute killer.

The pain didn't matter.

There were so many things to think of that the pain was only one of them, inconsequential. The breadth of him inside her, the feeling of fullness there, the taste of his sweat on her lips and the dark hair curling wavelike down his forearms, his lean good looks tensed now and straining and the smell of him and what they talked about sometimes when they talked about his hopes and dreams for the future because he wasn't much of a bartender, he knew that, he wasn't that great with people and he wanted to buy his own place—and her dreams too when he would let her speak about them, about kids and family and a house somewhere that was not his mother's house but somewhere in Barstow not Woolcott, a life with a future. There was plenty to think about.

So she didn't mind the pain.

Not at first.

She felt his hand clutch her breast and began to ride the pulses happening inside her as the hand traveled slowly to her neck and clenched there, his fingers curling, strong, cutting off her breath a little and then a lot, so that he had her gasping—and *she came!* Came suddenly and so unexpectedly under him that it startled her, his fingers sinking deeper and it was impossible to breathe now, *impossible*—and my god what was he *doing?*—terminating her orgasm as instantly as it had hit her and filling her with a sudden strange kind of wonder looking up at him, because the face that was so intent on her was also as distant as a straight-A student dissecting a frog in a lab—and she felt an icy terror.

Wayne? Wayne?

Death a real, sudden possibility, a comet streaking across her suddenly gone-black-as-midnight sky.

She struggled, clawed at the fingers sunk too deep for her to grip and stared up into his face pleading at him with her eyes, aware of her tongue protruding eyes bulging blood soaring through her cheeks. She twisted under him and kicked and pulled desperately, hopelessly at his forearms, stones raking her spine, she pounded him with her fists, trying to scream but nothing but a bubbling strangled sound like something under water coming out of her until the curled hard fingers seemed to receive some distant message, some caution from the brain—and he released her. And she could almost breathe again through throat and lungs that throbbed with rushing life as he groaned and collapsed on top of her.

He rolled away. Lay panting while she gasped and fought for air.

And being next to him was like lying next to a poisonous, treacherous snake. She got to her hands and knees and scuttled away.

“You *bastard!* You fucking *bastard!*”

“I...”

There was no way to know when the tears had begun but now all of a sudden she could hardly see. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and groped for her blouse, her panties, her jeans.

“*Bastard!*”

She stumbled getting into the jeans and nearly fell, still dizzy and sobbing, too much movement too soon after...what had happened...and him just sitting there watching.

Not moving. Not reaching for his clothes. Just sitting there looking dazed.

Looking almost...my god! Looking almost innocent!

“You *bastard!* You almost *killed* me! Was that your idea of some kind of *game*? Are you *crazy*?”

“Susan, I...”

“What? You’re sorry? Is that what you’re going to say to me? You’re *sorry*?” She shook her head. “Jesus! and to think that I...Jesus, *I’m* the one who’s crazy!”

“Susan just listen to me, all right? I don’t know what...”

“*NO*, you *bastard!* I’m *not* going to listen to you! You come *near* me and I swear I’ll kill you. You understand me? *God damn you!*”

She couldn’t stop sobbing. Chest heaving huge deep still-liquid gulps of air. Still so out of control of herself that it hurt.

He reached for his clothes. She wiped her eyes and watched him.

She saw no remorse. No concern for her.

He doesn’t care! she thought. My god. He really doesn’t care!

And the tears this time were worse in a way than before because they came from somewhere deeper inside her. Not from lingering fear or pain or even anger, but from the loss of him, the loss of her idea of him and of the two of them together. She had held that idea much closer than she’d imagined.

“I *loved* you,” she said. “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you would do...*this* to me. I think you need help or something, Wayne. I think you’re a...very sick person.”

She buttoned her blouse and tucked it in. Turned. Her footsteps along the stone and dirt path unnaturally loud in her ears as she stumbled toward home down the mountain.

He’d come so close this time.

In the end, he hadn’t dared.

God! He’d wanted to. Every cell and nerve end in his body seemed to demand it of him. Its power was wonderful, the holding back a brute physical ache. And now he felt drained, as though pummeled by some massive orgasm. When in fact his own had been weak, brief, unfulfilling. Nothing to what it would have been, he knew, had he given in.

Had he killed her.

He wondered—for maybe the thousandth goddamn time in his adult life—why he hadn’t dared.

So close.

He tied his Reeboks, got up and slipped the backpack over his shoulder. He felt depressed. It would be good to walk for a while. There was a place down by the pond he thought was okay. He had the sandwiches.

Jesus! She’d been angry!

Thinking about it now, it was almost comical. He almost laughed. Because of all she didn’t know. Because of what none of them knew and what they couldn’t see.

That so many of them *asked* to die. Men, women, kids. Their sex didn't matter. Their age didn't matter. The Leigh kids who kept tearing up his fence at night. Roberts, the fatass next door with his goddamn dog from hell. Half—no, nearly *all*—his regular customers over at the Black Locust Tavern. Murdoch with his smelly backyard barbecue every summer. The weird old lady who waved to him from her three-wheel bike and whose name he didn't know but who seemed to know him or want to know him, some friend of his mother's maybe attempting some fucked-up down-home intimacy.

Assholes. Going through life with so little on their minds that it was comical. Knowing nothing *about* life, really—that life had nothing to do with love and home, family and friends, that life was made up of stealth and planning and *brains*: brains and guts and will. That, and the obvious—the isolation. All of them thinking that they actually mattered to somebody. And that because of that their weaselly little lives had to matter too. When they didn't. Couldn't. Ever.

He kept a notepad and jotted down offenses. “Roberts: dogshit in left-hand corner of the yard, 1/3/93—he picked up the big chunks but left some smeared on the grass. *RETAL.*” Or “Loden: ordered scotch with water back, then tells me no, *soda* back, 2/25/93. *RETAL.*”

Just so he wouldn't forget just who and when.

He wondered why he hadn't.

Killed her.

It felt cowardly somehow.

There had been deaths at his hands for sure but he hadn't dared for years now, not with what they called the higher animals, and even then it was only cats. And one old miserable stray dog.

Even then it was wonderful.

Of course the aftermath wasn't. Not exactly. He'd had to bury them in his yard. Worrying all the time that his mother would see or suspect something. Whereas here, now...

Here he could have just pulled her into the bushes and left her that way.

The way god left his dead.

The bird who strikes the wire.

The old raccoon too crippled to fish or scavenge anymore.

The weak and the stillborn and the cold and hungry.

The way the dead had been left useless—no, not useless, because you had to think about the soil and how the dead enriched the soil—since life began.

God's way.

There was nobody who would miss her. Not for a few days at least and maybe not for a long time. Her parents had moved to South Carolina and they'd never been close.

They had that much in common, at least, he and Susan. Nobody would miss either of them.

He lit a Camel. Susan didn't like him to smoke. Now it hardly mattered.

The Black Locust Tavern had gone half smokeless three months ago. A separate section, and smaller than the other, for those with the habit. It was a case of the manager, Peters, allowing himself to get pussywhipped by a bunch of yuppies and blue-hair oldsters.

Peters was in the notebook, naturally.

RETAL.

He climbed a shelf of rock and allowed himself a glance over the edge. He was susceptible to vertigo sometimes but felt sure that this was the way to beat it. Just keep on looking over. The trail below was obscured by a squat stand of windblown pines growing out of the rock, trunks twisted like elbow joints of gutter pipe to accommodate the need for growth both out and up simultaneously. The pines weren't doing too great a job at either. They looked small and beat and scruffy.

He moved away. The pond wasn't far.

~~He had dreamed last night that he and his mother had driven to a house neither of them knew but~~ which was to be her home from then on and he abandoned her there, old and crippled in the legs, which she had never been, left her standing shaky in the enormous open yard looking confused and frightened and angry. There were cats in the yard and she hated cats. He had driven away laughing. The dream was very vivid. Very real.

He wondered if Susan would ever fuck him again. It was possible. But not likely.

Too bad. She was pretty good at fucking and there were fewer notes about her in his notepad than there were on most people. He decided to give it a week or so and then see if maybe he could talk to her. If he could talk to her then he could possibly convince her to start fucking again because even if it wasn't the whole thing it was something.

He was considering taking one of the sandwiches out of the backpack, unwrapping it and eating along the trail because he'd worked up an appetite by then with all this *stress* when he heard voices—shouts—coming from below. He walked over to the edge again and peered down through the trees.

He saw movement there, shifted to a more open area and saw the three of them clearly in a tight little circle moving in and then outward, back and forth like a rough awkward dance slightly off the trail in the brush.

He felt a tingling. Something scuttling crablike down his spine.

He saw what they were doing and forgot all about Susan and all about his notepad and the dream of his mother and all about his sandwich. He knew suddenly that his life had changed forever and he let it flow over him.

He watched.

Between the first and second strokes of the Louisville Slugger, Howard Gardner had time to entertain a number of notions, think a number of thoughts—none of them too deep but most of them important.

You little bitch you're not gonna get me was the first thought and probably the most significant. Because that gave him anger, and anger gave him fight.

Wrong! I'm gonna get you was the second most important simply because it was so utterly wrongheaded. His immediate concern was the man with the baseball bat. Not the woman. At the moment the woman was just a distraction. And that was too bad, because Howard did not need any distractions.

Move and tuck, he thought. *Come on. You can get this guy. You're bleeding, dammit!* He could feel it rolling down the side of his face. *Fuck it! Get the bastard. You've got the reach and you've got the weight.*

I'll kill the little bitch.

He should have known in the first place.

Something was wrong with the whole setup. Why in hell would she want to be alone with him after all this time, and alone in the woods no less. For what? Old times' sake? Because they used to climb up here and picnic once in a while? Those days were long gone and since then she'd taken the house from him and the car and half the business and even had the Barstow PD on his ass, had a restraining order out against him the little fuck so that he wasn't even supposed to come near her, his own ex-wife! But there was no restraining him then—no way—and there was no restraining him now.

The dizziness wasn't good, though.

The guy Lee had been standing behind him. He'd never even seen the guy. Carole had simply stopped to admire the scenery and suddenly *bam!* lights bursting in his head but Lee had misjudged

the reach. Caught him midway through the wood instead of at the thick end of the bat so that it slid over his ear and the side of his head down to the collarbone. The collarbone felt broken. But Howard was standing. He was by god standing!

He fainted left and came in right, beneath the blow—boxing the guy, just like in the Navy. Planted a right fist in a surprisingly tight belly while the bat rolled harmless off his shoulder. The guy fell back into the bushes and Carole made a choked-off screaming sound behind him. Some woman-scared little shriek.

You bitch.

You fuck me, and then you fuck with me and now you want to get rid of me. Is that it?

What's the matter?

Am I too much trouble for you?

He turned to her, to maybe quite fucking *possibly* throw her the hell off the mountain—he could do it, they were that close to the edge right here—and he was wondering if he would *feel* like doing it to her when he got over there because it was *completely up to him*, it had always been up to him whatever he wanted to do with her, stepping toward her thinking oh to hell with it, to hell with the running after her and the hassle and jerking her around, trying to make her life fucking miserable, it would be easier just to end her nasty little life right here and now, he was thinking this when the guy got up out of the bushes and let him have it again.

He'd screwed up bad, turning toward her. Going after her.

And the guy was good this time. Much better. His head split open really bleeding now so that he had to wipe the blood pouring down off his forehead out of his eyes in order to see, and he realized that he was on his knees. He didn't remember falling.

But something was queer. Something was wrong. *What the hell was happening?*

The guy should have hit him again by now.

Sure. That was it.

What the hell was wrong with the guy?

The guy had *hesitated*.

Asshole.

His vision cleared enough to see a pair of legs standing in front of him and he grabbed them, jerked them toward him and hugged tight and lifted and Lee fell, flailing at him with the bat, smashing down across the middle of his back to his hip, the bat coming down so hard that he could feel the hip bone crack. Not like the head wound. Hell the head wound hardly hurt at all. Pain like a bulldozer now.

But by then he was up on top of him pounding at the blurry oval that he knew was Carole's lover's face, watching it turn red suddenly, red with the guy's blood or his own he wasn't sure which and didn't care because he was connecting, he could feel teeth jab into his fist and then something so that was probably his eye and he was howling, Howard was howling dousing his pain with the blind ecstatic glee of manslaughter when he sensed—not saw—her step up right beside them standing above them and sensed—not saw—her lift the rock.

He smelled the new fresh dirt off the rock. It smelled like the blood-smell only richer. Thicker.

And then for a moment he felt some kind of amorphous contact, some sudden enormous pressure from above snapping down his head and his neck, Lee sliding off to one side, the earth and grass looming.

And then felt nothing at all.

Wayne lay low over the rocks. No vertigo now.

No.

~~He couldn't believe what he was seeing.~~

They fucking *dared!*

He almost felt like shouting, like whooping up there in sheer delight. My god! At first he hadn't been sure what he was seeing, it had looked like maybe nothing more than a fight down there, maybe over the woman. One of the men had a baseball bat but he'd seen worse in the parking lots of bars at night with jacks and tire irons so that it was only at the end of it when the woman picked up the rock and brought it down on the taller, bigger man that Wayne knew what he was seeing.

Murder.

He felt like calling down to them. *Hey! Guys! Hey! Include me in!* He felt like going down there. See this thing up close. Hell—maybe even help out a little. Who the hell *were* these people? Where the hell did they come from? He couldn't *remember* being this excited. Not by anything! He was aware of his heart racing and a pounding in his ears.

They *dared!*

God *damn!* he wanted to go down there.

But instead he did the smart thing, he guessed it was the smart thing, he watched silently as the man wiped the blood off his face—he was bleeding from the mouth—and then bent down and lifted off the rock. The rock was big and flat and beneath it the man's head looked like somebody had pushed it all out of shape and painted it red. The man heaved the rock off to one side down the mountain and returned to where the woman was standing, hands fluttering, saying something to him and then looking nervously both ways up and down the trail. She needn't have worried. Apart from Wayne they were alone there and would be for quite a while. He had a good view of the trail and it was empty.

It seemed to be just dawning on her that they—that *she*—had actually just killed somebody. It was not just her hands—he could see even from up here that her whole body was shaking. He noted that it was a very good body. The tight jeans and T-shirt made that clear. He didn't know which was more attractive, the body or what he'd just watched it do.

The man seemed calmer. He wrapped his arms around her and held her for a moment.

Wayne could hear a muffled sobbing.

After a moment he let go and moved back to the dead man, took each of his wrists and started dragging. The head lolled sideways and left bloody skid marks across the path. The dead man's expensive-looking running shoes scraped out their own trail.

And Wayne wondered how in hell they were expecting to get away with this.

It was going to be hard to clean up the mess up there. Head wounds did a lot of bleeding. This one sure did. And even the most mentally deficient cop was probably going to check the slope above the place a corpse had landed.

He watched as the man dug a small hiker's backpack out of the brush beside the trail, turned the dead man over and slipped his arms through the shoulder straps, turned him again and hitched it together across his chest.

Hiking accident, thought Wayne.

Sure, maybe.

But there was still the problem of the bloody trail.

It was only when the body disappeared down off the rock face and he heard the long silence and then the dim, faraway splash that he realized that these people were smarter than he'd thought and maybe even knew what they were doing—that in fact they'd chosen the site pretty well. There was a

stream down below that would be running deep and fast these days with all the rain they'd been having. He couldn't see it from where he was but he and Susan had passed it on the way up.

The body would carry.

Not bad, he thought. Not bad at all.

If they were lucky they might even get a little more rain tonight or tomorrow morning to wipe the slate clean altogether. He wondered if they'd checked the weather reports.

He bet they had.

He smiled. Watching them was absolutely the best damn time he'd had in years. Even now, as they were getting ready to leave. Even as the man kicked dirt across the path and pulled off his blood shirt, turned it inside out and wet it from a thermos, used it to wipe the blood off his face and hands and stuffed it into a second, larger backpack he'd hidden with the smaller one in the brush; then took a clean shirt out of it and put it on.

The woman just sat there on a rock, watching, slack, as though her legs might not be up to supporting her. The man took a roll of plastic wrap out of the pack and wrapped the bat and put that in there too along with the thermos and zipped the backpack shut. He slipped the pack over his shoulder and they were ready.

And the nicest thing happened then.

The man turned and looked up the mountain.

And Wayne knew him.

The man was a customer over at the Black Locust Tavern. Came in now and then.

A scotch drinker, he thought.

He didn't know his name.

He watched the woman rise—it seemed as though she was going to be able to walk on out of here after all—and the two of them move away down the path. Just a pair of hikers out for a walk on a nice sunny day. If somebody passed them and thought that the woman looked a little shaky—well, it was no easy climb.

The whole thing, Wayne thought, including the killing, had probably taken less than ten minutes.

Ten minutes to kill a guy. It was amazing.

He waited until they were out of sight, and then he started down.

There was blood splashed along the rocks where they'd killed him, droplets in the brush and a small pool staining the grass. He pulled this up with his hands. The blood was half-dried and sticky, the color of rust. The grass clung to the palms of his hands. He scattered it and dug up the dirt beneath until no trace was left and rubbed some more dirt into his hands.

They'd done a piss-poor job on the trail so he finished scuffing it up for them with his Reeboks and a sharply pointed stick. He rubbed some dirt along the rock face. There was nothing he could do about the splattered brush but he had made the whole scene less noticeable. You would have to be looking for something now. You would not just trip across it.

It took him a while to find the body.

In fact it was getting on to late afternoon when he finally saw it drifting back and forth in a gentle whirling eddy between some granite boulders a quarter mile or so from where they'd killed him.

He did not approach directly but waited until he was certain there was no one around either moving up- or downstream or coming down the mountain from above.

At this hour it was unlikely but he did not want to take any chances.

He waited until he was confident that all he was hearing was rushing water and birds and forest sounds and then he waded in.

The body floated facedown. The pants, jacket, and shirt were sodden and looked too big for him now. The backpack rode high, almost to his neck, and was skewed to the left. Wayne took hold of a clammy pale wrist and pulled him halfway up onto one of the rocks so that just his legs dangled in the water. The right leg had twisted in its socket during his fall. The knee pointed almost completely behind him now.

He examined the head wound, washed partly clean but still red and glistening. It looked like a roast or a steak left to defrost too long in its clear plastic wrap on the counter, a deep rich spoiled red lying in a pool of blood thinned and diluted by water.

He touched its rim, touched the strands of soft thick brain matter the stream had urged free along the side of the wound, saw small sharp shards of bone poking through the way the broken shell of a clam will embed itself in the soft delicious mantle.

He touched the hard jagged edge of broken skull, thinly draped with silky flesh and coarse strands of muddy dark hair.

He picked a twig away.

He turned the body over. It was the eyes he wanted to see. The body was heavy with water and it was hard to move but he managed to get it over on one shoulder and pulled and finally the legs flopped over splashing in the water, followed by the torso and the head.

The eyes were not what he expected.

He had expected shock. Maybe even wonder. Some romantic final gaze into the infinite. A look of startled wide-eyed amazement like they wrote about in all the books. Like you saw in the movies. The look of somebody who's seen deep into his own mortality. Then past it.

But the eyes were hardly open.

Just thin dull slits of gray filmed over. Like the guy was drunk, maybe, and sleeping off a hangover.

It was boring.

He turned the body over, let it slide back into the stream. He gave it a push with his foot so that it escaped the eddy, turned slowly into the current and began moving downstream. He watched it drift away. He had done the same with toy wooden boats once long ago.

He guessed that he had learned something.

It was the killing—not the death—that mattered.

It was not the product of the kill, which was nothing but meat and emptiness when you got down to it, though the person you killed wasn't there anymore and that was something. But the act itself, the moment of the taking and the losing.

That was classy. That was important.

He wondered what it felt like.

No dog, no cat. But a man.

Maybe one of these days he'd ask them.

It was getting dangerously close to dusk. The stream had turned metallic black. The sky was gray—as though they indeed might see more rain tonight. He decided he'd better get out of there.

It was a fact that people got lost on this mountain every year.

This time it was definitely going to be the other guy.

SUNDAY

CHAPTER THREE

The morning after the murder she dreamed that she had shut both her cats up inadvertently in the oven. She had seen them crawl in there, had simply forgotten and turned the oven on and closed the oven door and left the kitchen.

It wasn't until she heard the yowling, the hideous hissing scratching sounds that she remembered and hurried in from her bedroom.

She opened it and there was Beastie covered with Vinni's blood, her black coat glistening, shaking Vinni by the neck, tearing wide the open gash from ear to shoulder with her two front paws and glaring out at Carole as though to say, *You did this. You made us crazy. You see what you did?* Vinni was dead, her poor head lolling, tongue longer than she had ever seen it in life protruding through bloody teeth.

She woke up crying, aching, to Sunday morning and the first thing she did was look past Lee's shoulder out the window.

It had rained overnight as they'd hoped.

The grass on her long sloping lawn was wet and green and there were puddles on the fieldstone porch.

She guessed that they were lucky.

She didn't feel lucky.

She felt frightened.

Lee was still sleeping, the sheet bunched up beneath him. She looked at the clock. The clock read eight fifteen. Three and a half hours of sleep. They'd both had more than their share to drink last night—more than they were used to. Adrenaline ran high in each of them until well into the morning. She supposed that fear would do that to you. The bed stank of sweat and exhaustion.

She looked at him. He looked like a stranger. A stranger she'd known for a good two years now. She didn't want to wake him.

She needed some time alone before she could face anybody. Even him.

Maybe a lot of time.

She got up and pulled on a robe and walked to the kitchen. There was coffee in the pot left over from the night before. She poured some and put it in the microwave and set the timer for seventy seconds. The cats were circling her, brushing against her ankles, so she fed them, pulled the tab on the can of Friskies and spooned it out onto two plates and watched them attack in their accustomed spirit of happy near-starvation. She leaned back against the counter and watched them.

Beast was all black except for a paintbrush stroke of white down along her bib. Vinni was a golden-gray-and-white tabby. Howard had picked them both up for her at the ASPCA a year apart from one another. The nicest thing he'd ever done for her.

That was years ago. Beast was six and Vinni was five.

And there was the goddamn trembling again.

Last night it had seemed it would never go away—her whole body shaking, coming at her in spasms. A drink would fix it for a moment but last night even the drinking was strange. The scotch would wear off in no time, leaving her vividly sober and remembering what they'd done and right back where she started again. Shaking.

She'd been afraid of Howard when he was alive.

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