



THE LAST RANGER

a novel

PETER HELLER

Best-selling author
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A Novel

PETER HELLER

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Also by Peter Heller](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

*To Becky Arnold. And to her sons, Landis and Thor.
And to her husband, Andy, in memoriam.*

Prologue

The night of the buffalo it rained. Hard, flooding the creek for hours as if trying to wash away the stain. He let them in—at first he thought the knocking was the limb of the pine at the corner of the cabin; too bad it wasn't. The two were panicked, cold, she was hyperventilating. They talked over each other. He smelled of probably bourbon. He let them lie about the accident for ten minutes while he gave them blankets and made them coffee. He built up the fire in the stove, and then he shrugged into his slicker and pushed out into the downpour and took care of it. Poor guy. The bull had been smashed at speed in the left hindquarter, and the force had spun him into the side of the van and crushed the left side of his face but not enough to kill him or knock him out. The cruelty of the thing. The bison was on his right side in the gravel of the shoulder, breathing in rapid strained snorts, and Ren put a hand on his neck and said, "I'm sorry, bud. I'm so sorry. Better them than you," and he meant it. The animal's eye was intact and in the headlights it shone black and wet, wide with desperation maybe, or simply pain. Ren unholstered his SIG .45 and gave the animal a coup de grâce. The bull heaved and scabbled his front legs and lay still.

The van was crushed along the right side and askew on the shoulder, just into the lane. In the lights of his truck he could see skid marks to the west of the bull, and the broken glass of the mirror, making it clear that the van had been traveling east. But where he found the van was again well west of the wreck and aimed west—away from help, from the nearest town by far, from the ranger station just up the road, which the couple clearly knew about because they had walked straight there in the rain. Ren swore. They had left the poor bull alive and suffering and tried to drive away, but the van had not cooperated.

Ren ducked his head into the driving rain and glare of headlights and hustled back to the truck. Had the carcass been farther from people and the road, he would have left it for the wolves and bears and ravens. Instead, he radioed his friend Pete in Cooke City and told him he was point-nine miles south of the station at the fishermen's pullout and asked him if he needed help and Pete said, "No, take off. Aliya and I got this. Thanks, Ren." Aliya was Pete's sixteen-year-old daughter, and together they would skin the huge carcass and quarter it with a cordless meat saw and debone the quarters with knives by hand and load two hundred pounds of meat into plastic tubs in the back of the truck. They would do it all in the sheeting rain, under the floodlights mounted to the rear of the ladder rack, and in three hours they would be heading home.

Ren drove back in a blowing squall. The manic wipers couldn't keep up with the downpour and he had to drive slowly, and as the truck crawled his anger welled. It was the second

unwarranted kill that day. In the afternoon, his neighbor, Hilly, had reported that she had found the fresh carcass of an uncollared female wolf from the Junction Butte Pack. She had been shot in the head and skinned yards from the bank of Soda Butte Creek, just inside the park. The slaying bore all the signs of a trained sharpshooter using a rifle with probably a noise suppressor.

Inside the park. It was brazen poaching and it was a Fuck You to anyone who cared about the wolves.

When Ren returned to the cabin, it was overheated and smelled a little of the alcohol and something else unwanted, something rancid or unwholesome. The man—Dave was his name, wasn't it?—knew enough to open the damper on the woodstove to make the cabin warmer, and the fire rushed in the flue, and the base of the stovepipe was cherry red. Way too hot: they could have burned the place down. A serious fire might have been seconds away. Ren stepped fast across the rag rug, pushed past their knees in the rocking chairs, and shut the vents down.

He hadn't been going to do it before, but now he did. He said, "How fast did you say you were going?" She started to speak, but the man spoke over her.

"Forty. Less. Thirty-eight."

"How do you know?"

"I could see the speedometer, I was dri—"

She had said she was the driver when they first told the story in a rush at the door.

Ren took the pad from his breast pocket and wrote it down. "Stand up," he said.

"What?"

"Stand up, please."

The man handed his mug to his wife and reluctantly stood. "Walk to me, please." Ren had backed to the front door. He didn't need a painted highway line. Panic blurred the man's face, then a reddening of anger. He stepped, put one hand out as if on a high wire.

Ren tugged the compact breathalyzer from his belt, handed it to the man. "Blow," he said.

"Whoa, look—"

"Blow," Ren said.

After Ren read .12 on the screen, he put his hands on the man's shoulders and spun him around and cuffed him. The woman was in the rocker, crying. It was too late to drive the three hours to Cody. He called Ty from the handset charging on the counter and said he was bringing someone in. He could be there in forty minutes. Ty was the Park County Sheriff's deputy stationed part-time in Cooke City, twenty miles to the northeast. A ranger from Yellowstone headquarters would transport the man in the morning. The man's wife was sobbing openly now, and he let her use the landline to book a room at the Super 8 that was right across the street from the two-room jail.

Chapter One

It was the anger in him that scared him. The more time he spent in Yellowstone, the more he wished that people would just go away, leave the bears, the herds of elk, the foxes, the hawks alone. The wolf packs. Yesterday morning he had issued a summons to a man and his nine-year-old son for walking across the shallow Lamar River to within sixty yards of where the Junction Butte Pack were trying to feed their pups.

The river ran through open meadows here, mostly wheatgrass and sage, and on the far side they were hedged by woods that climbed steeply. The four hunting wolves had loped in from a fresh kill down-valley, and the rest of the pack had run to meet them. Nineteen, twenty, strung out in the tall grass—the image frozen like a photograph in Ren’s mind, a portrait of how the world ought to be—the wolves lean from summer, grays and blacks and buffs, one big male nearly white, sprinting flat out in what looked to be a joyous line beneath a wall of trees. They didn’t have to run. But it was daybreak on a brisk mid-September morning, and the pack was all together, and there was meat. The sun had just cleared the pass, and it burnished the grass and threw the shadows of the runners ahead of them. If he himself could feel joy, it was now. And then, through the binocs, he saw the two figures. Man and boy already over the far bank, through the willows, stalking for a better look. Already too close.

Integrity, Honor, Service. He would run. Splash knee-deep across the river, and in forty more yards he would hail them. Yell. The pack, which had known the two were coming since well before they crossed the river—and decided to ignore them—had tumbled together in an exuberant moil, yelping, wrestling, but now, at the shout, they would freeze and stand and look. The father and son would turn, confused. Ren would wave them back, retrieve them, as he was trained to do. Back at the road he would give a stern lecture about harassing wildlife and the safety of the boy and the wolves themselves, and write the man a summons that would result in a five-hundred-dollar fine. He would tell them that the wolves would have tolerated their proximity only so long and so close, and maybe within seconds the entire pack would have raised the alarm and moved into the trees, and that every calorie they spent retreating from the boy and the man was another calorie closer to starvation. Which was true.

But it was not what Ren wanted. What did he want? In a parallel life, the wolves would stand all together and turn and decide enough was enough. They would fan out in an arc, eyes steady and fast on their prey, and they would flank the father and son. And one of the fast females would feint a charge, and one of the big males would dart in behind and hamstring the man, and in minutes it would be over.

Wolves had never once attacked a human in Yellowstone. In Ren's fantasy they would spare the boy. And when Ren had shaken himself from his reverie, he thought, *Jesus, what the hell has gotten into you? Do you think you're the last ranger that puts the animals first?*

But that was the anger that frightened him. In his world lately, the life of a wolf, or a hawk, might be worth more than the life of a man.

Now, with the rain gusting against the roof of the cabin, he left the door to the porch wide open for a minute and filled the kettle in the steel sink and set it on the woodstove. He'd make tea. It was late, and he was amped from the night, more from what he'd seen in the buffalo's eye than anything else. The animal was one of those huge, scarred old bulls who had lived a life of hardship and battle and now browsed alone, and dozed in the open, sometimes skylined on a grassy spur because he feared nothing now, not wolf packs nor storm. As Ren squatted over him in the rain, he had thought he saw, beneath the confusion and fear and raw pain, a sadness: after wolves, lions, drought, snowdrifts so deep the calves drowned in them...had it come to this? Or maybe the depthless black eye was only a mirror for Ren's own bafflement and grief. In any event, he needed to open the cabin door wide and let the gusts smatter the screen door and fill the room with the cold of the autumn night. On the wind he could smell the faint sweetness of aspen turning and the unmistakable scent of snow, which must now be falling on the highest ridges. It was already past midnight. He wouldn't sleep much.

He picked a smaller stick of firewood out of the box and knocked the chrome handle of the woodstove and let the door swing open. He stuffed in two more chunks of aspen—not the best firewood, it burned hot and wouldn't bank all night, but there was plenty of it standing dead on the pass above Cooke City, and it was easy to cut a truckload. Part of the deal for him to stay at the research station: he'd supply his own firewood. He didn't mind. He liked it. To get out of the park and onto a highway whose speed limit wasn't forty. Where nobody was gawking. Where the pickups going too fast were the parents fetching their kids from the bus stop down in Ranford, and where sometimes a passing teenager flashed him the finger, because Ren's truck had a green stripe and "U.S. Park Ranger" on the side, and all things park were bogus because they wouldn't let the boy or his father kill the wolves in there, or the trophy elk that wandered the clearings so close to the road you could slay them with a shovel. He didn't mind. Life in Cooke City was hardscrabble. In the summer the tourists came in tidal floods, a local could work sixteen hours a day for thirty days straight, and in winter moms took their schoolchildren over the pass on snowmobiles in the dark. And so, having this enforced Eden right next door, enjoyed by mostly privileged folks from away who were *on vacation*, and where idyllic herds roamed and the lion practically lay down with the lamb—it galled. More than a few people along the park's borders would abolish Yellowstone in a heartbeat. Ren got it. He didn't mind. He usually met the flipped birds with a smile. He liked to leave the park, and then he loved to drive back in. There was wildness going in either direction.

But once in a while a resident in Cooke City did kill. There was today's wolf. And now Mink Man was back. In the same wooded canyon, and in another creek one drainage over, never far from the park boundary, seven leg traps had been discovered in the last few weeks. Each trap had had a red ribbon tied to the chain ring. It had baffled Ren and the other rangers. A taunt or a brag, who knew. A fisherman had reported the first, and after that Ren had made a point of fishing that stretch and scouting, and he had found the rest. In the silt of the creek at water's edge he had photographed a single boot print. Ren laid his Pilot pen next to the track before he took the picture. The foot was large—size fourteen, it turned out. How many trappers out of the handful in Cooke City had feet that big?

There had been other disturbing incursions. Outside of Mammoth, along Lava Creek, an enforcement ranger named Jim Lefevre had his tires slashed. Farther upstream, in plain view of the road, a nesting osprey had been blasted with a shotgun. A growing sense of organized harassment had begun to percolate slowly up the park's chain of command; but the chain of command did not at all like making a decision, especially one that carried a smidgen of political risk. And so the rangers' reports were tucked into a Review in Six Months file and ignored.

And then the note. A week ago, he had been fishing up Slough Creek, and he'd come back to his truck, and tucked under the wiper blade was a cash receipt from the general store in Cooke City. Someone that morning had bought ten dry flies for twenty-five dollars cash. It was folded in half, and Ren opened it, and on the back was scrawled in scratchy ballpoint a stick figure hanging from the inverted L of a gallows and in capital letters below it, each letter underlined, his name: *H-O-P-P-E-R.?*

Question mark after the period. A barb like an uncrimped hook. Ren on reflex took a step closer to the side of his truck, the protection of it. He looked down the line of seven pickups and SUVs still parked at the edge of the gravel road. Backpackers and fishermen, mostly. He glanced at the trail climbing steeply into the aspen. No one.

Tonight Ren wouldn't sleep much. He knew. The kettle would boil and whistle and he'd steep a chamomile and sit in the chair where the woman had listened to her husband lie. He'd let the buffeting wind from the open door chill his back, and then he'd get up and step onto the porch and let it truly freeze him. Until chest and hands were numb and he began to shake. And then he'd sing—"River in the Rain" or "Guantanamera"—just so he could listen to the hard quaver and chatter, and finally something clean and good would rise in his torso and warm it. "Stop whining," he would think. "This is fun." *Not whining.* "Well, you're something. This is the best place and one of the jobs you always wanted." He'd end the song with a loud "Brrrrrr" and body shake, then step inside and close the door and stretch out on the bunk in back and drift.

It was true. It was one of the jobs he'd always wanted. But then he'd been one of those kids who had wished he had a dozen lives to try out. Game warden had been one aspiration—among more conventional careers like cowboy, salvage diver, and founder of a new country

—but when he landed the job with the NPS and was assigned to Yellowstone his fifth year, he had felt like he'd come home.

Day broke nearly clear and washed clean. He slept in, which meant not being out in the dark, and he stepped onto the porch with his first cup of coffee just as the sun balanced on the black timber of Beartooth Pass and warmed the valley. Wolf Running Time. How he would think of it from now on. It was his day off. Must be a Tuesday, then, though out here he had to look at a calendar to know. He thought maybe Hilly would show up on her way through. He hoped she would.

Rich scents of wet earth, swollen creek water, rain-sweetened grass. Above him, mist spumed in tatters off the rocky cap of Druid Peak, and off the wet black cliffs farther north. The sky looked scrubbed. The few clouds splayed like empty linens blown off a line. The gusting rain had torn leaves from the aspen across the creek and flecked the ground with yellow like a flight of songbirds just landed. Maybe the simile occurred to him because he could hear the meadowlark trilling what sounded like a glad song, an after-rain song. He was resident, Ren was pretty sure, his own cabin was in the bird's territory, and Ren had been hearing him improvise and embellish all summer and would miss him when he flew south in the next few weeks. Ren couldn't see the bird now, but at one of his caesuras he whistled a few responding bars and raised his cup. Did the glad singer pause a beat longer, as if trying to interpret his regular interloper? Ren always thought he did, and then the bird warbled on.

Still brisk, but he left the solid door open and stepped inside. He unhooked the skillet from over the gas range and scrambled eggs in an enamel bowl and poured them, hissing, onto a skim of clarified butter. No toaster, but he rolled the eggs onto a plate, pried two more fat chunks of butter from the plastic tub and into the pan, and laid two pieces of bread onto the *beurre noisette*. What his mother had called it. Twenty seconds a side, and he plucked out the ranch toast with two fingers, fetched a jar of huckleberry jam from the fridge, poured another cup of coffee, and carried it all out onto the porch. He sat in one of the two cane rockers, and used an upended wooden ammo-crate for a side table. It had been used to ship tranquilizer darts. Why the government sent a thousand rounds of darts at the beginning of every season, and why they came from Agriculture, he had no idea.

He ate. Three ravens flew over, just clearing the roof, and croaked a greeting. Below, over the broad meadow sloping to the river, he could see a harrier hunting, gliding just over the browse and hovering abruptly, wings beating—flushing mice, probably, or voles. And farther out, across the stream that now ran low and clear, over stones of a hundred colors, blues and greens and burnt reds, a herd of elk grazed, heads down. He knew the wolves would be watching them from the deep shadows at the edge of the woods.

Again the sense of the world working as it should. He tore off a piece of jam-covered toast and closed his eyes against a current of air moving down-valley. It came off the pass, night cold, and flowed downhill as the river did, and if he listened closely he thought he could hear

it in the tallest grass. He breathed. He thought he could sit like this for the rest of his life. This time of day. He loved the stillness and awakening together. He fluttered open his eyes and used the toast to slide eggs onto his fork. Sipped the coffee. *What could be better than this?* What he often told himself, especially when he needed convincing. And he thought, not for the first time, that though there was no hour that held more stillness and peace, it was also when the hunters in all this country were most active. The night hunters might still kill, and the diurnal predators were just getting started. Wolf and meadowlark, lynx and harrier...and trout.

Trout. Did he want to fish today? Maybe. He might drive down to the confluence with the Yellowstone. The good fishing was a two-hour walk in. Or he might hike straight out the back of the cabin, over the flank of Druid and down into a creek that he never named, a stream so alive with green-gold cutthroat that the grizzlies fished it, too; or they swiped at the thickets of serviceberry that grew along the banks. When he fished there, he almost always encountered a bear. By now he knew that the big male with the scarred face was 631, the sow with two cubs 570. When he saw her he would move fast away and fish another bend, but the battle-scarred boar was never bothered. Plenty of food for everyone. Ren had often fished a run while the huge grizzly foraged and dug on the slope above. Once, the two of them fished the same long riffle—Ren at the very bottom, where he knew he could beat a retreat around the corner.

He was tired, though. He felt hungover, though he had not drunk. He didn't want to get out of the chair. He would, in a sec, hoist himself up to get more coffee, but this morning he wanted to be in no hurry. Which meant that he would probably just drive a few miles down to Slough Creek and hike up to the second meadow, where he could fish into dark if he wanted; it was a good wide trail, and after nightfall he could find his way down by feel.



Ren always thought that planning a day was almost as good as spending one. Which meant he was in no hurry now. It had driven Lea crazy. She was his first and only wife. She ran a small nursery-and-landscape business in Denver, with a fiercely loyal clientele who loved her nonsense positivity and generous laugh as much as her work. Ren had thought about it often, and he concluded that one of the traits people adored in her was her literalness. That could always cut both ways, but in her it was endearing. When she said she and her crew would show up at seven and be done by noon, she meant it. When she thought your wild English garden looked slovenly and sad and you'd be better off with a few more parking spaces or a basketball court, she buttressed her impression with a "You know, a landscape, more than any other feature of a home, reflects the character of the owner." And if that stung, and you asked why, she would tell you that it was because it was evolving and aging just like you were, and how you handled it was how you handled yourself. God. Her candor could leave the more tender humans in tatters, but somehow it usually just made the clients love her more. She had no patience for hothouse flowers. Ren marveled. Well, he had loved that in her, too. As much because it was so much the opposite of the way he navigated the world—he who spent half his morning daydreaming, and who, among all the other aspirations, had

wanted to be a writer. A writer of the wild, like Merwin or Dickey or even Conrad. Well. He was a bad poet, or at least unexceptional, which was pretty much the same thing. Poetry is like hunting, he thought: you either come home with the kill or you don't.

They had met in a coffee shop in his neighborhood in Northwest Denver. He was twenty-four, working a job at a brick-warehouse art gallery in the River North district, where his appreciation of art history was channeled into transporting sculptures and hanging pictures and repainting walls. Down at the gallery, they had been preparing to hang a new show by the well-known cowboy artist Maddie Caldwell. The show was a departure for her: most of the paintings, which were large, were of silos or empty landscapes. Empty of her usual subjects, which were mostly wranglers on horseback herding cattle through every kind of weather. These new pieces were insistently quiet. A quiet so pervasive it spilled into the gallery. The usual conceits of drama were wholly absent; there were no wheeling horses, or lowering storm, or driving wind, or even the flattering long light of early morning or late afternoon. The silos and barns and rail fencing stood above their own short shadows, the grass barely stirred, the hour felt no need to explain itself. Ren was transfixed. On a break, he would stand before one or another and feel the curious pull of an ecclesiastical silence. He wondered why a hugely successful artist—one who had delighted many and raked in the bucks with a dependable genre of nostalgic work—why she would make such a departure. What in her life had prompted it? He thought it her best work and wondered at that, too—that, in taking what seemed a step back, she had entered exciting new territory. And...how could that be? There were a billion paintings of barns in the world, and silos, too.

In any event, the gallery staff had been busting ass to hang the show before next Friday's opening, and they had nearly finished, and the owners had given everyone an afternoon off. Ren never had an afternoon off in the middle of the week, and so he walked up the hill to West Highlands with a book of short stories by Gogol, his favorite nineteenth-century Russian. His favorite because, of all the towering intellects of an intellectually top-heavy empire, Gogol carried his brilliance the most lightly and was the most brazenly satirical, and...he made Ren laugh.

He got a café au lait and sat at a table facing the window and was buried in his book when the door jingled and in walked a tall young woman in torn Carhartt work pants followed by two equally ragged minions who wore hand shears and Leathermans in leather holsters on their belts. Clearly a work crew of some kind. The tall girl took off her safari hat, and Ren, more curious about her just now than the comings and goings of Nevsky Prospect, saw high tanned cheeks smattered with freckles and smirched with mud, a strong jaw, and the forthright amber eyes of a husky. Her cotton work shirt was rolled to her elbows, and her forearms were grimed with dirt, and tendoned. She moved with the balance of someone very strong. Ren had not dated in many months, and suddenly he was more than intrigued. He knew his verbal pickup game was lame at best, and so he slid his napkin toward her and took a pen from the jacket hanging over the back of his chair and jotted his number. Beneath he wrote: "Wish I had the nerve to say Hi but I don't. BTW you have dirt all over your face. Ren."

As she passed his table he cleared his throat and said, “Excuse me.” The husky eyes came around, fixed him, maybe mildly curious, maybe holding no expression at all.

Ren said, “Here.” He held out the folded napkin, and she cocked her head barely, touched the tip of her tongue to the corner of her mouth as if she were reckoning how many yards of soil she’d need to cover a plot, and took it. No word exchanged. The crew got their coffees to go and left and she never looked back, not once. And so it was kind of a shock when his cell rang the next day with an unknown number. He was on a stepladder adjusting overhead spot lighting; he heard a woman’s voice, clear, direct, but with a resonant raspy edge, say, “I’m having a glass at six tonight at the BookBar. I might not have dirt on my nose, so you might not recognize me.” And she hung up.

That was Lea. He was already head over heels. He got to the bookstore/café/wine bar ten minutes early, and she walked in the door at six-zero-zero *en punto*. Also Lea. And she wore clean jeans and a clean button-down rolled to the elbows and her hair was brushed out, and as she scanned the room he noticed how broad her shoulders were. In truth, thinking back on it, he would have taken her hand and gone to the altar right then. How did he know? He knew.

Ren sipped the strong coffee and thought that he would give almost anything on earth to have her in the chair beside him now.



The memory was interrupted by the faintest click of stone.

His cabin was one of five that were built into a grove of Doug firs. His was at the bottom, at the edge of the clearing, and had the widest view across the valley. The largest was behind him, up the gravel drive, and had served as lodge and common dining area when the station was most active, in the late nineties, when wolves were first reintroduced. It was boarded up now, part of a package of deep cuts that had swept the National Parks across the country. Ren thought it was just another waste of resources in hand. Managed well, the lodge could have been thriving all summer and fall, hosting college groups and grad students studying ecology and wildlife management and, of course, wolves. It could have paid for itself and for a lot more, including, he thought, another resident ranger to help handle the swelling flow of tourists that poured into the valley. The other cabins were now empty except the one at the top, farthest up the creek. Hilly lived there. She had been a college intern when the first wolf pack was established in '95, and had gone on to study under Bob Ream at Missoula and Doug Smith at Michigan. She was now one of the country’s most respected experts, and she held a professorship at the University of Montana but never taught, preferring instead to spend her time with four-leggeds and pursue research funded by grants.

And now she appeared at the corner of the porch, presto, and leaned her head around, asking for permission. Her thick black braid, threaded with silver, swung off her shoulder. She wore binoculars around her neck. He lifted his cup, summoned a smile. “Come up. I’ve got a pot on.”

“Bad time?” Hilly said. She hovered, poised to move. Ren thought she was spring-loaded, like the wolves she studied. And, like them, she carried not an ounce extra. Her eyes were alight with green flecks, her high cheeks deeply burnished by years outside.

“No. Yes. But it’s never a bad time to see you.”

She didn’t ask what the trouble was. He liked that about her. Because she loved wolves much, much more than people, her dealings with humans were pretty much on a need-to-know basis. He was already standing. “Black?” he said. She nodded. He opened the screen, stepped inside. She came up the steps without sound, as if she were weightless, and sat in the chair farthest from the door. She flexed her ankles and let it rock. Her eyes roved across the river and up the valley. Then she halted the chair, lifted her binoculars, slowed her breathing. As he came out again with the two full mugs, he thought that she held the exact poise of a hunter about to take a shot. But of course she wasn’t. Her reason for being, entirely, was about protection. She was a remarkable marksman, he knew—he had seen it and marveled—and it was with a bolt-action rifle modified to take a .30-caliber tranquilizer dart. If she wanted to tranq a wolf and get a radio collar on him, and she had to do it leaning out of a helicopter with her Remington, very few could elude her.

She laid the binoculars against her sternum. He handed her the coffee, sat.

“What do you see?”

“A new kill. Looks like a bison calf. Wanna see?”

He held up a hand. “I’ve had enough dead buffalo for a few days,” he said.

She didn’t ask. He had his job and she had hers.

“Are you going to bring in the man who killed my wolf?” she said.

My wolf. That was Hilly. “I’m going to try,” he said. “Try hard.”

“Thanks.”

They sipped the coffee. Ren thought that whoever the poacher was might be lucky if Hilly didn’t get to him first. Word going around Cooke City was that she had started bringing her rifle—the *unmodified* one, the lethal Winchester that shot bullets, not darts—with her into the field, and not for grizzly protection. And an outfitter whose truck door advertised legal wolf and bear hunts in Montana had emerged from the Lamar Trailhead restroom to find two empty bottles of Karo syrup on his hood. The syrup had evidently been poured into his gas tank, because the truck would no longer start. When Ren had asked Hilly about it, she shrugged, eyes alight, and said, “Gosh, there’s corn syrup in just about everything now.”

Now the sun warmed the grass below the cabin, and the creek burred. Ren felt no desire to move anywhere. Hilly said, “Your day off, right?”

“Yep. I was thinking about fishing.”

“You’re always thinking about fishing. Sometimes it makes me wonder about the state of your intellect.”

“Well, wolves are always thinking about food, aren’t they?”

She actually cracked a smile. A bona-fide grin. Her hazel eyes danced. “No, not always. Sometimes they think about fucking. And I wouldn’t be surprised if once in a while they thought, *That ranger dude really stinks. He should stop using cucumber soap and Old Spice.*”

Ren choked on his laugh. He didn’t get the mug down fast enough, and he spilled coffee all over his hand.



They sat side by side in the chairs and didn’t discuss the weather or the surprising stream of post-Labor Day tourists. Most people would have, just to hear themselves talk. Nor did they range into gossip, which would have been easy, since the young host couple at the campground a few miles downriver was going through a difficult split. Robbie and Kelli were thirtyish and from Tahoe, where they had sold their bakery to come to the wilds to host the Slough Creek Campground. One night recently, Robbie was making his late bedtime rounds—he joked with the guests about turn-down service—checking that everyone was okay and where they were supposed to be—when he discovered someone not at all where they should have been. He was passing Kyle’s place. Kyle was a bearded wildlife guide for an elite tour company based in Jackson Hole who liked to spend the few days between groups camping at the creek. He was a mountain-man devotee. Whenever he met anyone new, Kyle inserted into the conversation that he was born two hundred years too late. That he would have been more comfortable in elk hide than Gore-Tex. Robbie thought that, for a mountain man, Kyle had a very slick mini Airstream trailer with heater and shower. And Robbie grew nervous whenever Kyle pulled up in his truck, elbow out the window, and regaled them with stories of his latest face-to-face encounter with a bear. Robbie concluded—after later hearing some of the tales confirmed by people who were there—that Kyle probably never lied, and he actually had deep knowledge of birds and plants, as well as the charismatic megafauna popular with park visitors. And he was the only person Robbie knew to get a close-up photo of one of the few mountain lions in the park. What made Robbie nervous was how Kelli shone whenever Kyle swung by, how she would set down her clipboard mid-check-in with a new guest and come to the truck. How she laughed at almost everything Kyle said. Well. That night, Robbie was making his turn-down service rounds and, through the gap of a hastily drawn curtain in Kyle’s trailer, he spied Kelli unbuttoning the guide’s shirt. That was all. No *in flagrante delicto* or *coitus interruptus*, no *fellatio*. No Latin involved, no nudity, just that simple act. But in the way she touched him, the way she spread her hand on his chest before undoing the

next button, and the tenderness and lust in her eyes, which Robbie could see even in the frugal light of the LED over the sink—the image was more painful somehow than if they had been engaged in anything more vigorous and banal. “I mean,” Robbie cried, “you could almost expect *that* from a young person cooped up in a sixteen-site campground in the middle of nowhere for five months.”

Robbie had related all this to Hilly. He had found her one afternoon at her tripod and spotting scope in the first meadow, two miles up the creek. He talked, then gushed. He spilled everything, maybe because she never lifted her eye from the scope and because he knew she didn't care a whit about anything he was saying. And because he was young. He would have forgiven Kelli, probably—they were churchgoing Christians, it was how they had met—but when he confronted her, she had declared her intention to leave him for Kyle. “Well, he's big and handsome and knows a lot about everything,” he said to Hilly, and slumped heavily on a rock. “Also, he says he belongs to some club of millionaire ranchers. Go figure. Me, I'm just me. I guess Kelli is bored.”

Hilly withdrew herself from the eyepiece and turned. “How can you guys feel cooped up out here?” she said with a sweep of her arm. “Do you really think this is the middle of nowhere? This is the middle of *everything*.”

Robbie stared at her as if she were clinically insane, probably dangerous. She softened. “I'm sorry, Robbie. It hurts, huh? You know, the legendary female 06—I'm talking about a wolf—she had two mates. Two brothers. It could work. Or you might tell Kelli you'd like to take a break, too, tell her you understand it's a bit...” Hilly hesitated, looked around the Slough Creek Valley as if asking its forgiveness. “Maybe it feels a bit claustrophobic. And when she's done playing around with John Colter, Jr., who, BTW, to my mind is a mega-sized fuckwit, she can come talk to you about renewing her vows. Just a thought.”

Something snagged in Robbie's grief-torn mind; she saw it. Some kind of bafflement and relief. She smiled. “My hunch is, she comes back,” Hilly said, and returned to her scope.

She had related all this to Ren last week, but only to say that if Robbie seemed less than his enthusiastic goofy self, this was why. And they only talked about it once. They did not indulge in *Schadenfreude* or gossip, because there was enough pain in the world. One night about a month before, Ren had heard her truck in the turnaround below and he came out with two cold beers. When he met her on the path, he could see the streaks on her face. She had been crying.

“You okay?” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” she said with conviction. And then she told him how she had just witnessed a male from a rival pack slay an entire litter of pups. She was close enough to hear the yowls and frenzied barks of the mother, who was trying to defend her young, and whom he had

almost killed, too. She took the beer, held it up, clinked his bottle. “To life,” she said. “One part wonder, three parts pain.”

Now Hilly sipped her coffee and followed the transit of a fox along a berm on the far side of the river and said, “Edgar’s back.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. He went viral again.”

“Oh, no.”

“If you go up the creek today you might see him.” She dug into the pocket of her cargo pants and pulled out a phone. She tapped it and handed it to Ren. The video began with a wide trail through yellow aspen and the sound of heavy breathing. Then a woman’s panicked voice: “Oh, shit, here he comes. He’s *running*. He’s *charging*. Oh *God*.” Jerky picture, and here, around the bend, comes Edgar, trotting. A two-year-old black bear, small and so plump that most of his parts are round—even, it seemed, his legs. Trundling toward the freaked-out hiker in what is clearly a genial amble—no change in pace at all, no alarmed lifting of the head—a bear fairly used to intruders and heading from A to B, minding his own business, and using the good trail as anyone would. More jostle and panic from the filmer, and then the unexpected hand in the picture, holding the can of bear spray, and then, when Edgar is maybe twenty feet off, a yell and the audible hiss and jet of pepper: Edgar’s head jerked, his whole body shied sideways, he gave a cry like a human child, startled. Ren knew it was always a mistake to anthropomorphize a wild animal, but he couldn’t help it. Edgar flinched back and whimpered and ran off into the trees as if more than his eyes stung.

He handed back the phone. “Well, that was dumb. Why didn’t she just step off the trail?”

Hilly shrugged. “ ’Cuz it’s more fun to post something dramatic on TikTok?”

Ren stood. “More coffee?” he said.

“No, I’m good. Thanks. Catch you on the flip.” She handed him her cup, and tripped off the porch as lightly as she’d come.

And Ren almost reluctantly started his day. The part where he didn’t just sit and listen to the wind rushing in the pines and think again how sometimes it sounded like surf, how the ticking of the aspen leaves in the same wind was prettier than chimes. He knew himself: how he loved to hold time in abeyance, or try. He never could, of course, because time, like everything else, flowed through his cupped fingers like water, and he knew he could rarely stave off anything that was already in motion.