

# BEAR- TOOTH

— A NOVEL

# CALLAN WINK







**BEARTOOTH**



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**BEARTOOTH**



**THAD HAD JUST SHOT A BLACK BEAR OUT OF SEASON. IT WAS A SMALL** yearling sow, and the rancid stink of it settled like a fog over the clearing where it died. The smell of a bear, Thad thought, had the flavor of nightmare about it. Putrefying flesh, fresh shit, all held together with something cloying and sweet, like smashed huckleberries just starting to ferment. This was the third one they'd killed this week, and Thad figured they could start heading home. Three heads attached to three pelts, twelve paws, three gallbladders, on top of all their other gear—it was going to be a backbreaking hump over the mountain. He and his brother, Hazen, were twenty miles from the logging road where their truck waited, a cooler in the back with a block of ice and a twelve-pack of Coors. Just thinking of the beer made Thad swallow reflexively.

Hazen was over at the edge of the timber splashing around in a small creek that looped through a stand of alders and meandered across the clearing. It was late summer, the grass was long and dry, and the creek running through it looked like a crooked part in a shock of thick blond hair.

“Quit messing around. When we get this one cut up, we're out of here,” Thad said.

“There's trout.”

“We're not fishing. Get over here. I'd like to be home tomorrow morning.”

Hazen stomped out of the creek. Thad could hear him grumbling as he set to work. Although he tended to stray from the task at hand, Thad had to admit that his brother was faster at butchering than he was. Hazen could break down an animal so quick it was almost unnatural. It was like he had some strange elemental knowledge of how the parts all fit together. Sometimes he didn't even use his knife. Just got the cut started and then used his hands and fingernails to divide muscles and separate flesh from bone. Thad had seen him using his teeth to snap a particularly stubborn ligament or tendon.



Thad was a year older, but they could almost pass for twins. They had the same lanky arms and legs. They weren't really all that tall, although there was something about their proportions that made them look like short men who'd been stretched. A couple years ago, Thad had started growing his hair out and Hazen had copied him. They now had shoulder-length brown ponytails that they tied back with thin strips of tanned deer hide. They both had veins that stood out in stark relief on their forearms. Their front teeth protruded slightly. It was only side by side that the differences between them became noticeable. Hazen was an inch shorter, his hair a shade lighter. His laugh came quick and stayed a beat too long. Thad was twenty-seven, Hazen twenty-six, and already they had crow's feet at the corners of their eyes. Over the years these marks would only deepen, their gazes hardening into perpetual squints. Their father's visage had been cast this way, and his father before him. Theirs were faces made for the weather, for looking into it. Hatchet chins, angled cheekbones, faces around which the high-country wind could pass with minimal resistance. Though they possessed no great strength, the men in their line had been shaped—by environment and circumstance—for tremendous acts of myopic endurance.

As Thad watched, Hazen made a quick incision up the bear's rounded gut and then plunged in up to his elbows, the bloody butt of his knife clenched between his teeth like a stogie. The gallbladder on a small black bear like this one was about the size of a golf ball. Hazen could find and excise this organ by feel, his face pointed up and away, his eyes closed with concentration, his hands moving around the hot insides of the animal as if he were rummaging through a junk drawer. Thad hadn't the slightest idea what function a gallbladder performed inside the body. Humans had one, too, he was pretty sure. All he knew was that one of decent size would go for fifteen hundred dollars, and fifteen hundred dollars was the equivalent of a half a dozen cords of firewood, cut, split, stacked, and delivered. If they wanted to be efficient, he knew that they should just go for the gallbladders and leave the rest of the animal where it lay. For the skull and the claws and the skin they could get another four or five hundred dollars, decent money until you

factored in the weight and additional time it took to skin one. He knew it made no logical sense, but the extra effort and risk involved in keeping the other bear parts did something to move the whole enterprise slightly closer to hunting, something respectable. Before this trip he'd visited the computer at the library to look up likely punishments if they were to get caught. Maybe that hadn't been a good idea. As far as he could tell, what they were involved in was considered wanton waste, a severe violation of the Lacey Act, punishable by fines of up to one hundred thousand dollars. Guaranteed felonies, potential jail time.

It was easier to think that in a wilderness area this large, a person could get away with whatever he wanted, but Thad knew that wasn't true. How many times had they been deep in the backcountry only to come across a troop of Eagle Scouts from Cincinnati, a crunchy honeymooning couple, a Forest Service trail crew? It was a large wilderness area, but all sorts of people were drawn to it for that very reason. All it would take was one Sierra Club member working on his life list with a Sibley's and a pair of binoculars and they'd be completely screwed.

Across the clearing, Hazen was pulling the hide off the bear, the skin separating from the carcass with a sound like tape being pulled off a roll. He'd gotten in the habit of carrying a spent .22 shell casing in his mouth, and now he was pursing his lips to blow air over it, making the chirruping bird whistle he did when he was concentrating. Eventually Thad went to help. The quicker this got done, the quicker they could get the hell out of there, collect their money, and put this whole thing behind them.

**IT TOOK THEM LONGER TO GET BACK TO THE TRUCK THAN THAD HAD** anticipated. They were moving over rough ground, staying off the trails to avoid people. Thad leaned into the weight of his pack and squinted up at Hazen making his way through the slabs of rocks above him. They stopped for a breather in a large boulder field hemmed in by dark stands of spruce. The boulders were massive, dark and lichen spotted, shot through with quartzite veins. Glacial remnants, they cropped up in the grassy slope in a random scattering as if they were cast there, rugged dice thrown and left by wagering giants. They shrugged off their packs and sat on a low table of rock and looked back down the valley. It seemed like they'd come a long way, but Thad could still see the ridge that hid the small meadow where he'd killed the bear. A full day's hike away and it looked like he could throw a rock to it. Right now, Thad figured they had a hard half a day's walk left before they dropped back down to the truck. They had at least three ridges to cross, give or take, and they'd be back to civilization, back to showers and beer and everything else. Thad leaned back against his pack and spit. "We're getting there," he said.

Hazen didn't respond. He was watching the little gray forms of the pikas scurrying around in the rocks, letting loose their shrill warning calls. He held the .22 casing sideways between his teeth and blew sharp puffs of air across its rim, creating a set of piercing whistles. Hazen was smiling, his cheeks rounded out and his eyes slightly crossed as he concentrated on the blowing. "Ha," he said. "How about that? I'm speaking pika. Look at those little shits."

There were half a dozen pikas flitting back and forth on the rocks, darting from one side to the other, stopping occasionally to turn and shake their stubby tails. Clearly, they were incensed at this gigantic imposter mangling their language. Hazen kept up with the call and searched around on the ground next to him with one hand, not taking his eyes off the rodents. When he found a suitable rock, he threw it, sending them scurrying off.

Eventually Thad heaved to his feet and they started out again. During their stop the sun had reached the high point of the day and begun its slow slide west. Even up in the high country, it still had the power to heat you up. It was behind them now, and Thad could feel the warmth of its gaze on the back of his neck; he could smell the bearskin heating up under the tarp strapped to the pack frame. It was like hiking with a festering compost pile on his back, everything overripe and hot with the fever of decomposition.

It took almost a mile to lose the flies that had found them when they had stopped. They buzzed around Thad's head, not biting but still an annoyance, especially as they scrambled across a shifting scree slope where a misstep would mean sliding fifty yards or more down the mountain. Hazen led them on meandering elk and deer trails. Sometimes they veered off at random, cross-country, through rock falls and tangled labyrinths of blown-down timber, until they linked up with another game trail that kept them headed back in their intended direction—toward the truck.

They'd ditched most of their food and water to make room for the additional bear parts, and they'd had nothing substantial to eat for almost twenty-four hours. Thad could feel himself weakening. Under the weight of the pack his spine felt like it was being compressed and permanently fused. He thought that when he finally removed the pack he'd remain hunched, his back forced into a tortured question mark. Roots and rocks reached out and grabbed at his feet. Uphill climbs that hours ago would have barely given him pause caused him to puff and blow, his legs screaming from the effort. His mouth was starting to dry out, his tongue sticking to his gums, his teeth covered in a paste that made his upper lip pull back in a perpetual grimace. Eventually, he came around a bend in the deer trail and found Hazen down on his hands and knees, his pack still on, splashing water over his face. They were down in the bed of a small creek, now mostly dry, with just a trickle purling over white sand and rocks made oval and brilliant by the wet vein of water. Thad found a small declivity where the water poured over a flat rock and collected into a sink-basin-sized pool. He flopped down on his belly, submerging his head entirely, sucking great draughts of water, his eyes open

to the effervescent swirl of bubbles rising from the plunge. He drank until pinpricks of white light danced around behind his eyes and he had to break for air. The water tasted of moss and stone. A silkiness on the tongue that water from the tap never seemed to possess.

Refreshed, they hiked. And when the sun fell below the peaks behind them, they kept going through the murky half-light, the shapes of things softened in the gloom, the smell of the pines turning damp as the air cooled. As full dark descended, Hazen led them through a stand of aspen, and they picked their way through the trees. The trunks gathered the moonlight, glowed silver. The aspen leaves had already started to turn, just showing a hint of gold at the edges, and it wouldn't be long before the snow fell up here, great drifts of it shape-shifting in the wind, forming ridges like wave troughs on the lee sides of the trees. When Thad ran his fingers over the smooth bark of the aspens, it seemed like they exuded warmth, released the heat they'd stored up during the day. He thought aspens could be spooky trees. They liked their own company, grew up close so their leaves could touch one another and their branches could reach together and intertwine like fingers. His father had told him once how the biggest organism in the world was a stand of aspen trees in Canada that stretched for a thousand miles. When you came upon a grove of aspens, you weren't walking through separate life-forms. Aspens are clones; they send up shoots from their shared root mass, so a whole stand of trees might be one plant, the separate trees separate only in the way that a man's foot is separate from his hand. Thad didn't know exactly how to explain it, but he thought that, as a group, aspens had a sort of consciousness.

This particular stand of trees seemed to stretch forever, but when he finally broke out into a clearing, he could see the overgrown trailhead in the distance, and there was Hazen dumping his pack beside the wheels of their truck.



**Only a sliver of ice** remained in the cooler, but the beer was so cold it made the back of his throat ache. Thad downed half a bottle in one gulp and then released a prodigious belch. He'd stashed a bag of elk jerky in the truck, and they ripped and chewed the salty meat until their jaws hurt, washing it down with the beer, belching and yawning and stretching their arms and backs. They sat on the dropped tailgate, and Thad decided that instead of driving the maze of logging roads in the dark, they should just camp out one more night, handle the transaction out here in the woods tomorrow, and then head home after all the contraband had been transferred.

"I'm going to start a fire." Hazen rummaged around in the cooler for another beer. He'd had four already, about as many as Thad ever liked him to have. Something about booze made Hazen argumentative, less pliant than he normally was.

"No fire. And you're done after that one. Find a spot to crash. Take your pack with you; don't leave it in the truck."

"My sleeping bag is wet. I'm going to start a fire and dry it out."

"Why is your bag wet?"

"I don't know, it just is."

"Well, that's your own stupid fault. It's not that cold anyway; you'll be fine. You could have been airing it out this whole time instead of bitching and drinking all my beer."

"If I can't have a fire then at least let me have another beer." He had finished his last one in three long drinks, half-chewed jerky still in his mouth.

"No fire. No more beer. Find a spot to crash, and I'll see you in the morning."

"That's bullshit. One more beer. I'll pay you back."

"No."

"Why?"

"You know why. Go sleep."

Hazen took one more piece of jerky and reached for the cooler. Thad chopped his wrist down, and then Hazen slid from the tailgate and stomped

off into the dark, dragging his pack behind him. Thad could hear the sound of breaking branches, incoherent muttering. Thad got himself another beer and reclined against his foul-smelling pack and yawned. Hazen could be a royal pain in the ass. He probably should just forbid him from drinking at all.

Last year Thad had to pull him out from under a pack of firefighters who were intent on rearranging his face. He'd gotten a call from the bartender at the Blue Goose, who said he should probably get over there quick before Hazen got his neck broken. By the time he arrived, Hazen had already talked his way into a pretty sizable ass beating. It was a small town, and no local would have let Hazen get under his skin, but it was late summer, and there were wildfires burning all over in the mountains. Town was full of hotshot crews from down south. Thad never did find out exactly what Hazen had said. When he got to the bar, three short, wide, Mexican-looking dudes were about to start applying their three-hundred-dollar White's to Hazen's skinny midsection. Luckily Thad had been able to pull Hazen out and smooth things over. He bought drinks. He wasn't sure if the men spoke English. He pointed at Hazen and tapped his head, spiraling his finger around his ear. "Loco," he said.

If he never had to go to town, Hazen would be just fine, Thad figured. Hell, during some era not too far past, Hazen would have probably been happier and more well-adjusted than Thad. He could have trapped, lived in the woods, got royally drunk once a year at some sort of mountain-man rendezvous, and spent the next year working off his hangover, alone in the mountains, skinning beaver and talking to himself.

Another beer. Thad was more comfortable than he'd been in days. He couldn't even smell himself anymore. He knew he'd been out in the woods for a while when the scent of his unwashed body no longer smelled foreign. He adjusted his position so he could look up. There was a narrow strip of clear sky, a scattering of stars, hemmed in by banks of purple-gray clouds. They'd lucked out with the weather this trip, nothing but blue skies. Rain in the backcountry made everything more difficult. The narrow logging roads