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from Wild Animals

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1.

Sitting at his desk in the police department, Ray Bartell decided it was a hell of a deal, you got right down to it. Here was a man, the former leader of the free world, who would soon be standing behind the podium at the Rozette Civic Arena, singing the praises of Merle Puhl. None of this high stakes campaigning seemed very likely, when you thought about it. Well, Puhl did. Who else could the Party have tempted into running against an incumbent who'd been United States senator from Montana since the days when money was backed by real gold and silver, and going to war was thought of as something more than a slick campaign tactic, a way to boost the market for yellow ribbon? Puhl had spent an equally long time wading around in the mire of state politics. He was an old standby in the Legislature, who could always be counted on to oppose just about everything that had transpired since the closing of the frontier, a quality that many people seemed to find endearing in politicians.

In private life, Merle Puhl had made a modest pile of money developing real estate and selling Chevrolets. Now he was semi-retired on a gentleman's ranch outside Rozette, where he had gone into the ostrich raising business, an enterprise that turned the spread into something of a local attraction, the target of many weekend drives with mom and the kids. People were used to seeing Puhl's ruddy face on TV selling used cars, so it figured to be an easy jump to listening to him hawk the dual virtues of free enterprise in the heartland, and Merle Puhl in the nation's capitol.

Puhl—"the Chosen Man from God's Country." That was the campaign's tag line. You had to admit, it had all the resonance of "Tastes Great...Less Filling," all the substance of "You got the right one, baby."

But the former President of the United States, that was something else again. This was the man whose Surgeon General had convinced the United States Olympic Committee that if synthetic growth hormones were good for cattle, what harm could they be to athletes? The humanitarian saint who masterminded a food boycott of Ethiopia, and walked away with the Nobel Prize. And most amazing of all, the man who, upon retiring, cut a blockbuster deal for the film rights to his office tape recordings—a deal that not only gave him a screenwriting credit, but points on the producer's gross. At least that's what *People* magazine said, and *People* was never wrong. Yes siree, the former president was clearly a world-class politician, and to have a man of that caliber in Rozette, Montana, well, it was enough to make you get a haircut and shine your cowboy boots.

Ray Bartell stared at his feet, which were propped on the edge of his desk. He shook his head, trying to remember if he owned any shoe polish. He could use a haircut, too. He looked at his watch. Five minutes till his meeting with Arnold Zillion, who was driving over that morning from the Secret Service office in Great Falls. Zillion was new in Montana, and this was his first visit to Rozette.

A couple of days before, Captain Vic Fanning had briefed Bartell on the former president's complete itinerary. First, you had your arrival at the airport, followed by your motorcade into town to the Civic Arena. Then, after the speech that afternoon, the traveling road show moved out to Merle Puhl's ranch, where the

former president would spend Friday night, maybe get in a photo opportunity with some of those great big birds, before leaving at noon on Saturday.

Transportation and crowd control. That was the name of the game. Archie Phegan, the new Captain of Uniform Patrol, was in charge of transportation. Puhl's ranch was out in the county, which made it the problem of Sheriff Riley Saulk and his band of deputies. And Vic Fanning would see to it that the Arena was well covered by detectives working in plainclothes.

But always, there was the potential for shitheads, and shitheads were going to be Ray Bartell's personal turf. While this was of obvious importance, Bartell was given to understand that among all the array of brass and heat, he was a grunt. Fine. A grunt on the lookout for shitheads. Perfect.

Across the office, Billy Stokes, another of the detectives, and Linda Westhammer were both muttering into telephones. Ike Skinner was using his index fingers on a computer keyboard, poking keys with all the finesse he would use to poke a drunk in the chest.

Bartell was thinking about phoning his wife when Red Hanrahan walked in, carrying a thick file in one hand, and a cup of coffee in the other. Hanrahan had been a detective longer than anyone in the Division. He was getting ready for the start of a homicide trial, a tough case that had kept him bogged down for over a year.

Hanrahan dropped the file on his desk. "This guy ought to hang himself in the jail," he said. Hanrahan was a loosely constructed man, with wild red hair and a soup-strainer mustache. His green pants were baggy, and his shirt tail wagged over his hips. His green and yellow necktie was crooked. Hanrahan

slipped out of his shoulder harness, then hung the rig from a hook behind his desk.

"Guys like that," Bartell said, meaning guys who took you to trial, "they never do the stand-up thing."

Hanrahan stretched his back, then sat down. "Justice," he said, thumbing through the file. "It sure takes us a lot of moves."

"No shit," Ike Skinner said from across the room. "So many assholes, so few bullets."

Bartell lowered his feet to the floor, sat up, and surveyed his desk. Paper. Nothing but paper, scattered all across his desk like the residue of a typhoon. Mostly burglaries, forgeries, and car break-ins. There were a couple of child molesting cases, too, but those had been around for nearly a month, and no matter which way Bartell tried to steer them, they were turning up inconclusive. The best thing about this gig with the Secret Service was that he could use it as an excuse to slough off the pile of trash on his desk.

Overhead, the plumbing from the upstairs men's room belched and strained above the low ceiling, and one of the long flourescent lights flickered. Bartell gritted his teeth and waited. Someday, unspeakable ugliness awaited the detectives.

A moment later, Bartell's phone rang, and Vic Fanning summoned him into the inner sanctum.

As he sat in Vic Fanning's office, Arnold Zillion, a large, fit man in his late forties, clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in the straight, metal chair. Vic Fanning, trim and brittle in his starched white shirt with French cuffs, sat behind his desk, while Lieutenant Frank Woodruff and Sergeant Sam Blieker, Fanning's two immediate subordinates in the Division, stood on either side, like bookends. Woodruff, tall and aristocratic, with a

pleasant, unlined face, adjusted the lapels of his camel jacket, and stared straight ahead. Blieker, on the other hand, shoved his glasses up onto his high, wrinkled forehead, then began a series of shrugs and rumples, as though trying to rearrange his body inside his baggy, brown suit.

Fanning introduced Bartell to Zillion, who leaned forward slightly, and offered his large, soft hand, which Bartell shook briefly. Zillion had a crisp, big city air about him, a friendly, business-like manner, which said he knew some things, but wouldn't bore you with them unless it became necessary.

"I've been doing this job since the seventies," Zillion said to Fanning, apparently resuming a conversation that Bartell had interrupted. "And I've always been lucky." Zillion laughed self-consciously. "Lucky enough to be somewhere else whenever there was bad trouble. No need to change the pattern now." Zillion wore a blue blazer, a pale blue, button-down shirt, floral tie, gray slacks, and cordovan Bass loafers. His full, brown hair, graying at the edges, was sprayed in place. "I'm sure Detective Bartell—Ray, is it?—I'm sure Ray and I will get along fine."

Bartell realized that he was the only guy in the room without a necktie. But the deficiencies in his wardrobe were even messier than that. Besides his battered ropers, Bartell wore black jeans, and a baggy black shirt, with hula girls dancing around the tail. Bartell wore the tail out, a practice that both kept his gun and handcuffs covered, and gave full effect to the hula girls. While technically within policy, the shirt did not exactly endear him to Fanning. Linda Westhammer liked to claim that compared with her, the dancing girls were, at best, mediocre.

"By the way," Zillion said, pointing to a large, sterling silver loving cup, which sat prominently on a bookcase shelf behind Fanning. "That's quite a memento."

Fanning's pasty face flickered with a sign of life. "Competition shooting," he said, reaching back for the cup, which he handed across the desk to Zillion. On the computer stand to Fanning's left, the monitor displayed the vivid colors of a solitaire game in progress.

Zillion accepted the cup, and eyed the inscription. "Combat courses?"

Fanning nodded. "Nothing but combat courses. That's the only true test. State Champion three years running." Then, when he saw Bartell eyeing the computer screen, he reached quickly for the keyboard, and punched Escape. The screen went blank.

Woodruff looked over Fanning's head at Blieker, and shook his head. Blieker lifted a hand to the side of his face, and violently scratched away a grin.

"I've got a cup similar to that," Zillion said, giving Bartell a sly, eloquently hasty glance. "From a tennis tournament in Palm Springs." Now he looked over at Fanning and smiled. "Almost the same size as yours." His grin was tight with false modesty, but it was clear from Zillion's tone that almost the same size meant bigger.

Bartell said, "You play polo, too?"

Fanning closed his eyes and shook his head.

But Zillion didn't mind playing straight man. "Not anymore." He passed the cup back to Fanning.

Bartell nodded sympathetically. "So hard to find a decent horse."

Ignoring the exchange, Fanning set the cup back on the shelf, then adjusted his lapels, and shot his cuffs. Blieker lowered his glasses back down to his eyes, as though adjusting a pair of goggles for the work ahead.

"Well," Fanning said, "down to business. Ray Bartell here is the best we've got," he said, with too much conviction. "He spent a lot of years on the street, and now he's a topflight investigator. Believe me, nobody knows crazy people like Ray Bartell."

Zillion peered up at Bartell. "Just by looking at him," he said, "I can see that if I ever needed a crazy person, Detective Bartell is the man I'd come to see."

So much for the roll of straight man.

Bartell knew, of course, that the reason he'd drawn this assignment was that there was bound to be a Command Post in place when the former president arrived. Fanning, Woodruff, and Blieker, along with anybody else on the department with any weight, planned to be there, and not out fingering asswipes in the crowd. Beyond that, Bartell's selection was just the luck of the draw.

"We've talked this over several times," Woodruff said, "here in the office. To be honest, none of us came up with anybody we believe might really be a threat."

Zillion's voice was a model of patience. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Just the same," Fanning said, hustling to reclaim his city's place in the pantheon of mean streets, "anything can happen. Anything."

"That's right," Zillion said, smiling again. "But not until after I retire. The trouble is that there are always nutcases in these crowds. And Ramrod always attracts his share."

"Ramrod?" Sam Blieker said.

Zillion explained. "Presidents, they pick up code names. Handles, you know? The former president, he's called Ramrod. And you're probably right, Frank. Most of the wackos are harmless. Still, local officers are always helpful in sorting those folks

out. But I'm afraid..." Zillion crossed his legs, and smoothed his tie, "there's something here in Rozette that has us a little more concerned than usual."

Fanning scowled, and adjusted his cuff links, which were miniature gold replicas of bullets. "You don't say..."

"Taxpayers," Bartell said. He felt the weight of four pairs of eyes slam into him.

Fanning opened his mouth to say something, but Zillion waved him off. "I like a man with a sense of humor," Zillion said. "Makes the interface that much smoother."

Interface. God, Bartell thought, I love it when they talk Federal.

"Especially an upgraded interface like this," Zillion added.

"And just what is it," Bartell wondered, "that's put the upgrade on this interface?"

"Not a what," Zillion said, "but a who. A man named Henry Skelton."

"And who is Henry Skelton?" Vic Fanning asked.

Arnold Zillion covered his mouth with his right hand as he coughed lightly, clearing his throat. "Henry Skelton, as I understand it, is a terrorist."

2.

Henry Skelton squatted on his heels over the embers, and listened to the small, unnamed creek that was fed by a spring farther up the mountain at his back. He poured another cup of coffee, then set the soot-blackened pot on a flat rock beside the remains of the fire. He groaned softly as he tried to stretch the cold out of his hips.

In the bulldozed clearing below, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a red pickup truck pulled to a stop near the large, twin-

rotored helicopter. Not long now, and the logging crew's day would be in full swing. We got a lot to do, Skelton thought. Because he had come to consider himself one of the crew. Everybody's got a job, the way Skelton saw it. There was the helicopter pilot. And truckers. Sawyers. Guys who set cable. These were the official guys, those who got paid. And then there was Henry Skelton. Skelton worked for free. He was the witness. The person whose job it was to see the whole fucking mess, and make sure somebody remembered. The witness.

The wind was a little gusty, now and then swirling ashes out of the small fire pit, drawing them back into the shallow cave at Skelton's back. There were small caves scattered throughout this part of the canyon, all of them scooped into the seam between beds of heavily folded limestone, and the weathered granite intrusion that was the mountain's heart. Skelton's cave, where he had camped regularly since late spring, was maybe fifteen feet wide, ten feet deep. All of the caves contained animal beds, but at the deepest recess of this particular cave, Skelton had made the discovery that settled him here: tufts of bear fur.

Far across the way, the morning sun continued to inch deeper and deeper into the canyon, warming frost from the mountaintop, and lighting the broad, ragged expanse of a clearcut, an area of maybe eight hundred acres from which all the trees had been logged several years ago. Even from several miles away, you could see the gullies cut into the bare ground by rain and snow runoff. You could also make out the scorched remains of five large slash piles, where brush, branches, smaller trees and treetops, all the residue from the logging job, had been burned.

Hundreds of feet below, Cradle Creek flashed intermittently through the cottonwoods. The cottonwoods followed the canyon

floor, until they gave way to cedars as the canyon narrowed and the elevation increased. The white road, surfaced with decomposed granite, followed the creek. Farther up the canyon, the higher elevations were checkered with more clearcuts, and countless roads zigzagged back and forth like sutures across the mountainsides. And finally, at the head of the canyon, loomed the huge, barren expanse of Red Wolf Peak, which rose to nearly eleven thousand feet, and separated Cradle Creek from Red Wolf Canyon, the next drainage north.

But it was the clearcuts that kept grabbing at your attention. The clearcuts always reminded Skelton of the felony time he'd done at Lompoc. Or was it the other way around? Was doing time like a clearcut slashed across your life?

Skelton took a sip of coffee, let it sit on the back of his tongue. Gone cold. He began to swallow, then spit the coffee into the fire.

Once in a while lately, there had been light snow instead of frost in the country above Skelton. One night soon it would begin to snow in earnest. His sojourn ended, he would make the last hike of the season out to his pickup, which he kept hidden off an abandoned logging road about three miles to the east. Then he'd be able to spend more time back in town with Gina. Gina, who had waited through those months in prison, and now continued to wait out Skelton's obsession with this damned mountain.

With a kind of aching nimbleness, Skelton got to his feet, and ducked into the cave. When he came out a moment later, he held a 7mm Sako rifle cradled in his left arm. He moved up the hill, then circled back onto the top of the limestone overhang above the cave, where he dropped to his belly and crawled ahead to the edge of the overhang. From there, he could see down into the clearing below.

Shouldering the rifle Skelton focused his right eye through the nine power scope, a fine piece of optics, that did a good job of gathering light. He could just make out the contours of the right seat inside the cockpit of the helicopter. As he watched, a man appeared from back inside the helicopter, and fitted himself into the seat.

Although he generally tried to avoid being seen, Skelton had never made any secret of his presence in Cradle Creek. In fact, last spring, he had climbed down to the helicopter one night, and taped a paper target over the cockpit glass, right there in the pilot's line of sight. Just to prove a point.

Well, there was no doubt he'd succeeded. The crew boss had made a big deal out of it, calling in a Forest Service investigator, pointing his finger straight up the mountainside at Henry Skelton's camp. Skelton knew what was coming, so he took time to stash the rifle and ammunition under some rocks well away from camp. With the felony conviction on his sheet, simply having a firearm was enough to buy him some more time. They made sure you understood that before they kicked you.

For a while that day, Skelton listened to the investigator, fat and breathless from the climb up to the cave. The investigator talked a lot about Federal crimes, and Forest Service regulations. Skelton listened patiently—so patiently it still amazed him. Although the timber sale had been planned and publicly debated for over a year, he had found his cave, and settled in it for his own purposes, weeks before the loggers started ripping out trees. So what bureaucrat did he look up to lodge his complaint?

After about twenty minutes the investigator left to continue his investigation, without even checking inside the cave. Over the next several days, Skelton entertained himself watching the For-

est Service investigator's pickup prowling the logging roads up and down the canyon. Then the guy stopped coming around.

The crew boss also called the *Free Independent*, Rozette's only daily newspaper, and a reporter named Robert Tolliver showed up. Tolliver climbed the mountain, too, and talked to Skelton.

"Are you affiliated with some group?" Tolliver wanted to know. He was younger than the Forest Service investigator, and not wheezing from the climb.

"Group?"

"You know. Earth First! Sierra Club." The Red Wolf sale had generated a truckload of controversy, Tolliver pointed out, so it was easy to suspect that Skelton's presence on the scene was simply one element of a larger protest. "Most activists," Tolliver said, "are part of some organized group."

"Activist?"

"Isn't that what you'd say you are? Some kind of activist watchdog?"

"I'm a camper," Skelton said.

Who was this guy Tolliver, that Henry Skelton should trust him to tell Henry Skelton's story? He had too much at stake to give up anything of importance just so some raggedy-assed reporter could glom on to a couple more inches under his by-line. Gina saved Tolliver's piece for Skelton, and he was surprised to see that Tolliver, citing "unnamed sources in the Forest Service," had mentioned his prison record. Skelton wasn't pleased about this, but his anger was more for Gina's sake than his own. He knew what she'd gone through with friends in California, when his troubles started down there. Everybody was polite, Gina said, and oh so supportive. Friendly enough it made you want to puke. Why would things be any different here in Montana?

Soon after the target incident, the logging company took on a nighttime security guard, but a couple of weeks ago the company's sense of economy overcame its caution, and the guard was canned. Skelton missed skulking through the woods at night, spying on the guard as he read *Penthouse* in the cab of his pickup.

Six hundred yards, Skelton thought, as he peered through the scope. What would happen if he put a few rounds through that big Chinook helicopter down there? How would the steep, downhill trajectory affect a shot? Hard to say until you tried it.

Maybe that's what he should do. Try it. Some morning just like this, while the logging crew was going about what they thought would be a perfectly ordinary day. Just for fun. He could pick a spot on the broad, smooth fuselage, then start busting caps. See how the shots grouped. The least he'd do was provide renewed job security for the miserable shit who'd just been laid off.

But if he got too crazy...got that crazy...somebody was sure to come looking for him with more in mind than earnest chitchat. And Henry Skelton wasn't ready to start making more headlines. Not yet, anyway.

Skelton continued to scan the clearing through the scope. There were maybe half a dozen pickup trucks now gathered, all parked between a silver-colored fuel tank, and a large yellow machine, like a backhoe, but with a claw on the end of its long, jointed arm. This was the machine they used to load logs onto the trucks that hauled them off to a mill somewhere. Earlier that morning, the helicopter had flown the logging crew across the mountain into Red Wolf. Now, it looked like the pilot was getting ready to start flying logs from the job site back to the clearing.

Skelton took the rifle back into the cave, and slid it inside his sleeping bag. Outside again, he poured what was left of the cof-

fee into the fire pit, and kicked dirt in after it, making sure the fire wouldn't flare back to life while he was gone.

About fifty yards below the ridge top, Henry Skelton paused to catch his breath. Just ahead, the trees fell away, and the country opened into a broad, grassy park, which saddled the divide. For the last half hour, he had been climbing through dense timber, detouring several times to avoid being exposed to view from the air. Twice now, the big Chinook had passed overhead into the next canyon, then returned with a log dangling from a long cable. As always, Skelton had left his rifle behind in the cave.

Leaning against a thick larch tree, Skelton thought about his burning thighs. The day would come when his legs would no longer carry him up and down these mountains. As it was, his only goal today was to get from one place to another. He didn't need his legs to hunt or to escape. But if he were a primitive man—a concept he had come to feel uneasy about applying to Indians—he might walk these hills until his legs no longer served him sufficiently, and then he would die. Simple as that. Sure, others might provide food for him when he got old. And he could substitute stealth for fading speed. But even with help, there would always be a minimum pace demanded to sustain life, your own life, and sooner or later, if you were lucky enough to survive into old age, sooner or later you would be unable to keep up and you would perish.

Coyote bait. That's what Gina called it. Coyote bait. Crow food. Magpie meat. Gina had a lot of synonyms for being dead. And she had used plenty of them that day over a year ago, when he'd first taken her to the small meadow down below, the one about half a mile upstream from where that gypo logging outfit later carved out the landing site.

Early the previous summer, Skelton had driven up the Cradle Creek road to spend the afternoon digging for quartz crystals, sapphires if he got very lucky. The surrounding canyon was on the edge of a batholith, and it was there that, millions of years ago, when the batholith was still molten, water seeped into the mass, forming gas pockets. Then the trapped gasses crystalized as the mass cooled into granite. Skelton wasn't under any illusion that crystals had mystical powers, as some people believed. But he did think of crystals as the mountain's teeth.

"I saw this spot marked on the map," he'd told Gina that night.

It turned out that Cradle Creek was on one of the traditional migratory routes used for centuries by the Nez Perce, when they made the annual journey from what became Washington and Idaho to the western valleys of Montana, hunting buffalo. What Henry Skelton had seen marked on the map was a burial site used generations ago by the Nez Perce. Not that you could tell that about the place just by looking at it. No, as far as the eye could tell, the small meadow, maybe ten acres, was just another meadow.

"Thick with grass," Skelton said to Gina. They were in bed. She lay on her belly beside him, her head turned away, near sleep. He played the tips of his sun-darkened fingers slowly up and down the small of her back, over her hips. "And ringed with lupine." The flowers were a perfect blue, like the sky directly overhead just after dawn. Skelton closed his eyes and thought about the lupine. He felt the sweat cooling on his shoulders, and he pulled Gina close again. "You'll see," he said.

Gina turned onto her side, and threw her leg over his thigh. "I can imagine," she said. She was a compact woman, with dense black hair, and eyes that were improbably blue. Lupine eyes, now

you thought about it.

"You walk out across that meadow," Skelton told her, "I don't know. There's nothing there but all this thick grass. The grass, and the woods all around. And the wind. Nothing, really. But I kept hearing something."

Gina raised her head and rested it on her hand. "Like what?" Then she kissed him.

Like what?

Well, Henry Skelton didn't exactly know. But he couldn't shake the notion that he'd been drawn to that meadow for a reason, that he'd come away with a task. It had all gotten confused since then, of course. Sometimes, he wasn't sure how much his sense of Cradle Creek had to do with that afternoon when he found the meadow, and how much with that night, when he'd held Gina close, and tried to explain. The next afternoon, he drove her to the meadow. She said it gave her the willies.

Maybe she was right. It was all pretty mush-headed, you thought about it too hard. Pretty California. And if there was one thing Henry Skelton had given up, it was thinking California.

Fuck California. Just fuck it, all of it.

Nowadays, Skelton was content to let his legs do his thinking for him. He pushed away from the tree and started uphill, reminding himself that he was still alive.

The logging business, Skelton figured, was like cancer, most damaging of all when it worked its hidden way through the body. At least with clearcuts, you could take one look at the patient, and tell she was pretty fucking sick. A month or so back, Skelton had hiked over the saddle to the Red Wolf site, which was about two hours from the cave. Within an hour, he could hear the whine of

the chain saws. If not for the Chinook, though, the site would remain deeply hidden in the backcountry. As logging jobs went, this kind of selective, isolated cutting was considerably less damaging to the forest than conventional methods, which seemed more like search-and-destroy missions than what the timber industry delicately called a harvest. Why was it, then, that the voices Henry Skelton heard echoing up from that Nez Perce meadow, measured whispers that, really, might only be wind, why was it those voices would not be still? Skelton had enough sense to worry about people who heard voices, worry like hell. Now here he was paying some kind of demented attention, grasping for a diagnosis.

As Skelton neared the ridge top, the trees grew more stunted and windblown, the canopy overhead more sparse. He stopped frequently now, and listened for the helicopter, making sure that he had time before moving across open ground.

"Fuckin' idiots," Skelton huffed. He was thinking about those people who claimed it was a waste of money to use a helicopter, since the Red Wolf sale was in a remote area you couldn't even see from a highway. If there isn't a road into a place, some seemed to think, and people can't drive there and see that the forest is gone—just fucking gone—then it's okay. A Forest Service bigshot even had the brains to suggest that this whole timber harvest crisis could have been avoided if his predecessors had just been smart enough to eradicate forests without ruining the view.

Skelton's legs were on fire, but he refused to let up his pace. Above his breathing, and the blast of wind drawing over the saddle, he heard the first, rising wail of the chopper. Caught in the open, he forced his legs to run the last fifty or sixty steps to the crest, at the eastern margin of the saddle.

Skelton fell to the ground near a group of granite boulders. When he looked back down into Cradle Creek, the chopper was just rising into view. He scrambled for cover behind the rocks, and wedged himself under a clump of juniper.

As the helicopter climbed toward him, Skelton caught some movement at the tree line along the lower end of the park, the area through which he had just passed. He looked closely at the patch of brown, and realized that it was a bear. A moment later, the bear stepped completely clear of the trees, and stood broadside to Skelton just over a hundred yards away. Even from that distance, Skelton could see the hump at the base of the bear's neck, and he knew it was a grizzly. A big, nasty goddamn grizzly bear, and it was between Skelton and his camp.

His camp. Shit. Like that cheesy cave was going to be some kind of shelter from a bear.

But the rifle. That was something else.

No. He wouldn't kill the bear. He didn't want to kill the bear. That was the whole goddamn point.

If the bear now had Henry Skelton's full attention, the same seemed to be true of the pilot of the helicopter. As Skelton watched the bear, he noticed that the trees and grass around it were beginning to whip under a powerful, unnatural wind, as the chopper descended to within forty or fifty feet of the ground, and hovered over the bear.

Rather than run, the bear looked up, studied the machine, then all at once he stood on his hind legs, extending himself to his full height. The bear reached his forelegs above his head, swatting at the end of the cable that hung from the chopper. The grizzly's mouth was open. Skelton knew that the bear was roaring, but he couldn't hear it, not above the thumpa-thumpa-thump of the

rotors.

A few moments later, the helicopter gained altitude as the pilot pulled away and dropped on over the ridge, heading for a load.

That left the bear. The bear and Henry Skelton.

After being distracted briefly by the helicopter, Skelton realized that, while the machine might be an irritation and his ultimate enemy, an enraged grizzly bear was an immediate jolt of heaving life on the hunt.

When Skelton looked back down the slope, he saw the bear running uphill with sickening speed, chasing after the chopper. And heading right into Henry Skelton's lap. The bear's brown fur was thick for winter, and tipped with silver, which gave the bear a liquid shimmer in the sunlight as he moved.

Skelton took a very deep breath, and began drawing further back into the junipers, hoping for the best, which in this case might only come down to being killed quickly, rather than maimed.

But the grizzly pulled up short, lifted its snout to test the air. Then he shook his huge shoulders, and ambled back down toward the trees, looking harmless now, like an oversized brown dog. Sure, a big brown dog with claws large as a man's fingers, jaws powerful enough to munch a Buick, and an attitude that was just that, a real fucking attitude.

Henry Skelton had to take a piss. He reminded himself to start breathing again. He closed his eyes, and ground the sweat from them with the heels of his hands. And he tried not to think about how badly he had to take a piss.

Throughout the summer, he hadn't seen any bears at all, to say nothing of a grizzly, and he had begun to have doubts about the

meaning of the tufts of fur he'd found inside the cave. Some old scat, he'd come across that. But no living, breathing bears. Now, maybe he'd been right after all. Maybe it was those caves, and the need for a place to settle in and sleep out the winter, that had drawn this bear into Cradle Creek.

Skelton was nowhere near an expert on grizzly bears, but it struck him as odd that one would venture into such close proximity to the logging job. Still, he knew that it wasn't uncommon in the country north of Helena and Missoula for grizzlies to roam out of the Bob Marshall Wilderness onto nearby ranches. That happened, too, west of the Mission Mountains on the Salish-Kootenai Reservation south of Flathead Lake. It was a lot easier to treat *ursus horribilis* like some sort of fragile icon, when one wasn't charging up the hill toward you, maybe on the verge of ripping your guts out. Especially when you had to take a piss.

Had to take a piss while you're huddled in a clump of brush, scared to death of a giant, man-eating beast, that's between you and anyplace you need to go. Between you and your camp, you and your truck, your camp and your truck.

Skelton's teeth started to chatter from needing to take a piss.

Finally, the bear passed out of sight, his movements through the forest now completely unpredictable. Skelton at last eased out of the junipers. After relieving himself, he decided that his best bet was to cross the saddle, then get back into the sparse trees along the upper flank of Red Wolf Peak. From there, he could make his way farther up into the canyon, and loop down to his camp from above. That would take several hours. But what else did Skelton have to do? At the camp, perhaps the lingering stench of the fire, along with the activity in the clearing below, would divert the bear to some distant part of the canyon. And if not, there was the rifle.

Skelton didn't like to think about that, but he was getting closer by the second to seeing the rifle as not a bad alternative. He wasn't ready to be magpie meat. Not hardly.

The chopper would return soon, this time with a log dangling from the cable. All day the chopper would be crossing back and forth. With luck, the chopper would keep the grizzly from noticing Skelton. Who knew, maybe the bear would even keep Skelton from noticing the chopper.

No, there wasn't that much luck to go around.