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University of Montana
HEART OF WINTER

By

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I sat at my kitchen table, talking with Jonathon Sommers on the eve of the biggest blizzard since bobby socks. Sommers stared at a manila envelope in front of him. He looked frazzled and probably hadn't slept since he called me late the night before. He had lost his daughter in what he felt sure had been a murder, and looked the way any father might. A few new lines were wincing into his brow, yet something else filled his tired blue eyes, something colder than the icicles hanging outside the kitchen window. He twisted one end of the droopy mustache that matched his thinning salt-and-pepper hair, then pushed the envelope at me. I didn't open it yet.

"I realize going back there could present some..., er difficult situations," Sommers said in an overly-polite voice, "but you know Coldwater better than most, and I know you. Hube seemed to think if I made you a fair offer, you'd have no problem with it," Sommers said.

"Hube Bush?" I asked.

Sommers nodded and said, "To be fair, he's the one who
thought of you."

He turned loose of his mustache and looked at me for an answer.

Hube Bush had been a fishing mentor to me in my long-gone Clearasil years, a sort of streamside sage. Old Hube liked things "fair" and never understood that most of us interpret the word to our own advantage. He probably also knew Sommers' timing couldn't be better. Fishing had sputtered to a depressing standstill from ice-overs on all the waters, and the thousand or so souls in and around the metropolis of Milltown weren't exactly crashing my doors with new work-- not even the usual civil cases that had put wine on my table the last few years. I had money, but the leisure to spend it ridiculously. A dangerous combination.

"It's certainly a fair offer, no arguing that," I said.

Didn't matter how things broke, I'd still get the prize-- a grand up front, plus my usual ten dollars an hour. I could probably get twice that an hour, but this way I didn't have to worry about which suit to wear or which accountant to trust. Besides, ten an hour is the best figure I can turn my back on and go fishing. I had a priority scale, but it was always open to the kind of defeat Sommers had in mind.
"Add another thousand if you can wrap this up conclusively," he said.

"I like the way you bargain," I said and shook his hand. I would have taken the deal anyway after the past week of coffee and crosswords.

I had hesitated because even the idea of working on a homicide raised my red flags. In Montana any murder is still a shock and law officers take it very seriously. They do extremely thorough investigations and don't tolerate a second of interference from outside meddlers like me. I seldom get asked to look into a homicide and when I do I have a habit of remembering that my calendar is too full to possibly take on any more work. If I stumble onto a body tracing a skip or looking for a missing person, I turn it over to the nearest officer faster than a kid can spend a quarter at Alladin's Castle. Money's the same on a shoplifting case, and I sleep better too. But Sommers had a different twist on this. His daughter's case had already been ruled a suicide in spite of his objections. A closed case only called for red flags at half-mast. Sommer's checkbook made it easy to ignore flags like that.

Sommers watched my face and waited for me to speak. People die, some by their own design, and somebody has to go beyond "I'm so sorry, call me if there's anything I can
do," really thinking, "Thank God it wasn't my daughter." I've been guilty of as many platitudes as anybody. I've shown pictures to people who hired me to take them, still hoping their suspicions were wrong, and when the client's face dropped I've said "these things happen," then gone home where I avoided my own eyes in the mirror. Platitudes-- drivel to cover those occasions when there is nothing to say. I nodded my head at Sommers and said nothing.

I picked up the envelope and Jonathon Sommers seemed to smile to himself as his eyes hardened into a look I didn't like-- the look of a grieving father contemplating the cleaning of guns.

I spread out the contents of the envelope in front of me. Five items: Two photographs, a cashier's check for a thousand dollars in my name --Murdoch Reeves,-- a handwritten list, and a calling card with Sommers' home phone and beeper number.

The first photo showed Sommers' daughter lying dead and naked on a bed. The woman's arms stretched casually over her head, a graceful, disturbing pose. I couldn't make out close detail in the photo, but an ugly wound marred the hollow between her pale breasts. Auburn hair fanned out to the left side of the woman's lean body,
stretching out further than the picture. It had to be a police photo, I thought. Her wide, dull eyes seemed to stare up at me. Jonathon Sommers kept his eyes turned away from the picture. I put it back in the envelope, out of sight. A hard picture to look at, even for a stranger.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, tapping the envelope.

"I still have some friends in Coldwater, although this may have cost me one," Sommers said. His blue eyes no longer looked hard, just sad and tired. I trusted that look better.

In his button-down jeans, green work shirt, and scuffed Justin roper's boots you wouldn't guess that he had once owned one of the biggest law practices in Montana. You also wouldn't guess he had seen nearly seventy winters, or that he now owned a good-sized bank. I'd worked for him a few times years ago, on a fraud case and a hellish child-custody dispute, and he had been exacting and tough. I hadn't seen much of him since.

I picked up the next item in front of me, another photo. This one showed a younger version of Sommers' daughter, Elaine, wearing a baggy white polo shirt and kissing the business-end of a putter. Her hair looked wind blown, and mussed to perfection. The picture highlighted
the blue eyes she shared with her father, and didn't mask the careless beauty that seemed to require little tending. The photo reminded me of one of those ads with a woman in her lover's workshirt, drinking her morning coffee and staring out a window. This second photograph was the kind of thing a husband would frame and keep on his desk. The border of the snapshot said "October 1973."

"That was the day after Elaine turned twenty. She had just won the end-of-the-year putting contest," Sommers said. His face grew sharp again and he added, "it was also the day she met that shit-heel she married."

If I smiled at that I could be forgiven. Lionel Webster, Elaine's husband, easily qualified as "shit-heel." Lionel worked as president of First City Bank of Coldwater, the bank that Sommers owned now, and Lionel's father had owned in the past. I remembered Lionel when he had been a loan officer and how he laughed as he ripped up my loan application and dropped it in the trash with a flourish and a quip about the "loathsome profession of private investigation."

The third item on the table, the hand-written list, covered the few sketchy facts Sommers had told me on the phone the night before. Elaine had died (killed according to Sommers) on Thursday, January fourth from a gunshot
wound to the chest. The gun that killed her, a .38 pistol, had been found beside her body. Three weeks later to the day, January twenty-fifth, Elaine's death had been officially ruled a suicide. At the bottom of the page Sommers listed The River Inn as the place Elaine had died, as well as the address and phone number for Lionel Webster. The last item, the calling card, I put in my wallet.

I poured Sommers another cup of coffee then went to my desk for a contract form. I filled out the form except for the additional information section where I wrote "Reasons for investigation," and told Sommers to fill it out. Sommers listed two reasons: "for my own peace of mind," and "to rule out suicide as the cause of death for insurance purposes."

"You have an insurance policy on Elaine?" I asked.

"One hundred thousand," Sommers said, looking at his boots, "I've had it since my wife, Margaret, passed away in 'sixty-three."

When Sommers had signed and dated the contact I handed him the client's copy. More than one person has mentioned my files as the only thing remotely organized in my life. I've worked on enough civil suits to turn me into a compulsive paper-work collector with straining file cabinets. The terms "word of mouth," "it was my
understanding" and "verbal agreement" have caused anguished people to make an infinite number of attorneys very rich. Lawyers have an irritating way of changing the jury's dilemma from Burden of Proof to which side lied the least. If it's not on paper some well-coached witness will invent his side's own version. "Put it in writing" should be tattooed on foreheads at birth.

We shook hands and Sommers started for the door, then paused.
"Thanks Murdoch," Sommers said as he pulled on his gray down-coat, "and stay in touch."

It seemed early for thank's, I thought. In all probability, I'd look at the report, maybe see the file if I got very lucky, talk to a few people, and tell Sommers that sadly it did look like Elaine had taken her own life.

He opened the door and swirls of snow blew across the floor in his wake. Sommers left the same way he'd come in--fast and to the point.

It would be good to get out of Milltown and away from nightly dinners at Harold's, no matter how good their burgers were. It would be even better to escape Missoula's tentacles of Nintendo merchants, frozen yogurt stands, flippant sports reporters and the rest of life's backside.
Close to nowhere in particular, Coldwater remained small and untouched by the world of cellular phones and fax machines. Bullshit, even I didn't buy that. Besides, she would still be there in Coldwater, like a corn on a toe that won't go away. Beverly No-Longer-Reeves Burke would be waiting.

By noon I had pointed my old Bronco east and left Missoula county behind. I had packed clothes, gear, some jerky I didn't remember buying, even my manual typewriter so Sommers would have legible reports. My neighbor had a key to my back door to feed my cat, Laimbeer-- an ugly, hate-filled, black stray that had adopted me. I'd banked Sommers' check and had cash. And as I headed down the interstate toward Coldwater, I knew I had forgotten something, but no clear idea of what that something might be. Happens all the damn time. I once came home from a security job in Charlos Heights to find I'd left my lawn sprinkler on for five days making a swampy haven for mosquitoes out of my backyard.

Usually I make the sixty-odd mile drive to Coldwater in that peculiar form of driver's trance dedicated fisherfolk suffer from when a river parallels the highway--eyes more focused on the water than the road, evaluating
likely holes and cutbanks for their trout-holding potential, and dreaming of trophy-sized fish in late-evening feeding frenzies on the stretches. But from the beginning this trip promised to be different. The ice-over had camouflaged the rivers in uniform white, hiding their secrets from prying eyes until the return of the motorhomes, now a more predictable indicator of spring than the red-breasted robin.

I watched the interstate for traces of black ice which became harder and harder to see as swirling flakes of snow gave way to a romantic fall of large picture-book flakes, then to a driving, gusting deluge of granular snow.

The high ridges of rocky cliffs and ponderosa pine that form the long river valleys disappeared. My face inched closer to the windshield, fighting for visibility, and I slowed the Bronco to about thirty-five. I drove through the blizzard dreading the inevitable meeting with Beverly. The only thing worse than a sudden meeting with an ex-wife is a sudden meeting with an ex-wife who is also the sheriff. It wouldn't help to say I'm looking into a case she had closed and would be trying to prove her findings wrong. I told myself the flutter in my stomach must be elation to be working again. My stomach did another flip, a clear message to quit conning myself.
I had the defroster on high. In the Bronco that only means the fan makes more noise. My breath condensed and froze on the windows. The snow began to freeze and stick to the windshield wipers and I realized I had driven into the heart of an arctic storm. Here in Montana they call these miserable storms "Siberian Slammers," and do so without any trace of affection. These arctic fronts can bring stupefying windchills of fifty or sixty below-zero and heavy snows.

The last fifteen miles into Coldwater I drove with my window down, searching for the center line, mileage markers, or any other guides that would help me stay on the highway. I needed a good Hank Williams song to purge the stress. I needed my yarn rod. I slammed the steering wheel with my hands. That's what I'd forgotten. It's a miniature fishing pole with a length of yarn on the end. Nothing as relaxing as a few indoor casts when there's no fishing to be had.

I pulled onto the exit ramp, frozen, tense, and hungry. At the first hardware store I bought an extension cord, a three-foot long ice-fishing pole, and a skein of thick orange yarn. The two clerks in the store pointed at me and whispered something as I walked out. I looked down at my purchase and nodded.
At the Big Sky Truck Plaza I rented a room and plugged in the block heater of the Bronco. I snaked the new extension cord through a sizable gap under the door to the room. Truck stops are not glamorous, but they do have the advantage of low rates, and usually offer cheap if mysterious food forms. This one had a sign that read "Diesel Fuel, Government Credit Cards Accepted, Meal Special 99 Cents." I wondered if the "Meal Special" would pass a cursory FDA inspection, and decided to have a pizza delivered.

Morning came as delightfully as the last night ended. My breath turned into clouds despite having the thermostat wide open. A delta of snow covered the carpet and the extension cord by the gap under the door. My newly created yarn rod lay at the foot of the bed and the room smelled of stale pizza. I folded a towel and jammed it under the door gap, as I should have done the night before, and walked back to the bathroom for a shower. I stood shivering on the cold tile of the shower until I realized no water would be coming. The pipes had frozen.

By the time I dressed and warmed up the engine in the Bronco, my head had cleared enough to think of coffee and getting the visit with Beverly over with. I made a couple
slack-line casts and watched the orange yarn scribe a serpentine pattern, then went outside. Truck drivers fumbled with frozen fuel lines and cursed about being behind schedule before they even hit the road. I helped a woman parked next to me pry open her ice-bound car door, dragged the frozen-stiff extension cord into my room, and left.

Hot brownish liquid from a Seven-Eleven served as a coffee substitute and tasted much better than it looked. I drove to the County building, weaving through the mess the storm had caused. Cars stuck in windrifts littered the streets of Coldwater, two water mains had burst and turned the front of the Post Office into a skating rink. People were stranded everywhere.

I thought Beverly might be too busy sheriffering to give my visit her full attention. The thought pleased me. No statute requires a visit to inform the authorities of a private investigation. It's just considered good form. Generally, I consider "good form" counter-productive if not asinine, like sticking a pinkie out after spilling tea instead of being smart enough to clean the damn mess up. But I knew skipping this visit would only come back to mess with me later.

Western Avenue is a mile-long extended exit ramp which
connects the Interstate with Lewis and Clark Boulevard, a misnomer for the deteriorating Old Highway. Locals sometimes delight in calling it the Old Highway, confusing tourists looking for the famed Copper Creek Archaeological Site. I turned off Western onto Avonlea and drove through what served as the heart of Coldwater.

Maybe twenty thousand people live in and around town if you make your count in July when the snowbirds have all come home from Florida or Arizona or wherever it is they flee to in the winter. Coldwater is one of those strange Montana towns with no real industry to support its population. Instead, the town thrives for about three months out of the year on tourist dollars, at the same time cursing the source of their money as out-of-state folk crowd the outnumbered locals out of their normal haunts. A place where xenophobics grind their teeth and fill their seasonal coffers.

Without thinking about it I slowed up by First Avenue and checked for traffic carefully even though I had a green light. First gets most of the north and southbound truck traffic and is a notorious site of accidents when the roads are too slick for the heavier rigs to stop quickly. I pulled through the intersection and wondered at my instinctive slowing. I hadn't been back in over four
years, but it still had the feel of long-time familiarity, like putting on a comfortable winter coat for the first time after summer. Coldwater had been my home until I lost my wife, my house, and my collection of Sara Vaughn and Hank Williams albums. I missed the records, the house had piece-meal plumbing, and unfortunately I'd have to see my ex now.

I pulled up at the County Building and parked beside a cruiser painted in the traditional scours gold of the Coldwater Sheriff's department. A teenager with the word "DOOM" shaved into his hair had just finished shoveling the sidewalk up to the building. He stood in his shirt sleeves despite the thirty-below chill factor and motioned me through with a theatrical arm gesture. I wondered what sort of civil code he'd broken to get him the honor of digging out the County building.
I walked up to the half-walled corner that partially separated the Sheriff's office from the rest of the room. Sheriff Beverly Burke rolled her eyes at Deputy Dallas Jennings as she talked on the phone. Her wavy red hair reached barely to her shoulders, shorter than she used to wear it. Teal colored eye shadow brought out the full effect of her blue-green eyes which looked the way winter felt.

Outside of pictures in the paper, I had never seen Beverly in uniform. She looked more beautiful than I remembered, more distant too, with no visible signs of softness or humanity. Maybe it had to do with her uniform, or her look of total control, or the patronizing tone she spoke into the phone with. I couldn't put my finger on it, only that I seemed to be looking at a stranger, not the woman I had been married to. But then Beverly always had an almost magical ability to control the way people perceived her, an aura she could shift at will from warm and inviting to sub-zero.

At its peak our marriage had been almost adequate; there had been no glory days. She had asked for a
honeymoon somewhere exotic, and wanted me to surprise her with the destination. I couldn't think of a more exotic spot on earth than Yellowstone Park with its geysers and mudpots and incredible trout streams. Beverly felt otherwise. It went downhill from there until the love we thought so strong before our marriage slowed to a trickle and eventually stopped. "How could I have been so stupid?" became a question that kept both of us awake at night. So when I cleared my throat at the entrance to her office I wasn't looking for any favors from the Sheriff's department.

"What next?" Beverly said, holding up her index finger without looking up at me. "Now we've got two trailers burning down because a couple of lunatics tried to thaw their pipes with propane torches. The fire-trucks could hardly thread through all the cars stuck in the road. I want emergency travel only. This is ridiculous. Get out there and make the call, and get the damn P.D. off their asses and tell them to block off the street in front of the Post Office."

Dallas Jennings stomped out of the room and jarred my shoulder as he went by. He glared over his shoulder at me for a second, then yelled for somebody to get the Police Chief on the phone. I cleared my throat again. The office
had no door to knock on.

"So?" Beverly greeted me from the government-green office.

"So, how's business?" I said. "You're looking well, at least."

"I'm a little busy to swap pleasantries, Murdoch. This had better be important," Beverly said. She iced me with her eyes and put a pencil in the exact center of a notepad. With Beverly things have their places. The pencil's place must be the center of the pad, and her glare made it obvious she had no place for me. We didn't have the kind of divorce where you kiss hello.

"Let's call it a formality," I said, "I'm going to be working on something here and I want to start out on the right foot."

"Breaking up more marriages with your Polaroid?" she said.

Over the years I've been hired to do a few backgrounds for divorce cases, which Beverly found detestable. I didn't care for the work myself. Nobody does except lawyers. Thankfully the days of instant divorces have about done away with glossy prints of compromised mates. Nice of her to bring that up.

"Actually I've been hired to look into the murder of
Elaine Webster," I said.

For a fleeting moment Beverly's eyes softened and she coiled a clump of red hair around her finger. It didn't last long. Her face went red and blotchy, showing the few faded freckles on her brow that had survived childhood.

"You've got no business working on that," she said in a metallic voice with none of the charm that got her elected. "The Webster case is closed. A clear suicide, and her family has been hurt enough already. You clear on that?"

"I've been hired," I said. "That means I've taken the job, and I intend to do what I've been hired to do. If the case is closed there isn't much chance of me getting in the way of an investigation, is there? I have a client who believes Elaine Webster was murdered. Now more than likely I'll talk to a few people, look over the reports and tell my client it was suicide after all. But I am definitely going to do my job. Are you clear on that?"

I realized I'd raised my voice when the room behind us got quiet. I turned and saw people staring. If there's one thing that sets me off, it's somebody carping at me like a second-rate high school principal. Our reunion hadn't brought out my best side.

"Aren't you just full of yourself today" Beverly
said. The sneer on her face didn't put me in a better mood.

"Look, I didn't have to come in like this," I said, "I thought it was the professional thing to do. A courtesy."

"Don't flatter yourself, Murdoch," Beverly said.

"If I could see a copy of the report on Elaine Webster I'd leave and save us both more aggravation," I said. I tried to sound more reasonable than I felt.

"No," she said, and pointed to open front of her office that served as a door.

"Come on, Beverly. Reports are public record, even in Coldwater," I said.

"I don't have time for this, now leave," Beverly said. She stood up from her desk. Her tan uniform made her petite frame seem larger. I wondered if she had a matching Smokey Bear hat.

"We're both going to look bad if I have to get a subpoena for a public record. I'm not asking for any inside information or even for the whole file, just the report," I said.

The people in the main room outside had stopped staring, but Dallas Jennings had returned and waited at the door. Beverly looked up and waved him away.

"For whatever reasons, Elaine Webster took her own
life," Beverly said.

Her sudden reasonable tone surprised me. She could do that, shift gears and leave you scratching your head.

She continued, "We found the gun that killed her, a .38, beside her body. The County Coroner did a complete autopsy and believes the wound that killed her could have been self-inflicted. The shot came from very close range, less than twelve inches. There was some evidence of sexual contact, but much earlier than the time of death. The body was unclothed and traces of cocaine were present in the blood.

"We think that a domestic problem, depression, and drugs could all have figured in her death, which strongly indicates a suicide," Beverly said.

Then in her best official voice, "That's all you need to know, and more than you deserve. You can get a copy of the report, including the Coroner's findings from the secretary. I don't want to see you, or even hear about you until this is over."

"Thanks. I only hope it is that straight forward. I'll still have to poke around, but we shouldn't have to butt heads on this," I said, still surprised at her sudden confidings.

"I will definitely not cover for you if... no, when
you screw up," Beverly said. She sat down again, picked up the phone, and lowered her long lashes to me. My interview had ended.

I left her office and walked to the island in the middle of the main room which the receptionist shared with the dispatcher. Dallas Jennings shot me another glare and I held his eye until he looked away which didn't take many seconds. He lumbered away, through the out door.

I zipped up my chore coat against the cold and left the County Building with a smudged copy of the official Sheriff's Department report on Elaine Webster in my hand. About the only thing new in the report was that the time of death had been placed between seven that night and midnight.

The cold wind stung my face and blew snow in my eyes, but it felt good to be out of Beverly's office. There's a fine line to be walked on a murder case and trouble on either side of that line. On one side you prove incompetent and don't do what you're paid to do. On the other side you do the job too thoroughly and wind up with something bizarre hanging over your head, like a charge of Obstruction of Justice on a closed case.

The trick is to not piss off the wrong people, which
meant Beverly. She might even smile if she could hassle me 
about interference on a case she had already closed. I 
walked through the gale-force wind to my Bronco. Blowing 
snow had formed a small drift on the hood and completely 
covered the windshield. I figured my first contrary act 
would be to defy Beverly's newly issued emergency traffic 
only decree.

Dallas Jennings had other ideas. He showed up as I 
finished brushing snow off the Bronco and scraping the 
windows. He stood between me and the car door and looked 
friendly, the way a diamondback does after a baler folds 
its tail into a hay bale.

"I used to really like you, Dallas," I said. Once 
upon a long time ago Dallas had escaped to San Francisco, 
and returned with striped bell-bottoms on and incredible 
stories about the people the rest of us only saw on the 
news. He'd been a nice guy then.

"You used to like my sister, too," Dallas said, and 
squared off his feet.

"Is that what all this is about? A date, what? Two 
decades ago? I'm glad it's nothing petty bothering you," I 
said.

"It's not just her, goddammit. You shoulda stayed 
gone. The way you treated Beverly, you--"
"The way I treated HER? It's none of your damn business, but if you knew half of it, which you can't from talking to her, you'd keep your—" I said.

"And you're gonna give me the true story, huh?" Dallas said. He rubbed the instep of one shark-skin boot on the back of his pants leg, wiping snow off the expensive footwear. The bitter wind made his face purple with cold. Mine felt the way his looked.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to justify my life to you or anybody else, but I'm not going to listen to bullshit you think you know about it either."

"Well, you're damn sure gonna listen to this," he said. "You stay clear of my sister."

"Rita? She's back in Coldwater?" I said.

"Yeah, and she's got enough problems without seeing you," Dallas said. He moved to punctuate the order by driving an index finger into my chest. I stepped back and let him poke the air with his finger.

"It's a small town, Dallas," I said just to aggravate him. I had no intentions of looking up his sister.

I probably wouldn't even recognize Rita Jennings. In 1969 I thought I was the luckiest guy in town to spend an exciting night with Rita at a bad drive-in movie. I couldn't imagine how such a dark-haired beauty just
materialized in a town like Coldwater. I should have known better. Rita might have looked eighteen, but the next day I found out she was fifteen. I never saw her again.

Dallas Jennings is about five-eleven. That gave me two inches over him. He narrowed his light blue eyes at me. In high school those eyes and his black hair earned him the nick-name "Hollywood." As he stood in front of me twenty-two years later, Dallas clenched his fists and looked more like a pissed-off overweight pretty boy than "Hollywood."

"Miserable storm sure made a mess of town, huh Dallas?" Lou Phelp called out and hurried the last few steps to get between us. Lou clapped Dallas on the shoulder and shook his head sympathetically, like he hadn't noticed the situation.

"Boss was wondering what happened to you," Lou added, and winked at me behind Dallas' back.

"See that you stay the fuck away from her, Reeves," Dallas said. He turned on his high-dollar heels and started back toward the building.

"Nice timing. We were just running out of small talk," I said to Lou, and shook his hand.

"Poor guy is one stressed-out deputy. You're lucky enough to be the first good scapegoat he's had in weeks,"
Lou said. "We can shoot the shit later. The good deputy will be back out in a second and less than happy. Beverly has elected him to the position of traffic director on Sixth until they get the light fixed."

"I guess that won't improve his humor," I said and pulled my coat collar up to block the wind that had started to swirl again.

"Stop by later on," Lou said, "it's been way too long."

I turned around to a fresh skiff of snow on the windshield. Lou Phelp's had been the first friendly face I'd come across. A nice change I thought, brushing off the Bronco a second time. Lou and I were good friends, more than that-- we were long-time fishing buddies with systems of rituals, sins, and fishing tactics.

Coldwater's not a huge town, but like most places with a bad economy and few opportunities it has its ills, especially during the cabin-fever months of winter. I passed a collection of hard-ass bars that fill even during the afternoon, and drove toward Coldwater's worst ill. The east corner of the North Side is a two-block by four-block section of town with two biker clubhouses, three abandoned buildings patronized by transients, and more than a few
parted-out cars on cinder blocks.

The Pit, as locals call it, sits in a slight depression that floods every spring. The area is flanked on one side by a railroad yard, on the other by several blocks of pawn shops and a small used car lot. In the middle of The Pit is the River Inn, nowhere near the slightest hint of a river.

The Pit looked better under the new snow and drifts which blanketed over the usual litter and debris, and softened the appearance of derelict cars. I stopped in front of The River Inn, a seedy joint of the type that usually gets named Shady Nook or El Rancho.

The motel had a sloppy paint job with runs of white paint on the windows in front and bubbles under the pink on the sides. It had eight rooms, nine counting the apartment in back of the abandoned front desk. I rang the small bell on the lacquered plywood desk.

"Comin'" a voice called out. I heard a loud grunt and the sound of footsteps. Heavy footsteps.

A large woman with a bloated face stepped behind the desk. She wore enormous faded jeans, engineer boots, and a black leather jacket. I didn't give the jacket a chance at closing over her impressive beer-gut. She scratched her phony-blond head and I noticed a tattoo of a hummingbird
on her wrist.

"Got a single I can let ya have for eighteen," she said.

"I don't need a room---" I said.

"Then ride on the hell out of here," she said and turned her big back to me.

"I wanted to ask you about what happened here last month," I said and reached for the I.D. in my wallet.

"The dead woman?"

"Yes, Elaine Webster," I said.

"I ain't talking to no more fuckin' cops," she said and waved me off.

"I'm not---"

"Piss off and bother somebody else, officer," she said.

"I'm not a cop," I said, "just a few questions?"

No reply from the she-monster. A mouse-haired guy walked in and held her hand. He must have been eight inches shorter than the woman, yet carried a belly that more than rivaled hers. I couldn't picture the couple in an embrace. Their arms weren't long enough.

"Candy here's a biker," the man said as if that completely explained the woman. "She don't much care for cops."
"The thought occurred to me," I said. "I'm not a cop, okay."

"He's not, and he don't want a room either," Candy said.

"So what's this guy want?" the man said, turning to Candy like I wasn't there.

"Who knows," Candy said, "he was asking 'bout that dead woman last month."

"I'm an investigator. I'm looking into the death of Elaine Webster," I said. I took out my homemade I.D. and handed it to the man.

"So what?" he said and frisbeed the I.D. at me so that it bounced off my face.

"So I'm not the law and I don't have a warrant or anything like that. I also don't have any reason not to come around this pitiful desk and slap your fat ass around," I said. I took a step forward, only partially bluff.

"What next, Mr. Toughguy investigator," he said. I watched his arms stiffen as he studied me to see if I meant business.

I held out a ten-dollar bill and said, "you can either take this and talk to me, or we can find out what next."

"All right, toughguy. We'll take your money for you,"
he said, then winked at Candy and grabbed the bill.

Sometimes money can make life run a lot smoother. Sometimes you might as well use it in the bathroom. I hoped this wouldn't be one of the later times.

"Tell me what happened that night," I said.

"What's to tell? Me and Tiny here was in back gettin' hammered the night your gal blew herself away," Candy said. She still kept a dark eye on me, but some of her bluster had gone.

"Who checked Mrs. Webster into her room," I asked.

"I took her money and give her the key, if that's what you mean. Cash money, too," Candy said.

"She sign the registry under her own name?"

"Registry? You gotta be kidding," Tiny said, "this look like the Hilton to you? Registry? Shit, man. We keep a list nice and legal, only like I told the cops sometimes we forget to ask a name, you know what I mean?"

He pushed the "list" at me. A new page for each date. I read the top page. It said "Client, pd., #3," or "Client, pd., #9." I nodded that I understood and asked him if he ever knew any of his clients' names.

"If they want phone calls it costs an extra dollar, and they leave a name they answer to. All we knew was Elaine in number 6, no last name or nothing. If somebody
stays around long enough you catch onto a name sometimes, like Donny Cooper in five," Tiny said.

"Did you see anybody with Mrs. Webster?" I asked.
Tiny lit a Kool and blew smoke at me.

"She was alone, and wasn't nobody in that fancy Accura thing she was driving either," Tiny said.

"I checked," Candy said, a little smirk on her face, "we get an extra five for a double."

"Had she ever stayed here before?" I asked. Hard to imagine a woman with Elaine Webster's resources in a place like this.

"Nope and I'd have remembered if she did," Candy said, "She wasn't the type we usually get here."

"Mostly we get somebody who wants a room for either an hour or a month, sometimes more like the guy in five," Tiny said.

"He's the Donny Cooper you mentioned?"
Tiny nodded and flicked cigarette ashes on the floor. He seemed proud that he actually knew the name of a lodger.

"How long has he been here?" I asked.

"Hell, he's been in there since before Christmas. Keeps his bill paid though," Tiny said.

"So he was there when it happened?"
Tiny and Candy looked at each other for a second, then
Candy said, "he was out that night. Maybe he had a date or something."

I asked if they saw anyone go into Elaine's room and they said no. Tiny admitted they had both stayed in back watching TV and drinking "animal beers," cheap stuff with pictures of ducks and deer on the cans. I asked if there were any calls for Elaine and they both started studying the dirty floor.

"We didn't know they were for her at the time," Tiny said. "Some woman called a few times askin' for a Mrs. Webster, but all we had was a first name for this woman."

"Name of Webster didn't mean nothing to us," Candy added.

Tiny said he had just closed the curtains in the office and turned off the "no vacancy" sign so they wouldn't be bothered by any last-minute lodgers. He said he heard a shot as he locked the front door.

"Just one shot?"

"That's what I said," Tiny answered. He exhaled a cloud of menthol smoke and crushed the Kool out in an overflowing ashtray on the desk.

"Did you hear a door slam? A car take off, or anything?"

"Nope. Shit, here's this woman just killed herself
and you want her out banging around the parking lot?" Tiny said. He smiled then, pleased with his logic.

"And you didn't see anybody leaving then?" I asked.

"Didn't I just tell you the curtains was closed?" he said.

"I thought hearing a shot might possibly have made you curious enough to look out the window," I said.

"You might just as well be a fucking cop," Candy said.

Tiny had become curious—two hours after the shot. The woman he described as "pesky" had called at about ten for Mrs. Webster. Tiny finally thought to ring Elaine's room to see if she was "Mrs. Webster." There had been no answer and it eventually occurred to Tiny to go check her room.

As we walked through the parking lot, they explained how if they "hadn't been buzzed from the beers" they might have been a little anxious hearing a gun shot in the motel. Room six still had yellow police tape across the door. I had to assure Candy that the case had been closed before she would hand me the key. I guess they had planned to let the room sit forever.

It was a typical cheap room: twin bed, scarred night stand with telephone, chipped formica table with one chair,
and a painting of fruit hanging over the bed. The sound of water dripping from a leaky faucet in the small bathroom made me think of my own room at the truck stop. I hoped they would have the pipes thawed by the time I got back.

The rumpled bedding had a blood stain, and a single Winston filtered cigarette butt lay in an ashtray by the phone. I shook my head to clear the image of Elaine Webster and her lifeless stare.

I stepped out of the room and closed the door. The broken police tape flapped and popped in the cold wind. I can't imagine what I'd hoped to find in the room. I felt my foot slip in front of the door. An ice patch had formed on the concrete. Another Winston butt lay trapped in the ice.

"I don't suppose either of you smoke Winstons?" I asked.

"No, but I'll let you have a Kool for a quarter," Candy said, pulling a pack out of her jacket pocket.

I declined and nodded a goodbye to her and Tiny. I got in the Bronco and jotted down "$10- Tiny," and the name of Donny Cooper. I didn't buy Candy's evasive claim that Cooper might have "had a date or something." The Bronco started hard and the wipers had frozen to the windshield.
The concrete-gray cloud bellies lowered farther and it began to snow again. The horizon contracted to barely a hundred feet. I switched on the headlights and turned west on Nez Perce Drive, which angles up the foothills on the southside of town. I had been told at the bank that Lionel Webster had gone home early to "attend to personal matters." The headlights sliced through the muffled gloom and highlighted falling snow.

Valley View Estates sits on a high bench in the foothills and looks out over Coldwater. I drove through the motel-sized houses of Valley View and stopped at 800 Vista Drive, a huge brick and cedar house that Lionel Webster owned. Snow settled on the shrubs dotting the landscaped mounds that led to the front door. I looked at the ornate doorbell button and wondered if the bell would sound like wind chimes or maybe play chamber music. Webster opened the door before I could find out. I fought an urge to grab him by his paisley tie.

"Hello, Lionel, remember me? The loathsome private investigator? I've been--"

"Yes, of course. Jonathon said you might be stopping
by," Webster said. "Please, come in."

He led me through the house to what must have been a den. The house seemed as lush as I would expect in a bank president's digs. Open beams accented the high ceilings. Clever indirect lighting emphasized the enormous proportions of the rooms. We passed a spacious sunken living room and a glass case of Kachina dolls, then through a wide hallway with a red-tiled floor and low sofas against walls, each draped with Navajo blankets. It was the Santa Fe look without the warmth. Pretentious and uninviting, like the lobby of an overpriced resort hotel.

Webster stood beside a potted barrel cactus and waved me to a seat on yet another blanket-covered sofa. He sat in a leather armchair, crossed his legs and faced me, but avoided me with his quick brown eyes. Webster had to stand six-two, and the tall armchair made him seem bigger. I guessed he had a similar chair at his office and liked people looking up at him.

"So, Jonathon has already talked to you?" I said. It irritated the hell out of me that Sommers had called.

"He rang earlier this afternoon and nearly forbid be to leave my own home until I'd seen you. He can be a little cheeky at times," Webster said.

Webster's blue suit had obviously been tailored to fit
his athletic frame. He looked like a triangle with legs, and exuded privilege with his butter-soft loafers and talk of 'cheeky.'

"He's something," I said. "Do you have any idea why your wife would have checked in to The River Inn?"

"No. I mean yes, or... No, not really," Webster said, and uncrossed his legs. My directness seemed to rattle him for a second before he recovered his banker-bearing again. "Elaine left a note that she was meeting a friend for a movie."

"A friend? Did she say who this friend was?" I asked.

"Rita Galloway. They often went out when I worked late," he said and crossed his legs again, fidgeting.

"So you worked late that night?" I said. "Most bankers call it a hard day if they have to work till four."

"I am not some junior officer. You have to make certain sacrifices to preside over a bank," Webster said with too much pride.

"Makes me sweat just thinking about it."

"Could I get you a drink, Mr. Reeves?" he said, ignoring the barb.

"Whatever," I said.

Webster stood, straightened his slacks, and walked out of the room. He seemed detached, too aloof to be real. I
tried to imagine what sort of life he'd had with Elaine. What did they talk about? What did they do? Did he wear his paisley tie when they made love, or did they do that at all? Maybe that had something to do with whatever Elaine had been trying to find in a cheap motel room.

"Here we go," Webster said. He put a heavy tumbler of Scotch on a thick cork coaster at my side.

I sipped at the drink. Good Scotch, old and probably expensive. I took another drink and looked at Webster.

"When did you first become concerned that night?" I asked. He raised his own glass and took a methodic sip.

"About Elaine?" Webster said.

"Yes, about Elaine."

"Well...," Webster said, as if that were a complete answer.

"Well? What time was it when you got home?" I said and leaned forward on the sofa.

"I really don't see what difference that makes to anything," he said.

"Probably none at all," I said, "but then again maybe it's important that you don't want to answer me."

"If you're trying to imply, that---"

"I'm not implying anything, Lionel. I simply asked you a question. Curiosity's part of the job," I said.
"It was perhaps three o'clock," Webster said. He crossed his legs again.

"Three in the morning?" I said. A bankers' huddle lasting till after last call at The Silver Dollar?

"Yes," he said, studying his shoes. "Deputy Jennings was waiting here with the news when I arrived."

Jennings probably wasn't thrilled with that duty. It surprised me that Beverly didn't come herself. She always liked a chance to rub elbows with the high-income crowd. Beverly had no peer when it came to envy.

"Do you remember what time you left for work that day?"

"Not the exact minute, but it must have been around eight that morning. Elaine was still asleep, I remember that. Yes, it must have been about eight o'clock, maybe a few minutes earlier," Webster said.

"Were you and your wife having any troubles at home?" I asked. According to the coroner, Elaine had slept with someone the day she was killed. It looked like the only sleeping her husband had anything to do with involved snores and hogged covers.

"I don't believe our relationship concerns you," Webster said. He reddened just below his ears and pursed his lips.
"Did Jonathon mention to you why he hired me?"

"It wasn't necessary, but he did, yes. He has felt all along that Elaine must have been murdered. He's made no secret of that, or the fact he wishes I had done it so he would have a reasonable excuse to relieve me of my position at the bank," Webster said. As he spoke he made elegant flourishes with his free hand, like a dowager shooing flies.

"Cheeky of him," I said, expecting him to say 'yes, quite,' but he didn't.

"Anyway," I continued after a moment, "I'm investigating the death of your wife. I have to wonder at an attractive woman, married to a wealthy man like yourself---"

"Not as wealthy as you seem to think," Webster broke in.

"Really," I said, looking around the plush den.

"Wealth is strictly relative, Mr. Reeves," he said.

"Still, I wonder about her taking a room at a place like The River Inn, or anywhere so close to home. At her claim to be going to the movies with a friend, and at your own very late hours that night. The first thing that comes to mind is trouble at home, 'domestic problems' as the Sheriff's department put it. You can tell me you'd rather
not talk about it. That might not stop me, but at least I'd understand. These things are sensitive, especially in your circumstances. But don't tell me any more crap about none of my concern."

"Does the term private lives mean anything at all to people like you?" Webster said.

I watched him gulp down the rest of his Scotch like cheap beer. Even with someone as unlikable as Webster, I hate this part. I knew I was asking him to tell me about the things he wanted most to forget, the things that keep you up at night and make your heart flutter with guilt. He could also show me the door if I kept pushing too hard.

"I'm not crazy about this either. Coldwater is a small town and I hate asking around about something like this. Everybody who knows you, and most who don't are going to have some half-witted idea about your life. I'd much rather get it from the one person who knows the truth," I said.

Webster looked past me and said, "We had some difficult times this last year, but we also had a very strong marriage. I can't imagine what Elaine was doing at that horrid little motel. There must have been a very good reason, though. And as I told you earlier, I was at the bank late that night working on some financial statements."
That's as much as you need to know, you...."

I didn't believe a word he said about working late, or his strong marriage. I did believe he had no idea why Elaine went to the motel, but it seemed pointless to ask him more details. Webster wasn't about to talk of his personal life and maybe he didn't even know he had one.

"Did Elaine smoke?" I asked.

"Only seldom. Mostly when she had too much to drink," Webster said.

"What brand did she smoke at those times?"

"I don't know what they were. Long, skinny things that smelled awful. Why?" he said and twirled the ice in his empty tumbler.

"Loose ends. And she was in good health?" I asked.

"Perfectly. What are you getting at Mr. Reeves?" Webster said. He uncrossed his legs and looked into his glass again. I knew he wanted another drink.

"Just one more question. Did Elaine own the handgun found in her room?"

"It belonged to me," he said, "part of my collection."

Webster stood and walked over to a paneled wall which he pressed. The panels sprang slightly open like kitchen cabinets, and he swung the two pieces out. Behind the disguised Dutch doors were perhaps fifty guns of all sorts.
"Impressive collection," I said as he pushed the doors closed again until they clicked. The smell of solvent and gun oil lingered in the den.

"Yes," he said, flatly. No spiel about a sportsman's love for well-crafted firearms or the value of his collection.

"Thank you for your time," I said. Webster led me back through the big house to the front door. I had an idea his habits included asking the questions, not answering them. He looked like an uncomfortable man in need of more drinks. I almost asked him for the rest of my own drink in a go-cup. My budget had no allowance for well-aged Scotch.

A tailwind pushed the Bronco downhill toward Coldwater. About a foot of snow already covered the road and more snow slanted in, driven by the wind. I turned on the headlights again and cursed myself for handling Webster poorly. After more than fifteen years at this I knew better. I could have asked him about his work, or the Kachina dolls, gradually zoomed in on the real questions. But then Sommers' damn phone call hadn't helped either. There hadn't seemed much point in subtlety. Coffee sounded very good and I guided the Bronco to The Silver Dollar, home of Coldwater's best cup of coffee and worst fishing
stories, courtesy of Hube Bush.

I pushed through the heavy door into The Silver Dollar and walked past the door jam that once had a scale of pencil lines on it charting my growth. The marks were long gone, underneath at least two heavy coats of dark-brown paint. I smelled the rich spicy aroma of home-made chili and would have known in my sleep it was Friday, when the special was always Hube's seven-alarm Texas chili. I sat down at the bar and saw Hube across the room, flirting with a table full of women wearing professional clothes. Hube sighted me, waved, and mouthed "one minute." I recognized one of the women talking to him; Lani Simms, the sturdily built editor of The Coldwater Gazette.

Hube Bush had a face like a sun-damaged dashboard—cracked, creased, and used up. Whiskey nights had left purple roadways on his slightly swollen, hooked nose. He owned The Silver Dollar and poured free coffee for anyone who would listen to his voice break over rambling stories and Rum Soaked Crookettes.

"About time you crawled on back here, Wuss," Hube said. He plunked down a chipped enamel mug for me and poured coffee.

"How are you, Hube," I said, "and what's this Wuss
stuff?"

He pulled out a cigar and struck a match against the Levis covering his scrawny legs. I watched him puff the thing to life, in no hurry to answer. That was Hube. At fifteen years old I listed Hube up there with Zane Grey, Mickey Mantle, and Lee Wulff. One of the gods. He taught me the dark mysteries of blood knots and roll casts because there was nobody else. My mother thought a Royal Coachman worked for the Queen of England. My father, according to Mom's best guess, had been a rancher in Australia. That left Hube as my first fishing buddy, and for five seasons I had shadowed him on streams and lakes.

"You heard me. Wuss being what runs off straddling its tail," Hube said. "Jesus Christ, boy, I thought you was he enough to work things out with your own wife."

"Good afternoon to you too, Hube," I said. Hube was the one person you didn't dare slight Beverly to. As Beverly's Uncle, he wouldn't listen to a word of it. He'd been our match maker and took our split as a personal wrong, mostly due to me.

"Don't you 'good afternoon' me, Murdoch. First smart thing you've done in five years is coming back for her," he said.

"You know damn well what I'm here for and it doesn't
have anything to do with your niece. Sommers told me you recommended me," I said. "Where's your hat, Hube?"

He reached up and touched the top of his head, puzzled for a minute.

"Took it off to talk to the ladies," he said and reached under the bar. He gave the old sweat-stained hat a thump on his leg and snugged it down on his head. Cigar smoke curled along the brim as he turned back to me. Other than sleep, flirting and funerals, the hat never left his head.

"Figured a job was all the excuse you'd need. Now what are you going to do about getting back with your wife?" Hube continued.

"We're divorced, Hube. That's over. I'm here on a job, period," I said. I opened up the front of my coat and let some warmth seep in.

"You ought to take her out for a nice dinner. Just talk to her. You never know what'll happen. Might surprise yourself and enjoy it if you quit being so damn stubborn. You know, she don't hardly come in to visit me since you left," he said.

"If all you want is to see her again, then tell her so. She's your niece, you could always give her a call. Just leave me out of it," I said.
"You listen to me now, boy---"

"Stop with that 'boy' stuff. I don't need this," I said. The free coffee was getting expensive and I stood to leave.

"Sit back down dammit, and I mean now. You're going to listen up, or I'm coming around there and tune you up," Hube said. He pulled out a heavily taped pool-stick butt and slapped the bar counter with it. His brown eyes lost their sparkle and he pushed his vein-mapped nose over the counter. Hube meant business.

I didn't think he'd use it on me, and I had no idea what to say to an old friend waving a billy club in my face.

"Put that thing away before you embarrass both of us. You're about the fourth person in my face today. I'm tired of it. Your niece made my unwelcome very clear. So let's forget about it, there's nothing left to patch up. Not that there was a hell of a lot to start with," I said.

I felt tired and perfectly willing to sit in my cold motel room alone, and wait for the pipes to thaw or sleep to come, which ever came first.

"There's always a hope," Hube said. He looked like a sad old man who'd just buried his sad old dog.

"I'll see you when we're both in a better mood," I
said and turned away from him.

Something about Hube standing behind the bar with his club still dangling loose and forgotten in his hand hurt worse than if he'd used it on me. The table of women stared at me like I'd committed some unnatural act and been run out by the nice old man who'd been flirting with them. Maybe Lani Simms would write it up in The Gazette, Beverly would like that. I pushed through the door into the blowing snow and zipped up my jacket. Damn, it was good to be back home.
The plank-wood floor of the Cenex station had warped more over the last five years. Otherwise the place hadn't changed much. A full line of video movies now stood in a rack by the old mechanical till, but wooden bins of sprinkler heads for irrigation pipes, parts for tractors and trucks still formed neat rows in the dust-covered building. I paid for my gas and bought a quart bottle of Raineer out of an ice-filled nail keg. I slipped the wet bottle in my coat pocket to take back to the motel. I had a bad attitude that worsened every time I thought about Hube, the latest encounter I'd managed to sour.

Two huge arms reached out of nowhere and wrapped me up as I stepped through the door. My shoulders crushed inward and I couldn't turn my head enough to see the monster squeezing me for juice. I planted my left foot hard and wrenched myself to spin an elbow into the face I couldn't see. My best effort didn't budge me an inch. I looked down for an instep to stomp or a shin to kick and heard a deep, rasping laugh. Beer breath, coming out in clouds, hovered in my face.

"Hey Bub," Rich Whitehead said, and spun me like a toy
until I faced him. "Never know who you're going to meet in these joints."

"How are you, Rich?" I said.

He held out his huge carpenter's hand and we shook. I could feel bones move in my hand under his crunching grip. Rich is six-foot-six, nearly the same across the shoulders, and strong enough to braid bumpers. His thick once-brown hair had grayed suddenly in his twenties, but he retained the open face of youth. We had an agreement--I didn't joke about "the weather up there," and he didn't invert me by the ankles anymore.

"Things been better, but give it a few more cold ones," Rich said. He gave back my hand.

"How's your wife these days?" I asked. Rich's look made me wish I hadn't mentioned her.

"I wish to hell I knew," he said. "Vonnie took off on me right before Christmas. She hasn't so much as sent a postcard since. I still got Christmas presents for her under the bed."

"Where did she go this time?" I said. I didn't ask what he'd done this time. Vonnie had left Rich four other times I knew of. Sometimes over Rich's innate talent for spending their entire savings in a week, sometimes over trivial arguments carried too far.
"She wouldn't tell me. and her old bitch of a mother only says I got what was comin' to me. Say...," Rich said, and nudged my shoulder.

Rich's hazel eyes and his face formed the question before he asked and I said, "I just got started on something, Rich. No telling how long it's going to take."

"I got money. I can pay you good to find her, Bub. Just tell me what you'll take," Rich said. He fumbled through the pockets of his faded overalls for a wallet. A tape measure clattered to the frozen asphalt lot.

"I'm booked right now. And your money's no good with me anyway," I said.

He had a carpentry business, Rich's Remodeling, and used to give me work when I needed money between clients, a condition so common it had a name—Coldwater Cramps. All of it had been make-work. Rich was the kind of man who had to do everything himself and get it perfect. My 'work' with him had been "Hey, Bub, find me that speed square," or "throw me up that box of drill bits, would you Bub?" For Rich, everyone on the planet was 'Bub.' Along with half the other 'Bubs' that knew him, I owed Rich.

"Take this," he said holding a wad of money at me, "I want to retain you for next."

"Consider it done, but put your money in your pocket.
I'll call you as soon as I finish this job," I said, and picked up the tape measure for him.

"At least take some of it. You can't do this for nothing," Rich said. He pushed the money at me again. That was Rich, do anything for a person, but damned if anyone could do him a favor.

"Nothing is exactly what I'm going to do if you don't put that in your pocket. Besides, you're going to help. I'll find Vonnie if I can, but I'm not about to tie her up and bring her back for you. I expect you'll have a lot of talking and flower buying to do before she'll even consider coming home," I said.

"Well, here, at least take this," Rich said. He put the money away and fished through all his pockets again before finally pulling out a folded-over coupon for a free dinner at The Bar-B-Q Hut east of town.

"That I'll gladly take," I said and put the coupon in my wallet. The Bar-B-Q Hut made ribs so spicy each order came with a pitcher of iced tea and a reminder of the chef's Cajun heritage.

"You need anything, just say the word, okay, Bub?" he said.

I waved and walked to the Bronco. Rich tossed the tape measure into the front of his green crew-cab pickup
and went inside the old Cenex building, no doubt for another six pack of beer or however much it takes to make a man that size forget what's real.

I tossed the Raineer on the back seat. I could poke around a little more before bedding down at the truckstop for the night. If nothing else, it would be nice to have the kind of meal that came on a real plate. I'd have to pass The Pit on my way to the east-side access ramp and I thought I'd see if Donny Cooper was at his room on my way.

Cooper hadn't returned to his room at The River Inn and the red no-vacancy sign glared over an empty parking lot. Tiny and Candy must have laid in a fresh supply of animal beer. Except for a snowplow making a center-line meridian of snow and ice on Eastern Avenue, The Pit was quiet. That would change when the Friday night crowds started to fill the bars after dark. I drove to the restaurant and had dinner. The ribs were as great as I remembered them and I had the place to myself. Nobody else had been fool enough to bust through the two-foot drifts of snow covering the interstate east of town.

I ordered a second pitcher of iced tea which tasted good, no matter that outside a new wave of arctic air blew so hard I could see the Bronco rock with the gusts. From
my window table I stared into the twilight and blowing snow, hoping for the welcome sight of flashing yellow lights that announce the coming of a snowplow. The Bronco had four-wheel drive and decent enough snow tires, but it had been no fun driving in. Hitting drift after drift of snow felt a lot like crashing through whitecaps in a small aluminum boat. You start to look around for the bright orange of a life jacket. I glanced out again for any yellow flashers and asked the waiter for a phone book.

Curiosity, envy, spite, or some similar ugliness made me turn through the meager Coldwater white pages to see if Beverly had kept my house. I couldn't recall a single day, aside from days she refused to talk to me, when she hadn't complained about some or all features of the house. But according to the listing she still lived at 85 West Kutenai, and I realized that despite everything, I wanted to see her. Stupid-- a few subtle messages from below the belt line and intellect goes out the window. Man's curse and the eunuch's last laugh.

I thought how she liked to sit beside the fireplace on cold nights with one hand propping open a book and the other toying absently at her red hair. A glass of wine, a warm fire on a wintry night, and Beverly could change into a mortal woman. Maybe Hube had seen it in my eyes, and I
hadn't wanted to admit it to myself. Maybe that was why I'd been short with him.

Then I remembered her placing a pencil in the exact center of her note pad that morning and returned to reality. Beverly's eyes had radiated all the warmth of Glacier Park in January. This was the woman who loathed Hank Williams and Sarah Vaughn, but still had the team of lawyers she'd worked for at the time demand my albums, along with the house she hated. Spite. No, Hube had been wrong. Beverly wanted nothing to do with me and that made one thing we could both agree on-- the more distance between us, the happier I'd be.

I flipped through the pages to The River Inn and jotted down the number. I also noted the number and address for Rita Galloway, the woman Webster said was supposed to have met Elaine for a movie the night she died.

I asked to use the phone and the waiter, an innocent looking teen, slapped the phone on the counter beside the till. He gave me a stare that made it clear he expected a big tip for this.

"Local call?" he said.

I nodded and picked up the receiver.

"The boss doesn't want customers using the phone," the boy whispered.
I put the receiver down and looked around in mock terror of the boss.

"It's all right, mister," the boy whispered and gave my shoulder a pat. "Boss didn't make it in tonight cause of the storm."

He must have figured me for his only chance at a gratuity that night and decided to play me as best he could. I told him I'd be quick. The Galloway woman's number had been changed and unlisted. I tried Donny Cooper. On the ninth ring Candy answered and slurred something into the phone when I asked for Cooper, then patched me through to his room. After seven rings, Candy broke in and said what might have been "he's not in," or "east no tin." I hung up as a snow plow went by, throwing clouds of snow in the air and dropping sand behind as it passed.

"Five ninety-five," the waiter said when I asked how much for the dinner and extra tea.

I counted out exact change and the boy's face dropped, but he still managed a "thank you, come again." He brightened again when I handed him the coupon for dinner. The five ninety-five disappeared into his vest pocket and he came out from behind the till. The boy took my coat from the rack and helped me into it, bidding me to drive
careful as I went out the door.

I broke through ten or fifteen drifts getting to the plowed surface of the dark interstate. Only the occasional ping of gravel against the undercarriage of the Bronco broke the silence on the short drive back to town. Cross winds pushed snake shapes of loose snow over the road, starting at once to rebuild drifts on the plowed surface.

With a full belly, I wanted only to go back to my room, maybe with a newspaper and the quart of beer in the back seat. One stop first. Rita Galloway lived only a few blocks from my room at The Big Sky Truck Plaza. I could talk to her, relax for the night, and type out an early report in the morning. I laughed at that. A blank page, a child's polar bear in a snowstorm. I still had no idea what Elaine Webster was doing in a run-down room at The River Inn.

One-nineteen Idaho looked like it should belong to a retired couple with a fetish for yard work. In fact it didn't look like it belonged in Coldwater at all. Meticulously trimmed hedges surrounded both the yard and the base of the small house. The driveway and the flagstone walk leading to the front steps were shoveled and swept free of snow and ice. I parked behind a red Subaru wagon, clean somehow despite the snow and winter grime on
the roads. I had to duck under long, picturesque icicles hanging from the awning over the steps. A single brittle yellow leaf on a maple tree in the yard ticked as the wind blew it against the branches.

On the second ring the front door opened an inch or so. I saw the inverted arc of a security chain in the gap, the type which even the weakest assailant can snap at will.

"Rita Galloway?" I said.

"Murdoch? Murdoch Reeves?"

The door closed for a second as she slipped off the security chain. Then the door reopened and she stood in front of me. A lot of years had passed, and her dark hair was pulled back into a severely tight ponytail, but it was definitely Rita Jennings.

"I didn't recognize the name. Married?" I said. A full grown moose in a sailor suit could have answered the door and surprised me less. I should have expected it, or at least thought of it. How many Rita's could live in a town the size of Coldwater?

"Widowed."

"I'm sorry. I---"

She nodded her head to something behind me, "You shouldn't be here now."

I looked at the driveway and the hedges and shrugged.
"Across the street, about half a block down," she said.

This time I saw it. A Sheriff's department cruiser idled at the curb.

"Your brother?" I said. She nodded again and narrowed her brown eyes, but smiled in a way that made me smile back.

"He warned me you were in town," Rita said. She rolled her eyes comically. "He's really into being the big brother since I moved back."

"He gave me a friendly request to avoid you as well," I said.

"I'll bet he was real friendly," she said.

Rita had grown another inch or so since I saw her last. She looked close to six-feet tall, and petite at the same time. A dark-haired Peter Pan in elevator shoes. She still held the door open. I'd been staring and cleared my throat awkwardly.

"I've really got to talk to you," I said. "Would it be all right if I stepped in for a minute?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea. Dallas is going to come over here any minute now if you stay. He'll make us all miserable then. He means well, but...."

"Maybe you could meet me somewhere? The Silver Dollar
in about an hour?" I said.

"I don't think so, not tonight, anyway, and definitely not at The Silver Dollar," Rita said. She started to close the door.

"Where then? I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important, Rita," I said.

"I don't know what could be so important. I haven't even seen you in... I don't know. A long time anyway," she said.

"Around twenty years," I said, "but this is about somebody else. A friend of yours I believe."

"A friend? What do you need to see me for then?" she said.

"Please?"

"Okay, but this better be on the level. Come back in the morning, sometime before eight-thirty. Dallas never gets himself together before then," Rita said.

"I'll be here at seven-thirty sharp... and thanks."

"I hope you're not up to anything, Murdoch," she said.

"No worries," I said and turned down the steps.

I heard the door close then only the sound of the wind and the one maple leaf scratching to free itself. And the soft idle of the cruiser down the street.

The heater in the Bronco groaned loudly as I backed
out of the driveway and headed the opposite direction from Jennings' car. I figured the heater had maybe another week left in it until it sputtered out completely. I took a left off Idaho onto Hanna which would take me straight to the truck stop. Headlights behind me swept through the Bronco then red and blue lights flashed in the mirrors.

The cruiser tailed me over to the curb. I turned the Bronco off and sat with my hands on top of the wheel, in plain view. I didn't want Jennings to have any excuses. Even in Montana times have changed and it's best not to do things that make cops nervous, like stepping outside or reaching for a registration in the glove box.

I blew out a long breath when Lou Phelp stepped from the car. He walked up to my window in his bulky department coat, Smokey Bear hat, and gag glasses with plastic eyeballs dangling from springs. I rolled down the window.

"You in trouble boy, big time trouble," Lou drawled in a bad southern accent.

"Beverly?" I said.

"Huh-uh," Lou said. He shook his head and the plastic eyeballs slapped the sides of his face. He put the glasses in his coat pocket and pulled his gloves out.

"My old lady's pissed cause you haven't graced us with your presence," he said.
"Your old lady," I said, "hates every breath I draw. If I remember right, the last time I saw her she damned my soul and chucked a rock at me."

Geraldine Mustacich Phelp was a sawed-off Yugoslavian woman, a fireplug who cooked the best Slavic food in Montana, and blamed me for every fault her husband had. The night she damned me to hell, I'd brought Lou back from fishing, a little drunk and several hours late. Geraldine had met us in the driveway and thrown a rock at me.

"Nah, she likes you, Murdoch. She's just not happy unless she has something to bitch about. She's making a big pot of Rizot tomorrow and I have orders to deliver you to the table," Lou said.

"C'mon Lou, we both know better than that. She's more likely to toss another rock at my head."

"She is expecting you. I'll check her for weapons first, but you have to come. Unless we have company, all I get to eat these days is carrot sticks and steamed fish," Lou said. He patted his stomach. Diets are a way of life when you live around Slavic food.

"I knew this had to be your idea," I said.

An icy gust of wind blew snow through the open window and against my face. Lou held his hat down with one gloved hand. His heavy coat flapped until the gust died down.
"Damn," Lou said, "don't matter where it snows, sooner or later this stinking wind picks it up and dumps it right down my collar."

He shook his shoulders and rubbed his sleeves. A white pickup drove by with five teenage boys crowded into the cab. Two cans of soda pop and a pizza box teetered on the dash.

"Amazing how much emergency traffic there always is. I wonder why we bother sometimes," Lou said.

"It's Friday night and everybody's sick of winter. You don't really think people are going to stay home and watch reruns, do you?"

"Makes as much sense as me standing out here in the cold yammering with you," he said.

"You are showing a bit of color in the cheeks," I said.

"So, you going to show for dinner tomorrow or should I let Dallas know his sister had a visitor tonight?" he said.

"You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you? I'll be there. It'll be the highlight of my day. What time?" I said.

"Nice to find such a willing---"

"Victim?"

"Guest," Lou said. "About six o'clock, I'm off early Saturdays. Unless something comes up, which is even money
this winter."

"You'd better be there," I said. I couldn't imagine Geraldine welcoming me to her home if Lou was out.

"Six o'clock. And don't go making U-turns or do anything like opening that beer there while you're driving. We're supposed to keep an eye on you," he said.

"Beverly's idea, I suppose."

"She loves you, Murdoch," he said and walked back to his car.

The flashers stopped and I drove through the dark to the truck stop. It sized up as an exiting Friday night. Drink a quart of beer, work on right-hand mend casts with the yarn rod, and if I still felt like a wild man I could pay the extra two bucks for the key to the TV. The one sure thing, it wouldn't take me long to type up today's accounts for Sommer's file.
Despite a breakfast that had tasted like used Crisco, I smiled on the way to Rita Galloway's house. Rita had dredged up some memories I'd given up for dead--drive-in movies and puppy-lust, scattering my first transmission on the drive home. Twenty years later the world looked different. For one thing, a used-car lot stood where the old drive-in had been. For another people were mortal. They died like Elaine Webster. I had a lot of things on my mind and Rita Galloway was just one of them. But I couldn't help feeling anxious or at least a little awkward meeting up with her now.

Actually my smile had nothing to do with Rita; I was thinking about an article I'd read in the Coldwater Gazette over breakfast. "Doc," the local captive groundhog--really a marmot kidnaped from Idaho--had bitten his handler yesterday and refused to go out into the Groundhog Day blizzard and check for his shadow. The Gazette was unsure how to interpret Doc's behavior, and declined to make any prediction about the coming of Spring.

I sided with Doc that morning. The wind had stopped again but the morning was so cold it froze the ground-level
clouds into silvery crystals that sparkled like glitter and sequins. It looked prettier than it felt and coated my windshield with ice.

Idaho Street had just been plowed and I didn't see any Sheriff's cars as I neared the block Rita lived on. I didn't know what to think about Dallas Jennings, other than wondering how smart it could be to irritate a guy with a badge on his chest and a chip on his shoulder. I'd have an hour or so before he got up and checked on his little sister.

A green Oldsmobile Cutlass backed out of Rita's driveway and turned off Idaho onto Besant. I let the Olds get out of sight before pulling into Rita's driveway. She stood in a window of her small house and watched me walk up to the door. It had to be thirty below that morning and the snow squeaked with each footstep. I slipped under the icicles hanging from the porch and knocked at the door.

"Are you always so punctual?" Rita said at the door. She held her watch toward me. Seven-thirty exactly.

"First thing in the morning I am. It goes downhill from there," I said.

"Well, come on in and tell me what's so important," she said.

Rita closed the door behind us and waved me to follow.
Her hands and fingers looked chapped and sore, like they needed a trip to Madge and the magic of Palmolive. Her Hoosier-red sweats had a tear at one knee and looked threadbare at the elbows. She walked quickly over the hardwood floors in bare feet. On her, the dog-eared clothes seemed more like a fashion statement than around-the-house rags. Some people can do that. Maybe it's something to do with posture or attitude. The rest of us simply look sloppy.

Inside, the house looked even smaller than it did from the street. Warm, stuffy air surrounded me and felt good after being out in the cold. The door opened to a half-sized living room furnished only with a sofa and a little TV perched on an inverted peach crate. Rita led me into the adjoining kitchen. A large oak table nearly filled the room. The table, counter, and chairs were all cluttered with homemade baskets and loose coils of reed.

"Just push those magazines out of your way and sit down," Rita said, "I'll pour us some coffee."

"I almost ran into your boyfriend when I pulled in a minute ago," I said.

"You want cream or anything?" she said, ignoring the comment I probably shouldn't have made.

"Black is fine," I said.
"He likes to think he's my boyfriend," Rita said, "he's not smart enough to know what over means."

"Best not to talk about it?"

"Please. Now have a seat and tell me what you're here to talk about," Rita said. She stood behind me, polite and smiling, but her voice had an impatient edge.

I moved the pile of magazines, all basketry publications, and sat down. A half-finished basket dominated my side of the table. A spray of long reed stuck out the top of the basket, like legs on some spider from hell. I pushed the basket back, got its reed legs out of my face.

"Excuse the mess. It'll only get worse until Easter. It's crunch-time for basket weavers," Rita said. The piles of baskets she'd made probably explained her chapped, red hands. She set a cup of coffee in front of me.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about Elaine Webster. Her husband told me you were a friend of hers," I said.

"What's this crap, Murdoch? What do you care if she was a friend of mine?" Rita said.

I knew I'd picked it up at the wrong point. She had no smile then, intensely no smile. I had expected a little surprise, not fangs. You have to start somewhere, but some places make better beginnings than others.
"This 'crap' is my job. I'm an investigator, hired by somebody that cares very much about Elaine. He doesn't believe she killed herself, which tends to imply somebody else did," I explained.

Rita wiped some coils of reed off a chair and sat down with her coffee. She didn't even glance at me, but wrapped both red hands around her mug and narrowed her eyes.

"And you think I did it then," she said and glared at me.

"I hadn't even considered it. I didn't come to accuse you of anything," I said.

"Fine."

"I only wanted to talk. I'm not going to ask where you were between the hours of seven and midnight on January fourth. I'm here because you were a friend of hers," I said.

"Fine."

"I can't make you talk to me, Rita. I wouldn't even if I could. I just thought since you were a friend of Elaine's---"

"You're not going to make me feel guilty," she said.

"That's not what I meant," I said. "I wanted to talk to a friend of hers, someone who would tell me about Elaine's life because they wanted to, not because they had
to or because I dragged it out of them. I don't want dates and addresses, only what was going on generally in her life."

Rita called off her glare and lowered her eyes again. I could see faint laugh lines around her mouth and the corners of her eyes, but her brow was lightly crossed with frown lines. She looked up at me again, almost timidly.

"I didn’t know about your job. All Dallas said was that you’re back in town and that I’d be better off not seeing you. You’re a private investigator now?" Rita said.

I nodded and watched her pick a bottle of hand lotion out of a willow basket full of assorted tools.

"I never really met a P.I. before. I thought it was just late-show stuff," she said. She rubbed some lotion into her hands.

"I never met a basket maker before, either. I always figured Easter baskets were something you pick up at K-Mart with egg dye and plastic grass," I said.

I admired the baskets scattered around the room and she told me they were actually Market baskets. They took longer to make than Easter baskets, but brought a better price too. I took a first sip of the coffee and choked, it was laced with brandy. Rita laughed at me and the lines at the corners of her eyes deepened. I laughed too, partly
because of Rita's musical and contagious laugh, and partly out of relief for the chance at a better start.

"Good for the blood on cold mornings my Aunt Vera used to say," Rita said. She took a sip of her own and nodded. It didn't seem to be the first time she had tested her aunt's theory.

"Your Aunt sounds like a character," I said.

"Not really," she said, and looked up at a clock over the stove. "So what do you want to know about Elaine?"

"Anything you'll tell me, like were you friends for long?"

"I met her when I moved back from Phoenix. That was a little over four years ago I guess. After work she'd stop in where I was bartending and have a couple. We got to be pretty close after a while. Elaine could be a lot of fun when she wasn't with Dinkweed," Rita said.

"Who's Dinkweed?" I asked.

"That was just one of the nicer names she called her husband. It seems to fit him better than the others though. They weren't exactly close, if you know what I mean," Rita said. Unfortunately, three years of marriage had taught me exactly what she meant.

"It means you take moonlight walks by yourself and nobody buys long-stem roses," I said.
"I don't think they even shared the same bed the whole time I knew... This just doesn't seem right. It's worse than talking behind somebody's back," Rita said. She pulled the half-finished basket to her and pretended to examine it critically.

"This one's different," she continued, "see how the reed is round instead of flat? It's going to be a fruit-bowl basket. A special order, as if I don't already have enough to do."

She didn't expect an answer. I took another sip of the brandied coffee and tried to think. I didn't want to make her bare her fangs again. I also didn't want to talk about basket weaving techniques. Rita didn't seem to be a woman who'd back down from anybody. On the other hand, I sensed a fragile side not quite hidden from view. She had lost someone close to her yet hadn't built a cool, protective shell the way Lionel Webster had, and I admired her for that. Part of me said let her be, but I needed the side of things Lionel glossed over. Sometimes consciences play hell with careers.

"Sometimes it gets to me, too. When you start prying into a person's life it can make you feel like dirt, but sometimes it's the only way. Maybe I should have left this alone, not taken the job. I thought about it. Maybe
Elaine really did kill herself, what do you think?" I said.

Her eyes stayed focused on the basket. For a moment I didn't know if she would talk anymore at all, or maybe begin a new series of "fines." Then her shoulders slouched in a small sigh. One hand flicked her ponytail from her shoulder to her back and she looked up.

"I can't believe Elaine would... do it, especially not that night. But who knows, I mean it happens all the time, right?"

"What was it that was special about that night? She left a note for her husband that said she was going to the movies with you. Was that true?" I said.

Rita took a drink and spun the basket idly in circles. She made what my mother used to call a supermarket smile, the kind that doesn't mean anything. Rita's brown eyes drifted up to meet mine.

"Elaine was meeting somebody that night," Rita said finally. "I was just her excuse, but that didn't really mean anything. It was almost a game. Elaine would say she's out with me, and Dinkweed would say he had to work late. All the time they both knew perfectly well what was going on."

"You mean they were both having affairs?" I said.
Lionel Webster obviously had strange ideas about the concept of 'a very strong marriage' if Rita was being straight with me.

"They didn't try to hide it much, except when they were in public," she said.

"Do you know who Elaine was seeing?" I said.

"She didn't kiss and tell, if that's what you're getting at. All she ever said was that this guy was just the opposite of Dinkweed. I saw him once and he certainly looked the opposite," Rita said.

"But she never gave you a name?"

"No. The time I saw him, he dropped Elaine off at the cafe where she was meeting me for lunch. She didn't offer to introduce us and I never asked. I mean this guy looked like a farmer or something. He was huge and driving a muddy green truck. I thought Elaine might be embarrassed if I mentioned the guy, but you never knew with her," Rita said.

"Remember anything else about the truck?" I said. My stomach muscles tightened like a boxer who sees a body shot coming.

"It was just a green truck. It had one of those funny-looking cabs with four doors. I think there was a sign on the side, but it looked like a plain old farm
truck," she said.

"Did this man get out of the truck? Did you get a good look at him?"

"Elaine got out and he drove away. He looked very big. I don't know anything else, okay? Big man, green truck," Rita said.

"Shit," I mumbled. Rich Whitehead. It had to be. But Elaine and Rich? The banker's wife and the giant in the carpenter's apron? It didn't seem likely. Then again, since when did Logic and Love ever share the same bed?

"You think the big guy killed Elaine, don't you?"

"Let's hope not," I said. "I'm still not sure if anybody killed her."

"More coffee?" Rita said.

"No thanks," I said. The brandy and the western omelet I'd had for breakfast were fighting it out in my stomach.

"What about Lionel? Did Elaine say anything about who he was seeing?" I said.

"She knew he was sleeping with somebody. Elaine never told me who it was, but I think she knew. She listened in on a phone call Dinkweed made to the woman once, she told me. And I think something about the call surprised her. That's about all I know. Elaine didn't talk about it much."
I don't think she cared one way or the other about her husband," Rita said.

"Do you have any idea why she would go to The River Inn of all places?" I said.

"She liked to go out slumming. She never called it that, but I knew what she was doing. She liked to dress down, you know, old jeans and stuff. We'd go to Harry's or something, anywhere but The Club, right? Anyway, it was fine with me. Those places fit my pocketbook a lot better, but Elaine really liked the places. They were something new for her," Rita said.

"And she'd also be less likely to bump into Lionel or his buddies at Harry's," I said. Harry's was a no-frills, cinder-block joint on the edge of The Pit, famous for being the last bar in Montana not plagued by video-gambling machines and their incessant electronic noise. It was also famous as the site of nightly bar fights.

"She never cared who saw her," Rita said. She looked up at the clock again.

"I won't be much longer," I said. "Are you the person who tried to call Elaine that night?"

"Tired is right. Whoever it was answering the phone was truly partied up. He kept cussing and telling me she wasn't there," she said.
"She only registered, if you can call it that, under her first name. Tiny, that's the nice man on the phone, had no idea who Mrs. Webster was. Maybe without all the beer in him he might have figured it out since Elaine was the only woman there, but I doubt it," I said.

"Anyway, I tried a few times and gave up," Rita said.

"She told you where she'd be?"

Rita stood up and walked to the counter. She moved a few coils of reed to reveal a phone book.

"She gave me this," Rita said. She pulled a yellow stick-up note off the cover of the phone book and handed it to me. I recognized the number for The River Inn I had written down last night.

"She never said what the number was for, just to call her if it got late. I don't think Elaine was ever on time for anything, so I waited an extra hour," she continued.

"You mentioned seeing Elaine when she got off work," I said. "Lionel never said anything about her having a job. Neither did the person who hired me."

"It wasn't really a job, I guess. More like an investment. She owned Treasure State Tunes, I think Dinkweed bought it for her. She didn't have to go there at all, but she kept an office in the back," Rita said.

"So she just went there and sat around every day?"
"She signed payroll checks, things like that. But mostly she went there because she wanted to. Everybody needs something, right?" Rita said.

Neither of us spoke then. The silence lasted long enough to tell me the interview had ended, and Rita glanced first at her watch and then at the wall clock.

"That's about it and I'd better be going anyway. No sense setting off your brother," I said. I stood up from the big oak table and took my coat off the back of the chair.

"Most of the time he's a sweetheart. He just wants what he thinks is best for me. Now if he'd let me decide that for myself...."

"Anyhow, I'm sorry to start your morning off like this," I said.

"Rubbish." Rita's smile returned as strong as ever. "I invited you here this morning, and the invitation stands if you need anything else."

"As long as it's before---"

"Eight thirty," Rita finished for me. She walked me back through the spartan house to the front door.

"It was good to see you again," I said. I held out my hand to her and she stepped closer, gave me a brief light hug, and opened the door.
"I always wondered what became of you," she said.

I zipped up my coat and walked through the cold to the Bronco. The warmth from the stuffy house or something else stayed with me until I got well down the street. I started thinking about Rich Whitehead. I had a few questions to put to him, and I wasn't at all sure I wanted to hear the answers.
Rich Whitehead was gone for the day, or not answering the phone. Ditto for the elusive Donny Cooper. The weather hadn't improved. If anything it had worsened. The windshield of the Bronco had to be hand scraped at two-block intervals, and walking back from the pay phone left my face and clothes covered with bumps of ice. By some meteorological perversion, the frozen crystals of fog hanging in the air retained enough moisture to stick to whatever they touched. Weeds sticking out of the snow, and even the street-light poles were coated in a thick layer of icy white. The kind of scene remembered as beautiful in mid summer, and a thing to endure when you're in it. A thermos of Irish coffee and a few roll casts with the yarn rod sounded good. Instead I bought a bag of candy corn and some horehound drops.

Most towns in Montana have a handful of gossips who know more than they should about the lives of neighbors and strangers. One of those people in Coldwater was Hube Bush, who could not only tell you about the person in question, but often their ancestors. Hube and I hadn't parted as old fishing partners should the day before. I put the paper
sack of candy on the bar. The love of sweets came natural
to Hube. While candy wouldn't mend the fence, it wouldn't
hurt either.

"Coffee's over there, help yourself," Hube said. He
flipped his hand at me, a dismissal, and started to turn
away.

"Sure thing, friend," I said. "Pour a cup for you
while I'm at it?"

Hube squared off in front of me. He raised one bushy
eyebrow so far it almost touched the brim of his old
Stetson.

"You wouldn't be sucking up to me now, would you?" he
said.

"Not a chance," I said.

I stood up and reached into the sack, grabbed five or
six horehound drops and put them on the bar in front of
Hube. He pulled off his hat and smacked me with it, then
snugged it back on his head and smiled.

"You're still a worthless shit, Murdoch," Hube said.
But his hand snaked out, and like lightning one drop was in
his mouth and the others were in the pocket of his denim
shirt.

I put the rest of the horehound drops out and soon his
shirt pockets bulged with candy.
"What some people will do to get out of pouring their own coffee," Hube said. He poured a mug full and put it in front of me.

"Now what else do you want?" he said.

"Nothing much. We could just talk," I said.

Hube looked down the length of the bar, checking the other three patrons there, and turned back to me. I could see the gears spinning behind his aging blue eyes. It took the entire bag of candy corn to divert him from the subject of Beverly. He chewed candy and started a story about a forty-pound lake trout flopping around inside a leaky canoe.

"I didn't really want to talk fishing," I said.

"You do look a little pale, boy," Hube said and held his hand to my forehead.

"I thought maybe you could tell me about Lionel Webster, like who he's been sleeping around with," I said.

"You'd be looking under the wrong rock there," he said.

"Likely, but I'm looking under them all," I said. "I heard Webster's marriage wasn't quite domestic tranquility."

Hube gave me a strange, cold look, then smiled again and said, "Did you, now? I don't know what you heard, but
it wasn't anything serious, not for her anyhow. I wouldn't lose any sleep over it."

"Who is 'her,' Hube?"

"You two have been apart for a long time. It's only natural she'd go out once in a while. And don't look give me that look. She's got rights, too. Hell, I'll bet you been with plenty of other women," Hube said.

"You mean Beverly? Lionel Webster was sleeping with Beverly?" I said. What a match. Webster was the kind of guy Beverly would eat up. And later she'd spit out everything but the legal tender.

"No call to talk about her like that," he said.

"I don't care who she's seeing. I just didn't expect it to be him. If Webster makes her happy though, I'm all for it."

"Happy? Worthless banker didn't deserve to be in the same room with her. Son of a bitch is no good. If he'd of been home with his wife where he belonged maybe none of this would have happened," Hube said. He popped a few candy corns in his mouth and bit down angrily on them.

"This been going on long?" I said.

"It lasted a few months. Near as I can tell they split up a couple weeks after Elaine died. Beverly's not seeing anybody now," Hube said and winked at me. I let it
"Webster wasn't at home the night Elaine was killed. Makes me curious," I said. I wondered where Hube learned all he did about people. But it did no good to ask. He guarded his sources closer than a scandal-sheet columnist.

"Well, you can stop curiousing about that right now. He spent most of the night at Beverly's place," Hube said.

Sharing a bed with the sheriff makes for one tight alibi. The list of candidates had narrowed in an ugly way. I could only hope Rich Whitehead had as pat an alibi as 'Dinkweed.'

"I wonder what Sommers thinks of all this?" I said.

"Jonny don't know about that or about Elaine. But he's not stupid either. They found his daughter in a motel room without a stitch of clothes on. He's got to be worrying that enough without being told. I didn't see where it was my place to talk dirt," he said.

Hube took the coffee pot and walked down the bar to his three customers. He filled their cups and came back sucking on a horehound drop. He mumbled something about his barmaid being late with the hotdogs. Saturdays, as long as I remembered, Hube served up what was left of Friday's chili over hotdogs.

"You don't want to go talking trash to Jonny about his
daughter, either. Not unless you got five or six good steps between you," Hube said.

"I might not have much choice," I said. "But I still haven't talked with Elaine's lover and I'm not much looking forward to it."

"Don't figure that you would," Hube said. I should have pressed on, but I didn't.

I watched Hube step down to the small grill. He plugged in the crockpot of chili and glanced at the clock. Bar time was noon, real time being twenty minutes earlier. Another half-hour and the lunch crowd would arrive.

"From what a friend of Elaine's told me, they had some strange ideas on marriage. It didn't sound like Elaine would kill herself over any who's-doing-who trouble."

"And it sounds to me like you been talking to Abbott. Now there's a guy with some 'strange ideas.' Likes to think he knows everything," Hube said. His voice carried a trace of a gossip's jealousy for being beat to the punch.

"I don't know any Abbott. Should I?"

"Mike Abbott. He's some kind of co-owner in Elaine's record store. But I wouldn't bother talking to him. He's one of those jerks who thinks he's always right and he's got an opinion on everything. All you got to do is look at the guy. Some kind of damn reject hippy," Hube said.
"I didn't know anything about the store until I talked to Rita Galloway. Somehow both Lionel and Sommers neglected to mention it," I said.

"Galloway's who you been talking to? She's probably too doped up to know what she's talking about. Another damn hippy. Real shame for such a pretty girl. She worked here for a while, you know, until I fired her ass for bringing dope in here. You wouldn't guess in a million years who her brother is," Hube said. He rushed his words, getting in the flow of fresh gossip.

"Sheriff's Deputy Dallas Jennings," I said.

With Rita starting her days off with brandy, drugs didn't come as a big surprise. In a place where weather keeps people inside half the year, choices can come down to drugs or TV. I couldn't decide which choice was worse. Hube felt differently. Two decades later, he still took long hair and the culture of the hippy days as a personal insult.

"Hard to believe isn't it," Hube said. He sounded disappointed that I knew about Jennings. He turned his back to me, stirred the chili and set a bag of hotdog buns on the counter.

"You want to think about it before you go believing anything Rita Galloway tells you," Hube added.
"Maybe Elaine did kill herself," I said, without much conviction.

"Could be," Hube said. He turned when the barmaid pushed the back door open.

"Glad you could make it," he said to her and grumbled something else under his breath.

The barmaid came in with a bag of bright red hotdogs. She looked about fifty and her bottled-blonde hair glistened with a coating of ice. I watched her and Hube get the special ready. She moved with slow purposeful movements; one of those barroom veterans who manage to do the work of three without looking like it. I decided to stick around for a chili dog and finished my coffee. I walked to the juke box to see if Hube still had any Hank Williams. G-7: "Your Cheatin' Heart."

"Have at her," Hube yelled. He reached behind the cash register and pressed the reset button.

A red Meadowgold milk crate filled a chuckhole on Lewis and Clark Boulevard. The top of the crate sat flush with the surface of the road. Maybe the crate was there as a joke, but I took it as a warning and slowed up to weave through the maze of chuckholes that followed. Usually it's a good idea to avoid the ravaged west end of the road, but
Lewis and Clark is the only road leading to Elk Springs—Rich Whitehead's neighborhood. I didn't know if Rich would be home or not, but I could at least leave him a note to call me at my room that night.

What do you say to a friend when his name turns up in the middle of a murder investigation? What does he say to you? I hoped Rich had all the answers, all the explanations. I pulled into his driveway, and didn't like what I saw.

Rich's green truck straddled the curb, its back end stuck out into the road, the engine still running. I reached in and switched off the keys. The overheated engine dieselized until I'd made it half way to the front door of the house.

Despite the cold, dark afternoon, there were no lights on in the split-level house. The outside of the blue house and the bare fruit trees in the yard were crusted white with ice from the frozen fog earlier in the day. A picture window next to the door had been broken. Occasional flakes of snow, just starting to fall, sifted through the busted window. A key had been broken off in the door lock. I rang the bell and got no answer so I tried the door. Locked. An empty bottle of Kessler beer, Rich's favorite, stood at the foot of the door.
I stepped through the picture window, careful of the sharp jags of glass stuck in the frame. Rich's tool box was upside down just inside the window, amid hundreds of glass shards. A light breeze flapped the curtains and swirled the light dusting of snow on the floor. I picked my way across the glass quietly, and eased through the house.

I found Rich Whitehead face down on the living room floor, like a toppled tree. One side of his face was ground into the green shag carpet and his big arms were at his sides. Spots of blood dappled his baseball cap, bib overalls, and white T-shirt. I kicked three empty Kessler bottles out of the way and knelt beside him. Whatever wound he had wasn't mortal. His breath came out in beer-tinged snores that rumbled his chest. I found a shallow cut on his forehead with a lock of curly grey-red hair stuck to it, and another surface cut on his right arm. I shook him.

"Aaarrr."

Rich's head moved slightly, and the snores started again. I shook him again, got the same result. It seemed pointless trying to wake him. If I did get him awake he'd be far from coherent.

I'd need a handtruck to move a man the size of Rich so
I left him on the floor. I took a quilted pillow off the couch and put it under his head then covered him with an afghan, even though he seemed beyond caring.

The house felt cold and in the dining room, by the broken window, I could see my breath. I searched for something to patch over the window and found some beer flats and duct tape that would do for the time. Empty beer bottles were scattered through the kitchen and most of the other rooms. It looked like Rich had been having himself a party, the kind of party someone has when they're alone in an empty house on a cold February day in Montana--no party at all.

I taped the beer flats over the big hole in the window and drew the curtains for extra warmth. It took longer to sweep up all the glass. Until I finally sat down I hadn't realized I'd been shaking. Finding a scene like that with a friend face down, spotted in blood had left my nerves crackling and heart racing, like a driver waking up in time to barely miss smashing into a logging truck.

By four-thirty Rich Whitehead's house had warmed up and smelled of coffee. Rich sat at the table rubbing his stiff neck and punctuating his sentences with moans. He was as cheerful as anyone who'd passed out in mid-step and
just woke up.

"Uhnn," Rich groaned. He rubbed between his eyes and blinked. "Run out of beer and had to go down the hill to Safeways and broke the damn key off in the lock when I got back. Had to break into my own house, Bub."

"You did a thorough job of that," I said. I pulled the curtain back to show him the window.

"Shit," he said. He took a sip of the coffee I'd made him and his hands shook so bad he spilled some on his lap.

"Shit," he said again, "I tried that deal with the credit card they do on TV. Ruined my damn Visa in the door, so 'to hell with it' I figure and toss my tools on through the window."

He didn't remember cutting himself on the glass, or leaving his truck running, or passing out on the floor. None of which surprised me much. What Rich did know was he felt sick, and he wobbled his way to the bathroom. When he came back he said he didn't feel so bad except for the green spots on the walls. He didn't look better. His face had a pallid tint. Nothing looks sicker than a man his size with a bad hangover and the jitters. After a minute he went back to the bathroom. I wouldn't get anywhere with him in that kind of shape.

"I'll be back in the morning. We need to talk, okay?"
I said when he returned.

"You going to ... damn that hurts," he said rubbing the cut on his head, "going to find Vonnie for me, Bub?"

"We'll talk in the morning, Rich."

I left him to suffer and get a good night's sleep if he could find it. I slipped out the side door in the kitchen and shook my head. The door was unlocked.

The wind picked up again as I drove down Elk Springs Road and it started to snow harder. I figured I had time to go back to my room and change clothes before dinner at Lou's. Maybe even time for a soda pop on the way. After seeing Rich a beer didn't sound very good. A small herd of cattle with icy muzzles watched me pass as they walked single file toward a feed truck. The cows would probably get a friendlier dinner-time reception than I'd get from Geraldine Phelp.
Lou Phelp's house did not look like anything Norman Rockwell would have painted. The one-storey place looked patterned after a trailer park derelict. Half the house had a covering of poorly-hung, yellow aluminum siding. The other half was done in discolored cedar shingles. The two materials awkwardly met to the right of the bright-orange front door. Loose sheets of visquine covered the windows, and snapped in the wind. A string of blue Christmas lights, two months neglected, encircled the bare branches of the lone tree in the yard.

Geraldine stood in front of her husband, blocking my entry. She had more streaks of gray in her hair than I remembered and more fire in her dark eyes. She gave Lou a silent peck on the cheek and said exactly what Lou must have instructed her to.

"Nice to see you again, Murdoch. We want you to know you're welcome to stay here while you're in town. We have plenty of room now that the twins are off to college," Geraldine said. She fidgeted with the seam in her floral-pattern skirt and looked like she hadn't meant a word she said.
"Thanks," I said, "and I'm sorry to put you out like this."

Geraldine was shorter by a head-and-a-half than Lou and a little slighter in build, like a pickle barrel next to a nail keg. I saw Lou catch her eye for a second.

"No trouble at all," she said, and muttered her way back to the kitchen, "nope, no trouble. Huh-uh, not a bit."

I stepped into the house, beside Lou. The spicy-sweet scent of Rizot filled the air. From the kitchen came the sound of a pressure cooker's syncopated hissing and Geraldine Mustacich Phelp's on-going grumbles.

"How's about a cold beer while we wait on dinner?" Lou said. He gave me a good whack on the back and led me to the wobbly dinner table.

"I'll pass. Just had a visit with big Rich and somehow beer doesn't look so good just now," I said.

"Dinner'll be ready in about ten minutes," Geraldine said. She put tomato juice, a can of lite beer, and a glass in front of Lou, then gave me a diet Shasta cola without asking.

"Still with the red beer?" I said.

"It's the only way I can choke down these diet beers," Lou said. He mixed equal parts juice and beer in the glass
and added pepper. I took my soda straight.

"Smells great," I said to Geraldine. She set the table around us, and I thought she glared at me from behind Lou before she went back to the kitchen.

"Well," Lou said and took a gulp of his beer, "you going to tell me why Rich turned you off beer, or make me guess? Don't tell me he's on the wagon."

"Not Rich. He drank the fridge dry and went down the hill for another armload of Kessler."

"Kessler... now there's a real beer," Lou said, shaking his head at the red mess in his glass.

"Some things never change. The way it looks, he figured the yard was close enough to the driveway," I said and told Lou what I knew of the story. Lou had a good laugh when I told him about the back door being open all the time, and I heard a soft chuckle from the kitchen.

"He was one hurting creature when I left, hung-over and drunk all at once. I patched over the window and swept up the glass. But the hundred or so empty Kesslers and the bottle flu are his problem."

"Dinner's ready," Geraldine announced and put a huge serving dish of Rizot on the table.

The concoction-- rice, chicken, raisins, and secret ingredients revealed only to family members-- tasted as
wonderful as it smelled and I said so.

"Lou," Geraldine said, staring at me, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't drink too much tonight."

"You worry about me too much," Lou said. He pulled his wife close and kissed her. She turned red for a second and looked away. Geraldine would nag at her husband, complain about him to friends, and if she heard someone say an unkind word about him she would remove their head without a second thought. I couldn't think of anyone with a closer marriage, or a more noisy one.

"Well just remember you're on call tonight, and you've got company," she said. The word "company" came out as a sneer.

"Yes dear," Lou said. He rolled his eyes at me.

"And you don't go drinking too much either," she said to me. "You're impossible when you do. Here's some fresh Romano."

"Thanks, I'll behave myself."

"Not that you aren't impossible anyway. In fact---" she said.

"Pass the truce please," I said.

Geraldine smiled for a micro-second and winked at me. It was the closest we'd ever come to a friendly moment, probably the closest we'd ever come. Lou and I had a
legacy of cheap whisky and extended fishing trips that would be hard to overcome.

"Eat your dinner before it gets cold," she ordered.

I winked back at her and dug into the meal.

"Don't get cute, Murdoch," she said.

"Yeah, don't get cute," Lou said.

Geraldine put her fork down and slapped Lou on the bald spot at the back of his head. He choked on red beer and almost dropped his glass, laughing. Geraldine laughed too, and I wondered if I could have been wrong about her all these years, if she was only a mock hard-ass, hiding a smile behind a straight face. I didn't have the fortitude to wonder out loud.

"So, how are the twins?" I said.

Geraldine carried the dinner conversation. The twins were fine. Kevin had bad grades and a new girl friend, and Randy had good grades and a new earring. Lou should hold his fork right, fix the table, get his hair cut, and call his parents, or had he forgotten their anniversary was tomorrow.

Lou turned on the VCR then settled into his recliner. From the back of the house came the soft chugging of Geraldine's sewing machine as she made yet another floral-
print dress. "Fishing the Northwest" began. Lou had taped all his favorite episodes.

"I don't suppose you can talk about the Webster case," I said.

"This is the one over to Coeur d'Alene," Lou said.

"I take that as a no?"

"What do you think?"

"I thought it was worth a try," I said. "I mean the case is closed. They didn't waste much time closing it either, did they?"

"For Christ sakes," Lou said and clicked off the tape with a remote. "What's on your mind?"

"It just doesn't make sense to say suicide, case closed. Did anyone check around at all? Elaine Webster was a beautiful woman, she had money, and plenty of freedom. Did you know both Websters were having affairs, and both knew about it? I don't see her checking into that rat-hole motel, taking her clothes off, and shooting herself in the chest, do you?"

"I don't think it adds up myself, but then I didn't have much to do with the case, either. I know the husband checked out clean. I know she was on drugs. And we found the gun with her. I bagged it myself. Under those circumstances, you can't exactly throw out suicide," Lou
said.

"Who did they talk to? Or did they just divine this idea?"

"I have no idea. I've been on the shit list ever since I made it known I was interested in being Undersheriff. I've been busting up bar fights and telling ranchers when their cows are on the road. Next thing will probably be setting speed traps, but if you want to know about the Webster case, talk to the Sheriff. She handled most of it herself."

"And she'll be so glad to see me, too," I said.

"You can probably catch her right now," Lou said.

"She's been up Copper Creek at night trying to bust some pot hunters that have been tearing hell out of that archaeological site."

"Just tell her I said hi," I said and stood up.

Lou clicked on the fishing show again. I got my coat from the rack by the front door and Lou followed me.

"You sure you won't stay? Geraldine's got Kevin's room all fixed up for you," Lou said.

"Thanks anyway," I said. "I got a place, and there's something I need to take care of tonight."

"You'll find her up Copper Creek," he said.

"You've got a morbid sense of humor, Lou. Tell your
wife thanks for a great dinner."

"Go tell her yourself. She won't bite you."

Lou's house was only four blocks from the Pit, but it seemed farther. The wind had picked up to new levels, creating a chill factor I didn't even want to guess at. I had no idea if it was snowing, or if the wind was picking up yesterday's snow and driving it through the air. I crept through the storm and parked in front of room five at The River Inn. Lights were on in the room.

I walked to Donny Cooper's door. A small drift of snow had formed along the base of the building. The lights in the room flickered TV green. The curtains moved slightly.

I knocked on the door. Nothing. I knocked again.

"It's open," a voice shouted. Wind blew the back of my coat up and I shivered, then opened the door.

I looked from the TV to the bed and saw nobody. I started to turn around and something hit the back of my head hard and I dropped to my knees. I saw sharkskin boots and the tan pants of a uniform. Another hard blow lowered me further. It's a lot tougher than it looks on TV to knock a man out, and it wasn't until the third blow that the world swirled and went dark. I still hadn't seen who
belonged to the boots, but I could guess.