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**THE
LONELY
DEAD**



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Chapter 1

There's never a pull-off when you need one. You're belting along, forest on both sides, making light work of shallow rises and swooping dips, ranks of paper birch framing a series of flicker-lit views so snowy beautiful you can't even see them, and you keep thinking that just around the next bend there must be a place to stop and park but for some reason there isn't. It's a cloudy Tuesday afternoon in mid-January, a fact that has already seemed odd to you, a strange time to be doing what you're doing, and you've got the road to yourself for probably five miles in both directions. You could just dump the car on the side of the road, but that doesn't seem right. Though it's only a rental and you have no attachment to it other than it being the last car you're ever going to drive, you don't want to abandon it. You're not being sentimental. It's not even that you don't want someone to see it, wonder if something untoward is taking place, and come investigating – though you don't. It's just a neatness thing. You want the car to be parked. To be at

rest. Right at this moment this seems very important to you, but there's never anywhere to stop. That's the whole problem, you realize, suddenly hot-eyed: that's life in a goddamned nutshell. There's never anywhere to rest, not when you really need it. Sometimes you don't need a vista point. You just want to be able to . . .

Shit – there's one.

Tom slammed his foot down three seconds late and far too hard. The car skidded thirty feet, back end swinging out gracefully until he came to rest straddling both lanes. He sat for a moment, neck tingling. Through the window came cold air and the sound of a bird cawing with maniacal persistence. Otherwise, silence, thank God. Anyone else on the road and it would have gone badly, which would be ironic as all hell, but again, not something he wanted. He was unpopular enough.

He straightened the car up and then slowly backed past the pull-off. Sarah would have been able to reverse right in, but he didn't feel confident of doing so, so he didn't try. That had always been his way. Hide your faults. Keep your secrets. Never run the risk of looking a fool even if that means you look a fool, and a cowardly one at that.

He pulled forward into the small parking area, crunching over a six-inch line of snow ploughed off the road. The lot evidently belonged to the head of some lesser-known hiking trail, firmly shut for the off-season. Only when the car was stationary again did Tom realize his hands were shaking badly. He reached to the passenger seat for the bottle and took a long swallow. Looking in the rear-view mirror he saw only the pale skin, brown hair, baggy eyes and incipient double chin he expected. Middle-age camouflage.

He opened the door and dropped the keys into the side pocket. No sense making it too obvious. He hauled himself out, slipped immediately on a rock, and fell full length on the ground.

When he pushed himself to his knees he saw there were small wet cuts on one of his palms, and his forehead and right cheek were

dripping. His right ankle hurt too. Face pricked with tiny pieces of flint, stunned into a winded moment of sobriety, he knew finally that what he was doing was the right thing.

He got his rucksack out of the trunk and shut it. He made sure the car was locked, then stepped over the low barrier made of logs and set off between the trees, in the opposite direction to the trail.

The bird, or another very like it, was still making its rasping noise. Tom tried shouting at it, first words, and then mere sounds. The bird went silent, then started up again. Tom got the message. In here he was just another noisy animal, not in any position to issue commands.

He let the bird be, and concentrated on not falling down.

The going was hard and steep. He soon understood why there'd been no rest areas: this forest wasn't a restful place. It wasn't here for anyone's benefit: there were no roped paths, restrooms or snack stops, none of the traditional mediators between the cooked and the raw. That was okay. His needs were few, and catered for. The rucksack had almost nothing in it except alcohol, and he'd paused to repack the bottles so they didn't clink. He had nothing inside him except alcohol either. He was already doubting vodka as a way of life. It wasn't for the faint of heart, that was for sure. Feeling like shit took a high level of tolerance. His wasn't actually that high, but he was being quite brave about it.

After two hours he estimated he'd only travelled three miles, though he'd climbed enough to leave the birches and fiery dogwood behind and be alone with spruce and cedars. Up here the ground was mainly clear of snow, but it was choked with fallen branches and aggressive bushes that grabbed at his jeans and coat. The trees were tall and quiet and grew wherever the hell they liked. Occasionally he came across a stream. The first one he jumped, but as his ankle began to ache more he made detours to find places where it was easier to cross. Sometimes he muttered to himself. Mainly he kept quiet, saving his breath. The faster he went, the less he had to

be aware. When he finished the bottle he dropped it and kept on going. A hundred yards on he realized this had been boorish, and reeled back to find it. He couldn't, which suggested he was doing his job: becoming both profoundly drunk and very lost. He kept walking steadily. Time spent with Green Trails sheets had shown that even logging roads were scarce in the area, but he knew from experience – albeit in cities – that his sense of direction was pretty good. He also knew how weak he was, how impulse could come and take his hand and lead him places he didn't want to go, then suddenly vanish, leaving him with blood on his hands. That's why being lost was crucial. Otherwise he'd change his mind. He'd cop out and procrastinate and fail, and surely there was nothing more pathetic than screwing up your own suicide.

Tom Kozelek had come to the Pacific North West with no plan except a desire to be somewhere other than Los Angeles. He had stood in LAX, a little drunk, and picked Seattle because he'd been there on business recently and knew a good hotel. He stayed there a single night and then drove east, into the Cascade Mountains. It's a strange area. There are peaks and vertiginous valleys, jagged rocks in every shade of grey. There's even a small amount of history, of an 'And then they cut down a bunch more trees' kind. But there aren't many roads, and the mountains pretty much keep themselves to themselves: unless you know where you're going – which Tom didn't – it would be easy to think there wasn't anything much to find. He moved vaguely between small, cold towns for two days, spent evenings sitting in motel rooms with the television off. He phoned what had been his home. The call was answered, which made it worse. The conversation with his wife and children was short and involved no shouting. Worse still. There are times when reasonableness is the worst cut of all, because if everyone's being adult and yet the world is still broken, where do you go from there?

In the end he found a town called Sheffer and dug in. Sheffer was little more than a main drag and five cross-streets that quickly petered out into steep fir-choked foothills; but a pair of snooty mini-hotels

and a hippy café with good oatmeal cookies and five pristine second-hand copies of *The Bridges of Madison County* suggested people came there on purpose. There was a small railroad museum (closed) and a stretch of disused track alongside the main drag, home to picturesquely rusting hulks of rolling stock. It was out of season and the town was kicking back, locals moving forward out of the background, combing the moss out of their hair.

Four days before his walk in the woods Tom sat at the counter in Big Frank's, the least anodyne of its three bars, staring at television coverage of a foreign sport whose rules he didn't understand. He felt agitatedly becalmed, way out in Injun territory. He was forty-three years old and a grown-up. He had charge cards. He had a car at his disposal. He was not limited by anybody's expectations or prior knowledge: he could pretend his name was Lance if he had a mind to, claim to be an ex-fighter pilot turned dotcom millionaire; or a cult jazz-fusion choreographer called Bewildergob. Nobody would know otherwise, or care. He could do anything he wanted. But with this came the realization there was nothing he wanted to do. Nothing at all.

Nothing would make a difference now. He had crossed the line.

He drank until his brain was empty and cold. The idea, when it came, arrived in his head as if shot there by a distant archer. He realized there *was* a way of making things, if not better, then at least manageable. Of making the problems go away. He got another beer and took it to a table in a darker corner to consider the idea more carefully.

He'd thought of suicide before, like most people, but never seriously: an occasional glance to check the idea remained ridiculous. This felt different. This wasn't a gesture. It was entirely rational. His situation wasn't yet irrevocable, after all. His marriage was over, but not all his friendships. He could get a new job, design corporate web for somebody else. Find an apartment. Do his laundry. Buy a microwave oven of his own. A year from now it might all feel different. So what? He'd still be the same Tom, a procrastinating

man of indifferent talents, slowly expanded by the metabolic cycle pump of age. The choices he wanted to make existed solely in the past.

So why not just have done with it? Draw the line. Swallow the loss. Hope reincarnation was true and try to make a better job of it next time.

Why not? After all – why not?

He drank until the bar shut, then tried to chat to the two young bartenders as they guided him towards the door. One radiated boredom, the other mild distaste. Tom realized he was probably not much younger than their fathers, most likely square-jawed mountain types who took a nip of bourbon or sour mash or whatever the fuck about once a month. The door was shut firmly behind him. As he staggered back towards his motel it occurred to him that he didn't have to care what they thought about him any more. His new course put him on a higher plane. He got so cross that he turned around and reeled back to the bar, intending to explain to Chip and Dale that while these were great times for boys in their twenties, men in middle age weren't having it quite so smooth; that one day their own abs might sag and they'd forget how to love and have no clue who they were. He felt this would be a valuable insight for them. It was the only one he had, in any event, and he was willing to share it around. By the time he got back to the bar it was locked and dark. He hammered on the door for a while, telling himself they might still be inside but mainly just because he wanted to hammer on something. It wasn't more than five minutes before he was suddenly quite well lit. He turned to see a car from the sheriff's department parked on the street behind him. A youngish guy in a uniform was leaning back on the bonnet, his arms folded.

'Believe it's shut, sir,' he said.

Tom opened his mouth but realized there was too much to say and none of it made any sense. He raised his arms, not in surrender, but in a kind of mute entreaty. Strangely, the deputy seemed to

understand. He nodded, got back in his car and drove away. Tom walked home, padding slowly down the middle of the main street through the steady, meditative blink of traffic lights with no cars to direct.

Next morning he thought it through. His options were limited. There was no gun store in town, and he didn't want to drive until he found one. Even assuming they let him have one, guns were scary. Jumping off a cliff, supposing he could find one, was also out. The idea was self-evidently counter-evolutionary. Even if his mind was determined his body could simply over-rule – in which case he'd have a long walk back to the car feeling the world's biggest fool. *Yes, I was going to throw myself off, that's right. No, it didn't happen. Sorry. Nice view, though. Mind your step.* Besides which, he didn't want to end up as something distended or smashed or half dead, something to be found, photographed, and shipped home. He didn't want to be broken, he wanted to be *erased*.

On Sunday he was picking at a huge Reuben in Henry's, the town's more friendly diner, when he heard something that put the final piece in place. A local old-timer was taking delight in worrying a pair of Winnebago retirees about the scope and impenetrability of the woods. Tom's attention was drawn by the repetition of a number. Seventy-three. The local said it several times in a row. Seventy-three – how about that?

His audience were looking at each other and nodding as if impressed. Then the male of the pair turned to the local, with the air of a man who had spotted a flaw in another's argument.

'Big ones, or little ones?' he asked. 'The planes? What kind of size were they?'

His wife nodded. No flies on her husband. She'd always said so.

'All sizes,' the old geezer said, somewhat tetchily. 'Big ones, little ones, civilian, military. Planes go down all the time – matter of fact, many *more* than that have ditched around here. My point is that of all the planes gone down in the Pacific North West since the war, *seventy-three have never even been found.*'

Is that right? Tom thought.

He pushed his sandwich away, paid his tab, and went to buy as much alcohol as he could carry.

He wasn't prepared for how quickly it got dark. He was stumbling more than walking, the muscles in his thighs and calves turned to lead. He'd still only gone maybe eight miles, ten at most, but he was exhausted. It occurred to him that if he'd spent more time in the gym he'd be in better shape to die. This made him laugh until his mouth filled with warm saliva and he had to stop walking and breathe deeply to avoid vomiting.

He was now about as drunk as he'd ever been. As he rested, bent over with hands on knees, watching the floating spots before his eyes, he considered what to do next. He was already very lost. Getting lost could be ticked off the schedule of tasks. The ground had been getting more mountainous all afternoon, steep and slip-slidy and treacherous. When it got properly night, it was going to be very dark indeed, the kind of darkness that would swallow up and deafen a city boy. He took the rucksack off and felt for the flashlight. When he flicked it on he realized it wasn't just the quality of the light that was changing. A mist was gathering. It was also unbelievably cold. For the moment it was just sweat turning to frigid water on his skin, but when it got into his bones it would be hard to bear. Which meant he had to keep moving.

He rotated his ankle to warm it up a little, made a slight turn and kept ploughing onwards. The forest was very quiet now, noisy birds having cawed their fill and gone off home to roost. He wasn't sure about other animals. He'd already spent time not thinking about bears. He didn't think there were any around – or the old-timer in the diner would surely have brought them up, he'd most definitely been the type – but you never knew. Tom didn't think he looked like a threat to any large mammal he might chance upon, and he had no food to attract them, but maybe that was all crap. Maybe they lay in wait and attacked people for the fun of it. Anyway,

he didn't want to think about that, so he didn't. He kept not thinking about it at regular intervals. The flashlight had two settings, bright and not so bright, and he soon stuck to the latter. As the mist thickened it bounced more of the light back in his face, making his head whirl. Also, the light made the shadows worse. Forests in the day are friendly places. They remind you of Sunday walks, swooshing leaves, holding a parent's big, warm hand, or providing that hand yourself. At night the woods take the gloves off and remind you why you're nervous in the dark. Night forests say, 'Go find a cave, monkey-boy, this place is not for you.'

So he kept himself mist-blind and smacked his brain with vodka and kept moving. All of the crunches and rustlings he could hear were of his own making, he was sure. There were no shapes in the mist, only the movement of the moisture itself – that was also certain. You could take all of it to the bank, leave it there, and keep on walking in utter safety and only moderate discomfort: walking until it was totally dark and time itself seemed to flatten out, until each thought became hard to distinguish from the next, until fear twisted back on itself and swelled and he started moving faster and faster to escape from something he carried within himself.

He had no warning of the fall. He'd been shoving aggressively through a long trench of mid-level bushes, yielding to a third bout of head-snapping hiccups, when all at once his leading foot had nothing to come down upon. His body was tilted forward, the better to shove branches aside, there was no way back.

He was suddenly skidding down a sharp incline, legs apart, arms thrashing. Acceleration was halted by a full-body collision with a smallish tree, at which point he lost the flashlight and his bottle and was twisted and spun onto his side to slide the rest of the way via every rock in the ground. It was over quickly, and ended with him landing hard on his face with a crunch that knocked every last breath out of him.

He groaned, a low and desperate sound. At last, he shrugged off the rucksack and rolled over onto his back. The pain in his chest was so intense he let out an involuntary whistle. His right side felt as if someone had poked a spear in it and was encouraging a child to swing off the end. His balls ached too, pain rising to a hot little hollow in his lower abdomen.

After a little longer, he sat up. He ran a tentative hand down his side, not looking, just in case, but didn't find anything sticking out. He saw the flashlight was lying ten feet away, glowing dimly in undergrowth, and crawled through cold mud to retrieve it. His vision was slightly doubled, but this had been the case for the last couple of hours so he wasn't unduly worried.

Retrieving his light source felt like a step in the right direction. It seemed he'd fallen into a wide rocky gully, designed to hold a decent spring-thaw stream but now home to a thin trickle which he could hear from ten feet away. Otherwise it was quiet. Very quiet, and very cold.

He decided he'd gone far enough. Tonight would do. There didn't have to be a tomorrow after all. School was out a little early, that was all.

He pushed himself backwards until his back was against rock. Then pulled the rucksack up between his knees and opened it. One of the remaining bottles had smashed – the bottom of the bag was soaking and sharp and the smell smoked up around his face. Shining the light, he saw there was no way he could just shove his hand in so he upended most of the bag out onto the ground instead. It took a while, but he found the packs of sleeping pills.

As he laboriously pushed each pill out of its individual foil pimple, laying them in a pile on a useful nearby leaf, he swam through an internal checklist.

Lost, check. Drunk, check. Christ yes. Great big check, in red.

He'd paid his motel bill, mentioning in passing that he was heading back up to Seattle. Check.

Anyone out hiking when it was this cold would have to be out

of their fucking mind, and it was mid-week, out of season, and he'd headed away from known trails. Check.

Push, another pill. Push, another pill. He peered at the pile. Was that enough? Better make sure. He kept pushing. An overdose wasn't weak if done the way he was doing it. It was manly. And being way out in the middle of nowhere meant he would never be found, even if it went wrong. He was the man in control.

Oh yeah.

The car would be spotted tomorrow, perhaps, and in a day or two someone would investigate. Not on foot but from the air, most likely, a desultory grid pass at best. On his last day in Sheffer Tom had bought clothes and backpack in autumnal colours, to make it even less likely that some passing plane or helicopter would be able to spot him. If he'd shelled out for some proper hiking boots too then his ankle wouldn't hurt so much, but it hadn't seemed worth it. Just went to show. Always get the proper equipment.

Anyway, a check in general. Checkety check.

As the pile of pills grew, he was surprised to find that he didn't feel afraid. He'd thought he might, that the proximity of the act itself might make him panic, that he would fight death as she had. He found he merely felt very, very tired. Somewhere in the journey from the car to this random gully he'd lost any remaining sense of his life as a process. It had become simply an event; this event, in this place, now. It was dark, and getting late. It was for the best. It was okay.

He was already very cold, his fingers thin and unmanageable. He started taking the pills, a couple at a time, washed down with more alcohol. He fumbled a few, but there were plenty. He took a lot, muttering in the dark. *Bye bye Sarah, go find someone else. Bye bye William, bye bye Lucy. You'll hate me for this, I know, but you would have come to hate me soon enough.*

At some point he seemed to accept he was into the realms of fatal dose, after which it all became more relaxed. Everything seemed easy, in fact. The forest got a little warmer too, though it was possible

he just wasn't feeling his extremities any more. Everything went fuzzy and liquid as he sat and swayed in perfect darkness. He was cold and not cold, bone weary and awake. Fear circled in the bushes but stayed just out of reach, until he was barely aware of anything and didn't bother to keep putting things in his mouth. He sobbed briefly, then couldn't remember what he'd been thinking about. Trying to follow thoughts was like walking alone down a deserted street where the stores were closing one by one.

When his eyelids began to flutter he tried to keep them open, not with any sense of desperation, but as a child might push away the sleep he knew could not be fought. When they finally closed it seemed lighter in his head for a moment, and then began to fade into slate grey and beyond. He expected, in so far as he had any expectations left, that this process would continue until everything became black and silent. A brief dreaming moment, as if tilting slowly backwards, and then not even that. Goodbye.

He wasn't expecting to wake up in the middle of the night, still drunk, racked with whole-body shivers. He wasn't expecting to be alive, and in thirty kinds of pain. He certainly wasn't expecting to see something standing over him, something big, something that smelled like the scent of rotted meat carried on a cold, cold wind.