
Opening Extract from...

Nowhere to Run

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NOWHERE TO RUN

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For Mark Nelson
And Laurie, always …

PART ONE
THE LAST PATROL

In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines which in any way threaten the way property is owned.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25

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THREE HOURS AFTER he'd broken camp, repacked, and pushed his horses higher into the mountain range, Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett paused on the lip of a wide hollow basin and dug in his saddlebag for his notebook. The bow hunters had described where they'd tracked the wounded elk, and he matched the topography against their description.

He glassed the basin with binoculars and noted the fingers of pine trees reaching down through the grassy swale and the craterlike depressions in the hollow they'd described. This, he determined, was the place.

He'd settled into a familiar routine of riding until his muscles got stiff and his knees hurt. Then he'd climb down and lead his geldings Buddy and Blue Roanie—a packhorse he'd named unimaginatively—until he could loosen up and work the kinks out. He checked his gear and the panniers on Roanie often to make sure the load was well balanced, and he'd stop so he and his horses could rest and get a drink of water. The second day of riding brought back all the old aches, but they seemed closer to the surface now that he was in his mid-forties.

Shifting his weight in the saddle toward the basin, he clicked his tongue and touched Buddy's sides with his spurs. The horse balked.

"C'mon, Buddy," Joe said. "Let's go now, you knucklehead."

Instead, Buddy turned his head back and seemed to implore Joe not to proceed.

"Don't be ridiculous. *Go.*"

Only when he dug his spurs in did Buddy shudder, sigh, and start the descent.

"You act like I'm making you march to your death like a beef cow," Joe said. "Knock it off, now." He turned to check that his packhorse was coming along as well. "You doing okay, Blue Roanie? Don't pay any attention to Buddy. He's a knucklehead."

But on the way down into the basin, Joe instinctively reached back and touched the butt of his shotgun in the saddle scabbard to assure himself it was there. Then he untied the leather thong that held it fast.

IT WAS TO have been a five-day horseback patrol before the summer gave way to fall and the hunting seasons began in earnest—before a new game warden was assigned the district to take over from Joe, who, after a year in exile, was finally going home. He was more than ready.

He'd spent the previous weekend packing up his house and shed and making plans to ride into the mountains on Monday, descend on Friday, and clean out his state-owned home in Baggs for the arrival of the new game warden the first of next week. Baggs ("Home of the Baggs Rattlers!") was a tough, beautiful, raggedy mountain town as old as the state itself. The community sprawled through the Little Snake River Valley on the same unpaved streets Butch Cassidy used to walk. Baggs was so isolated it was known within the department as the "warden's graveyard"—the district where game wardens were sent to quit or die.

Governor Spencer Rulon had hidden Joe there for his past transgressions, but after Rulon had won a second term in a landslide, he'd sent word through his people that Joe was no longer a liability. As luck had it, at the same time, Phil Kiner in Saddlestring took a new district in Cody and Joe quickly applied for—and received—his old district north in the Bighorns in Twelve Sleep County, where his family was.

Despite his almost giddy excitement about moving back to his wife, Marybeth, and his daughters, he couldn't in good conscience vacate the area without investigating the complaint about the butchered elk. That wouldn't be fair to the new game warden, whoever he or she would be. He'd leave the other reported crimes to the sheriff.

JOE PICKETT WAS lean, of medium height and medium build. His gray Stetson Rancher was stained with sweat and red dirt. A few silver hairs caught the sunlight on his temples and unshaved chin. He wore faded Wranglers, scuffed lace-up outfitter boots with stubby spurs, a red uniform shirt with the pronghorn antelope patch on his shoulder, and a badge over his breast pocket with the designation GF-54. A tooled leather belt that identified him as "Joe" held handcuffs, bear spray, and a service issue .40 Glock semi-auto.

With every mile of his last patrol of the Sierra Madre of southern Wyoming, Joe felt as if he were going back into time and to a place of immense and unnatural silence. With each muffled hoofbeat, the sense of foreboding got stronger until it enveloped him in a calm, dark dread that made the hair prick up on the back of his neck and on his forearms and that set his nerves on edge.

The silence was disconcerting. It was late August but the normal alpine soundtrack was switched to mute. There were

no insects humming in the grass, no squirrels chattering in the trees to signal his approach, no marmots standing up in the rocks on their hind legs and whistling, no deer or elk rustling in the shadows of the trees rimming the meadows where they fed, no grouse clucking or flushing. Yet he continued on, as if being pulled by a gravitational force. It was as if the front door of a dark and abandoned house slowly opened by itself before he could reach for the handle and the welcome was anything but warm. Despite the brilliant greens of the meadows or the subdued fireworks of alpine flowers, the sun-fused late summer morning seemed ten degrees cooler than it actually was.

"Stop spooking yourself," he said aloud and with authority.

But it wasn't just him. His horses were unusually twitchy and emotional. He could feel Buddy's tension through the saddle. Buddy's muscles were tight and balled, he breathed rapid shallow breaths, and his ears were up and alert. The old game trail he took was untracked and covered with a thin sheet of pine needles but it switchbacked up the mountain, and as they rose, the sky broke through the canopy and sent shafts of light like jail bars to the forest floor. Joe had to keep nudging and kissing at his mount to keep him going up the face of the mountain into the thick forest. Finally deep into the trees, he yearned for open places where he could see.

JOE WAS STILL unnerved by a brief conversation he'd had with a dubious local named Dave Farkus the day before at the trailhead.

Joe was pulling the cinch tight on Buddy when Farkus emerged from the brush with a spinning rod in his hand. Short and wiry, with muttonchop sideburns and a slack expression on his face, Farkus had opened with, "So you're really goin' up there?"

Joe said, "Yup."

The fisherman said, "All I know for sure is I drink beer at the Dixon Club bar with about four old-timers who were here long before the energy workers got here and a hell of a lot longer than you. A couple of these guys are old enough they forgot more about these mountains than either of us will ever know. They ran cattle up there and they hunted up there for years. But you know what?"

Joe felt a clench in his belly the way Farkus had asked. He said, "What?"

"None of them old fellers will go up there anymore. Ever since that runner vanished, they say something just feels wrong."

Joe said, "Feelings aren't a lot to go on."

"That ain't all," said Farkus. "What about all the break-ins at cabins in the area and parked cars getting their windows smashed in at the trailheads? There's been a lot of that lately."

"I heard," Joe said. "Sheriff Baird is looking into that, I believe."

Farkus snorted.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Joe had asked.

"No. But we all heard some of the rumors. You know, camps being looted. Tents getting slashed. I heard there were a couple of bow hunters who tried to poach an elk before the season opened. They hit one, followed the blood trail for miles to the top, but when they finally found the animal it had already been butchered and the meat all hauled away. Is that true?"

Like most hunters who had broken the law, the bow hunters had come to Joe's office and turned themselves in. Joe had cited them for hunting elk out of season, but had

been intrigued by their story. They seemed genuinely creeped out by what had happened. "That's what they said."

Farkus widened his eyes. "So it's true after all. And that's what you're up to, isn't it? You're going up there to find whoever took their elk if you can. Well, I hope you do. Man, nobody likes the idea of somebody stealing another man's meat. That's beyond the pale. And this Wendigo crap—where did that come from? Bunch of Indian mumbo-jumbo. Evil spirits, flesh eaters, I ask you. This ain't Canada, thank God. Wendigos are up there, not here, if they even exist. *Heh-heh.*"

It was not much of a laugh, Joe thought. More like a nervous tic. A way of saying he didn't necessarily believe a word of what he'd just said—unless Joe did.

Joe said, *"Wendigos?"*

THEY BROKE THROUGH the trees and emerged onto a treeless meadow walled by dark timber, and he stopped to look and listen. Joe squinted, looking for whatever was spooking his horses and him, hoping reluctantly to see a bear, a mountain lion, a wolverine, even a snake. But what he saw were mountains that tumbled like frozen ocean waves all the way south into Colorado, wispy puffball clouds that scudded over him immodestly showing their vulnerable white bellies, and his own mark left behind in the ankle-deep grass: parallel horse tracks, steaming piles of manure. There were no human structures of any kind in view and hadn't been for a full day. No power lines, microwave stations, or cell phone towers. The only proof that he was not riding across the same wilderness in the 1880s were the jet trails looking like snail tracks high in the sky.

THE RANGE RAN south to north. He planned to summit the Sierra Madre by Wednesday, day three, and cross the

10,000-foot Continental Divide near Battle Pass. This was where the bow hunters said their elk had been cut up. Then he would head down toward No Name Creek on the west side of the divide and arrive at his pickup and horse trailer by midday Friday. If all went well.

THE TERRAIN GOT rougher the higher he rode, wild and unfamiliar. What he knew of it he'd seen from a helicopter and from aerial survey photos. The mountain range was severe and spectacular, with canyon after canyon, toothy rimrock ridges, and dense old-growth forests that had never been timbered because cutting logging roads into them would have been too technical and expensive to be worth it. The vistas from the summit were like scenery overkill: mountains to the horizon in every direction, veins of aspen in the folds already turning gold, high alpine lakes and cirques like blue poker chips tossed on green felt, hundreds of miles of lodgepole pine trees, many of which were in the throes of dying due to bark beetles and had turned the color of advanced rust.

The cirques—semicircular hollows with steep walls filled with snowmelt and big enough to boat across—stair-stepped their way up the mountains. Those with outlets birthed tiny creeks and water sought water and melded into streams. Other cirques were self-contained: bathtubs that would fill, freeze during winter, and never drain out.

PRIOR TO THE five-day trek, Joe had been near the spine of the mountains only once, years before, when he was a participant in the massive search-and-rescue effort for the runner Farkus mentioned, Olympic hopeful Diane Shober, who'd parked her car at the trailhead and vanished on a long-distance run on the canyon trail. Her body had never been found. Her face was haunting and ubiquitous, though,

because it peered out from hundreds of homemade handbills posted by her parents throughout Wyoming and Colorado. Joe kept her disappearance in mind as he rode, always alert for scraps of clothing, bones, or hair.

Since he'd been assigned districts all over the State of Wyoming as both a game warden and Governor Rulon's point man, Joe ascribed certain personality traits to mountain ranges. He conceded his impressions were often unfair and partially based on his mood at the time or things he was going through. Rarely, though, had he changed his mind about a mountain range once he'd established its quirks and rhythms in his mind. The Tetons were flashy, cold, bloodless Eurotrash mountains—too spectacular for their own good. They were the mountain equivalent of supermodels. The Gros Ventres were a rich graveyard of human history—both American Indian and early white—that held their secrets close and refused to accommodate the modern era. The Wind River Mountains were what the Tetons wanted to be: towering, incredibly wealthy with scenery and wildlife, vast, and spiritual. The Bighorns, Joe's mountains in northern Wyoming where his family still was waiting for him, were comfortable, rounded, and wry—a retired All-Pro linebacker who still had it.

But the Sierra Madre was still a mystery. He couldn't yet warm to the mountains, and he fought against being intimidated by their danger, isolation, and heartless beauty. The fruitless search for Diane Shober had planted the seed in his mind. These mountains were like a glimpse of a beautiful and exotic woman in a passing car, a gun on her lap, who refused to make eye contact.

HE DISMOUNTED ONCE he was on the floor of the basin to ease the pain in his knees and let his horses rest. As

always, he wondered how horsemen and horsewomen of the past stayed mounted for hours on end and day after day. No wonder they drank so much whiskey, he thought.

Joe led his horses through a stand of widely spaced lodgepole pines that gradually melded into a pocket of rare and twisted knotty pine. Trunks and branches were bizarre in shape and direction, with softball-sized joints like swollen knees. The knotty pine stand covered less than a quarter mile of the forest, just as the elk hunters had described. As he stood on the perimeter of the stand he slowly turned and noted the horizon of the basin that rose like the rim of a bowl in every direction. This was the first cirque. He was struck by how many locations in the mountains looked alike, how without man-made landmarks like power lines or radio towers, wilderness could turn into a maelstrom of green and rocky sameness. He wished the bow hunters had given him precise GPS coordinates so he could be sure this was the place, but the hunters were purists and had not carried Garmins. Still, though, they'd accurately described the basin and the cirque, as well as the knotty pine stand in the floor of it.

In the back of his mind, Joe thought that if there really were men hiding out in these mountains stealing elk and vandalizing cabins and cars, they would likely be refugees of the man camps. Over the past few years, as natural-gas fields were drilled north of town, the energy companies had established man camps—clumps of adjoining temporary mobile housing in the middle of sagebrush flats for their employees. The men—and it was only men—lived practically shoulder-to-shoulder. Obviously, it took a certain kind of person to stay there. Most of the temporary residents had traveled hundreds and thousands of miles to the most remote part of the least-populated state to work in the

natural-gas fields and live in a man camp. The men were rough, independent, well armed, and flush with cash when they came to town. And when they did, it was the New Wild West. For months at a time, Joe had been called just about every Saturday night to assist the local police and sheriff's deputies with breaking up fights.

When the price of natural gas plummeted and drilling was no longer encouraged, the employees were let go. A half-dozen man camps sat deserted in the sagebrush desert. No one knew where the men went any more than they knew where they'd come from in the first place. That a few of the unemployed refugees of the man camps had stuck around in the game-rich mountains seemed plausible—even likely—to Joe.

He secured his animals and walked the floor of the basin looking for remains of the elk. Although predators would have quickly moved in on the carcass and stripped it of its meat and scattered the bones, there should be unmistakable evidence of hide, hair, and antlers. The bow hunters said the wounded bull had seven-point antlers on each beam, so the antlers should be nearby as well.

As he surveyed the ground for sign, something in his peripheral vision struck him as discordant. He paused and carefully looked from side to side, visually backtracking. In nature, he thought, nothing is perfect. And something he'd seen—or thought he'd seen—was too vertical or horizontal or straight or unblemished to belong here.

"What was it?" he asked aloud. Through the trees, his horses raised their heads and stared at him, uncomprehending.

After turning back around and retracing his steps, Joe saw it. At first glance, he reprimanded himself. It was just a stick jutting out from a tree trunk twenty feet off his path.

But on closer inspection, it wasn't a stick at all, but an arrow stuck in the trunk of a tree. The shaft of the arrow was handcrafted, not from a factory, but it was straight, smooth, shorn of bark, with feather fletching on the end. The only place he'd ever seen a primitive arrow like this was in a museum. He photographed the arrow with his digital camera, then pulled on a pair of latex gloves and grasped it by the shaft and pushed hard up and down while pulling on it. After a moment, the arrow popped free and Joe studied it. The point was obsidian and delicately flaked and attached to the shaft with animal sinew. The fletching was made of wild turkey feathers.

It made no sense. The bow hunters he'd interviewed were serious sportsmen, even if they'd hunted prior to the season opener. But even they didn't make their own arrows from natural materials. No one did. Who had lost this arrow?

He felt a chill roll through him. Slowly, he rotated and looked behind him in the trees. He wouldn't have been surprised to see Cheyenne or Sioux warriors approaching.

HE FOUND THE remains of the seven-point bull elk ten minutes later. Even though coyotes and ravens had been feeding on the carcass, it was obvious this was the elk the bow hunters had wounded and pursued. The hindquarters were gone and the backstraps had been sliced away. Exactly like the hunters described.

So who had taken the meat?

Joe photographed the carcass from multiple angles.

JOE WALKED BACK to his horses with the arrow he'd found. He wrapped the point of it in a spare sock and the shaft in a T-shirt and put it in a pannier. He caught Buddy staring at him.

"Evidence," he said. "Something strange is going on up here. We might get some fingerprints off this arrow."

Buddy snorted. Joe was sure it was a coincidence.

AS HE RODE out of the basin, he frequently glanced over his shoulder and couldn't shake a feeling that he was being watched. Once he reached the rim and was back on top, the air was thin and the sun was relentless. Rivulets of sweat snaked down his spine beneath his uniform shirt.

Miles to the south-east, a mottled gray pillow cloud and rain column of a thunderstorm connected the horizon with the sky. It seemed to be coming his way. He welcomed rain that would cool down the afternoon and settle the dust from his horses.

But he couldn't stop thinking about the carcass he'd found. Or the arrow.

THAT NIGHT, HE camped on the shoreline of a half-moon-shaped alpine lake and picketed the horses within sight of his tent in lush ankle-high grass. As the sun went down and the temperature dropped into the forties, he caught five trout with his 4-weight fly rod, kept one, and ate it with fried potatoes over a small fire. After dinner he cleaned his dishes by the light of a headlamp and uncased his satellite phone from a pannier. Because of the trouble he'd had communicating several years before while temporarily stationed in Jackson Hole, he'd vowed to call home every night no matter what. Even if there was no news from either side, it was the mundane that mattered, that kept him in touch with his family and Marybeth with him.

The satellite phone was bulky compared to a mobile, and he had to remove his hat to use it because the antenna bumped into the brim. The signal was good, though, and

the call went through. Straight to voice mail. He sighed and was slightly annoyed before he remembered Marybeth said she was taking the girls to the last summer concert in the town park. He'd hoped to hear her voice.

When the message prompt beeped, he said, "Hello, ladies. I hope you had a good time tonight. I wish I could have gone with you, even though I don't like concerts. Right now, I'm high in the mountains, and it's a beautiful and lonely place. The moon's so bright I can see fish rising in the lake. A half hour ago, a bull moose walked from the trees into the lake and stood there knee-deep in the water for a while. It's the only animal I've seen, which I find remarkably strange. I watched him take a drink."

He paused, and felt a little silly for the long message. He rarely talked that much to them in person. He said, "Well, I'm just checking in. Your horses are doing fine and so am I. I miss you all."

HE UNDRESSED AND slipped into his sleeping bag in the tent. He read a few pages of A. B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, which had turned into his camping book, then extinguished his headlamp. He lay awake with his hands beneath his head and stared at the inside of the dark tent fabric. His service weapon was rolled up in the holster in a ball near his head. After an hour, he got up and pulled the bag and the Therm-a-Rest pad out through the tent flap. There were still no clouds and the stars and moon were bright and hard. Out in the lake, the moose had returned and stood in silhouette bordered by blue moon splash.

God, he thought, *I love this. I love it so.*

And he felt guilty for loving it so much.