

Peter slowly turned truck off the black top of Highway 43 and headed north on the hard pack dirt of Cobalt road. His ancient Apache pickup truck heaved and swayed with every undulation in the road. It had been thirty years since he had last seen this country. He had been barely fourteen years old and now he remembered very little of the trip, only that he had felt a sacred privilege driving across the country with his uncle.

It was late afternoon, the time he liked best. He had been driving since before dawn. After crossing the gently rolling hills of the plains, the sharply rising foothills of the Montana Rockies gave him a feeling of being home once more, even though this country was a sharp contrast to the wooded hills of south eastern Indiana. The sun hung low over the mountains, turning the grassy open areas next to the road to a pale grayish blue. The grass sloped up gradually, then the ink green lodge pole pines, a section of bare aspen trees, and then more pines climbing the sharply rising hills.

He drove for over an hour on the dirt road. The sun gave way to the glare of incandescent bulbs on the front of weathered, shingled houses, and the glare of the neon lights in front of dilapidated bars and small grocery stores. The excitement that he had felt thirty years ago was even stronger today, but the romance was blunted by the harsh reality of the living conditions he imagined for the few hundred residents of these small towns. Each one looked familiar, Millwood, DuBois, Logan, Melrose, but only because they so closely resembled Dresden, where he had spent ten days elk hunting with his uncle.

When he pulled in the gravel parking lot of the Thompson Hunting Lodge, he was surprised that only two other pickup trucks were parked there. Most of the other hunters must have driven into Sand River where there were several large saloons and restaurants.

"Just as well," Peter thought to himself. He really hadn't come here to be around other people. The way he remembered, there had only been a dozen or so men and they were gone all the time - either hunting or drinking beer in Sand River.

He walked across the wide planks of the front porch and into the main room of the lodge. The room looked the same, the large rock fireplace with

the wooden chairs in a semicircle, the wide book shelves on the far wall, the knotty pine counter with the crudely lettered registration sign. The deer, elk, and moose trophies mounted high on the walls. Though things were different this time, the books were in slight disarray, there was no fire in the fireplace - only cold charred chunks of wood. No one was in the room, his footsteps echoed loudly as he walked across the wooden floor. Peter looked for a bell on the counter. Several minutes passed before he walked around the counter and into a dark room that looked more like a hallway. Small shelves with canned goods and cubby holes stuffed with odd bits of paper lined the room from floor to ceiling. The room ended in corner with a door, just slightly open. Light shone through the crack. He pushed lightly on the door. Beyond was a kitchen. There was a large oak table in the center with three settings of dirty dishes.

"Hello," he said, raising his voice. He heard some movement that sounded many rooms away.

"Be right there," a woman's muffled voice answered.

Peter retreated back to the large main room at the front of the building. Several minutes passed and then a woman his age came out of the hallway into the warm light of the main room.

"You must be Peter Bach, I'm Kate," she said in a friendly voice, "We've been expectin' you for some time."

"I would've been here yesterday except my truck broke down yesterday in the Black Hills. It took half the day to find someone to get it runnin' again."

"Well, we're glad you're here now. You just fill out this card and you're all set." She pushed a small white card and a ballpoint pen, with a picture of Old Faithful, across the wide counter.

"It seems awful quiet around here," Peter said.

"We don't get too many hunters any more. Seems most folks head to Idaho these days. I'm about to ready to close this place, if I could just bring myself to do it. Besides, this is an awful out-of-the-way place to be bringing up a boy."

"How old's your boy?"

"He just turned eleven. Well, everything looks fine here," she

dropped the card in the drawer. "Your room is on the front, just turn right at the top of the stairs, number fourteen. Well, if you'll excuse me, I gotta get my boy to bed. G'night." She smiled, then turned, and went down the hallway back to the kitchen, leaving Peter alone in the main room of the lodge.

Peter went out to his truck. From the front seat he pulled out a large black suitcase, an old overpacked, heavy canvas backpack, and finally his rifle in its worn black leather case. He went back in the lodge, up the wide wooden stairs, and turned right at the top. Inside in his room he carefully unpacked his suitcase. He put his neatly folded clothes in the drawers of the dressers. He hung his trousers in the large, antique wardrobe. Finally, he removed his rifle from its case. The rifle had belonged to his father a Kimber .458 Winchester Mag, with a cold blue barrel, slightly more than thirty inches long, The English Walnut finish on the stock was worn to a dull luster. It was the same rifle he had used when he was fourteen. But then it bruised his shoulder with the recoil and he hadn't been able to make an accurate shot. He hadn't shot an elk that trip and not until many trips later. Now it had been over ten years since he had been hunting but he still he continued to shoot and was a superb marksman. But since the war he hadn't been able to hunt. The thought of hunting still left a burning taste, like acid, in his mouth.

Peter lifted the gun and aimed at the window latch. He exhaled slowly and smoothly pulled the trigger. The slightly hollow click satisfied him. He reached back in the case and pulled out the two yellow and black boxes of Speer Grand Slam shells. The first box contained 350 grain solid bullets, the type Peter used for shooting targets. He emptied the second box of shells on the bed. They were 500 grain soft point bullets, for big game. They were designed to spread on impact, causing as much internal damage as possible, while leaving a small entry wound. He carefully put the shells back in the box. Then he lay across the bed with the rifle across his lap. After a long while, he softly slipped into a dreamless sleep.

He awoke up at four am. The window was open, the room was cold and his neck was stiff. He got up rubbing his neck and twisting it back and

forth. He crossed the room to the window and thrust his head out into the cold night air. The sky was jet black. He could never remember seeing this many stars. All the familiar constellations were obscured in the swarm of new light. Several inches of fresh snow had fallen during the night.

"That should make for good tracking," he thought to himself. He shut the window and turned on the lamp next to the bed. He dressed in the warm hunting clothes he purchased the week before. The cotton underwear felt good next to his skin. The boot leather was still stiff even though he had worn them ever since he bought them from the store in town. Finally, he pulled on his heavy wool, red plaid coat. It was the only piece of old clothing he had brought. It had been a present from his uncle when he turned seventeen. It still fit fine and had worn well over the years. He slung his canvas backpack over one shoulder and his rifle over the other. Peter quietly left the lodge and crossed the back yard of the lodge into the pine grove that grew up on three sides of the lodge.

When he returned in the middle of the afternoon, the snow was melted. The ground was soft and the air was moist and slightly sweet – it was the smell of spring come in November. He approached the lodge from the road, the same way he had driven in the night before. A small, slight boy was playing alone at the side of the lodge. He had leaned many long poles together in a teepee fashion and was now covering them with pine boughs that he was dragging from the woods. Peter stopped and watched him for a few moments and then continued on up to his room.